



Christianity

Resource P5b

One excuse enslavers used to justify enslaving Africans was that they were heathens who needed converted to Christianity.

Yet in many instances, this conversion **provided a pathway to resistance**.

The Bible preached **liberation, justice and empowerment** which helped Africans **facilitate cooperation** with each other as although they could not return to Africa, they could band together **around shared beliefs**.

Africans also established Black churches which further helped prevent slavery from dominating their thoughts, providing an escape – if not physical – from their daily torment. One such church – **the Ethiopian Baptist Church** - was founded in Jamaica’s capital city Kingston in 1782 by African American George Liele who had originally served in churches in Georgia.

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For resistance to succeed, enslaved people needed to share some common values. Enslaved people who were able to convert to Christianity were able to create such a bond through a common religion. In turn, this unity served as a way to resist the atrocities their enslavers imposed on them.

During the era of the slave trade, many whites claimed that enslaved Africans were not capable of understanding Christianity. However, many were afraid that if the people they enslaved received education they would demand their rights as human beings. For Africans to be kept in bondage, they needed to be kept in ignorance. And so, many enslavers believed that the teaching of Christianity would undermine the whole institution of slavery. Enslavers who were most cruel and barbarous towards the African people they enslaved feared conversion the most. They feared the Africans’ vengeance if a revolt were to take place.

Many enslavers who opposed conversion also did so because they resented missionaries. Christianized Africans sometimes looked to white missionaries for protection when their enslaver was angry with them. Women in particular faced sexual advances from their enslavers. Those who had internalized European Christianity’s ideas about sexual purity now had another reason to reject such advances, even at the risk of infuriating violent white men. Often, women would seek the support of the missionaries and some preachers in turn denounced the white enslaver, sometimes publicly, as a sinner and a rapist. This sort of activity brought violence down on some missions. Notable islands where persecutions of missions and Christianized enslaved Africans occurred include British St. Vincent. Both islands suffered for many years and the violence there included public floggings and hanging of converted Africans.”

(modified from Jeffrey K Padget)



One formerly enslaved African, Wash Wilson, explained how they resisted in this way:

“De masters... didn’t like dem [them] ’ligious [religious] meetin’s so us natcherly [naturally] slips off at night, down in de bottoms or somewhere. Sometimes us sing and pray all night.”

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Pro-slavery activists in Britain falsely claimed that the system of slavery helped to spread Christianity among the enslaved. In reality, many enslavers opposed the [spread] of the Christian faith as they feared it would weaken their control over enslaved people, or give them ideas about freedom. Missionaries were frequently blamed for slave resistance and revolt.”

Historical archaeologist, Dr Peggy Brunache



To exert further control over enslaved Africans, Europeans sought to 'deculturalise' Africans. They forbade traditional African cultural practices such as drumming and dancing. Enslaved Africans had their names taken from them and given European names.

So a way enslaved people could resist was by continuing to practice and hold on to their culture.

Africans would continue to use their real names in secret, would tell stories, share traditional foods, and as far as possible continue to practice traditional beliefs like obeah. They would also use Christian iconography and symbols to hide their own traditional beliefs and practices. Some established new cultural traditions – a blend of those from the different parts of Africa they each came from.

Food was another way they could resist – cooking was a way enslaved people could come together to bond and build community, and cuisine stemming from enslaved practices still characterises Caribbean food today. It could also help them resist as if they grew surplus garden foods, they could sell these or use them to make street food to sell at island markets – helping them resist by building up finances which could even buy their freedom if they earned enough.

Most Africans spoke many languages and were highly proficient at learning new languages. So despite the best efforts of the enslavers, they found ways to communicate including through developing a common language. Further, they communicated through song – especially 'call and respond' songs which could raise morale by mimicking, poking fun at, or subtly threatening white enslavers.

They continued to dance for entertainment and celebration – but also to reject 'white' culture as a way of resisting.

Women, responsible for child rearing, also orally passed on stories and traditions to children, instilling their values and beliefs which allowed these practices to continue to be shared down the generations

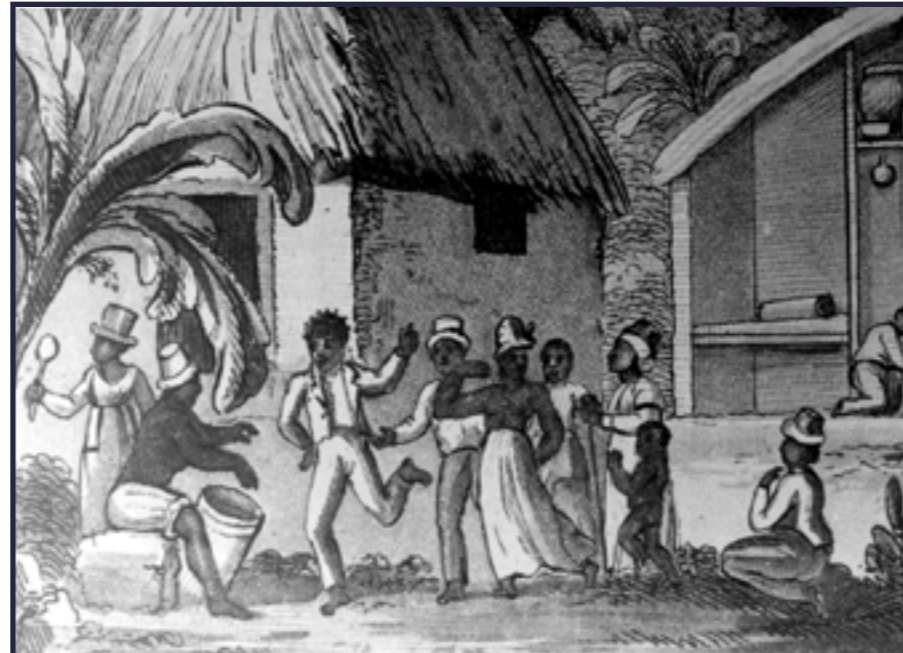


Image shows enslaved musicians and dancers in Barbados, 1807-8.

Moreau de St.-Méry put it, "for [the enslaved] the dance offers relaxation and, when they are not involved in the atrocities of fighting, they express themselves in a manner totally different from their warlike customs"

RUN AWAY from the Subscriber, on the 11th of August last, a Negro Woman, named *FLORA*, born in Kington; remarkable for having what is called a Bald Head, not having the smallest appearance of hair on it.—Also, Her Daughter *PHIBA*, Calls herself often *CUBA* and *ABBA*.—She is marked on both shoulders *AW*, raised in lumps, from endeavouring to take them out: She is also marked on both cheeks and breast, if narrowly examined.

A runaway advert in the Jamaica Mercury, 30th August 1779

with evidence of an enslaved woman attempting to maintain culture through calling herself a name different than that given to her by her enslavers:

"PHIBA – calls herself often Cuba and Abba" as well as trying to remove her slave branding "she is marked on both shoulders **AW**, raised in lumps from endeavouring to take them out"

An African Song or Chant, - taken down in Notes, from the information of Dr. Wm. Dickson, who lived several years in the West-Indies, & was Secretary to a Governor of Barbados. by G.S.

A single Negro (cuttle at Work with the rest of the Gang) leads the Song, and the others join in Chorus at the end of every verse. (Generally in a minor Key - suppose E. with minor 3^d.)

(Key Note) *Mafsa buy me he won't kill a me Oh - Mafsa buy me he won't kill a me Oh Mafsa*

buy me he won't kill a me Oh 'for he kill me he ship me regulaw

Chorus of Labouring Negroes as they proceed in their work

a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a

'For I live with a bad Man oh la - 'for I live with a bad Man Obudda-Go

'For I live with a bad Man oh la - 'for I woud go to the River side Regulaw

Chorus *a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a*

An African Song or Chant taken down in notes by G.S. from the information of Dr. Wm. Dickson between 1772-1785



Poisoning

Resource P5b

It was well known by white enslavers that many Africans had natural knowledge which they believed could be used to create poisons to use against them. **Obeah men** would make natural medicines using plant life, and poisoning was one way they could resist.

This was a covert way of resisting by those who had access to meal preparation of enslavers or overseers.

They would **pay the more knowledgeable obeah man in donations of food, shelter or money – or a favour** – and in return they would give them the means of poisoning their target.

At this time, **Europeans did not understand vaccination**, while many **African societies had for many years practiced** a form of **vaccination** – they would take a small amount of bodily fluid from a person suffering from a disease like small pox, and introduce it in a healthy person. This would induce a mild case of the disease and help build their immunity, demonstrating an advanced knowledge of disease prevention at the time. **But Europeans saw this practice and assumed they were trying to kill other enslaved Africans** to spare them a life of slavery – but also saw it as a way they might similarly try to ‘poison’ Europeans.

As fear of death by poisoning rose, enslavers decided it must be being done by Africans. So **they brought in harsher legislation** such as searching their residencies for poison ingredients, or more extremely – execution – in order to prevent this happening.

S I R,

Read Jan. 7. 1741-2.

AS the ROYAL SOCIETY, over which you so worthily preside, was instituted for the Advancement and Propagation of Natural Knowledge, and as I am convinced, that every the least Step towards such a Design cannot but be agreeable; I shall do myself the Pleasure of communicating to you, an extraordinary specific Antidote against the *Indian* or *Negro* Poison; which, I doubt not, will be the more acceptable, as this Poison hath hitherto been esteem'd the most destructive of any.

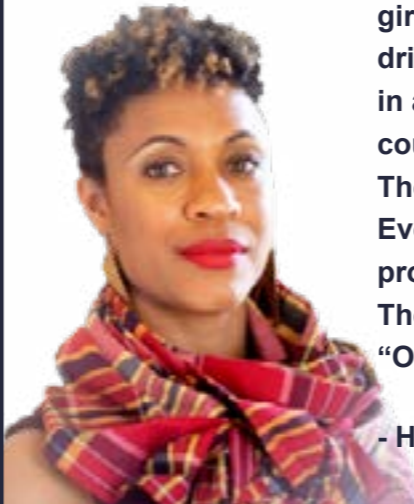
The Knowledge of this Remedy was first purchas'd from a famous *Negro* Poisoner, at a great Expence, by one who styles himself, *Isaiab Burges's, Doctor of Physic*; and the Secret devolv'd to myself, by means of a Manuscript of the Doctor's, which, amongst others, I have procur'd, for my *History of the Physical and Chirurgical Writers of this Kingdom*. The Author intended this little Tract, which

- A letter to the President of the Royal Society reporting on an antidote to 'Negro poison' in the Caribbean. Similar antidotes were published in newspapers – presumably to put white enslavers at ease.

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WHEREAS SLAVES HAVE OF LATE ATTEMPTED TO DESTROY SEVERAL PEOPLE, AS WELL WHITE AS BLACK, BY POISON... THE SAID SLAVE OR SLAVES, TOGETHER WITH THEIR ACCESSORIES, AS WELL BEFORE AS AFTER THE FACT, BEING SLAVES, AND CONVICTED THEREOF... SHALL BE ADJUDGED GUILTY OF MURDER, AS IF THE PARTY OR PARTIES THAT TOOK OR SHALL TAKE THE SAME HAD DIED; AND SHALL BE CONDEMNED TO SUFFER DEATH, BY HANGING, BURNING, OR SUCH OTHER WAY OR MEANS AS TO THE SAID JUSTICES AND FREEHOLDERS SHALL SEEM MOST CONVENIENT.”

- A law declaring execution as punishment for poisoning



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Enslaved teenager, Minetta, faced trial...for allegedly attempting to poison her master. Witness reports that the girl confessed to “having infused corrosive sublimate in some brandy and water” before giving her master the drink. Minetta then stood by his bed to ensure he drank the entire mixture, quietly standing by as he writhed in agony as the poison seeped through his body. At the trial, Minetta supposedly retained a “hardened” countenance, confessing her murderous deed, but refusing to “say sorry” for having poisoned her master. The presiding judge returned a guilty verdict, condemning her “to die Thursday next, the day after tomorrow.” Even with a death sentence, the “girl of fifteen” purportedly remained unremorseful, hearing “the sentence pronounced without the least emotion.” And, as she ascended the gallows to her fate, “she was seen to laugh” The narrator of Minetta’s case, Matthew Lewis, further alleged that women poisoned enslavers with the aid of “Obeah men,” who supplied them with lethal substances.”

- Historian Sasha Turner Bryson telling the story of a young girl accused of poisoning in Jamaica:



Work, home and town

Resource P5b

The **most common forms** of resistance were those done within the workplace.

Enslaved people could covertly resist their enslavement by **working slowly, faking illness, breaking tools or sabotaging productivity** in some other way. This was often **done in retaliation** for meagre rations, severe punishments or increased workloads.

This way they could **'negotiate'** the terms of their enslavement – **if enslavers responded more harshly production would be hampered further** (if for example they chose to physically punish them, they may injure their workforce which would again reduce efficiency of work).

Enslaved people also **stole** from enslavers. **Theft of foodstuffs was especially common** as it was accessible but also justifiable to the enslaved – their rations were entirely inadequate, especially for the amount of hard labour they were doing. Furthermore, how could 'property' (the enslaved) steal other property (food)? They were just moving the property to a different container...their stomachs.

One enslaver, **Thomas Thistlewood** of Breadnut estate in Jamaica, recorded **over 80 instances of theft** in his diaries, proving this was a common form of resistance. He often **brutally punished those he caught**. Some of these entries are below (errors are from the original):

Friday 20th:

In the afternoon found 10 or 12 Negroe Men and Women in the Coffee tree piece Paradise Stealing Run Canes, Could not Catch any...

Sunday 12th: PM:

Rode over the Estate, and in the Cotton Tree Cane piece Paradise, Catch'd a Negroe Stealing Cane, he escaped me.

Saturday 19th: May 1781:

gave the Negroes today, but first made them pay me 16 bits, Vizt: the Suspicious Ones, a bit a piece, ffor Stealing & Selling my Limes, as ffast as they ffell So that am yet fforced to buy

On top of this, women also had other ways they could resist.

Black women **used friendships with white women to gain preferential treatment** – in some cases they stole their clothes to wear to night gatherings. Some then manipulated these relationships further by **becoming literate and using these skills to petition Europeans for better treatment** for themselves or family – one formerly enslaved woman called **Dolly Newton** did just that, gaining a 'quasi freedom'.

They were also **'hucksters'**- street sellers – where they would be able to make **a little income from selling fruit or vegetables** they grew on their own small garden plots.



The Barbadoes Mulatto Girl

This engraved print shows an anonymous free woman of color (freedwoman) purchasing fruit/vegetables from enslaved vendors 1770s

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...contemporary observers believed that the **low rates of pregnancy, childbirth and infant survival were influenced by women's determination not to assist in the extension of the slave population**: they used herbs and other means of inducing abortions, and many were accused of neglect and infanticide. Some scholars argue that this gynaecological resistance did a great deal to disrupt the labour system in the short and long runs”

- Historian Michele A Johnson



The fiscal and slave strikes

Resource P5b

An interesting way enslaved people could resist in **British Guiana – Demerara, Berbice and Essequibo** – was through the **Office of the Fiscal**. This was an institution established by the Dutch who owned the islands until 1796, and after the British took control they maintained this role.

The fiscal was **an official who could investigate mistreatment of enslaved people**. Seeing an opportunity, enslaved Africans bombarded the fiscal with a constant stream of complaints. However, **most complaints were dismissed quickly** and if enslavers found out they had complained, they were often **punished** for doing so.

There is also evidence of enslaved people **going on strike** in British Caribbean plantations, in some cases demanding the removal of an overseer due to particularly poor treatment of enslaved people:



Protector of Slaves Office (Trinidad)

Richard Bridgens, 1838 (this source is from much later than our period of study – however this role existed as an avenue for complaints in the time period 1796-1807)

One woman, **Mary Williamson**, a free Black woman, tried to campaign on behalf of enslaved people who were angry at 'severe usage' from a new overseer. The enslaved people had already tried to complain to the fiscal:

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Then Mr Kircady the Overseer turned very severe on the Negroes on the property, and they could find no redress, for **on Complaint to Mr Brown the Attorney** he punished them the more severely, that the poor critures are harrassed out of their lives, many dying; On Mr John H. James coming to the Island he took a look at the Estate, but did not have the Negroes called up in the latter end of August, the Negroes went on a Sunday to Mr James at Green Island, seeking for redress, from there so severe usage for which reason...Honoured Sir this is the truth and nothing but the truth, your negroes are harrassed floged, and drove past human strength, with out any redress, to complain to an Uncle against his nephew is needless, it's not my own immediate case that make me address this to you, but my suffering family, who can not go otherwise as I am obliged to do. Thus Sir I have laid down the state of Estate of Houton Tower, which if not soon redressed you will have no slaves, to work on the Estate.”

[bold added for emphasis – spelling errors are original]

- **Mary Williamson to Haughton James, 26 October 1809**



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Williamson's letter sheds light on many preoccupations of recent historians of slavery...of plantation managers' use of violence; and of enslaved people's tactics in combatting that violence.”

- **Historian, Dr Diana Paton**

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Managers in the provision ground system regarded book-keepers and overseers as eminently dispensable, but took care not to lose the cooperation of skilled and confidential slaves and were chary of exerting their authority over head men...There were St Thomas in the East managers who took strikes in their stride by the 1770s. This is not to claim that slaves who attempted to bargain always did so with impunity; nevertheless, grievance procedures were acknowledged to exist, were frequently followed and demonstrated respect for slave leaders”

- **Historian Mary Turner on slave strikes existing in the 1770s**





Obeah

Resource P5b

Enslaved Africans brought a range of religious practices and beliefs with them from their homes. They included reverence for multiple ancestral spirits and gods, belief in a spiritual power that can be accessed by ritual specialists for protection and power, and the use of dance, drumming to reach alternative states of consciousness ('possession' or 'trance'). Over time, in the British colonies aspects of these beliefs and practices came to be called 'obeah'

Obeah included natural and supernatural healing, and ritual protection. Obeah workers also turned their power against enemies, including enslavers. This **provided comfort** to displaced Africans as it felt like the **familiar practices of home** which could make them feel safer.

Obeah gave enslaved Africans **links to a spirituality** which connected them with their past and the spirit world from an African rather than European point of view. It helped them **determine for themselves what was culturally appropriate, helping them hold on to their identity.**

Obeah men and women were also **highly respected** and were often **community leaders and teachers of African cultural heritage** – meaning they could **resist by not letting their spiritual practices die out**. This respect also saw people gather to them as **leaders in violent acts of resistance** as they were seen as a **rallying point for shared beliefs**, so could organise resisters more successfully when the time came.

During rebellions, Obeah men would **administer an oath to rebels** which bound them to not betray their fellow insurgents – otherwise they were cursed to an agonising death. Obeah men also **made a powder which supposedly protected the Africans** who used it from the Europeans' weapons.



An image depicting an obeah practice from the early 1800s

It has been described as the “**magical art of resistance**” because it helped **empower** those who engaged in its practices. It was believed obeah practitioners could control life and death – **that sense of control in a world that took all other agency from them would have had a powerful impact on their sense of self, helping them hold out against their oppressors.**

Of course, their **enslavers saw it as dangerous** – Europeans feared drumming and dancing believing it would be used to communicate rebellious plans (which in fairness...they did!) They also feared poisoning – but we will get to that later...

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“By the mid-eighteenth century, concerns over African spirituality and its potential to stimulate open slave rebellion pushed Jamaica to pass its ‘Act to Remedy the Evils Arising for Irregular Assemblies of Slaves’ in 1760. African or creolised African religious practices intertwined with overt rebellions was a common phenomenon throughout the Caribbean... The criminalisation of Obeah stayed on the books until the twenty-first century.”

– Historical archaeologist
Dr Peggy Brunache



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Not long since, some of thee execrable wretches in Jamaica introduced what they called the myal dance, and established a kind of society, into which they invited all they could. The lure hung out was that every Negro initiated into the myal society would be invulnerable to the white men; and, although they might appear slain, the obeah-man could, at his pleasure restore the body to life.

...a serious source of danger to the peace of the colony was recognized to be ever present in the assemblies of slaves where the old religious tribal dances were openly accompanied by drumming which aroused the fanaticism of Africans to such a degree as to endanger a general uprising.”

- White Jamaican enslaver, Edward Long, recalling obeah practices

