“Blood, fire, and freedom”
Enslaved women and rebellion in nineteenth-century Cuba

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In Cuba’s public history of rebellion, Carlota Lucumí dominates the narrative at the Triunvirato sugar mill archeological site in Matanzas. At the signal to start the revolt in November of 1843, she retrieved a machete hidden inside the slave barracks. With the dramatic cry of “Blood, fire, and freedom!” Carlota raised the blade, broke the chained door, and freed the rebels. Authorities linked her actions to a series of uprisings in March, May, June, and July of that year. Carlota Lucumí, however, was not the only woman who led or participated in the uprisings. Rather, she represents one end of a continuum in the multidimensional contributions that women of African descent made in the struggle to end Cuban slavery during the nineteenth century. Exploring their roles expands our understanding of gendered resistance in the colonial context and lays the foundation for insights into contemporary forms of collective and individual agency at the intersection of race, gender, and power.

The actions of enslaved women in revolts varied from the visible to the clandestine. Some led their comrades into battle, like Carlota Lucumí and other insurgent figures across the Caribbean. Many took on less visible parts as informants, messengers, munitions suppliers, and confidants. If trials ensued, officials demanded that women testify as witnesses to rebellious plots. The growing scholarship on this subject has sought to shift Black women from the margins to the center in areas ranging from community and family structures to resistance and nation-building. Such works shed light on the servitude that produced women’s “dual burden” of manual and reproductive labor within plantation economies. Furthermore, their opposition to enslavement reinforces the reality that revolts required shared efforts. The inhumanity of slavery fostered what Angela Davis called “a profound consciousness of resistance.” Scrutinizing these tumultuous spaces upends notions of African-descended women’s subservience to reveal their inherent abilities to foment insurgency, lead combatants, and conceal conspiratorial knowledge.

Women and slave rebellion in Cuba

In the early nineteenth century, the Atlantic slave trade funneled thousands of Africans into Cuba. In defiance of Britain’s abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and Anglo–Spanish treaties in 1817 and 1835, Cuba expanded its imported workforce. Enslaved women had numbered 37,166
in 1792. By 1817, this sector had more than doubled to 74,821, and it escalated to 103,652 in 1827. By 1841, African and Cuban-born bondswomen had multiplied again to 155,245. Comprising approximately 30 percent of the enslaved sector, they proved vital as agricultural workers, domestics, street vendors, and midwives. Many of those who hailed from West and West-Central Africa arrived fully enmeshed in a skill set involving oral transmission, spiritual rituals, and warfare. As a result of their demographic size, African women played a significant role in Cuba’s cycle of revolt.

Organizations known as *cabildos de nación* helped sustain African ethnic affiliations during enslavement, such as Arara, Gangá, Mina, Kongo, and Lucumí, as the Yoruba were known in Cuba. These sociocultural mutual aid associations brought together captive Africans as well as free people of African descent. They supported the cultural transition of new arrivals and maintained traditions and adaptations in the diaspora, including the development of Santería and other syncretic religions. The organizations also offered a variety of services, ranging from artisanal apprenticeships, loans, celebrations, and housing to buying the freedom of enslaved participants. Groups also elected kings and queens as leaders. Because women often comprised a larger proportion of the membership, they typically directed organizational priorities as officers. Moreover, authorities implicated numerous association members in insurgencies. The lexicon of sovereignty within *cabildos de nación* provided the context for the roles of enslaved women in armed revolt.

Cuba experienced major uprisings between 1812 and 1843, yet the scholarship on women rebels is sparse. During the 1812 Aponte rebellion, officials arrested 32 women, including Isabel Infante, a slave, who garnered a punishment of 150 lashes and six years in prison, and Maria Merced Llanes, a free woman of color, who was sentenced to a four-year incarceration. The revolt of 1825 implicated Ana Gangá, wife of conspiratorial leader Frederico Carabalí, when rumors circulated that she had helped plan the uprising. Given that accused men faced death, Ana Gangá denied these allegations. Following upheavals in 1835, authorities apprehended a free woman of African heritage, known as “La Reyna” (queen), for hiding weapons on her property. This sparse data suggests that women’s shared subjugation enabled them to forge personal, cultural, and political alliances to incite revolt. They facilitated clandestine meetings and arms, but also disavowed knowledge when confronted with prosecution. These glimpses into women’s actions in the early nineteenth century underscore the reality that agitated resistance required their explicit and implicit participation.

Women in the Conspiracy of La Escalera

Leaders and insurgents

The rebellions of 1843, known collectively as the Conspiracy of La Escalera (The Ladder), named for the instrument of torture used to extract confessions, shed light on women as principal agitators. Carlota Lucumí and Fermina Lucumí became the most well-known enslaved women insurgents. Both had been born in Africa, shared the same ethnicity, and labored in the Matanzas sugarcane fields; Carlota on the Triunvirato plantation, and Fermina at the neighboring Ácana estate. Although additional data on Carlota remains shrouded, records on Fermina indicated that she had served as a primary organizer of a summer uprising and facilitated contact with the Triunvirato sugar mill in preparation for the ensuing revolts. For her actions, she suffered a vicious whipping and spent several months in iron shackles. This sketch of Carlota and Fermina provides insight into how cultural heritage, ethnic allegiance, harsh labor conditions
“Blood, fire, and freedom” – and in the case of Fermina, a history of agitated defiance – set the stage for the bold feats attributed to these women.

Testimonies characterized Carlota as a rebel leader. Following her battle cry of “Blood, fire, and freedom!” she ordered insurgents to set the Triunvirato fields ablaze and gather firearms abandoned by retreating planters and overseers. She then directed them to the nearby Ácana estate. Carlota’s exploits became more personalized there, where she assaulted the plantation manager’s daughter. She then guided fighters to four more sugar mills. While it is unknown when she succumbed to local militia forces, authorities found her dead body the next morning.14

Fermina Lucumí would also exact similar revenge while leading efforts at the Ácana plantation. Slave witnesses Filomena Gangá and Catalina Gangá declared that Fermina steered the combatants to the homes of white personnel and families living on the estate and instructed rebels to capture whites trying to escape. The groups at Ácana torched the fields and buildings, coerced hesitant slaves into battle, freed those who had been placed in irons, and killed six members of the slaveholding family. Officials imprisoned Fermina for several months and interrogated her. Although she denied having a leadership role, her rebuttal fell on deaf ears. Bondsmen and women from area plantations watched the display of colonial power as Fermina, along with seven accused men, suffered death by firing squad and had her body disfigured.15

Witnesses named additional women as front-line warriors. A dozen testimonies acknowledged Clotilde, a criolla (woman born in Cuba), for ordering rebels to scorch the La Purísima Concepción Echeverría grounds and proclaimed that she had targeted the overseer’s wife. The attacks by Clotilde and Carlota on the plantation manager’s spouse and daughter, respectively, suggest an antagonistic relationship between each pair that highlighted the gendered nuances of power and oppression that fueled retribution. Observers identified cíollas Carmita and Juliana among those from the Triunvirato estate who fought against colonial troops. They also recognized Filomena Gangá and Lucia Lucumí as major conductors of the armed upheaval at the Ácana and La Concepción plantations.16

The unconscious privileging of men in slave unrest has offered little space for addressing women’s leadership. Archival sources have traditionally recorded men at the center of revolts and attributed the expected acts of aggression and destruction to them. When women engaged in violent methods of resistance, their actions were often masculinized, masked, or reframed as mythical or extraordinary. The daring exploits of Carlota, Fermina, Clotilde, and numerous others, however, loosen the entrenched expectations of what a rebel leader looks like and what she is capable of doing.17

Colluders, queens, and confidants

Rebellion records from 1843 also offer alternate ways that women supported armed revolt. Authorities accused Antonia, a cook at the Buena Esperanza coffee plantation, of using her position to collude with bondsmen to poison their enslaver and asserted that her actions revealed a deep knowledge about the targets and goals of the plot. Her conspiratorial behavior could not be ignored, and consequently, Antonia faced execution.18 In addition, investigations revealed that many women had gained an awareness of the rebellion based on the dual meaning of “queen.” Beyond an elected office in a cabildo de nación, the title became a central designation of the insurrection. The testimony by Rosa, a queen from the Merced estate, exposed her vast understanding of the plot, from poisoning the enslavers and acquiring munitions and money, to using free men of color to circulate the movement.19 In terms of tacit participation, authorities arrested María del Pilar Poveda, a free woman of color, for permitting rebel leaders like her son-in-law,
renowned poet Placido (Gabriel de la Concepcion Valdes), to hold meetings in her house. As a skilled midwife, Poveda held a highly regarded position that garnered her social capital among the free, enslaved, and white populations. Judges assessed this as a dangerous combination and insisted that she must have had full knowledge of the rebellion and willingly hidden the gatherings from police. As punishment, officials banned Poveda from practicing midwifery under penalty of life in prison. As these examples suggest, aiding revolts as colluders, queens, and confidants left women vulnerable to incarceration, employment bans, and execution.

Because harsh punishments befell women for knowing too much, some engaged in an innocent bystander strategy. Many testified that they had only “overheard” snippets of conversations and therefore, had no real information about insurgent plans. Cecilia Criolla affirmed that she had noticed intermittent subversive chatter among the male work gangs, but nothing more. Numerous women whose spouses had been selected as kings denied any awareness of the uprisings. The mental and emotional exertion required to keep such secrets reveals an important form of passive resistance crucial to the development of the rebellion. State repression of the uprisings not only made knowing about the revolts a criminal act; it also entangled individuals within the larger conspiratorial framework. Ultimately, however, women’s silences and actions empowered combatants in the quest to dismantle the slave system.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to shatter the dominant refrain of slave rebellion as a fully masculine endeavor. Women’s involvement, whether visible or obscured, should be situated as crucial in the panorama of slave unrest. Their perception of insurgency as a path to liberty would prove pivotal in collective efforts to end Cuban slavery and colonialism. Since the time of Cuba’s nationalist battle against U.S. neocolonialism in the mid-twentieth century, a public narrative has embraced historical women freedom fighters. In honor of Carlota Lucumi, Cuba launched Operation Carlota, an elite military force that supported the Angolan liberation struggle in 1975. In 2015, the Rebel Slave Museum opened to venerate the cycles of revolt. A monument erected on the grounds of the Triunvirato plantation depicts three stages of enslaved Africans’ agency, from despondent to resolute to triumphant, and features a woman in the center position. These tributes represent Cuba’s efforts to acknowledge the ways that African peoples challenged colonialism and enslavement. Additional studies into the actions of women of African descent will craft a deeper understanding of the multifaceted ways in which they lived, fought, and died for freedom.

Notes

“Blood, fire, and freedom”


Franco, La gesta heroic del triunvirato, 28; Tour of the Rebel Slave Museum at the Triunvirato Sugar Mill, 2019; Franco, La gesta heroic del triunvirato, 29–30; Finch, “What Looks Like a Revolution,” 117.


Finch, Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba, 161, 165.
20 Reid-Vazquez, “Formidable Rebels,” 165; Reid-Vazquez, The Year of the Lash, 3; Reid-Vazquez, “Tensions of Race, Gender and Midwifery in Colonial Cuba,” 198.
21 Finch, Rethinking Slave Rebellion in Cuba, 152, 156, 157, 161, 165.
22 Reid-Vazquez, “Formidable Rebels,” 172.

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