

# Understanding Slavery Initiative

## Resistance and Rebellion



African resistance to enslavement and captives' rebellion against the conditions of slavery were natural reactions to the transatlantic slave trade.

According to slave owners, 'slaves were notoriously lazy and ill disposed to labour', which illustrates that daily resistance was ubiquitous. The enslaved also engaged in acts of non-cooperation, petty theft and sabotage, as well as countless acts of insubordination.

Sometimes enslaved Africans would resort to more open or violent means of resistance, including the poisoning of animals and owners, and sometimes turned it against themselves by committing infanticide, self-mutilation and suicide. It was not unusual for slaves to absent themselves from enslavement for a few hours or a few days, regardless of the punishment they might receive on their return. It is estimated that about 10% of all the enslaved took such action, which sometimes involved moving temporarily to another location or, for those held captive in the Caribbean, even to another island.

Resistance to slavery had a long history, beginning in Africa itself. Rebellion would reach its peak in 1791, when the enslaved people of the French colony of St Domingue defeated three European powers to establish the first Black republic: Haiti.

### Resistance in Africa

In African societies, there are many examples of opposition to the transatlantic slave trade. One of the earliest documented is the correspondence of the Kongo ruler Nzinga Mbemba (also known as Afonso I, c. 1446–1543) who wrote to the king of Portugal, João III, in 1526 to demand an end to the illegal depopulation of his kingdom. The Kongolese king's successor Garcia II made similar unsuccessful protests.

Other African rulers took a stand. For instance, in the early 17th century Nzinga Mbandi (c. 1583–1663), queen of Ndongo (modern-day Angola), fought against the Portuguese – part of a century-long campaign of resistance waged by the kingdom against the slave trade. Anti-slavery motives can also be found in the activities of the Christian leader Dona Beatriz Kimpa Vita (1684–1706) in Kongo.

Several major African states took measures to limit and suppress the slave trade, including the kingdoms of Benin and Dahomey. Agaja Trudo, the king of Dahomey (r. 1708–40), banned the slave trade and even went as far as attacking the European forts on the coast. Unfortunately, Agaja Trudo's successor did not share his view and profited from engaging in the trade.

Several Muslim states in West Africa, including Futa Toro in the Senegal River basin in the late 18th century and, in the early 19th, Futa Jallon in what is now Guinea, were opposed to the trafficking of humans. In Futa Jallon, the religious leader Abd al-Qadir wrote a letter to British slave traders threatening death to anyone who tried to procure slaves in his country.

Many ordinary Africans also took measures to protect themselves from enslavement. Flight was the most obvious method, but there is also evidence that many Africans moved their villages to more inaccessible areas or took other measures to protect them. In his Narrative, Olaudah Equiano mentions some of the defensive measures that were taken in his own village.

It is reported that, when the English slave trader John Hawkins attempted to kidnap people to enslave them in the late 16th century, he was resisted. It is also said that communities of Africans who had fled from and escaped enslavement settled on the Cape Verde and other islands off the west coast of Africa. Other reports tell of coastal residents who refused to load slave ships with supplies and of many escapes from the forts that held enslaved Africans prior to transport across the Atlantic.

### The 'Middle Passage'

It is now estimated that, during 1 in 10 of all Atlantic crossings – the so-called 'Middle Passage' – there was some kind of rebellion, Africans continuing on board the resistance that had failed ashore. Alexander Falconbridge, a slave-ship surgeon who became an abolitionist, certainly believed that rebellions on ship were common and expected, and the Middle Passage became increasingly dangerous for crews. As a result, slave traders demanded more shackles and arms to hold their captives securely, increasing production in England.

There are several reports not only of rebellion but of Africans taking control of ships and attempting to sail them back to Africa, with the assistance of the European crew or without, and of Africans battling against other ships. The most famous example of such a rebellion is the Amistad: In 1839 (after the Emancipation Act to end transatlantic slavery), the 53 Africans were taken captive aboard a cargo ship. The captives freed themselves, killed the captain and the cook and forced their ostensible owners to sail the ship back to their home in Sierra Leone. Instead the owners steered a roundabout course up the eastern coast of the United States, where the ship was captured by the US Coast Guard. The Africans eventually returned to Sierra Leone, but only after two years of legal battles that reached the US Supreme Court.

In many of these rebellions, it appears that women played an important role, as they were sometimes permitted more freedom of movement on board ship. On numerous occasions, however, maritime rebellion might simply consist of jumping overboard and

committing suicide rather than continuing to endure slavery. It seems that the idea that, in death, there was also a return home to Africa was widespread among the enslaved both on the slave ships and in the Americas.

## **Cultural resistance**

In the Caribbean and in many slave societies in the Americas, one of the most important aspects of resistance to slavery was the retention of African culture or melding African, American and European cultural forms to create new ones such as the Kweyol languages (Antillean Creole).

The importance of African culture – names, craftsmanship, languages, scientific knowledge, beliefs, philosophy, music and dance, was that it provided the psychological support to help the captives resist the process of enslavement. The act of enslavement involved attempts to break the will and ignore the humanity of slaves in what was known as ‘seasoning’. Obvious examples would be the use of Vodun (Voodoo) religious beliefs in the Haitian Revolution and the employment of Obeah to strengthen the Jamaican Maroons in the struggles against the British. Rebel leaders such as Nanny in Jamaica and Boukman and Mackandal in St Domingue (Haiti) were also religious or spiritual leaders. Religious beliefs should perhaps be seen as also providing the enslaved Africans a way of understanding the world and giving them simultaneously a whole belief system, a coping mechanism and a means of resistance.

As in all other forms of resistance, women played an important role in cultural resistance, especially in the transmission of African culture from one generation to the next. They were also particularly noted for their insubordination: when in 1823 a law was introduced in Trinidad outlawing the whipping of enslaved women, it was strongly opposed by slave owners on that grounds that, without such punishment, women would be impossible to control. Enslaved women were often more likely to be in a position to engage in infanticide and in acts of poisoning.

They sometimes developed different strategies of resistance to those of men. Female slaves, for example, seem to have been particularly adept at developing forms of economic independence by growing their own provisions and through trading. This helped the enslaved women to maintain some level of independence. But like the men, some ran away, and women were also leaders of several rebellions: one, known as Cubah, the ‘Queen of Kingston’, was prominent during Tacky’s Rebellion in Jamaica in 1760, while Nanny Grigg was one of the leaders of the 1816 rebellion in Barbados.

## **The maroons**

The word ‘maroon’ is thought to derive from the Spanish word *cimarrón* – literally meaning ‘living on mountain tops’ – which was first applied to runaway animals that has returned to their wild state. The term has come to mean communities of fugitive or escaped slaves.

The first African maroon communities were established in the early 16th century when enslaved Africans were brought to the Caribbean by the Spanish. Some of these built on earlier traditions of Amerindian runaways or even joined in creating settlements with them.

In Hispaniola, it is estimated that, by 1546, there were over 7,000 maroons among a slave population of 30,000. Following the division of the island into French St Domingue (later Haiti) in the west and Spanish Santo Domingo (later the Dominican Republic) in the east in 1697, maroons took advantage of the hostility between France and Spain to maintain settlements along the border throughout the period of slavery. In addition, there were maroons in Cuba, Puerto Rico (including fugitives from other islands including the Danish Virgin Islands) and Jamaica, followed in the 17th century by communities in St Kitts, Antigua, Barbados and the French colonies of Martinique and Guadeloupe.

As European cultivation of the islands increased, it became more difficult to establish maroon settlements on the smaller ones except those with a strong Amerindian presence such as St Vincent and Dominica. The former became the home of the Garifuna, a mixture of indigenous and Africans inhabitants, who preserved their independence against both the French and the British. Mountainous and heavily wooded islands were also favoured – Jamaica, Cuba, Guadeloupe and Hispaniola. In addition, there were important communities on the South American mainland, especially in Belize, French and British Guiana, Suriname and Brazil.

In Brazil, the most famous maroon community, or quilombo, was Palmares, which existed from 1605 to 1694. It resisted invasion by both the Dutch and the Portuguese, and is reported to have had a population of at least 10,000 organised and governed by a king using political traditions drawn from central Africa. Significant maroon communities also existed in the United States, including the so-called Black Seminoles of Florida.

In many places, the maroons essentially comprised a small guerrilla band led by an elected chief. In Cuba, for example, there were hundreds of small maroon settlements, or palenques – stockades guarded by ditches, stakes and secret paths. Settlements communicated with each other, but most remained isolated, growing their own crops and hunting and fishing, as well as engaging in petty trade, sometimes even with other islands.

Maroon communities are often considered important as custodians of African cultural traditions, including language, music and religious beliefs. African political institutions were also adapted to provide a means of establishing effective means of government, as seems to have been the case in Palmares.

## **The maroons of Jamaica**

In Britain, the Jamaican maroons are the most well known. Settlements had been established on the island from the time of Spanish rule, and the Spanish actually released many enslaved Africans when the British invaded and occupied Jamaica in 1655. The British in turn

came to an agreement with one band of maroons led Juan Lubola as early as 1658, and by the 18th century, there were two main maroon groups on the island.

The British colonial forces attempted to suppress them in the 1st Maroon War of 1731–9. It was inconclusive but led to the treaty of 1739, which gave the maroons land and some rights in return for assisting the British against foreign invasion and for helping in the hunt for and return of runaway slaves.

The treaty clearly undermined maroon independence and led to the 2nd Maroon War of 1795, involving only one group of maroons. Severely outnumbered, the Trelawny Maroons were eventually forced to surrender and subsequently deported to Nova Scotia (in Canada) and then to Britain's new West African colony of Sierra Leone.

## Rebellions in the Caribbean

The first enslaved Africans to be transported to the Spanish colony of Hispaniola are said to have rebelled and run away. From that time on, it is possible to speak of continual African resistance and rebellion. There were seven major rebellions in the British colony of Jamaica between 1673 and 1686, as well as several others during the same period in Antigua, Nevis and the Virgin Islands. In 1733, during the Amina rebellion on St John in the Danish Virgin Islands, the African insurgents were able to take control of the island for six months before being defeated.

More slave rebellions occurred in Jamaica, Britain's largest colony, than in all its other colonies in the Caribbean combined. One of the most famous of the Jamaican rebellions started in 1760 and was led by a man known as Tacky. It lasted for over a year before being suppressed by the British colonial forces.

Some groups of rebels presented the slaveholders with specific demands. For instance, in 1791 there was a major rebellion in Dominica led by Louis Polinaire, a free man from Martinique who is said to have been influenced by the French Revolution. Rather than demanding a complete end to slavery, however, Polinaire and his followers pressed for free days for the enslaved so that they could also work for themselves.

On some occasions, African rebels tried to come to an agreement with the colonial power. In 1763, in the colony of Berbice in Dutch Guiana, enslaved Africans led by Cuffee rebelled for the fifth time in 30 years, seized part of the colony and threatened to take over the whole island. When the Dutch brought reinforcements, the enslaved initially suggested a partition of the island and sought to establish an alliance with the maroon communities in neighbouring Suriname.

In the 19th century, slave rebellions were sometimes led by literate slaves or those who were aware of what was happening in other parts of the world and/or had been inspired by the French or Haitian Revolution or the growth of abolitionist sentiment. This was a feature of the 1816 Bussa rebellion on Barbados and the 1831 Christmas rebellion in Jamaica led by Sam Sharpe.

The most important of all the slave rebellions was the revolution that occurred in the French colony of St Domingue in 1791. It was highly organised and took advantage of the turmoil in the colony caused by the revolution in France that had broken out two years before. Led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, 500,000 enslaved Africans and free people in St Dominique defeated the armies of three major European powers: France, Spain and Britain. They established their own independent republic – Haiti – in 1804.

The impact of that revolution was profound. It inspired others in the Caribbean and in parts of the Americas and had a major effect on efforts to abolish Britain's role in the transatlantic slave trade and in transatlantic slavery.

You can find [artefacts](#) in the theme of [Resistance and Rebellion](#).

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