

# Environment and Architecture: Maroon Communities in Suriname

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Nick Howland

# Goals and Aims of the Project

This project has three main goals; the first is to allow new audiences to understand the idea of marronage. The second is to introduce the topic of biomimicry as a formational tool for understanding current relevancies of marronage. Finally, use Surinamese maroons as an example of what maroon settlements had and continue to look like.

# What Does Maroon Mean?

Maroon is the term used to describe a formerly enslaved individual that has escaped from enslavement. The word in English comes from the Spanish word *cimarrón*, meaning feral cattle, in the 1530s. Later in the century, it was understood to mean escaped enslaved indigenous peoples who fled to safer spaces.<sup>1</sup>

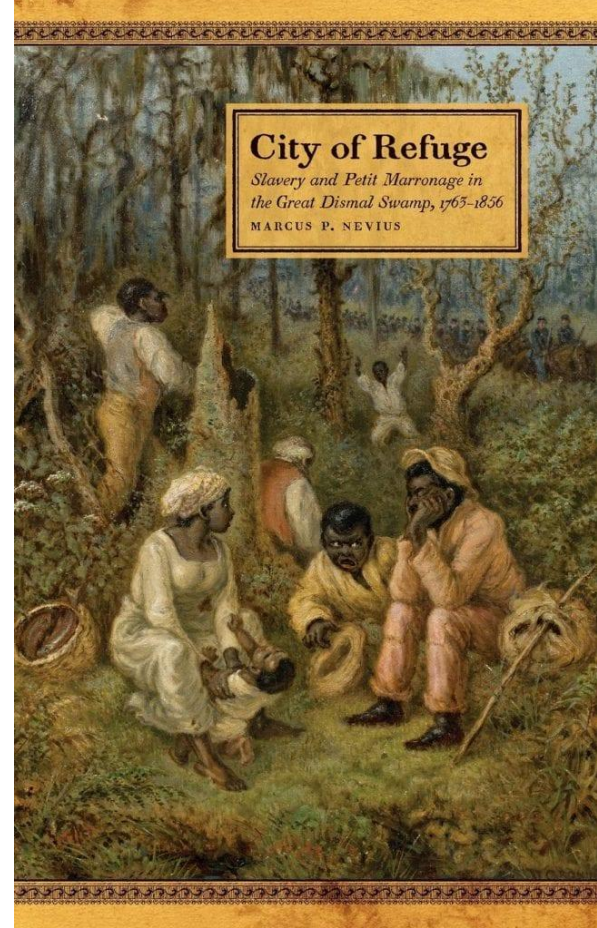


Discovery of Nat Turner. , 1880. Photograph.  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/cph11571/>.

<sup>1</sup> Marcus P. (Marcus Peyton) Nevius, *City of Refuge: Slavery and Petit Marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp, 1763-1856*, *Race in the Atlantic World, 1700-1900* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2020), 7.

# What is Marronage?

Marronage is the verb for Maroon. It describes the process of self-emancipation of enslaved individuals from enslavement. It exists in many different contexts but it shares the same characteristics; escape from enslavement and resisting the institution of enslavement. Marronage has two main forms; petit and grand.



Neivus Marcus P. 2020. *City of Refuge : Slavery and Petit Marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp 1763-1856*. Athens: University of Georgia Press. From *Fugitive Slaves in the Dismal Swamp* by David Edward Cronin, 1888

# Petit Marronage

Petit, as defined and described by Nevius in *City of Refuge* as, enslaved individuals or small groups of enslaved people engaged in petit marronage fled oppressive slave societies in the short term, without intending to remain indefinitely in flight or to escape permanently from the region in which they lived.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup>Nevius, 7.

# Grand Marronage

Grand marronage reflects the largest maroon camps, communities that penetrated the foundations of plantation systems throughout the Atlantic world.<sup>3</sup> Grand marronage is the long term intent to escape and create a society and community that is separate from and actively rebels against enslavement.

<sup>3</sup>Nevius, 7.



*Maroon village, Surinam River 1955*

[www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)

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Ndyuka Maroon Village, Suriname River, 1955, Milwaukee Public Library Collection.

# Resistance

The goal of either form of marronage is to resist. Resistance can come in many forms.

The act of marronage is one of the most powerful. Escape directly devalues the system of enslavement and promotes systems that do not rely on enslavement. Living in maroon communities solidifies the resistance of the people that have escaped and can encourage others to escape, which furthers the call for resistance.



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“Zumbi dos Palmares: An African warrior in Brazil – The legend of the nation’s greatest black leader continues to be a topic of debate and inspiration.” Black Women of Brazil. August 18, 2014.

# Relationship to the Environment

Marronage relies upon continuous protection from detection by enslavers. The natural environment provides some of the best protection for these maroons. The ability to navigate the wilderness and to use it to evade captors is linked to the heightened relationship with the land. These maroons depended on the environment for their survival with gathering, hunting, and access to water. The maroon communities of Suriname exemplify these relationships to nature and marronage.



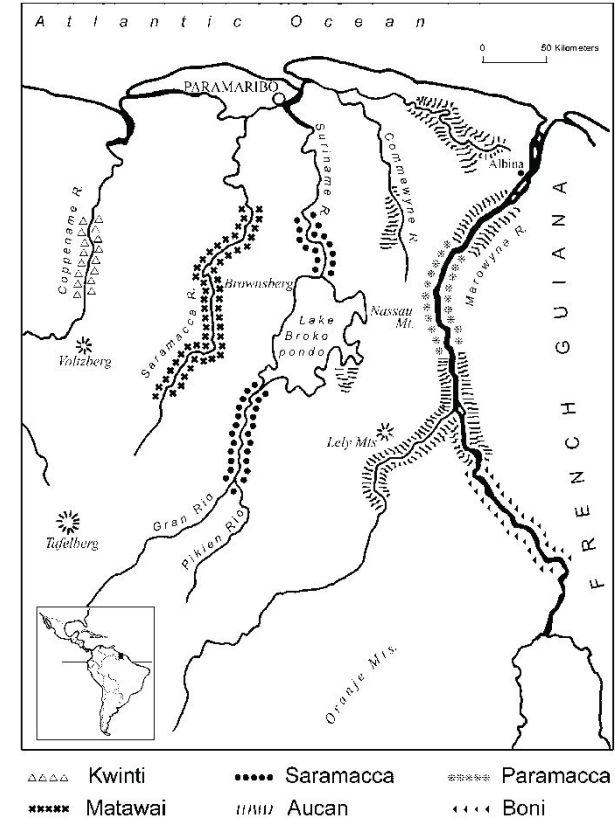
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Photographer unknown, Accompong Town Jamaica.



# Maroon Communities in Suriname

Suriname, a former Dutch colony, has an extensive history of marronage and independent maroon communities. As of 2002, there was an estimated 71,000 maroons left in Suriname, with an estimated 45,000 living in the surrounding countries and the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup> Suriname has six main maroon communities, which are split into two broad categories based on region, culture, and linguistics.<sup>5</sup> They are the Eastern and Central branches. They share many of the same characteristics and relationship to the environment.



<sup>4</sup> Richard Price, "Maroons in Suriname and Guyane: How Many and Where," *NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 76, no. 1/2 (2002): 81–88.

<sup>5</sup> "Maroons," Minority Rights Group, June 19, 2015, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/maroons/>.

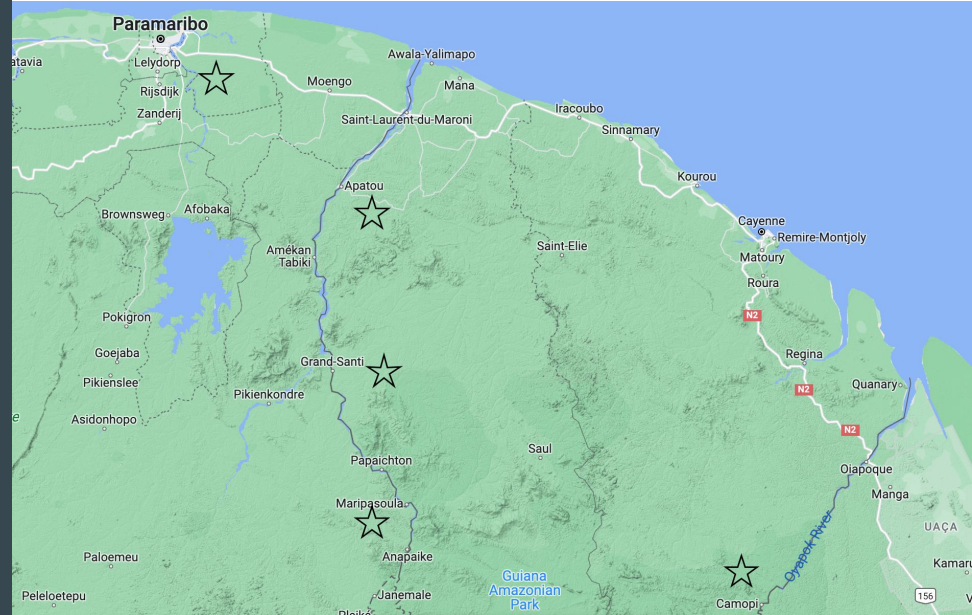
Andel, Tinde & Quiroz, Diana & Towns, Alexandra & Ruyschaert, Sofie & Van't Klooster, Charlotte & Berg, Margot. (2014).

# The Eastern Branch

The Eastern Branch consists of three maroon groups the Djuka, Aluku, and the Paramaka.

The groups live along the rivers on the Eastern half of Suriname and the river that creates the border between Suriname and French Guiana.

Djuka has the largest population of over 15,000. These groups share a common language; Ndjuka.<sup>6</sup>

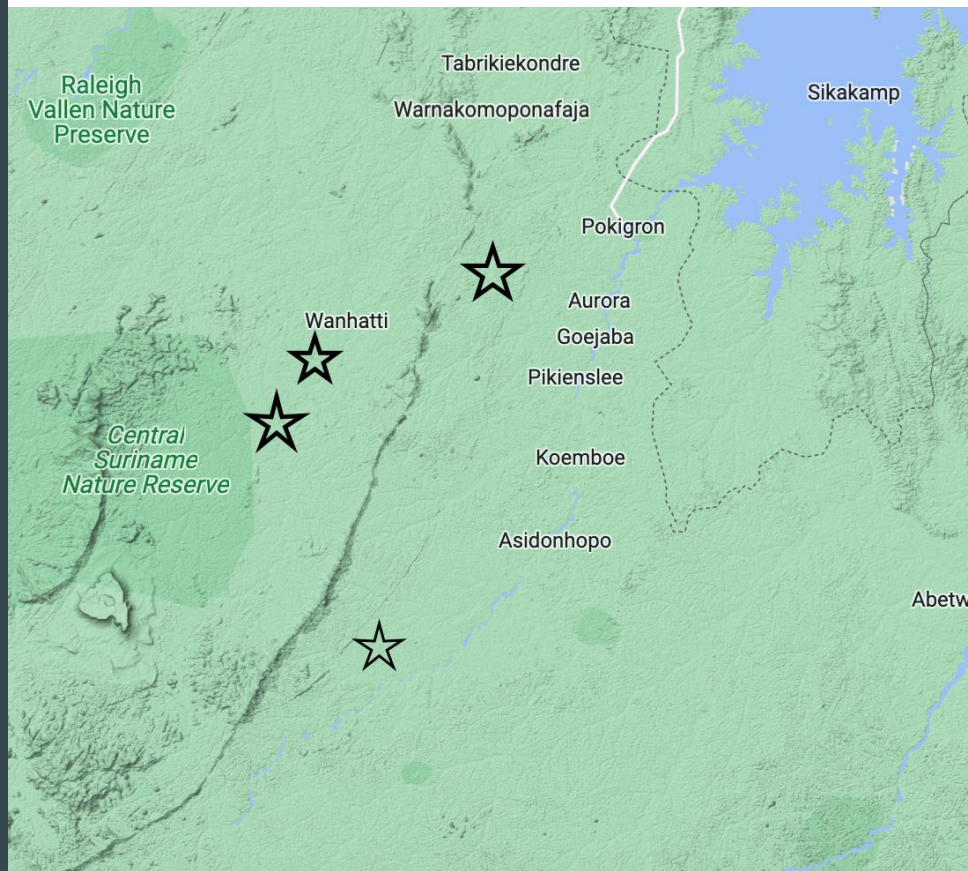


Nick Howland, Google Maps, Screenshot with Stars representing maroon communities in Suriname.

<sup>6</sup> “Maroons,” Minority Rights Group, June 19, 2015, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/maroons/>.

# The Central Branch

The Central Branch of maroons in Suriname consists of the Saramaka, the Matawai, and the Kwinti.<sup>7</sup> These groups live within the center of Suriname in the inland sections along the Saramaka River and the Suriname River. The Saramaka are the largest group, with over 20,000 people; the Matawai has around 5,000 people, and the Kwinti has under 500.<sup>8</sup> The Saramaka and Matawai speak Saramaccan; it is unclear what language the Kwinti speak since there are so few people.



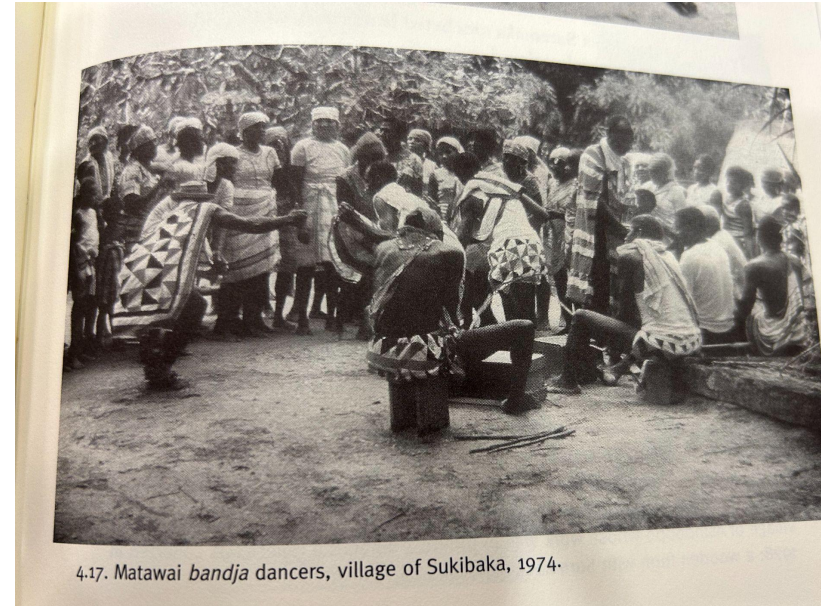
Nick Howland, Google Maps, Stars representing the central maroon communities in Suriname.

<sup>7</sup> “Maroons,” Minority Rights Group, June 19, 2015, <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/maroons/>.

<sup>8</sup> Price, “Maroons in Suriname and Guyane.”

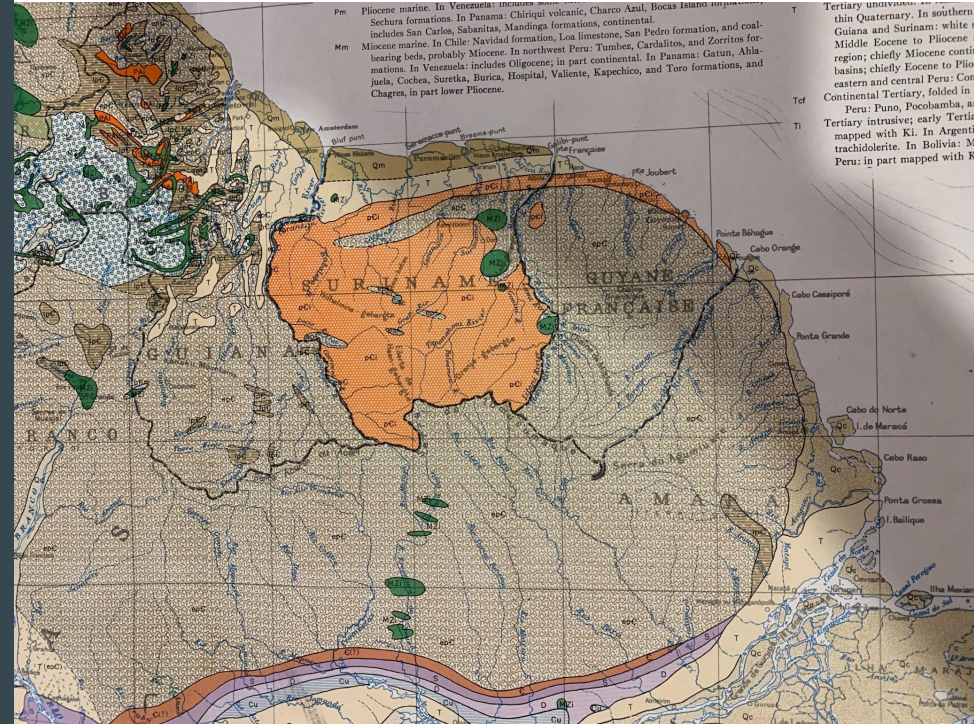
# What Links These Communities?

All of these communities share a common story of escape and resistance. They branch out from the same practice; marronage. These maroons have actively resisted enslavement by moving into the interior of the country away from settlements. The environment that these people lived and continue to live in is one of extreme challenges and was highly protective of these populations.



# Geography of Suriname

Suriname's geography is based upon a pre-cambrian intrusive plate structure, meaning that it is mostly granite which provides stable conditions for land in the interior where maroons would settle.<sup>9</sup> Suriname has four distinct geographic types, rainforest, savannah, coastal swamps, and mountainous. Suriname has two mountain ranges, the Bakhuis and the Van Asch Van Wijck Mountains. These factors make Suriname's geography extremely diverse and difficult to traverse.

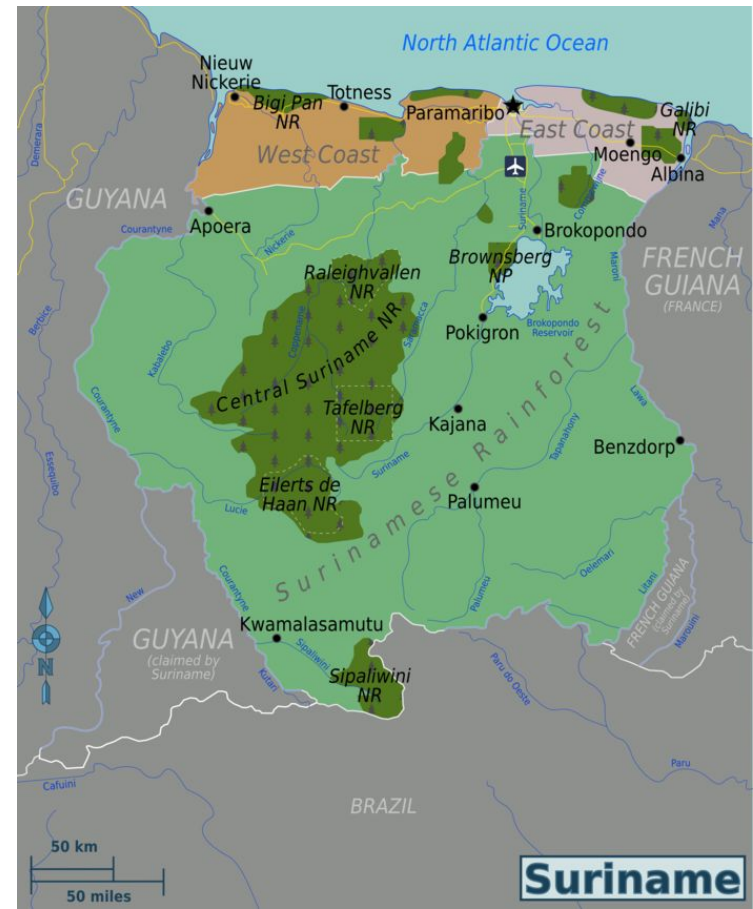


Geological Map of South America, Macalester College Archives, 2023.

<sup>9</sup>“Precambrian - Precambrian Geology | Britannica,” accessed May 7, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/science/Precambrian/Precambrian-geology>.

# Environment of Suriname

Suriname is made up of rainforest, savannah, coastal swamp, and mountainous terrain. Many of these maroon communities escaped along the rivers to the heavily rainforests areas on the base of mountains. These communities would have to contend with dense forests, wet climate and harsh terrain in order to survive undiscovered. Suriname provided the perfect conditions for that escape and ability to continue to live undetected.



The Perry-Castañeda Library (PCL) Map Collection, Map of Suriname, 2021.

# Settlements

Grand marronage relies upon the establishment of settlements that are both secure but easily movable in case of discovery. These settlements range in construction and complexity. For the purposes of this examination of environmental architecture and marronage the settlements are split into modern and historical. These settlements highlight the uses of structures and the intentionality of the buildings.



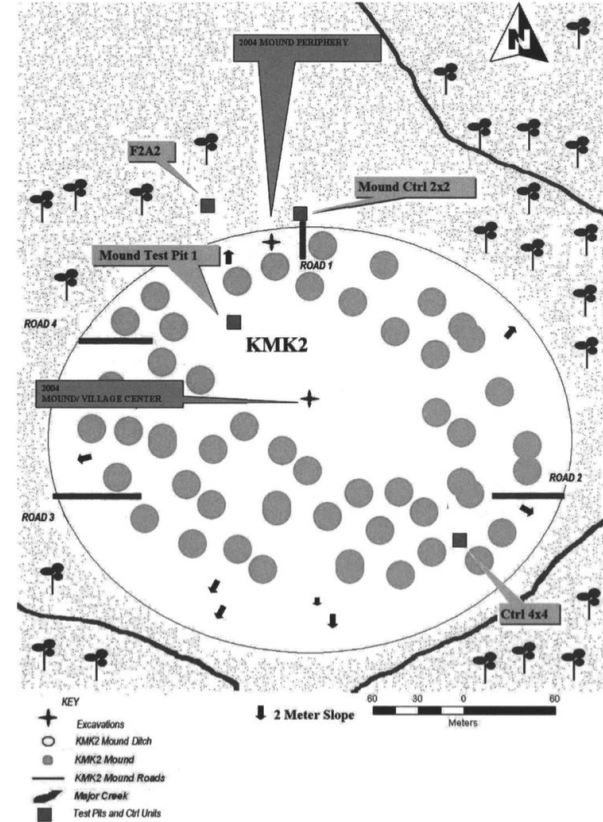
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Image of Maroon Settlement in Suriname. Photographer Unknown.

# Historical Villages

Maroons in Suriname have created numerous settlements with many similarities. An archeological dig on these historical maroon settlements provides important information on their uses and purpose. They highlight the need for protections from discovery, predators, and extreme weather.<sup>10</sup> Many of the settlements that were studied were formed in a radial pattern meaning they have a central point and are built outwards with points of exit in case of discovery.

Figure 4: Map of KMK2



<sup>10</sup> Cheryl White, "Archaeological Investigation of Suriname Maroon Ancestral Communities," *Caribbean Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2009): 65–vi.

WHITE, CHERYL. "Archaeological Investigation of Suriname Maroon Ancestral Communities." *Caribbean Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2009): 65–vi.



# Historical Villages Cont.

The archaeological study highlights the structure of these historic structures. In the image to the right, the settlements are surrounded by a ditch for both drainage and separation from the outside rainforest with the large tree canopy on either side of the ditch to hide the settlement. Within this canopy, the settlement did not clear cut the trees but are theorized to have built around them for protection and stability.<sup>11</sup>

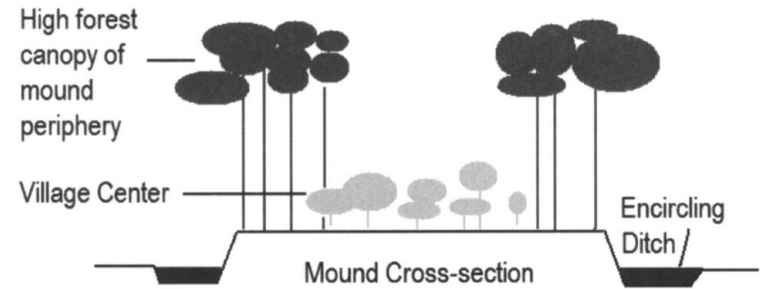


Fig 8c

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WHITE, CHERYL. "Archaeological Investigation of Suriname Maroon Ancestral Communities." *Caribbean Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2009): 65–vi.

<sup>11</sup> Cheryl White, "Archaeological Investigation of Suriname Maroon Ancestral Communities," *Caribbean*

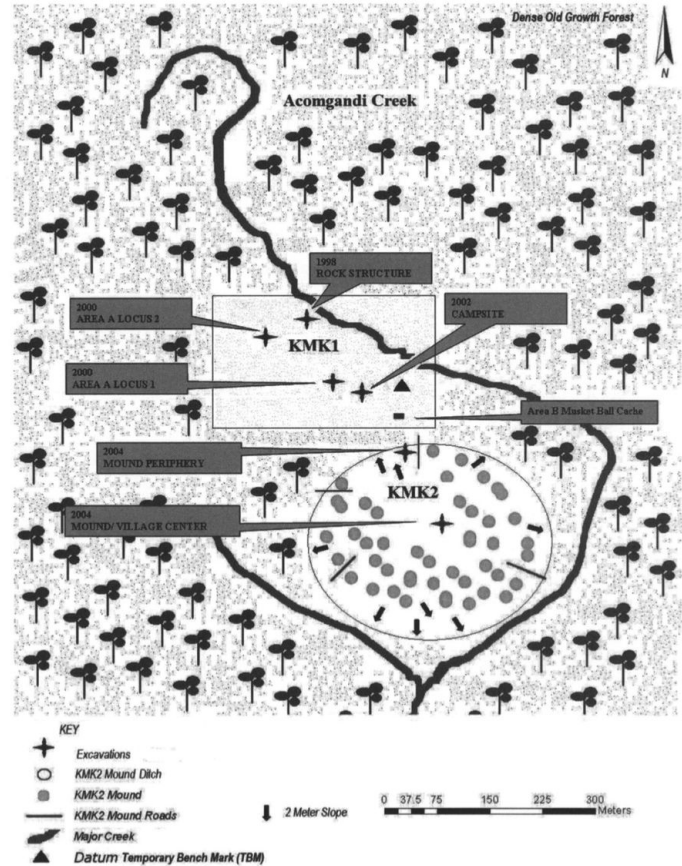
# Historical Villages Images



2.7. A garden camp on the upper Pikilio which has three houses, four open-sided structures, and a menstrual hut (on the right in this photo).

Price, Richard. Photograph, A garden camp on the upper Pikilio, 1968.

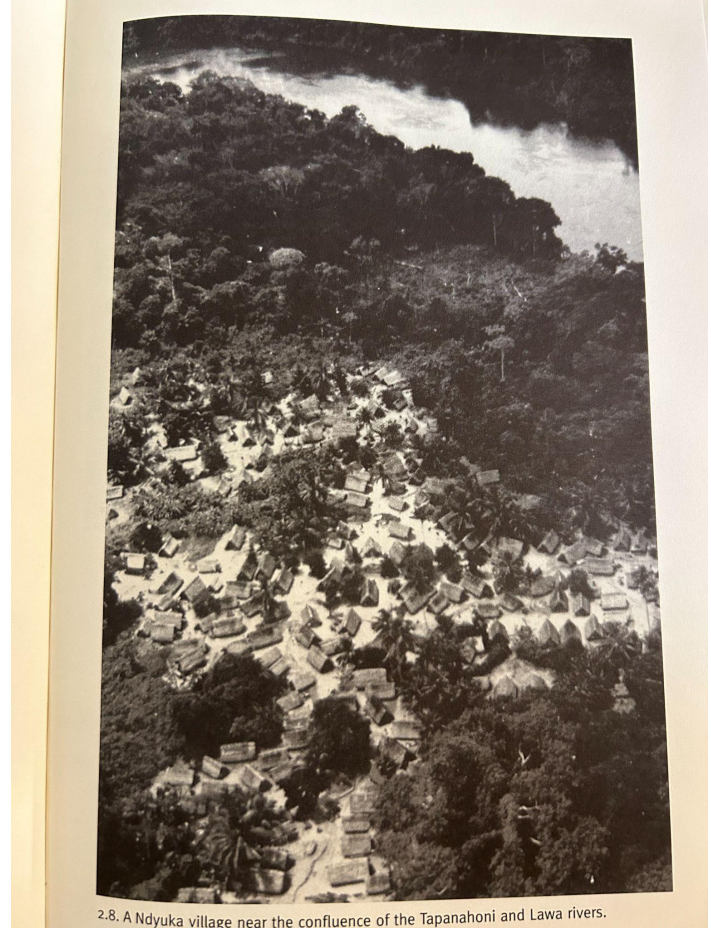
Figure 2: Map of Kumako settlement, KMK1 vis-à-vis KMK2



WHITE, CHERYL. "Archaeological Investigation of Suriname Maroon Ancestral Communities." *Caribbean Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2009): 65–vi.

# Modern Villages

The study of modern maroon villages in Suriname is almost non-existent. These communities still participate in many of the same religious and spiritual practices as before. A similar examination has not been fully investigated in connection to architecture in the settlements. As exemplified by the image on the right, these villages run along the river and are not made in the traditional western grid system but are made based on human living patterns and connection to environmental factors such as cliffs and hills.

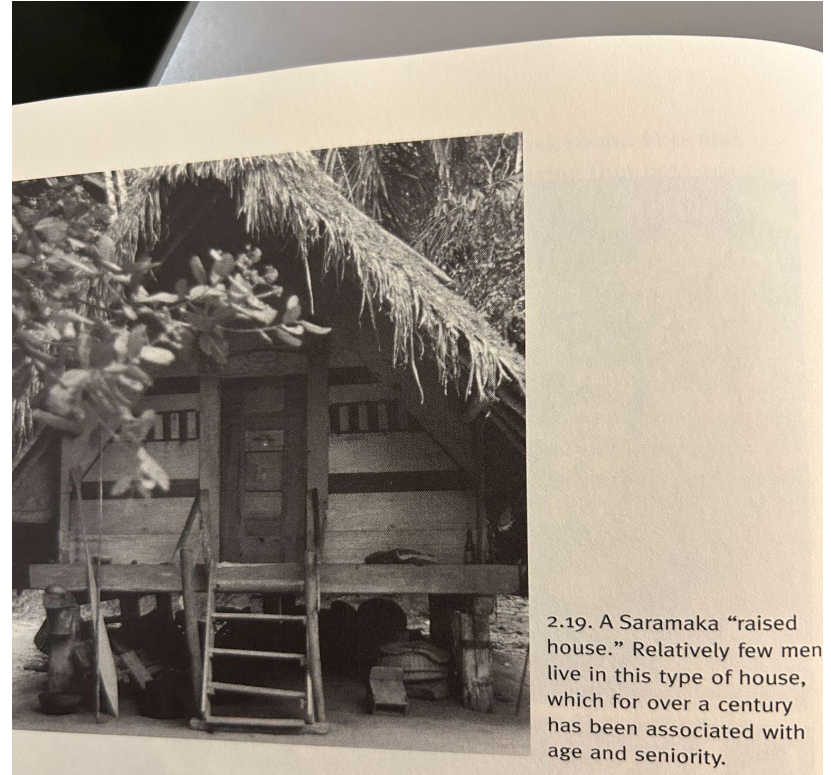


2.8. A Ndyuka village near the confluence of the Tapanahoni and Lawa rivers.

Wekker, Dr. J. B. Ch.. A Ndyuka village near the confluence of the Tapanahoni and Lawa Rivers, Photograph, 1962.

# Architecture

The architecture of these settlements reflect cultural and environmental factors. Many of the buildings are raised to prevent flooding from extreme weather conditions. Other structures have open faces for ceremonial and practical purposes. The materials used for these structures are made by naturally occurring materials such as leaf mixtures, straw and grasses. These buildings have lasted for generations but are also easily replicated and replaced in case of extreme weather conditions.<sup>12</sup>



2.19. A Saramaka “raised house.” Relatively few men live in this type of house, which for over a century has been associated with age and seniority.

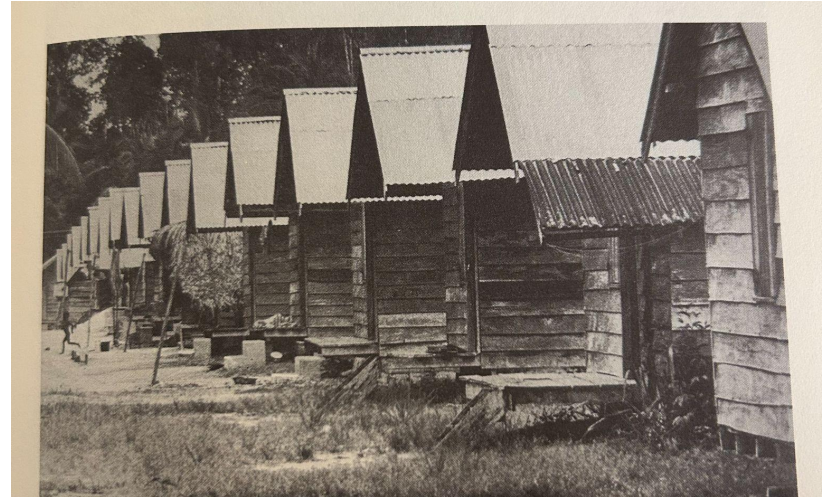
<sup>12</sup> Sally Price, Richard Price, and Richard Price, *Maroon Arts: Cultural Vitality in the African Diaspora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

# Architecture Cont.



2.14. A Saramaka woman's house. A basket, a cassava press, brooms, and protective medicines hang on the front wall. Horticultural products are stored in the bucket, basket, washtub, and sawed-off oil drum under the roof overhang.

Price, Richard. House of Kabuesi, Photograph, 1968.



Diepraam, Willem. Brownsveg, From van Westerloo and Diepraam, Photograph, 1975.

# Connections Between Marronage and Environment

Marronage depends upon the environment. Maroons could not escape and continue to live in freedom without the natural environment and the resources. The two topics are intertwined to their core. Maroons used the environment to the fullest extent without destroying its natural protection and with few negative externalities.



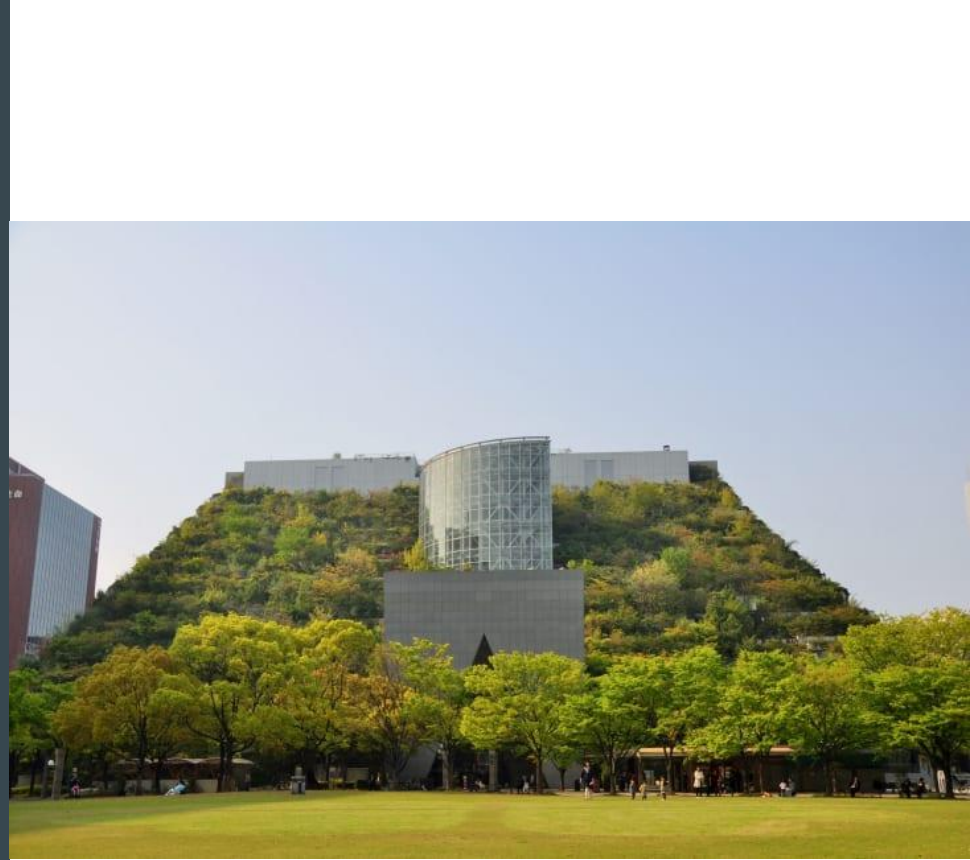
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Nick Howland, Google Earth, Satellite Image of Maroon Settlement in Suriname, 2023.

# Modern Architecture Connections

How can we learn from Maroon communities in their relationship to nature and architecture? Maroon communities prioritized keeping nature protected in order to use its natural protection and benefits.<sup>13</sup>

This principle can be adapted to modern architecture from environmentally friendly design and biomimicry.



<sup>13</sup> Richard Price, “Maroons in Suriname and Guyane: How Many and Where,” *NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 76, no. 1/2 (2002): 81–88.

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CNN (Credit to Shutterstock Photographer Unknown), ACROS Fukuoka Prefectural International Hall, Photograph, 2020.

# Biomimicry

Biomimicry is the emulation or imitation of nature in its many forms, systems and processes to solve the most pressing challenges faced by our world today.<sup>14</sup>

Biomimicry uses the template that nature has given us and applies to current industry and architecture. It aims to allow for our society to become more environmentally friendly and efficient.



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Elytra Filament Pavilion at the V&A, 2016. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

<sup>14</sup>Mwila Nkandu and Halil Alibaba, "Biomimicry as an Alternative Approach to Sustainability," *Bulletin of the Polytechnic Institute of Jassy, CONSTRUCTIONS. ARCHITECTURE Section 8* (January 1, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.5923/j.arch.20180801.01>.



# Biomimicry Cont.



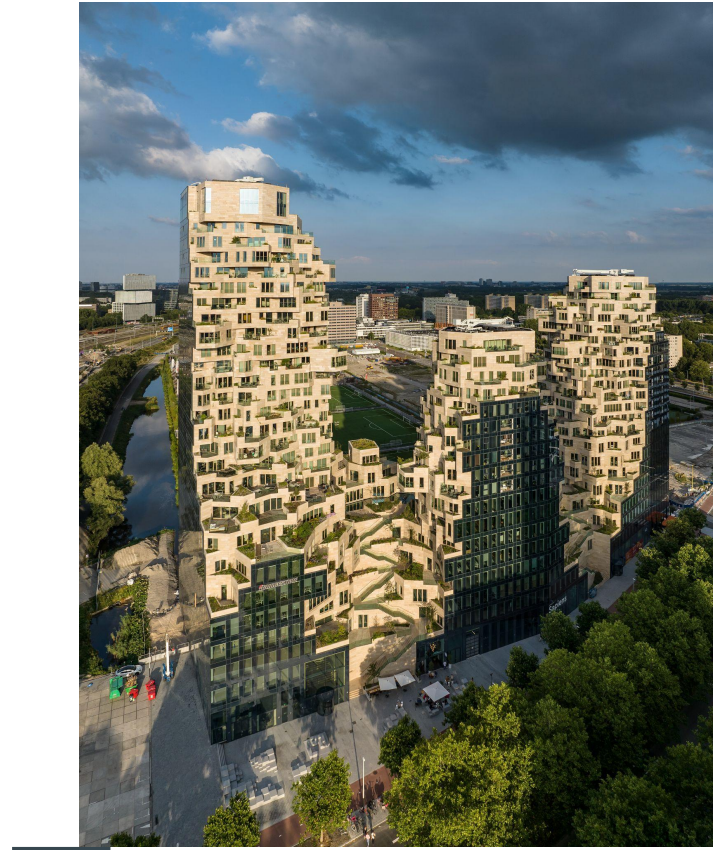
The Gherkin, Norman Foster Foundation Archive.



Top: Architectural Digest.  
Bottom: Santiago Calatrava, Milwaukee Art Museum.

# Environmental Architecture

Environmental architecture also known as sustainable architecture is grounded in promoting sustainable building practices that curb the emissions of building and to promote natural elements within the architecture.<sup>15</sup> It is exemplified by plants being incorporated into the design either on the exterior or using natural light to allow for plants to grow inside. The buildings aim to meet the strictest standards of sustainability.



Ossip van Duivenbode, Valley Buildings, Amsterdam Zuidas, Netherlands, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> “What Is Sustainable Architecture,” Barker Associates, accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.barker-associates.co.uk/service/architecture/what-is-sustainable-architecture/>.

# Environmental Architecture Cont.



Getty Images, Westend61.

Kampung Admiralty / Ramboll Studio Dreiseitl and WOHA. Image Courtesy of WOHA

# Architecture of Resisting Systems of Power

Biomimicry and Environmental Architecture is meant to solve the problems of pollution in buildings. But how do we actually resist? Marronage and the architectural set up of the settlements may hold the key to using space and architectural materials correctly to reduce emissions. Maroons depend on the sustainability of nature in order to survive and if we use those same principles we may be able to resist the current systems of power that drive high emissions.



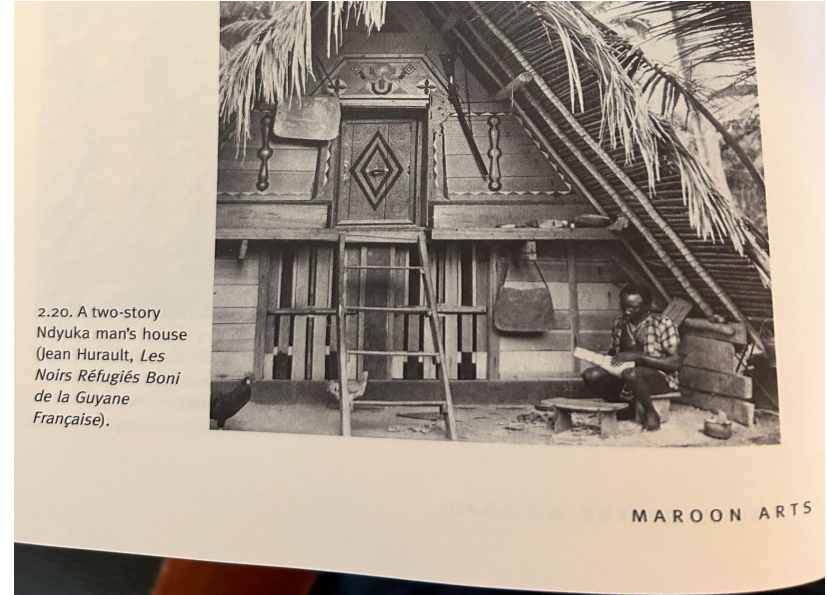
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Panama Rainforest Discovery Center, Arch Daily.

# Modern Architecture Learning from Marronage

So what can modern architecture learn from Marronage? Maroons were constantly trying to find the best way to resist power and become free from systems of oppression. That attitude can be translated to the understanding of how to make the cities and architecture that we are designing work for people and secure a better future for everyone.

Architecture should follow in the footsteps of marronage with the goal of changing the systems of oppression and power in order to benefit all people.



2.20. A two-story  
Ndyuka man's house  
(Jean Hurault, *Les  
Noirs Réfugiés Boni  
de la Guyane  
Française*).

MAROON ARTS

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Hurault, Jean. A two-story Ndyuka man's house, *Les Noirs Réfugiés Boni de la Guyane Française*, 1961.

# Connecting to Maroon Resistance and the Future

The goal of this project is to highlight Marronage, the Suriname maroons, and architecture to begin a conversation about the future of building and the sustainability of our current systems. Marronage is central to the understanding of resistance to systems of oppression. This can be tailored to city building and architectural projects that deal with the impending climate disaster. By highlighting Surinamese maroons and sustainable architecture, two ideas that seem totally separate but can be interpreted in conversation to inspire new ways of thinking. That is the ultimate goal of marronage, to change the systems and to change the ways of thinking.

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<https://www.barker-associates.co.uk/service/architecture/what-is-sustainable-architecture/>.
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<https://www.britannica.com/science/Precambrian/Precambrian-geology>.
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- Price, Sally, Richard Price, and Richard Price. *Maroon Arts: Cultural Vitality in the African Diaspora*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.
- White, Cheryl. "Archaeological Investigation of Suriname Maroon Ancestral Communities." *Caribbean Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2009): 65–vi.