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Reproductive Resistance: Abortion, Infanticide, and Agency Among Enslaved Women in Madagascar and the Mascarenes, 17th to 19th Century

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Abstract

Madagascar and the Mascarenes from the 17th to 19th century were ethnically diverse societies shaped by economic structures of enslavement. Enslaved women subjected to colonial oppression and sexual violence – that was made to commodify all labour, including reproductive – existed in a complex space of reproductive vulnerability and power. This paper proposes that, when chosen, abortion and infanticide functioned as acts of resistance and agency, reclaiming reproductive autonomy and choice within a system designed to strip all freedoms. While widely acknowledged in Atlantic world scholarship, these practices are relatively understudied in the Indian Ocean World, particularly in Madagascar and the Mascarenes. Examining colonial records, oral histories, and botanical knowledge uncovers potential motivations and methods of infanticide and abortion, revealing cross-cultural information exchange and positioning enslaved people as knowledge carriers involved in a transnational network. The persistence of botanical abortifacients and reproductive traditions across Madagascar, South Asia, and mainland Africa underscores an enduring legacy of resistance. This narrative of sexual and reproductive dynamics found within the confines of enslavement and oppression illustrates the complexity of agency and unfreedom seen through acts of resistance.

Introduction

Although abortion and infanticide as a form of agency and resistance for enslaved women is mentioned throughout Atlantic world literature, the same is not true for the Indian Ocean World, especially for Madagascar, Mauritius and Réunion. Perhaps due to the enduring illegality of abortion on the islands, the topic is a rarity in literature, typically encapsulated in a few sentences rather than a devoted chapter, article, or book. However, the current body of literature on the topic does not negate its existence in a past reality. The histories of Madagascar, Mauritius, and Réunion provide a distinct lens to examine the intersections of reproduction, resistance, and enslavement in the Indian Ocean World. Enslaved women, subjected to colonial violence, navigated systems that sought to commodify their reproductive labour. In this context, abortion and infanticide, when chosen, became acts of resistance, asserting autonomy in systems that denied them agency. Central to this analysis is the transnational and generational knowledge that enslaved women preserved and adapted. Drawing from indigenous Malagasy traditions, African influences, and Indian cultural exchanges, their body of botanical and medicinal knowledge reflects the power of oral history and cross-cultural collaboration as tools of survival and defiance. By exploring the complexities of reproductive practices as both agency and oppression, this paper highlights the broader implications of these acts, contributing to the discourse on enslaved women's agency and resistance in the Indian Ocean World.

The histories of Madagascar, Mauritius, and Réunion are deeply interwoven with systems of enslavement, colonial exploitation, and transnational exchange, making them crucial regions to the analysis of abortion and infanticide as forms of agency. These islands were shaped by the forced migration of enslaved people, colonial labour demands, and cultural and botanical exchanges facilitated by the Indian Ocean World. Mauritius and Réunion were first populated with

enslaved people in the 18th century, with Madagascar serving as a primary source for their enslaved labour population.[1] Madagascar's proximity to these islands and its position in Indian Ocean trade routes made it central to the transnational movement of people and knowledge. Mauritius became a slave society under successive colonial regimes. First settled by the Dutch, it transitioned to French control in 1715, with French colonists arriving from Réunion to establish plantations. By 1735, enslaved people made up 77% of the population, and this proportion remained consistently high. The economy was dominated by cash crops, such as sugarcane, cotton, and spices, demanding intensive labour that subjected enslaved people to brutal conditions.[2] Réunion, colonized by France in 1674, operated similarly as a slave society with a plantation-based economy reliant on enslaved labour imported primarily from Madagascar, Africa, and India. The unique status of plantation enslavement that Madagascar, Mauritius, and Réunion held in the Indian Ocean World allows for an analysis of forms of unfreedom consistent with chattel slavery. The proximity of the Islands and their constant exchange of people, goods, and knowledge further deepens the possibility for analysis due to their interwoven and shared histories.

Conceptualizing Unfreedom in Madagascar and the Mascarenes

Unfreedom may be easier to conceptualize in Indian Ocean World and within the context of the Mascarenes, due to the explicit presence of chattel and plantation slavery. Both Mauritius and Réunion were established from inception as slave societies, meaning their very foundations constitute a human settlement shaped by an economic and power-based imperative.[3] In such

[1] Benedict Burton, "Slavery and Indenture in Mauritius and Seychelles," Chapter in *Asian and African Systems of Slavery,* ed. James L Watson, (Basil Blackwell, 1980), 137.
[2] Burton, "Slavery and Indenture," 137.
[3] Philippe Holstein, Jehanne-Emmanuelle Monnier, and Pablo Corral-Broto, "Lost Eden: An Environmental History of the Plantation," Chapter in *Entire of Itself? Towards an Environmental History of Islands,* ed. Milicia Pokic and Pavla Simkova, (White Horse Press, 2024), 262.

societies, the definition of unfreedom and slavery becomes rooted in the treatment of individuals as property, not as persons. Within this framework, in connection to abortion and infanticide, is the notion of an individual having no choice – whether in labour, living conditions, behaviour or life trajectory. The entirety of an enslaved person's existence, including their role in society, was determined by those who wielded power over them. Lack of choice, however, extends beyond direct and active coercion by a dominant authority; it also reflects societal conditions that present survival as contingent on one singular choice. Even in the absence of outright compulsion towards labour, if it is the only avenue for economic and, thus, physical survival, the lack of choice still represents the removal of choice.

Between 1670 and 1810, over 160,000 enslaved people were imported to the islands, with 45 percent originating from Madagascar.[4] While Malagasy people contributed the largest demographic portion of the labour force, others arriving from India and East Africa warp the Atlantic view of slavery as one that is purely racialized. Indian labour introduced another layer to the dynamics of unfreedom, often resembling indentured servitude more than the chattel slavery that is commonly associated with plantations. Even within Indian labour, there were varying elements of choice and labour status; prior to 1810, approximately 20,000 of the enslaved people imported to the Mascarenes were of Indian origin. By the late 18th century, Réunion hosted a sizeable population of free Indian craftsmen and artisans. However, as early as 1816, the French colonial government began exploring the use of Indian convict labour, and by 1828, over 1,000 Indian convicts were used in infrastructure projects.[5] Unlike African and Malagasy labour, Indian

[4] Burton, "Slavery and Indenture," 138.
[5] Richard Allen, *Slaves, Freedmen, and Indentured Laborers in Colonial Mauritius,* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 16.

labourers were not primarily employed in plantation and agricultural fields but instead worked as domestic servants, clerks, and artisans.[6]

The existence of choice within indentureship does not negate this as a life of unfreedom. Referred to as "a new system of slavery," Indian indenture was not by any means an easy life.[7] Often used as a replacement for lost African or Malagasy enslaved people, Indian labourers faced physical and legal abuse. Although given legal personhood, unlike chattel slavery, Indian labourers were bound by laws that restricted their movement, eroded their wages, and were manipulated to deny them rights.[8] These regulations tethered them to their workplaces, creating an oppressive system of control. This highlights a spectrum of unfreedom that existed within the varied experiences of enslaved and labouring groups, a spectrum on which Indian indentured labour belongs. The differences in rights, choices, and legal designations between indentured labourers and enslaved people reflect gradations of unfreedom rather than a binary opposition of freedom versus slavery. The spectrum of unfreedom is used to shows the interwoven nature of being unfree, illustrating that the designation of 'free' often fails to reflect the realities of a lived experience. The lingering social and economic legacies of slavery and indenture ensure that unfreedom persisted in varying forms; being 'less unfree' than another does not constitute freedom; it merely positions one at a different point on the continuum of unfreedom.

Contextualizing Infanticide in Madagascar

Infanticide and abortion remain highly politicized topics. Infanticide, defined as the intentional killing of a baby or infant, might initially seem less complex, as it is regularly deemed and agreed

[6] Burton, "Slavery and Indenture," 148.
[7] Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920,* Race Relations by Oxford University Press, 1974.
[8] Burton, "Slavery and Indenture," 149-150.

upon as unethical. However, a historical review and continued debate reveals a more nuanced issue, philosophically clouded with interpretations of passive versus active decisions. Infanticide has been recorded across various cultures and societies, with its motivations often linked to the perceived value of the infant and its potential contribution to society. Confucian beliefs in the 5th century BCE China placed little value on women. Philosopher Fung You-Lan, in the 3rd century BCE, noted, "A father and mother when they produce a boy congratulate one another, but when they produce a girl, they put her to death."[9] Similarly, the Roman Empire's Law of 12 Tables in 451 BCE commanded: "A Dreadfully malformed child shall be quickly killed."[10] While such statements may appear callous by contemporary standards, they reflect an accepted historical worldview in which, if a child poses little value to society, society is not responsible for the protection of their life.

Although existing in a modern capitalist society, interpretations of infanticide have shifted, mostly moving beyond the assessment of a child's value as the determinant of their right to live. Nonetheless, debates about infanticide persist and, in rare cases, it is legally sanctioned. The 'Groningen Protocol' in the Netherlands, for example, permits medical professionals to end the life of an infant at a parent's request if the infant is enduring "hopeless and unbearable suffering."[11] Similarly, practices like 'selective non-treatment' and 'withdrawal of care' involve somewhat passive 'letting die' scenarios rather than active killing.[12] These distinctions place human intentionality at the forefront of discussions about infanticide, compelling ethical analyses to focus

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[9] Fung You-Lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy,* (Princeton University Press, 1952, vol 1), 327.
[10] Michael Obladen, "From Right to Sin: Laws on Infanticide in Antiquity," *Neonatology,* (2016): 58.
[11] A A Eduard Verhagen, "The Groningen Protocol for Newborn Euthanasia; Which way did the Slippery Slope Tilt?" *Journal of Medical Ethics* 39, n.5, (2013): 294.
[12] Julian Savulescu, "Abortion, Infanticide, and Allowing Babies to Die, 40 Years On," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 39, n.5 (2013): 257.

on whether actions involve omission or commission and whether morality should be judged not on the result of a decision but the intentionality behind it.

Madagascar's history is entwined with discussions of infanticide, which was a widely accepted practice rooted in spiritual intent. Although the Merina Kingdom, which existed as a reigning body in parts of Madagascar from 1540 to 1897, banned infanticide in 1823, reports suggest the practice persisted into the 19th century and likely existed long before.[13] James Sibree, an English missionary who travelled to Madagascar in 1863, observed that Malagasy spirituality designated certain days and even entire lunar months as unlucky for childbirth. In some regions, up to seven to eight days a month were unlucky, and in others, periods such as Alakaosy and Asorotany, held specific astrological significance and deterred birth. Alakaosy, both referred to as a full lunar month and a singular unlucky day, somewhat aligns with the appearance of the Sagittarius constellation in late December and early January, and is based in Merina astrology as the ninth lucky star. It was said that children born in this month were at risk of killing someone older than them. [14] Asurotany, a lunar month somewhat aligning with the Cancer/Crab constellation in late July to early August, is designated as the fourth lucky star and is reigned over by Alakaosy. Children born in Asurotany were believed to be at risk of dying young. Women nearing childbirth during these periods sometimes resorted to abortions or ceased eating to avoid giving birth; and these spiritually unlucky stretches for birth resulted in children and infants being put to death. [15] Grandmothers commonly took on this role, carrying out acts of suffocation, burying alive, or

[13] Gwyn Campbell, "The State and Pre-Colonial Demographic History: The Case of Nineteenth-Century Madagascar," *Journal of African History* 32, (1991): 423.
[14] Edith Peetz, "A Visit to Andrianambodilova, Ambohimiarina, Tananarive, on 1st Alakaosy," *Folklore* 26, no. 4 (1951): 453-456.
[15] James Sibree, *Fifty Years in Madagascar Personal experiences of Mission Life and Work,* (Gresham Press, 1924), 42. And, James Sibree and Richard Baron, *The Antananarivo Annual and Madagascar Magazine: A Record of Information on the Topography and Natural Productions of Madagascar, and the Customs, Traditions, Language and Religious Beliefs of its People,* (Press of the London Missionary Society by Malagasy Printers, 1893), 51.

placing the infant in route of cattle. However, if the infant escaped death, they were allowed to live.[16] Sibree estimated that infanticide was the cause of 25% of Merina baby deaths in the mid-nineteenth century.[17] The moral and ethical weight of infanticide as a practice is relative to the cultural beliefs of the society in which it is rooted. In the Kingdom of Imernia and in some other provinces in Madagascar, the spiritual and cultural beliefs of the society trusted in infanticide as a preventative measure against bad luck, exempting it from broader moral dilemmas associated with the act of killing.

Contextualising Abortion under Slavery from Madagascar to the Mascarenes

Mauritius and Réunion introduce more complexities in the analysis of the historical tradition for infanticide and abortion. Their colonial creation as slave societies limits the potential analysis of an indigenous or traditional exploration into reproductive rituals. Instead, the trends stemming from these regions are based on transnational and cross-cultural collaborations of practices and beliefs. This creolization creates a convoluted yet interesting form of indigeneity unique to the region that demonstrates the power of transnational and generational knowledge as a form of resistance, especially as it pertains to reproduction.

Abortion, like infanticide, occupies a contested space of debate where morality, power, and agency intersect. While infanticide ends the life of an already-born child, abortion consists of the deliberate termination of a pregnancy to ensure the prevention of birth. Abortion also then differs from miscarriage, defined as the unexpected or accidental ending of a pregnancy before birth. Infanticide and abortion, then, intertwine again in their shared reliance on human intentionality;

[16] Sibree, *Fifty Years,* 42. And, Campbell, "State and Pre-Colonial," 417.
[17] Gwyn Campbell, Hagan Castle, Suzanne Miersand, and Joseph Miller, *Women and Slavery,* (Ohio University Press, 2007), 250.

both require certain intent and motivation to be present for them to be defined as they are. The earliest mention of abortion in law appears with the Sumerians. Yet, it is during the middle Syrian period that a woman's volition in ending her pregnancy is first explicitly addressed. Article 54 of the Assyrian Law Code provides that if a pregnant woman intentionally causes the abortion of her fetus, she will be punished with death and denied burial.[18] This criminalization of abortion reflects the influence of state and religious authority over women's bodies, reducing their reproductive autonomy in favour of enforcing societal norms. Such laws enact a form of reproductive violence, especially in consideration of the applied death penalty, wherein the value of life is determined at the detriment of the lived experience of women to prioritize the potential life of a fetus over the woman's autonomy.

Tensions within abortion discussions become even more pronounced when viewed in the context of unfree or enslaved women. Enslaved women, as defined in the context of chattel slavery, are denied legal personhood and subjected to physical and sexual violence, inhabiting a reproductive reality that is fundamentally shaped by their place and vulnerability within systems of oppression. Within these constraints, the meaning of pregnancy and its termination shifts. Pregnancy for an enslaved woman is not simply the potential of giving birth, just as motherhood is not some romantic, idealized version of domesticity. The dehumanization of enslavement altered motherhood into a tale of survival; the historical context of being a mother was not solely rooted in the development of love but in the fight for life under horrific conditions. As such, motherhood becomes captured in concepts of sexual and reproductive labour; as Saidiya Hartman explores,

[18] Fereniki Panagopoulu-Koutnazi, "Abortion: The Legal Voyage of the Unwanted Child," Chapter In *Protecting the Genetic Self from Biometric Threats: Autonomy, Identity, and Genetic Privacy,* ed. Christina M Akrivpoulou, (IGI Global, 2015), 115.

slavery becomes conscripted in the womb.[19] Acts of agency and resistance in motherhood then take on a different perspective than generally accepted today:

> "Certainly we know that enslaved women fled the plantation, albeit not in as great numbers as men; poisoned slaveholders; plotted resistance; dreamed of destroying the master and his house; utilized abortifacients rather than reproduce slaves; practiced infanticide rather than sentence their children to social death, the auction block, and the master's bed; exercised autonomy in suicidal acts; gave birth to children as testament to an abiding knowledge of freedom contrary to every empirical index of the plantation; and yearned for radically different ways of being in the world."[20]

Some anti-abortion arguments today posit abortion as unethical as it deprives the life of an infant to materialize. But an infant born into chattel slavery does not receive legal personhood; they are born into a life of hard labour, severed from familial ties, and exposed to a life of brutality and cruelty. To exercise historical empathy is to recognize that consciously bringing a child into such a life is a sentence of hardship, not a privilege of living. Even today, even decades ago, some parents were conflicted with the idea of bringing a child into a society of climate decline, economic inflation, and the overall hardships that accompany a modern-capitalist society. So, in combatting historical presentism, it is not unreasonable to empathize and imagine that an enslaved woman whose life has been defined by abuse and unfreedom would not want to sentence her child to the same fate.

Although relying on somewhat limited literature, a recurring theme emerges in discussions of enslaved women's motivations in performing abortions and infanticide. Most sources situate abortion within a context of prevention, often linked to resisting the idea of birthing a child into slavery.[21] Keeping in mind the previous exploration of prevention and intention within discussions

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[19] Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls* 18, no. 1, (January-March 2016): 169.

[20] Hartman, "Belly of the World," 167.

[21] See: Campbell, *Women in Slavery,* 250. Edward Alpers, Gwyn Campbell, Michael Salman, *Resisting Bondage in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia, vol 2,* (Routledge, 2007), 5. Dorit Brixius, "From Ethnobotany to Emancipation:

of infanticide and abortion, this posits an interesting framework to explore perceived culpability versus acts of agency and resistance. This perspective aligns with Hartman's analysis, which frames giving birth in an enslaved setting as akin to conscripting your child to slavery before they are even born. Yet, it would be reductive to assume this belief was universal among enslaved women – a point Hartman herself acknowledges.[22] For many, childbirth was seen as a detriment to the mother and baby. Still, for others, it was a source of increasing "social and spiritual value," viewing childrearing as an opportunity to "give their lives meaning and value beyond the daily drudge and brutality of slavery."[23] Again, this analysis bears the weight of human intentionality and the spectrum of unfreedom. A woman's decision not to view or practice abortion as resistance does not negate the agency of others who do.

Similarly, a mother's choice to bear and rear a child amidst enslavement does not relegate abortion to pessimism or moral judgment. The complex nature of abortion and infanticide as resistance is that both choices – whether to end a pregnancy or to give it life – are acts of resistance. To carry a child, raise them under the relentless violence of enslavement and practice love and kinship is an assertion of humanity against a system designed to deny it. Conversely, the decision to terminate a pregnancy – to spare a child from the dehumanizing realities of slavery or/and to alleviate the mother's own suffering, is equally a refusal to acquiesce to the structures of domination and control. Both decisions, deeply personal and shaped by the constraints of unfreedom, constitute acts of defiance against a society that sought to erase autonomy and limit choice.

Slaves, Plant Knowledge, and Gardens on Eighteenth-Century Isle de France," *History of Science* 58, n. 1, (2020): 61. Dorit Brixius, *Creolised Science: Knowledge in the Eighteenth-Century Indo-Pacific,* (Cambridge University Press, 2024),138. And, Tyler Yank, "Women, Slavery, and British Imperial Interventions in Mauritius, 1810-1845," (PhD diss., McGill University, 2019), 49.

[22] Hartman, "Belly of the World," 168.

[23] Yank, "Women, Slavery," 62.

Beyond the desire to guard a child from a life of enslavement, other motivations underpinned the practices of abortion and infanticide. Recognizing an enslaved woman's status as property inherently acknowledges that anything she produced, including children, would also be classified as property. Recognition of this case could suggest that some women practiced abortion and infanticide as an economic form of resistance, denying their enslavers the ability to profit from increased human capital. However, in continued differences from the Atlantic slave trade, disagreements surround whether the Mascarene Islands viewed reproduction as necessary and desirable. Pierre Poivre, Intendant of Réunion from 1767 to 1772, provides insight into this tension. Noting, after 8,000 enslaved Malagasy people were introduced to the island, that these people did not 'multiply' because Malagasy women "practiced a terrible usage to destroy their fruit."[24] Viewing these women's reproductive choices as a challenge to colonial economic imperatives, he suggested shifting the slave trade to rely on Mozambican women, whom he regarded as more suited for reproduction. In a way, this transition away from enslaved Malagasy women was due to their practice of reproductive autonomy, prompting a redirection of colonial practices, and is perhaps a peculiar example of resistance being successful. While, given the globalization of the slave trade, Malagasy women would likely face enslavement elsewhere, this response illustrates how their decision directly influenced the trajectory of slavery on the Mascarene Islands.

Further evidence of the perceived threat posed by acts of reproductive autonomy comes from the introduction of anti-abortion and anti-infanticide laws in the 18th and 19th centuries. These measures indicate that colonial powers were aware of these acts and viewed them as dangerous, undermining societal and economic stability. There is, within this, the potential for additional

[24] Dorit, *Creolized Science,* 138.

external factors: religion likely played a role in shaping these legal frameworks as well. Due to the presence of missionaries, converting to Christianity and Christian practices became synonymous with upward social mobility, including constrained and conservative views of sexuality.[25] In Madagascar, due to the traditional and spiritual history of abortion and infanticide, these laws may have also been an attempt to suppress Malagasy beliefs and impose cultural norms.

However, not all sources agree that enslaved women in the Mascarene Islands were valued for their reproductive capacity. Some accounts suggest that enslavers prioritized physical labour over reproduction, viewing childrearing and birth as burdensome.[26] This ambiguity is reflected in the varied treatment of pregnant women: some enslavers provided up to thirty days of rest and recovery, while others offered none at all.[27] Regardless, reproduction undeniably influenced the course of slavery in the Mascarene Islands, shaping broader trends in the sourcing of enslaved populations and impacting individual relationships between enslaved women and their enslavers. These acts of resistance – whether they succeeded in reshaping colonial policies or disrupted individual enslavers' plans – underscore the agency of enslaved women, even within the constraints of systemic unfreedom.

The potential for future autonomy also played a decisive role in enslaved women's decisions regarding childbirth and the lives of their children. In the context of escape, particularly marronage, the presence of children or kin could significantly hinder the enactment of flight plans.[28] Marronage varied by region, shaped in part by the topographical construction of Réunion and Mauritius, highlighting the environment's active impact in the creation of history. The

[25] Karine Aasgaard Jansen, "Cleaning the Womb: Perspective on Fertility Control and Menstruation Among Students in Antananarivo, Madagascar," *Culture Health and Sexuality* 23, n.9, (2021): 1228.
[26] Yank, "Women, Slavery," 35.
[27] Bernard Moitt, *Women and Slavery in the French Antilles,* Indiana University Press, (2001) 94.
[28] Campbell, *Women and Slavery,* 251.

distinction between *petit marronage* – temporary, short-term escapes – and *grand marronage* – permanent escapes marked by the creation of new lives and communities – highlights these regional differences. Réunion is a much younger island geographically compared to Mauritius. Where Mauritius' volcanic landscape has lesser heights and more plains, Réunion is marked by three mountainous zones full of ravines and forests. [29] These isolating and inaccessible features offered greater opportunities for long-term marronage, enabling communities to remain hidden from colonial forces. Resistance in these circumstances also underscores the significance of transnational and generational knowledge as a form of activism, visible in the ability to navigate unfamiliar terrain inaccessible to enslavers and colonial forces and the ability to sustain oneself through the natural resources of the land. The interactions between maroons and the environment reveals itself further in the languages and names of the plants found in the mountains, valleys, and forests of Mauritius and Réunion. Many plant names bear linguistic ties threading them to African, Malagasy, and South Asian languages, often in collaboration with creolization, showing a medley of linguistic and botanical knowledge. The names themselves sometimes carry vernacular allusions to marronage, especially through the use of the adjective *marron(ne).*[30] Maroons relying on wild and cultivated plants for survival leaves a linguistic imprint on the botanical history of the islands. The labelling of these plants and the creolization that accompanies them suggests a maroon agency in their use and introduction, embedding both history and environmental utility into everyday speech, illustrating a developed, carried, and enduring environmental knowledge.

On Réunion, reports suggest that 90% of maroons were Malagasy. Within gender distinctions further shaping the patterns of resistance, men constituted the majority of maroons,

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[29] Christian A Kull, Edwards A Alpers, and Jacques Tassin, "Marooned Plants: Vernacular Naming Practices in the Mascarene Islands." *Environment and History* 21, n.1, (2015): 50-51.
[30] Kull, "Marooned Plants," 61-62.

not only due to the difficulty that women with children or infants would face in accessing these communities but also due to reports that maroon communities themselves were sometimes rather violent environments.[31] For enslaved women, abortion and infanticide, while not definitive solutions, could ease the burden of childrearing during escape. Such decisions prioritized a woman's survival and autonomy, placing her life and future above that of an infant within the broader context of unfreedom and resistance.

Abortion and infanticide were not the only methods employed by enslaved women to avoid childrearing and birth. Contraceptives were reportedly used across all three islands, and women who had previously given birth often extended the duration of nursing their children. This practice, seen as a natural form of contraception, leveraged the hormonal changes associated with lactation to suppress ovulation and reduce the likelihood of reimpregnation, even in the context of ongoing sexual acts.[32] Regardless of method, pregnancy and childbirth were frequently regarded as undesirable by enslaved women. While abortion and infanticide represent more radical forms of resistance, they were neither unheard of nor incompressible within the harsh realities of enslavement. Some scholars, however, question the extent to which abortion and infanticide were practiced as deliberate acts of resistance. For example, Elisabeth McMahon, in her analysis of a report made by Vice-Consul O'Sullivan on the Island of Pemba in 1896, notes that "colonial officials and missionaries complained about enslaved women using abortion to avoid motherhood, yet it is unlikely that abortion was widespread given the deep sadness expressed by these women whose children died."[33] While McMahon's observation rightfully acknowledges the emotional toil

[31] Kull, "Marooned Plants," 52; Yank, "Women, Slavery," 46.
[32] Patricia Romero Curtin, "Laboratory for the Oral History of Slavery: The Island of Lamu on the Kenyan Coast," *The American Historical Review* 88, n.4 (1983): 872.
[33] Elisabeth McMahon, "Managing E-Motion and Motherhood Among Enslaved Women in East Africa," *Journal of Migration History* 10, n.3, (2024): 338.

of losing a child, this interpretation risks oversimplifying the experiences of enslaved women. Of course, it is natural that these women would be sad and devastated upon the death of their child, but this presence of sadness and grief following death does not negate the agency involved in making such decisions. To suggest that sorrow invalidates the intentionality behind acts like abortion or infanticide diminishes the complex realities of enslaved women's lives. Such actions, while not universally practiced, were likely deliberate choices rooted in both survival and resistance. They reflect a deeply layered and complex notion of care, wherein women sought to shield their children from the horrors of enslavement and reclaim some measure of control over their own lives. For those who made these decisions, the act was not just one of personal autonomy but also a blow against the system of enslavement itself, depriving enslavers of capital and undermining their power. In doing so, these women demonstrated profound agency and resistance within a context designated to strip them of both.

Methods of Infanticide and Abortion

The question then arises: if enslaved women were actively engaging in the practice of infanticide and abortion, how were these acts carried out, and from where did the knowledge originate? Some scholars suggest that the harsh physical labour endured by enslaved women disrupted menstrual cycles, leading to miscarriages and low fertility rates.[34] While these factors are undoubtedly relevant to the reproductive experiences of enslaved women, they do not fully account for the methods employed by those who consciously chose to terminate a pregnancy. Patricia Romero Curtin, drawing on the testimony of a freed enslaved person, concluded that no mechanical or artificial devices were used in abortions.[35] Instead, when the act was intentional, the process of

[34] Campbell, "State and Pre-Colonial," 423.
[35] Curtin, "Laboratory," 872.

abortion often depended upon transnational and generational knowledge of plant life and the environment. This knowledge underscores the enduring power of oral history and the agency that can be enacted through shared and inherited knowledge. Enslaved people as knowledge carriers disrupt the colonial framework by suggesting networks formed of people considered 'socially dead' could aid in not only surviving socially but thriving. In particular, plant knowledge, and in this case, medical knowledge, emerges as a powerful tool that challenged hierarchies and the very nature of enslavement by positioning enslaved people as those more knowledgeable, exceeding the understanding of their enslavers.

Again, there is a limitation in the literature available for the use of plants as abortifacients in Madagascar, Mauritius, and Réunion. Although much of the existing scholarship related to this topic focuses on the Caribbean and South Asia, further research reveals some surprising connections. Some plants mentioned in European sources of the West Indies are, in fact, native to Madagascar, Mauritius, and Réunion. This transnational exchange of knowledge highlights the physical transnational movement of plants and the expertise surrounding them. This phenomenon underscores the capacity for movement that knowledge as an entity can possess, even within the confines of enslavement, providing an ever-increasing body of evidence that suggests plant knowledge crosses linguistic, cultural, and regional ties, superseding imposed borders and restrictions. Additionally, South Asian plant knowledge further contributes to this transnational framework. The transplantation of these plants to the Mascarenes through the migration of Indian labourers demonstrates how the circulation of people also facilitated the exchange of knowledge.

To explore the nature of plant knowledge used in abortions, it is essential to begin with plants native to the Mascarenes and Madagascar. However, even plants considered indigenous to Madagascar often have transnational origins. Austronesian and East African influences have long

shaped both the linguistic and ecological landscapes of the region. Cultivated plants such as rice, yam, coconut, saffron, sorghum, cowpea, Bambara pea, and bananas, while deeply rooted in Malagasy history, trace their origins elsewhere.[36] Plant transplantation from Africa, specifically, also highlights a possible method of the actual transportation of plant material, as it is noted that some people would braid rice seed into their hair before embarking on transnational journeys.[37]

The songo plant has a particularly extensive history in Madagascar and Réunion. Songo, similar to a type of taro, grows wildly along riverbanks in Madagascar and the Mascarenes. Due to its starchy composition, it was initially used as a form of sustenance. This was even encouraged by the French colonial government when they forced enslaved people to live off the plant during periods of famine. However, colonial perceptions of songo shifted in the mid-18th century. Specific preparation methods caused the ingestion of songo to produce numbing effects, stimulating a fear within enslavers that they could be tricked with false symptoms by the people they enslaved. Although the exact process remains unclear, the plant's sustenance properties are derived from its roots, suggesting the toxic elements may reside in the stems or leaves. In the context of abortion, songo is only referenced once, yet its broader significance lies in the fear it invoked among French colonial authorities. In 1754, the colonial government considered burning all songo due to fear of the toxic elements as well as a building resentment that rebels and maroons were able to use it to survive.[38] This colonial focus on songo underscores an intersection of plant knowledge, resistance, and the threat such knowledge posed to colonial power structures.

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[36] Philippe Beujard, "The First Migrants to Madagascar and their Introduction of Plants: Linguistic and Ethnological Evidence," *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 46, n.2, (2011): 174.
[37] Tinde van Andel, Harro Maat, and Nicholaas Pinas, "Maroon Women in Suriname and French Guiana: Rice, Slavery, and Memory," *Slavery and Abolition* 45, no. 2 (2024): 189-190.
[38] Brixus, *Creolized Science,* 97-99.

Bearers of a significant body of knowledge and acting as memory keepers, women are often responsible for the transmission of oral history and generational knowledge. This is especially true for the *matrones* of the Mascarenes. Acting as midwives, healers, wet nurses, and nurses, *matrones* were often scapegoated when women terminated pregnancies.[39] While the blame was harmful, it was not entirely misplaced. These women carried vast repositories of knowledge, and many *matrones* today still report methods for natural abortion, even during periods of illegality. For instance, in interviews conducted in 2017 by Laurence Pourchez, an anthropologist conducting a study in Mauritius, Rodrigues, and Réunion on women and traditional medicine in nature, Raïssa, a 35-year-old *matrone* recommended a *tisane* of pineapple and green thyme. Similarly, Miriam, a 32-year-old *matrone*, suggested using red pineapple leaves.[40] Notably, although this is based on interviews conducted in the 21st century, every *matrone* interviewed accredited their knowledge not to any formal training or literature but to their elders and those who generationally passed the knowledge down to them, whether it be a cousin or a grandmother. Tracing the origins of this knowledge into the deeper past is challenging due to the reliance on oral history and generational trends. Two predominant theories emerge: one posits that these techniques originated in Madagascar, East Africa, or India and were brought to the Mascarenes by enslaved women, along with their existing knowledge systems. The other suggests that the *matrones* themselves developed these methods within the context of their lived experiences. Regardless of their origins, the knowledge carried by *matrones* has probably been shaped over centuries, reflecting narratives of survival and resilience. The advice provided today echoes the agency and

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[39] Laurence, Pourchez, *Women's Knowledge: Traditional Medicine and Nature; Mauritius, Réunion and Rodrigues*, (UNESCO, 2017), 35.
[40] Pourchez, *Women's Knowledge,* 36.

resistance embodied by enslaved women who relied on such practices to assert control over their bodies and their circumstances in the past.

Other plants native to Madagascar and the Mascarenes that have been reported as abortifacients include the peacock flower, aristolochia (birthwort), Madagascar periwinkle (myrtle), *ahilava*, *nifin'akanga*, avocado leaf, *romba* (African basil), and *vatolalaka*. The peacock flower, although native to Madagascar and the Mascarenes, was popularized as an abortifacient in the Caribbean, and although the flower itself gained popularity in Europe, the knowledge of its abortive qualities did not.[41] This embedded knowledge being a protected entity among enslaved people, whether in Madagascar and the Mascarenes or the Caribbean, demonstrates a cultivated ignorance by the colonial culture surrounding the knowledge enslaved people carry. Whether ignored due to perceptions of being unintelligent or primitive compared to western medicine, knowledge, held closely by the enslaved, remained intentionally hidden or inaccessible to colonial systems, underscoring the cultural and intellectual agency of enslaved people.

Much like the knowledge of their existence, the preparation methods for these plants are rarely documented in formal literature. It can be assumed that their usage was transmitted orally rather than through written records or recipe catalogues. In interviews conducted in 2016 by a group of researchers exploring Madagascar's pharmaceutical uterotonics in connection to abortion and hemorrhaging, two *matrones* acknowledged that, despite abortions being considered a possible spiritual source of misfortune or unluck, they were performed by both health practitioners and traditional healers. These *matrones* referenced the explicit use of stems from *ahilava* and *nifin'akanga*, highlighting the specific plant parts associated with abortive qualities.[42] The concept

[41] Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World,* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 5.
[42] Lillian Collins, Rachel Favero, Christian W Gruber, Kristin Mmari, and Luke C Mullany, "An exploration of Village-Level Uterotonic Practices in Fenerive-Est, Madagascar," *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth*, (2016): 5.

of misfortune tied to abortion is particularly significant, as it reflects the shifting spiritual beliefs in Madagascar. While misfortune was historically a leading cause of infanticide, over time, it became a testimony of anti-abortion sentiments. Furthermore, change over time is highlighted through the acknowledgement of misfortune and the continued practice of abortion despite it, demonstrating a continued assertion of agency. *Nifin'akanga*, described as a plant with a small blue flower, is so widely recognized as an abortifacient that it has become the namesake of a pro-abortion and pro-choice activist group in Madagascar in the 21st century.[43] This enduring legacy of plant knowledge connects historical resistance to contemporary activism, particularly in reproductive health.

An intriguing case is that of savin (*juniper sabina*), which was one of Europe's leading abortifacients and was also used in the Caribbean.[44] Originating in the Mediterranean basin, it was prepared as an abortifacient by boiling its leaves to create a tisane.[45] Savin's connection to the southwest Indian Ocean World was only discovered through examining Jacques Arago's account of his travels in the region during the early 19th century. In mentioning how frequent abortion was among Black women and the varying performances they would do to encourage the termination of pregnancy, he includes mention of Malagasy women taking infusions of savin and other pernicious plants.[46] His observations, although deeply embedded in racialized and oppressive narratives, provide evidence of savin's use in the region, adding new dimension to the conversation on plant knowledge and transmission.

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[43] "Madagascar's 'Angel Makers' Flourish in Ban on Abortion," France 24, published September 1 2019, accessed December 8, 2024. https://www.france24.com/en/20190901-madagascar-s-angel-makers-flourish-in-ban-on-abortion
[44] Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire, 105.*
[45] Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire,* 132.
[46] Jacques Arago, *Narrative of a Voyage round the World: in the Uranie and Physcienne Corvettes, Commanded by Captain Freycinet, during the years 1817, 1818, 1819, and 1820,* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 141-142.

South Asian, particularly Indian, knowledge also contributes to the body of reproductive knowledge in Madagascar and the Mascarenes. Ethnopharmacological studies reveal the use of four plants native to India used for abortive purposes in Mauritius: papaya, peepal tree, piper betel, and lemongrass.[47] The practices surrounding these plants reflect a diversity of regional applications. For instance, papaya usage in Eastern Rajasthan involved making an oral infusion from its flower and latex root, while in Assam Bhopal and Tinsukia, the latex and leaf were used.[48] The peepal tree, originating in Tamil Nadu and Thoppampatti, was similarly utilized for its latex, leaf, flower, bark, and tender shoots. [49] Interestingly, while the peepal tree served as an abortifacient in Mauritius and some Indian regions, it was also revered by Hindu women as a symbol of fertility, showcasing the adaptability and evolving nature of plant-based knowledge, in their medicinal and spiritual practices. Piper betel is used for the root, which is crushed and mixed with water. Similarly, it originates from Thoppampatti, Dindigul, Tamilnadu, and Eastern Rajasthan.[50] Piper betel has further roots grounding it in the history of abortion and infanticide in the Mascarenes as one of its vernacular names includes *maron(ne)*.[51] Bétel marron, also know as *Piper borbonense,* has both creolized and direct linguistic ties to maronage positing it as biological evidence of botanical knowledge and resistance collaboration, both in freedom making and in reproduction. Lemongrass is used by the leaf and taken orally, not only for abortion but also for postpartum bleeding. Lemongrass' transnational ties extend further beyond Mauritius as it was also found being used for abortive in the Caribbean in the 18th and 19th centuries under the name fever grass.[52]

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[47] Mohamad Fawzi, M F Mahomoodally, Kheemy Protab, and Muhammad Zakariyyah Aumeeruddy, "Medicinal Plants Brought by Indian Indentured Immigrants: A Comparative Review of Ethnopharmacological Uses Between Mauritius and India." *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 234, (2019): 247.
[48] Fawzi, "Medicinal Plants," 253.
[49] Fawzi, "Medicinal Plants," 259.
[50] Fawzi, "Medicinal Plants," 260.
[51] Kull, "Marooned Plants," 67.
[52] Fawzi, "Medicinal Plants," 279.

Roots of the henna plant can also be used to cause an abortion, a plant apparent in the Mascarenes, but originating from South Asia.[53] These examples highlight the fluidity of transnational plant knowledge, illustrating how practices evolved and adapted across linguistic, cultural, and geographical boundaries.

In examining the use of plants as abortifacients, it becomes clear that this knowledge not only highlights the resourcefulness of enslaved women, but also underscores abortion as a profound act of resistance. By utilizing plants to terminate pregnancies, these women actively defied the reproductive labour expected of them, directly challenging the colonial systems that sought to commodify their bodies and their children. This act of resistance, deeply rooted in botanical and medical knowledge, reveals the agency of enslaved women who made calculated decisions to reclaim autonomy over their bodies, even within the oppressive confines of enslavement. Moreover, the transnational and generational transmission of plant knowledge reflects a powerful narrative of survival and resilience. The movement of plants and associated practices—whether from Madagascar to the Mascarenes, the Caribbean, or India—shows how enslaved and marginalized communities preserved, adapted, and shared this knowledge across borders and through oral communication. These networks of knowledge, cultivated and maintained primarily by women, disrupted colonial hierarchies by positioning enslaved people as bearers of critical expertise, whether in medicine, healing, or survival. Through this interplay of transnational plant movement, generational oral history, and personal agency, the enduring legacy of enslaved women's reproductive knowledge transcends the historical narrative of oppression. Illustrating how these women transformed their intimate understanding of the natural world into a tool of resistance and empowerment, ensuring that their choices—whether for survival, defiance, or

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[53] Rosabelle Boswell, "Sexual practices and sensual selves in Zanzibar," *Anthropology Southern Africa* 31, n.1 (2008): 75

care—resonated far beyond the immediate boundaries of their enslavement. This continuity of knowledge, still evident in practices today, stands as a testament to the agency, resilience, and enduring impact of enslaved women's actions in resisting the dehumanizing forces of colonialism.

The recognition of abortion and infanticide as forms of agency and resistance necessitates a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding these practices. While they often embody acts of defiance against the oppressive systems that sought to control the bodies and reproductive lives of enslaved women, they are not universally or exclusively symbols of resistance. For many enslaved women, these experiences were forced upon them, stripping them of autonomy and representing profound suffering rather than practicing agency or resistance. Many cases stem from horrific displays of reproductive violence and simply remove the choice from women in a different way. This duality underscores the importance of situating abortion and infanticide within the broader spectrum of unfreedom. When women chose to terminate a pregnancy, it was an assertion of agency—a reclamation of choice in a world designed to deprive them of any. But forcibly enduring an abortion or infanticide without consent is equally the removal of choice. In the 1970s, French Réunionese doctors, spurred on and falsely justified by theories of overpopulation, conducted a decade-long practice of forced abortion and sterilization on Réunionese women.[54] This case of post-colonial state violence perpetuated the same systems of control and violation that enslaved women endured centuries earlier. It is not separate from discussions of abortion; they exist in the same sphere. Both agency and oppression can and do exist as true, acknowledging one without the other would be harmful and erase essential aspects of an interwoven history.

The historical mathematics of life are difficult to analyze; Katherine McKittrick phrases it as how the "breathless, archival numerical evidence puts pressure on our present system of

[54] Françoise Verges, *The Wombs of Women: Race, Capital, Feminism,* (Duke University Press, 2020), xv.

knowledge affirming the knowable and disguising the untold."[55] The absolute economic registers we depend on for analysis are excellent at offering statistics but hinder the expression of humanity. Stories of humanity that cannot be told otherwise because these histories are not written by those who experienced it or even recorded at all. Within this, even simple statistics, such as Sibree's estimation of infanticide being the cause of death for 25% of Malagasy babies, cannot be taken at face value. There is no way to know that this statistic refers just to the spiritual and intentional practice of infanticide by Malagasy women; it could just as easily be a product of illness, abandonment, a lack of resources, or state-based action. Framing abortion and infanticide as acts of resistance can, at times, romanticize an idealized vision of history, one where enslaved women always retained the agency to make such choices. While this agency existed in some cases and must be honoured, it was not universal. The reality is far more complex: these acts can simultaneously signify empowerment, tragedy, and a reflection of the profound constraints placed on enslaved women. Remaining childless was not always a purposeful choice of resistance; its convoluted nature can also put it within stories of tragic loss and an unachievable goal. Conversations about resistance must move beyond the binaries of agency versus victimhood or resistance versus compliance. Instead, it should embrace the intricate, overlapping realities of choice, coercion, survival, and loss. By doing so, we can more fully honour the lived experiences of enslaved women, recognizing their capacity for resistance while remaining cognizant of the immense suffering imposed upon them. This duality of experiences, even within a singular act, enriches our understanding of the past and underscores the importance of resisting reductive interpretations of historical resistance and survival.

[55] Katherine McKittrick, "Mathematics Black Life," *The Black Scholar* 44, n.2, (2014): 17.

Conclusion

The histories of abortion and infanticide in Madagascar, Mauritius, and Réunion reveal a profound interplay between resistance, oppression, and survival within the broader framework of enslavement and colonial violence. For enslaved women, reproductive decisions—whether made voluntarily or imposed—existed on a complex spectrum that underscores the tension between agency and systemic exploitation. When exercised by choice, acts like abortion and infanticide symbolized defiance, a refusal to comply with colonial powers that sought to commodify their bodies and reproductive capacities. Yet, these same acts could also reflect immense suffering when forced upon women, stripping them of autonomy and subjecting them to reproductive violence. These women's stories demonstrate the complexities of enacting care and agency as resistance and against all odds, practiced even through violent structures and environments and the oppressive confines of enslavement. The transnational and generational transmission of knowledge emerges as a cornerstone of this resistance. Through the preservation and adaptation of botanical knowledge rooted in Malagasy, African, and Indian traditions, enslaved women disrupted colonial narratives that sought to render them powerless. This knowledge transcended linguistic, cultural, and geographic boundaries, becoming a potent tool not only for survival but also for challenging hierarchies and asserting agency. These practices reflect the enduring legacy of oral history and the resilience of enslaved communities, who navigated and resisted the systems of oppression that sought to define every aspect of their lives.

While much of the existing literature has focused on the Atlantic world, this essay highlights the importance of the Indian Ocean World in understanding the broader dynamics of enslavement and resistance. The cases of Madagascar, Mauritius, and Réunion challenge dominant colonial narratives, demonstrating that enslaved women were not passive victims but active agents

in shaping their lives and asserting control where it was otherwise denied. By exploring these histories, we not only acknowledge the humanity and resilience of enslaved women but also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of resistance within the structures of colonialism and enslavement.

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