Werner Zips


This interesting book was first published in German in 2003 under the title _Das Stachelschwein erinnert sich: Ethnohistorie als praxeologische Strukturgeschichte_ (The porcupine remembers: Ethnohistory as praxeological structural history). It was later updated and translated into English by Francesca Deakin. Werner Zips has written several books and articles on the black experience in Africa and the Americas during and after the colonial era (see the bibliography in the work under review). Historians dealing with the Maroons will no doubt be aware of his seminal work entitled _Black Rebels: African Caribbean Freedom Fighters in Jamaica_ (1999). He has spent over twenty years doing ethnographic and other research among the Jamaican Maroons, and has also spent a great deal of time conducting related research in West Africa on the slave trade and the African diasporic experience. He is therefore well qualified to write on these subjects.

_Nanny’s Asafo Warriors_ deals mainly with a comparison of the political and religious systems in Ghana and the Accompong Maroon community in Jamaica. A preface and a fairly long introduction entitled “Encounters with History—History of Encounters” are followed by six chapters: “Ethnohistorical Appraisal of the ‘Historical Present’,” “The Logic of Maroon Praxis: Some Theoretical and Methodical Notes,” “Roots from the Roots—Africa in Jamaica,” “A Comparative Dimension of West Africa and the Caribbean: On the Structural History of Chieftaincy among the Maroons,” “Engendering History: Comparative Reconstruction of Female Political Participation in Jamaica and West Africa,” and “Sanctified by Blood Sacrifice—The 1738-/1739 Peace Treaty as the Basis for Maroon Sovereignty.” The analysis concludes with an epilogue. Each chapter contains extensive notes. The bibliography includes a wide-ranging list of sources, both published and unpublished, and an impressive list of “interviews and conversations.” A number of richly colored photos of various persons and places in Jamaica and Ghana help to illustrate the text.

The strength of the study lies in the wide comparisons that Zips makes between the various political groups and stools in Ghana on the one hand and those of the Accompong Maroons on the other. For instance, he indicates that rituals such as burial and coronation ceremonies, ceremonial umbrellas, annual festivals of remembrance and veneration of ancestors, the role of the queen-mother, and (in several instances) actual titles and names indicate clearly a close affinity between the two communities. He provides the most
convincing argument and evidence that this writer has come across to prove that the Accompong Maroons are largely of Akan origin.

Apart from the comparative dimension, the book deals in some detail with the origins and development of the Maroon communities in Jamaica. Much of the discourse attempts a revisionist approach to previous writers on the subject, especially in relation to the treaties that were signed by the British on the one hand, and the Leeward and Windward Maroons on the other, in 1739. Zips criticizes Edward Long (1774), Bryan Edwards (1801), and Robert Dallas (1803), the three major contemporary writers on the Maroons, for deliberately distorting the relations between the Maroon communities and the colonial state to convey the impression that the former were forced to make peace with the latter or risk the impending destruction of their polities. He also takes to task more recent writers, such as Barbara Kopytoff (1973, 1979), Orlando Patterson (1979), and Mavis Campbell (1990), for buying uncritically into the Maroon narrative of the three “colonial” historians mentioned above, and repeating many of their views. One aspect of the treaties (as published by the authoritarian state) with which he takes particular issue is the provision of a British “superintendent” in the Maroon settlements, and the requirement that only the authoritarian state could impose the death penalty.

Zips is quite correct in saying that some aspects of the published treaties and the narratives by contemporary historians do not make logical sense in terms of the historical relations between the authoritarian state and the Maroon polities. Neither the suggestions, for instance, that the Maroon leader Kojo (Cudjoe) grovelled at the feet of Cassidy, the British military officer sent to conduct peace negotiations with him, nor the British concession in the treaty of only 1500 acres to the Maroons (when the Maroons had previously occupied and ranged over a much larger territory) seem to make much sense. At the same time, Zips appears to have accepted the Maroon interpretation of every contentious issue in the published treaty, and the wider early posttreaty relations between the two parties. His analysis would (or could) have been enriched by a comparison between the treaties under review and earlier treaties that Mexico, Colombia, Brazil and other colonial states had made previously with Maroon communities, and the later ones that the Dutch authorities made with the Suriname Maroons. The Jamaican government clearly borrowed extensively from the early treaties, which contained basically the same clauses as those in the treaties signed with the Leeward and Windward Maroons.

Zips’s discourse is at times clouded by far too complex language which the ordinary reader would find difficult, if not impossible, to unravel. This is particularly true of the preface and introduction. But on the whole, his book adds a fresh perspective on its subject.
References


