SAN MALO REMEMBERED

Adapted from a thesis submitted to the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College by Erin Elizabeth Voisin. Adapted by R. Johnson

San Maló hailed from an area populated by German immigrants, just north of New Orleans, referred to as the German Coast (Hall 1992: 212). He was the runaway slave of Darensbourg, leader of the German community (Hall 1992: 212). The German coast in Louisiana refers to the area just south of Lake Pontchartrain and encompasses the parishes of St. Charles and St. John the Baptist. The origins of San Maló’s name are tenuous. Hall notes three possible derivations. She notes that Malo in Spanish is translated as “bad,” while the French term refers to the port of St. Malo which was a French port that was actively involved in the slave trade (Hall 1992:213). The more likely origin of the name, according to Hall, comes from the Mali language of Bambara, in which Malo “refers to the charismatic leader who defies the social order, whose special powers and means to act may have beneficial consequences for all his people when social conventions paralyze others” (Hall 1992:213). This speaks to the role that San Maló played in the rebellious, contagious spirit found throughout these maroon societies.

Simultaneously this was a role often taken up by the Obeahmen, conjurers, and root doctors who played major roles in some of the more widely known insurrections (Genovese 1979; Holloway2005; Rucker 2001; Sidbury 1997). Eventually, the figure of Juan San Maló would be passed down in oral tradition among the Afro-Creole community of Louisiana under the name of Saint Marron or Saint Maló (Hall 1992:212, 226). The stories relating his actions vary in perspective, portraying him as brutal murderer or rebellious freedom fighter,

depending on which source is used (Hall 1992:226).

During the Spanish colonial governorship of Don Esteban Miró, the runaway slave known as Juan San Maló established a community of maroons, runaway slaves, who wreaked havoc on the local plantations surrounding New Orleans between 1773 and 1784 (Din 1980:262). This maroon community occupied the cyprières, or cypress swamps, behind the various plantations of New Orleans known as the Bas du Fleuve which translates as downriver.

According to both Din and Hall this area encompassed the land “from Chef Menteur to the Desprès plantation” (Din 1980:248; Hall 1992:202). San Maló also maintained control of the Rigolets, narrow passages of swamps and marshes between Lake Pontchartrain and the Gulf of Mexico, as well as the area between Lake Borgne and the Mississippi River known as Ville Gaillarde (Din 1980:248; Hall 1992:213). Ville Gaillarde would be the site where Miró’s men would finally overtake San Maló and approximately forty to sixty runaway slaves, not all of

whom were directly associated with his band (Din 1980:254-255; Hall 1992:230).

Hall describes the maroon societies of the Bas de Fleuve as “an extension of creole slave society” implying that they had successfully taken control of their own existence back from the slave owners (Hall 1992:212). Maló and his associates maintained close contact with the enslaved populations of the plantations. During the cimmarones occupancy of the cypress swamps there were numerous complaints of stolen or slaughtered livestock for which they bore

the blame. San Maló’s band was often aided by the enslaved populations of the plantations in these endeavors (Din 1980:245; Hall 1992:212). Not all of their endeavors were so covert. This settlement of maroons participated in a small-scale trade economy with the local lumber mills by which they made their livelihood (Hall 1992: 207).

The slaves of the plantations used the known presence of the maroons to their advantage, often bartering for better treatment with the threat of and sometimes feigning marronage (Hall 1992:203). This sort of psychological warfare had a direct effect on the already strained relations between slaves and slave owners. This tension, part of which was derived from the recent regime change from French rule to Spanish, may have enabled a band such as San Maló’s to form.

In the presence of the neighboring American Revolution the opportunity could not be passed up for the cimarrones to establish their own community while the attentions of the new Spanish government were otherwise engaged (Ingersoll 1991: 190, 1995: 52). In May of 1784, at the time of San Maló’s most active resistance, the most recent Governor of the Louisiana colony was called away to the “Indian congresses in Pensacola and Mobile” (Din 1980:247). In the absence of Governor Miró, the acting governor in command of the military was Lieutenant Colonel Francisco Bouligny (Din 1980: 247). Bouligny accepted the responsibility for dealing with the band of maroons at the insistence of the white plantation owners (Din 1980:245). He gathered forces to pursue the band through the swamps of Ville Gaillarde. At one point San Maló and his band were reported to have killed a group of Americans in Bay St. Louis who captured his men. In their fight for freedom they turned on and killed their captors (Din 1980: 249; Hall 1992: 217). This act made San Maló a reputed killer of whites and bolstered the determination of the Spanish officials in their desire to apprehend San Maló and bring order back to the colony (Hall 1992: 227).

Within two short months San Maló was captured by Bouligny’s men and on June 12, 1784, was brought to trial at the Cabildo (Din 1980:255). He and his associates were put to death by hanging on June 19, 1784 (Din 1980:255). After the dispersal of the Ville Gaillarde community, a number of San Maló’s followers were believed to have set up camp at Barataria, a barrier island on the southeastern coast of Louisiana (Hall 1992:346; Hearn 1924; Exnicios 2006:39). Although the story of San Maló’s historic existence ended tragically, his posthumous legacy became the unofficial backbone of a unique cultural identity within the Creole society of Louisiana.

**Marronage: Ideology of Resistance**

The maroon was the comprehensive embodiment of resistance and self-preservation, and the development of maroon societies throughout Colonial America is one of the most elusive and intriguing aspects of the development of African-American culture. The independent establishment, no matter how temporary, of these fugitive slave communities illustrates the act of marronage as the most direct reaction of an oppressed population that has been transplanted into a hostile culture and an alien environment. This is not to say that these settlements were developed with the sole overarching purpose of rebellion, but the act of marronage is defined by Singleton as an “overt” form of resistance (Singleton 1999:5). There is a deeper aspect of this action which speaks to the nature of all humans who inherently desire to assert control over their own destinies.

The term maroon finds its origin in the French marron, a term thought to be derived from the Spanish-American cimarrón, meaning wild or runaway, referring initially to livestock but later associated specifically with fugitive slaves (Price 1979:1-2). Maroon societies developed in various regions of the Americas and went by a number of names (Weik 1997). They were palenques, mambises, quilombos, magotes, and mocambos (Weik 1997:81). They were also known as pasajes in Louisiana, defined by Hall as, “an escape route or maroon settlement behind the various plantations,” and literally meaning “passage”(Hall 1992:212). Marronage is the general term for the action of an enslaved person deserting

his or her forced status of oppression in pursuit of life independent of being at the mercy of another person’s will.

In order for a maroon society to survive for any extended period of time, certain conditions had to be met. The environment of a promising maroon settlement needed to be located in, “inaccessible or marginal areas,” (Weik 1997:82). The maroon community of Bas de Fleuve, under the leadership of Juan San Maló, or Saint Maló, established their territory in this swampy landscape (Hall 1992:212). These communities were able to form in the swamps due to the rise of the Cypress lumber industry, beneficial to the maroons because the money earned in lumbering allowed them to increase the state of their independence and support their newfound and increasingly sedentary lifestyle (Hall 1992:202). Along with this occupation, maroons participated in agricultural endeavors and small-scale animal husbandry (Hall 1992:203). They persisted due to their marginal existence to the rest of colonial slave society. Although Saint Maló’s band did not endure as long as some his fugitive counterparts, they certainly left their mark on the wilderness of Louisiana. They matriculated between the encampments of Ville Gaillarde and Chef Menteur in the mid to late eighteenth century, scouting the Mississippi delta for slaves desirous of emancipation and causing the local authorities great anxiety in the process (Hall 1992:212-224).

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Note: Attempts to contact the author were unsuccessful. Thesis advisor was of the opinion that author would not object to the use of her research for educational purposes.