Hoogbergen, Wim
Reseña de "Cultures en Guyane: Les Marrons" de Richard Price, Sally Price
Instituto de Estudios del Caribe
San Juan, Puerto Rico

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an original work in a field that, so far, remains ethnographically underdeveloped and theoretically stagnated.

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In August 1966 a young couple, Richard and Sally Price, travelled by coracle up the Suriname River into the Surinamese interior to embark on their first anthropological fieldwork. When they arrived, and after the necessary negotiations, they hung up their hammocks in the village of Aboikoni, the paramount chief of the Saramaka. Their first visit lasted for two months, but there would be many more months of fieldwork to follow.

The ancestors of the Saramaka were slaves on the plantations of Suriname and escaped in the period between 1690 to 1760. The white plantation owners, mainly Dutch or French, and Portuguese Jews fleeing from Brazil undertook many expeditions to try to recapture their slaves, but were mainly unsuccessful. In the end (in 1762), they reluctantly had to close an agreement in which they recognized the Saramaka as ‘free negroes’, that they could live in the interior in whatever way they pleased and that they would receive annual gifts by which the government, in effect, paid ‘protection money’ to forestall raids on the plantations.

The Saramaka were not the only group of escaped slaves with whom the colonial government made agreements. Two years earlier (in 1760) the plantation owners signed an accord with the Ndyuka (also known as Aukaners) who lived in the east of Suriname. In 1767 a third group of Maroons, the Matawai, were offered a peace accord. At this point the government felt they had done enough because they continued to pursue the other groups
of Maroons, the Boni (also known as Aluku) and the Kwinti, although these groups were certainly as old as the Ndyuka. They lived closer to the plantations and therefore the government believed that they could conquer these ‘runaway slaves’. This turned out to be a dreadful blunder because in the 1770s the Boni in particular waged a fierce guerrilla war against the plantation owners. The Governor brought an extra 1,200 troops over from the Netherlands and formed a small army of 300 soldiers from the enslaved population. Each slave was offered his freedom, a weapon, a small salary and a red beret, which quickly led to them being known as Redimusu’s, Redcaps. Interestingly, this name remains an insult in Suriname.

John Gabriel Stedman, a Scots officer, fought with the Dutch against the Boni. Stedman wrote a wonderful book about Suriname and the battles against the Boni Maroons. Fifteen years ago (1988) the Prices published Stedman’s original manuscript. It seems that the original publisher had subjected it to heavy censorship. Negative comments on the planters were removed as were the more favourable remarks about the slaves.

The fieldwork carried out by the Prices in 1966 was the start of a lasting and deep contact between these American anthropologists and the Surinamese Maroons. Now, almost 40 years later, this has led to a number of excellent books and a series of wonderful articles.

In 1969 Richard Price graduated on his ethnography of the Saramaka. Whether or not Sally Price ever graduated I do not know, but her 1983 book on Saramakan women (Co-wives and Calabashes) is of the level of a cum laude dissertation. During the 1970s a reader on Maroon Societies (1973) and a bibliography about the Surinamese Maroons (1976) were published. The Prices also organised an exhibition of Maroon art which had a beautiful catalogue (1980).

In the 1980s Richard Price in particular continued in a more post-modern vein in his works on the history of the Saramaka. First Time (1983) is based on oral traditions; archival information and
the sources are distinguished by the use of different fonts. *First Time*, as the title suggests, describes the history of the Saramaka from the beginning: the flight from the plantations.

In Suriname *marronage* generally took place in small groups. Out of these groups grew the matrilineal clans of the Surinamese maroons. The oldest clans of the Saramaka dated from around 1690 and the process of formation carried on until the peace accord in 1972.

In *Alabi's World* Richard Price describes the history of the Saramaka from 1762-1820, the year in which Alabi, the paramount chief of the Saramaka and the principal character in Price’s book died. *Alabi’s World* is, above all, a study in intercultural confrontation. The parties in this historic encounter are the Saramaka, the missionaries of the Moravian Brethren, the Dutch government and Richard Price himself as the mediating historian. As in *First Time* Price uses the device of typography to characterize the different voices.


In the Dutch translation of this book (2002) Sally Price enters the discussion. What is clear is that in the meantime there have been developments regarding the way in which non-western art forms are discussed, but that there is still a long way to go before there is any real question of a multicultural understanding of the concept of art.

This was a very long introduction and I still have not begun to speak about the Prices’ latest book. The introduction is necessary because *Cultures en Guyane: Les Marrons* is an introductory book for the francophone world about the Maroons in French-Guyana and because it makes use of a great deal of material which has already been published. My introduction also shows the structure...
of *Les Marrons* in broad lines. As far as the information on the Saramaka is concerned, the authors use their own work. As far as the history and anthropology of the other Maroon groups is concerned they lean heavily on the work of other authors (mainly Dutch and French). For information on the Boni (Aluku) they rely on Kenneth Bilby, Jean Hurault, Silvia de Groot and Wim Hoogbergen, and for information on the Ndyuka they turned mainly to Bonno Thoden van Velzen and Wilhelmina van Wetering. For the political history of the Maroons they were greatly indebted to the dissertation of Ben Scholtens, who was murdered in an attack in Paramaribo.

*Les Marrons* is about the Maroons currently (year 2003) living in French Guyana, their history and cultural background. The book begins with a chapter about Maroons and *marronage* in the New World. *Marronage* took place in all the plantation colonies. The best known are the Maroons of Brazil, Jamaica and Suriname. In French Guyana runaway slaves from the plantations also formed Maroon groups at certain periods of history, but they have not remained as coherent groups.

Next the Prices sketch the history of the Surinamese Maroons. The Maroons now living in French Guyana have their roots in the plantations of Suriname. About seven Maroon groups came into being on Surinamese soil. In order of age these are the Saramaka, the Matawai, the Ndyuka, the Boni (Aluku), the Kwinti, the Broos-Maroons and the Paramaka. The Saramaka and the Ndyuka are the two largest groups.

Two divisions can be made. First a division into western (Saramaka, Matawai and Kwinti) and eastern Maroons (Ndyuka, Boni’s, Broos-Maroons and Paramaka). This is not simply a regional division; the Prices discuss important linguistic and cultural differences between the two groups. Second, in the 1760s the colonial government closed peace accords with three groups (Ndyuka, Saramaka and Matawai). These Maroons then became free people who could travel with a pass to the plantation areas and trade goods. No peace accords were signed with the other
groups and the colonial government continued to hunt them down until the abolition of slavery in 1863. In 1862 the governor sent yet another military patrol to the Broos-Maroons, but when it was ambushed and five soldiers killed, Governor van Lansberge aborted the mission.

In a historical perspective the Boni (Aluku) were probably the greatest victims of colonial repression. After a year-long guerrilla war the Dutch troops (with the above-mentioned Stedman in their midst) were driven over the Marowijne into French Guyana in 1777. In 1789 the Boni again went to war against the Surinamese plantation owners and carried out raids on the plantations. That went badly wrong for the Boni when they were hunted down almost to the Brazilian border and in the struggle the leaders Boni and Kormantijn Kidjo were killed. In 1793 only about 100 Boni were left (of the 400 living in 1789). In the 1830s the remaining Boni settled on the French bank of the Lawa river which forms the border between Suriname and French Guyana. From that time on, there were six Maroon groups living in Suriname and one in French Guyana.

At this time (2003) the Boni have a far more secure official status than the other Maroons. They have French passports and can avail themselves of all the facilities offered by the French to their citizens. The Maroons still living in Suriname are much worse off. Since 1975 Suriname has been independent and following a military coup in 1980 and an ethnic civil war between 1986 and 1992, in which mainly Ndyuka Maroons were fighting the Surinamese army, the country has seen a big economic and moral slump. The government has little power and is not concerned with the interior of the country. At some point the Prices mention that the government provides 0.05 euro cents per annum per schoolchild in the interior of the country. Hardly anyone goes to school any more and uneducated Maroons go to Paramaribo and French Guyana to try to earn a living. Multinationals are felling the forests on a huge scale without any thought for reforestation, while gold seekers rummage around and dump their rubbish wherever they can,
pollute the rivers with mercury, so kill the fish, et cetera.

In the past fifteen years the Maroons have been leaving their homes in the interior in droves to settle in French Guyana. The description of the current situation of the Maroons in this overseas province of France is the most interesting part of the book because the Prices have presented information which has not been previously published. Apart from the roughly 5,000 Boni in the interior and the same number of Ndyuka who have gone to live on the French banks, around 30,000 (Surinamese) Maroons have settled in the coastal areas of Guyana. Most of them live there illegally. The Boni, of course, are allowed to live there and a small group of Ndyuka and Saramaka have succeeded in getting French papers. In the border town of Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni the Maroons currently make up more than half the population. The Sranantongo language of Suriname has replaced French Creole here as the lingua franca. Anyone can cross the Marowijne river from Suriname into French Guyana by dug-out canoe; there is barely any border control. To retain a vestige of authority the French carry out raids to confiscate goods from illegal traders and burn down their houses. In French Guyana it is not only Surinamese who are living there illegally, there are also large numbers of Brazilians and Haitians. Most of the Brazilians work in the illegal gold industry in the interior of both Suriname and French Guyana. They sometimes work alongside the Maroons, at other times they are competitors. The problems this causes for society and for the environment is one of the topics of the book. Maripasula, once a peaceful Boni village, is now the capital of Guyana’s wild west.

In the final chapter the authors discuss Maroon art. For those who are familiar with the Prices’ work, this will add very little new information. The book is primarily intended for the interested layman and in particular for those living in French Guyana. They will find in this book a clearly written story, skilfully shaped and illustrated with 128 illustrations, many of which are in colour. In the photo on page 91 we find the authors sitting in the front row at a dance performance by the group Denku.
Is there more to say about the book? Of course there are always things which could have been done better. The weakest part of the book is the part dealing with the history which does not concern the Saramaka. A note could have been added to the information about the Kwinti referring to articles about this group as they are rather more unruly than the Prices suggest on page 35. Little has been published about the history of the Paramaka, but the group certainly did not exist in 1780 as stated on the same page. It was not until 1830 that small groups of escaped slaves began to gather together in the Commewijne area to form the Maroon group we now know as Paramaka. The ‘forefather’ of the Paramaka, Dauphin, was still a slave on the Lustrijk plantation in 1820. And then there is the section on pages 39-43 giving a résumé of the Boni wars. The Prices mention that these pages are quoted from Kenneth Bilby (1990), but forget to add that Bilby had in turn quoted the material from my own 1985 dissertation which was published in English in 1990 under the title *The Boni Maroon Wars in Suriname*. That left me with a somewhat sour taste in my mouth.

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As Glenford Howe reminds us in his introduction, the history of the British West Indies Regiment (BWIR) ‘has remained largely untold’ (p. xiii). The contribution of West Indians to the war effort was ignored by historians until the pioneering work of Joseph and Elkins in the late 1960s and early 1970s, even