

# Slavery

and the natural world

## Chapter 6: Resistance

## Context

This material is part of a wider project on slavery and the natural world, carried out at the Natural History Museum, 2006–08. The information is based on documents held in the Museum’s libraries, and explores the links between nature (especially the knowledge, and transfer, of plants), people with an interest in natural history (mainly European writers from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries) and the history and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade<sup>1</sup>.

More can be found in the original documents, written by natural historians at the time of slavery. Contact the Natural History Museum Library [www.nhm.ac.uk/research-curation/library/](http://www.nhm.ac.uk/research-curation/library/) +44 (0) 20 7942 5000. The additional references section has other useful sources such as relevant articles, books, journals and websites.

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1 For more background information see Chapter 1: The project.

## 1. Introduction

Many Africans captured and sold into enslavement did not accept the system of slavery. They were oppressed by enslavement and had few choices, but they were not passive and they resisted in many different ways.

Escaped Africans and indigenous peoples of the Americas formed communities, called Maroons, and often lived in mountainous or forested areas where they could not easily be captured. They lived off natural resources and grew some foods, such as rice, very successfully<sup>2</sup>.

The many different forms of resistance included African-led uprisings, refusing to co-operate, working slowly, and retaining a sense of identity as well as African traditions. On plantations, men were often in a better position than women to lead revolts or to run away<sup>3</sup>, but there were notable exceptions such as Nanny of the Maroons (see section 4).

Some women had domestic roles and could use this position for active resistance. They used plants as poisons to kill enslavers. Sexual violence and exploitation of enslaved women were commonplace, and plants were used to abort unborn children. It could be argued in some circumstances that enslaved women used their sexual influence as a form of control over their enslavers. Another subject for debate is whether the reports of suicide to escape enslavement, and return home in death, could be seen as a form of resistance.

Everyday survival of enslaved people, who retained their own traditions, often using natural resources and plants, can also be seen as a powerful form of resistance.

## 2. Revolts

Uprisings on the ships crossing the Atlantic were frequent. A good example of this is Tomba<sup>4</sup> who led a revolt on board the ship *Robert of Bristol*, which was under the command of Captain Harding. Tomba was known as the leader of the Baga people in what is now Guinea Bissau. Together with an alliance of other villages he tried to stop African middlemen trading in their own people. But his efforts were defeated and Tomba himself was captured and taken to a fort in Sierra Leone where he was put on board a slaving ship<sup>5</sup>.

John Atkins, a ship's surgeon, described what happened as he was told at the time:

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<sup>2</sup> See also Chapter 9: Transfer and exploitation of knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Walvin, 2001, p108.

<sup>4</sup> For more background information on Tomba see Chapter 2: People and the slave trade.

<sup>5</sup> See Thomas, 1997, p339, 392 and 423, and [www.nathanielturner.com/timelongerdanrope.htm](http://www.nathanielturner.com/timelongerdanrope.htm).

‘... *Tomba*, about a Week before, had combined with three or four of the stoutest of his Country-men to kill the Ship’s Company, and attempt their Escapes... a Woman-Slave, who being more at large, was to watch the proper Opportunity. She brought him word one night that there were no more than five white Men upon the Deck, and they asleep, bringing him a Hammer at the same time (all the Weapons that she could find) to execute the Treachery. He encouraged the Accomplices... but could... engage only one more and the Woman to follow him upon the Deck. He found three Sailors sleeping on the Fore-castle, two of which he presently dispatched, with single Strokes upon the Temples... other two of the Watch were... made awake, and... soon awaked the Master... who... took a Hand-spike... and redoubling his Strokes home upon *Tomba*, laid him at length flat upon the Deck, securing them all in Irons. The Reader may be curious to know their Punishment: Why, Captain *Harding* weighing the Stoutness and Worth of the two Slaves, did, as in other Countries they do by Rogues of Dignity, whip and scarify them only; while three others, Abettors, not Actors, nor of Strength for it, he sentenced to cruel Deaths; making them first eat the Heart and Liver of one of them killed. The Woman he hoisted up by the Thumbs, whipp’d, and slashed her with Knives, before the other Slaves till she died.’ (Atkins, 1737, p72–3)

*Tomba* was not an isolated example, and European traders faced a continual threat of revolt. John Atkins described the risk of uprisings when enslaved Africans were captured in Dahomey, now Benin, in 1721:

‘The Commanders, with their Surgeons (as skilled in the Choice of Slaves) attend the whole time on shore, where they purchase, in what they call a fair open Market. The Mates reside on board, receiving from time to time their Master’s Directions as to the Goods wanted, and to prepare the Ship for the Reception and Security of the Slaves sent him; where this is a Rule always observed, *to keep the Males apart from the Women and Children, to handcuff the former; Bristol Ships triple such as are sturdy, with Chains round their Necks*; and to keep your own Men sober, and on a barricado’d Quarter-deck: tho’ the natural Cowardice of these Creatures, and no other Prospect upon *rising*, but falling into the hands of the same Rogues that sold them, very much lessens the Danger: Nevertheless it is adviseable at all times, to have a diligent Watch on their Actions, yet (abating their Fetters) to treat them with all Gentleness and Civility.’ (Atkins, 1737, p172–3)

If enslaved Africans could not physically escape from their captors, they often refused to co-operate. There is evidence that they refused to eat. The abolitionist Olaudah Equiano described his experience of being put on board ship:

'I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that with the loathsomeness of the stench and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything.' (Equiano, 1789, p56)

The refusal to eat could have been due to the conditions and illness as well as being seen as a form of resistance<sup>6</sup>. Enslaved people were then force-fed:

'... and have an Overseer with a Cat-of-nine tails, to force it upon those that are sullen and refuse'. (Atkins, 1737, p171)

Enslavement had an impact on Africans' mental health. Some of this may have been due to their poor diet<sup>7</sup>, as well as to the severe physical and psychological trauma suffered by enslaved people<sup>8</sup>.

### 3. Retaining traditions

In the limited time that enslaved people had to themselves, they kept aspects of African traditions and culture alive<sup>9</sup>, which can also be seen as a form of resistance. Enslaved Africans were given new names but, despite this, they retained many aspects of their cultures, including their languages, medicines and spirituality. All of these were seen as a threat to their enslavers.



▲ Replica of an Asante-style drum, collected for Hans Sloane in Virginia, 1730–1745  
© The Natural History Museum, London<sup>12</sup>

Drums, for example, were a very important part of African life. They were used on board ship to force captured Africans to exercise. In the Caribbean and the Americas enslaved Africans made drums out of natural resources and used them as part of their religious ceremonies and to make music for weekly dances and festivals. They also used them to communicate and to signal revolt. The revolution in Haiti (which led to independence in 1804) was started on the signal of drumbeats in 1791<sup>10</sup>.

This led to laws and restrictions on the use of drums across the Caribbean<sup>11</sup>. The doctor and natural historian, Hans Sloane, wrote that in Jamaica drums were used:

6 See Chapter 5: Diet and nutrition.

7 See Chapter 5: Diet and nutrition.

8 See section 6. Suicide and Chapter 4: Everyday life.

9 See Chapter 4: Everyday life.

10 See: [www.understandingslavery.com](http://www.understandingslavery.com).

11 See, for example, Walvin, 2001, p141.

12 This is a replica of a drum held at the British Museum, see: [www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight\\_objects/aoa/a/asante-style\\_drum.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/a/asante-style_drum.aspx).

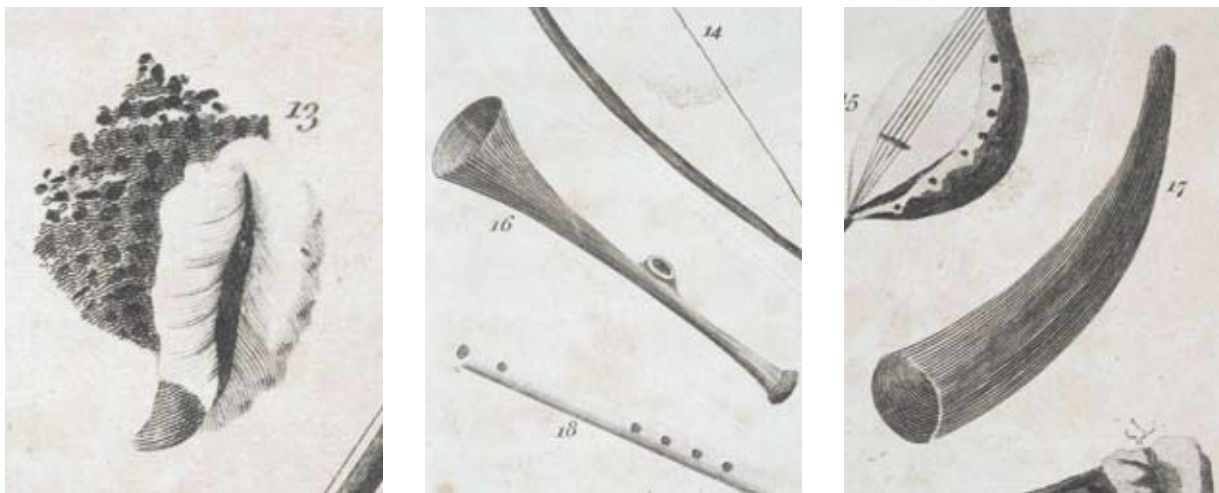
‘... in their Wars at home in Africa, it was thought too much to inciting them to rebellion, and so they were prohibited by the Customs of the Island’.  
(Sloane, vol 1, 1707, plii)

Conch shells, such as the queen conch (*Strombus gigas*), and species of triton’s trumpet (*Charonia tritonis* or *Charonia tritonis variegata*) were used as trumpets to call enslaved Africans to work<sup>13</sup>. They were also used as signals in rebellions and wars, as John Gabriel Stedman described in Suriname:

‘No. 13 [referring to a drawing] is a conch, or sea shell, which by blowing they sound, for pleasure, or to cause an alarm, &c., but is not used as an accompaniment to dancing...

No. 16, is the *trumpet of war*, to command advancing, retreating, &c., and is called by the negroes the too-too.’ (Stedman, vol 2, 1806, p297–8)

In Jamaica, cow horns were used in a similar way. Conch shells and horns were called *abeng*, an African word. These horns, like the machetes used to cut the sugar cane, were symbols of forced labour as well as the potential to rise against the oppressors. In Haiti, the conch shell became the national symbol of resistance to slavery<sup>14</sup>.



▲ Conch shell and cow horn trumpets in Suriname, Stedman, 1806  
© The Natural History Museum, London

13 Sloane, vol 1, 1707, plii and Hughes, 1750, p275–6.

14 See: [www.lambifund.org/about\\_history.htm](http://www.lambifund.org/about_history.htm).

## 4. Maroons

There are many records of enslaved Africans escaping from enslavement<sup>15</sup>. Regular advertisements appeared in newspapers and on posters offering rewards for the return of runaways<sup>16</sup>. However, running away to freedom involved a high degree of risk. Often individual attempts were unsuccessful and runaways were caught and severely punished<sup>17</sup>. Hans Sloane described how the great black-bird sometimes signalled the position of runaways:

‘It haunts the Woods on the Edges of the Savannas, and is very common, making a loud Noise upon the sight of Mankind, which alarms all the Fowl in their Neighbourhood, so that they are very prejudicial to Fowlers, but on the other Hand when Negros run from their Service, these Birds on sight of them as of other Men, will make a Noise and direct the Pursuers which way they must take to follow their Blacks, who otherwise might live always in the remoter inland Woods in Pleasure and Idleness.’ (Sloane, vol 2, 1725, p298)

This example, written by William Smith, a church minister and an amateur natural historian, described a runaway sentenced to a brutal death:

‘However, in order to bring him to relish a state of Slavery, by gentle and easy degrees, he set him to look after his Horses, Mules, and Sheep: But he had not been long in that station, before he quarrelled with another of his Master’s Negroes, and killed him with a Knife; upon which, he fled away, with his Wife and Child, to the thick Woods, where he immediately erected a Hut, resolving to die rather than submit: However, he was soon found out, and his Hut surrounded with armed White Men, and Negroes, who were resolved to apprehend, and make a publick example of him: He first of all butchered his Wife and Child, and then came out the Hut with the bloody (reeking) Knife in his hand, offering it to his Master, and saying, that as he had fairly bought, and paid for him, he had a just right to take away his life: The Master told him, that he must surrender himself, and be tried by the Civil Magistrate; whereupon, he struck at him with the Knife, but was knocked down and secured. The next day he was tried by two Justices of the Peace, who have a discretionary Power, to inflict what Death they please upon such Negroes: The Justices adjudged him to be broke upon the Wheel, and then burnt alive, which Sentence was strictly put in execution: When his Arms, Thighs, and Leg Bones, were broken all to shivers, with an Iron Crow, he did not so much as once cry out Oh! He then desired a Dram of Rum, which was refused him by his Master, who rightly imagined, that he only wanted (if possible) to die drunk; however, a Draught of Water was offered him, which he refused to accept of; they then flung him into a large and fierce Fire, where he expired, with little or no concern.’ (Smith, 1745, p227–8)

15 The ‘underground railroad’ was the most famous way of escaping slavery in mainland America, see: [www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USASunderground.htm](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USASunderground.htm).

16 See: [www.nmm.ac.uk/freedom/viewTheme.cfm/theme/resistance](http://www.nmm.ac.uk/freedom/viewTheme.cfm/theme/resistance).

17 See Walvin, 2001, p240–256, Sloane, vol 1, 1707, plvii and also Chapter 4: Everyday life for more information on punishment.



More organised successful attempts led to groups of escaped Africans forming communities called Maroons. Maroon comes from the Spanish word *cimarrón* meaning wild or untamed. These groups escaped into the interior of Caribbean islands or the North and South American mainland to form their own separate communities. There were particularly successful groups of Maroons in Suriname (South America) and in Jamaica<sup>18</sup>.

John Gabriel Stedman went to Suriname as a mercenary with the Dutch forces. His job was to capture Maroons and stop uprisings. He seemed to become more sympathetic to enslaved people when he saw how badly they were treated. He also had a relationship with an enslaved woman, Joanna<sup>19</sup>. In his book, Stedman described meeting Joanna's uncle, Cojo, who told him of a family friend called Jolly Coeur. Jolly Coeur was a leading freedom fighter and had recently led an attack on a plantation.

'From these he related to us the following remarkable story, having a little girl, called Tamera, by the hand.

'This child's father,' said he, 'is one whose name is Jolly Coeur, the first captain belonging to Baron's men, and, not without cause, one of the fiercest rebels in the forest, which he has lately shewn on the neighbouring estate of New Rosenback, where your colonel now commands. On that estate one Schults, a Jew, being the manager at that time, who formerly was the manager of Fauconberg, the rebels suddenly appeared, and took possession of the whole plantation. Having tied the hands of Schults, and plundered the house, they next began to feasting and dancing, before they thought proper to end his miserable existence. In this deplorable situation now lay the victim, only waiting Baron's signal for death, when his eyes chancing, to catch the above captain's, Jolly Coeur, he addressed him nearly in the following words:—"O Jolly Coeur, now remember Mr. Schults, who was once your deputy-master; remember the dainties I gave you from my own table, when you were only a child, and my favourite, my darling, among so many others: remember this, and now spare my life by your powerful intercession." — The reply of Jolly Coeur was memorable:—"I remember it perfectly well:—"But you, O tyrant, recollect how you ravished my poor mother, and flogged my father for coming to her assistance. Recollect, that the shameful act was perpetrated in my infant presence—Recollect this—then die by my hands, and next be damn'd."—Saying this, he severed the head from his body with a hatchet at one blow; with which having played at bowls upon the beach, he next cut the skin with a knife from his back, which he spread over one of the cannon to keep the priming dry.'

—Thus ended the history of Mr. Schults; when Cojo, with young Tamera, departed...' (Stedman, vol 1, 1806, p348–9)

18 For more information see: [www.jamaicans.com/info/maroons.htm](http://www.jamaicans.com/info/maroons.htm).

19 See Chapter 2: People and the slave trade.



In Jamaica, Maroons controlled large parts of the mountainous interior. They were skilled hunters and fighters, and the British found it difficult to defeat them<sup>20</sup>. Nanny was the leader of the Windward Maroons on the east side of Jamaica. She was born an Asante, or Akan speaker, in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and was enslaved and taken to Jamaica. Nanny preserved and passed down Asante legends, customs, music and songs, and some Maroon communities retain a strong sense of Akan identity today<sup>21</sup>.

Successful Maroon communities used their knowledge of the environment to stay free. They grew rice<sup>22</sup>, which became an important part of their diet, and used many plants for clothing, housing and medicines. John Gabriel Stedman described rice being exchanged between Maroon communities in Suriname, South America:

‘At ten o’clock we met a small party of the rebels, with each a green hamper upon his back; they fired at us, dropped their bundles, and taking to their heels ran back towards their village. These we since learned, were transporting rice to another settlement for their subsistence... The green hampers... when our men cut them open with their sabres, there burst forth the most beautiful clean rice that I ever saw... the rebels retiring, and we advancing, until we arrived in the most beautiful field of ripe rice, in the form of an oblong square, from which the rebel town appeared at a distance...’ (Stedman, vol 2, 1806, p108–10, 118–21)

Patrick Browne described lace-bark (*Lagetta lintearia*) used for clothing by Maroons<sup>23</sup>:

‘It has been, upon occasions, made into different forms of apparel, by the wild and runaway negroes.’ (Browne, 1756, p371)

## 5. Poisoning

It was often women in domestic roles who had the opportunity to poison their enslavers. Plant knowledge was an important part of resistance. There is evidence that Europeans lived in great fear of being poisoned. The natural historian Henry Barham spent many years perfecting his knowledge of antidotes. Fear of poisoning meant there were laws passed outlawing ‘slave medicine’ in the 1730s in English colonies and in the 1760s on French islands<sup>24</sup>.

The Reverend William Smith described an example of a woman poisoning four Europeans in Nevis in 1720. She was executed as punishment. He blamed the poisoning on the fact that the woman had been converted to Christianity<sup>25</sup>:

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20 Maroons the British did manage to capture in Jamaica were deported first to Nova Scotia and then to Sierra Leone where many died of diseases such as malaria and yellow fever; see Chapter 7: Fevers.

21 See: [www.jamaicaway.com/Heroes/NannyPage.html](http://www.jamaicaway.com/Heroes/NannyPage.html).

22 See Chapter 5: Diet and nutrition and Chapter 9: Transfer and exploitation of knowledge.

23 See also Chapter 4: Everyday life.

24 See Schiebinger, 2004, p89–90.

25 There was widespread resistance to converting enslaved Africans to Christianity throughout the Caribbean in the early days of the transatlantic slave trade, see: [www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/nav.18065](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/nav.18065). For more information on the relationship between religion and the slave trade see: [www.setallfree.net/bible\\_trans\\_slavery.html](http://www.setallfree.net/bible_trans_slavery.html).

‘When a Slave is once Christened, he conceits that he ought to be upon a level with his Master, in all other respects; in consequence whereof, he presumes, That if his Master corrects him, for ever so great a Fault, he is at full liberty to send him out of the World, by a Dose of Poison. For instance, a Parishioner of mine, baptized a Black Woman, and had her well instructed in our Religion here in *England*, but she had not long been arrived at *Nevis*, before she poisoned four White Persons, and was executed for so doing: But if even the whole Country was so mad, as to set about such an odd Conversion, the effect would then be a general Rebellion, and Massacre, of us Whites: This is the Truth.’ (Smith, 1745, p230)

European naturalists wrote about the powerful effect of plant poisons in the Caribbean. Contact with the fruit or sap from the manchineel tree (*Hippomane mancinella*<sup>26</sup>) caused intense itching and a burning sensation (from extreme dermatitis<sup>27</sup>). However, enslaved people learned how to cut the tree and protect themselves with lime juice:

‘Formerly no one dared to cut down these Trees, without first having made a large Fire round them, in order to burn the Bark, and dry up the Spry and Juices that fly from them in cutting: But now naked Negroes venture to cut them down green, only using the Caution of previously rubbing their whole Bodies with Lime-juice, which prevents the Juice from corroding or ulcerating their Skins.’ (Hughes, 1750, p124)

Indigenous peoples of the Americas used the tree’s saps and fruit juices as a poison for their arrows and to stun fish. Henry Barham described the poisonous effect of manchineel on crabs and fish:

‘It is certain the fruit of these trees are poison, insomuch that the land crabs that eat of them, although they do not poison the crab, yet those that eat of those crabs shall be taken very sick; some have died suddenly after. Some of these trees grow by the sea and river sides; and it hath been observed, that fishes will eat of their fruit as they drop into the water, which will make their teeth turn yellow, and become poisonous.’ (Barham, 1794, p100)

Griffith Hughes wrote a description of an enslaved woman trying to poison her master with manchineel in Barbados:

26 Manchineel is named after the Spanish word for little apple and it belongs to the Euphorbiaceae (spurge) family.

27 See, for example, [pubs.acs.org/cgi-bin/abstract.cgi/jnprdf/1984/47/i03/f-pdf/f\\_np50033a015.pdf](https://pubs.acs.org/cgi-bin/abstract.cgi/jnprdf/1984/47/i03/f-pdf/f_np50033a015.pdf) and [www.unboundmedicine.com/medline/ebm/mesh/English\\_Abstract](https://www.unboundmedicine.com/medline/ebm/mesh/English_Abstract).

‘A certain Slave, conceiving herself injuriously treated, poured into her Master’s Chocolate about a Spoonful of this Juice: Immediately after he had swallowed it, he felt a violent Burning in his Throat and Stomach; and, suspecting, he was poisoned, he strove, and with good Success, to vomit; and, having taken after this seasonable Discharge, a regular Emetic, his Stomach was, in a great measure, suddenly cleansed of the Poison, tho’ it cost him a long time to perfect the Cure.’ (Hughes, 1750, p123–4)



▲ *Hippomane mancinella*, top, and the parasitic plant *Dendropemon purpureum*, 1771, Picture Library Reference 40409 © The Natural History Museum, London



▲ *Hippomane mancinella*, Sloane Herbarium, Illustration by G Moore, ID 76 © The Natural History Museum, London



▲ Manchineel (*Hippomane mancinella*), Jacquin, 1780 © The Natural History Museum, London

One antidote to manchineel poisoning was antidote cocoon<sup>28</sup> (*Fevillea cordifolia*), as the natural historian Patrick Browne described in Jamaica:

‘The kernels are extremely bitter, and frequently infused in spirits for the use of the negroes: a small quantity of this liquor opens the body and provokes an appetite, but a larger dose works both by stool and vomit. It is frequently taken to clear the tube, when there is any suspicion of poison, and, often, on other occasions.’ (Browne, 1756, p374)

However, the natural historian James Macfadyen questioned how effective it was as an antidote:

28 See: [www.herbaltherapeutics.net/Medicinal\\_Plants\\_of\\_Jamaica.pdf](http://www.herbaltherapeutics.net/Medicinal_Plants_of_Jamaica.pdf). Antidote cocoon is a member of the Cucurbitaceae (cucumber) family. It was also used as a candle, see Chapter 4: Everyday life.

‘It has often been remarked, that when any vegetable production is more than usually nauseous and unpleasant to the taste, popular opinion immediately concludes that it must possess medicinal qualities. This is, I believe, the case with the Antidote Cacoen<sup>29</sup>, which has, for no good or sufficient reason, been established in the domestic Pharmacopeia of the West Indies as a most valuable plant. It has been regarded also with favor by the French Colonist... Of the medicinal properties of these seeds I cannot speak from my own experience. Dr. William Wright in his Memoirs states, ‘I am far from agreeing that it is of use for pains or weakness of the stomach. On the contrary I find the disorder rapidly to advance under its use, and that the patient gets into a dropsy.’... In cases of poisoned wound, such as that by a dog suspected of rabies, the pounded kernel of the seed, mixed with laudanum, is applied to the wound, and the application is regarded, by the simple natives, as the ‘sovereign’st thing on earth;’ whereas the only effect that can be produced is that of irritating the wound.’ (Macfadyen, vol 2, 1850, p130–1)

Henry Barham described the well-known use of savanna flower (*Echites umbellata*, commonly called Maroon weed) as a poison in Jamaica in 1710:

‘It is too well known, and it is pity that ever the negro or Indian slaves should know it, being so rank a poison: I saw two drachms of the expressed juice given to a dog, which killed him in eight minutes time...’ (Barham, 1794, p167–8)

Henry Barham described how the poison was used against a physician and how he personally provided the antidote:

‘Some years past, a practitioner of physic was poisoned with this plant by his negro woman, who had so ordered it that it did not dispatch him quickly, but he was seized with violent gripings, inclining to vomit, and loss of appetite; afterwards, he had small convulsions in several parts of him, a hectic fever, and continual wasting of his flesh. Knowing that I had made it my business some years to find out the virtues of plants, especially antidotes, he sent to me for advice; upon which I sent him some *nhandiroba* kernels [another word for antidote cocoon] to infuse in wine, and drink frequently of, which cured him in time; but it was a considerable time before his convulsive fits left him.’ (Barham, 1794, p168)

Cassava (*Manihot esculenta*) was a staple food of the indigenous peoples of the Americas as well as of enslaved Africans<sup>30</sup>. It contains poisonous cyanogenic glycosides, but preparation methods such as boiling and drying make it safe for eating<sup>31</sup>. Cassava could therefore be a cause of accidental as well as deliberate poisoning<sup>32</sup>.

29 Cacoen was the Jamaican spelling of cocoon.

30 See Chapter 5: Diet and nutrition.

31 See, for example, [www.researchnews.osu.edu/archive/cassava.htm](http://www.researchnews.osu.edu/archive/cassava.htm) and Siritunga and Sayre, 2004.

32 See Chapter 5: Diet and nutrition for information on the processing of cassava to eat.

'I have seen several bad accidents happen to negroes newly come to Jamaica, and strangers to the root, who have eat of it only roasted with its juice, which hath poisoned them: The symptoms are, first, a pain and sickness of the stomach, a swelling of the whole abdomen, then violent vomiting and purging, giddiness of the head, then a coldness and shaking, dimness of sight, swoonings, and death, and all in a few hours. The expressed juice of the root is very sweet to the palate, but soon putrifies and breeds worms, called topuea, which are a violent poison, and which Indians too well know the use of: They dry these worms or maggots, and powder them; which powder, in a little quantity, they put under their thumb-nail, and, after they drink to those they intend to poison, they put their thumb upon the bowl, and so cunningly convey the poison; wherefore, when we see a negro with a long thumb-nail, he is to be mistrusted.' (Barham, 1794, p34)

Hans Sloane observed that cassava was widely eaten in Jamaica, and also noted:

'The juice is poisonous, so that any creature drinking of it (after swelling) dies presently.' (Sloane, vol 1, 1707, pxviii–xix)



▲ Cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), Merian, 1705, Picture Library reference 26483  
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## 6. Suicide

Suicide can be seen as one of the most extreme examples of resistance. Enslaved people were subjected to such hardship that, for some, suicide seemed preferable to living in enslavement. Examples of depression among captured and enslaved Africans were common. The natural historian Griffith Hughes wrote that, in Barbados:

'The Capacities of their Minds in the common Affairs of Life are but little inferior, if at all, to those of the Europeans. If they fail in some Arts, it may be owing more to their want of Education, and the Depression of their Spirits by Slavery, than to any Want of natural Abilities; for an higher Degree of improved Knowledge in any Occupation would not much alter their Condition for the better.' (Hughes, 1750, p16)

Griffith Hughes went on to say that, after a few years, enslaved Africans might have felt that their lives were better than they had been in Africa:

'... new Negroes as are brought hither from Guiney, whose Despondency, and careless Regard for Life, from the Uncertainty, or rather Certainty of what they are to undergo, makes Life, at that Juncture, irksome to them; though a few Years Experience convinces them, that if there can be a Degree of Happiness without Liberty, they enjoy a more certain Tenure, and a better Condition of Life, here, than in their native *Africa*'. (Hughes, 1750, p42)

Some African people thought that they would return to their own country after death, as the Reverend William Smith described in Nevis in the 1720s:

'Some Negroes believe, That when they die, they return back to their own Native Country; for which reason, they often hang themselves at first coming to us.' (Smith, 1745, p228–9)

Hans Sloane recorded similar beliefs in Jamaica in 1688:

'The *Negroes* from some Countries think they return to their own Country when they die in *Jamaica*, and therefore regard death but little, imagining they shall change their condition, by that means from servile to free, and so for this reason often cut their own Throats. Whether they die thus, or naturally, their Country people make great lamentations, mournings, and howlings about them expiring, and at their Funeral throw in Rum and Victuals into their Graves, to serve them in the other world. Sometimes they bury it in gourds, at other times spill it on the Graves.' (Sloane, vol 1, 1707, pxlviii)

As well as these methods, some enslaved people used poisonous plants to commit suicide. Henry Barham described a suicide by manchineel poisoning in Jamaica:



‘I had a negro man that wilfully poisoned himself with them, and a little before he died he confessed it, and would fain have lived: I observed, he complained of a great heat and burning in his stomach, but could not vomit; his tongue swelled, and was burning hot, as he called it; he was continually calling for water; his eyes red and staring, and he soon expired.’ (Barham, 1794, p100)

## 7. Abortion

Enslaved women were seen as the property of their enslaver, and sexual abuse was common. William Smith’s account illustrated one example of sexual exploitation:

‘But I had like to have forgot to tell you, that about ten years before my arrival at Nevis, a young Negro Woman was delivered of two different sorts of Children, at a neighbouring Island, viz. a Coal Black one, and a Mulatto, which odd kind of Birth, was accounted for (right, I suppose) thus. Her Husband had carnal knowledge of her, just before he went out to his work, and as soon as he was gone, the White Overseer went to the Hut, and had the like carnal knowledge.’ (Smith, 1745, p231)

As well as poisoning their oppressors or taking their own lives, enslaved women aborted their unborn children rather than see them born into slavery. Maria Merian<sup>33</sup> described a plant, the peacock flower, which she called *Flos pavonis* (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*). It was used by the indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans to cause abortions and suicide as a direct result of enslavement and sexual exploitation<sup>34</sup>.

‘This plant *Flos pavonis* has parts which are used by the slave women to induce abortion. The Indian slave women are very badly treated by their white enslavers and do not wish to bear children who must live under equally horrible conditions. The black slave women, imported mainly from Guinea and Angola, also try to avoid pregnancy with their white enslavers and actually seldom beget children. They often use the root of this plant to commit suicide in the hope of returning to their native land through reincarnation, so that they may live in freedom with their relatives and loved ones in Africa while their bodies die here in slavery, as they have told me themselves.’ (Merian, quoted in Counter, 2006<sup>35</sup>)

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33 See Chapter 2: People and the slave trade.

34 See also Schiebinger, 2004.

35 Counter’s translation may have been using Stearn’s English translation from 1980–2, or it may be his own translation from the Latin or Dutch.



Other natural historians also described the abortive powers of *Caesalpinia pulcherrima*<sup>36</sup>. Hans Sloane described it in Jamaica and Barbados (where it was also used as a type of hedging) and compared its use to savin (*Juniperus sabina*), which was used to control menstruation and cause abortions in Europe:

‘It provokes the Menstrua extremely, causes Abortion, &c. and does whatever Savin or powerful Emmenagogues will do... Ligon, tells us that it was carried first to Barbados from the Cape Verd Isles, and that it throve there very much.’ (Sloane, vol 2, 1725, p49–50)

Henry Barham also wrote:

‘... besides which, a decoction of the leaves or flowers has a wonderful power to move or force the menstrua in women’. (Barham, 1794, p16)



▲ Flos pavonis (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*), Merian, 1705 © The Natural History Museum, London



▲ *Caesalpinia pulcherrima* specimen, Sloane Herbarium, collected 1687–89, ID 732 © The Natural History Museum, London

36 See Chapter 10: Attitudes and acknowledgment for a discussion of how these natural historians reported their sources.

James Macfadyen described uses of *Caesalpinia pulcherrima* in the Caribbean almost 100 years later:

‘The leaves when bruised have a smell resembling that of savine, and the infusion, as also that of the flowers, is considered a powerful emmenagogue, so as even to bring on abortion. The leaves are also said to be purgative, and to have been used as a substitute for senna. The seeds, in powder, are stated to form a remedy for the belly-ach.’ (Macfadyen, vol 1, 1837, p331)

Allen Counter’s recent work has shown that *Caesalpinia pulcherrima* is still known in the Amazon rainforest as a plant to cause abortion. He was told:

‘This plant, ayoowiri, cures many things,’ said the medicine man DaBuWan in the Amazon rain forest as he held up a beautiful plant with red and yellow flowers. ‘The juice from the leaves cures fever, the juice from the flower cures sores, and the seeds cure bad cough, breathing difficulty, and chest pain.’ DaBuWan... carefully examined the roots of the plant like any other scientist. ‘This part can be very dangerous,’ he warned, pointing to the brown roots, which he said could cause death if eaten. ‘It is a powerful woman’s medicine,’ the descendant of West African slaves added with a very serious look on his face. ‘A woman can use it to end a pregnancy.’

‘Abortion?’ I asked. ‘Yes,’ he said with hand gestures around the abdomen, ‘abortions.’ DaBuWan was then arguably one of the greatest medicine men in the Amazon rain forest, if not the world, and I spent seven years in the 1970s and 1980s storing and cataloguing some of the plants he identified. I was in awe of his knowledge.

I was reminded of him recently when I came across several molecular biology studies of *Caesalpinia pulcherrima* – the plant I had identified back then as ayoowiri... Earlier research had found that the active ingredients of the same plant... induce vomiting, and 4 grams can induce abortion in the first trimester of pregnancy.

So, Western medicine, with its expensive machinery and sophisticated scientists, has finally figured out what DaBuWan and his peers knew long ago...

‘This plant, Ayoowiri, has been used by the women of our village for abortions since the time of Bakarah,’ the white man...’ (Counter, 2006)

The fertility of enslaved women was low due to poor nutrition, disease and overwork as well as abortion. More African people were continually captured and enslaved to maintain the workforce in the Americas, especially in the Caribbean where death rates were highest. This continued the cycle of oppression and resistance.

‘... it will not be here improper to take some Notice of the Nature and Disposition of our Negroes, or black Inhabitants, employed in cultivating our Land: These are between Sixty-five and Seventy thousand, tho’ formerly we had a greater Number: Yet we are obliged, in order to keep up a necessary Number, to have a yearly Supply from *Africa*. The hard Labour, and often the Want of Necessaries, which these unhappy Creatures are obliged to undergo, destroy a greater Number than are bred up here...’ (Hughes, 1750, p14)

As the anti-slavery movement grew, the supply of enslaved workers was under threat. This drew more attention to the low fertility of enslaved women and caused increasing concern among plantation holders<sup>37</sup>.

## 8. Alternative interpretations



This chapter presents research information and context. The evidence itself can be seen in different ways and raises many questions and some further areas for research. Through the Natural History Museum’s slavery and the natural world public programme many alternative interpretations and questions relevant to this chapter have been collected and some of these are summarised below:

- The common name for the savanna flower (*Echites umbellata*), used as a poison, was Maroon weed – does this imply it was used a lot by Maroon communities?
- The extreme physical and psychological hardship endured by enslaved people led some to resort to death. What impact might this have had on communities at the time and today?
- What legacies of resistance by enslaved Africans remain today?

### Meaning of resistance

Participants in the discussion sessions expressed strong personal feelings and perspectives on the subject of resistance. The actual meaning of resistance was discussed at length. The more obvious forms of resistance were compared with more covert types: ‘You think they are just passive and just do what their people told them. But they actually resisted and they found really resourceful ways.’ One opinion stated was: Do not react with violence as that gives victory to the oppressor. Remain dignified and remote.’

<sup>37</sup> See Schiebinger, 2004, p128.

It was also said that:

- Resistance is fighting back, not giving in and not giving up.
- 'Resistance' means 'fighting back' and there are many ways to fight...
- Resistance is self-esteem, survival, non-compliance and holding fast.
- It is to stand against something perceived as injustice.
- Resistance was more a question of surviving as a slave rather than opposition to being enslaved.
- Resist is to stand up against overbearing powers. It can be done through physical and emotional techniques.
- Resistance is standing up for what you believe is right and good.
- Resistance: Struggle by an oppressed people/peoples against an unjust power/authority for universal values.
- Making choices about your destiny.
- To make a decision to revolt even if death is a plausible way out...
- Surviving and maintaining identity.
- Dignity. Keep your own culture.
- Self-esteem gives you the inner strength to resist and not go under (is keeping something alive within).
- 'Resistance is futile' – true for oneself, perhaps, but hopefully not for one's descendants...
- Resistance is never futile, ever.

The extreme forms of resistance such as, 'abortion, sabotage and suicide' generated emotional discussion. The question was raised: 'Was suicide a result of desperation and depression or was it the ultimate protest?'

### Poisons

The information about poisons was of great interest. 'I was intrigued by the poisons and this real idea of resistance.' One participant asked: 'When you researched your collections did you look for examples of poisoning or did they just pop up?'

The relationship between medicines and poisons was explored. 'Plants that have poisons also have antidotes in them. I would have thought when you first got to a place you might poison yourself inadvertently by trying new foods/plants out.'

It was also pointed out that, 'it was us women who often did the resisting when it came to poisons and I think in this country women are more likely to poison men especially'.

But the sessions also raised further questions, and people asked:

- Slow-acting poisons would have been hard to trace. Were there any in common use?
- What is the compound in manchineel that causes its poisonous effect?

Some additional comments and questions were:

- Drums were used as communication during slavery – eventually the slave owners put a curfew on drum beating so as to put an end to 'rebel' slave communication.
- Why were the black people enslaved, not the other way round?
- Why was it so brutal?

One of the participants said: 'The use of the term slaves or enslaved used alone implies that they had no sense of identity or self, which they clearly had due to their resistance. They should be called Africans and then the term 'who were enslaved' or 'who were forced to become slaves'.

## 9. Additional references

There is a full list of references, including all of the research documents, in Chapter 1: The project. These references offer additional reading specifically relating to this chapter.

Websites with more information on Africans who resisted enslavement include:

[www.jamaicans.com/info/maroons.htm](http://www.jamaicans.com/info/maroons.htm)

[www.jamaicaway.com/Heroes/NannyPage.html](http://www.jamaicaway.com/Heroes/NannyPage.html)

[www.nathanielturner.com/timelongerdanrope.htm](http://www.nathanielturner.com/timelongerdanrope.htm)

[www.nmm.ac.uk/freedom/viewTheme.cfm/theme/resistance](http://www.nmm.ac.uk/freedom/viewTheme.cfm/theme/resistance)

[www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAslavery.htm](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAslavery.htm)

[www.understandingslavery.com](http://www.understandingslavery.com)

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Equiano, Olaudah, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, 1789, reprinted as *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed Vincent Carretta, Penguin Classics, 2003

Nellis, D W, *Poisonous Plants and Animals of Florida and the Caribbean*, Pineapple Press, 1997

Schiebinger, Londa, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World*, Harvard University Press, 2004

Siritunga, Dimuth, and Sayre, Richard, 'Engineering cyanogens synthesis and turnover in cassava (*Manihot esculenta*)', *Plant Molecular Biology*, 56:4, 2004

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