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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Lassina Songfola YÉO, Nonhontan SORO, LA FILIERE RIZ EN CÔTE D'IVOIRE A L'EPREUVE DE LA COVID (2019-2021).....	pp. 01 – 09
Sory Ibrahima KEITA, Adama COULIBALY, THE STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY AMERICAN SLAVES TO RESIST SLAVERY	pp. 10– 30
Zakaria Coulibaly, DECODING THE IMPACTS OF SLAVERY ON THE PSYCHE OF SOME WHITE FOLKS IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF <i>FREDERICK DOUGLASS, KWAKUVI AZASU AND EQUIANO OLAUDAH</i>	pp. 31 – 45
Boubacar Abdoulaye BOCOUM, LA PROTECTION DES DONNEES A CARACTERE PERSONNEL DANS LE CONTEXTE DE LA LUTTE ANTI-TERRORISTE AU MALI	pp. 46 – 72
Ali TIMBINE, LES SITES SYMBOLIQUES ET LES HOMMES CELEBRES DU PAYS DOGON.....	pp. 73 – 87
Abdrmane Sadio SOUMARE, LA PLANIFICATION DU DEVELOPPEMENT TERRITORIAL, LOCAL ET URBAIN DANS LA COMMUNE DE KAYES : CAS DES PDSEC DE 2005-2009 ET 2011- 2015.....	88 – 103
Mamadou Gustave TRAORE, Samba SOGOBA, Yacouba M COULIBALY, LE DIVORCE DANS LE CODE DES PERSONNES ET DE LA FAMILLE DU MALI.....	pp. 104 – 121
Abdoulaye SAMAKÉ, LA PRISON AMOUREUSE DANS LA LITTÉERATURE FRANÇAISE DU MOYEN ÂGE : UNE ANALYSE DE <i>CHASTEL MIGNOT</i> DANS LE ROMAN DE <i>HELCANUS</i>	pp. 122 – 140
Abdoulaye DIABATÉ, Seydou LOUA, Souleymane DAOU, DE LA PÉDAGOGIE COOPÉRATIVE À L'APPRENTISSAGE COOPÉRATIF, UNE STRATÉGIE EFFICACE IGNORÉE DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT SECONDAIRE AU MALI	pp. 141 – 157
KOUAKOU N'guessan, TOWARD THE BIRTH OF A NEW SOCIETY IN BINWELL SINYANGWE'S <i>A COWRIE OF HOPE</i>	pp. 158 – 171
DIAMOUTENE Mamadou, <i>EBONICS</i> COMME EXPRESSION IDENTITAIRE DES AFRO-AMERICAINS DANS <i>THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD</i> DE ZORA NEALE HURSTON.....	pp. 172 – 182
Ibrahim BAGNA, <i>L'HISTORIQUE DU TERME « APPEL » DANS LA PHILOLOGIE RUSSE ANCIENNE</i>	pp. 183 – 193
Maméry TRAORE, UNE REFLEXION SUR LES POLITIQUES LINGUISTIQUES EN AFRIQUE À L'ÈRE DE LA MONDIALISATION : LE CAS DES PAYS AFRICAINS AU SUD DU SAHARA.....	pp. 194 – 212
Françis MIAZAUDI, ÉMIGRATION NIGERIENNE ET NIGERIANE AU NORD-CAMEROUN : DU RAPATRIEMENT DES FONDS A LA CONTRIBUTION AU DEVELOPPEMENT DE LEURS PAYS D'ORIGINE (1916- 2019)	pp. 213 – 226
Zakaria BEINE, Mahamat Foudda DJOURAB, UNE RELECTURE SOCIOHISTORIQUE DES VIOLENCES INTERCOMMUNAUTAIRES AU TCHAD DE 1979 A 2021	pp. 227 – 239

Amadou TRAORE,
NIANGUIRY KANTE, LE SCIENTIFIQUE DE CONFORMITE : VIE, ŒUVRES ET HERITAGE . pp.
240 – 253

Moussa Etienne TOURE,
L'ORGANISATION DU TISSU SOCIAL AU MALI À L'ÉPREUVE DES EFFETS NÉFASTES DU
CHANGEMENT CLIMATIQUE..... pp. 254 – 267

KONE Guiba Abdul Karamoko,
DU RÉCIT HISTORIQUE À L'IDÉOLOGIE POLITIQUE : UNE ANALYSE COMPARATIVE DE LA
DERNIÈRE NUIT DU RAÏS DE YASMINA KHADRA ET MAIS LE FLEUVE TUERA L'HOMME
BLANC DE PATRICK BESSON..... pp. 268 – 284

Adjoua Pamela N'GUESSAN, Toily Anicet ZRAN,
GROSSESSES EN MILIEU SCOLAIRE ET CONTRADICTIONS DANS LE DISCOURS DES
ACTEURS SANITAIRES ET ÉDUCATIFS DE SOUBRÉ (CÔTE D'IVOIRE) pp. 285 – 294

Ornheilia ZOUNON,
L'ENFANT BENINOIS FACE AUX ECRANS : LA SUREXPOSITION ENTRE EFFET DE MODE,
LOGIQUES EDUCATIVES, CONDUITES ADDICTIVES ET TROUBLES DU
COMPORTEMENT pp. 295 – 306

AHOUANDJINOU Géraud,
LE BUSINESS DE LA DEBROUILLE SUR LES RESEAUX SOCIAUX AU BENIN pp. 307 – 316

Abdramane DIAWARA,
LA MORPHO-SYNTAXE DES ADJECTIFS QUALIFICATIFS EN LANGUE BAMBARA ET
L'ANGLAIS : UNE ETUDE CONTRASTIVE pp. 317 – 332

Dr Aldiouma Kodio, Dr Moulaye Kone, Dr Balla Dianka,
A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF TABOOS AND EUPHEMISTIC EXPRESSIONS IN A
DOGON COMMUNITY IN MALI..... pp. 333 – 344

Moriké DEMBELE,
ATTRITION DU PERSONNEL ENSEIGNANT EN MILIEU RURAL DU CAP DE
OUSSOUBIDIAGNA pp. 345 – 366

Moïse KONATE,
GANGSTA RAP: A TOOL FOR THE ADVENT OF RACIAL UNITY IN THE U.S.A. pp. 367– 380

THE STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY AMERICAN SLAVES TO RESIST SLAVERY

¹Dr. Sory Ibrahima KEITA, ²Dr. Adama COULIBALY

¹Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako, Enseignant-Chercheur à la Faculté des Lettres, des Langues et des Sciences du Langage, E-mail : kesoryibrahima@yahoo.fr

²Université des Lettres et des Sciences Humaines de Bamako, Enseignant-Chercheur à la Faculté des Lettres, des Langues et des Sciences du Langage, E-mail: adamafa67@yahoo.fr

Résumé

Cet article porte sur les stratégies que les esclaves américains ont adoptées pour résister à l'esclavage. Certains observateurs sous-estiment les voies et moyens entrepris par les esclaves nord-américains pour fuir l'esclavage. Cet article vise à explorer les stratégies que les esclaves américains ont adoptées pour résister à l'esclavage. Certains auteurs de la littérature pensent que les propriétaires d'esclaves étaient si bien organisés que toutes les tentatives des esclaves pour échapper à l'esclavage étaient vouées à l'échec. Ils estiment également que la fuite des esclaves vers le Nord n'aurait pas réussi sans l'aide des abolitionnistes blancs. Dans cette étude, et pour arriver à nos conclusions, nous avons fait recours à des sources primaires et secondaires écrites parfois par des fugitifs ou des écrivains pionniers en la matière. Les résultats de cette étude réfutent une croyance profonde selon laquelle seuls les efforts des abolitionnistes blancs ont contribué à l'abolition de l'esclavage. Ils montrent que les esclaves ont employé plusieurs méthodes pour échapper à leurs conditions de vie inhumaines. Ils mettent également à nu la désillusion des esclaves fugitifs au Nord. Le Nord n'était pas un Eldorado, car les fugitifs n'étaient pas égaux aux blancs.

Mot clés : Amérique, Esclavage, Fugitifs, Marrons, Résistance.

Abstract

This paper is based on the strategies American slaves adopted to resist slavery. Some observers have underrated the undertakings of slaves themselves in their attempt to flee slavery. This paper aims to explore the strategies American slaves adopted to resist slavery. Some authors of literature think that slave owners were so organized that all attempts of slaves to escape slavery failed. They also believe that slaves' escape to the North could have failed if they had not been helped by white abolitionists. To collect the research data, we resorted to some primary and secondary sources written sometimes by some runaways and the pioneer writers about slavery. The findings of this paper go against a deep-seated belief according to which only white abolitionists' efforts contributed to the demise of slavery. The findings of study show that the enslaved people used several methods to escape from their inhuman living conditions. They also highlight the disillusionment of fugitive slaves in the North. The North was not an Eldorado because fugitives were not equal to white people there.

Keywords: America, Fugitives, Maroons, Resistance, Slavery.

Introduction

Before delving into the different strategies American enslaved people adopted to resist slavery, it would be necessary to talk about the circumstances that pushed them to seek their freedom, either by running away or by killing their owners. It must be recalled that slavery was a worldwide phenomenon. Nevertheless, the one that existed in the New World was unparalleled in human history because of its pernicious nature and the massive deportation of Africans. Africans' dehumanization started the moment they boarded the slave ships and continued until they died except those who became free. During the Middle Passage, they were imprisoned under the deck without distinction of sex; their hands and feet were chained, and those who tried to resist were brutally beaten. The place was very dirty and the air was not pure. The description given thereof by Dr. Jonathan Edwards, an American religious man is gruesome. He was a member of the Connecticut Society for the Promotion of Freedom, and for the Relief of Persons Unlawfully held in Bondage. In 1791, he gave a sermon before this society in which he mentioned the inhuman conditions of slaves

during the Middle Passage. Here is a part of what he said:

They are crowded so closely in the holds and between the decks of vessels, that they have scarcely room, to lie down, and sometimes not room to sit up in an erect posture; the men at the same time fastened together with irons by two and two; and all this in the most sultry climate. The consequence of the whole is, that the most dangerous and fatal diseases are soon bred among them, whereby vast numbers of those exported from Africa perish in the voyage (Edwards, 1791, p. 6).

As this passage shows, the place African slaves were put was so narrow that it was impossible for them to move. They were shackled, especially men, in order to prevent them from revolting. In case of epidemics, several of them would die. Today, it is impossible to give the exact figure of the slaves who died during the Middle Passage.

Once African slaves arrived at their destination, they were put in 'Negro pens' awaiting the planters who would buy them. On plantations, they were expected to perform backbreaking work. Those who were slow or neglected their work were severely punished

by ruthless overseers. On plantations, they were depersonalized for they entirely belonged to their owners: their life and their work alike. Their owners could punish them the way they wanted and sell them anytime they wished. The food ration they were given was very low. They were beaten for the slightest mistakes. Talking about slavery in the American South, Camp (2004) argued: “Enslavement in the American South meant cultural alienation, reduction to the status of property, the ever-present sale, denial of the fruits of one’s labor, and subjugation to the force, power, and will of another human being” (p. 12).

In the South, slaves could not do whatever they wanted. If they wished to visit their families in other plantations, they needed first permission of their masters. This permission was a written document that was called Pass or ticket. They carried this pass wherever they went otherwise they would get into trouble if they were asked by slave patrols. The pass system was a way to control slaves’ mobility. Their masters thought that if bond people were not restrained in their mobility, they could either run away or conspire against them.

African slaves understood that their enslavement was permanent and that their

living conditions were very bad. Therefore, they decided to put an end to the ill-treatment that was meted out to them.

In this research, we used qualitative approach. Primary sources, essentially based on slave narratives, revealed some strategies slaves used to escape to the North or tried to better their conditions. Secondary sources were used as well.

The objective of this paper is to show that African-American enslaved people resisted slavery by using different methods. They did not remain indifferent to the punishments of slave-owners. They took their destiny at hand and showed to their masters that they were entitled to the very freedom their masters were blessed with. The problem is that when we talk about slave resistance in America, the skeptic say that all the slave revolts were aborted or suppressed because slave-owners were well organized to make their slaves more obedient. Besides, they had their own militias to suppress any slave revolt. They will say that even individual slaves who made their escape to the North could not have succeeded if they had not been helped by white abolitionists. These people must bear in mind that American slaves played a major role in their escape. This paper seeks to point out their role in breaking their fetters.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we presented the misfortune of the fugitive slaves. Two types of fugitives are dealt with: Those who left their plantations for the North or Canada, and those who decided to establish their own communities commonly called the Maroons. Then follows the analysis of some important slave revolts. Finally, we concluded with the resistance of female slaves.

1. Fugitive Slaves

There were several ways to resist slavery: the peaceful and violent ways. This section deals with the former, embodied essentially in fleeing slavery. The institution of slavery was so dehumanizing and debasing that some slaves decided to run away. There were two types of runaways. Some slaves ran away in order to escape punishments or avoid backbreaking works, but they came back again. Other slaves escaped to the North or Canada where slavery was outlawed. First, we talk about fugitive slaves who left their plantations forever. Then we focus on Maroons, those slaves who refused to remain under the control of masters.

As mentioned above, if we talk about fugitive slaves, people automatically think of the Underground Railroad. They will say that without this clandestine network, slaves'

attempts to escape would not be successful. It is undeniable that the Underground Railroad played an important role in helping slaves to run away to the North or Canada. Its members, essentially composed of white abolitionists and free blacks, assisted runaways, gave them food and shelter, and guided them in their journey. Likewise, enslaved people assisted each other to escape to Free States. They gave fugitive slaves shelter and food. They used their knowledge of local geography to guide them. As Lussana (2016) has put it,

Enslaved men used their mobility and knowledge of local geography to engage in another collective act of resistance: assisting fugitive slaves to escape from slavery. Men used their contacts in the grapevine telegraph to funnel slaves to freedom in the North along an “underground railroad” operated almost entirely by enslaved people in the Antebellum South (pp. 139-40).

According to Lussana (2016), some slaves enjoyed a relative freedom. Sometimes they left plantations “to work, drink, wrestle, hunt, evade the patrols and commit theft [and] they came into contact with other enslaved men from different plantations” (p. 125). Some were also teamsters, carriage drivers and transporters of plantation goods. Consequently, they developed “a secret system of communication that linked their

communities: the grapevine telegraph, which kept enslaved communities across the South informed of news and events” (p. 125). These mobile slaves were well informed. They heard about abolitionists who were eager to help slaves. They knew that the North had abolished slavery and that any slave who set foot in the North would become a free man. They knew what state fugitive slaves had to avoid and whom they had to confide in. These enslaved men shared their knowledge with their brothers and sisters and helped them break the fetters of slavery. The whole operation required some preparations. They shared this secret with only some trusted friends who, they believed, would not let out their secret. However, sometimes they were betrayed by the very persons they trusted. According to Henry Bibb, “the domestic slaves are often found to be traitors to their own people, for the purpose of gaining favor with their masters; and they are encouraged and trained up by them to report every plot they know of being formed about stealing anything, or running away, or anything of the kind; and for which they are paid” (Quoted in Lussana, 2016, pp. 117-118).

The position of ‘domestic slaves’ or household servants is understandable. Their living conditions were better than those of field hands. They ate and slept well, and they

wore clean clothes. These slaves did not know the harshness of slavery for they did not work in sugar, rice, and tobacco plantations from sunup to sundown. There was no overseer behind them with a cowhide in his hand to force them to speed up their work. Their sole preoccupations were to please their owners even at the cost of betraying their brothers in chains. The inhumane conditions of field hands pushed them to assist each other in their tribulations. It was rare to see them betray each other because they all aspired to become free. One of the prominent American abolitionists, William Wells Brown, expresses the risk of betrayal within the slave communities in his *Life and Escape* (1851). Brown talked about his escape to the North and his suspicions of being betrayed. He decided not to trust any person, according to his own words: “I had long since made up my mind that I would not trust myself in the hands of any man, white or colored. The slave is brought up to look upon every white man as an enemy to him and his race; and twenty-one years in slavery had taught me that there were traitors, even among colored people” (Brown, 1851, n.p.). Nobody knew about his escape except his mother, his sister and a soothsayer. The first two persons were his close relatives, and the last one had no interest in betraying him. The success of the slaves’ escape to the North was partially due

to this secrecy about their project, and the development of some strategies to do it.

In the eighteenth century, it was believed that slavery corrupted both slaves and masters. It can also be said that slavery taught slaves the way to become free. Some literate runaway slaves wrote their own passes and signed them. It was impossible to doubt the authenticity of these passes because slaves were denied education. It was impossible to think that a slave could write a pass. Brown (1853) stated that “No country has produced so much heroism in so short a time, connected with escapes from peril and oppression, as has occurred in the United States among fugitive slaves, many of whom show great shrewdness in their endeavors to escape from this land of bondage” (n. p.). He talked about the strategies some characters of his novel devised in order to become free. A fugitive slave deceived white people into thinking that he was on an errand for his master. In fact, he stole a pig in Virginia and headed to Ohio. On his way to the Promised Land he was asked by a white man: ““Where do you live my boy? Asked a white of the slave, as he passed a white house with green blinds. ‘Jist up de road, sir’, was the answer. ‘That’s a fine pig’. ‘Yes, sir, marser like dis choat berry much’” (n. p.). When the slave crossed the Ohio River, he sold the pig and got his freedom. Another example

concerned two fugitives. The one on the horseback disguised himself as a slave catcher and the other whose hands were tied played the role of a recaptured slave. When a farmer saw them, he said, “Oh, ho, that’s a runaway rascal I suppose”. The disguised slave catcher replied, “Yes, sir, he bin runaway, and I got him fast”. [So happy in hearing these words, the farmer continued] “You are a trustworthy fellow, I imagine” (Quoted in Brown, 1853, n. p.). These two fugitives travelled a long distance in this way changing roles anytime the one who was walking was tired. Once again, there was nothing in the attitudes of these two slaves that could raise suspicions. Slave-owners were eager for catching fugitive slaves, because it meant the recovery of a great loss to their economic investment. It is worth mentioning that the new freedom experience of the runaways in the North was not as pleasant as they had expected.

As stated above, fugitive slaves either made their way to the North or Canada. Of course, in both places, slavery was abolished. However, the Northerners had some prejudice towards black people. Northern fugitives were discriminated against. In churches, they could not associate with white people. They were given specific seats. On this account, the testimony of the Methodist Richard Allen (1760-1831) is revealing. He was born a slave

in Philadelphia. Later on, he bought his freedom and became involved in the anti-slavery movement. The discrimination that was raging in the Church of Philadelphia towards colored people induced Allen and his associates to found the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in 1816. He described the discrimination they faced in the church in the following words:

A number of us usually attended St. George's church in Fourth street; and when the colored people began to get numerous in attending the church, they moved from the seats we usually sat on, and placed us around the wall, and on Sabbath morning we went to church and the sexton stood at the door, and told us to go in the gallery. He told us to go, and we would see where to sit (Quoted in Marable and Mullings, 2000, p. 20).

As this passage shows, whites and blacks were not expected to mix in the Church. It was as if they were not worshipping the same God. What the whites preached and what they said were paradoxical. They said that God created man in his own image, and yet they did not consider black people as their equals. When Frederick Douglass fled to the North, he tasted the prejudice that was prevalent there, especially in New Bedford. He stated in his autobiography (1845) “[...], I went in pursuit of a job of calking; but such was the strength

of prejudice against color, among the white caulkers, that they refused to work with me, and of course I could get no employment” (n. p.). When he got married and had children, his daughter was denied admission in an all-white school. He wrote a memorable letter in which he expressed his anger. It was so eloquently written that William Lloyd Garrison, the American abolitionist, published it in his *Liberator* on October 6, 1848 (Lewis & Lewis, 2011, pp. 204-206).

Runaway slaves faced another problem in the North. The disgruntled planters, who were most of the time their owners and members of the Congress, succeeded in passing the second Fugitive Slave Act in 1850. This Act was just the reinforcement of the Act of 1793. It empowered slave-owners to go to the North, arrest their fugitive slaves, and bring them back to slavery. It also obliged the local authorities to collaborate with them. Once the runaway slave was arrested, he could not testify in court. This law had a dramatic consequence on Northern black communities because it brought confusions. Some fugitives arrived in the North before the promulgation of the law. They had obtained a job and had set up families, but they were arrested and returned to slavery. Those who had not been arrested yet were obliged to flee to Canada.

Talking about the consequence of this law on Northern black people, the historian Foner (2015) stated “The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law created a crisis in northern black communities. In the first three months after the law went into effect, hundreds of men, women, and children—the exact figure remains unknown—fled to Canada from the northern states” (p. 134). These people ran away because they felt that they were not safe; they knew that danger was everywhere. Harriet Jacobs, a fugitive slave, gave a vivid description of the impact of the second Fugitive Slave Act on runaway slaves in the North in her autobiography (1861). She wrote: “[...] I was subject to it [the Fugitive Slave Law]; and so were hundreds of intelligent and industrious people all around us. I seldom ventured into the streets; and when it was necessary to do an errand of Mrs. Bruce [her employer in New York], or any of the family, I went as much as possible through back streets and by-ways” (n. p.). Fortunately for her, she was not arrested; her kind employer bought her freedom. It is noteworthy to say that Northern fugitives were not abandoned on their own in this situation. White abolitionists defended them. These abolitionists waged legal battle to obtain the freedom of some arrested fugitive slaves. Sometimes, they

raised money to buy their freedom (Foner, 2015, p. 126-127).

In addition to the efforts of white abolitionists, American slaves resisted slavery by buying their freedom. Sometimes, those who fled to the North, leaving behind their families, negotiated their families’ sale through another person. The way these men and women worked to release their families from bondage shows their abhorrence for this system. On March 18, 1834, Theodore Weld, an American abolitionist, sent a letter to Lewis Tappan, a staunch defender of American slaves. The letter, herein revealed partly, shows the determination of blacks to buy their freedom and that of their families:

I visited this week about 30 black families, and found some members of more than half these families were still in bondage, and the father, mother and children were struggling to lay up money enough to purchase their freedom. I found one man who had just finished paying for his wife and five children. Another man and wife bought themselves some years ago, and have been working night and day to purchase their children; they had just redeemed the last and had paid for themselves and children 1,400 dollars! Another woman had recently paid the last installment of the purchase money for her husband. She had purchased him by taking in washing, and working

late at night, after going out and performing as help at hard work (Quoted in Lewis and Lewis, 2011, pp. 203-204).

The blacks who purchased the freedom of their relatives knew that if they had not helped their wives, husbands, children, brothers and sisters, they could have died in slavery unless they succeeded in running away. Slaves could scarcely save money to buy their freedom. Those who were hired out were given something, but this was not enough to buy their freedom. The assistance that blacks had for each other shows their sense of solidarity. This solidarity was a powerful weapon to resist slavery.

There was another category of fugitive slaves who did not make their way to a Free State in order to start life anew. They rather fled to inaccessible areas such as mountains, swamps, and forests and joined up other fugitives or just melted into indigenous communities. These fugitives were called Maroons. They established their own communities and helped each other survive and face slaveholders. Maroons were like a thorn in the feet of slaveholders. If they lived in inhospitable areas where growing food was difficult, and if their roaming bands were essentially composed of men, then they had to go back to their plantations for provisions and to recruit women. In doing so, they struck

terror in plantation owners. According to Postma (2008) “Most runaway slaves were men, and because gender equilibrium could be maintained in their settlements only by capturing female slaves, maroons regularly raided plantations for women. They also stole food, supplies, and tools” (p. 92). The punishments that were meted out to those who were recaptured were very cruel. The case of those who were captured in Suriname in 1730 is telling: “The Negro Joosje shall be hanged from the gibbet [gallows] by an iron hook through his ribs, until death... Negroes Wierai and Manbote...shall be bound to a stake and roasted alive... Negro girls, Lucretia, Ambia, Aga, Gomba, Marie and Victoria will be tied to a cross, to be broken alive...” (Quoted in Postma, 2008, p. 92). These punishments were a way to dissuade other slaves from running away and crush the spirit of those who nurtured bad intentions for their owners. Despite all these measures of discouragement, the Maroons continued to terrorize the planters. They preferred to risk their life rather than accept to be under the control of ruthless slaveholders. It is noteworthy to say that these runaway slaves were ordinary Maroons. They avoided confrontations with white people. They did not try to kill them. They stole out of necessity. Once their communities were well established, that is if they could grow their

own food, they would never plunder plantations again. The only thing they desired much was live peacefully. The Maroons had large communities. However, the attitudes of some of them tarnished their image. Some individual Maroons indulged in committing theft, burglary, attacking people in highways and killing sometimes. Diouf (2014) calls them the Maroon Bandits. These ‘outlaws’ were not numerous. They really represented a threat to the safety of white people “In Louisiana, a group of twelve—including several women—who lived close to a plantation in St. Charles Parish, stole tools, money, and several other items from plantations and broke into a New Orleans house, from which they took 1,500 piastres” (Quoted in Diouf, 2014, p. 235). They needed these criminal activities to survive. In order to put an end to their atrocious acts, prices were constantly put on their heads. They were tracked, arrested and executed. Diouf (2014) stated that these *bandits* were different from the Maroons who lived in communities “Ordinary maroons [...] did not indulge in this type of action. Instead they avoided confrontation and did not go out of their way to execute white men” (pp. 237-238). They avoided hostilities with white people because they knew that they were not well equipped. Even if they did not try to kill white people,

they were tracked down. This is understandable because there was a conflict of interest between them and planters. The Maroons needed the planters to survive, but the planters were losing money subsequent to what the runaways were stealing from them. From this perspective, they were rivals. Besides, slave-owners believed that if they did not destroy the Maroon communities, they would incite their slaves to run away. They succeeded in destroying some communities.

However, some Maroon communities became very powerful such as those of Jamaica. The British tried to destroy them but to no avail. They ended up signing a treaty with them which stipulated that the Maroons would live unmolested in exchange for their collaboration with the British, that is to help them suppress slave revolts and return runaway slaves to their masters (Craton, 1982, pp. 81-96). Some slaves did not choose to run away; they rather revolted and killed their masters.

2. Slave Revolts

Slave revolts that occurred in America were so many that dealing with all of them will go beyond the scope of this paper. Some of them have been selected to highlight the resistance of slaves.

In any slave society, the risk of revolt was very high. Toiling hard for another person without having something in return, being severely punished for a slightest mistake, being constantly separated from their relatives, and knowing that there was no prospect for freedom, some slaves decided to rise up against their oppressive owners. Slave dealers understood that African slaves would do everything they could to get their freedom. That is why they chained their hands and feet and put them in ships. In doing this, they considerably reduced their mobility. These measures did not prevent slaves from revolting. Slaves' revolts began on board the slave ships during the Middle Passage. They tried to kill the crew members in order to take the control of the ship. Most of the time, these revolts were suppressed. The ringleaders were severely punished in order to terrorize other slaves. As Edwards (1791) put it,

Others in dread of that slavery which is before them, and in distress and despair from the loss of their parents, their children, their husbands, their wives, all their dear connections, and their dear native country itself, starve themselves to death or plunge themselves into the ocean. Those who attempt in the former of those ways to escape from their persecutors, are tortured. By live coals applied to their mouth. Those who attempt an escape in the latter and fail, are equally

tortured by the most cruel beating, or otherwise as their persecutors please. If any of them make an attempt, as they sometimes do, to recover their liberty, some, and as the circumstances may be, many, are put to immediate death. Others beaten, bruised, cut and mangled in a most inhuman and shocking manner, are in this situation exhibited to the rest, to terrify them from the like attempt in future (p. 6).

As this passage shows, during the Middle Passage, slaves had many ways to resist. Some refused to eat hoping that death would put an end to their sufferings; some jumped into the sea and drowned themselves; and others physically attacked the crew members. However, slave dealers had their own methods to deal with slaves' resistance. As they did not want to lose the money they invested in their 'human cargoes', they severely punished their rebellious slaves.

The most famous and successful slave revolt on board a slave ship was the Amistad case (1839-1841). This case brought Americans and the Spanish on the verge of a diplomatic crisis. In fact, in 1839, fifty-three slaves revolted on board the schooner Amistad. They killed all the crew members except two. Then they ordered these two Spanish to return them to their homeland, Sierra Leone. The ship was seized by the Americans on Long Island, the slaves were

jailed, and the Spanish José Montez and Pedro Ruiz claimed to be their owners. Their government asked for the extradition of the slaves so that they could be tried for murder. The Americans automatically dismissed the murder charges on the grounds that they were illegally transported by the Spanish. In the Americans' eyes, their revolt was legitimate because they had abolished the slave trade in 1808. Accordingly, these slaves were kidnapped. The case was brought to the US Supreme Court in 1841. The US Former President, John Quincy Adams, defended them and succeeded in getting their freedom "Adams spoke before the Court for nine hours and succeeded in moving the majority to decide in favor for freeing the captives once and for all. The Court ordered the thirty surviving captives (the others had died at sea or in jail) returned to their home in Sierra Leone"¹.

As stated above, in any oppressive system, the oppressed will sooner or later revolt against the oppressors. Several slave revolts occurred on the American plantations, but all of them were suppressed. Evoking the New York slave revolt in 1712, Walters (2015) said that slaves and Indians joined

forces against slave owners. They set fire to buildings, killed some whites and wounded others. The rebels were arrested and publicly executed. Another slave conspiracy took place in the same area in 1741. The alleged guilty were sentenced to death. It was said that the insurgent slaves would burn the city, kill white men and rape white women. To Walters, this was just a rumor because there was no evidence. The New Yorkers were just afraid of slave rebellion. This fear was coupled with paranoia (p. 49).

Another revolt which struck fear in Southern slaveholders was that of Nat Turner in 1831. Nat Turner was born in slavery in 1800 in Southampton County, Virginia. All the information we have on his bloody revolt and his life came from his *Confessions* (1831) that he made to Thomas Gray, his assigned counsel. Before the 1831 revolt, Nat was looked on by other slaves as a prophet. He could say things that happened before he was born. When he was a child, he was able to read. Besides, his messianic status did not permit him to socialize with other children. He had often visions. Therefore, he could easily influence other slaves to embrace his cause. He and his followers indiscriminately

¹<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source-john-quincy-adams-and-amistad-case-1841>.

massacred about sixty white people. The local militia arrested all of them and they were all executed. The accuracy of *The Confessions* is debatable because it was written by a white man who was against slaves' revolt. He might have exaggerated the story in order to make slaveholders tighten their control over African slaves. Nat's master is described as a kind person in *The Confessions*: "Since the commencement of 1830 I had been living with Mr. Joseph Travis, who was to me a kind master, and placed the greatest confidence in me; in fact, I had no cause to complain of his treatment to me" (From *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 1831, quoted in Mullane, 1993, pp. 91-92). Nonetheless, he murdered his master and the whole family. This is suspicious. If his master was kind to him, why would he kill him? Fugitive slaves and former slaves did not fail to thank their kind masters or all those whites who helped them during their tribulations in their autobiographies. Gray wrote this passage to discredit all the slaves and to tell slave-owners not to trust even the most loyal slaves. If they were not watchful, their slaves would end up killing them.

This revolt left a traumatic scar on the collective white psyche, to use the words of Walters (2015). It showed their vulnerability and the inherent danger in slave societies. In

the aftermath of this revolt, panic spread all over the South. Repressive slave laws were enacted in order to tighten the control over slaves. Even free blacks were punished. They could not do whatever they wanted. They were forbidden to assemble unless there was a white man among them, and they were forbidden to enter some States. It was believed that free men incited slaves to revolt. Southern white people thought that slaves from other States would emulate Turner's revolt. There were constantly rumors of slave conspiracies. This led to the arrest of several slaves, but there was no proof. The climate that prevailed in the South is better explained by Aptheker (2006). He argued "Panic flashed through Virginia accompanied by a reign of terror. The uprising was infectious and slaves everywhere became restless, or, it was feared that they had or might become restless, so the panic, momentarily localized in Virginia, spread up to Delaware and down to Florida, across to Louisiana and up again into Kentucky" (n. p.). White people began to realize that they were not safe and that they could be killed by their slaves at any time:

A gentleman in Virginia thus writes to his friend in this city. (Cincinnati). 'These insurrections have alarmed my wife so as really to endanger her health, and I have not slept without anxiety in three months. Our nights are sometimes

spent in listening to noises. A corn song, a hog call, has often been a subject of nervous terror, and a cat, in the dining room will banish sleep for the night. There has been and still is a *panic* in all this country' (Quoted in Aptheker, 2006, n. p.).

The sentiment of this gentleman is representative because it echoes the prevalent atmosphere in Virginia in the aftermath of the 1831 revolt. Every Virginian had the same state of mind. They understood that the very people they considered inferior and incapable of taking care of themselves, were intelligent enough to resist them violently.

One may think that the bloody nature of the 1831 revolt could make Southerners think about abolishing slavery. Its effect was just temporary. They refused to put an end to slavery because it was their source of wealth. Their refusal of emancipation would oppose them to the North in a bloody Civil War in 1861-1865. It is important to recall that Nat's revolt was just local. It was confined to Southampton County only. The insurrection might have spread had he succeeded in taking the county over. This hypothesis was confirmed in the West Indies.

The only successful slave revolt in the West Indies was that of St. Domingue. The classic book of James (1989) is very informative. He gave a Marxist interpretation

of history: the fight between the oppressed and the oppressors. In 1791, in a coordinated action, thousands of slaves rose up against their masters, set fire to their plantations and massacred several of them. For the first time, the danger that hang on the heads of white people went unnoticed. Nobody thought that this revolt was possible. According to James (1989), this revolution owed its success to several events. First, the insurgent slaves had an able and charismatic leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture. He organized the undisciplined former slaves, made them soldiers, obliged them to work, and led them to victories. He was respected by both blacks and whites. He succeeded in winning over the minds of both black and white people. Second, uprising does not mean emancipation. Internal problems in the colony obliged the French commissioner, Sonthonax, to abolish slavery in 1793. The act thereof was ratified in 1794 by the French Convention. When Toussaint heard about this good news, he devoted himself to fighting for the values of the Republic (Liberty, Equality and Fraternity). Then, blacks ousted the British who wanted to take advantage of the weakness of France to take over St. Domingue and bring the rebels back to slavery. Finally, in 1802, they defeated the troops of Napoleon who wanted to re-establish slavery in the French-controlled West Indies. The

determination and courage of the blacks of St. Domingue made possible the birth of Haiti in 1804.

The importance of this revolt, and the cruelties perpetrated by slaves on white people brought agitation in all slave-holding countries, especially North America. North Americans' fears were exacerbated by the massive influx of the refugees coming from St. Domingue. These people were essentially composed of free blacks and white people who brought with them their slaves. It was believed that these blacks had come with a vengeful spirit and would transmit it to American slaves. Foreman (2016) evokes the impact of the Haitian Revolution on North Americans in the following words "For many [...] Saint Domingue was not only a valuable trading partner, but a symbol of slavery's legitimacy and merit. The prospect of a successful slave revolt posed challenges to American slaveholders' prevailing notions of racial domination, and even politicians who did not own slaves voiced concern about the message being sent"². Why wouldn't they be afraid? They knew that what they were doing was wrong, and if they did not put an end to this iniquitous system, the same fate might befall

² Foreman, N. (2016, January 5). The History of the United States' First Refugee Crisis. Smithsonian Magazine. On

them. Their fear was groundless because the black refugees—free and slaves— had not joined the insurgent slaves. Those slaves who arrived in North America were still under the domination of their masters. They had not yet tasted the fruit of liberty. If they were really rebels or a danger to slave-owners why hadn't they killed their masters and joined the Revolution? Besides, their masters did everything they could so that they would know nothing of the evolution of slaves' resistance for their own security. In other words, these slaves were harmless.

3. The Resistance of Female Slaves

Once we speak of slave resistance, people naturally think of male slaves. It is undisputable that men were more involved in revolts than women. Almost all the American slave conspiracies were organized by men even if there were some women. Besides, those slaves who ran away from the American South were mainly male slaves. This is understandable because men were more mobile than women. They were skilled workers. Consequently, their masters hired them out to other plantations. Female slaves were assigned their traditional roles "midwifery, nursing, and seamstress roles"

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/history-180957717/>.

(Lussana, 2016, p. 40). Besides, several of them worked as field hands. That does not mean slave women accepted these roles. On the contrary, they devised strategies to bring about a change to their gloomy fate. According to Dadzie (2020), “Enslaved women were by no means the passive victims we’ve led to believe, despite the extremities of their lives. They contributed their full share to the long tradition of resistance that was such a striking feature of slavery throughout the British West Indies” (p. 224). She analyzed women resistance in the British West Indies. What she said about the West Indian slave women stands true for North American slave women as well.

Female slaves ran away the same way as male slaves. Their escape was just unbelievable. The protagonist of Brown’s novel whose name is Clotel made an extraordinary escape. She was a light-skinned woman and very beautiful. She was a slave as well. She connived with a slave whose name was William to run away. She disguised herself as a white gentleman and took the pseudonym of Mr. Johnson, saying to William: “I will assume the disguise of a gentleman and you that of a servant, and we will take passage on a steamboat and go to Cincinnati, and thence to Canada” (Quoted in Brown 1853, n. p.). Their plan was successful

for they arrived at their destination safe. However, Clotel refused to continue. She let William keep on alone to Canada and went back to Virginia for her daughter, Mary, who was enslaved there. She did not know that the alert was given in advertisements with the full descriptions of both of them. She was in danger to be captured and brought back to slavery again because a reward was offered for her capture. She was arrested and put into jail. She escaped again. As she was pursued by slave hunters, she threw herself into the river and died. Her life was full of tragic events. The daughter she wanted to save finally escaped from slavery. She met a rich French man, Mr. Devenant, who sympathized with her. This generous man fled with her to France where they got married. The freedom of Mary was unquestionable because slavery was not permitted in France. This was not the case with the slaves who remained in the U.S.A.

The escape of William and Ellen Craft from slavery would have appalled any ruthless Southern slaveholder. They could not imagine that slaves were capable of conceiving such a plan. They were married and both of them were slaves in Georgia. Ellen was a quadroon; therefore, she could easily pass for a white woman. In 1848, they hit upon a plan that consisted in disguising Ellen as a white master

and William as his servant, as her husband put it:

Knowing that slaveholders have the privilege of taking their slaves to any part of the country they think proper, it occurred to me that, as my wife was nearly white, I might get her to disguise herself as an invalid gentleman, and assume to be my master, while I could attend as his slave, and that in this manner we might effect our escape (*Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, in Andrews and Gates, 2000, p. 1932).

She also put poultices in her hand and walked as if she was crippled. When asked about her name, she said Mr. Johnson. In all their way to the North, she deceived the white folks into thinking that she was sick. Their escape was successful for they reached Philadelphia. However, they were advised by some abolitionist friends to move to Boston. Even there, the whirlwind of slavery was against them. Their masters sent slave hunters to bring them back. Once again, their effort to arrest them was frustrated because their abolitionist friends sent them to England. It was in England that they published their narrative that detailed their escape.

It is noteworthy to say that the escape of Clotel and that of Ellen overlaps. Both of them feigned sickness, and both of them were attended by servants, their accomplices.

Besides, they had the same pseudonym, Mr. Johnson. Nonetheless, their examples show that slave women had never accepted their conditions. They were able to devise plans to escape the 'den of the lion'. That does not mean that the thousands of female slaves who were still in bondage could do what they had done. They would not even have ventured to do it because of their skin color. Clotel and Ellen succeeded because both were light-skinned women, even lighter than some white people. Black-skinned slave women could not imitate them.

Light-skinned women adopted another strategy to resist slavery. They refused to collaborate with black-skinned people and concentrated their efforts on winning the heart of white men. This prejudice they had for dark-skinned people is called Colorism. To them, this was the only way to better their conditions. In Brown (1853), there is a woman whose name is Curren. She was "a bright mulatto" and a slave. She hired her time to Thomas Jefferson, who would become the third president of the U.S.A. Together they had two beautiful daughters, Clotel and Althesa. She understood that the only way to emancipate them was to make them more beautiful so that they could get the attention of white people "Curren early resolved to bring her daughters up as ladies, as she termed it,

and therefore imposed little or no work upon them [...] To bring up Clotel and Althesa to attract attention, and especially at balls and parties, was the great aim of Currer” (Brown, 1853, n. p.). No black-skinned persons were accepted in these balls. During one of these parties, Clotel met Horatio Green, “the son of a wealthy gentleman” of Virginia. When Currer saw that this man was interested in Clotel, she “appeared delighted beyond measure at her daughter’s conquest” (n. p.). Horatio bought Clotel and made her his mistress. They had one daughter. Everything went smoothly, but the happiness of Clotel did not last long. Horatio got married with another white woman who despised Clotel. She and her father obliged Horatio to sell her; and Mary, the daughter of Clotel, was taken as a servant in her father’s house. The case of Clotel illustrates the consequence of the union between a slave and a white man at that time. Slave women thought that by accepting to be the mistresses of white men, they would better their conditions and eventually become free. However, such a union was precarious. Dadzie (2020) rightly states that “Enslaved women were mostly lured into relationships with white men by the promise of more favorable treatment or eventually being given their freedom, even though they risked being socially ostracized” (p. 233).

Currer and her daughter used their skin color and their beauty as a powerful weapon to resist slavery. To them, it was the only way out. Anyway, the strategy they adopted did not work because neither of them became free.

Another strategy worked out by slave women was less praiseworthy. They resorted to infanticide to combat slavery. From experience, they knew the hardships and cruelties of slavery. They did not want their children to experience the same thing. That is why they did not hesitate to kill them. In 1831, the same year Nat’s revolt took place in Southampton County, a desperate slave woman decided to kill all her children. The incident goes as follows:

Unnatural and horrid Murder—On Wednesday night last, a negro woman, the property of Col. Thomas Loftin, near this place, destroyed three of her children by drowning; one a boy aged about seven years, and two girls, one an infant at the breast. On the evening of that day, she had been chastised by her master, the first time it is said, that he had ever corrected her. At a late hour of the night, she, according to her own acknowledgements, deliberately took them to a pool of water, one at a time, and held them in it, until life became extinct. In the Act of taking her fourth child for the same purpose, she was discovered by her husband, when an alarm was made---The woman stand

committed for trial (Quoted in Lewis and Lewis, 2011, p. 153).

In 1867, Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman tried to escape with her children from Kentucky to Cincinnati, but they were arrested by slave catchers. She killed two of her children. Her actions made her get the pseudonym of a Greek mythical figure, Medea. According to Lewis and Lewis (2011) “Medea was a figure in Greek mythology who killed two of her children as form of revenge for her husband’s abandonment” (p. 196).

The actions of those women who killed their offspring should not be judged from the perspective of modern readers. In order to understand what motivated their actions, we need to contextualize them. According to the Black Codes, the children of slave women followed the status of their mothers. If the mothers were slaves and the fathers free, the children would automatically become slaves. They would belong to their mothers’ masters who could dispose of them the way they wanted. It was not uncommon to see slave-owners separate mothers from children. Some women did not even have the possibility to see their children again. In the eyes of these slave women, their actions were justified because they wanted to prevent their children from tasting the bitter fruit of slavery. Some women even refused to reproduce despite the

encouragements of their owners. They used their knowledge of traditional medicine to avoid being pregnant. In doing so, they struck a terrible blow to their masters’ interests. It must be noted that slave women sometimes feigned pregnancy in order to improve their living conditions. According to Chakrabarti Myers (2008) slave women shammed pregnancy in order to diminish their workload and have “larger food rations” (p. 153).

Conclusion

In the light of the above findings, we can say that American slaves never accepted their conditions. They resisted slavery in several ways. They ran away to Free States. However, in these States, life was not as easy as they had imagined. They faced two major problems: white prejudice on their skin color and the Passage of the second Fugitive Slave Law (1850). Other runaway slaves did not go to the North, but rather they established their communities in swampy and mountainous areas. They became a threat to slave-owners’ interest because they occasionally raided their plantations for subsistence. That is why they were constantly tracked down. Those who were captured were savagely executed. Another form of resistance that slaves resorted to was physical violence. They conspired against their oppressors and tried to get their

freedom by killing their owners. None of these revolts succeeded except that of Saint Domingue. Slave women resisted slavery as well. They resorted to several strategies such as disguise, infanticide, and abortion. All in all, American slaves played a major role in the fight against slavery.

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