



Maroon woman from Langatabiki, Suriname, 1947 (Photo W.van de Poll; Nat. Arch., 252-6776)

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Embodied identifications of slavery

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Since the sixteenth century, African bodies, along with European guns and capital, shaped a transatlantic system of globalisation dominated by Western Europe. The Netherlands and its American colonies formed an integral part of this system. Between c. 1600 and c. 1830 some 600,000 African men and women were forcibly transported by Dutch ships from the coasts of present day Guinée (Bissau) down to Angola, and then to the Americas. Almost half of them went to Suriname. The violent coming together of Native Americans, Europeans and Africans within this system of slavery soon produced socio-cultural processes which are now often defined as creolisation. In this process, new cultures emerged out of the continuous, and often violent, interactions within a context of extreme unequal power relations between culturally and ethnically different groups. In this process of cultural mixing, selections are made between what is relevant and what is not in the new creole situation. Linguists have shown how, over time, the constituent components of such a creole might almost disappear (a process dubbed decreolisation) or re-emerge (recreolisation). Four centuries of Caribbean history are the ultimate proof of these processes.

Probably the two most degrading parts of enslavement were when, beginning at African shores, buyers branded their mark into enslaved bodies with a hot iron, and next when this was repeated in Suriname by plantation owners who imposed a new name upon the enslaved. It had to be made perfectly clear whose property they were now. And if brandmarks did not stress the enslaved's loss of personal autonomy, the whip did, until the last day of slavery, leaving their bodily traces as well.

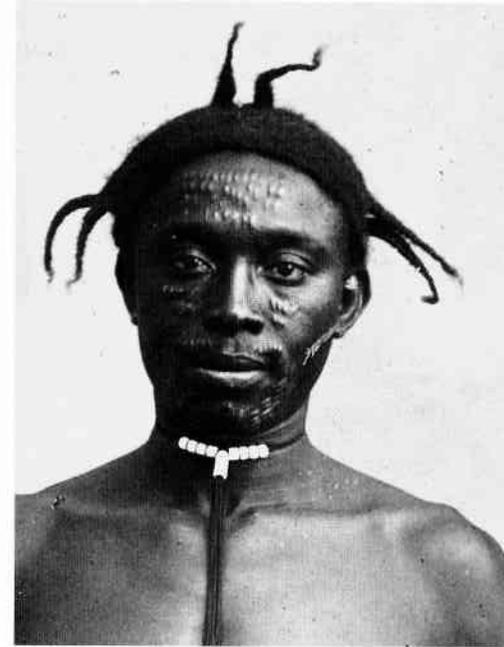
However, like any rigid suppressive system, slavery was full of paradoxes as shown by the enslaved's body. Next to the brandmarks that same body was often proudly decorated as a result of African

practices of decorating by scarification, and/or cicatrisation. The latter entails a special form of incising the skin with a sharp instrument after which ash, herbs and palm oil are rubbed into the wound, resulting in raised, more pronounced scars. This form of scarification was particularly known in the Congo Basin and the region of present-day Ghana which happened to be the main slaving areas for Suriname. In many parts of Africa, scarification was applied to distinguish oneself from others as part of an elite, a family or an ethnic group. It was a form of identification which also held a dimension of aesthetic and personal decoration. Many African masks in museums all over the world are evidence of this tradition.

Slave traders and slave owners were very much aware of these ethnic markers. They used them when differentiating Africans by their ethnic reputations of being “good” or “bad” slaves. Three observers in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Suriname differentiated between at least twenty-five African ethnicities, of which only five were not scarified. The others had all kind of marks all over the body, from a few facial incisions or dots to deep incisions in the breast or back. The application of these often very complicated scarifications had obviously been accompanied by a lot of pain. And to keep them fresh, they had to be renewed often several times a year. Thus, the physical pain might have been much stronger than that of the two brandmarks that accompanied enslavement. Nonetheless, the latter was a sign of degradation and suppression, whereas the former was a sign of pride, announcing that “I still own myself.” Part of survival strategies during slavery, however, was to be as invisible as possible. Therefore, these embodied signs of identification were no longer applied by the enslaved born in Suriname, the so-called creoles. Due to continuing imports of enslaved Africans, however, scarification remained in the colony until well into the nineteenth century.

Remarkably, scarification was re-introduced by the descendants of those who had escaped from slavery since the end of the seventeenth century. This community, known as Maroons, had built up independent and free communities far away in the Amazonian rain forests to the south and southeast of the plantation colony and incorporated scarification as part of their culture. New forms were introduced and new cultural practices came to surround it. Two of the most notable forms were the highly erotic scarring of the erogenous zones, which was kept hidden from everyone except the sexual partner, and scarring as a healing practice by rubbing herbs into the scar wounds to cure particular diseases. A century later Maroon men again discarded the practice as a result of their increased interaction with urban regions where scarification is considered primitive and heathenish. By the same influence, Maroon women have reduced scarification to the area “under the skirt”. Embodied identification

in the history of slavery and its afterlife has been a process of creolisation, as well as de-, and recreolisation. It would not surprise me if, among Maroon youngsters, today’s global tattoo culture would (re)emerge based on old scarification patterns. The body remains an understudied, though intriguing, historical source.



Maroon man from the Cottica region, Suriname, c. 1910.
(Photo Eugen Klein; Coll. Tropenmuseum, 60038520)

Further reading

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