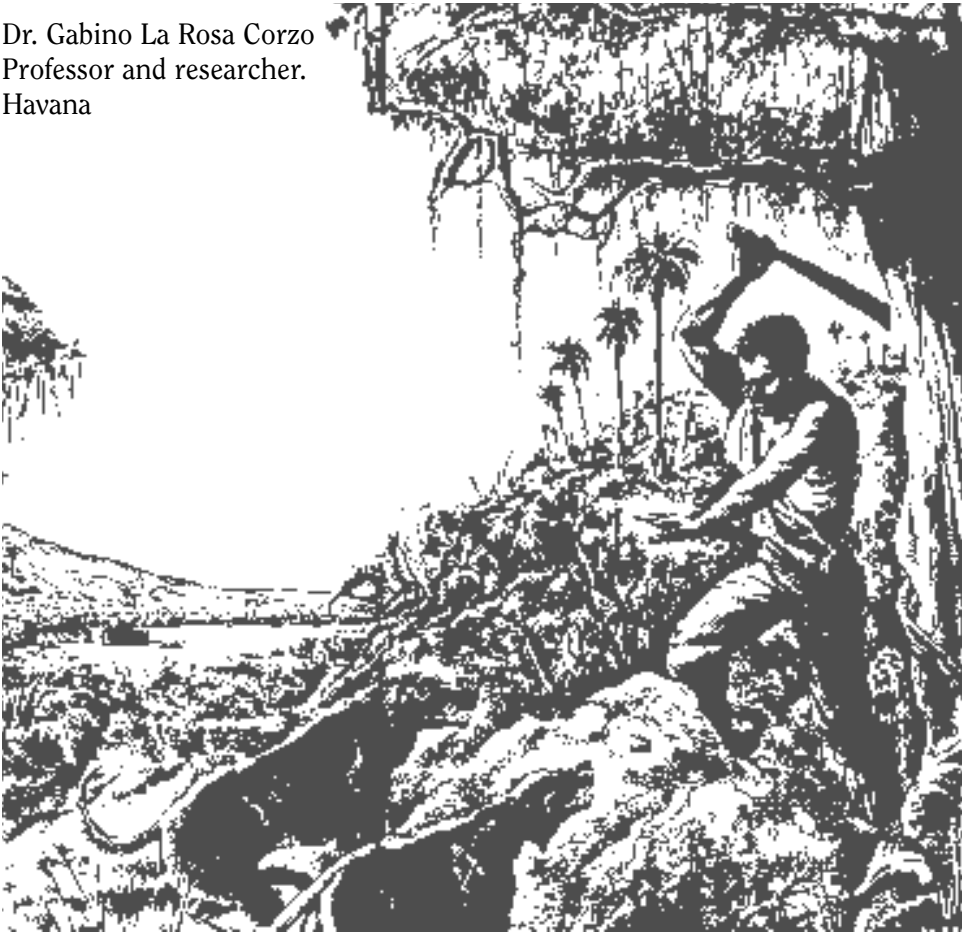


# The spaces of slave resistance in Cuba

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From the middle of the 20th Century, the investigations intended to reveal the history of slavery in America, and especially in the Caribbean environs, have

tions are revealed of the economic, social and ideological structures".<sup>2</sup>

For the past ten years much has been advanced, especially on the basis of histori-

cal archaeology, in the knowledge of the living conditions of the enslaved masses and of the African components, as part of the study of the slave-labor plantations and industrial capitalism in America.

However, a historiographical vacuum of some weight presents itself when the studies transfer from the slave-labor plantations and haciendas toward the secret and hidden villages erected by communities of Africans and their descendants born in America (quilombos or palenques); although these, as spaces of the active slave resistance, essentially typify the space of the marginals in a good part of Caribbean societies.

Cuba, the largest of the West Indies, where the slave-labor plantation economy reached its greatest development between 1790 and 1860 and which was one of the last bastions of slavery and colonialism in the continent, treasures in its archives thousands of documents which allow investigating the historical process the slavery of the African and his descendants on the Island went through, as well as studying the different media through which he expressed his discontent, be it in an open and direct way, through conspiracy or rebellion, or by way of resistance, with the palisading, the maroonage individually or in groups, and even in a passive way through, among others, abortion, suicide, breakage of equipment and resistance to work.

But this documentation, it so happens, may illustrate about the frequency of the escapes, the places which served as haven or settlement, the number of their inhabitants, the types of crops, the number of dwellings, but it does not illuminate about the daily lives of these communities. It does not offer us the possibility of accessing the knowledge of the material culture through which the African roots are expressed and the transcul-

turation process<sup>3</sup> which must have risen as a reflection of the variations occurred in life, behavior, knowledge and habits of the enslaved groups as a consequence of their introduction in American lands.

For this reason numerous anthropologists have searched in historical archaeology for a medium of access to the understanding of the material culture of the palenque, since, as happens with all historical documentation, the documents about the marginals originated from the center, their material culture, instead, was recreated in its origins and responded to its own vision, mission and resources. In this field the studies carried out in the United States, the Dominican Republic, Brazil and Cuba, among others, have stood out.<sup>4</sup>

As an immediate consequence of this trend in the American anthropological and archaeological studies, since the decade of the '80's of the 20th Century archaeology in Cuba has displayed important field work in the search for material evidence, through which the ethnohistorical reconstruction is launched of the villages founded by the fugitive slaves.

The slave-labor plantation as social historical space and the marginal spaces

The slave-labor society in the island of Cuba, as in the rest of America, was a socio-spatial phenomenon, not only because it distributed and exploited the existing geographical spaces, but also because it created and modified the spaces, and built the social relations in them.

The production of sugar and coffee demanded the best lands and they were granted specific productive and social functions, while the tall mountains and the swampy areas were left aside, until productive expansion demanded it, as marginal or excluded areas. These would be, precisely, the

spaces temporarily available to the fugitive slave, but their use would be subject to numerous factors. Let us see some of them.

On the basis of the wide historical documentation existing on the Island, it was possible to establish, initially in the nature of a hypothesis, the presence of regional differences in the ways the slave resistance manifested itself. The field work and the study of the material evidence allowed the discovery that the palisading or construction of hidden villages, in effect, prevailed in the mountainous areas of the eastern region of the Island as the main form of slave resistance, although the figure of slave population in it was lower than that concentrated in the western region.

The last region, where the highest numbers of slaves concentrated, had a mountain range of low altitude and limited physical space, named Habana-Matanzas Heights, and a narrow strip of swampy terrain on the south coast. Given the high concentration of slave-labor plantations in the western plains, these two areas constituted the only marginal space or means of escape for the fugitive slaves, but construction of stable villages in which crops could be grown and community life reestablished, was a very risky enterprise, hence that what prevailed were temporary havens or hiding places in caves and rocky shelters.

These differences in the forms the slave resistance adopted determined variations in the persecution and extermination systems. While in the eastern region large expeditions were organized for two or three months a year with troops of up to 150 men, persecution in the areas of the Habana-Matanzas region relied on small parties made up of barely six hut-plunderers who raked the territory on a permanent basis.

It has been verified through field work that in the eastern areas the construction of villages (*palenques*) on the skirts of the tall mountains was frequent as a defensive tactical resort. The maroon towns in Cuba were not generally raised either on the tops or on the low parts or mouths of brooks. The former would have made them visible from far distances and the latter would have been a great tactical defensive error. For this reason, the skirts were chosen and, to make the space habitable, artificial taluses were built on which their ranches and dwellings were erected.

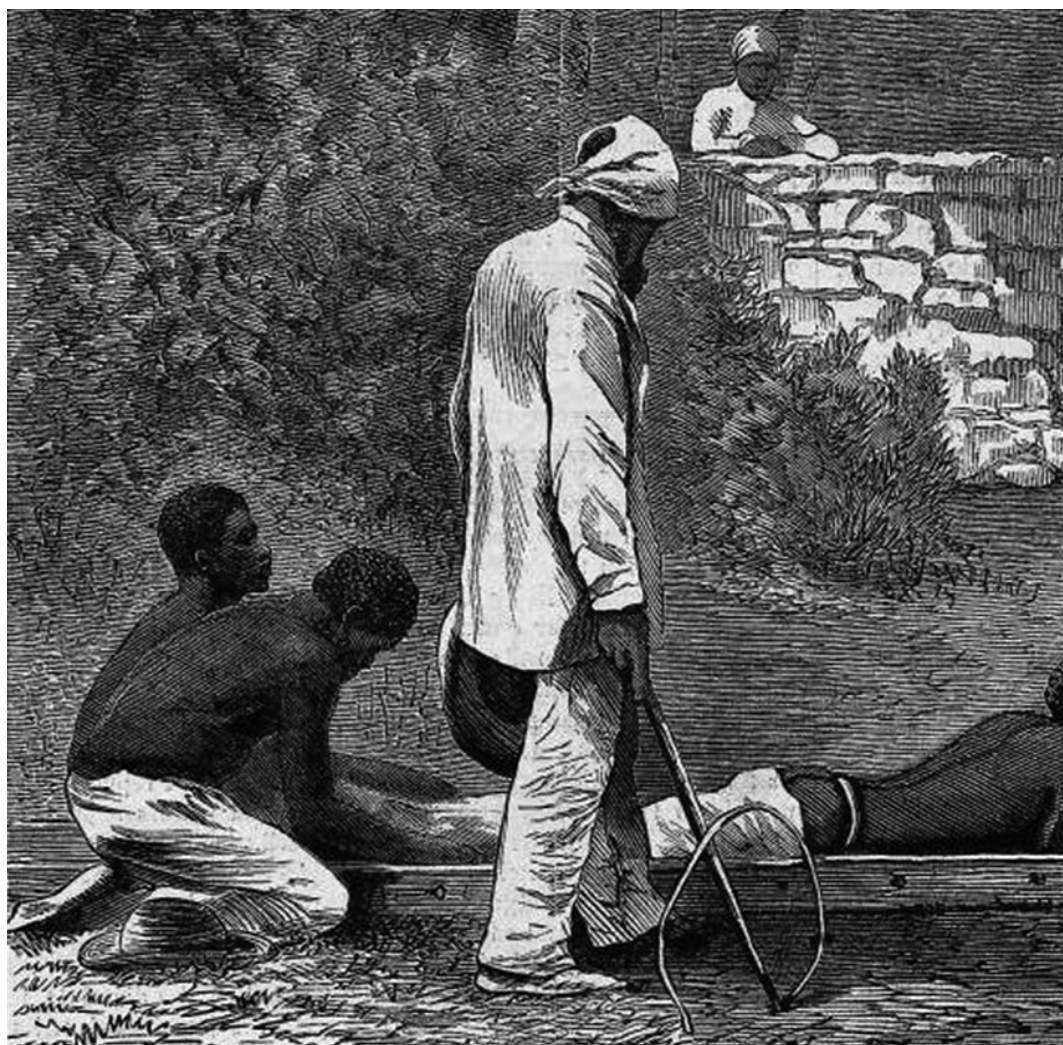
The geographical conditions of the tall eastern mountains and the absence of nearby population nuclei favored the development of this particular form of resistance, which took on very relevant characteristics in the area studied. The place selected by the escaped slave to settle must fulfill, above all, the most elementary requirements to be able to face a subsistence under constant harassment: distance, that is, the greatest isolation possible from any nucleus of colonial population, as well as from any communication route; inaccessibility, by that it is understood places of difficult or little access by a farmer, forester or passer-by, and with few probabilities of being discovered, and camouflage, a place which had topographic and vegetation characteristics that offered protection for the village. These three conditions, though they might be confused, in reality respond to different spatial levels, even though related among themselves.

This question becomes obvious on an insular scale and makes it possible to explain the fact that while the palisading appeared throughout the whole territory of the Island, it was precisely in the eastern region where it took on importance, since this was the area best favored by the three require-

gotten gradually closer to the ethno-historical reconstruction of the object of study, which has allowed entering the economic-social motives in the slave-labor process and the historic-cultural consequences of the system, almost always in the interest of pointing out the contemporary relevance of the issue.<sup>1</sup> But much is still not known of the culture and the contributions of the enslaved groups, even though modern historiography has acknowledged that "through the speeches and practices of the marginality and the exclusion, the most fundamental transforma-

ments listed above. This does not operate in a way independent from other factors such as large groups of slaves submitted to an intensive exploitation, which is really the base for all which unchains afterwards.

In the years 1985, 1987 and 1993 expeditions were carried out to the Cuchillas de Toa and, through the elements offered by the oral tradition, the local toponymy and the presence of evidence of the material culture of this type of settlement, the area occupied by the Kalunga palenque was located.<sup>5</sup> Since their dwellings had each been built on an



artificial talus, its topographic survey could be made and the reconstruction of the part of the settlement on a plat. The plans of 14 of the 26 dwellings it had were located. The presence of rudimentary stoves made up of three stones in the low part of some of the taluses and the different dimensions these latter had, prove the existence of rooms of different sizes, as well as the fact that cooking was done outside the dwellings.

Another of the plans, raised through identical processes, is the one corresponding to the palenque Todos Tenemos. In this case,



the assault description offered by the party that carried out the operation in the year 1848 also served as a basis for the field work.

The plans prove the concentration of dwellings in a relatively limited area in a space of difficult access. This is the basic distinctive characteristic of this type of human settlement. In this way, each palenque or village was integrated to a spatial concept defined by the harassed survival.

The palisading, as a form of the slaves' active resistance, from the social point of view represents a higher level with relation to the single maroonage or maroonage in troops or bands, since the palisading meant, not only evasion, freedom and unity in small groups, but also the possibility of living in communities, building dwellings, procreating and, in short, reproducing family life.

Since this type of community raised behind the law and persecuted represented a socially superior goal, this resort demanded interests and possibilities from the associates which exceeded the maroons' objectives. The palisading, by its very essence as a form of slave resistance, implied the respect of definite defensive principles different from those which ruled for the simple fugitives, as well as the establishment of certain resources which were its own.

A settlement which guaranteed life in freedom for a marginalized and persecuted human group, in that historical insular space, must necessarily be based on the development of a subsistence economy. If not being found was important for the single maroon or the maroon troop, and hence their constant mobility, for the palisaded this took on a primary importance, since his resources differed from the former because his interest was staying in the place selected.

The experience accumulated prior to the escape and the knowledge acquired in the life

of continuous persecution to which they were subjected in Cuba, took the palisaded to the constant search for the most remote and inhospitable areas. In this way the selected place was first an isolated refuge and shortly after a settlement which grew in members as time elapsed and it was not the object of attack. Thus, the palisaded respected the most elementary principles of a harassed subsistence. For this reason, they based their survival on sedentariness in very remote areas of difficult access, and on the degree of ignorance which the local authorities might have about their village.

On the other hand, in the western region of the Island the marginal spaces of the plantations were more physically reduced and vulnerable, limited to the Habana-Matanzas Heights, a small mountain range basically defined by the conic shape with steep but not too tall elevations and the small swampy strips of the south coast. For these reasons, the main form of slave resistance in the area would be the maroonage and not the palisading.

Cuba's colonial documentation identified as a single maroon the fugitive rural slave whose escape had an individual and temporary character. This form of resistance was a resort much utilized by the slaves to escape the hard daily labor and the cruel punishments inflicted on them. In this case, the fugitive slave, generally with a very limited vision of the place where he was and almost always with no relatives or friends in other places, guaranteed his subsistence in a more effectual manner when making his scape if he roamed the environs of the properties where he had been exploited. The concept maroon applied only to escaped slaves, be they from whatever property they might be, who wandered in the forest. This was one of the

social problems which most occupied the colonial authorities.

The single maroons or maroon troops, basing their survival on burglary and swap, were forced almost always to move in areas relatively close to the haciendas or nuclei of population and in order to reduce the risk that this implied, they resorted to a constant mobility.

So much so, that of the 35 archaeological sites corresponding to this historical phenomenon located in the Habana-Matanzas Heights, they all correspond with small stops/havens, always rocky shelters and caves. Many are linked among themselves, each of them with a specific function within the defensive tactics, since there were refuges near the plantations which served as lookouts, while the rest, in a scaled way, offered shelter to a gradually larger number of individuals.

In the study of these havens special interest was paid to the spatial distribution of the alimentary evidences, which confirmed a similar behavior pattern in all of them as far as the sources, preparation and consumption of the food. The stoves turned out to be the areas in the domestic spaces richest in evidence of every type.

It can be maintained that the maroons as alimentary resorts consumed poultry, reptiles and mammals which were obtained through hunting in the forest areas, but in the havens of the Habana-Matanzas Heights the remains prevailed of domestic fowl, cows and horses, which were poached from the nearby plantations. It is unquestionable that the subsistence character of these marginals' economy took them to the indiscriminate use of everything which might serve as a source of food, since there are several sites in which remains of domestic dogs have been identified in the stoves of these havens, with evidence of their consumption as food.<sup>6</sup>

The high consumption of sugar as an energetic resort was a habit acquired by the slave in the sugar plantation, which is evidenced by the abundance of pieces of clay molds of those which were used for the manufacture of this product in the mills in the maroons' havens, especially those found near the plantations.

The maroons and palisaded utilized all the material resources they could obtain in the plantations, for which reason the presence is common of containers of liquid, such as jugs and demijohns, and vessels for the preparation of food, such as cast iron pots (trivets) and clay pots. But the verification has proved highly significant that the maroons sheltered in the Habana-Matanzas Heights built clay utensils, among which are

found pipes to smoke and pots to cook food, some of which were decorated with motifs which remind of African patterns.<sup>7</sup>

In summation, archaeology offers the possibility of reconstruction of the material culture of the havens of the maroons and the palenques as a space of the marginality and complete with it the historical vision of that society, since the social history of the Caribbean will reveal itself fully in the same measure in which it includes the marginals' space within its object, since a culture subsisted in it with its proper signs and functions which reveal the deepest transformations which arose in the societies of the America of past centuries and to which present America is not alien.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCE:

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2. Schmitt, J.C.: *La historia de los marginales*. In: *La Historia y el oficio del historiador*. Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, La Habana, 1996, pages 255 to 281.
3. I use the transculturation concept in the same sense in which Cuban ethnologist Fernando Ortiz proposed it and Bronislaw Malinowski accepted it when saying that transculturation "is a process in which something is always given in exchange of what is received... in which both parties are modified... in which a new reality emerges composed and complex... original and independent..." (Ortiz, 1963: XIII).
4. LaRosa, G. (1992): *Los palenques del oriente de Cuba*. Editorial Academia, La Habana; \_\_\_\_\_ (1996): *Rescate de Olórum (Estudio de arqueología afroamericana)*. *América Negra*, Bogotá, No. 12, pages 39 to 57; \_\_\_\_\_ (1999): *La huella africana en el ajuar cimarrón. Una contribución arqueológica*. *El Caribe arqueológico*, Santiago de Cuba, No. 3, pages 109 a 115; \_\_\_\_\_ (2002): *La subsistencia del cimarrón: Estudio arqueológico*. Entry submitted at the 67th Annual Meeting of the SAA, Denver, Colorado, 2002.
5. This palenque was assaulted on March 9, 1848 and it was made up of 26 "houses" (A.N.C. Gobierno Superior Civil, Leg. 625, No. 19877). During the topographic survey several tobacco pipes, pieces of machetes, knives, fragments of ceramic pots were collected, and a rustic wooden trough was located.
6. LaRosa, G.: *La subsistencia del cimarrón: Estudio Arqueológico*. Entry submitted at the 67th Annual Meeting of the SAA, Denver, Colorado, 2002.
7. LaRosa, G.: *La huella africana en el ajuar del cimarrón. Una contribución arqueológica*. *El Caribe arqueológico*, Santiago de Cuba, No. 3, 1999, pages 109 to 115.