

[Blakley on Brown, 'Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War'](#)

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Vincent Brown. *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020. viii + 320 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), [ISBN 978-0-674-73757-0](#). 

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Decentering Tacky: The Coromantee War in the African Atlantic World

Slavery can be understood as a state of ongoing, everyday war between the enslaved, enslavers, and the societies that engender these relations. Vincent Brown's study of the 1760-61 war on Jamaica, led by diverse figures—predominantly Coromantee men and women from the Gold Coast of Atlantic Africa including Tacky, Wager (also known as Apongo), and Simon—is a complex history of “a war within an interlinked network of other wars,” namely the Seven Years' War (p. 7). Making use of a range of archival materials, including maps, drawings, sketches, the papers of slaveholders, minutes of the House of Assembly, the Admiralty, the Board of Trade, and the diary of Thomas Thistlewood, Brown tells the story of a distinctly Coromantee-led war whose events reverberated throughout the Atlantic world. *Tacky's Revolt* is comprehensive in breadth and details the histories of Atlantic Africa and Jamaica before the war, the conflict itself, and the aftermath of the crisis on the island and throughout the broader British Empire. Brown's aim in telling the story of Tacky's Revolt as a war, rather than an uprising led by a singular figure, is to place the conflict as an ambitious bid for conquest within a uniquely Coromantee military-political history of the African diaspora, and to make sense of this struggle within the wider context of the Atlantic Revolutions of the late eighteenth century.

Brown utilizes the patterns of warfare, trade, and displacement in the wake of conflict to provide narrative structure to the book. The first chapter considers the militarized slaving societies in Atlantic Africa—principally the Gold Coast and Bight of Benin—that emerged between the mid-seventeenth century and early eighteenth centuries. Reinforcing patterns of combat, commerce, and dislocation in Africa ultimately produced a “martial geography” for African peoples as they moved about the Atlantic world, both willingly and unwillingly (p. 2). As the gold trade transformed into the slave trade, firms like the Royal African Company and the Dutch Geoctrooieerde Westindische Compagnie entered a world of ongoing warfare between African kingdoms. Trade opportunities with Europeans held in check on the coastline pushed kingdoms like Oyo, Dahomey, Asante, Denkyira, Akwamu, and Akyem to become “predatory slaving states” that waged war upon one another to expand their territorial reach and reap profits from exchanges of captive prisoners for goods from the Indian Ocean world via foreign slavers. Savvy rulers like Opuku Ware I of Asante and Agaja of Dahomey manipulated European rivals to push the geographic limits of their kingdoms as they

transformed their states into empires in their own right. The British Empire likewise adapted its martial forces for expanding slavery in the Atlantic world through conflicts such as the War of Jenkin's Ear, or Guerra del Asiento, a war fought over Britain's ambition to expand its merchant slaving fleet beyond the designated port cities of the asiento contract. Royal Navy ships besieged Porto Bello and Cartagena de Indias in a bid to "make the world safe" for British merchant slavers (p. 26). Here Brown considers the possible origins of Apongo, who later became one of the leaders of the Coromantee War in Jamaica, in the context of this Atlantic Africa. Whether he hailed from Dahomey, Asante, or one of the states making up the Fante confederation on the Gold Coast, Apongo's life—perhaps as a soldier, diplomat, or captive—was shaped by the cycles of warfare, captive-taking, and exchange that are central to Brown's analysis.

Meanwhile, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English Jamaica functioned as a militarized society ruled by a "garrison government" filled with veterans of imperial wars. The colonists in Jamaica likewise embraced the vision of being "governed as an army" and the martial culture of patriarchal male domination that suffused the island's government and society (p. 45). Military governance organized the island's forts, militias, and naval bases to fight constant war on two fronts: an outward war against European adversaries, namely the Spanish and French, and an inward war against the enslaved, runaway captives, and the Leeward and Windward Maroon communities that developed in the Cockpit Country and Blue Mountains. These latter "intestine enemies" faced brutal torture for resisting enslavers, and the slaveholders meted out punishments intended for enemy combatants such as starvation, drawing and quartering, and beheading (p. 57). In addition to the island's formal military architecture, sugar and coffee plantations were militarized spaces equipped with defensible walls installed with "Flankers, having loop holes for Fire Arms & Ports for small carriage Guns" surrounding estates (p. 52). Martial rule flowed from the government to plantations, as many planters and their overseers were veterans of conflicts like the Nine Years' War and Queen Anne's War. Brown emphasizes that slaveholders and overseers conditioned themselves to enjoy violence against the enslaved, as when one observer wrote that the children of slaveholders are raised to "make it one of their Diversions" and find pleasure in "a war against the dignity of the enslaved" (p. 58). The Articles of War, amended by Parliament in 1749, further enshrined an exceptionally hierarchical, disciplined, and bellicose vision of the nation's military and navy that intensified the martial culture of the empire's colonies. Apongo experienced this change himself as he labored for a year aboard a warship, the *Wager*, during the War of Jenkin's Ear. Apongo served alongside several other Akan men, including John Quaco, Peter Quamina, and John Primus, and his time in the navy added to his knowledge of European maritime tactics and ground strategy. Brown raises the hypothesis that enslavers specifically sought slaves with military prowess in an effort to reinforce their own "self-image as a conqueror" of territory and exceptionally militaristic people (p. 78).

Coromantees, principally Akan, Twi, and Ga-speakers from the Gold Coast, such as Apongo and Tacky, constituted a significant ethnolinguistic group in Jamaica by the early decades of the eighteenth century. Slaveholders coveted captives from the Gold Coast for their "ingenious" reputation for being "easily taught any Science or Mechanick Art." (p. 87). On the other hand, many planters feared Gold Coast slaves for their reputed predilection to revolt in rapid, fierce uprisings, as when fifteen Coromantees murdered Major Samuel Martin of Antigua on Christmas Day in 1701. Expanding on previous scholarship, Brown explains how the ethnic category of Coromantee—often spelled Calamante or Cormantine—emerged in the early eighteenth century as multilingual captives with similar cultural backgrounds from the Gold Coast coalesced in the Caribbean.[1] The term

Coromantee likely stems from the English castle at Cormantyn, established in 1618, and from the appellation being later associated with the Gold Coast. English and Dutch slavers learned how Atlantic Africans prosecuted war through rapid skirmish attacks rather than deployed linear regiments. The influx of guns from Europe in the second half of the seventeenth century transformed warfighting and slaving in Atlantic Africa. States and armies in Europe and Africa simultaneously experienced a “military revolution” that resulted in the escalation of the Atlantic slave trade.[2] Therefore, the war captives who were transported to the Caribbean brought West African stratagems and rituals with them, especially oath-taking ceremonies led by obeah shamans. For instance, the 1733 revolt on Sankt Jan was led by slaves who sought to replace the island’s Danish government with “the remnants of the Akwamu political-military aristocracy,” which also involved ritual oath-taking (p. 105). While this revolt was unsuccessful, others achieved significant results. The First Maroon War (1728-40) led to the ratification of peace treaties between the Leeward Maroons at Trelawny Town, the Windward Maroons at Nanny Town, and the British state. It was in particular knowing and exploiting Jamaica’s mountainous terrain carved with sharp ravines that proved central to the maroons’ tactics and ultimate triumph in 1740. Further, Brown illuminates how psychological and sonic warfare, such as manipulating noises and echoes from abeng horns to confuse British troops, played a role in the maroons’ success. In the wake of the war, the British launched a massive road-building and forest-clearing campaign to improve transportation and prevent future rebellions from gaining any more momentum.

The event known as Tacky’s Revolt, Brown argues, is as much “an artifact of the fear and disorientation” caused by the uprising that began in Saint Mary Parish in April, 1760, as the actual assault on Frontier and Trinity plantations led by a group of Coromantee insurgents (p. 131). Rather than focus on the uprising led by Tacky on Easter Monday, April 7, 1760, Brown devotes more time to mapping the attacks that followed Tacky’s capture and death by April 14. Rebel units attacked and raided plantations after the Easter assault on Frontier and Trinity until mid-October 1761, including a campaign led by Apongo against estates in Westmoreland Parish. Like the First Maroon War, this war amounted to a contest for territorial conquest and political autonomy. One captured rebel was found armed with a mahogany “sword of state,” an artifact signifying the royal right to wage war, and Brown stresses the enslaved “were literally taking power into their own hands.” (p. 152). The rebel’s goal, Brown asserts, was the creation of a new Akan state, much like the attempted recreation of Akwamu in Sankt Jan. In particular, women played a crucial role in this multi-sided conflict, including Akua, the “Queen of Kingston,” who led a rebel group while adorned with “a crown upon her head” (p. 162).

Expanding beyond established narratives of the revolt as a phenomenon limited to the attacks in April, Brown situates the revolt within the broader conflict that he calls the Coromantee War, which lasted until the last attacks on plantations led by Simon and his followers upon St. Elizabeth Parish in the spring and fall of 1761. Brown lays out a brilliant narrative of the war, including the mistiming of Tacky’s group and the strategic decision by Apongo to assault Westmoreland Parish, a commercial and naval hub at the heart of the British Empire. The British counterinsurgency eventually defeated the rebels through scorched-earth warfare, the aid of maroon allies, and merciless public executions of captured rebels to intimidate would-be insurgents. Those captured who were not executed were transported to other colonies, including British Honduras and South Carolina, where they continued to rebel against their enslavers. One group of transported rebels from Jamaica in British Honduras murdered their enslaver and later blocked the colony’s river traffic at the same time as others

launched attacks in Saint Mary's Parish (p. 224). Uprisings like this one added to a growing anxiety among enslavers from Dutch Berbice to New York of the threatening presence of Coromantee rebels.

The Coromantee War sent shock waves throughout the wider Atlantic world and influenced the intellectual and political changes already underway in the early Age of Revolutions. Brown shows how the rebels' conscious decision to strike in the midst of the Seven Years' War tested the limits of Britain's imperial war machine as the state struggled to defeat the insurgency while simultaneously battling throughout the globe. Moreover, the war influenced the growing anti-Black thought of genocidal settler colonists like Edward Long, whose ideas gained traction within the empire in the conflict's aftermath.

Needless to say, slave war and diaspora continued to drive the creation of Atlantic African communities in the Americas into the late eighteenth century. For instance, Dutty Boukman, one of the figures involved in the early conflict in Saint-Domingue in 1791 that later became the Haitian Revolution, and who presided as a houngan priest during the vodun ceremony on August 14, 1791, at Bois Caïman in which rebels pledged their allegiance to each other after sacrificing a black pig, possibly arrived to the island from Jamaica in the wake of the Coromantee War. Boukman would have quickly learned about the previous wars from the enslaved community, since narrating resistance and war became a means of initiation into Afro-Jamaican society by which the enslaved repeatedly instructed new arrivals from West Africa. Thus, Brown interprets acts of telling history between slaves and those newly arrived as "a radical pedagogy of the enslaved" that nourished future acts of revolutionary violence (p. 242). Into the nineteenth century, then, antebellum slaveholders still feared "Tackey among us" who might prepare to eradicate the United States' slave society (p. 244).

Altogether, *Tacky's Revolt* is a highly original military, social, and political history of the Coromantee War and its influence in the Greater Caribbean and Atlantic world. Brown's use of cartography to map the timing and direction of the revolts led by Tacky, Apongo, Simon, and others gives the reader an excellent visual sense for understanding each wave of the long Coromantee War and its spatial evolution as the result of strategic decisions made on the part of Atlantic African martial thought. While Brown introduces several women involved the Coromantee War—especially Akua, who returned to Jamaica from exile in Cuba during the revolt, and Mary, an enslaved women who survived rape at the hands of her enslaver and was later transported to British Honduras during the rebellion—it is surprising that the book's overview of the development of the Windward Maroons largely minimizes the role of Nanny, or Queen Nanny, in leading the town that later bore her name in the Blue Mountains. Though Nanny has been a subject of historical analyses of the Windward Maroons and marronage more generally, it is surprising she is given less attention here than other important maroon figures such as Kojo. Moreover, while Brown does mention the presence of Taíno-speakers in the Leeward and Windward Maroon towns, he does not pursue, to the extent that the archive would permit such questions, the possibility that Indigenous ideas about war may have played a role in the Coromantee War. Nevertheless, scholars of the Caribbean, West Africa, the British Empire, and Atlantic slavery/world will find the text valuable, particularly for Brown's development of the *longue durée* of the Coromantee War.

Notes

[1]. Walter C. Rucker, *Gold Coast Diasporas: Identity, Culture, and Power* (Bloomington: Indiana

University Press, 2015); Kwasi Konadu, *The Akan Diaspora in the Americas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[2]. John K. Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa, 1500-1800* (London: University College London Press, 1999), 6-9.

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