

Danish West Indies. Breffu: a slave, a rebel, a fighter - and a woman almost invisible to history

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The role of women in conflict is often lost to the archaeological record - but Breffu's story illustrates how sometimes we catch a glimpse of them

Early one November morning in 1733 on St Jan, a small island in the Danish West Indies, two slaves waited outside a small stone house belonging to a family of plantation owners, the Krøyers. The slaves, Breffu and Christian, were listening for the sound of a cannon to be fired by their compatriots at the island's fort, signalling the defeat of the fort's soldiers and the beginning of a slave rebellion. The cannon fired and Breffu entered the house, killing the entire Krøyer family.

In May the following year, as the slave rebellion was collapsing, St Jan's governor, Phillip Gardelin, noted in his correspondence that he had learned with surprise that "one of the leaders of the rebellion, Baeffu [sic], whom none of us knew, and whom we assumed to be a man having murdered my son Pieter Krøyer and his Wife, is a woman!"

Gardelin's surprise at Breffu's sex is puzzling, since her involvement had been known to the Danish authorities since January 1734 from the testimony of other enslaved people questioned about the rebels. Apparently no one thought it important to provide the Danes with the gender of the leaders. And apparently the Danes did not think it important to ask.

Slave rebellions were, of course, a common event in the slave societies that dominated the western hemisphere in the 16th through 19th centuries. Rebellions and uprisings were complicated affairs, usually involving men with varied experiences and skills in a variety of roles from charismatic leaders to dodgers and informers. While women were intimately involved with rebellion activities, it was rarely in the role of leaders or as combatants - at least, not in a way that was actively recorded.

Women and the various roles that they played in these events have been largely invisible. The reasons for this are many - the enslaved did not leave written records, so the documentary record of slave insurrections and subsequent trials was left by the opposing side: white plantation society. With the exception of the Haitian revolution, no slave rebellion in the western hemisphere achieved the goal of permanent freedom. The subsequent trials were also therefore biased: questions asked by prosecutors were not only steeped in racial assumptions, but gendered assumptions as well. According to many scholars, numerous trial transcripts show that plantation society assumed not only that most women did not take part in these "male" political activities, but also that they knew little about the details of the events.

Breffu's involvement as a combatant, and as a leader of the St Jan rebellion, offers extraordinary questions, with very few answers from the historical or archaeological record. There have been a

handful of women identified in other rebellions, and even fewer in similar roles as leaders and fighters. Marjoleine Kars [discusses](#) another enslaved woman, Amelia, who “saw fit to temporarily take on a male role” in a different rebellion in Berbice, Guyana, nearly 30 years after the St Jan rebellion. Amelia had survived the Middle Passage – the horrifying voyage from African slave ports to the New World slave markets – with the organiser of the rebellion, Coffij, and the shared experience marked them as siblings. Amelia’s role seems to have been largely advisory, not as a combatant, although Kars points out she was accused of carrying a “broad sword like a man” and possibly taking part in the ritual murder of European children to honour her “brother” at his funeral. Amelia, unlike Breffu, never seems to have lost her gender identity – she just traded it for a while.

Both of these cases illustrates the fluidity and contextuality of gender and gender performance. It was the event of the insurrection itself that seems to have created a space for both Amelia and Breffu to perform as male. But there are many unanswered questions that could provide insight into how gender was expressed under these conditions. In what ways did Breffu perform as a man? Did she dress as a man or just carry certain “accoutrements” of maleness like a weapon, the way that Amelia did? Was it only by taking part in violence? Was it by taking part in political violence directed at slave owners? Was Breffu able to take on that role of combatant because she performed as a male in other aspects of her life, prior to the rebellion? What was Breffu’s relationship to the other leaders and the “rank and file” of the rebel forces?

It also suggests the ways in which enslaved men were viewed and perceived, particularly with regard to rebellions, and the complications for male identity for those who chose to participate as noncombatants – or who chose not to participate in slave rebellions at all. As an archaeologist, even if we can’t get answers to these questions from the material record, knowing that even events such as slave rebellions were not black and white, male and female, helps to guide us in seeing and understanding the beautiful nuances of humanity, past and present.

Little else is known of Breffu. Rather than be captured, she reportedly took her own life in a ritual suicide in May 1734 along with 23 other rebels. She does not show up in the *landlisters*, the tax records of the Danish West Indies in the early 18th century. Nor are her actions, between the event of killing the Krøyers and the event of killing herself, left for posterity in the testimony in the aftermath of the rebellion. What we do know is that the woman known as Breffu acted as a man, leading one of the longest-lasting slave rebellions in the New World; a subtle yet vital component of our perception of those turbulent times.

Holly Norton studied the 1733 St Jan slave rebellion for her dissertation work, and is currently writing a book based on that research.

Further reading

Bush, Barbara (1982), [Defiance or Submission? The Role of the Slave Woman in Slave Resistance in the British Caribbean](#). *Immigrants and Minorities*, 1(1):16-38

Finch, Aisha (2014), [“What Looks Like a Slave Rebellion”: Enslaved Women and the Gendered Terrain of Slave Insurgencies in Cuba, 1843-1844](#). *Journal of Women’s History*, 26(1): 112-134

Kars, Marjoleine (2016), [Dodging Rebellion: Politics and Gender in the Berbice Slave Uprising of 1763](#). *American Historical Review*, February. 39-69

Holly Norton

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The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/mar/20/breffe-a-slave-a-rebel-a-fighter-and-a-woman-almost-invisible-to-history>