

2024

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Recommended Citation

Kirby, Jack (2024) "Hungry for Change: Food Politics and the 18th Century History of Jamaican Maroons," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*. Vol. 15, Article 14.

Available at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol15/iss1/14>

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the food history of Maroons in Jamaica. More specifically, it analyzes the ways in which food was political in Jamaican Maroon society. In the existing historiography, the preeminent scholars of Jamaican Maroons argue that Maroons had little political agency in their negotiations with the British. I argue that the lens of food shows a political agency that those scholars have largely left out. To arrive at this conclusion, I mainly relied on 18th and 19th century historians as primary sources. I also utilized Maroon treaties, law codes, and court records as primary sources.

Marronage, meaning the freeing of oneself from slavery, was widespread in the Atlantic in terms of time; this form of resistance is as old as slavery itself. But it was not entirely pervasive geographically. One major prerequisite for marronage was an environment capable of keeping people hidden. The island of Barbados, for example, was too small and too flat to hide escaped people. Jamaica was not such an island; its mountainous terrain turned out to be more than suitable to the needs of Maroons—those who freed themselves from enslavement.

The scholarship on Jamaican Maroons is more prolific than any other Maroon group (Campbell, 1988; Cumper, 1962; Kopytoff, 1978; Patterson, 1970). The reason why is as follows: two Maroon groups, called the Leeward and the Windward, became the first to formally negotiate with colonists in 1739 and 1740, respectively (Campbell, 1988). Although other groups successfully resisted colonist efforts to re-enslave them, Jamaican Maroons were the only Caribbean group to broker a peace deal in the 18th century. This is the anomaly that historians have wrestled with for decades now. Why did Jamaican Maroons negotiate but not others?

In answering this question, scholars must utilize the source most readily available to them—the works of 18th and 19th century authors. Traditional historians agree with their sources that the contents of Maroon treaties heavily “favored the colonial authorities and local plantocracy” (Campbell, 1988, p. 131). The only way this could

have happened, they argue, was if Maroons were deceived somehow in the negotiation process. This narrative, crafted by 19th century authors and embraced by the first Maroon scholars, shows the “triumph of diplomacy over warfare,” or put another way, the superior negotiation tactics of colonists (Campbell, 1988, p. 129). In this narrative, the political agency lies in the hands of the colonists.

This paper calls for a new interpretation of Maroon political agency, one that exists at the intersection between two budding fields of research: Atlantic world food histories and new histories of slavery. In the former field, scholars are theorizing different ways in which food is political (Carney, 2002; Carney & Rosomoff, 2011; Harris, 2012; Mintz, 1986). In the latter field, historians are telling new stories that center the agency of those who resisted slavery, including Maroons (Brown, 2020; Burnard, 2009; Chopra, 2018; Dubois, 2004; Kars, 2020; Thompson, 2006).

Through the lens of food, I will argue that Maroons made savvy political decisions in their negotiations with the British. In making this argument, I will first describe the Maroon war time food system. Then, I will discuss how the treaties of 1739 brought about positive changes to Maroon life. Examining the food politics of the Maroons suggests that the Leeward and Windward Treaties unfolded contrary to how it has been described by the traditional scholarship. According to my own interpretation, Maroons successfully negotiated on behalf of their own interests. This is a dramatic break from the scholarship that portrays Maroons as diplomatically ignorant. Beyond its historiographical significance, examining food politics reveals how food is often crucially important in the decisions we make.

Food in the Time of War

In Jamaica, Maroons utilized the geographic features of two environments: the Windward Maroons lived in the Blue Mountains, and the Leeward lived in a region of steep hills known as the Cockpit Country (Higginson, 1889). It was in these hills and mountains that Maroons were able to ward off the advances of colonist soldiers. Especially later into the history of Maroon/settler conflict, colonial authorities adopted total warfare tactics that were aimed at Maroon provision grounds rather than the Maroons themselves. This was no easy task, though, given that the Jamaican forests were dense and difficult to traverse.

Even without confirmation from 19th century books, we know that Maroons grew a substantial amount of the food they consumed because the colonial government would not have targeted their provision grounds otherwise. Of all the crops they grew, contemporary authors seem to think that maize, also referred to as Indian corn, was most essential to Maroon sustenance. Nineteenth century author Thomas Coke (1808), for example, claimed Maroons lived off the maize they planted “in the most inaccessible parts” of the mountains (p. 306).

In addition to maize, root vegetables, such as cassava, yams, and sweet potatoes, were highly valued by Maroons because of their ability to thrive in the tropics. Admittedly,

there were some drawbacks to cultivating cassava; the root is poisonous when raw and must go through a lengthy process in order to become edible. But several factors made it an appealing option for Maroons. Crucially, few crops compare to cassava in terms of its hardiness and caloric value. Since it is a root, cassava has the added benefit of being harder to detect than other crops like maize (Higman, 2008). Maroons had green thumbs for sure, but colonists understood them to be expert hunters more than anything else. Higginson (1889) was one of many writers who suggested that the origin of the term “Maroon” was tied to their status as hunters. “The word Maroon is derived,” he said, from the Spanish term for “a wild boar,” the favorite target of Maroons (p. 118).

Mayne Reid, a contemporary of Higginson but different in the sense that he was a fiction writer, not only suggested the term Maroon was connected to Maroon hog-hunting, but he described what it might have looked like. In his book *The Maroon*, the protagonist, Herbert, was stumbling through the woods when he came across a wild boar (Reid, 1870). Shortly after being startled by the boar, Herbert observed a “bullet hissed through the air” and effectively crippled one of the boar’s back legs. Although wounded, the aggravated boar was still as formidable as ever. To Herbert’s surprise, the next attack from the hunter, a young man who appeared to be a Maroon, was not with a gun but with a sword. Acrobatically, the Maroon “sprang high into the air” and cleared the boar (Reid, 1870, p. 95). Before the beast could reposition itself, the man pressed down with his sword with great strength until the boar was dead.

Obviously, this account of Maroon hunting is romanticized. The hunting techniques Maroons used probably required much less energy than the techniques that Reid describes. If given the chance, for example, Maroons probably would have killed the boar with a gun rather than a sword. In writing this piece, Reid had an interest in making the events spectacular since he was writing to a broad audience. However, we can trust that the spectacular events that Reid described were based in some truth.

Although Maroons were most associated with hog-hunting, the game that they hunted was not limited to wild boar. One of the stranger animals in their diet was the land-crab. “In the companies of millions,” writes Higginson (1889), land-crabs regularly migrated back and forth from the ocean to the mountains (p. 127). Birds were a more difficult game than crabs, but certainly the variety and ubiquity of bird species on the island enticed Maroons. Ring-tail pigeons were the most popular to hunt. Although difficult to shoot, pigeons provided Maroons with a “lump of fat” that was at once tasty and energy rich. Colonists agreed it was “one of the most delicate viands” available on the island (Beckford, 1790, p. 389).

Hunting and growing provided Maroons with much of what they needed to sustain themselves. However, they could not completely depend on it. Maroons’ ability to hunt was restricted by their relationship with colonists. Colonists were obviously hostile to Maroons because communities of escaped slaves threatened any society, such as colonial Jamaica, which revolved around slavery. The conflict between British settlers

and escaped slaves is often conceptualized as a war that spanned from 1728 to 1739. However, it is more accurate to remember their relationship as a state of constant conflict from the British conquest of the island in 1655, to the Maroon treaties of 1739. Therefore, trespassing on colonist land, which was vast compared to the rest of the island, was always a risk for Maroons. And although agriculture is generally more reliable than hunting, severe weather in Jamaica made crop failures a real threat. To supplement their diets, Maroons foraged for a variety of plants. Maroons probably foraged all types of plants including the “roots and herbs which were nourished by the intense action of the [sun]” (Coke, 1808, p. 54).

When foraging, hunting, and agriculture were not sufficient for Maroon necessities or desires, they turned to plantation raiding. These raids had enormous implications for the history of Maroons because they escalated the war with the previously mentioned colonial state in 1728. For some contemporary authors, like Thomas Coke, Maroons raided plantations when “hunger” led them to “descend upon the plains, to pillage provisions from new settlers” (Coke, 1808, p. 306). Other authors presented the raids in a different light, arguing it was the Maroons’ “dastardly method of conducting war” (Edwards, 1796, p. 8).

Regardless of why Maroons attacked plantations, a careful source reading confirms that they did. In 1734, colonists began to construct barracks around Maroon territory. According to Thomas Coke (1808), the location of each outpost was consciously selected so as to create a “chain of fortifications” (p. 308). It was the hope of the colonial government that this blockade, so to speak, would dissuade Maroons from approaching plantations. A conscious effort like this would not have been made unless there was a considerable track-record of Maroons raiding plantations.

Maroons took the risk of raiding plantations, in part, because it was not only food they were after. Edwards claimed Maroons “carried slaves into captivity” when they raided (Edwards, 1796, p. 8). Maroon communities at this time were mostly made up of people who escaped slavery on their own will. However, scholars also accept that at least some members of the Maroon population were kidnapped (Kopytoff, 1978). Maroons also would have valued tools, weapons, and other worldly products they could not produce in isolation.

To stop Maroon raids, the British military began to launch attacks from their forward bases in the barracks in which they targeted Maroon homes and provision grounds. The escalation of colonial tactics weakened food supplies and added profound stressors to Maroon lives. When the colonist total warfare tactics are considered, it seems that Edward Long (1774) might not have been far from the truth when he claimed Cudjoe, leader of the Leeward, was in a hungry and somewhat desperate state in the year before peace.

Implications of the Leeward Treaty

Eventually, both sides became tired of waging the war. In 1739, Governor Edward Trelawny met with Captain Cudjoe of the Leeward and the two parties reached an agreement for peace. In the following year the Windward signed their own peace treaty. Since it is largely based on the Leeward treaty, this paper will focus on the earlier of the two. For such a significant moment in the history of Jamaican Maroons, the treaty is a relatively short document (fifteen articles and a preamble). Most articles serve one of two purposes: to either make the island a safer environment for the colonists or provide Maroons with basic rights. The most obvious example of the former purpose was the cessation of fighting in article one. However, other articles stabilized the colonist state in alternative ways. For example, article seven called for Maroons to defend the island in case it was “invaded by any foreign enemy” (Guthrie et al., 1739)). Fewer articles were dedicated to Maroon rights and liberties. Article two might be considered the most important since it guarantees Maroons a “perfect state of freedom and liberty” (Guthrie et al., 1739).

By and large, the traditional Maroon scholarship views the Leeward Treaty as completely unfavorable and unnecessary to the Maroons. Many argue that while the treaty provides basic rights to Maroons, it had the actual effect of restricting Maroon freedoms—a devastating blow for Maroons according to Campbell (1988) and like-minded scholars. And all of this for what? “Maroons were never defeated in battle,” she contends, and therefore did not need to negotiate (p. 129). According to this interpretation, the treaty was a needless action for Maroons brought about by superior colonist diplomacy.

This essay offers a rebuke of the traditional narrative. Contrary to the traditional argument, Maroons made savvy political decisions while negotiating with the colonists in 1739. Implicated in this argument is that Maroons were agents of political change. This conclusion is reached by analyzing the Leeward Treaty of 1739 from the perspective of food politics. In the following paragraphs, I will describe the positive changes made to the Maroon food system brought about by the Leeward Treaty. Mainly, I will discuss the stability that the treaty brought to various Maroon food sources.

The first article of the Leeward Treaty states, “that all hostilities shall cease on both sides forever.” To the outside observer, this article has no immediate connection to food. However, we should remember that the primary target of the colonial military was Maroon crops. Therefore, an end to hostilities meant that food would no longer be scarce. Although the first article of the Leeward Treaty does not mention food, it had the effect of stabilizing the Maroon food system by protecting their provision grounds, their water supplies, and their own lives while hunting or foraging.

Although the lands set aside for Maroon communities were considered to be of poor quality, 18th century authors provide evidence that Maroon territory post-treaty was at least partially cultivable. Robert Charles Dallas (1807) provided a particularly detailed analysis of Maroon agriculture. Although “the soil of the mountain was unf-

avorable,” Maroons were able to grow a variety of crops—most notably maize. He also claimed that Maroons grew a variety of roots like yams, cassava, and sweet potatoes (p. 106). It is worth remembering that many of the foods Maroons had grown for decades, like cassava and callaloo, were hardy crops that have been proven to grow in the mountains of Jamaica. In addition to those crops, Higginson (1889) adds that Maroons eventually grew orchards which consisted of guavas, papaws, and avocados. Higginson and Dallas generally wrote favorably of Maroons, but even Bryan Edwards, the contemporary author most critical of Maroons, admitted to having seen Maroons cultivate their land. “I have sometimes observed,” said Edwards, “patches of Indian corn and yams, and perhaps a few straggling plantain trees” (Edwards, 1796, p. 30). Maroon land in the Cockpit Country and in the Blue Mountains was not ideal for agriculture; that does not mean Maroons were incapable of growing crops there. The work of Dallas, Higginson, and Edwards confirm that Maroons cultivated several crops in their gardens. Therefore, Maroons did not relinquish their rights to subsist off their own gardens by agreeing to limit their territory.

Additionally, Maroons did not forfeit their right to hunt when they signed treaties; if anything, they made it safer to hunt by negotiating with the colonists. While at war, Maroons hunted several species including pigeons, crabs, and most notably wild hog. It might be thought that Maroons severely impeded their ability to hunt by agreeing to limit their land. However, one article of the Leeward Treaty permitted Maroons to “hunt where they shall think fit, except within three miles of any settlement, crawl, or pen.” In case they ran into white settlers on the hunt, Leeward Maroons were to split their winnings with the settlers. Although they would have liked to keep it all, ceding part of their meat was better than the previous consequence of running into colonists while hunting: a firefight. Maroons maintained their right to hunt through negotiations with colonists, but they also made it so that they could hunt at ease knowing their lives were not in danger if their game brought them in contact with others.

They continued to raise cattle, chickens, and hogs (Dallas, 1807). Presumably, they continued to forage for all of the delicious fruits found in Jamaica’s forests. The only source of food Maroons gave up by signing treaties was the food they stole from settlers and the enslaved. What they lost out on in that respect was replenished through trade with their former enemies (Edwards, 1796). The point is, Maroon food sources were varied in the post-war years similar to how they were while at war. The crucial difference between the war time food sources and the post-war food sources is that the latter were not subjected to colonist war tactics. And given that subsistence strategies like horticulture and hunting did not become less viable after the treaty, it is safe to say that Maroons subsisted much more comfortably after the war than they did during the war.

Scholars aligned with the traditional narrative downplay the significance of Maroons stabilizing their food system. According to sociologist Orlando Patterson (1970), the Leeward Treaty was a “completely unnecessary sell-out” because Maroons never lost a battle (p. 312). While it is true that Maroons were militarily more successful than the

British, Patterson and other traditional historians fail to realize that the stress of war might have brought them to the negotiating table, not their diplomatic ignorance. A good deal of the stress they lived with was due to the instability of their food system. Edward Long claimed that Maroons were “reduced to so miserable a condition by famine” that they nearly surrendered (Long, 1774, p. 2.344). This claim appears to be an exaggeration. Maroons, who experienced brutal colonist war tactics for several years, probably realized the harsh treatment that awaited them if they were to surrender. And if the colonists had thought there was a chance that Maroons would have surrendered, they would have continued their war effort. Even though surrender was not on the table for Maroons, the hardships they faced while at war were significant. In particular, attacks on their food system caused Maroons periodic hunger and constant stress. Edward Long was probably closer to the truth when he said that Maroons were “wearied out with this tedious conflict” (Long, 1774, p. 2.344). In this light, Maroons wisely engaged in peace talks because it added security to their turbulent lives.

A desire to stabilize their lives only partially explains the unique history of treaty negotiations for Jamaican Maroons; colonists practiced total warfare tactics elsewhere, and yet only Jamaican Maroons formally negotiated with the colonists. Part of the answer to this question is that the colonial authorities in Jamaica were particularly spent from fighting the war. But Maroons also had a different food related goal in mind: expanding their economy into the colonial sphere. Perhaps the most neglected part of the Leeward Treaty is article 4—that which permits Maroons to trade. One of the effects of this article was that Maroons became competitors to colonist merchants; this undoubtedly conflicted with the interests of colonial authorities. For this reason, we can assume that Maroons negotiated for the inclusion of this article.

Conclusion

This paper is based on a longer thesis of the same name. The full-length thesis goes on to discuss other topics such as Maroon trade after the treaties and the Second Maroon War. However, the significance remains the same as the thesis it is based on. For one, the interpretation of Maroon politics presented here is dramatically different from the traditional narrative. Campbell, and like-minded scholars, would have us believe that Maroons were totally ignorant of their own diplomatic interests; their agency, then, is reduced to violence. This paper breaks with the traditional narrative by arguing that not only were Maroons aware of their own interests, but they negotiated on behalf of their interests. This is demonstrated in the history of Jamaican Maroon food sources. The approach taken here is aligned with a somewhat recent wave of scholarship that attempts to not only center the experience of enslaved people in the Atlantic world, but articulate their agency. When such an approach is taken, as shown here, quite different results can be reached.

The other lens used in this paper, food history, provides another source of significance. Here, food is shown to be political in a couple of ways. For Maroons, food

was political because it fueled their political actions. Clearly the British realized this because they made a concerted effort to starve the Maroons. Food was also political in the sense that it could be a commodity—a subject covered in the full-length thesis. The political value of subsistence and commodity foods can be observed in the two most significant Maroon political documents, the Leeward and Windward treaties. However, given that all humans need to subsist and that many have utilized food as commodities to coalesce power, the lens of food politics is not limited to Jamaican Maroons. In fact, all topics in history have the potential to be reanalyzed from the perspective of food politics. Documents that have been poured over by historians, like the Leeward and Windward treaties, might tell a different story if considered from this angle. In this case, it appears that Maroons were not unwittingly dragged into negotiations—they were hungry for change.

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