

United Maroon Indigenous Peoples (UMIP)

Statement to the First United Nations Permanent Forum on People of African Descent

**Geneva, Switzerland
December 5-8, 2022**

Ref Item 6: The Future Work of the Permanent Forum: Feedback from Participants

We, the United Maroon Indigenous Peoples (UMIP) call on the Permanent Forum to address the following concerns:

- 1) Recognition of Maroons as African descendant Indigenous Peoples; and
- 2) The need for justice in the areas of climate, gender and economic justice, cultural and linguistic education, land rights, and reparations.

Moreover, the UMIP stands with other Civil Society groups calling for another decade, subsequent to the end of the UN International Decade of People of African Descent, to galvanize momentum from the Decade to implement measurable changes from reparatory actions to African descent communities and to deepen healing.

1. Introduction: Maroons and the Declaration of the UMIP

a. Who are the Maroons?

Maroons uniquely occupy an intersection of Afrikanity and Indigeneity. We are the direct descendants of enslaved Afrikans who fought, fled, and established free independent settlements in the so-called New World. Whether through land granted via treaty rights by colonial powers or assimilated into First Peoples' communities, we existed as free peoples enabling us to retain significant Afrikan cultural and social practices of our ancestors despite centuries of economic struggle and marginalization. Systems of exploitative white supremacy marginalize, ostracize, and criminalize our rich ancestral heritage and extractive capitalism threaten our land rights and lifeways.

Maroons of African descent exist wherever there was African enslavement. The greatest number are in Brazil. Given its proximity to Africa, Brazil exceeded other colonial powers in trafficking the most human cargo. This resulted in the largest number of freedom seekers who readily sprinted into the country's interior, formidably equipped to survive in tropical environments. Their invisible presence blossomed into thousands of Quilombolo villages, not fully documented until the late 20th Century, when corporate expansion challenged their land rights. Many, if not most, had assimilated with Indigenous groups, thereby ensuring the preservation of their cultural practices and identity. Ergo the emergence of the colloquial phrase, "O Brasil não conhece o Brasil." (Brasil doesn't know Brasil.)

No matter where you come from as long as you are a Black..., you are African,” Peter Tosh, musical artist. We are African not because we were born in Africa, but because Africa was born into us.

Gloria “Mama G” Simms
Gaaman (Spiritual Leader) of the Maroons of the Diaspora:

b. What is the UMIP?

UMIP, founded in 2022, formerly known as United Maroons of the Diaspora since 2014, is a pan-Maroon forum that enables our ability to bring our shared experiences and challenges to international forums to educate, agitate, and organize corrective action that respect and honor our lives, lifeways, and livelihoods.

c. Who are Indigenous Peoples and why are Maroons Indigenous?

While there is no universal definition of “indigenous peoples” adopted by UN bodies, one of the most cited descriptions of the concept of Indigenous Peoples was given by Jose R. Martinez Cobo, the Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, in his famous Study on the Problem of Discrimination against Indigenous Populations. The study offered a working definition of “indigenous communities, peoples and nations,” which included the right of Indigenous Peoples themselves to define what and who is Indigenous. The working definition reads as follows:

Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions, and legal system.

This historical continuity may consist of the continuation, for an extended period reaching into the present of *one or more of the following factors* (emphasis added):

- a. Occupation of ancestral lands, or at least of part of them;
- b. Common ancestry with the original occupants of these lands;
- c. Culture in general, or in specific manifestations (such as religion, living under a tribal system, membership of an indigenous community, dress, means of livelihood, lifestyle, etc.);
- d. Language (whether used as the only language, as mother-tongue, as the habitual means of communication at home or in the family, or as the main, preferred, habitual, general or normal language);
- e. Residence on certain parts of the country, or in certain regions of the world;
- f. Other relevant factors.

On an individual basis, an indigenous person is one who belongs to these indigenous populations through self-identification as indigenous (*group consciousness*) and is recognized and accepted by these populations as one of its members (acceptance by the group). This preserves for these communities the sovereign right and power to decide who belongs to them, without external interference.

The Indigeneity of various Maroon groups is located in some or all of points 2-6 above. It lives in their historical memory and intentional, lived experiences of their ancestral Indigenous African lifeways as a *group consciousness* that is increasingly nurtured in their communities established through grand Marronage, and as a point of intentionality in the actions of the United Maroon Indigenous Peoples organization. They descend from Indigenous Africans whose ancestors were stolen from Africa during the Maafa (the African Holocaust, the Holocaust of Enslavement, or the Black Holocaust). These include knowledge and lifeways consisting of spiritual beliefs, land-use practices, foodways, decision-making processes, storytelling, music—especially drumming—and dance, rituals, art and aesthetics which inscribe designs and embody cultural narratives pertaining to their sacred understanding of their relationships with one another and the Earth. These together constitute a worldview of relationality—interconnectedness—with all living beings and the spiritual ever-presence of the ancestors.

In many cases, Maroons intermarried with the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas, and have struggled alongside their relatives for social, economic, cultural, and land rights, to freely express their identities. Through their political and social movement activism to attain the full realization of their human rights, they expand the definition of “Indigenous Peoples” to include Diaspora communities that have preserved their specific African Indigeneity or have grown into unique “tribal” communities through an Indigenous “ethnogenesis” of a mixed African Indigeneity.

d. Declaration of United Maroon Peoples

The Declaration of United Maroon Peoples, first crafted in 2014 and subsequently revised in 2021 and 2022, outlines a list of issues central to achieving Maroon Indigenous self-determination and pertain to climate, gender and economic justice, cultural and linguistic education, and land rights, framed by the UNPFPAD and UNPFII approach to reparations.

The United Maroon Peoples, descendants of indigenous peoples of Afrika and survivors of over 500 years of slavery, diaspora, colonialism, and discrimination, adopt and make the following declarations:

1. We Declare an end to racial discrimination and injustice against our Afrikan Indigenous Maroon Peoples Globally in all forms and manifestations;
2. We declare that Afrikan Indigenous Maroon Peoples Globally be compensated through reparations, financially, socially and otherwise, for the crimes committed against our ancestors;
3. We declare that our Afrikan Indigenous Maroon Communities, both children and adults, be taught an Afrikan language;

4. We declare that the right of all Afrikan Indigenous Maroon communities to self-determination be respected;
5. We declare the rights to land for farming and to practice our rituals the way our ancestors use to;
6. We declare an equal right to rights and privileges like all other racial, ethnic, and Indigenous groups globally;
7. We declare the right to be heard and to have effective remedies for the injustices we and our ancestors have suffered;
8. We declare the right to economic development, to end poverty and the inhumane ways of living forced upon us by the colonial system;
9. We declare the right to make and patent our own medicines, alcohol, and other drugs for our healing and wellness and recreational benefits;
10. We declare the right to repatriate to our Motherland Afrika free of charge as we were taken against our Will;
11. We declare the return of our stolen artifacts and treasures from our Motherland Afrika;
12. We declare that Afrikan people will never again be enslaved;
13. We declare the right to truth, to have our history universally declared and taught;
14. We declare that the Afrikan Maroons in the Caribbean, the Americas and Afrika who have exercised the right to define ourselves as Indigenous and be recognized as Indigenous and have Indigenous Peoples Status;
15. We declare that our Afrikan Maroon Indigenous Children have the full right to their distinct culture, including the rights to wear their dress, locks, refuse colonizers' religions and wear their spiritual accessories and implements at schools without discrimination;
16. We declare the right to install monuments and museums, archives banks, schools, hospitals and spiritual centers teaching and celebrating our culture and ancestry;
17. We declare the right to exercise our Self-determination and Sovereignty equal to that of all other peoples and nations;
18. We declare the right to live and work in harmony with our relatives, Indigenous peoples across the Americas whose DNA also fills our blood for over 500 years;
19. We declare the right to defend our forest flora and fauna and natural environment in preparedness to mitigate the growing climate crisis;
20. We stand in defense of women and girls and by extension the Maroon family;

WE DECLARE that these are initial and minimum declarations of the rights of the Maroon descendants of the Indigenous peoples of Afrika and that We possess, both individually and collectively, the rights to the full enjoyment of life, liberty and freedom, equality and justice, and to all other human rights and fundamental freedoms.

2. The Durban Declaration and Outstanding Issue Areas

a. The Recognition of Maroon Communities in the Durban Declaration

The Durban Declaration reaffirmed the principles of equal rights and self-determination of peoples and as to Maroon communities stated:

We recognize that people of African descent have for centuries been victims of racism, racial discrimination and enslavement and of the denial by history of many of their rights, and assert that they should be treated with fairness and respect for their dignity and should not suffer discrimination of any kind. Recognition should therefore be given to their rights to culture and their own identity; to participate freely and in equal conditions in political, social, economic and cultural life; to development in the context of their own aspirations and customs; to keep, maintain and foster their own forms of organization, their mode of life, culture, traditions and religious expressions; to maintain and use their own languages; to the protection of their traditional knowledge and their cultural and artistic heritage; to the use, enjoyment and conservation of the natural renewable resources of their habitat and to active participation in the design, implementation and development of educational systems and programmes, including those of a specific and characteristic nature; and where applicable to their ancestrally inhabited land.

b. Outstanding Issues Affecting the Rights of Maroon Indigenous Peoples

Over two decades after the Durban Declaration, Maroon Indigenous Peoples continue to experience human rights abuses rooted in historical legacies of slavery and contemporary manifestations of systemic racism.

Land Rights

The lack of recognition of the collective property rights of Maroon Indigenous Peoples has left us vulnerable to the harms of extractive projects. Governments routinely grant concessions in our territories without taking steps to title and demarcate our lands, without meaningful consultation, and without respecting the principle of free prior and informed consent.

We must defend our rights because the atrocities mount up. We are developing our legal team from around the world to brace us here in Belize with boots on the ground in the spirit of marronage. We are fighting the Vulcan company that is invading our territory in Gales Point. They dynamite and blast pristine environments doing pillage and rape of our resources. As if that's not enough, the Fortis Company has the boldness to set up an office hereafter we campaigned for years against the building of a dam near my hometown.

Cynthia Ellis, Garifuna Ambassador at Large

Climate, Gender, and Economic Justice

Indigenous Peoples, Maroon Indigenous Peoples, and women and youth within these communities continue to be affected disproportionately by poverty and face ongoing social, economic and political barriers to equality in all parts of the world. As a result, they are disproportionately impacted by climate change. Yet, they are excluded from climate decision-making processes.

As one of the groups which is subsequently most vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change, Indigenous Peoples, Maroon Indigenous Peoples, and women and youth within these communities will experience considerable losses that cannot be addressed by adaptation or development efforts. This is what is called Loss and Damage, and wealthy countries are currently fighting against the Loss and Damage financing in climate negotiations. The mapping of the consequences of climate change must be culture and gender-sensitive and transformative. We must ensure equitable participation of Indigenous Peoples, Maroon Indigenous Peoples, and women and youth in decision-making and loss and damage activities. We must assess accordingly the differentiated vulnerability and prioritised needs of these communities. We must integrate these particular vulnerabilities in the loss and damage accounting processes. This plan should cut across all relevant sectors, identify urgent actions, and actively promote successful experiences for scaling up.

Caroline Mair-Toby, Attorney at Law, Director, Institute for Small Islands

Education

Cultural assimilation has long been a tool of cultural genocide used against Indigenous peoples around the globe. We seek sites and centers - that we control - that recognize, educate, and share our traditional knowledge systems and practices. Curriculum, museums, heritage sites, performance spaces and other places and mechanisms of historical and cultural transmission enables current and future generations to thrive. In addition, it allows us to accommodate those discovering their maroon heritage and others interested in learning about maroonage and traditional knowledge systems. Furthermore, our expertise in farming, forestry, botany, and climate management and mitigation would be recognized, incorporated, and compensated rather than ignored, stolen, and exploited. Our past and current struggles for cultural and territorial autonomy will be acknowledged.

Criminalization of Persons of African Descent

The criminalization and persecution of African cultural heritage and religion is an ongoing issue as evidenced, for example, by criminal laws related to marijuana and obeah.

Our black youths who are growing old and forgotten in the prisons for being in possession of one little herb tree, or a few joints of Marijuana. They need to be released immediately. For the Babash Alcoholic drink that the Merikins produce that is deemed illegal and you can be charged or sent to prison, that's a crime against our people. Our African languages and spirituality that were deliberately taken from us, e.g., the Obeah law. That's another crime, and the list goes on and on. Our rights to housing, proper education, place of worship, clean water, land, money, proper health care, rights to have our Kinky hair or natural hair.

Akilah Jaramogi, Merikin Chief

Reparations

States have failed to provide reparations for racial discrimination rooted in slavery and colonialism. The project for reparatory justice must extend beyond compensation for past wrongs and include the eradication of contemporary systems of racial oppression, restoration of the dignity of persons of African descent, and reparations for historic and ongoing climate injustice.

Reparations needs to be more than monetary value. Reparation means repairing the damages—yes, it will have a cost—but our focus must be based mainly on restoration of our dignity and integrity, to restore us from being “stock” to being human.

Gloria “Mama G” Simms, Gaaman (Spiritual Leader) of the Maroons of the Diaspora

Talking about reparations (repairing the damages) programs/projects needed to address the mental health of African peoples, projects based on Restorative Justice, through workshops, seminars, therapies & ceremonies, we need funding for these things now. We have to identify the “survivors”; only the survivors can help those who did not survive the holocaust of slavery, survivors are those who moved away from plantation life in time and preserved the African retentions, one of the most important retentions that Africans preserved is “ Family Life” family life could only be preserved because Maroons get property in time, so they could rear family and keep family together for generations.

Akilah Jaramogi, Merikin Chief