

## Refiguring Palmares

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As part of the 1995 tricentennial commemoration of the fall of Palmares, the largest and most famous of Brazilian *quilombos* (runaway slave communities), I prepared a paper trying to raise questions about our historiographic knowledge. This article revisits and expands those ideas.<sup>1</sup> I had spent some time trying to remind myself what is known—and how we know it—about this iconic site of black resistance in the Americas. Toward this end, I reread the rich work of such scholars as Raymundo Nina Rodrigues (1935), Arthur Ramos (1935), Ernesto Ennis (1938), Edison Carneiro (1946), M. M. de Freitas (1954), R. K. Kent (1965), Clóvis Moura (1972), and Décio Freitas (1973), and thought back on the two Palmares films of Carlos Diegues (*Ganga-Zumba* and *Quilombo*), which I had seen years earlier. I also had the opportunity to read a preliminary report of the ongoing archaeological investigations by Pedro Funari and his team (see now Funari 1996).

What strikes me most forcefully from this perusal of the literature is *how little we really know about Palmares* relative to what we might like to know. I wish to be precise in explaining what I mean, since I write from a special, unashamedly comparative perspective, one that despite its necessarily superficial and tentative nature I hope may foster further scholarship and reflection, especially by scholars in Brazil.<sup>2</sup>

Palmares was one of a class of “Maroon societies” (sometimes single communities, in other cases confederations or republics or quasi nations) that developed and flourished throughout the colonial Americas, wherever African slavery had been established. While such Maroon communities were, from one perspective, the antithesis of all that slavery stood for, they were at the same time everywhere an embarrassingly visible part of these systems. Just as the very nature of plantation slavery implied violence and resistance, the wilderness setting of early New World plantations made marronage and the existence of Maroon communities a ubiquitous reality. Throughout Afro-America—from what became the United States down through the Caribbean to Brazil—such communities stood as an heroic challenge to colonial authority, and as living proof of the existence of a slave consciousness that refused to be limited by the whites’ conception or manipulation of it.<sup>3</sup>

My own expertise concerns a Maroon society some 2500 kilometers to the northwest of Palmares, in what is now the Republic of Suriname. At first blush, it appears to have many historical similarities to Palmares, but it also has one major difference—the Saramaka Maroons continue to exist as a proud and semi-independent people today. I have had the privilege to work with Saramakas as ethnographer and historian for nearly forty years and I want, here, to try and tease out some possible lessons from that work as they might be applicable to our understandings of Palmares.

It strikes me that if we had only written documents to go by—and the contemporary Dutch documents about the wars against the Saramakas are remarkably similar to the Dutch and Portuguese documents about the wars against Palmares—we might envision Saramaka society during its first century of existence very much the way we envision Palmares during its own splendid century. Yet, on the basis of other kinds of evidence—not available for Palmares—we now know that such a picture of Saramaka would be not only incomplete but in important respects false. I have published an anthology of contemporary documents relating to the colonial wars against the Saramakas that includes the field diaries of expedition commanders, the official interrogation of a slave spy sent in to learn about the Saramakas and then escape back to the whites, the journals of “peacemaking” expeditions, and detailed treaties between colonists and Maroons (Price 1983b). There is much here of interest and it is a possible exercise to try to “read through” these documents to try to understand from the inside what these observers were looking at very much from the outside. Yet such an effort falls dramatically short, as I will suggest, when put in the context of information originating, instead, with Saramakas themselves. It is important to underscore that the great bulk of our knowledge of Palmares comes from the very similar writings of military men, or administrators, all of whom were seeking to destroy the great *quilombo*, so these writings are strong in describing Palmarino military fortifications, weaponry, and the like. We should never forget that almost all of what we know about Palmares derives from the written words of its mortal enemies.

What is different for Saramaka is that it has been possible for me to work with the descendants of the very people who fought in the colonial wars of liberation, who today preserve precious and precise memories of that period and its continuing meaning in their lives, and to record their views of events and society during the years they refer to as “First-Time.” The picture of Saramaka life and society that emerges (Price 1983a and 1990) differs in important ways from that contained in the outsider documents. By considering some of these differences we can, perhaps,

begin to imagine some of what might be missing in our picture of Palmares, which is derived from very similar outsider sources.

The half century of persistent, organized *entradas* into Palmares produced what scholars have assumed to be a clear picture of the *quilombo's* political organization: a quasi-monarchical system that made sense to the Dutch and Portuguese (who were thinking of European models), and to mid- and late twentieth-century historians (who envisioned African models)—Ganga-Zumba with his high council, followed by the redoubtable Zumbi. What emerges from twentieth-century Saramaka accounts of their own early political history is, first, that the presumed centralization of authority was vastly exaggerated by the whites, and second that the identity of many of the Saramakas' foremost political leaders was absolutely unknown to the colonists. Colonial Saramaka population and territory was roughly comparable in scale to that of Palmares—many different communities spread over a vast landscape. But we now know that actual political authority was far more dispersed than the whites believed, with rival leaders from different, geographically dispersed communities (or groups of communities) constantly jockeying for power. The oral accounts make clear that one of the cardinal principles of Saramaka survival strategy was not to reveal to the whites who their real leaders were. During the wars, some of the names of leaders indeed filtered out as a result of the torture of Saramaka captives and the interrogations of slave spies sent in to get information, and as a result of abortive attempts at peacemaking. But the identity of the bulk of political leaders—and certainly of the key ritual/spiritual leaders, who often wielded similar authority—was successfully hidden from the whites. Without twentieth-century historical ethnography in Saramaka, we would have only a very dim view of the actual nature of Saramaka political and military organization during the wars of liberation and we would not even know the names of some of their greatest leaders. The same is true for the names of many of the wartime Maroon communities themselves. How many of the names of the eleven population centers of Palmares—Macaco, Subupira, Acotirene, and so forth—were the names used by the *quilombolas* themselves? Only some, if we judge by the Suriname experience, where “whitefolks’ names” for Saramaka strongholds substitute in the documents for the names used by Saramakas (which were often deliberately protected from the colonists’ knowledge). Even as late as the 1960s, some of the names for Saramaka villages on the official maps of Suriname were the names of nearby cemeteries or were obscenities spoken by Saramakas to the urban mapmakers who had asked them (but who did not understand their language).

Based on its Suriname analogs, our understanding of the 1678 treaty signed by Ganga-Zumba in Recife deserves further interpretation. The agreement, on the part of the Palmarinos, to turn back to the colonists those community members who were not born in Palmares, has often been assumed by scholars to be the measure of Ganga-Zumba's weakness and the cause of his ultimate downfall. From a Suriname perspective, I would make several alternative speculations. First, the proportion of locally born people in Palmares would by this time have been quite high (though, as has been pointed out, perhaps not as high in Zumbi's *mocambo* as in Macaco itself). But more important, it was common for a similar clause to be part of Maroon treaties throughout the Americas but for Maroons, over time, to quietly but effectively subvert that part of the treaty.

We have very detailed information over the course of fifty years about the outcome of the Saramaka treaty—which they “signed” with the whites by ritually drinking each other's blood—agreeing to return to the colonists all of their fellows who were not members of their communities prior to the treaty. The story gleaned from the whitefolks' documents (which claim general success with the process) and that from Saramaka oral accounts show radical contrast. In fact, the Saramakas effectively hid from the whites—despite there being white administrators present much of the time in their villages after the treaties—very large parts of their population who were, according to the treaty, “illegal.” How they managed this feat is too complex to go into here (see Price 1990 for details). However, there seems little reason to assume that a promise by Maroons to their colonial enemies to betray, say, their own sisters or their own brothers-in-law (and such would have been the effects of the Saramaka treaty—or that in Palmares—had they been honored) would have been kept by the Maroons. While the emphasis in thinking about Palmares has—in part because of the nature of the available documents—been on war and military strategies of force, more attention ought to be paid to strategies of dissimulation, to the ways Palmarinos interacted with surrounding populations, to the ways in which they undoubtedly knew far more about whitefolks and their intentions than the colonists did about them.

To take another example, consider the nature of domestic organization. Outsider documents depict Palmares as severely lacking women (one slave spy reported common polyandry) and *quilombolas*, like their Saramaka counterparts, frequently participating in raids on plantations to carry them off. Moreover, the specificities of Brazilian psychosexual realities seem to have created a peculiar fixation, among the colonists, on Rape-of-the-Sabines stories involving *white* women—fueled by fears of their wives and sisters being carried away by marauding Maroons—which do little to help

us understand what was going on within these Maroon communities themselves. Though sex ratios were undoubtedly skewed in Palmares at the outset (as they were on contemporary slave plantations), within two or three decades fairly even sex ratios probably became the norm, as each new generation of children grew into adulthood, women married soon after menarche, and adult males were lost in raids and battles. In Saramaka at least, quite normal domestic life, including polygyny for powerful men, developed rapidly and contributed to the stability of social life throughout the war years. There seems to be no hard evidence to suggest that it was otherwise for Palmares.<sup>4</sup>

The presence in Macaco of a “chapel” and scatterings of outsider observations have led scholars such as Edison Carneiro to conclude that “Los negros tenían una religión más o menos semejante a la católica” and even to “explain” this by the alleged “pobreza mística de los pueblos bántus” (Carneiro 1946:40). Of course, in the 1940s, scholars had not yet learned of the genuine richness of Bantu religious thought and practice. But even so, the presence of that *capilla*—like the similar reports of shrines in Suriname Maroon villages devastated by colonial armies—does not begin to tell us of the enormously complex ritual life enjoyed by early Maroons. In the Saramaka case, oral testimony has revealed an arsenal of ritual protection used, in one form or another by every man before entering battle, to protect against gunshot and bayonets, to send the enemy in the wrong direction, and to render oneself invisible. Likewise, agriculture, which the colonists describe in their documents in some detail from an outside, purely utilitarian perspective, depended for its success, from a Maroon perspective, on countless rites. Again, in the Suriname case, the whole unfamiliar forest area that the Maroons occupied as they escaped had to be, from their perspective, “domesticated.” The Maroons had to become friendly cohabitants with the as-yet-unknown-to-them spirits and other supernatural beings that already lived there. So, through divination that is remembered in considerable detail today, early Saramaka Maroons consulted with the Mother of Waters by diving to the bottom of the river, they learned of the class of deities known as *apúkus* who inhabit forest trees and boulders and how to deal with them, they discovered and learned to placate the various kinds of gods that live in boa constrictors and anacondas, and they met and tried to befriend a host of other similar beings who lived in the surrounding forest. We also know, from oral testimony, that early Saramaka funerals, healing, birth rites, and many other “marked” occasions involved spectacularly elaborated beliefs and practices. Indeed, the lives of early Saramakas as we know it from the kinds of “documents” we do not have for Palmares—was shot through with ritual concerns, much as is the lives

of their descendants today. I would suggest that the lives of Palmarinos would have been in similar ways inflected by their own Afro-American religion, despite our lack of strong confirming evidence.

We know from the documents that the Africans who made up the original population of Palmares, like that of Saramaka, were highly mixed ethnically. The central cultural process that would have characterized their initial years was inter-African syncretism, the creation of new cultural forms on the basis of the diverse beliefs and ideas and practices of the Africans who composed the original population. Rather than interpreting the history of Palmares simply in terms of our current ideological needs (à la Carlos Diegues, who says he made the film *Ganga-Zumba* to emphasize the theme of “liberty” and *Quilombo* to emphasize that of “utopia” [Nadotti & Diegues 1984:169-171] with very much the same sort of political sensibility Alex Haley used in conceptualizing *Roots*), might there be something to be learned by trying to “read Palmares” from the ideological perspective of Suriname Maroon societies? The shared and unusual process which we might call “creolization-while-in-a-state-of-war” certainly lends tremendous similarity to the two cases. Such an approach might provide a window from which to try to discern more of what went on within Palmares during its tumultuous hundred years.

I cannot read the documents and interpretations of Palmares without imagining a different outcome from that of 300 years ago. In colonial Suriname, the Saramakas (and their Ndyuka brothers and sisters) posed a sufficient threat to the plantation system, during nearly a century of hostilities, so that the Dutch crown had to sue them for peace and grant them their freedom. The men and women of Palmares came tantalizingly close to such an outcome by posing a similarly serious threat, by defeating for decades the successive waves of *entradas* mounted against them, and by creating what must have been a vibrant and unique Afro-American culture. But it was not to be.

I would be shirking my responsibility not to report here that all is not well with the Saramakas and other descendants of First-Time Maroons who live in Suriname. The period of national independence, which began in 1975, has not been kind in general to the Republic of Suriname, which was racked by civil war between 1986 and 1992 and has far from recovered today. For the Saramakas and the other Maroon populations who constitute more than 18% of the national population, the past decade has been truly disastrous. The civil war pitted the Maroons against the national army, and during its course hundreds of Maroon civilians—women and children as well as men—were brutally murdered. Whole villages were razed by government troops and some 25% of the Maroon population was forced to

seek refuge across the border in French Guiana. To these effects of war can now be added a more sinister and perhaps more devastating spectre: in its efforts to unite the nation, the government has set out on a plan of unification or normalization designed to end what it sees as the ethnic autonomy and separate rights of such population groups as Maroons and Amerindians. Much of the forest for which the ancestors of the Maroons spilled their blood is being auctioned off by the national government to Chinese, Indonesian, Malaysian, Australian, Canadian, and Brazilian timber and mining corporations. From my own perspective, the current government's unilateral program to abrogate the Maroons' eighteenth-century treaties in the alleged interest of national unity is tantamount to ethnocide. In twenty-first-century Brazil, I hardly need spell out the implications of the ongoing struggle between indigenous groups and the state over rights to land, over rights to decide what kinds of family law prevails within communities, and so forth (see, for example, Price 1998). But I do want to emphasize that the descendants of Suriname Maroons, who have carried on traditions very much like those of the heroic Palmarinos during the past three centuries, find themselves today under severe threat, including threats to their human rights, threats to the land rights they fought so hard for centuries ago, and, ultimately, threats to their continued existence as separate peoples within the modern world (see Kambel and MacKay 1999, Price 1995, Price and Price 2001, 2003).

The language Palmarinos spoke, according to what I have read, was a kind of Portuguese mixed with African forms (see, for example, Freitas 1973:46), but sufficiently different so that other Brazilians could not understand it. There were always special interpreters accompanying the *entradas* in order to interrogate captives. The Saramaccan language was described by colonial sources in identical terms. It is, in fact, a Portuguese-based creole—the slave owners from whom most Saramakas marooned were Sephardic Jews who came to Suriname from Brazil—a New World linguistic invention incorporating deep-level African grammatical principles. So my dream goes like this: I walk into Palmares today, with its surrounding fields of manioc and sweet potatoes and plantains, and address the first person I see in Saramaccan. Then, he or she replies and there is understanding facilitated between one Maroon language and another, across the forests, through time. Are there ways that we, as historians and anthropologists, might build on this dream in seeking greater understanding of the Palmares experience and its meaning for Brazil, and for us all?

## NOTES

1. The initial presentation of this work took place at a conference, “Palmares: 300 Anos,” held in São Paulo in November 1994. A version of the paper was published in Portuguese as “Palmares como poderia ter sido,” in João José Reis and Flávio dos Santos Gomes (editors.), *Liberdade por um fio: História dos quilombos no Brasil*, São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 1996, pp.52-59. This is a revised and expanded version of that Portuguese paper and its first publication in English.

2. I also write, unabashedly, from the perspective of an ethnographic historian, a perspective developed by a generation of anthropologists, like myself trained in the 1960s, including Greg Denning, Renato Rosaldo, David William Cohen, and others (see Price 2001).

3. The English word “maroon,” like the French and Dutch *marron*, derives from Spanish *cimarrón*—itself based on an Arawakan (Taino) root (Arrom 1986). *Cimarrón* originally referred to domestic cattle that had taken to the hills in Hispaniola, and soon after to Indian slaves who had escaped from the Spaniards as well. By the end of the 1530s, it was already being used primarily to refer to Afro-American runaways, and the word had taken on strong connotations of “fierceness,” of being “wild” and “unbroken.” My comparative perspective on Maroon societies in the Americas was first spelled out in Price 1973.

4. Recent evidence from Cuba suggests that the idea that Cuban Maroon communities conducted raids, including rape and vandalism, in order to terrorize the planter population, does not match the historical evidence (La Rosa 2003). This fits my general impressions from elsewhere in the Americas as well.

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