

Marronage in Eastern Cuba

By Mack Williams

“I never liked to be near the masters. I was a cimarron from birth” (Montejo 10).

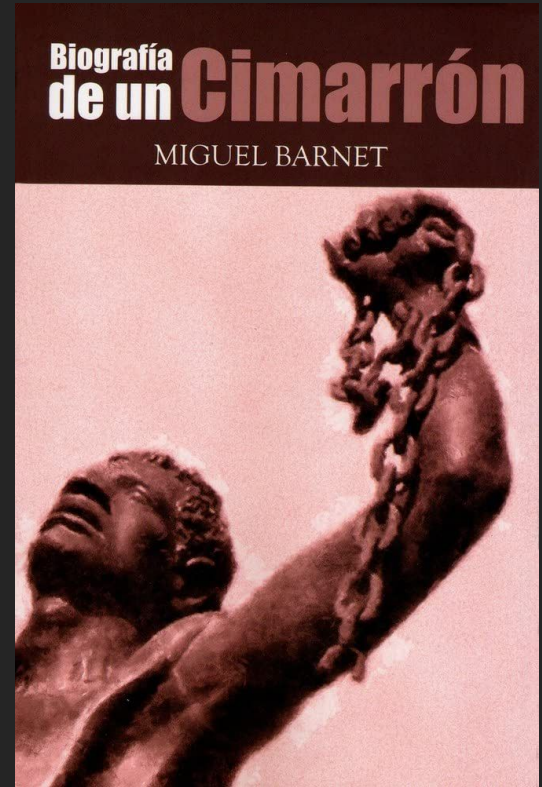
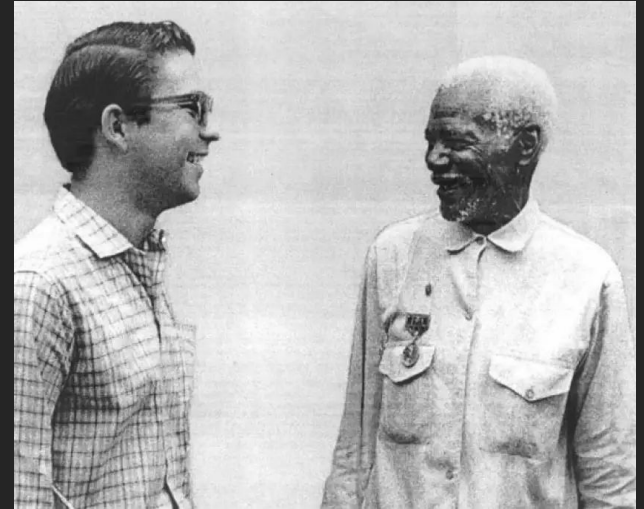


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Background on Biography of a Runaway Slave

The words on the previous slide come from Esteban Montejo. Montejo was an enslaved person, and later maroon, who lived through the official abolition of Cuban slavery, the Cuban war of independence and the Cuban Revolution. “Biography of a Runaway Slave” is a book co-written by Montejo and Miguel Barnet, a Cuban anthropologist.



Miguel Barnet and Esteban Montejo
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Esteban Montejo was enslaved in the central region of Cuba. The maroon settlements (palenques) which he lived in were likely not in eastern Cuba. However Montejo's narrative provides of a powerful first-person account of Cuban marronage.

The two halves of Cuba

The development of maroon communities in Cuba was impacted by the development of the island's economy as a whole.

“Since 1607 Cuba has been effectively divided into two halves - eastern (centered on Santiago de Cuba) and western (centered on Havana)... The main economic variable is that intensive sugar production developed more thoroughly in the western region while mountainous terrain helped promote a more diversified and less intensive agricultural regime in the eastern region” (Sayers 328)

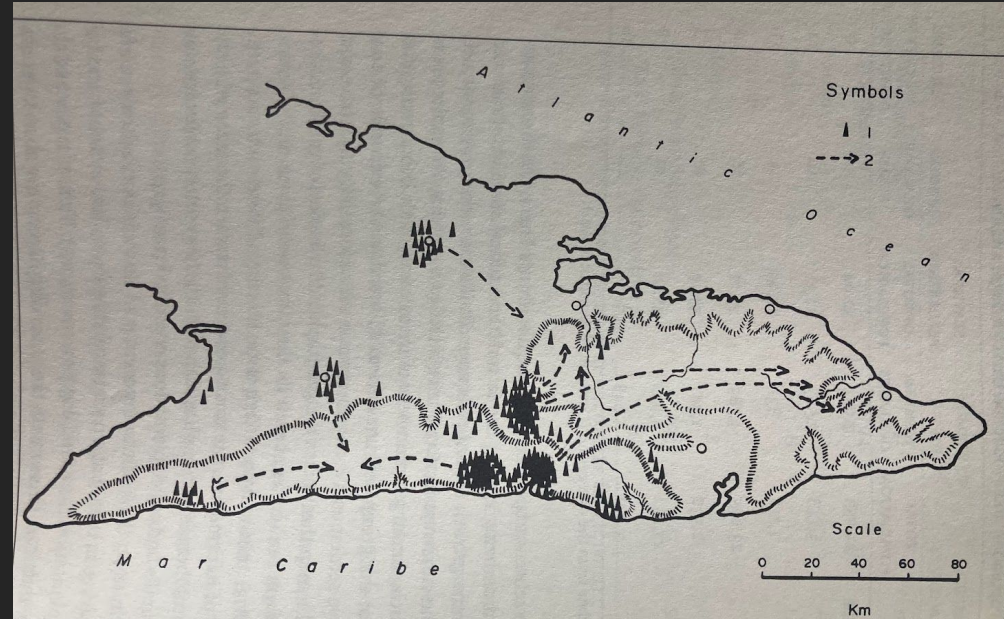
This uneven development meant that colonial society (and therefore slavery) was more consolidated on the western half of the island than the eastern half.

Factors influencing marronage in Cuba

Due to the less consolidated production, Eastern Cuba had less people and lower population density than Western Cuba by the 18th Century

“Slaves constituted a large percentage of the total population in the Santiago de Cuba and Bayamo jurisdictions [Southeast Cuba]” (Corzo 80)

The rural nature of eastern Cuba meant many enslaved people opted for fugitivity, rather than rebellion, as a form of resistance. The jungle environment made escape more feasible.



“Origins of slaves who had run away from their masters in the eastern region in 1841 and the migratory trends toward existing runaway slave settlements, based on statements by runaways who were captured” (Image via Corzo 152).

The criteria for palenque location

Many fugitive enslaved people in Cuba formed small, rural communities, where they avoided recapture. These settlements were known as “palenques” on the island. The residents were known as “cimarrones”, or maroons in English.

Palenque location was determined by proximity from colonial settlements (greater distance preferred), inaccessibility, and concealment. Along with access to water, these characteristics were considered to avoid enslavers.

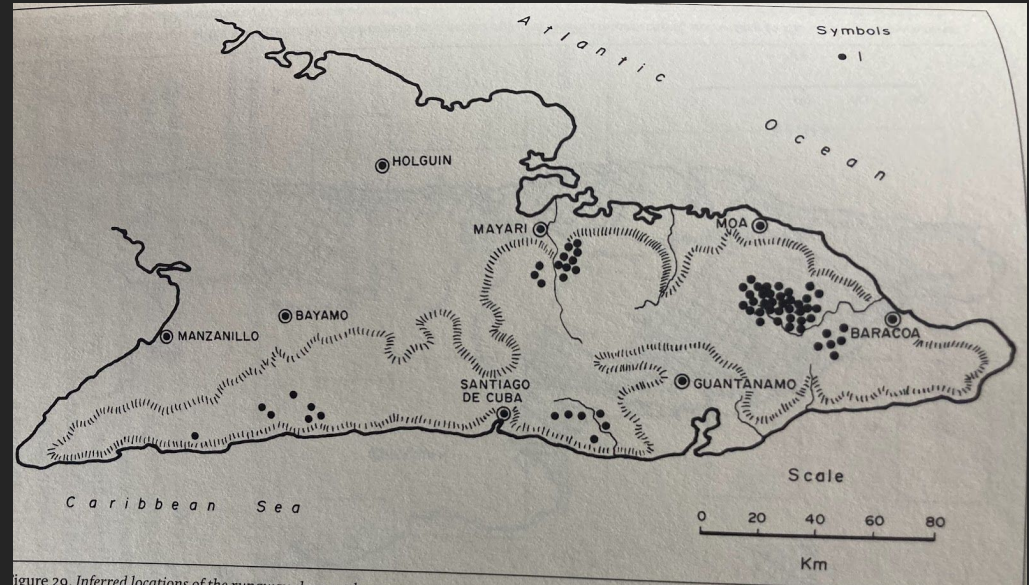


Figure 29. Inferred locations of the runaway slave settlements.

“Inferred locations of runaway slave settlements mentioned in this study are noted. Their concentration shows that four large subregions contained most of the settlements (Image via Corzo 251).



A standard landscape for Cuban maroon communities. “The Cristal mountain range, where the Guarda Basura, La Ceiba, Bumba, Maluala, and other runaway slave settlements were located. It was the scene of operations carried out by Ignacio Leyte Vidal’s slavehunting militia in the 1820s. (Image via Corzo 121).

Most maroon communities in eastern Cuba were located in Oriente Province, known for its mountainous regions.

Image via [this location](#)



Rumors of “El Portillo”

In early 1747, the municipal council of Santiago de Cuba “echoed rumors that had been circulating for some time... to the effect that there was a runaway slave settlements... known as El Portillo in the Sierra Maestra” (Corzo 44)

There was no indication that the maroons at El Portillo posed a military threat to Santiago de Cuba, but slave owners deemed the rise of El Portillo “alarming” (Corzo 44).

The Sierra Maestra

The mountains where El Portillo was located are called the Sierra Maestra. The range is 150 miles long, and in the 18th Century could only be accessed from Santiago, Manzanillo, Bayamo. The landscape was too steep and forested for pack animals.

All known Sierra Maestra maroon settlements were in a 25 mile stretch between Turquino Peak and Sevilla River. Not coincidentally, this was the most elevated and rugged terrain in all of Cuba (Corzo 226).



Turquino Peak (Pico Turquino)

Image via [this location](#)

By 1747, El Portillo was thought to have been around twenty years old. The council in Santiago de Cuba said the maroons at El Portillo had engaged in subsistence farming, and were totally capable of providing for themselves in the Sierra Maestra.

“El Portillo was the most important expression of [marronage] at a very early stage in the development of slave plantations” (Corzo 44). This is due in part to the magnitude of the response by the colonial government to the existence of the settlement.

The Inhabitants of El Portillo

By fall of 1747, the Santiago de Cuba provincial government organized a raid on El Portillo. A column of over 100 colonial slave hunters failed to reach El Portillo, but captured 11 maroons who had fled the settlement in fear of attack.

Legal prosecution of the captured maroons gives some insight to El Portillo. At the time of the raid, El Portillo had 21 inhabitants (12 men, 7 women, and 2 children). The children, who were among those captured, were ages 1 and 2, and had been born at El Portillo. Their mother, Maria Antonia was pregnant with another child (Corzo 49-57).

Table 3. Runaway Slaves Captured at the El Portillo *Palenque*, 1747

NAME	ETHNIC GROUP	AGE	YEARS AS A RUNAWAY
Miguel	Carabalí	50	16
Antonio	Congo	45	15
Antonio Felipa	Congo	40	6
Juaquín Eduardo	Congo	22	1.5
Gregorio	Congo	35	2.5
Salvador	Mandinga	66	5
Juana	Conga mondonga	35	7
Mariana	Carabalí	35	17
María de la Caridad	Mina	50	2
Rosa	Congo	30	3
María Antonia	Criollo (Jamaican)	30	7
No name recorded	Criollo (born in the settlement)	1	
No name recorded	Criollo (born in the settlement)	2	

Source: Based on information contained in the decrees of the trial (AGI, Santo Domingo, leg. 367).

“Source: Based on information contained in the decrees of the trial” (Image via Corzo 60).

Descriptions of palenques

Slavehunter expeditions noted cultivated land in palenques. Depending on the settlement plots of land were separate or communal. Some settlements also had lookout stations and guard dogs. Dwellings were usually scattered over a large area to be harder to detect. (Corzo 197). While effort was put into constructing palenques, maroons understood them as expendable locations, should they no longer become safe.

SETTLEMENTS AS A SYSTEM OF RESISTANCE

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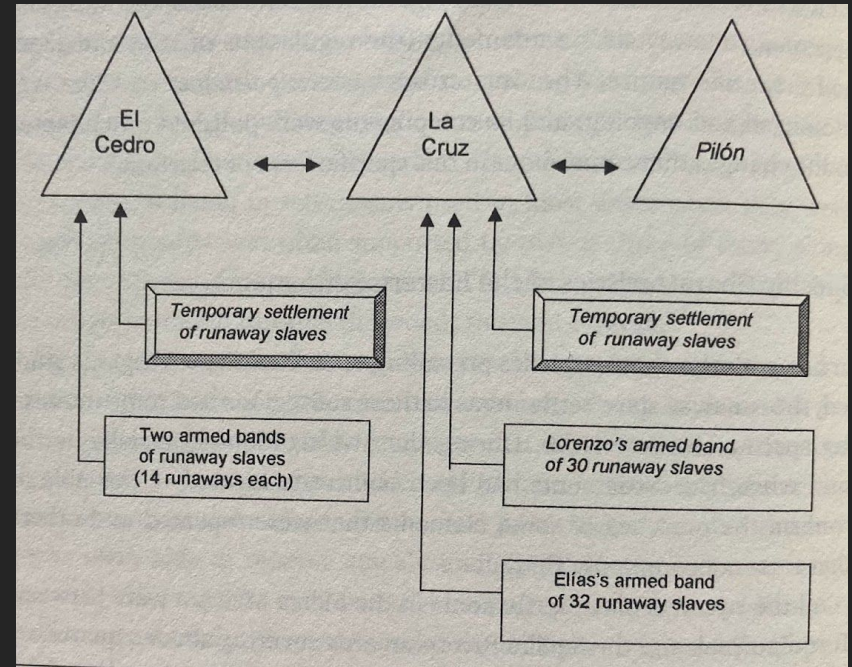
Table 15. Number of Dwellings, Beds, and Inhabitants in Runaway Slave Settlements in Eastern Region (by Subregions)

RUNAWAY SLAVE SETTLEMENT	HUTS	BEDS	INHABITANTS	OBSERVATIONS
<i>Subregion 1. Sierra Maestra</i>				
Bayamito	45		160	Houses with living room and master bedroom
Palenque de la Cruz	39			One hundred plots of land
El Portillo			21	Abundant crops
El Cedro				Forty-seven plots of land and fruit trees
Bayamesa			12	Eleven plots of land

Slavehunter records of Sierra Maestra maroon settlements (Image via Corzo 248).

Interaction between maroon communities

Maroon settlements in the Sierra Maestra had sophisticated communication networks that slave hunters were aware of. Maroon communities were able to provide food and shelter for themselves but were still dependent on one another. Communities exchanged members and information.



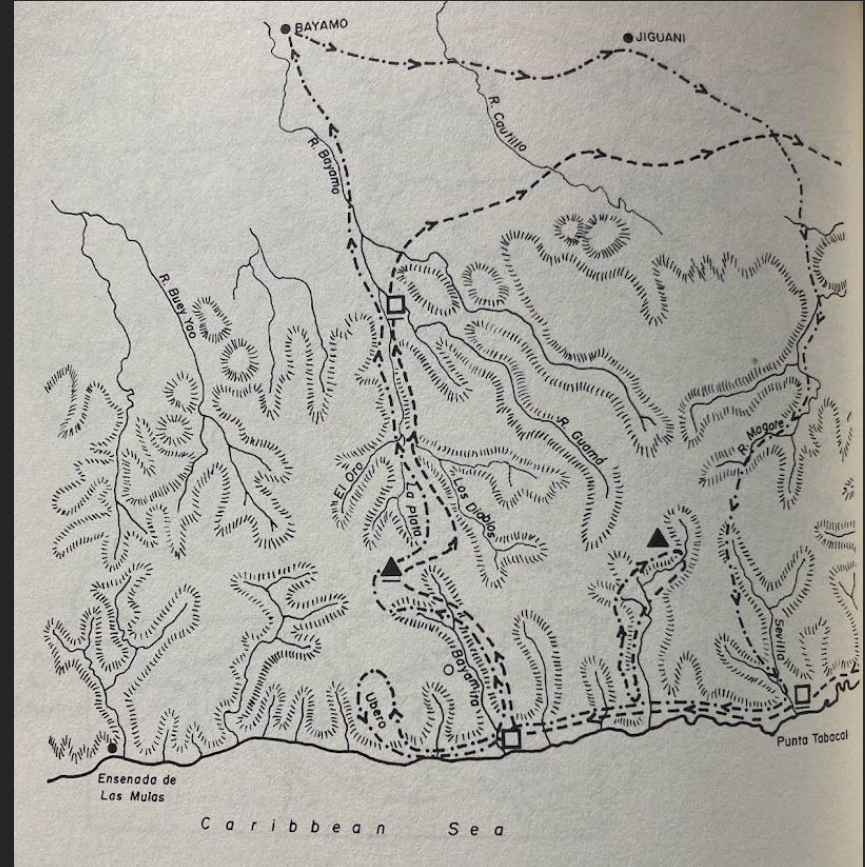
“Communications routes among the runaway slave settlements in the Sierra Maestra subregion”
(Image via Corzo 232).

Colonial repression of maroons

“The first important operations against runaways living in settlements... in all of Cuba... were carried out in the highest part of the Sierra Maestra” (Corzo 227)

The hundred-strong slave hunter expedition searching for El Portillo in 1747 was the earliest expression of an advanced repressive system meant to eradicate sites of marronage. The Cuban colonists became adept at guerrilla warfare for the purposes of countering maroon resistance.

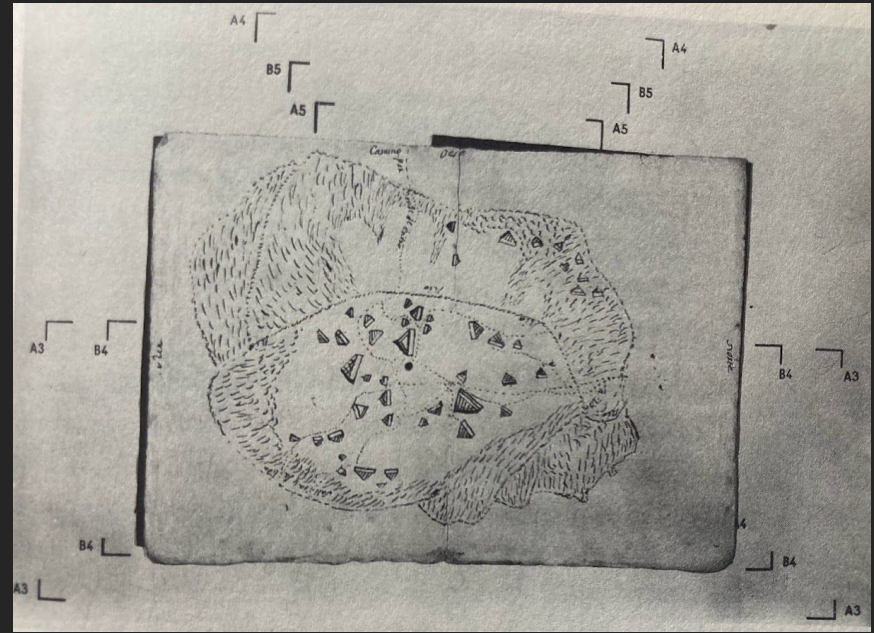
“Routes taken by the members of Eduardo Busquet’s slavehunting militia from (El Cobre) and Antonio Lora’s slavehunting militia (from Bayamo) in 1848” (Image via Corzo 194).



Palenque culture

“To consider that all the runaways living in settlements were fierce warriors who would fight to the death when a settlement was attacked is a forced interpretation that does not correspond to reality” (Corzo 230). Maroons are sometimes characterized as exceptional fighters. While they were certainly tough people, it is unrealistic that they would risk their freedom to defend temporary settlements.

“Everything was determined by the survival needs of the group of humans who were being hunted down” (Corzo 230). Palenques were built for the sole purpose of survival.



“Drawing of an unidentified runaway slave settlement in the eastern region of Cuba” (Image via Corzo 238).

Esteban Montejo remembered, “Truth is that I lived well as a cimarron, very hidden, very comfortable” (Montejo 33)

African Influence in Eastern Cuba

African influence can be found in Cuban art forms such as the music styles “son cubano” (Cuban sound) and changüí.

Changüí utilizes instruments such as the botija, the clave, the bongos, the guira, and maracas, all of which are of west African origin. Son originated in eastern Cuba.



Image via [this location](#)

Changüí in the Sierra Maestra

Changüí is best known for call and response sections, a classically African melody. “This section is sometimes called the montuno, a name that tells of its prevalence in the Sierra Maestra... Occasionally, the subject of the lyrics is Santeria or Abakua, Afro-Cuban religions” (Hill 194). The montuno (“from the mountains”) points to the prevalence of African art in the Sierra Maestra, an environment defined by marronage. Lyrics referencing Santeria adds another connection to the survival of African cultures in Afro-Cuban practices.

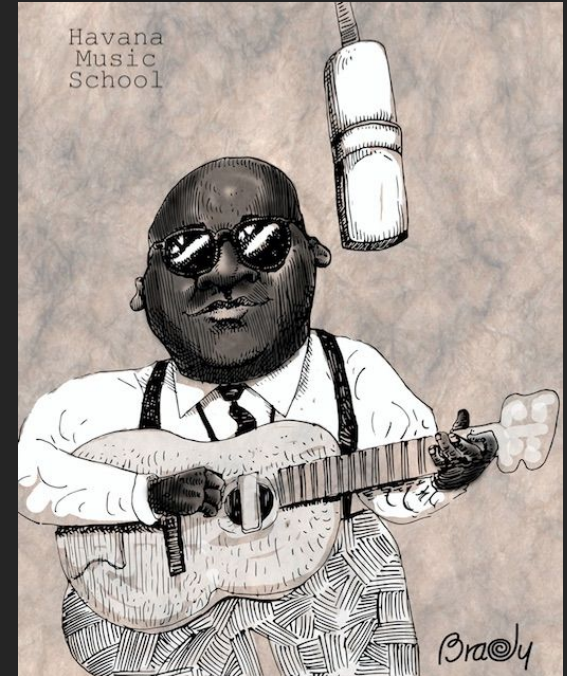


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“The only ones who didn’t have trouble were the old timers from Africa. They were special, and you had to treat them different because they knew all about religion” (Montejo 23)

The Origins of Santeria

Esteban Montejo's recollections speak to the value of religion for enslaved people in Cuba. One of the most prominent Afro-Cuban religions is Santeria. "Oral tradition tells us that the gods arrived in Cuba in 1512 when the first slavery ships sailed into port" (Kirby 39). Santeria traces its roots to the beginning of slavery in Cuba. As Montejo establishes, "Santeria is an African religion" (Montejo 58).



Image via [this location](#)

“Linguistic analyses and observation of behaviors shared by peoples in the New World and Africa left no doubt that southwestern Nigeria was the birthplace of the great majority of Cuban slaves” (Kirby 41). Santeria combines Yoruba deities with Catholicism, which was forced onto enslaved people. Enslaved African people in Cuba were able to adopt Catholic rituals and prayers while continuing to worship the orisha. “An obvious attempt to protect and ensure cultural continuity, this compromise between creeds ensured the survival of African religious ceremonies, rites and beliefs” (Kirby 41).



Yoruba orisha, image via [this location](#)

African Religion in Cuban Maroon Sites

“Groups of runaways living in settlements in the mountains in Cuba observed African magical-religious practices” (Corzo 158). Slave hunters found evidence of religion practiced in mountainous maroon settlements. Their journals note burial grounds with offerings placed on graves.

Marronage and the Black Radical Tradition

In “Black Marxism”, Cedric Robinson hypothesized a historical phenomenon amongst Black people living under colonialism and imperialism. Robinson pointed to slave rebellions, infra-political resistance, religion, and marronage as examples of a collective impulse by people throughout the African diaspora to escape subjugation.

“All of it was a part of a tradition that was considerably different from what was made of the individualistic and often spontaneous motives that energized the runaway, the arsonist, the poisoner” (Robinson 169). Marronage is often misunderstood as the act of Black people running away from slavery. Running away could be an impulsive decision, but the construction of long-term communal settlements was a greater commitment. While escape led to marronage, marronage was distinct as a sustained effort by Black people to build lives outside the violence of enslavement and colonial society. This is why Robinson considers it part of a Black Radical Tradition.

Religion and The Black Radical Tradition

“When its actualization was frustrated, it became obeah, voodoo, myalism, pocomania—the religions of the oppressed...” (Robinson 169). Santeria is a clear example of enslaved Afro-Cubans negotiating the imposition of Catholicism to retain their native Yoruba religion. Inability to actualize their desire to physically escape slavery produced cultural practices connecting them to societies they had lost.

Marronage and the Black Radical Tradition (continued)

When it was realized, it could become the Palmares, the Bush Negro settlements, and, at its heights, Haiti” (Robinson 169).

Robinson asserts that where it was able to flourish, the so-called “Black Radical Tradition” appeared in permanent maroon communities. Marronage in the Cuban context was smaller in scale than Palmares, Brazil. Still, the attempt was made by maroons to construct autonomous communities with African characters.

“Supremacy to metaphysics not the material” (Robinson 169).

A characteristic of the Black Radical Tradition which Robinson identifies is a focus on metaphysics, rather than the material world. This can be seen in the willingness of maroons to abandon their settlements to escape raids. Their freedom from bondage took precedent over the living spaces they had spent months building. In the case of Santeria, the religion allowed people living under bondage a place to take agency over their own lives.

Conclusions

The decentralized eastern Cuban colonial society in the 17th-19th centuries facilitated slave flight. These runaways were able to establish settlements in regional mountains, especially the Sierra Maestra range. The Oriente region also birthed distinctly African art, such as changüí. Enslaved people and maroons fostered syncretic religions like Santería. Maroon communities like El Portillo, art forms including changüí, and religions such as Santería were aspects of a broad tradition amongst Afro-Cubans, and Black people throughout colonial societies. A tradition which prioritized escape from subjugation, physical or mental, above all else. As Esteban Montejo remembered, he was a maroon from birth.

Unanswered Questions

Questions remain on the maroon communities of Eastern Cuba.

How did maroons regard themselves with relation to Africa or Cuba? How did maroons interact with each other? Did maroons encounter indigenous people of the region?

How did the children of Maria Antonia- born at El Portillo and sold into slavery following the raid- regard their family's history? How did children born at maroon settlements in Cuba understand the world?

The voice of Cuban maroons is largely absent in the scholarship on marronage in Cuba.

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