Resisting Slavery: The Agency of African Slaves and Why it Matters

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*A*lthough some historians depict slaves as passive objects unable to impact the world around them and resist enslavement, scholars like Sean Stilwell, Dennis Cordell, Bruce Mouser, Jonathan Glassman, and many others disagree. These scholars argue that slaves could oppose slavery and did so in a variety of ways. In his *Slaving and Slavery in African History*, Stilwell presents slavery as a dynamic product of history that should not be viewed as static or changeless. Slavery in Africa was as diverse as the continent itself. Slaveowners used slaves in different settings and granted them different privileges and economic, social, or political opportunities, depending on the location, timeframe, and type of their service.[1] Slave-master relations were always fluctuating. Stilwell frames freedom as "belonging in" society. This is in opposition to slavery, which he defines as "belonging to" society.[2] It is within this framework that this paper places resistance to slavery. Slaves were only connected to society through their masters, meaning they often lacked social and economic benefits that came with belonging, such as kinship ties or property rights. Slaves did not always exert their agency via resistance to slavery itself, but rather to renegotiate the terms of their service if they felt they were being treated poorly; Ismail Rashid calls this the "moral economy."[3]

This paper draws upon the scholarship on the agency of slaves to dispel myths of slave passivity, and to present their resistance as a dynamic product of history with a special focus on the agency of slaves themselves. This paper pays special attention to female slaves to emphasize the impact gender had on slavery and resistance. People rebelled against initial enslavement by fleeing or mounting rebellions and defences within their communities. During their captivity, many slaves navigated new systems of control to renegotiate with their masters for better conditions and elevate their status above that of "outsiders" – even if they remained slaves. Enslaved Africans resisted their slave status by forcing their owners and wider societies to recognize their rights to these social institutions or form alternative versions thereof.

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[1] Sean Stilwell, "Defining Slavery, Defining Slavery," in *Slavery and Slaving in African History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 5-6.
[2] *Ibid.,* 8.
[3] Ismail Rashid, "'Do dady nor lef me make dem carry me': Slave Resistance and Emancipation in Sierra Leone, 1894–1928," *Slavery & Abolition* 19 (1998): 210.

Africans resisted their enslavement by evading and defending against being captured. In his article "The Myth of Inevitability and Invincibility: Resistance to Slavers and the Slave Trade in Central Africa, 1850-1910," Cordell challenges notions that slaves failed to establish effective resistance to slave raiders by focalizing on those who did so.[4] Similarly, Winston McGowan explores how slaves resisted the Atlantic slave trade in a variety of ways that slave traders feared. Cordell also shows that targets of slave raids sometimes defeated the raiders outright. This was the case at Kaga Kazembe when a Manza force defeated one of the most successful Muslim slave raiders of the time, al-Sanusi, in 1892 or 1893.[5] Often, potential slaves fled and relocated elsewhere, thereby depriving raiders of a successful raid because there were fewer people to cart off.[6] If they did get captured, especially during the Atlantic Slave Trade, slaves would resist going to market by abandoning slave ships and holding forts called barracoons, from which they also escaped.[7] Ships were sometimes mutinied by their cargo in an attempt to return home or sail to shore. McGowan explains that crews of European transporting ships feared such uprisings because they threatened their safety and livelihoods.[8] Slaves sought refuge and defended themselves against slave raiders and traders; they were not passive victims. Many of these precautions and evasive maneuvers failed, but it is essential to their story that slaves resisted enslavement.

Loosely populated societies were often targets of increasingly rapacious slave raids wherein raiders would use their numerical advantage to overwhelm their prey. Many scholars have falsely concluded that decentralized and sparsely populated communities were easy victims of slave raiders. Walter Hawthorne shows this is false. Both Hawthorne and Cordell show the historical processes that resulted from these "victim" societies engaging with increasingly intensified slave raids to reorient themselves accordingly. In north-central Africa, these groups, such as the Sara, gravitated toward larger, more easily defensible, and evermore centralized societies because they made logical choices to do so.[9] In West Africa, the Balanta similarly

[4] Dennis Cordell, "The Myth of Inevitability and Invincibility: Resistance to Slavers and the Slave Trade in Central Africa, 1850-1910," in *Sylviane Diouf*, ed., *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003), 37.
[5] *Ibid.,* 38.
[6] *Ibid.,* 42.
[7] Winston McGowan, "African Resistance to the Atlantic Slave Trade in West Africa," *Slavery & Abolition* 11, no. 1(1990): 18.
[8] *Ibid.,* 19.
[9] Cordell, "The Myth of Inevitability and Invincibility," 39.

migrated their society away from their traditional plains to swamps because the plains were difficult to defend against slaver raiders. To adjust to this new environment, the Balanta reorganized their labour into a system of age-grades to utilize new agricultural technologies which allowed them to produce new crops. Similar to the Sara, they established *tabancas*, which were more densely populated and secure villages.[10] Is it essential to the history of slaves that they were not merely captured easily by "big men," but instead, they actively chose their resistance.

Even after their initial enslavement, slaves were not docile. Gordon explains that some slaves in south-central Africa could negotiate their terms of service with their masters. Slaves could leave their masters relatively easily, provided they – as kinless outsiders – could find other protection elsewhere. Slaves could even "break a Mitete," which was an act that symbolized the transfer of their loyalty from one master to another.[11] Of course, slaves still fled once enslaved. Still, more impactfully, they could also form a rebellion, as Bruce Mouser shows in his "Rebellion, Marronage, and Jihad: Strategies of Resistance to Slavery on the Sierra Leone Coast, c. 1783–1796." In Moria, groups of slaves pounced on an opportunity for rebellion when most men were out fighting.[12] The uprisings quickly expanded and lasted for three years due to the various defence and food production methods utilized by the slaves.[13] Although the rebellion was ultimately unsuccessful, it created new dynamics in the region; they forced powerful chiefs to ally to reassert their authority over the rebels of Yangekori.[14] The end result of this slave revolt was not as significant as its scale of both intensity and duration. Slaves impacted the socioeconomic structures of the area and remain a testament to the impact of slave agency.

Equally important to how is why slaves chose to exert their agency to resist and rebel using their specific methods. Slaves did not act without reason; they were engaging critically with their environment and their status as slaves. Relocation was a good option for when slave raiding was prevalent. Some slaves relocated to open woodland areas relocated that received plenty of rainfall and had sections of dense brush and light forest, meaning they could find refuge for the few days it took for raiders to retreat. Cordell notes the caves that were unique in central Sudan facilitated

[10] Walter Hawthorne, "Nourishing a Stateless Society during the Slave Trade: The Rise of Balanta Paddy-Rice production in Guinea-Bissau," *Journal of African History* 42, no. 1 (2001): 2-3.
[11] David M. Gordon, "The Abolition of the Slave Trade and the Transformation of the South-Central African Interior during the Nineteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (October 2009): 927.
[12] Bruce Mouser, "Rebellion, Marronage and Jihad: Strategies of Resistance to Slavery on the Sierra Leone Coast, c. 1783-1796," *Journal of African History* 48, no. 1 (2007): 36.
[13] *Ibid.,* 37.
[14] *Ibid.,* 40.

refuge because they were not easily approachable by external raiders and even less so on horseback.[15] The Maroons, to which Mouser refers, changed their strategy to accommodate for islands, mangrove islets, or highlands.[16] Rebel slaves on the Swahili coast asserted their rights by drawing upon the history of particular groups of slaves like the *mafundi* – who could better accumulate wealth in the past.[17] The Balanta employed specific techniques to navigate their increasingly violent setting near a powerful Mandinga slaving states.[18] McGowan shows that many slaves resisted being captured and sold into the Atlantic Slave Trade because they feared the loss of personal freedom, were ashamed of enslavement and dreaded white cannibalism, and dreaded permanent separation from their families.[19] The Chikunda interacted with their unique social space, as military slaves in the *prazo* system, in particular ways that caused the formation of their ethnic identity.[20] They chose their rituals and *makaju* (facial tattoos), patrilineage,[21] and formed their language, known as *Chi-Chikunda*, to differentiate themselves from nearby populations specifically.[22] Mouser shows that a significant factor in the Yangekori rebellion was the arrival of leaders like Fatta, who claimed to be the Prophet Muhammed's successor, which destabilized pre-extant social dynamics, thereby giving slaves a more significant opportunity for rebellion.[23] Slaves were utilizing their specific environmental and social conditions to resist dynamically. They were making active and engaged choices; they were not merely reactionary. This affected slave owners' obligations and impacted their control over their slaves.

In multiple cases, slaves developed their own versions of social institutions such as their attire or identity or negotiated for economic opportunity to show their agency. These rebellious slaves were not specifically reacting against their status as slaves, but rather their treatment and rights. During slavery and afterwards, groups such as the Chikunda resisted slave status by controlling their identities. *Prazos* military slaves, known as the Chikunda, organized themselves to influence their masters' actions or even assigned themselves new masters if they were treated

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[15] Cordell, "The Myth of Inevitability and Invincibility," 37.
[16] Mouser, "Rebellion, Marronage and Jihad," 36.
[17] Jonathan Glassman, "The Bondsman's New Clothes: The Contradictory Consciousness of Slave Resistance on the Swahili Coast," *Journal of African History* 32, no. 2 (1991): 292.
[18] Hawthorne, "Nourishing a Stateless Society during the Slave Trade," 2.
[19] McGowan, "African Resistance to the Atlantic Slave Trade in West Africa," 21.
[20] Allen Isaacman and Derek Peterson, "Making the Chikunda: Military Slavery and Ethnicity in Southern Africa, 1750-1900," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 36, no. 2 (2003): 267.
[21] *Ibid.,* 268.
[22] *Ibid.,* 269.
[23] Mouser, "Rebellion, Marronage and Jihad," 40.

poorly.[24] Isaacman and Peterson point out that the *prazeiros* were intimidated by the Chikunda, who regularly rebelled against perceived mistreatment, but not necessarily against their status as slaves. The Chikunda forged a new identity in between the peasants – from whom they sought distinction – and their masters.[25] The Chikunda used rituals, culture, and dress, to idealize their status as military slaves to give themselves a sense of belonging.[26] Jonathon Glassman similarly argues that disobedience on the Swahili coast was formed around slaves' desire to join key social institutions such as community and kinship, which facilitated the reproduction of social life, and around their desire to access economic opportunity and *peculium* – customary property rights.[27] Slave resistance in Swahili, like the Yangekori rebellion in Moria, resulted in the alteration of the broader society because it forced the coalescence of a master class consciousness in addition to a more solidified – though often contradictory – slave consciousness.[28] The Waungwana caravan traders along the coast of East Africa negotiated more autonomy for themselves because they were valuable to their owners' profits.[29] Swahili slaves, as Glassman shows, sought economic and social rights which influenced broader institutions in society. As explained by Rashid and Glassman, the concept of the moral economy can shed light on other reasons behind slave dissent. Rashid describes the moral economy as "the balance between rights and obligations of masters and slaves" that arose historically "from the dynamic intersection of the pre-colonial mode of production, politics and customary laws and slave resistance."[30] He is referring to northwestern Sierra Leone, but similar processes occurred throughout the continent. During the rebellion in Moria, Sierra Leone, slaves felt they received poor treatment and that their masters were withholding their customary protections.[31] Many still sought protection afterwards, however. Some slaves pledged allegiance to their master's rivals, showing that they did not necessarily seek dissolution of their slave status but rather better conditions under which to serve.[32] Certain groups of slaves, such as the *Olisos* in northwestern Sierra Leone, were more likely to gain rights as a result of their closeness to their masters. These rights, however, were often still forced by resistance and

[24] Isaacman and Peterson, "Making the Chikunda," 274.
[25] *Ibid.,* 258.
[26] *Ibid.,* 274.
[27] Glassman, "The Bondsman's New Clothes," 277-78, 287.
[28] *Ibid.,* 288.
[29] Stephen J. Rockel, "Slavery and Freedom in Nineteenth Century East Africa: The Case of Waungwana Caravan Porters," *African Studies* 68, no. 1 (2009): 87.
[30] Rashid, "'Do dady nor lef me make dem carry me,'" 210-11.
[31] Mouser, "Rebellion, Marronage and Jihad," 36.
[32] *Ibid.,* 37.

represented their greater negotiating power.[33] Many Chikunda kept their identity after the collapse of the *prazos* system – when they were no longer legally slaves – and continued to serve under their selected warlord, Kanyemba, showing that slaves often sought to belong, not always individual freedom.[34] Furthermore, Glassman also defines slave marronage in East Africa concerning this moral economy. They did not want to reject their status as slaves outright in favour of "freedom," but rather, they wished to participate fully in social, political, and economic institutions.[35] These slaves did not structure their resistance on the basis of class struggle, but instead, they struggled to preserve their *peculium* rights.[36] They did so often without questioning their masters' language of ownership over them or their status as slaves.[37] In post-abolition Zanzibar, former slaves asserted their freedom by altering their clothes to that of elites and participating in social and religious rituals from which they were previously denied.[38] Struggles for better terms of service with the concept of the moral economy represent slaves' active struggle to change their societies and dismiss claims that slaves were merely reactionary characters.

In particular, women had unique circumstances with which to contend and chose their methods for resistance accordingly. Women were responsible for cooking, cleaning, and other domestic chores traditionally completed by women, and some became concubines.[39] Marcia Wright argues that women occupied a unique space between wife and slave, which altered their emancipation options. These women were conscious of their status as slaves and acted against it. The presence of missionaries who sought the abolition of slavery and colonial courts presented women with new options to obtain freedom, thereby challenging the moral economy. The ambiguous divide between a wife and a slave created unique struggles for women to prove their status as slave wives or free women. [40] Women navigated these challenges by fighting their status as slaves in court or repaying the price paid for them. These women sought to escape their status

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[33] Rashid, "'Do dady nor lef me make dem carry me,'" 212.
[34] Isaacman and Peterson, "Making the Chikunda," 275.
[35] Glassman, "The Bondsman's New Clothes," 303.
[36] *Ibid.,* 288, 311.
[37] *Ibid.,* 288.
[38] Laura Fair, "Dressing up: Clothing, Class and Gender in Post-Abolition Zanzibar," *Journal of African History* 39 (1998): 65.
[39] Emily S. Burrill, "'Wives of Circumstance': Gender and Slave Emancipation in Late Nineteenth-Century Senegal," *Slavery & Abolition* 29, no. 1 (January 2008): 52.
[40] Marcia Wright, "Bwanikwa: Consciousness and Protest among Slave Women in Central Africa, 1886-1911," in Claire Robertson and Martin Klein, eds., *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1983), 266, 263.

as slaves, and not necessarily to alter their roles or expected tasks as women.[41] Women who recognized themselves as slaves worked to repay the price that had been paid for them. Bwanikwa, who was purchased with the price of a gun by her husband, utilized various methods to repay her husband to be treated as a free wife.[42] Emily Burrill argues that this intermediary space drove women in Senegal to choose slavery as a form of protection rather than remain unprotected in the increasingly violent and unstable climate caused by colonial and African conquests.[43] The agency of slave women presented itself differently than men because their options for resisting varied, but it still impacted their relationships with their owners and husbands.

The story of Chisi-Ndjurisiye-Sichyajunga (Chisi) and Samuel Ajayi Crowther of Oyo convey the different avenues women slaves had to exert their agency versus male slaves. Chisi was enslaved during a raid and taken away from her home in Biza country when she was a young girl.[44] The raiders killed all the men in her village, but spared her because she was a woman, and, therefore, a more suitable target. She was given to the chief as a slave-wife when she reached luBemba – the territory of her captors.[45] Chisi was sold several times to a variety of different men. Since female slaves were purchased as wives and their children often belonged to their masters, the threat of taking their children from them remained powerful.[46] Women were generally more connected to their children, which meant they often had to look after them and, in Chisi's case, contend with their misdeeds – such as having intercourse with another man's wife.[47] Samuel Crowther, on the other hand, was freed from a slave ship in 1822, and went on to attend several schools both in Africa and in Europe. He went on to become a teacher, missionary, and a Bishop in the Anglican Church. His life was unique and shows that slaves could achieve success if given the chance.[48] However, Crowther's adventures were only possible because he was a man. It was next to impossible to join a school of the sort Crowther did as a woman. Chisi and Crowther show the disparity in a woman's opportunity as a slave and a man's opportunity.

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[41] Wright, "Bwanikwa," 264.
[42] *Ibid.,* 260.
[43] Burrill, "'Wives of Circumstance': Gender and Slave Emancipation in Late Nineteenth-Century Senegal," 59.
[44] Marcia Wright, ed., "Chisi-Ndjurisiye-Sichyajunga" in *Strategies of Slaves and Woman: Life Stories from East/Central Africa* (New York: Lillian Barber Press, 1993), 81.
[45] *Ibid.,* 82.
[46] *Ibid.,* 87.
[47] *Ibid.,* 88.
[48] Ade J.F. Ajayi, "Samuel Ajayi Crowther of Oyo," in *Africa Remembered*, ed. Philip D. Curtain (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 290.

This paper has shown that many slaves actively engaged with their status as slaves to present resistance to slavery in the same manner as Stilwell – as a dynamic product of history.[49] They resisted enslavement, strove for social and economic privileges during their service, and secured their status as freed persons. It is essential to the history of slaves that they defended against slave raiders, influenced their master's obligations and control, and sought emancipation. Furthermore, this paper has situated resistance to slavery within the moral economy to convey the nuanced visions of "freedom" for which slaves struggled. Rashid, however, says this cannot be taken as an equalization between the voices of slaves and masters, and the dynamics of slavery were inherently unequal.[50] Since slaves were often denied community and kin, and their sense of dishonour and exclusion associated with slavery, there is a lack of formal oral traditions from which we can draw upon to tell the story of slaves. [51] This is why historians must reconstruct the history of slaves. However, these enslaved Africans' impact on power dynamics and in general society cannot be excluded from the history of slavery in Africa.

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[49] Stilwell, "Defining Slavery, Defining Freedom," 8.
[50] Rashid, "'Do dady nor lef me make dem carry me,'" 210.
[51] Martin A. Klein, "Studying the History of Those Who Would Rather Forget: Oral History and the Experience of Slavery," *History in Africa* 16 (1989): 213, 211.

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