

## 20. “I do not want to be silent”: Slavery and Colonialism in South Africa and the Southwest Indian Ocean

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One winter’s evening in 1793, on a farm near Tulbagh in the southwestern Cape, an enslaved man named Caesar van Madagascar spoke the words “I do not want to be silent, and I must retain my right to speak.” He made this deeply resonant statement in the midst of a heated and violent argument with the man who claimed ownership over him, burgher (settler), Daniel Malan. Caesar and two other enslaved men were sitting in the farmhouse kitchen when Malan entered, at around 8:30 pm, and asked them why they had not yet gone to bed, considering that there was so much work to do in the morning. Caesar responded that he could organize his own time. When Malan repeatedly instructed him to be silent, Caesar refused. And when Malan struck him with a *sjambok* (leather whip), the symbol of violent oppression at the Cape, Caesar literally broke the whip.<sup>1</sup>

At the time, Caesar van Madagascar was one of thousands of enslaved people at the Cape of Good Hope. Networks of forced migration through which enslaved men, women, and children were transported alongside convicts and exiles, tied the Cape of Good Hope to the Indian Ocean world. In this chapter, I highlight some aspects of the impact of Dutch slavery, slave trading, and colonialism at the Cape of Good Hope in relation to the southwest Indian Ocean. The enslaved people at the Cape of Good Hope were brought from elsewhere to the Cape to labor on farms; as farming expanded, more and more local Khoikhoi and San communities were afflicted by this Dutch presence. Thus, as I will discuss in the second part of this chapter, both enslaved people and the Khoisan (the collective name for the Khoikhoi and San populations) resisted. The landscape in which this Dutch colonial expansion took place was radically altered by the introduction of settled, extractive agriculture, based on foreign crops, which in turn had an

impact on resistance. Finally, I return to Caesar's profound words and point to some of the questions that remain to be answered on the history and legacies of Dutch slavery, slave trading, and colonialism in the southwest Indian Ocean.

## Slavery and Slave Trading

The VOC settlement at the Cape started in 1652 as no more than a wilting garden and a rickety wooden fort with the dual purpose of keeping English rivals out and resupplying the ships that sailed around the treacherous Cape that linked the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. Between 1638 and 1710, Mauritius played a similar role for the Dutch. The VOC settlement in Mauritius worked as a supplying station, proved a source of ebony, and functioned as a base from which to extend ties with Madagascar, which was an important node for the Dutch slave trade in the region. In Madagascar, the Dutch encountered strong polities with long-standing European and Asian trade connections. The Dutch did not establish a lasting presence on the island but the Company and private ships visited its ports to purchase enslaved people to supply the Cape with laborers. The Dutch were one of several European powers that purchased enslaved people on the coast; European demand for slaves changed the enslavement methods on the island, fueling political rivalries and war. As the Cape Colony grew, the role of Mauritius in the VOC world faded and Cape Governor Jan van Riebeeck ordered the island abandoned in 1658.<sup>2</sup> The Company decided to rebuild the settlement in the 1660s, but over the following decades, the vision of thriving agriculture on the island failed to materialize, and in 1710, the VOC again withdrew from the island. In 1715 the French took possession of Mauritius and renamed it Isle de France.

As the Dutch gained more power in the Cape, slave trading with the colony increased, bringing tens of thousands of enslaved people there, including Caesar van Madagascar. Initially, the VOC was involved in slave trading along the west coast of Africa. The first slave ships that arrived at the Cape in 1658 brought people from Dahomey and Angola. Subsequently, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, enslaved men, women, and children were transported to the Cape as forced migrants from South and Southeast Asia (India, Sri Lanka), the Indian Ocean islands of Madagascar and Mauritius, and Mozambique on the east coast of Africa. The Company established slaving links with Madagascar as early as 1654, with

Delagoa Bay (Mozambique) in the 1720s and 1730s, and later in the eighteenth century with areas on Africa's east coast and in Zanzibar. The origins of enslaved workers—or their points of embarkation—are visible in the way in which their names were recorded, like Caesar van Madagascar. While the importance of one region of origin relative to another shifted over time, the Cape's slave population was always ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse.

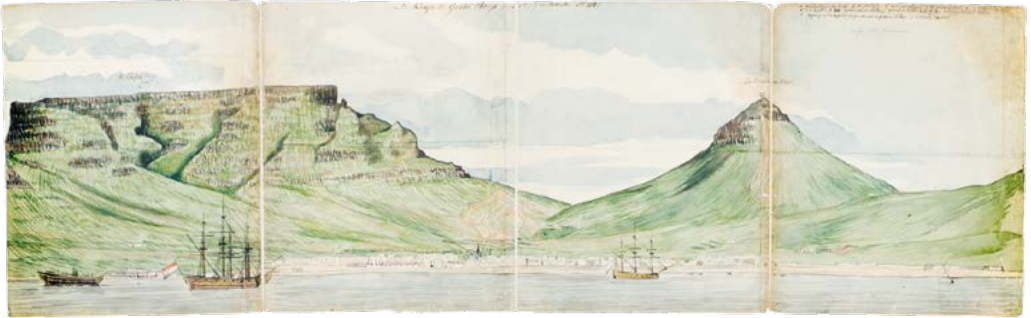
In addition to the VOC trade, enslaved people were brought to the Cape on passing ships, both Company and foreign vessels, which stopped at the Cape during their voyage. Company officials who had completed their duty for the VOC sold slaves on the repatriation journey and ships' crews ran small-scale slave trade to the Cape, purchasing enslaved people themselves and on behalf of others and transporting them as trade goods to be sold at the Cape. Foreign slave ships also sold off parts of their human cargo there while en route to colonies in the Americas. It was through such imports that the slave population grew. But over time there was another increasingly important source of slaves for the Cape: children born into slavery.

Historical demographer Robert Shell estimates that 63,000 enslaved men, women, and children were brought to the Cape Colony between 1652 and 1808.<sup>3</sup> They were the property of the burghers. At the Cape, slaveholdings tended to be small-scale. But there were significant regional differences; most enslaved people were concentrated in Cape Town and the wine and wheat farming districts in the vicinity (Cape District, Stellenbosch, and Swellendam); pastoralist farmers in the interior relied more heavily on Khoisan labor with fewer enslaved people. In 1773, no individual slave owner anywhere in the colony owned more than 101 enslaved people and only 10 individuals owned more than 50 enslaved people. In addition to private ownership, the Dutch East India Company owned enslaved people who lived in the Slave Lodge in central Cape Town. With a population averaging 467 over the period 1658–1828, the Lodge was the single largest slaveholding in the colony and the exact opposite of the small, dispersed slaveholdings which typified private ownership.<sup>4</sup>

Starting in the 1710s, there were more enslaved people than free burghers at the Cape for the rest of the eighteenth century. In 1711, the enslaved population numbered 1,771, only slightly more than the burghers. By the 1730s, the gap had widened considerably, with 4,709 enslaved people and 3,074 burghers. By the end of the century, both groups were far more numerous, and again closer in number with 14,747 enslaved people and

13,830 burghers. The slave population had more than doubled in size by the 1830s when the British—who had taken the colony from the VOC in 1795—abolished slavery across their empire.

The impact of slavery, slave trade, and colonization was pervasive. Historian Robert Ross points out that South Africa today is the “constitutional continuation of the colonies” that had been dominated by settlers from Europe, whose descendants, while no longer politically dominant (since 1994), still “play a major role in its economic and social life.” The impact of Dutch colonization can be heard in the language spoken by some South Africans (Afrikaans), experienced in the law under which South Africans live (Roman-Dutch law), felt in the religion of the majority of the population (Christianity), and seen in the landscape that was transformed by imported crops.



A seascape of Table Mountain and Cape Town by the Dutch artist Jan Brandes from 1787. He painted this during his stay in the Cape Colony. The Dutch flag represents the Dutch presence in the area.

## The Disintegration of Khoisan Societies

The land to which the enslaved were transported and which was granted by the Company to free burghers to farm, was not empty. The Dutch East India Company assumed the right to grant land to free burghers in a dual tenure system that included freehold (ownership) and loan farms (yearly payment for use). Exclusive rights of ownership and use that underpinned the land tenure systems stood in opposition to Khoisan customs of communal use of land and its resources. The increasing European occupation of land led to growing Khoikhoi and San dispossession. Their response

was resistance, which erupted into a series of wars with the Dutch. As the Khoisan societies lost their land, and their way of life was disrupted, more and more individuals were incorporated into colonial society in servile positions. Others fled beyond the colonial frontier.

The histories of Dutch encounters with the Khoisan communities of southern Africa have been written in terms of dispossession, disintegration, and murderous violence. Before the VOC established a long-term presence at the Cape of Good Hope, Dutch, English, and Portuguese ships stopped at points along the coastline and encountered Khoikhoi communities with whom they traded. Dutch colonial expansion from 1652 onward caused conflict that continued at varying intensities deep into the eighteenth century. The First and Second Khoikhoi-Dutch Wars (1659–1660, 1673–1677) left the Khoikhoi of the Cape peninsula and its surroundings defeated. The economic consequences of the loss of cattle and sheep were accompanied by political and social disintegration. Colonial expansion emanating from Table Valley gathered pace after 1700. The expansion of farming into areas farther from the Castle of Good Hope, combined with the opening of the meat trade between burghers and Khoikhoi, precipitated renewed violence between the Dutch and the Khoisan. The raiding and counterraiding of 1700–1708 involved almost all Khoisan groups on the Cape frontier, evidence of how widespread the impact of colonial expansion was. When an uneasy peace was restored, the Company recognized new Khoikhoi captains, giving them copper-headed canes to symbolize that they ruled under the authority of the Company.

Nevertheless, the upheaval continued throughout the eighteenth century, with the frontier shifting unevenly as the colony expanded. The *comando* became the most important frontier institution. Commandos were groups of armed civilians who rode out against the Khoisan. From 1715 onward, these burgher units were legitimized and supported by the Company officials at the Cape. The 1760s saw a resurgence of resistance from independent San as well as other Khoisan who had been incorporated into the colonial labor force. In response, burghers organized the General *Comando* in 1774 to crush the resistance and acquire labor. The commandos killed San men and captured women and children. San children were indentured as unfree laborers and forced to work alongside enslaved people and ostensibly free Khoikhoi on the farms.<sup>5</sup> Historian Mohamed Adhikari traced the use of terms like “extermination,” “destruction,” and “genocide” in histories that address the experience of the San. He shows that while

there is consensus about the violence and mass killing inflicted upon San people, opinions differ as to whether this constituted genocide because historians disagree on the question of intent that is part of some definitions of genocide: did the Dutch intend to exterminate the people? Adhikari's own position, however, is clear from the very title of his book: *The Anatomy of a South African Genocide* (2010).

## Enslaved Resistance

From the time that the VOC introduced slavery at the Cape of Good Hope, enslaved people resisted their bondage. This manifested itself in various ways, including mutinies on slave ships destined for the Cape, running away from slave owners, attempted poisonings, attacks, arson, theft, and suicide. Caesar's defiant words reveal a rare, or perhaps rarely preserved, form of resistance: an outright overturning of the master-slave relationship in which the enslaved person was expected to be obedient, compliant, and silent. Over the course of the 1700s, the most common crime committed by enslaved people was desertion. The Council of Justice records are full of episodes of unsuccessful escapes, where enslaved people who ran away to escape punishment or flee the colony were recaptured, tried, and punished as deserters. In the court testimonies of the enslaved, we catch glimpses of those who were successful in evading recapture, sometimes for years, like Reijnier van Madagascar, and sometimes for good, like Balij, who was last seen escaping a commando. That at least some enslaved people at the Cape maintained a vision of a world beyond the colony is clear in the places that they mentioned as their desired destinations: the land of the Portuguese, the Namaqua people (San) beyond the colony, or "home" across the sea.<sup>6</sup>

Remarkably, there were no major slave rebellions at the Cape, at least not before the nineteenth century. The reason for this, argues historian Robert Ross, is that enslaved people were isolated, in small-scale slaveholdings, of diverse origins, and in close contact with resident owners. The characteristics of Cape slavery thus limited the development of a slave community cooperating in large-scale, organized uprisings. The revolutionary ideas circulating in the late eighteenth century and waves of abolitionism swelling at the time did, however, influence a shift from individual to more collective forms of resistance at the Cape. The 1808 and 1825 rebellions—one a peaceful march and the other a killing spree—were marked by enslaved people "directly challenging the colonial system."<sup>7</sup>

## Environmental Impact

Dutch colonization had a profound impact on the environment. At the same time, colonial expansion and slave and Khoisan resistance were partly shaped by the Cape environment and geography. In Mauritius, the ecological impact of extracting ebony, a sought-after hardwood, was enormous. After the Cape settlement was established in 1652, the role of Mauritius in the Company's world declined, fueled in part by falling ebony prices. When the Dutch returned to Mauritius in 1664, they resumed the extraction of timber, which they exported to the Cape. At the Cape, wood was the only available fuel for burning. The role of the Cape settlement in provisioning ships was principally about supplying fresh water—which was abundant in the natural streams and rivers of Table Valley in the 1650s—and firewood to the passing ships. The task of cutting wood was given to enslaved people who had to venture further and further to find trees to cut as the areas around Cape Town were cleared. By the 1740s, there apparently were no trees left in Table Valley to cut down.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, the Dutch imported new plants into the colony, changing the landscape and altering the habitat of the indigenous flora and fauna. In the 1650s, they also introduced horses, which Commander Van Riebeeck saw as crucial to both the development of the settlement and exploration beyond. From the 1670s, horses played a military role as they were used by the commandos against the Khoisan. Horses became important markers of difference used by settlers to affirm their European identity as separate and distinct from enslaved people and Khoisan.<sup>9</sup>

The introduction in 1657 of settler farming—of imported crops, principally vines and wheat in the southwestern Cape—reshaped the landscape of the Cape Colony and carved up the land in new ways. While some deserters, including enslaved runaways, tried to flee the colony entirely and reach the independent Khoisan groups and the AmaXhosa beyond the frontier, others used the liminal spaces between the farms as sites of refuge. Runaways also frequently used mountains as a refuge and as corridors through which they could share information. Such facts led historian Nigel Worden to argue that enslaved people at the Cape perceived and used the environment in different ways than colonizers. For them, the environment was conducive to individual resistance. The 1808 rebellion marked a change toward collective resistance; rather than escape the slave owner-dominated environment, enslaved workers attempted to conquer it.<sup>10</sup>

## Slavery, Voices, and the Voiceless

Caesar van Madagascar's statement that he would not be silent resonates with the approaches taken by historians to recover the voices of enslaved people at the Cape. There are few historical records created by enslaved people to record their own thoughts and experiences. Moreover, as Nigel Worden points out, while enslaved people are omnipresent in old documents, they were never of great interest to either archivists or historians before the 1980s.<sup>11</sup> Only in the heyday of anti-Apartheid activism was there a growing interest among scholars in slave resistance and in the openness of early Cape society specifically regarding race relations, as well as a recognition of the need to write histories of marginalized groups, including the enslaved. The field has continued to grow since then. Court records continue to be a focal point for recovering these histories of the enslaved, through the many layers that muffle them. In studying these records, historians take into account the power relations that were at play when enslaved people gave court testimony, the threat and reality of torture to extract confessions, and the role of the translators and scribes who recorded the accounts given by enslaved people in court. It is through these challenging and fascinating records that Caesar's voice, demanding that he be heard, rings out more than 200 years after he spoke.

Many questions remain. While social histories of slavery at the Cape have been especially strong, the financial side of slavery under the VOC remains an area for researchers to explore. For instance, what did it mean for owners and enslaved people themselves that enslaved individuals, as assets, were acceptable collateral on loans? What was the extent and impact of wages earned by enslaved people? Other areas of research can be linked to the material culture of the enslaved and formerly enslaved: What did they own, and what did those objects mean? Information networks in the colony and beyond are another avenue to pursue, from the points of view of both the enslaved and slave owners. Among the descendants of enslaved people in South Africa today, there are divergent views: some pore over historical sources doing genealogical research while others intentionally avoid digging up slave roots. For those who want to know, much work still needs to be carried out to recover their ancestors' stories.



## Notes

- 1 Nigel Worden and Gerald Groenewald, eds., *Trials of Slavery: Selected Documents Concerning Slaves from the Criminal Records of the Council of Justice at the Cape of Good Hope, 1705–1794* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society for the Publication of South African Historical Documents, 2005), 614–15.
- 2 Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 1–19.
- 3 Robert C.-H. Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1838* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), 40.
- 4 For slave numbers, see Nigel Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 11 (Table 2.1), 29–33 (esp. Table 3.3); Robert Ross, *Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance in South Africa* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 5; and on the Slave Lodge, see Shell, *Children of Bondage*, 172–176.
- 5 Nigel Penn, *The Forgotten Frontier: Colonist and Khoisan on the Cape's Northern Frontier in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005), Parts I and II; Ross, "Settler Colonialism in South Africa, 1652–1899," in *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism*, ed. Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini (Milton Park: Taylor & Francis, 2016): 187–200.
- 6 Kate Ekama, "Just Deserters: Runaway Slaves from the VOC Cape, c. 1700–1800," in *Desertion in the Early Modern World: A Comparative History*, ed. Matthias van Rossum and Jeannette Kamp (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 161–84.
- 7 Robert Ross, *Cape of Torments*, 96.
- 8 Megan Vaughan, *Creating the Creole Island: Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Mauritius* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 1–19; Ross, "Settler Colonialism"; Robert Ross, "The Occupations of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Cape Town," *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, 2 (1980): 8.
- 9 Sandra Swart, "Riding High: Horses, Power and Settler Society, c. 1654–1840," *Kronos* 29 (2003): 47–63.
- 10 Nigel Worden, "The Environment and Slave Resistance in the Cape Colony" in *Bondage and the Environment in the Indian Ocean World*, ed. Gwyn Campbell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 101–21.
- 11 Nigel Worden, "Cape Slaves in the Paper Empire of the VOC," *Kronos* 40, no. 1 (2014): 27.

## Court Cases as a Source

The colonial authorities and their administrative staff who were responsible for most of the written sources from the time of slavery generally had little interest in the daily lives of enslaved people. This is why it is difficult to find detailed information about the relations between enslaved men, women, and children. One exception to this rule is court records. Court cases, and particularly legal investigations following a slave revolt or another instance of violence or insubordination, often offer surprisingly detailed information about the lives of enslaved people. The National Archives in The Hague houses a large collection of such court reports, many of which have been digitized. Most of them are from the courts in Batavia (Java) and Suriname, but there are also smaller series of Dutch-language court documents from the Caribbean islands, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Elmina (Ghana), southern India, Essequibo, Berbice, and Demerara (Guyana).

When there was a disturbance of the peace among the enslaved (a violent incident or a revolt, for instance), the colonial authorities usually began an inquiry in which those involved were interrogated. The transcripts of these interrogations often contain information that was otherwise rarely written down, about social contacts, childcare, dietary patterns, festivities, and other aspects of daily life. In cases of plantation revolts, the colonial authorities were noticeably interested in sexual relations. They probed witnesses not only about the sexual relations among the enslaved, but also about sexual abuse perpetrated by plantation overseers. The latter was seen, and often rightfully so, as a risk factor that significantly increased the chances of a rebellion. Several investigations of revolts in Suriname, Berbice, and Demerara-Essequibo focused on the role of plantation directors in sexual violence, jealousy, and forced sexual relations between enslaved men and women. In any other context, such intimacies were seldom made explicit.

Caution must be applied when using court records as a historical source, because the trial documents saved in colonial court archives had a singular purpose: to gather evidence that the public prosecutor could use as evidence against suspects. Enslaved defendants had no right to defense counsel, and torture was permitted as a means of extracting a confession. As a result, the documents recorded during these criminal cases were strongly biased towards the particular narrative that the prosecution wished to build. Likewise, witness testimonies and interrogations did not represent the individual enslaved person's perspective. Not only are their statements often translated and paraphrased, but it is also likely that the answers they gave were calculated to protect themselves and those close to them. For this reason, court reports seldom provide an unambiguous picture of the truth in individual cases. However, by comparing the many details they contain (which are often told in passing), it is still possible to acquire a varied image of life in slavery. This is why these sources are very valuable for historical research, but only if read critically and put in a wider context wherever possible.

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## Abstract

Movement of enslaved people formed an important link to all the crucial nodes of the VOC empire. Judging from its most prominent possessions—Batavia, Ceylon, and the Cape colony—the VOC empire can be considered one massive slave society. Within this slavery network, the Indian subcontinent played a crucial, yet virtually unknown role. This chapter will delineate the subcontinent's place in the Asian networks of the VOC empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, summarizing the research produced in the past three and a half decades. The chapter will take stock of what is known, identify blind spots, and recommend lines of future research.

**Keywords:** VOC; South Asia; slave trade; Jakarta; Sri Lanka; South Africa