

MAROON LEADERSHIP AND THE SURINAMESE STATE (1760-1990)

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Introduction

An analysis will be offered of the power bases of Maroon leadership, *gaanman* (Paramount Chief), *kabiten* (village headmen), and *lanti* (the council of advisors). Maroon leaders are shown to occupy an intermediary position between the city state and the people of the interior. Jointly they share responsibility for a good relationship between human and the world of gods and spirits. This latter fact is often misunderstood by outside observers.

Africans, Slaves and Maroon

Suriname is situated on the northern coast of South America. Together with the Republic of Guyana, French Guyana, northern Brazil and eastern Venezuela it forms the region known as GUYANA. During the 17th and 18th centuries the Dutch colony of Suriname was one of the most important plantation areas in the world. The colonising efforts started in 1650 by the English, and continued by the Dutch after they seized the colony in 1667, led to the forced relocation of many sons and daughters, my ancestors, from West and Central Africa to Suriname. Each year thousands of people were shipped from various African ports to provide the colony with its labour force. Approximately 300,000 people from the continent of Africa entered the colony of Suriname in chains. They arrived empty-handed.

Many historians assert that working conditions were among the worst in the so-called New World. The people from several parts of West and Central Africa who were

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enslaved and transported to the Dutch colony of Suriname suffered a fate that can hardly be comprehended. To this very day Maroon historians tell their children about these sufferings. They often narrate the ordeal of those who had to work in Suriname's muddy soil to dig trenches used for draining and transport. *Den wooko di den be e dwengi u fu du, na ogii. Dey anga dey den e poti u wooko a ini tokotoko* (The work that they let us do was terrible. Day after day we were digging away in the mud)! Maroons will never forget the memory of those days as they may return.

It should therefore not come as a surprise that through rebellion they managed to free themselves. They threw off the yoke of slavery, and withdrew into the South American rain forest. It must be more astounding for the colonial authority that these Maroons soon managed to establish viable communities in the interior. Using the cover of the dense tropical rainforest, Maroons were fortunate enough to survive the first few years of liberation, and went on to form six politically autonomous Maroon communities. Under the vigorous leadership of their *gaanman* and headmen an intensive guerrilla offensive was mounted against the planters and their mercenaries. But already, in the opening years of the plantation colony, in the 17th century, the insurgents withdrew from the plantations to take refuge in the rain forest of the Guyanas.

Around the middle of the 18th century several consolidated Maroon groups emerged in different parts of Suriname's interior. Until the year of abolition (1863), slaves escaped in great numbers from Suriname's plantations. Many were caught; others, unable to survive in the harsh conditions of the tropical forest, returned to the world of slavery. Hundreds of refugees, however, managed to keep themselves alive; they settled on the upper reaches of rivers, and sought protection from their pursuers by withdrawing behind rapids and waterfalls, and many miles of almost impenetrable rain forest. When small bands of fugitive slaves coalesced to form larger groups, the *Loweman* as these Maroons called themselves, they began to pose a military threat to the plantation colony. Early in the eighteenth century pitched battles were fought between the colonial troops and the Maroons, but small-scale raids on plantations also continued to occur. Motives for such raids varied: revenge is sometimes mentioned as a reason for the assault; more often Maroons sought to capture food, women, equipment, and weapons, or attempted to liberate kinsmen who were still in bondage.

When the losses of plantation owners grew, and the cost of military expeditions mounted, the planters opened negotiations with the Maroons, their former subjects. In the meantime, three main groups of Maroons emerged: the *Ndyuka* or *Okanisi* in the south-east, near the Marowijne and Tapanahoni rivers; the *Saamaka* in the centre, in

the upper part of the Suriname basin; and finally, along the upper reaches of the Saramaka River, the *Matawai*. Peace Treaties were concluded with the *Ndyuka* in 1760, the *Saamaka* in 1762, and with the *Matawai* in 1767. The amazing fact is that a century before the abolition of slavery in Suriname, thousands of Maroons had gained their freedom. Estimates of their numbers at the time of the Peace Treaties vary considerably, but to put both *Ndyuka* and *Saamaka* between 2,500 and 3,000, would not be far off the mark; the *Matawai* probably numbered about 300.

Soon after the Peace Treaty of 1760, *Ndyuka* started to leave their first settlements on the *Ndyuka* Creek and move to the Tapanahoni, which they named *Ndyuka liba* (River of the *Ndyuka* People). They exchanged the cramped and isolated territory bordering a shallow creek for the Tapanahoni, a stream often more than half a mile wide, with many tributaries. First they built their villages along these tributaries, but gradually they began to occupy islands in the middle of the river. These new locations offered them access to the vast expanses of territory drained by this river, and to large tracts of forest, needed for hunting and swidden agriculture. The Tapanahoni flows into the Marowijne, a geographical fact that enabled them to establish communications with various Amerindian groups, with other Maroons and with the whites on the coast. The move from the *Ndyuka* Creek to the Tapanahoni was completed around 1790.

In the east of Suriname, however, war continued. By 1768 hostilities between the government of planters and the *Aluku*, a coalition of smaller groups of Maroons under the leadership of Boni, was beginning to pose a formidable threat to the plantations (Hoogbergen 1985). Between 1768 and 1777 an army of mercenaries drove them out of the plantation colony. In 1789, when the *Aluku* hit the plantations again, the colonial army followed them to their new villages along the Maroni (Marowijne) River, the border river separating Dutch from French territory. The colonial troops destroyed one settlement after another. They set the *Ndyuka* and the *Aluku* against each other, and the *Aluku* attacked the *Ndyuka*. In 1792 the *Ndyuka* struck back and defeated the *Aluku*. Other smaller groups of Maroons, such as those later known as *Pamaka*, were left in peace by the planters' army. The tension between the *Aluku* and the *Ndyuka* was clearly caused by the colonial power. Of their own accord these two communities would never have chosen to be hostile to each other. *Ndyuka* would, for instance, secretly establish relations with the 'Non-pacified Maroons,' i.e. with *Pamaka* and other smaller groups of Maroons. In 1805, they went even further by granting asylum to a group of mutinous Black Rangers, former slaves who were forced by the colonial government to serve as mercenaries in the Dutch army. *Ndyuka* offered the Rangers a place to settle at the confluence of the Tapanahoni and Lawa rivers, with the obligation to stand sentry over the entrance to

the main *Ndyuka* area of settlement, the Tapanahoni River.

Maroons and the Colonial State

This paper focuses on Maroon leadership as it took shape after the treaties. To analyse the situation I first place the Maroons against the backdrop of political and economic relations in the colonial state. Secondly I take a closer look at developments after Suriname won its independence. Finally, I sketch the fortunes of Maroon leadership under the encroachment of new economic and political pressures with special reference to the *Ndyuka* or *Okanisi* Maroons of south-eastern Suriname. A discussion of the position of Maroon leadership in the aftermath of Suriname's civil war (1986-1990) will be the conclusion of the present paper.

Before the conclusion of the Peace Treaties, the Maroon leaders ruled their communities without the assistance of the colonial power. When the colonial power started negotiations to conclude peace with them, the Maroon leaders acted on a basis of independence and equality. But the main result of the Peace Treaties was that the colonial power transformed their erstwhile foes into vassals. In return for recognising their autonomy, and providing them with most of the goods that they could not make themselves such as guns, gun-powder, iron utensils, clothes, and many other objects, Maroons pledged to refrain from acts of aggression against the plantation colony, and not to enter into negotiations with other groups, be they Amerindians, other Europeans, or other Maroons without the approval of the authorities of the plantation colony. In other words the colonial power kept Maroons from conducting an independent foreign policy.

The Peace Treaties influenced the authority of Maroon leaders in a negative way. Particularly galling, and a cause for considerable friction later, were those articles of the treaty demanding that Maroons deliver all later Runaways into the hands of the slaves' masters. To restrict and control their movements beyond their own territory a pass system was devised: only small groups of Maroons were allowed entrance into the plantation colony. An official with the title of *Posthouder* (Postholder) took up residence with each of the Maroon groups to supervise the implementation of the peace treaty. This *Posthouder* served as a liaison between Maroon leaders and the colonial authorities; he issued passes to Maroons travelling to the plantation colony; he was also instructed to gather 'intelligence.'

Firm ties of dependence connected the Pacified Maroons with the plantation colony.

The three or four yearly shipments of goods, named in official documents 'the distribution of presents', but viewed by Maroon leaders as tributes, as obligatory payments to their people, represented one of these links. Economic transactions between planters and Maroons were soon to forge even stronger bonds. The options of withdrawing deeper into the interior, or severing links with the plantation colony, were excluded by the economic dependence of Maroon communities on the coastal society.

A Society of Lumbermen and River Transporters

The trek to the coast was even more significant. Around 1790, *Ndyuka* settlements were built near the confluence of Sara Creek and Suriname River, just beyond the region which the Dutch considered the colony proper, the area where the plantations were located. Then, in the opening decades of the nineteenth century, *Ndyuka* started to settle in the colony itself. First they came in small groups, later in greater numbers, to build their camps and villages on the banks of the Cottica, Courmotibo, and lower Saramacca rivers; in the last region they rubbed shoulders with *Saamaka* and *Matawai*. Although subsistence agriculture remained important to them, many *Ndyuka* males earned a good income by working as lumbermen. Others, less numerous, grew food stuffs for Paramaribo or the plantations. Through these economic transactions, particularly the timber trade, the *Ndyuka* played a substantial role in the colonial economy. As early as 1806 a government official noted that Mainsi, a Tapanahoni village, was deserted, because "all the men folk of this village are with the Whites" (Politie 1808: Coll. K, March 10: the reference is probably to the year 1806).

Between 1880 and 1885, the hinterland of the Guyanas became a focus of international economic interest with the discovery of gold (Lacroix 1970: 110). The new riches lured thousands of bounty hunters, who swarmed over the newly discovered fields in the remote interior. Several gold rushes attracted thousands of goldminers to the upper reaches of French Guyana and, to a lesser extent, Suriname's rivers. Due to the dense tropical rain forest, transport for the gold diggers had to follow the rivers, which have their origin in the mountainous region on the Brazilian border, to the Atlantic. River transport encountered serious problems. About 40 to 70 kilometres from the coast natural barriers of rapids and falls block all rivers.

Such obstacles repeated themselves every five or ten kilometres. Those in search of El Dorado needed the Maroons to unlock the interior for them. They alone had a means of conveyance adapted to the shallow, treacherous waters: the dug-out canoe. They

knew their way through the continually shifting meander of rapids. Their only rivals could have been the Amerindians, but their numbers were too small to influence conditions on the transport market, and they were often employed by the goldiggers as guides.

The Maroons rapidly gained a monopoly over river transport in Suriname and French Guyana. Their services were much sought after by companies operating in the Sara Creek region in the centre of the country. Maroons found an even more hefty demand for river transport in French Guyana. They were soon working for goldiggers and companies on the Mana, Sinnamary, Approuague, Comté, and Oyapock rivers. The presence of Maroon river transporters on the Mana is first mentioned in 1886 (Brunetti 1890: 239; Bureau 1936: 96).

Maroons and the Postcolonial State

Maroon societies are extolled by most Surinamese nationalists as communities of free and proud people. And so are the Maroon leaders of the eighteenth-century revolt against the planters. In the rhetoric of the modern nation state a triumvirate of rebels stands out: Boni, Bayon (Baron) and Abonkiya (Jolicoeur). De Kom, best known of Suriname's early wave of nationalists, formulates it as follows:

Baron, cheated and mistreated; Jolicoeur, reviled and badgered; opened contacts with Boni, the fear of the Whites. These chiefs succeeded in establishing a regime of discipline and order, and in forming an army that for many years proved itself equal to the well organised force of the Dutch. (De Kom 1971: 75)

The heroic tale of the freedom fighters found its way into present-day discourse through Stedman's (1988) well-known eighteenth-century *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Suriname*. Stedman's account of the defence and capture of *Buku*, an ingeniously built Maroon fortress in the swamps of the coastal plain, has been enshrined in modern nationalist rhetoric as well: *Membre Buku* (Remember *Buku*) is the name given to the barracks of the Surinamese army in Paramaribo, capital of Suriname.

Rhetoric aside, the relationship between the Surinamese state, or rather the city state of Paramaribo where about 50% of the country's population lives, and all major political decisions are taken, has not radically changed. The civil war (1986-1990)

pitted a few thousands of young Maroons against the army. In 1986, ironically, it was from the *Membre Buku* barracks that the special army unit was directed that spread terror through *Ndyuka* settlements in Suriname's coastal plain, killing women and children. This led to the flight of thousands of Maroons to neighbouring French Guyana, reminding them how justified the warnings of their elders had been "never to forget these times [of slavery and the liberation fight], as these may return." Soon after he came to power in 1980 the military regime of Commander Bouterse continued the attempts to undermine the legitimacy of Maroon leadership. This policy was part and parcel of a more comprehensive strategy to open the interior as an area of exploitation for the city state. Although the authority of Maroon leadership is dented, it is still very much a force to be reckoned with. In my analysis the resilience of the 'traditional leadership' is a result of at least two factors: (a) the prevailing egalitarian relationships which make it hard for an outside power to annex them to their system; (b) the spiritual responsibility of the Paramount Chief, and to a lesser extent those of Captains and elders as well. I will discuss both factors.

Village Republics

As a consequence of differences in experience on the plantations Maroon communities exhibit linguistic and cultural diversity. Their common African cultural base best explains why these communities developed remarkably similar political, social and religious institutions with elements strongly based on the culture of some countries of West and Central Africa. The brutal and destructive life on the Surinamese cotton and sugar plantations, did not prevent Maroons from keeping the only things they could take with them when they were transported to Suriname: their knowledge and beliefs of African traditions. The Suriname Maroon communities are the only black communities outside Africa which to this very day have conserved their African cultural heritage in a near-original form. Its richness attests to the vitality and staying power of their African heritage.

During the first period after the formation of the tribe, the grip of national - or tribal - *Ndyuka* institutions on social life was tenuous. I use tribe for a community of people, feeling spiritually bounded by God, common ancestors, roots and history. White contemporaries claimed that the *gaanman* had no authority and wielded hardly any power. These observations were ill-founded. A nineteenth-century *Ndyuka* village was virtually an independent republic. Most of its older citizens had a say in village politics. The elders, men and women, particularly women with many children, and the spirit mediums all could influence social life. The ruptures in the social fabric were

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between full-fledged citizens and refugees and between elders and the young people (*yonkuman*) who conducted the patrols against newer and more aggressive groups of Maroons, and often felt too much excluded from the village councils.

The daily affairs of the community were settled through lengthy palavers (*kuutu*). A strongly democratic and egalitarian atmosphere pervaded village life. Usually young people did not participate directly in village government. Most women were not prominent in public meetings, but they were heard behind the scenes. Yet, although a younger generation sometimes showed dissatisfaction, consensus was greatly prized and a key ideological tenet. Co-operative and harmonious living, and practices of sharing among many kinsmen and affines, were believed to be essential for the survival of *Ndyuka* communities.

A village's population overlapped considerably with a matrilineal clan (*lo*), that is to say with a group sharing an ideology of common matrilineal descent: sometimes the name of an ancestress is given, but most clan members would rather offer the names of a few 'sisters' when asked for their pedigrees by an outsider; while in a few cases a pre-independence federation of Runaways is mentioned without any attempt to establish an over-arching matrilineal descent structure. The number of these matrilineal clans (or matriclans) varied between ten and fifteen, depending on the moment in history. The matriclans were divided into two blocs: the *Bilo* or 'Downriver *Ndyuka*' and the *Opu* or 'Upriver *Ndyuka*.' The settlements of the *Bilo* matriclans string the Tapanahoni from its confluence with the Lawa almost to the *Gaan Olo* falls. Sangamansusa is the first *Opu* village; from there to Godo Olo - or Gaan Boli after 1890 - all villages are *Opu*. Each village comprised two or three, and sometimes four matrilineages (*bee*). The members of such a lineage can trace descent to a common ancestress through real or putative matrilineal links; for most of last century the lineage was exogamous.

The lineage was and still is a corporate group in the sense that it has a fund of possessions: titles to particular tracts of forest, fishing rights, and political offices. Others are non-material but no less coveted: knowledge of medicinal plants, herbs and leaves, and a claim to a special relationship to a few spirits. Of significance too are the ritual possessions of the group. Central among these are two shrines, both of them for the veneration of the ancestors: a flag pole (*yooka faakatiki*) and a mortuary (*ke-osu*). The rites conducted at these shrines are a collective enterprise, demanding the presence of all elders in a village. Elders take turns in making libations and offering their prayers. The mortuary is not under the exclusive control of one single lineage, but the collective property of the village community (Pakosie 1993). The notion of a

collective curse, an avenging spirit (*kunu*) that has haunted each *Ndyuka* matriclan since the formation of the tribe some 250 years ago, greatly enhanced the corporate character of the lineage. Such ideas created a well-demarcated religious community as its members were obliged to share the burden of responsibility for the avenging spirit. Although a single individual could provoke the avenger, all members would suffer from the consequences, both contemporaries and descendants of the wrongdoer. The feast of atonement for such an offence was a collective responsibility; only joint worship could placate the spirit.

The Sacred Covenant

Ndyuka, as other Maroons, feel that the world they live in is a 'borrowed world', a world that they have been given on loan by the Supreme God, Nana Keedy Amaa Keedy Ampon. They will therefore have to come to terms with God and his foremost spirit helpers. Right from the beginning of their society *Ndyuka* knew that two Great Spirits were of particular relevance: Gaan Gadu (the Supreme Oracle) and Gangasukosu Kwaami (the Savage God). Gaan Gadu had escorted the Africans in the hold of the slave ships. On the plantations Gaan Gadu had taken pity on his people and had helped them to escape into the forest. Struggling through the forest for days on end, the Maroons finally arrived at a river. According to their tradition they then had a vision.

When the fugitives were looking for a place to settle, deep in the interior, they quite unexpectedly caught a glimpse of a deity. The spirit manifested itself as a man in a canoe, escorted by two other spirits that had also taken on the guise of men. My ancestors saw this apparition for the first time when emerging from the dark forest to stumble on the wide, sunny expanse of the Tapanahoni River. These great forebears of mine saw a boat moving upstream without any effort on the part of the three boatmen. The crew just sat there without touching the paddles. Then, as suddenly as they had come into view, boat and crew disappeared, dissolving into thin air, 'in the way spirits are wont to do'. Afterwards my people realised what it was they had seen: the man occupying the central and most prestigious place must have been an important spirit that belonged to the area (a *genius loci*), accompanied by two of his spirit lieutenants.

From that moment *Ndyuka* knew that they had seen the divine appearance of the god of the River and Wilderness, the Great Spirit who belonged there, who had his abode in that remote place. It was clear to the first generation of Maroons that to live in such an unfamiliar, and in many ways dangerous environment, they needed the protection

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of this god of the Interior. But they were also convinced that they could not abandon the Spirit who had helped them to throw off the yoke of slavery. Fortunately, the two Great Spirits concluded a covenant that laid down the sacred rules for divine co-operation: it is this agreement that is at the foundation of *Ndyuka* society.

A *gaanman* is the representative of God on earth, the *Benpenimaunsu* (Pakosie 1993). He must live by His divine rules. Time and again, the colonial and postcolonial society have found the *gaanman* and his headmen unwilling to comply with their instructions, not because these leaders have been set on provoking the authorities in Paramaribo, but rather because they have felt it their first duty to obey the divine powers. Instructions from secular authorities, from a District Commissioner or a military commander, cannot be fulfilled if these conflict with divine rulings. The covenant between Gaan Gadu the Great Oracle and the god Gangasukosu Kwaami is the prime touchstone of a *gaanman*'s policy. Anything suggested or forced upon Maroons that would go against the Covenant is impossible to execute: it would endanger a *gaanman*'s life and put the well-being of his people in jeopardy. The Covenant is a source of strength for a *gaanman*, but it can at times also make him vulnerable. A few examples may suffice here.

During the reign of *gaanman* Akontu Velanti (1950-1964), who also occupied the position of high priest of the Gaan Gadu oracle, city politicians began to understand the strategic advantages of the latter position and to court Akontu with gifts and with jobs for his nearest kin. The flag of the National Party of Suriname (NPS) - Suriname's strongest Creole party - was hoisted over the temple of Gaan Gadu in his village of residence Diitabiki.

This form of politics had both positive and negative effects for the power position of the *gaanman*. First, Maroons in general began to feel that, if they wished a particular favour from city people, they must secure the co-operation of Akontu. The *gaanman* did nothing to discourage their deference. On the other hand, such favours were at the same time considered dubious gifts, corrupting the moral stature of *Benpenimaunsu* (the highest priest), and subverting even the standing of the Gaan Gadu cult.

When Akontu died in 1964, and his younger brother Asenfu succeeded him as priest, the stream of gifts from the NPS continued unabated. Yet Asenfu was not recognised as the new *gaanman*. This honour fell to Gazon Matodya (term of office: 1966 to the present). As a result of outside patronage and gifts a rift had been opened up between the two most important functionaries in *Ndyuka* society, a rift that proved to have disastrous consequences only a few years later. In the late 1960s it caused

considerable friction between Gazon and Asenfu. These circumstances, and several scandals, brought a severe crisis close. It came to a head in 1971. A *Ndyuka* man by the name of Akalali claimed mediumship of an emanation of the Savage God (the Ogi). This Great Spirit wished to renege on the Sacred Covenant of the 18th century. At that time both Gaan Gadu and the Ogi had agreed that the dangers of witchcraft could only be countered by certain stiff punishments. Persons who committed those crimes were to be killed by Gaan Gadu, their corpses to be left unburied and their material possessions to be confiscated. Two centuries later, however, the Ogi felt that his divine counterpart had been misrepresented by his priests. The number of posthumous condemnations for witchcraft had gone up drastically, too drastically. The Ogi's mouthpiece condemned Gaan Gadu's priests for manipulating the oracle, and subverting the spirit's wishes. Akalali ordered all work at Gaan Gadu's oracle to be stopped forthwith; the Spirit was to 'take early retirement,' and its human servitors were fired. This created a difficult position for the *gaanman*. Akalali was courted by Paramaribo as the new power holder, and received by the authorities as if he were a *gaanman*. Another political party, the VHP, whose electorate consisted mainly of the descendants of East Indian migrants, the Hindustani, started to promote Akalali's cause. Again money and other gifts flowed to the new centre of power.

After a promotion to village headman, Akalali was nominated 'Head Captain,' the most important political position after the *gaanman*. Akalali now wished to be *gaanman* himself, but that was overstepping his boundaries. After some angry exchanges, and some defections, city politicians began to understand that there were limits to his power. However, they never understood the main constraint that kept Akalali from grasping ultimate authority. Gazon was not a mere figurehead representing an empty office, but in the eyes of his fellow *Ndyuka* God's representative on earth. He did not need to be high priest of the Gaan Gadu cult; even the demise of that cult did not bring his downfall. He remained the pivotal figure in all national rites of the *Ndyuka*. He was and is after all *Benpenimaunsu*.

Conclusion

The Maroon communities lost through the Peace Treaties a great deal of their independence. Their authority was subordinated to the colonial power in Paramaribo. The colonial power undermined the independence of Maroon leaders in a cunning way. Instead of sending them hats, skirts and mirrors which they did not require, they sent the goods which the Maroons themselves insisted on. These were goods that they could not make themselves such as, guns, gun-powder and iron utensils.

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Psychologically the colonial power forced the Maroons to accept goods that were not needed, and were mere luxuries in those days.

Then, playing upon the Maroons' induced dependence on these goods, in 1857 the colonial power stopped their shipment. Only the *gaanman* received an allowance of 300 guilders a year, or 25 guilders a month. It was made clear that this amount could be raised if the *gaanman* acted according to the requirements of the colonial power, which thus tried to undermine the authority of the Maroon leaders.

This authority is even nowadays not constitutionally recognised, but only tolerated by the central government in Paramaribo. Narrow political interests still dominate Paramaribo's attitude towards the Maroons. This is reflected in the fact that none of the political parties in Suriname is in favour of constitutionally recognising the authority of Maroon leaders. The political power in Paramaribo does not seem to be inclined to change this situation. They continue to control Maroon legitimate authorities by pursuing a misleading political and partisan policy.

Almost 90% of the interior inhabitants, including the *gaanman*, are uneducated, and therefore cannot evaluate the city state's political affairs. But they have many good ideas concerning development, democracy, human rights, and the environment. A serious government should take over their good ideas and work them out. Unfortunately, the government looks down upon them, and does not give the traditional authority the opportunity to show the potential value of their contribution to the nation of Suriname. The country's central government in particular could learn a lot from the democratic system of the traditional authority in the Maroon communities in Suriname.

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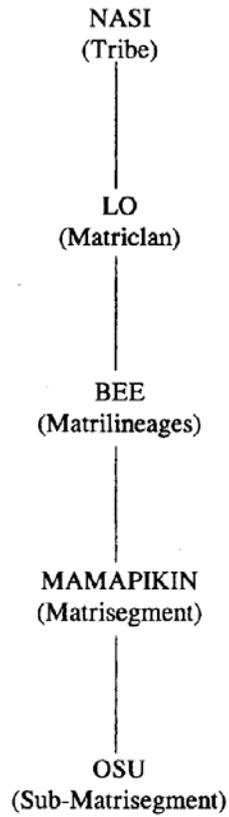
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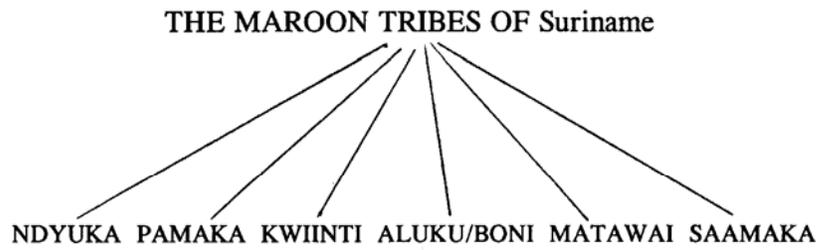
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Appendix 1

STRUCTURE OF A Suriname MAROON SOCIETY



Appendix 2



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