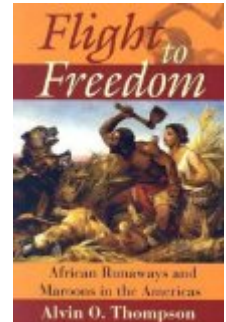


Alvin O. Thompson. *Flight to Freedom: African Runaways and Maroons in the Americas.* Mona: University of the West Indies Press, 2006. xi + 381 pp. \$40.00, paper, ISBN 978-976-640-180-1.



Reviewed by Kevin Mulroy

Published on H-Caribbean (June, 2007)

Alvin Thompson, professor of history at the University of the West Indies, Barbados, and an expert on Guyana, has written an impressive survey of the history of African slave runaways and marronage throughout the Americas. Interested readers in this field will need to go back nearly thirty years, to Richard Price's groundbreaking and indispensable *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (1979) to find a work of comparable scope and importance. Thompson builds upon Price's edited compilation by analyzing and synthesizing the best and most recently published research on the subject. This leads to a reassessment of interpretations that have informed discourse on marronage that is Pan-American in scope.

Thompson positions his book as an interpretive work focusing on the struggle for freedom of displaced and enslaved Africans. He concentrates on the most notable maroon societies—Palmares, Brazil; the Saramakas and Ndjukas of Suriname; San Basilio, Colombia; Esmeraldes, Ecuador; Le Maniel, on the border of Haiti and the Dominican Republic; and the Leewards and Windwards of Ja-

maica—but notes that marronage existed almost everywhere in the Americas. He supports his arguments with examples drawn from a wide range of additional communities. According to Thompson, "Maroon settlements constituted the first independent polities from European colonial rule, even if the authoritarian states did not recognize them as such at the time. They had their own independent political, economic and social structures, and occupied definitive land spaces that they often contested with the colonial powers and won" (p. 13).

Thompson divides his work into four parts. In "Ideological Bases of Marronage," he argues that, in spite of its dangers, becoming a maroon offered the enslaved a better option than the degradation and short life expectancy they were likely to experience under white owners on plantations or in mines. Freedom "became in slave societies almost an end in itself" (p. 40). He covers "petit," "grand," "individual," and "group" marronage, concluding that, "It was the constant trickle, like water out of a leaking container, that best represents the Maroon flow away from the plantation" (p. 65).

Thompson suggests that the rate at which maroons abducted women has been grossly exaggerated. And he argues that maroon societies placed less emphasis on ethnicity than on imperatives for success: fidelity, hard work, and ability.

In part 2, "Origins and Development of Marronage," Thompson notes that the first recorded case of African maroons in the Americas came in 1503 with some fugitives from Hispaniola (Dominican Republic). For close to four centuries after that, marronage figured prominently in the affairs of slaveholding societies. In Cuba, for example, there might have been as many as 82 maroon communities in the east of the island between 1740 and the end of slavery in 1886. Suriname is believed to have had a maroon population of around 7,000, or roughly 10 percent of the enslaved population in 1786, and Venezuela might have had as many as 30,000 maroons, or fully half the enslaved population, at the end of the eighteenth century. Most maroon communities typically numbered 100-300 individuals. The exception was Palmares, Brazil, whose population might have peaked at 30,000 at the time of its destruction in 1694-95. Expeditions by whites to destroy maroon settlements sometimes included Indians and enslaved Africans. Maroons often extracted revenge on neighboring plantations and other white institutions. Nothing less than the complete destruction of a maroon society would break the cycle of violence.

In part 3, "Maroon Organization," Thompson argues that defense and security not only determined the choice of site for a maroon community, but also affected many of its economic, social, and political arrangements. Maroons typically lived in complex societies. Some of their leaders were despotic and sadistic, while others were democratic and consensual. Some newcomers to the communities were reduced to slavery. Maroon economies were diverse, typically featuring some combination of the following: agriculture, mining, hunting, fishing, trading, manufacturing, live-

stock-raising, banditry, and service provision (in urban centers). Maroons demonstrated high levels of organization, and their societies offered viable alternatives to the slave system.

In the most interesting section of the book, part 4, "Accommodation or Revolution?" Thompson addresses two charges often leveled at maroon communities: first, that they typically returned new runaways to bondage, and second, that they did not seek to overthrow slavery as a whole. He argues that, although marronage opposed the slave system both ideologically and practically, maroons and slaveholders often found a middle ground aimed at resolving conflicts through negotiation, arbitration, and compromise, rather than by force.

Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, maroon societies in Mexico, Panama, Colombia, Brazil, Jamaica, Suriname, Essequibo (Guyana), the Dominican Republic, Dominica, French Guiana, and the United States all entered into treaties with colonial governments that led to the recognition of maroon communities as legitimate, independent, autonomous polities with rights to occupy certain lands. Those treaties usually included clauses whereby the maroons agreed to apprehend and return recent runaways, and put down slave revolts. Thompson argues that it was the maroons' leaders who made treaties with clauses often prejudicial to the community as a whole, and that they sought self-preservation often at the expense of the rank-and-file. This was similar to what happened in Africa during the slave trade era, when the black ruling classes sold lower-ranking Africans into bondage for European consumer goods. Thompson supports the argument that most maroons were freedom fighters. He suggests that most maroon societies never were in a position to wage a general antislavery or anticolonial struggle, yet he sees evidence of a growing revolutionary consciousness among the formerly enslaved in Brazil, Haiti, Venezuela, and

elsewhere from the late eighteenth century onwards.

Thompson concludes that the significance of marronage throughout the Americas transcended the numerical size of maroon communities as a whole. He notes "the lethal role that Maroons played in the ultimate overthrow of the system of slavery by making life miserable and short for large numbers of enslavers," and concludes: "Their persistence in the face of overwhelming material and technological odds speaks eloquently to the triumph of courage over steel and freedom over bondage" (p. 329).

This compelling and thoughtful book is highly recommended. Thorough, skillfully organized, well written, and readable, *Flight to Freedom* makes an important contribution to the literature of the African Diaspora. In authoring this sweeping yet compact text, Alvin Thompson has provided a considerable service to scholars, researchers, teachers, and students working on slave systems and marronage in Latin America, the Caribbean, and North America.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-caribbean>

Citation: Kevin Mulroy. Review of Thompson, Alvin O. *Flight to Freedom: African Runaways and Maroons in the Americas*. H-Caribbean, H-Net Reviews. June, 2007.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13345>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.