

# The African Woman, Slavery and Survival Flame of freedom in their souls

*"OF ALL slaves, domestics probably exhibited the greatest degree of duality of behaviour. Outwardly they conformed and adopted white culture to a greater degree than the more autonomous field slaves, while covertly they rejected the system. Paradoxically, the most favoured slaves, the house slaves and the skilled elite, were often in the vanguard of slave resistance at all levels."*



**A DEVICE** used to stop a captive from escaping in the African jungle: the hooks would entangle him in the vegetation. Also used as a punishment in the West Indies to prevent his lying down and sleeping. *Photo courtesy DARA HEALY.*

FEMALE slaves worked tirelessly to frustrate their owners. Although they were reluctant to run away because of kinship ties, they used other methods to ensure that they were not mere spectators and accomplices in their enslavement. They poisoned, became ill, mutilated themselves, complained and generally made life difficult for massa.

Apart from this, they engaged in open conflict. A study of historical accounts would reveal that the men were the undisputed leaders of active resistance. One historian notes that "in Antigua in 1736, out of 47 slaves, only one woman, Joan, was executed". Nevertheless, the absence of names of women in revolts throughout the region, is more an indication of the generalised or male-centric perspective of historians, rather than of any evidence that they did not participate in this way.

The legend and image of Nanny, the Jamaican Maroon, is perhaps one of the most powerful examples of the woman slave and active resistance to slavery. She was the leader of the Blue Mountain Rebel Town Maroons, renamed Nanny Town, and she terrorised British troops in the 17th and 18th centuries. Frankly, they were afraid of her. Accounts of

her feats are perhaps more legend than fact, but a description of her with knives hanging from her belt which had been plunged into human flesh and blood gives an idea of the larger than life sister that she was.

Retention of African culture was important in giving the slaves the impetus to rebel against enslavement. Women already had significant power in traditional African society as indeed the existence of matrilineal tribes such as the Ashanti demonstrates. Remember too, the warrior women such as Hatshepsut who cleverly wielded and held on to power in ancient Egypt, Makeda, the Queen of Sheba who controlled vast empires and later, Nzinga and Yaa Asantewa, who battled colonial invaders to the continent.

Religion was critical to the struggles of the women slaves in the Caribbean. Nanny herself was a prophet and a healer. Her spirituality ensured loyalty and significantly boosted the moral of the Maroons. Much is already known about the ability of Voodoo to inspire and ensure cohesive militant effort in the Haitian Revolution.

Interestingly, a signif-



**NINETIES GIRL**  
*By Dara E Healy*

icant proportion of the practitioners of Voodoo or Obeah were women. It is important to remember that in Africa, the women would have been respected for their healing and divining powers; it was no different when they were transplanted to the New World. The whites often accused the women of being the ones who incited revolt because of their skill in this ancient art.

"...Whatever the prophetess orders to be done... is most sacredly performed by the surrounding multitude which renders these meetings extremely dangerous, as she frequently enjoins them to murder their masters, or desert to

the woods..."

Why was religion important in rebellion? For the same reason that any peoples who hold strong collective beliefs will always behave in a more cohesive way than those who do not.

The slaves drew strength from their rituals, and undoubtedly the nightly gatherings would have taken them away from their unbearable existence.

But more importantly, the coming together would have reminded them of their loss and their servitude; this understanding could and did spur them to resist as a group. Trinidad did not possess the Maroon communities that Jamaica

did, so that the incidence of running away was not as high here, and when it occurred, slaves largely did not attain permanent freedom. The Government was said to be "ruthless" in the way it sought out and destroyed actual or potential Maroon settlements.

The penalties for resistance were high. Slaves were burnt alive, flogged to death, or confined in stocks, a device through which the slave would place his hands and feet, making movement impossible. After the 1800's, the importation of African slaves to Trinidad grew, causing more "recalcitrant" slave behaviour. In 1801, one slave was hung and his head cut off and exhibited on a pole for such alleged behaviour. Throughout the Caribbean another favourite type of punishment involved confinement on Sunday, market day. It was the only day that the slave had to himself, to conduct trade and for a while enjoy a dignified existence. Depriving him of this escape would have been severely demoralising and was therefore effective as a deterrent.

Women did not escape the cruelty of corporal punishment, and even after abolitionist agitation and the introduction of Amelioration Laws forbade whipping women, it still occurred. DeVerteuil recalls that in La Brea in Trinidad, women were punished by "turning up their linen in a shameful manner" prior to being whipped.

We know of another Nanny who was a fighter, Nanny Grigg from Barbados. She was a significant threat to the estab-

lishment, because she could read, she was inspired by the Haitian Revolution, and she believed in armed conflict. It is said that she was responsible for providing the ideological framework for the 1816 rebellion in Barbados. The rebellion was not successful because of

strategic blunders, and also because of the viciousness with which it was quelled. Nanny's fate is not recorded but she was likely captured and murdered.

The two levels of resistance by women were equally important in eroding enslavement. Whether she was poison-

ing massa, shouting verbal abuse at the overseer, running away or engaging in armed rebellion, we see a woman who at all times retained her instinct for survival. Further, her every recalcitrant act sent a clear message to the planters that she was enslaved but not subdued. It is understand-

able that her role in the struggle would not be as completely documented as that of the men; the black woman was after all at the bottom of every social rung. However, it is important to know about her tireless hacking away, her refusal to give up.

In other words, every day that you are free, remember the blood of the warrior women that flowed through our history in the quest to make it so.