Jean Besson

Transformations of Freedom in the Land of the Maroons: Creolization in the Cockpits, Jamaica. Kingston: Ian Randle, 2015. xxii + 367 pp. (Paper US\$ 47.95)

While numerous anthropological and historical works have been written on the Maroons, there is a dearth of comparative treatises considering the binary of creolization and ethnic identity formation among modern Maroons and their freed-slave descendant counterparts in the Americas. Veteran Caribbeanist Jean Besson—who has carried out extensive fieldwork in the region—expertly fills this gap here by concentrating on three “transnational” communities in Jamaica’s Cockpit Country—Accompong, Aberdeen, and Maroon Town. (Maroon Town has also been known as—or associated with—Trelawny Town, Cudjoe/Kojo Town, Petty River Bottom, and Flagstaff, at different historical periods.) Her book is an interdisciplinary work of historical ethnography that weaves together oral history interviews with members of the three communities, anthropological fieldwork/participant observation of the ways in which the members of the community remember and commemorate their history, and written records.

The Cockpit Country is central to Besson’s study given that the “similarities and differences in creolization that evolved in Accompong, Aberdeen, and Maroon Town, rooted in maroon and non-maroon transformations of African-American [more accurately Afro-Jamaican] slave cultures, were forged in this Cockpit Country landscape” (p. 14). This rugged interior was also the site of violent antislavery upheavals that contributed to the demise of slavery on the island and the consequent establishment of peasant villages, as well as emigration to urban centers and abroad. Thus, the Cockpit Country “has been shaped by a long history of violent resistance as well as peaceful coexistence, continuity as well as change, mobility as well as rootedness” (p. xvii).

Besson first traces and analyzes the causes and consequences of the Maroon Wars. She then examines how those wars are remembered in oral history narratives and cultural practices within the three communities with disparate post-war and postemancipation historical trajectories. She explains that the Accompong Maroon stronghold was officially recognized by the British immediately after the First Jamaican Maroon War with the former (1725–38/39), when the British Governor of Jamaica, Edward Trelawny, and the Afro-Creole Maroon Captain Cudjoe signed a peace treaty in the Cockpits. The treaty “granted” the Leeward Maroons both freedom and legal rights to 1,500 acres of land in Trelawny Town, which later increased to 2,559 acres to include Accompong(’s) Town. However, after the Second Maroon War (1795–96), the colonists betrayed the Maroons of Trelawny Town, deporting them to Nova Scotia, and confiscat-

ing their lands. Hence, Accompong became the only surviving village of the Leeward Maroons. (In recent years, the residents of Maroon Town/Flagstaff have attempted to reconstitute themselves as a functioning Maroon polity in the Cockpits.) Today, the legacy of the treaty has allowed Accompong (like other established Maroon communities) to remain an autonomous creole Maroon polity and tax-free territory. Its Afro-Creole Maroon identity is further “reinforced by oral traditions and Myal beliefs and rituals deriving from the Myal slave religion” (p. 16). As such, the land has over time become a sacred landscape with symbolic significance—commemorated through ritual practices.

Besson argues that, unlike Accompong, which is an Afro-Creole Maroon society made up of people descended from rebel slaves, the residents of Maroon Town and Aberdeen are descended from black emancipated slaves. Aberdeen was established in the 1840s by plantation-squatting, emancipated slaves who later purchased land. Some of the land “was gradually turned into family land held in common by large cognatic kin groups, descendants of the original owner, and later sacralized through the burial of deceased family members on the land” (p. xviii). Maroon Town, on the other hand, evolved on the former site of Trelawny Town. After the confiscation of the 1,500 acres of treaty lands, the colonial state subdivided and sold it to the “descendants of foraging non-treaty mulatto Maroons, colonists and slaves—who subsequently created family lands and whose descendants still hold such lands today” (p. 15). Besson’s interviews show that, while these lands provide a sense of belonging and identity to the communities living on them, population increase and the lack of adequate sources of livelihood, among other factors, have forced members to migrate to seek greener pastures. An example of this is the late Jonathan Dunstan, who lived part of his life in the United States under the Farm Work Scheme in 1943.

Besson’s multidisciplinary approach provides a subaltern reconstruction, comparison, and analysis of the temporal, territorial, and cultural contours and encounters among the three communities within their shared landscape. This microworld is comprised of planters, slaves, Maroons, freed-black peoples and their descendants in Jamaica, traversing the colonial period to the present. Such a well-researched and argued comparative study of the processes of creolization, ethnicity, and community formation, underpinned by both change and continuity, will serve as a model for other scholars researching similar themes among other Maroon communities in Jamaica and beyond.

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