

FREEDOM FIGHTING FOUNDING FATHERS

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

The history of Dominica is rich with culture from many nations and a large part of their past lies with the maroons. Maroonage is the ultimate form of slave resistance where they would escape from their owners into the rugged terrain located in the center of the island. This rebellion paved the way towards freedom for the country. Today the spirit of the maroons still lives on within the people of Dominica.

INTRODUCTION

Four months ago when I first heard of the maroons, I was instantly drawn to their story. Never before had I heard of bands of escaped slaves thriving together on an island in the Caribbean. These men, women, and children found shelter in the depths of the rainforest and chose to live as free people, not as shackled slaves. They were able to subsist, defend themselves, and sustain their numbers in the face of white resistance. My original intention with this project was to view how the history of the maroons was integrated in today's society through means of song, dance, or folklore. However as I began my series of interviews the project morphed into something much more. The history of slavery, much less maroonage, has never been taught with great detail in the schools. Generations of Dominicans know very little factual information concerning maroons. However the fighting spirit, the hunger for what is humanely just, thrives inside each and every Dominican.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Three books were used as references. The following people were asked questions according to their qualifications or interest:

Mona George-Dill

Manager of Springfield Center for Environmental Protection Training and Education (SCEPTRE)

Alexander Bruno

Broadcaster/ Journalist, Pampro Foundation: Motivational Speaker, Playwright, and Advertising Consultant

Dr. Lennox Honychurch

Leading Dominican Historian

Ethan Astaphan

Resident of SCEPTRE

PAST

The government of Dominica constantly switched hands while European nations were vying with one another for territorial influence in the region. As the Spanish influence decreased in the Caribbean, Dominica became of particular interest to the French and British, mostly due to the booming sugar production in that area. However, even before the European occupation maroons existed in Dominica, with slaves arriving as early as 1518 (Honychurch, 1995). They built huts, planted gardens, and raised small livestock.

There were varying degrees of slave resistance. Some slaves did nothing at all and passively accepted their life and worked until death. Others tried to improve their social standing within the slave system by obtaining "better" positions. Some would rebel internally by working slowly, poisoning animals, and not maintaining the crops properly. The French had a term called *petit marronage*, in which individuals ran away more as a form of protest (Baker, 1994). Slaves would subsist in the bush with the help of fellow slaves and then

return, usually to endure severe penalties from the plantation owner.

Maroonage, on the other hand was the highest form of rebellion for a slave.

The maroon communities were inaccessible deep within Dominica's jungle. Initially they had contact with the Carib Indians where they learned certain survival strategies, and formed an alliance with them in the bush. However they quickly learned the ways of the jungle and so vast was the area that they inhabited, that the Carib-Maroon interaction was neither necessary nor desired from either group (Baker, 1994).

During the first British period, escaped slaves were captured and jailed in Roseau and many of them died due to the unbelievably harsh conditions. By the second French occupation Maroons had grown significantly in size and strength. Actual numbers cannot be established but figures show 300 maroons existed in 1785 and 578 in 1814 when they were nearly defeated (Honychurch, 1995). By 1785, maroon camps were established in the center of the island, along the Layou Valley and the high mountain ranges of Morne Diablotin and Morne Trois Pitons of Dominica.

There were 13 maroon chiefs, chosen for their leadership, bravery and strength. Congo Ray, Balla, Zombie, Jupiter, Juba, Cicero, and Hall had camps in the southern region. Mabouya occupied the area above the grand fort. Jacko, Goree', Greg, and Sandy established camps within the high reaches of Layou Valley, and Pharcelle set up camp above Colihaut. Women and children also inhabited the camps and some females gained significant status. Names of some of the female leaders include Charlotte, Calypso, Angelique, Marie-Rose, Tranquille, and Victorie (Honychurch, 1995).

With the arrival of British expansion, maroon attacks on whites started to worsen. No one was discriminated against, maroons killed people while on the street by throwing boulders, and others were harassed in broad daylight. Eventually some planters even chose to abandon their property. The maroon camps differed in organization, but all were far advanced for their time in survival tactics. They practiced intense guerilla warfare and exploited their

government by any means possible. Ainslie, governor of the island at the time, referred them to as "An internal enemy of the most kind" (Baker, 1994).

The maroons proved to be a strong challenge to authority and the plantation system. They raided and plundered estate after estate, destroying everything. This eventually grew to be of serious concern to the British so a group was organized to combat the maroons, known as the Black Rangers or Legionaries. The Rangers proved to be most efficient due to the fact that they were composed of slaves who were familiar with the rugged terrain and ways of the maroons (Baker, 1994). They set up a series of camps and found out where the maroons were located. During a period from 1802-1815 known as the Maroon Wars the constant battle between the maroons and Rangers was at its peak (Honychurch, 1995).

Eventually the maroons lost the battle and one by one the 13 great chiefs met their demise. Some like Pharelle were offered freedom after capture if details of maroon encampments were shared. Slaves themselves killed maroons like Balla, whereas some chiefs remained for nearly 40 years like Jacko, until he too met death by a Ranger (Darroux, 1984). The plight of the maroons was a great one and although they were plucked one by one from the jungle, their cause was most certainly felt. The British spent a great deal of time and money in trying to capture maroons. This disallowed them from enjoying complete economic prosperity and created social disorder that prevented establishment of large-scale communities (Darroux, 1984).

PRESENT

Fast-forward 200 years into present day Dominica. I conducted a series of interviews in attempts to capture the essence of who the maroons were and how their struggles translated into today's society. These people differed in cultural background, age, and gender. Despite their differences many shared common experiences and thoughts when dealing with the maroons.

One hurdle all the interviewees had to overcome was the lack of information available to the general public about maroons. Generations upon generations of Dominicans have not studied the history of their own people. This is primarily due to the fact the school system is under British curriculum, as Dominica is a commonwealth of The United Kingdom. This being the case, research concerning anything related to slavery is done on an individual basis and most certainly the ways and traditions of the maroons were lost.

When discussing maroons with Ms. Mona George-Dill, her deep concern in regards to the lack of effort being put into the education system with historical issues is quite evident, "If our children have nothing to be proud of their ancestors- then they will have no respect for authority...no self respect". She feels socially it is unacceptable to discuss and revere anything to do with slavery, despite its positive impacts. She comments on how monuments are found throughout the island of French and British-born heroes, but none of native Dominicans.

Ms. George-Dill chooses to call the maroons Dominica's Freedom Fighting Founding Fathers. Her will to push this perspective on the island is highly evident through her actions. As a former President of the Dominican Conservation Association, Mona has made huge contributions in mobilizing Dominican resistance to the whaling industry. As a female Dominican, Mona George-Dill captures the maroon spirit by striving to push unity through diversity and educate her countrymen on national issues.

Alexander Bruno is a 34-year-old self-proclaimed cultural healer. He is well versed in historical issues and actively tries to make an impact today. Mr. Bruno goes to schools, neighborhoods, and local communities educating Dominicans of their heritage. He is intent upon returning to a more grassroots lifestyle, by sporting dreadlocks and rejecting Western ideals. He wants to instead go back to the soil and stop importing culture from the United States of America. Mr. Bruno wants Dominicans to live life as the maroons, and even refers to himself as one. He is the very essence of what a present day maroon

would be. In his attempts to break free from current social standards, Alexander Bruno is following in the footsteps of his forefathers.

Dr. Lennox Honychurch shed a different light on the maroons. A noted historian, he gave insight on slaves who chose not to escape. His personal slant was that their mantra was one of "survival of the fittest". By choosing to stay on the plantation, they were choosing to live. However, he pointed out that the survival mentality of the maroons is one that the people of today need to emulate. Dr. Honychurch tries each day to impress upon Dominicans the importance of historical information. Due to the school system on the island, the government is unimpressed with integrating history into the curriculum. However his increasing attempts to present historical information is invaluable to the country.

I asked Ethan Astaphan, a 9-year-old boy who lives at Springfield if he knew who slaves were, and he promptly gave me an answer detailing all the hard work they had to do when building pyramids in the desert. Then I asked him if he knew of slaves existing in Dominica and his response was, "There were slaves long ago, but that was when kids had to do all the yard work". It is clear that to date, Ethan has been taught little or nothing of maroon history. However in the 3 weeks I have had interacting with him I see so much strength of mind in such a little guy.

FUTURE

It was really interesting to see individuals of today identify with people 200 years before them. The maroons could never disengage freely from their enemy. They were a product of the society they fought to free themselves and yet it was the sole assuredness of their existence. Today, Dominicans face various battles for their country and work against them everyday. All of the people I interviewed fight hard to better their nation and enlighten those about the past.

The people of Dominica are trying their best to change the apathetic view many of the people share concerning historical findings. In time, I feel that the Mona George-Dills and Alexander Brunos will leave their impression and mold the future to care about such issues. They say history repeats itself and if that is the case, Dominicans will be armed with the essence of their freedom fighting founding fathers.

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