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NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE 92 (2018) 275–283



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Research Note



Maroons in Guyane *Getting the Numbers Right*

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Abstract

This note presents new demographic data on the number and location of “Suriname Maroons” in Guyane (French Guiana), as well as elsewhere in the world. After brief discussion of the methodological challenges of estimating the size of “ethnic” populations in a country whose census prohibits such counts, it shows that about 38 percent of Maroons now live in Guyane and that they form one-third of the total population. It ends by suggesting some implications of this demographic explosion.

Keywords

Maroons – Guyane – Suriname – demography

A major task in rethinking the situation of Maroons in Guyane (French Guiana) 15 years after Sally Price and I first published *Les Marrons* (R. & S. Price 2003)¹ has been to pinpoint demographic change. For a new edition of that book

1 This book was written in French for readers in Guyane who encounter Maroons on a daily basis but have little idea of their diverse histories, languages, and cultures—schoolteachers, physicians and nurses, lawyers and judges, government employees, and others.

scheduled for 2019, we have drawn on many months of fieldwork in Guyane over the years as we pursued other projects,² and more targeted research during January and February 2018.³

The difficulties of estimating populations by ethnicity in a country that, by law, prohibits such an endeavor has required some imaginative research strategies. Article 1 of the French constitution reads in part “France shall be an indivisible, secular, democratic and social Republic [that] ensures the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race, or religion.” This is interpreted by government agencies as prohibiting the enumeration of anyone’s “origin, race, or religion” in the national census and even in less formal settings. (Sally was once asked her advice by a woman conducting an in-house survey at the Louvre museum about how she might determine the number of visitors of various ethnicities—should she listen to what languages they spoke to one another? she asked, since she was not permitted to ask the direct question itself.) In this context, figuring out how many “Maroons” or “Saamakas” or “Brazilians” or “Haitians” live in Guyane becomes fraught. Although the French census is permitted to distinguish between “French citizens” and “foreigners” as well as between people born in France and those born elsewhere, that’s as far as it goes. Ethnicity and national origin, so very important in Guyane’s daily life (in terms of inequalities, discrimination, opportunities ...), are erased in the service of official equality before the law.⁴

In 2002, after considerable research, we estimated the burgeoning Maroon population in Guyane at 37,200—some 20 percent of the total population (which officially totaled 182,000).⁵ According to official statistics, during the last 16 years the population of Guyane has risen 57 percent to 286,000; according to our own estimates, that of Maroons has exploded by 266 percent, to 99,000 today. If these figures are correct, more than one in three people living in Guyane today is a Maroon.

2 The results of these projects include S. & R. Price 2005 and R. Price 2008, 2011, and 2013a&b.

3 Quantitative analysis of population change has been largely my domain, hence the single authorship of this research note. I thank Catherine Benoît, Rémi Charrier, and Clémence Léobal for their helpful criticisms of a draft of this note. I take sole responsibility for the results.

4 In fact, L’INSEE in Guyane collects information on nationality (though not ethnicity) but does not make it public.

5 R. & S. Price 2003:6, 23. At the time, I estimated the total population of Suriname and French Guiana Maroons in the world at 118,000, which meant that about one in three Maroons were living in Guyane (R. Price 2002).

In estimating the number of Maroons (and of particular Maroon groups) in Guyane, we have used various resources and strategies.⁶ Figures from the Institut national de la statistique et des études (l'INSEE), which conducts the official French census, served as a base, giving for each *commune* both the total population and breakdowns of French/foreigner and born-in-France/born-elsewhere, further broken down by age. We visited schools (from elementary through high school), spoke with teachers, doctors, other hospital personnel, and municipal officials (who engage with residents in a range of everyday problems), read what other scholars have written, and, of course, did what ethnographers always do—interacted with and listened to as many people as we could. Together, these resources permitted estimates that we believe are worth taking seriously.

Our analysis of Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni, the largest majority-Maroon town on the planet, may serve as an example. Our starting point was the census. (We assume that an official census, like our own estimates, is a blunt instrument, but it serves a useful purpose.) Officials at l'INSEE described how, working with municipal agents, they divide communes that have a population of more than 10,000 people into five zones and do a careful count of a different zone each year. They draw on maps, aerial photos, and other records (electric and water bills, et cetera) in order to identify all dwellings and then determine which are inhabited, before doing door-to-door interviews with residents.

In 2018, the official population of Saint-Laurent was some 55,000.⁷ But there are a number of mitigating factors in this count. First, there are many transnationals living there, both men and women, mainly Maroons who move between households in Albina (just across the Maroni River) or elsewhere in Suriname, and Saint-Laurent. Furthermore, a significant number of schoolchildren arrive each morning by motor canoe from the Suriname side to go to school in Saint-Laurent, using the address of a local relative to establish residence and tak-

6 For purposes of this research note, “Maroon” refers to the descendants of maroons who in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries fled plantations in Suriname and eventually formed the Aluku, Kwinti, Matawai, Ndyuka (Okanisi), Pamaka, and Saamaka peoples. Neither Matawai nor Kwinti have significant populations in Guyane.

7 There is considerable debate, and political consequence, concerning the current population of the commune. René Charrier of l'INSEE, using the 2014 census as a base, projects forward to 2018 on the basis of prior annual increases of 1,500, which suggests that the current official figure should be 52,000 (personal communication, 2018); other government officials, using different assumptions in their projections, arrive at a higher number—see discussion in Léobal 2017:24. My own estimate based on the 2014 census assumes (1) that the percentage of Maroon population of the *commune* has held steady at 77 percent and (2) that Maroon population increases at a rate of 4.5 percent per annum, which yields a total population for 2018 of some 55,000.

ing advantage at once of the French educational system and the possibility of acquiring French nationality after the age of 18, on the basis of birth at the Saint-Laurent hospital and five years of residence in the French territory.⁸ The commune also includes an unusually large number of “*sans-papiers*” (people without French residence papers)—mainly Saamakas, but other Maroons and some Haitians (Lauriat 2016) as well, many living in relatively inaccessible places, others simply fearful of having any contact with French authorities. Although the census takers are supposed to count everyone, regardless of legal status, large numbers of people remain uncounted because they flee or hide—on the basis of our interviews, we estimate the number of uncounted Maroons to be at least 4,000 people.⁹

At various schools in Saint-Laurent, we asked teachers to give their estimates of classroom makeup (Maroons vs others), which we compared to our own experiences during the past several years visiting classes and speaking with students in the *commune*. (In a few cases Maroon lycée students helped us by counting the students of different ethnicities in their classes.) We also spoke with hospital staff, taking into account that many Maroon (and some non-Maroon) patients come over from Suriname to seek French services, especially to give birth (generally with the aim of eventual citizenship for the child). We interviewed municipal officials, especially those who dealt with housing and the census. We tried to visit all the many neighborhoods of the town, including those that are semi-hidden in the surrounding forest. And, of course, we read whatever relevant scholarly as well as imaginative literature we could.¹⁰

In analyzing the new data, I looked back at the estimates we made in 2002: 13,500 Maroons in Saint-Laurent or 56 percent of the official population of 24,000. Since that time, the total population of the *commune* has more than doubled to some 60,000. In an earlier article, extrapolating from official French figures, I used an annual rate of natural increase of 4.5 percent for Maroons in Guyane (R. Price 2013b).¹¹ Applying that rate to the 2002 figure yields a current Maroon population of 27,302, to which we must add the “illegals” (undocu-

8 French law permits acquisition of citizenship at age 13, 16, or 18 depending on various proofs of residence but the local tribunal normally waits until age 18 to (reluctantly) consider such requests.

9 And we assume another 1,000 non-Maroons (undocumented Haitians and others) to be similarly uncounted. For the whole of Guyane, the French minister of the interior estimates the number of undocumented immigrants at 30,000 to 60,000 (Rapport du Gouvernement, 2015:168).

10 To cite only the most useful in this regard, see Léobal 2017 and Américain 2016.

11 In 2006, the birth rate for Saint-Laurent was 41.6 per 1000 inhabitants (while that of Guyane was 29.9 and that of metropolitan France 12.8)—Léobal 2017:687. In 2018,

mented residents) who were not counted by the census, making a provisional total of about 31,000 Maroons, before considering immigration and emigration during the period. Immigration to the *commune* comes not only from Albina, Moengo, and Paramaribo (and elsewhere on the coast of Suriname), but more importantly from the rapidly emptying-out Ndyuka villages along the Tapanahoni River as well as from the upriver French *communes* along the Lawa and Maroni (Maripasoula, Papaïchton, Grand-Santi, and Apatou), from which most *collégiens* (middle-schoolers) who wish to continue in school arrive at one of the four *lycées* (high schools), there being none further upriver.¹² Outmigration from Saint-Laurent is moderate but significant, particularly by lycée graduates who move to Cayenne to attend university and Maroons who—and this is a relatively new phenomenon—seek a better life in metropolitan France. I estimate that the balance of Maroon in-migration and out-migration in Saint-Laurent since 2002 yields a positive number of 15,000 additional people to the population.

I conclude, then, that the Maroon population of Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni is now about 46,000 people or 77 percent of the *commune's* total population. Schoolteachers with whom we spoke estimate that in most zones of the *commune* Maroons make up at least 90 percent of their classes. So, this estimate seems reasonable and even conservative.

Each *commune* in Guyane has specificities that require slightly different approaches in order to arrive at credible population estimates for Maroons. As a second example, let's consider the *commune* of Papaïchton, known as “the capital of the Aluku Maroons” and the area that encompasses almost all of the traditional Aluku villages. It has grown, officially, from 1,900 people in 2002 to 7,266 people today, an increase of 382 percent. Since the assumed natural increase of 4.5/100 would produce only an additional 1943 people (making a total of 3,843), we must account for the origin of the additional 3,424 people in the official count. Massive immigration seems clear, and the census helps. It tells us that 71 percent of people over the age of 24 are immigrants and foreigners. This means, first, that 71 percent of the adult population are not Alukus (since virtually all Alukus are French citizens by birth). And the census notes that 72 percent of these immigrants are men, which fits independent information, and our own fieldwork observations, that large numbers of (undocumented) Brazil-

officials at l'INSEE agreed with our estimate of a rate of natural increase of 4.5 percent for Maroons in Guyane; the actual rate in Saint-Laurent could be even higher. (This rate of natural increase is higher than that of any single country in the world—see Population Division 2017.)

12 A smaller number of upriver students who go on to a lycée choose to do so in Cayenne rather than Saint-Laurent.

ian *garimpeiros* and a smaller number of Ndyukas from Suriname, sometimes with their women, now reside in the *commune*. Where does this leave us?

The municipal census-takers (who carry out the local task for l'INSEE) made our task much easier, kindly sharing some crucial figures that l'INSEE is not permitted to give out. According to their 2014 data, in the "traditional" Aluku villages (Loka, Nouveau Asisi, Vieux Asisi, Abattis Cottica, et cetera) they counted 1,216 residents. In the *bourg* of Papaïchton (including Kormontibo) they counted 2,862. And in the mining camps and the newer villages closer to the border with Grand-Santi, where they made a special effort to count as many people as they could (telling us they believe they enumerated "more than half of the 'illegal' *garimpeiros*") they counted 2,552, including several hundred Ndyukas from Suriname. On the basis of our fieldwork and the testimony of these municipal census-takers, it seems conservative to estimate that 2,000 undocumented goldminers/immigrants were not counted in the census, raising the *commune's* real population in 2018 to some 9,400.¹³

Of this 9,400 total, it is likely that some 2,900 are Alukus (once we subtract other French citizens such as gendarmes, soldiers, doctors and nurses, schoolteachers, and those 675 Ndyukas who are citizens),¹⁴ that about 925 are Ndyukas with Suriname citizenship, and that about 4,500 are Brazilians. All this fits both our observations on the ground and the reports of other visitors, including the police charged with rounding up the undocumented goldminers and destroying their equipment. We end up, then, with an estimate of 4,500 Maroons in the commune of Papaïchton, with Aluku Maroons being a statistical minority in their own capital, though they remain very much in charge politically. (The foreigners do not, of course, vote in French elections.)

Our *modus operandi* for the other *communes* of Guyane follows similar patterns. We eventually arrived at current figures of 10,000 Maroons in the greater Cayenne area (Cayenne, Matoury, Remire-Montjoly, and Roura), which is probably a conservative estimate; 12,225 (the great majority Saamaka) for the space-center town of Kourou; 4,000 (the great majority Ndyuka) for Mana, which in the 1990s welcomed Cottica Ndyuka Maroon refugees from the Suriname civil war; 23,700 for the four Maroni/Lawa river *communes* (Apatou, Grand

13 I multiplied the 2014 census figure, minus Brazilians (whose population was presumed to be steady) by a 4.5% rate of natural increase to arrive at the 2018 figure. (Some municipal workers suggested that the number of uncounted Brazilians was 4,000 rather than 2,000 but there is no way of being sure and, in any case, the number of *garimpeiros* might be quite different today.)

14 The 2014 figure for French citizens was 3,230, which would become 3,852 in 2018 by natural increase.

Santi, Papaïchton, and Maripasoula, for which the official census gives a total population of 33,650¹⁵); and a smattering of Maroons in settlements in other *communes* (Saint-Georges-de-l'Oyapock, where we counted three Maroons; Régina, where we counted six; Sinnamary, where there are several hundred, including employees at the Russian Soyuz launch site; Macouria, where there are perhaps 3,000, many living in the new town of Soula; Iracoubo, where there are several hundred; and others).

These estimates end up with a population of some 99,000 Maroons out of a total (official) Guyane population of 286,000. That's more than one person in three.¹⁶ Meanwhile, if we project the estimated 127,000 Maroons living in Suriname in 2013 forward to 2018, using an annual rate of natural increase of 4 percent (R. Price 2013b:325), we get a provisional total of 154,000 Maroons living in Suriname today. Subtract from that an estimated 14,000 who have moved either to the French side of the river or elsewhere in the world in the interim, and we get a total of 140,000 Maroons residing today in Suriname. If we add the roughly 24,000 Maroons living in Europe and elsewhere in the world to the Guyane and Suriname totals (99,000 and 140,000, respectively), we arrive at a worldwide Maroon population (including Suriname, Guyane, Europe, and elsewhere) of some 263,000 people. This means that about 38 percent of all Maroons now live in Guyane. Table 1 summarizes these findings.

In Guyane, within the catchall "Maroon" label, the question of ethnicity remains important in daily life. Although the government (in most contexts) and most non-Maroons (in most contexts) lump all Maroons as "*Bushinengué*," individual ethnic identities remain crucial in many contexts, as witnessed by everything from the languages they speak at home to the foods they eat, as well as their "employability" (with Saamakas being preferred over other Maroons by most employers for their ethic of hard work). Our statistical conclusions about ethnic distributions in Guyane take off from the logics already discussed, though our ethnographic fieldwork played an even more important role, given the limitations of the official census data. We conclude that of the 99,000 Maroons residing in Guyane today, the "ethnic" breakdown is 47,000 Ndyuka, 35,500 Saamaka, 9,800 Aluku, and 6,900 Pamaka, including an unknown number of "mixed" children (perhaps 5–10 percent of the whole).

15 The majority of the 10,000 non-Maroons in the four Lawa/Maroni *communes* are Brazilian *garimpeiros*. L'INSEE told us that, in the *communes* of Grand-Santi and Apatou (in contrast to Maripasoula and Papaïchton) municipal census-takers did not even attempt to enumerate undocumented *garimpeiros*.

16 Given our suspicion of an undercount of undocumented residents, the total population of Guyane is probably closer to 300,000 but that would still show Maroons at 33 percent.

TABLE 1 2018 population figures

	Suriname "interior"	Paramaribo and environs	Guyane interior	Guyane littoral	Europe, USA, etc.	Totals
Ndyuka	19,000	39,000	13,500	33,500	10,500	115,500
Saamaka	35,000	35,000	—	35,500	10,000	115,500
Aluku	100	400	6,600	3,200	1,300	11,600
Pamaka	1,000	1,100	3,500	3,400	2,000	11,000
Matawai	1,300	6,800	—	—	400	8,500
Kwinti	300	750	—	—	150	1,200
TOTAL	56,700	83,050	23,600	75,600	24,350	263,300

For the Ndyuka, "Suriname 'interior'" includes both the Tapanahoni/Lawa and Cottica/Moengo regions, as well as the (former) Sara Creek villages. For the Saamaka, "Suriname 'interior'" includes villages both above and below the lake. Note that, with increasingly easy movement by road and canoe between Paramaribo and the upriver Saamaka villages, many Saamakas have dual residence upriver and in the capital. For purposes of this table, we consider Apatou part of Guyane's "interior."

The potential political implications of this Maroon population explosion and its accompanying linguistic, educational, cultural, economic, and political changes still lie in the future, but they promise to affect Guyane profoundly. Aluku Maroons, who constitute only 10 percent of the Maroon population in Guyane, currently continue to speak on behalf of all Maroons in local politics. To cite only the latest example, the *Grand conseil coutumier des populations amérindiennes et bushinengué* ("Great traditional council of Amerindian and Maroon populations"), established with considerable pomp by French law under the aegis of the prefect in February 2018, consists of eight Maroon leaders (six official "captains" and two leaders of Maroon "associations")—all Alukus (and all men), without a single Ndyuka or Saamaka or Pamaka representative. Will the other far more numerous Maroon groups permit this political anomaly to persist? Or again, Maroons now make up 77 percent of the population of Guyane's second-largest *commune*, Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni (soon set to surpass Cayenne, the capital, in population size). For how long can the Creole mayor (in office since 1983) and his party expect to hold on to political power in that overwhelmingly majority-Maroon town?

These are among the many questions raised by our recent demographic findings. The social changes that accompany them, for example, the way Maroons in Guyane now live—often in apartment buildings in Saint-Laurent and Kourou that resemble those in Parisian banlieues and hold much the same promise

of rapid ghettoization, or the sudden rise of evangelical churches among Maroons that threatens to cut them off from much of their ancestral heritage—will be the subject of future publications, beginning with our new edition of *Les Marrons*.

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