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A Study of West African Slave Resistance from the Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries

Adam D. Wiltsey

Linschoten, South and West Africa, Copper engraving (Amsterdam, 1596.)

Accompanying the dawn of the twenty-first century, there has emerged a new era of historical thinking that has created the need to reexamine the history of slavery and slave resistance. Slavery has become a controversial topic that historians and scholars throughout the world are reevaluating. In this modern period, which is finally beginning to honor the ideas and ideals of equality, slavery is the black mark of our past; and the task now lies
before the world to derive a better understanding of slavery. In order to better understand slavery, it is crucial to have a more acute awareness of those that endured it. Throughout the period of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in West Africa, slaves consistently resisted slavery as both a condition and as an institution. Slaves represented various ages, tribes, sexes, regions, but resistance was its one true constant theme that crossed all other categories. Examining the different stages of slave resistance during the height of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in Africa, and the diverse ways in which Africans stood against the practice of slavery, researchers will better understand not only the people who endured slavery, but the institution of slavery itself.

Slavery reached its all time high between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. This span of two hundred years would mark the height of the worldwide shipping and selling of human beings. Millions of humans from West Africa alone were uprooted, transported and sold across the world. The result would be a tremendous and lasting transformation of African society.¹ The vast majority of these slaves were taken from the west coast of the African continent, to be remembered throughout history as “the slave coast.”

It was in the interior of Africa, not at the coast as some assume, that resistance began. With all of the articles and research available on the resistance of slaves while crossing the Atlantic, strikingly little research has been done on the beginnings of slave resistance at the time of initial capture. It is, however, overwhelmingly obvious that potential slaves resisted their enslavement and all of the atrocities that came with it most strongly at the initial point of capture.

As European demands for slaves increased from the seventeenth century onwards some West African empires such as the Dahomey and the Asante began to focus more on slave trading. Their primary source for their continued power became the capture and resale of human beings to be used as slaves. Samuel Crowther, a former slave himself, in his autobiographical narrative, remembers these groups as having “no other employment but selling slaves to the Spaniards and Portuguese on the coast.”

It is important to note that potential slaves forcefully resisted these raiders. Whether they fled, hid themselves, or fought directly, Africans did all that they could to avoid their own initial enslavement. At the mere possibility of being suppressed into slavery, many fled, “only to save themselves and their children,” or worse, only to be “overtaken and caught by the enemies with a

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noose of rope over the neck.”

Others, like Crowther’s father, Crowther recalled, fought to the death to avoid the enslavement of himself and his people. Often, whole villages of men were killed defending the village from the slave raiders.

It is crucial to understand that all of the slaves taken captive in the interior were not exported to the coast to be shipped across the Atlantic. This reveals a number of things about both slavery and the ongoing debate among academics about various forms of slavery. First, while some Africans participated in the slave trade, large populations of Africans resisted not only their own personal capture, but the slave trade itself. Resistance was not merely against slavery or the trading that was taking place with the Europeans, but resistance was against the institution, no matter the final outcome or destination. Instances were recorded where whole villages of men were willing to die in order to stop the enslavement of their people. Secondly, all of the discussions about varying degrees of slavery in Africa turn on the debate of whether a “domestic slave” is the same as a “slave” in the European context of the word. The sacrifice of life during this stage of resistance illustrates the horror with which Africans beheld all types of

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3 Ibid., 301.

slavery, domestic and foreign alike. Despite the case that many historians such as Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff\(^5\) had made stating that “domestic slavery” in Africa is more of a kinship based social relationship; such definite resistance at initial contact makes it clear that Africans facing the possibility of becoming enslaved did not distinguish between foreign and domestic slavery in their forms of resistance, risking their lives if necessary to avoid capture. Therefore, from a potential slave’s perspective, scholars need to rethink the distinction between domestic and foreign slavery. Through their resistance at the point of capture, we can see that Africans resisted slavery without regard to destination and may not have had any reason to distinguish domestic and foreign slavery until much later in their journeys.

Although the African people opposed being sold into any and all forms of slavery, with the growth of the Trans-Atlantic trade between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, Africans taken as slaves became even more defiant when being transferred from African to European traders. Often, coordinated revolts took place at holding places where slaves were to be sold from the African raiders to the European shippers. One such

\(^5\) Miers and Kopytoff are leading historical authorities known for linking “slavery” in Africa more to kinship based relationships and disassociating this sense of slavery from the common “western” perception of slavery. See S. Miers and Igor Kopytoff, “Introduction,” in Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives, (University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 3-40.
organized revolt took place in Moriah in West Africa in 1785. A group of slaves being worked in the fields and awaiting sale to the European traders “seized the opportunity presented by an outbreak of war between Moriah and neighboring Soso polities. . . [and] six to eight hundred people residing in slave villages [revolted] torch[ing] the rice fields, the states economic mainstay.”6 This revolt affected the entire northern rivers region, and the self-freed slaves eventually negotiated freedom from their captors.7 Perhaps these slaves were more aware of the horrors of European slavery that awaited them than scholars commonly recognize, or perhaps they merely perceived this point of transfer as a fleeting opportunity to escape while still on land. But individuals may have perceived the point of transfer as a strategic opportunity to challenge their new captors’ authority or ability to hold them captive, since we have little evidence to indicate that slaves would not have attempted the same organized attempts to escape during an African to African transfer of bondage. Regardless of motivation, organized revolts led by African slaves in camps like these show the risks African slaves would take in an attempt to avoid being sold to European shippers. More importantly, instead of marking the origins of resistance, revolts

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6 Ismail Rachid, “A Devotion to the idea of liberty at any Price,” in Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies, ed. Sylviane Anna Diouf (Ohio, Ohio University Press, 2003), 140.

7 Ibid., 141.
amongst slaves at the coast represent a continuity of resistance that began at their points of capture. While the intensity of their resistance may have increased as the threat of permanent removal from the continent of Africa became more apparent, or when their transfer from one captor to another provided slaves with a perceived opportunity to escape, organized resistance at the coast represented continuity in their perception of their own status as slaves.

Violence was not the only means of resistance to this stage in the slave process. Crowther’s account of his sale into slavery shows further that Africans feared being sold to Europeans on a higher level than that of domestic slavery, indicating either fear of European enslavement or of being uprooted from the African continent. When his master spoke of going to the Popo country he believed this “to be the signal of [his] being sold to the Portuguese” and instead of going with her to Popo he “determined to make an end of [him]self, one way or another . . . [and] attempted strangling [him]self.”

Unfortunately this is most likely the more common form of slave resistance, that of the unbreakable-will of the individual ready to accept death before enslavement. Suicide took many forms during the slave process.

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8 Crowther, 307.
trade, from hangings to refusal to eat to throwing oneself overboard.\footnote{Antonio T. Bly, “Crossing the Lake of Fire: Slave Resistance during the Middle Passage, 1720-1842,” \textit{Journal of Negro History} 83, no. 3. (Summer, 1998): 178-186.} What is most devastating is that there is little recorded information on this type of slave resistance at all stages of the slave trade because to raiders and shippers slaves were seen as mere numbers, and while staged revolts merited recording, the death of one or a few slaves by suicide was not important enough to record. This leaves modern historians with few records by which to estimate how many slaves resisted slavery to their death through these methods. Their willingness to abstain from food or water until death, or to throw themselves overboard into the never ending blue of the Atlantic Ocean once aboard European ships, should help to demonstrate how defiantly these men and women opposed being slaves.

Despite the resistance of many of the Africans toward the transfer from African raiders to European slave traders, a vast majority of Africans taken captive during the period between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in West Africa were sold to Europeans and shipped across the Atlantic to the Americas. Despite the relatively small amount of research on the two points of transfer already discussed, there is a plethora of historical study done on the resistance of slaves aboard ships while crossing the Atlantic. Whether it is a type of European ethnocentrism that inspires
historians to focus on the shipping of the slaves and not their initial capture, or the question of what these revolting slaves hoped to accomplish if successful in taking control of a ship already out to sea, Trans-Atlantic resistance is the best and most thoroughly chronicled stage of slave resistance.

One thing that makes Trans-Atlantic slave rebellions stand out is the frequency with which they occurred. Journals and diaries kept by ship captains, along with manifestos detailing not only the voyage, but the reasons for “losses” in slave freight, help historians to estimate the regularity of Trans-Atlantic slave uprising. A newly compiled and published bank of the records of 27,233 slave ship voyages chronicles the on-board revolts as follows:

The set contains 483 attacks or revolts experienced by 467 vessels. These incidents break down into 92 attacks by Africans who were not slaves, 388 rebellions by Africans held as slaves, and three instances of three or more slaves committing suicide. Of the 388 rebellions, 22 were ‘planned’ insurrections for which the slaves were punished, and eight were described as ‘cut-offs’, a term which could be used to describe an attack from shore, but which is assumed here to mean a revolt.10

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As is well recorded by such datasets, slave resistance was not rare while crossing the Atlantic. From the French port of Nantes, which required ship captains to submit a report of their voyage when entering port, of the 815 vessels that reached port between 1715 and 1777, seventy had experienced slave revolts. This would mean that one in every eleven to twelve ships that transported slaves across the Atlantic experienced some sort of organized revolt.\textsuperscript{11} Taking into account all of the small rebellions not reported and captains not wanting to report the rebellions taking place on their watch, it is most probable to figure that near ten percent, or one in every ten ships crossing the Atlantic during the height of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade dealt with some level of slave resistance.\textsuperscript{12}

What is most important about these more recent investigations into ship bound rebellions is not only the frequency with which slaves resisted their transport into bondage, but that there is no reason for historians to believe that these numbers and percentages of violent or direct resistance should be any higher than those at any other point of transfer during the slave trade. In fact, logic points to the opposite. Seeing that most Africans were sold from the interior of the continent, being unfamiliar with sailing and Europeans sailing ships in specific, revolts while at sea would logically

\textsuperscript{11} Behrendt, 456.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
be the lowest in frequency. Slaves, at this point in the slave trade, had already been uprooted off of the continent of Africa and were crossing the ocean. Therefore, revolt held less hope of freedom and therefore less purpose at this point in their voyage. It is more logical to suppose that the will of the slave to resist and revolt would be greater and therefore more frequent while still on land. In short, these well recorded numbers of Trans-Atlantic uprisings are crucial to the understanding of the entirety of the slave trade because they logically inform historians that resistance at every point discussed prior would have been both better organized and more frequent.

It is imperative that historians understand that revolts upon ships represent a last effort of resistance for African slaves. To be successful in taking control of the ship would most likely mean death to the slaves while on the Atlantic. One might even question the motivation of a revolt at this point in the journey. Winston McGowan attributed these revolts to the slave’s belief that “a horrible destiny awaited them across the Atlantic” with rumors of cannibalism.\footnote{David Richardson, “Shipboard Revolts, African Authority, and the Atlantic Slave Trade,” \textit{William and Mary Quarterly} 58, no. 1 (Jan., 2001): 71.} More likely, these revolts were a reaction to their being taken off of their home continent of Africa. Of the revolts and resistance that took place on the ocean, Captains and other Europeans
involved in the slave trade recorded that those resisting claimed that their captors were “Rogue[s] to buy them, in order to carry them away from their own country.” As destructive as it must have been to be uprooted from families, homes, and villages, the transporting of slaves away from Africa often served as the final blow to the slaves endurance, and often inspired the on board uprisings.

Despite the odds against a successful Trans-Atlantic rebellion, a very small fraction of these “on board” revolts were successful. With all that stood against them, the “trauma of capture and enslavement, the brutality of the crew, the inhuman living conditions on the ship, the lack of adequate weaponry . . . the Africans found a way to prevail, and countless slaves succeeded in regaining their freedom in the process.” Evidence exists to support the claim that at least 120 successful ship rebellions that led to the freedom of the slaves, and an additional 32 where they took control of the ship but never made it to freedom. The success of slave resistance at this late point in the slave trade serves to further reinforce the overwhelming

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14 Ibid.


16 Ibid.
evidence of the readiness of a slave to sacrifice anything to avoid being subjected to slavery.

In the reexamination of the slave trade in West Africa between seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, there are crucial lessons taught by resisting slaves at each of the three examined points of transfer. First, it is imperative to note the resistance by “would be slaves” was widespread and constant. There was never a point in the plight of a slave where the captive did not demonstrate a yearning for freedom and willingness to sacrifice everything, even life, to avoid further captivity. Despite conflicting views and differing ideas of slavery, all attempts to enslave Africans were met universally with resistance by those who were threatened the most by slavery: slaves themselves. Secondly, in reviewing the resistance of slaves, scholars of African and African Diaspora history are able to better appreciate the impact that slaves really had on the slave trade. All of the successful and unsuccessful revolts that were led by slaves against their captors had a large and lasting effect on the slave trade. Most recent evaluations of ship revolts have found that “rebelliousness by slaves on ships, and the resulting efforts by European carriers of slaves to curb such behavior, significantly reduced the shipments of slaves.”\footnote{Richardson, 69.} By recognizing these effects, historians recognize the power that slaves retained in the form
of agency and resistance. Slaves were not helpless, powerless victims.

These revolts empower African men and women of the past and allow historians to reevaluate the roles of slaves, not just as victims of a brutal trade in human bondage, but also agents of power and resistance. These types of conclusions form a new and imperative view of slavery.

Lastly, this study of the resistance of slaves toward capture and transport is most influential in helping historians come to a better understanding of slavery itself. In reexamining the past, it is important to view the events through the actions of those who were forced to live them. For slavery, it is a both a very sad and very brave story that history is shown through the continuity of slave resistance. The fate of a vast majority of those who refused to be sold, owned, and uprooted was death, either by their captors or various means of suicide. Despite these odds, however, slaves throughout the period continued to revolt, rebel, and resist. Their sacrifice now gives the world, three hundred years later, a deeper understanding of the horrors of slavery, and the human impulse to resist slavery at any and all cost.