

## **The culture of resistance**

How resistance was expressed in culture during slavery

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- **Video of Mutabaruka: the ghost of Columbus (4 min.)**

### **Abstract**

Resistance was the common ground for all enslaved African men, woman and children on the plantation and on the cotton- and cane fields in the period of colonial slavery in the diaspora. The triangle of the Atlantic slave trade was the start of the nightmare for millions of Africans who were taken against their will from the hinterland of Africa to the America's and the Caribbean. The slave trade was built on the collaboration of Africans and West Europeans merchants, for a period of 400 years.

The produced sugar, cotton, molasses, tabaco and indigo by the enslaved Africans, created new European industries. Ironic, the so called plantation system accumulated capital in Europe to initiate the industrial revolution. Enslaved Africans on the other hand, constantly tried by any means necessary to evoke revolutionary moments to regain their freedom.

To the enslaved Africans resisting their enslavement was fundamental and naturally. The Africans used all kinds of cultural, natural and other means to get rid of the labor force and bondage. Resistance was carried out for several decades on a local, national and international level.

The most successful slave rebellion took place in 1789 in Haiti under the leadership of Toussaint l'Ouverture; Haiti became the first independent black state in the world. The resistance and rebellion of African slaves in the diaspora resulted in the long term in their freedom.

The African enslaved women in particular have contributed their creativity and artistry to the overall resistance. Resistance of women took place on a day to day basis, a 24 hour task during which the women constantly experienced indignities, sexual assaults, rapes and harassments. They were confronted with several types of burden: the productivity and reproductivity, the

oppression of race, of sex and class, Giacommi (1988). My lecture focuses on the specific ways of resistance of the enslaved African women, who in some cases correspond to the resistance offered by the men, but because of their gender and their role varies with the forms of resistance by the men.

## **1. Resistance in general**

Resistance was a logical answer to circumstances the enslaved Africans were confronted with as human beings. It was assumed that they had no sense of self-worth or pride.

Although today we are aware that the race myth is problematic, the European colonists, slave traders and enslavers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were convinced that they were superior to the enslaved African people. That abject idea cleared the way for the creation of an oppressive systematic form of dehumanization of Africans for many centuries.

Whatever techniques the slave-owners used to heavily control or establish their legislative supremacy over the partly dependent enslaved Africans, this did not lead to a diminishing of their resistance or make this impossible, Gaspar (1985).

Resistance can be defined as: an organized collective action which aims at affecting the distribution of power in a community. The aim of the minority of white slaveholders was to establish and distribute power by all legislative means over the majority of enslaved Africans.

The outcome of that power was to the enslaved hardship, fears, and uncertainty on day to day basis. Enslaved Africans used various kinds of methods to resist their enslavement that decultured, dehumanized and marginalized them.

Resistance was sometimes fierce and at other times passive. Enslaved people were expected to produce and reproduce to the benefit of the slave-owners and the European markets. But they also produced 'fruits of resistance' by using their diverse culture and their inventory minds. Acts of insurrection and rebellion were individually or collectively transformed into long periods of wars that severely damaged the economy of the plantations or in particular the economy of the colony.

The idea and fact of losing their freedom and ending of their attainment with their homeland brought the African men and women to take their lives in their own hands. Some of the men and women in the dungeons decided to a self-chosen horrible death. They even choose to end their lives by diving in the sea or start rebellious actions on board of the ships. To their opinion this choice was a better one, than to accept a life in oppression, bondage and displacement.

Resistance tactics by the men were: slow work, suicide, braking tools, uprising, armed rebellions, killing of the slaveholders, pretending being ill, theft, flight, burnings and marronage

Enslaved people who were caught after an attempt to escape stood out from the others. They suffered from broken limbs or bones and walked crippled. It was not uncommon for the Africans to walk with open scars.

During the period of slavery the ruling laws and regulations were in favor of the male slave owners. A contradiction with their rights; they were fictious and subject to conditions of arbitrary.

A very particular way of job assigning was the use of the color of the skin for the job determination and distribution among the enslaved; *reference to Mutabaruka (If you're white...)*.

By law the enslaved were dictated not to be on the streets after sunset, not allowed to wear shoes, gather in numbers of more than three, carrying guns or possess money. They needed permits from the slave owners, which reminds me of the permits from the 'Apartheid regime.'

## **1.1 The gender specific resistance by African women**

The exploitation of African women meant to the European that they were the masters of the captive women and that they could do whatever they liked to the women. They started using captured women to satisfy their sexual needs.

The early onset of the enslavement of Africans was already characterized by forms of resistance. Women used different strategies for their resistance. For women kept as servants in the houses of the slave owners, it was easier to collaborate with slaves from the fields. Within their labor as house slaves they could sometimes use poison or pollute food to kill their owners.

To tackle the assaults, rapes and harassments the women developed various ways to resist the attacks on their dignity and humanity. A major part of the enslaved woman's day-to-day resistance was to avoid sexual aggression from the slaveholders.

Although the role of women in the resistance differs from that of the men, we would sell the woman short, if we look at their resistance from the aspect of sexuality and abuse or childbearing. Women were also involved in other forms of insurrection and rebellion, they developed their own forms of resistance. Because many enslaved women worked in and around the home of the slave owner, they had a special position. They had a minor position compared to the owners with power, but the fact that the owners and their families depended on them for their household, gave the women a specific kind of power.

The main tactics used by the women included suicide and infanticide, abstaining from food, pretending indisposition or pretending being severely sick. And further on, sexual abstinence, abortion, contraception and feigned pregnancies. This form of strategic opposition from women was gender-based. The gender specific strategy was seen as a form of 'gynecological warfare' or 'reproductive' resistance. There are examples of women who flee with their infants in the period of breastfeeding.

The mothers wanted to nurture their children with a spirit of resistance and cultural practices of their communities, Turner (2012).

## **2. The oral related resistance**

Those early mentioned laws, the forced labor, loss of freedom, the fact that Africans were given European names, the harassment against women, fuelled their resistance and rebellion acts.

The African enslaved women participated in all kinds of resistance to support the men and to end their sexually related hardship with the slave owners. By doing so they also used their oral lore, the *odo* or proverbs, an ever presence verbal force to learn, from generation on generation about life-lessons, African values and norms, rites of passage, humor and strategies for survival. Every occurrence in the daily life could be and still can be expressed by an *odo*. The enslaved African women in Suriname used the communicative aspects of cloth as "proverb cloths"

In Africa, the practice of communicating with textile designs is still known. The 'Akan' language with its textile Adinkra symbols is a familiar example. In West Africa, verbal and nonverbal abstraction is often encoded with specific meaning. Adinkra and Kente designs on textiles refer to specific political, social, spiritual proverbs or historical events. There are similarities with Ewe proverbs that are also mingled with proverbs.

The Akan have used cloth not only for personal adornment , but they have also used it metaphorically as a powerful expressive medium of communication. The Akan cloths include the screen and block-printed *adinkra*, the hand-woven *kente*, the appliqued *akunintam* and *asafo* flags, and the factory-made java and wax prints.

The African tradition leading to the combination of textile and proverbs, shows that proverbs can be used as a source for generating several symbols for textile design and for other fields of art.

The way the enslaved Africans in Suriname and the Caribbean communicated with each other, rendered the cultural and spiritual examples of their ancestors by using verbal and non-verbal elements. Initially the enslaved Africans suffered from communication problems, because they came from different parts of Africa. They solved that problem by constructing a new language they used mutually and called: Sranantongo or the language of Suriname. Sranantongo is based on words, idioms from their African languages, the indigenous languages in combination with the influence of European languages.

The typical communication of the women was intertwined with on African languages based proverbs, to express their feelings, ideas and identity. Odo are timeless, succinct, clever, or funny and usually easily memorable. Many odo reflect the idea that there is often more than one way to say something or to address a coded message. Folktales and fables use animal behavior to represent human behavior. This made it possible to raise concerns without fear that the message was understood or recognized. In practice of the inhuman conditions of slavery, the importance of encrypted personal expressions were of immense importance.

The universal purpose of most proverbs is to teach us about life experiences and survival. They are created in several different ways: some are simple platitudes which, because they seem to have universal application, become commonly regarded as small bits of wisdom. Some are derived from actual tales or fables, others from the Bible or literary texts. Usually it is the act of repetition that elevates an assertion to the odo status.

The gender-specific resistance of African slave women was associated with the use of odo. The meaningful odo were also

used in textile manifestations, in songs and dance, which they were physically expressed. Odo could also have a spiritual significance.

Contrary to African routine, the 'textile proverbs' were used as a linguistic weapon during the slavery period.

The African Women played a preponderant role in the initiating of various kinds of rebellion and wars against the European slaveholders.

## **2.1 The specific female way of communicating**

Striking in the Sranantongo language are the proverbs or odo, regarding mainly the world of the animals and vegetation. An odo can be regarded as a way of saying something implicit, by hiding its two folded meaning. An odo has a literally and a interpretable meaning. They are historical traditional sayings which date back to the early 16th century. With an odo thoughts, criticism, ideas or humor can be formulated, in the tradition of the African ancestors.

Odo also enables users to warn or to advise others. The proverbs highlight humor and aspirations as a source of warning and advice. For it is also in the realm of the proverb that we clearly see the inter-mixture of African and European influences producing the characteristics which are essentially Jamaican. In addition, the proverbs reveal much of the country and the characteristics of the people.

The odds are that the word Odo is historically fragmented from the Benin language, the word *Elododwo*, which means: 'proverb.' The making and shaping of the odo was done by women, who played and still play a great historical role on that part. An odo is said to be 'cut,' and used in a conversation to diverse the essence of the communication or to address it firmly. Most of the odo consists of a dichotomy: day and night, cause and effect, truth and lies, beginning and ending, allegations and denial, and so on and so on.

The proverbs convey wisdom and indicate lessons for day to day situations for those who use them in a skillful manner. During the period of their enslavement the women used the odo

cautious: to put non Africans on the wrong track. With the examples of the Rastafari's and Quilts made by enslaved African women in the USA, I will address other kinds of communication through proverbs and textile.

## **2.2. The use of proverbs by Rastafari's**

The resistance to slavery in Jamaica is similar to the situation experienced in Suriname. Rebellion and maroonage were part of the resistance in which women were also involved. The use of proverbs and storytelling were also part of the resistance strategy they used. In the cultural context of Rastafari's, words and sound are considered powerful forces to bring about change with obvious implications for the meanings of both proverbs and music. I don't know if it is, in general, well-known to music listeners of Rasta music, the layman and scholars, that Rastafari's always have mingled proverbs in their songs. Many of the proverbs quoted by Rastafari's are taken from the Old Testament. The same can be said for the Anansi, the Trickster, storytelling, this technique was used by the enslaved Africans and their descendants to encode their messages and for over all communicating.

The Jamaican proverbs, alike the *odo*, stand as examples of creolization "a cultural action, material, psychological or spiritual based upon the stimulus response of individuals to their environment and as white/black, culturally discrete groups to each other" (Braithwaite, 1971, p, 26). As in many cultures, the ability to understand proverbs depends on the level of familiarity one has with a particular culture.

Today, still there are many proverbs used by Rastafari's in songs. When it comes to Rasta lyrics and songs I recall, Mutabaruka, Jimmy Cliff, Steel Pulse, Peter Tosh, Burning Spear, Toots and the Maytals, Black Uhuru, Culture, Lucky Dube and many, many others.

There is a similarity between the Rastafari's and the performers from the Kaseko, a popular Suriname music style, who also use proverbs in songs. It is noteworthy that kaseko performers are



mostly men, but women are better at controlling the culture of the proverbs. Undeniably Bob Marley is the most outstanding Rastafari of them all since he brought Reggae, Rastamusic to every corner of the globe.

Take for instance his song Rat race; he used at least three proverbs in this song to address his message.

- The first proverb: When the cat is away the mice will play;
- the second one is: In the abundance of water the fool is thirsty
- and the third one says: Me throw me corn, but me noh call no fowls.

Marley wanted his audience to understand fully the content of his song and helped them to make it easy, by using well known proverbs.

Those who listen carefully to any given Rasta song will experience the recognition of proverbs in these songs.

The Rastafari and diaspora communities, use criticism and encouragement in songs to suggest that African descendants and Afro-Caribbean peoples struggle against Babylon. In songs addressed to Jah, Rastafari proverbs are absent. Enslaved Africans in the USA also used proverbs to communicate.

### **2.3. Resistance with quilts in the USA**

The African enslaved women in the USA, who suffered from the same experience as their sisters in the Caribbean and the South-American countries, also used textile as a technique of resistance. Their resistance was also verbal and non-verbal. African women demonstrated their skills through the slavery period by producing outstanding quilts.

Quilts-making played a central role and was part of their African legacy and helped to preserve their sense of identity of who they were and how they perceived their hostile world, Gladys-Marie Fry (2002).

*Example of a quilt (Power point)*

It is well known that any gathering for quilting provided the means to build the slave community through shared ritual. For the women were gathering communication about all kinds of events and experiences. But most of all their language was coded. At those gatherings the enslaved transmitted messages through quilts and proverbs to another.

*Example: Never let the same bee sting you twice.*

Colors were also very important to the quilt makers and were used in the quilts to send coded messages. On the Underground Railroad a black colored quilt, for example, gave information about a refugee shelter. The hanging of clothes on the line was a sign for a safety or dangerous situation. The courageous Sojourner Truth was the leader of the Underground Railroad, through which she provided freedom to thousands of enslaved Africans.

### **3. The use of verbal and textile proverbs in Suriname**

Proverbs are part of the mechanism with which most societies interpret their cultural, religious and social environment. As mentioned before, there are similarities between cultures. Because the African initiated proverbs belong to oral culture, there are often versions of the same proverbs along the diaspora.

African women preserved their African textile traditions and passed it on from generation to generation over several hundreds of years. In the vision of the enslaved African women they were constantly at war with the white European men for their cruel attempts. The women were forced to construct and invent helpful ways with all kinds of proverbs to defend themselves and their children from the daily attacks on their femininity.

### 3.1 Odo concerning the slavery penalties

The arsenal of odo consists of all kinds of odo referring to the daily life and experiences. In case of punishment the women constructed odo that referred to the horrible experience they endured. For instance those who tried to flee and were captured were punished as follows: cutting of a foot, earlobes, the Achilles heel or other kind of mutilation. The in that respect referring odo were used to warn and help to prevent similar actions of those who had the same intention.

A. An historical odo referring to a form of penalty:

*“Mi na kotiyesi, mi no abi bisi nanga lingaman trobi”*

I am the one without earlobes, so I don't care about fights for earrings.

B. special punishment was the Spanish buck; the hands and feet were tied together and a stick was placed between hands and feet. The poor enslaved man or woman was then extremely whipped on his back, as long as the penalty lasted.

The following odo is referring to that penalty:

C. *“ Tangi fu spansboko, meki mi si benifoto:”*

“Thanks to the Spanish buck, I could visit the benched town (in the capital of the colony, situated at the bench of the Suriname River). 'Foto' is derived from the first part of Fort Zeelandia; the fortress of Zeeland referring to the Dutch place Zeeland.

D. The third odo in this regard, says: *“ So langa lowe no keba, koti yesi no sa keba”*. As long as there is maroonage, earlobes shall be cut off.

D. The last odo to mention is about the dignity of the abused women. *“ Umasma na leki lepibana, den no abi fadon.”* Women are like ripe bananas, (plantains) they can never be spoiled. Their worth is of all time.

### 3.1.2 Textile related resistance

In Suriname the women also used textile to take their nonverbal communication to a higher level. The secret language that was constructed through textile and *odo* was as remarkable and inventory.

Take the *angisa* or *head kerchief* , the *pangi* or *shoulder kerchief* , and *koto* or *skirt*.

#### 1. **Angisa or head kerchief** (Power point example)

The enslaved African women used the *Angisa* or head kerchiefs to which the existing *odo* were attached, to pass encoded messages to warn each other. Beside the use of the *Angisa*, there were also secrets consisting of different folded head positions to communicate with each other. By doing so they created a secret language in the non-verbal way.

2. **The Pangi or shoulder kerchief** ( Power point example) In tradition with the African ancestors, shoulder kerchiefs were placed as part of the dress on the shoulders of the women, to which also proverbs were stitched on.

#### 3. **Koto or skirt** (Power point example)

Another use of textile concerned the *koto*, as part of their daily dress, to which they also attached *odo*. By doing this they create a secret language well known to insiders only. To unravel this secret language one had to be aware of the codes of the secret language itself to understand the message. A lady seen in this dress was called a *kotomisi*, a miss in *koto*dress.

Women have been able to resist the brutal and inhuman violence against them, by creating and using the early mentioned gender-specific tactics and the secret language in the various manifestations of the *odo*, including those used in textiles.

#### **4. Singing and dancing**

Singing and participating in other forms of communication was familiar as a particular and natural habit of the enslaved African men, women and children. It was therefore also used as resistance technique to communicate encoded feelings and messages. With songs different encoded messages were addressed to those who they concerned.

*As an example: illustration of the song called: 'Den ta boko lalú'a sonde.'*

#### **5. The Banya dance**

Banya was a social originated African dance with which the African women and men addressed encoded messages. There were other African inspired and related dances like the Kanga, the Laku and the Susa. But the Banya dance was well equipped to be used on the one hand as cultural dance and on the other hand to encode several secret messages. On Banya meetings plans were made to resist or to flee.

Woman played a capital role in the Banya dance meetings, for they were masters in using the *odo*. The responsibility by way of singing, dancing and passing through the *odomessages*, lay with them. Women have played a major role in the conservation, innovation and in transferring the legacy of the African culture in Surinam.

#### **6. Summary**

One may wonder why this horrendous nightmare lasted that long and why the descendants of slave-traders, slave-owners and enslavers seem to know little about it. We, the descendants of the enslaved Africans should use any means necessary to break the silence that obscure this shared history. And hopefully this lecture, helps to bridge the gap concerning the invisibility of the resistance of African women throughout the slavery period in the diaspora.

Three powerful forces helped the enslaved women to contribute to resistance as rebellious women:

1. The need of the group of African women for a social outlet for their different experiences to survive.
2. And their innovative external ways of dealing with communication in reaction to resistance.
3. The continuous urge to resist the efforts aimed at their disempowerment and marginalization as women.

Thank you for your attention!

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