CHAPTER 7

Maroons and the Communications Revolution in Suriname’s Interior

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1 Introduction

From the first until the last day of slavery, enslaved people liberated themselves by escaping from the plantation colony and setting up new, independent communities. These escapees, who came to be called Maroons, settled in the tropical rain forest of Suriname’s interior, far away from the seat of colonial power in Paramaribo. Yet they stayed tied to the colonial economy in several ways. The general impression people have is that Maroons lived in total isolation in Suriname’s interior until quite recently, about one or two generations ago, but this must now be largely discounted as a myth. This is certainly true in the case of Maroon men.1 Women, on the other hand, remained comparatively isolated until quite recently as gender-based labour division and traditional notions of womanhood mostly linked women to the domestic sphere and the village context.

This chapter examines the extent to which contact with the outside world formed part of the Maroons’ existence, and how contact has influenced Maroon lifestyles throughout history.2 Crucially, I explore how Maroons’ adoption of new communication technologies is impacting patterns of communication with the wider world and among the Maroons themselves. This contribution does not simply deal with how objects are being adopted by subjects, rather it focuses on what happens to people and their context when they use new technologies and also how new technologies are transformed due to their use in specific social contexts. In their study of the impact of the cell phone in Jamaica, Horst and Miller (2007) call this the “communicative ecology”, that is, the wider sphere which is influenced by new technologies. They emphasise the fact that a cell phone can save one’s life because it is possible to call immediately for a car or ambulance to bring a sick person to the hospital.

1 See Van Stipriaan (2011) on which this chapter is based.
2 The outside world here means outside of Suriname’s interior, therefore, contacts with Amerindians will not be discussed here.

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Cell phones also provide the opportunity to almost simultaneously mobilise a transnational network of relatives to help pay the hospital bill.

Another important observation is that when people adopt new technology or new media “[they are] used initially with references to desires that are historically well established, but remain unfulfilled because of the limitations of previous technologies” (Horst and Miller 2007: 7). Recent developments among Maroons who live in Suriname’s interior seem to confirm this. However, the pace at which changes have occurred, and the subsequent consequences, differ. The coming together of a number of new technologies almost at the same time and the resulting explosion of communication was quite revolutionary.\(^3\) In order to properly understand the impact of contact and especially the role of new technologies in the changes that took place in communication patterns among Maroon villagers residing in the interior of Suriname, I discuss them with respect to distinct historical periods. I distinguish three principal historical periods of communication based on differences in degrees of intensity of contact and intensity of change in patterns of communication. The relevant periods are: (1) Diplomatic and economic communication with the city, 1760–1890, (2) Acceleration of communication and transport, 1890–1960, and (3) Transport and communication revolution, 1960–present. The posited periods also involved demographic and geographic changes as illustrated in Tables 7.1 and 7.2.

Not much is known about demographic growth of Maroons before the twentieth century. Obviously, maroonage from slavery was the main growth factor before 1863, the year of slave emancipation. Since then natural growth was constantly increasing due to more stable circumstances as well as, eventually, improved health care. Today population increase of the Surinamese population is just over one per cent yearly, whereas that of Maroons is three to four times as high, as a consequence of high birth rates (Census 2004). Table 7.2 shows how, despite high natural growth the population in the traditional Maroon territories is decreasing, due to out-migration. Two thirds of all Maroons now live outside their former territory, a majority among them even outside Suriname.

Obviously, mobility was a crucial factor in Maroon history. Mobility was involved in their ancestors’ enslavement in Africa and their enforced transportation across the Atlantic to Suriname. In Suriname, sooner or later they escaped from slavery and settled outside of the plantation area in the tropical rain forest in (temporary) camps and villages. The period and direction of their flight from the plantations eventually turned out to be a decisive factor in the formation of the six different Maroon groups. The first groups that escaped

\(^3\) In this article, revolution(ary) should be conceived of more as a process involving definite change rather than as a sudden event, as, for instance, the Industrial Revolution.