Marjoleine Kars, *Blood on the River: A Chronicle of Mutiny and Freedom on the Wild Coast*. New York: New Press, 2020. 362 pp. (Cloth US\$27.99)

This is the first full study of the Berbice Rebellion of 1763, in which hundreds of enslaved men and women took over much of the tiny Dutch colony (population: 350 Europeans, nearly 5,000 enslaved Africans, 300 enslaved Amerindians, plus thousands of Amerindians off in the forest), held their ground for 13 months during which they bargained with the local plantocracy to be given half the colony permanently, and were eventually defeated by mercenaries imported from Holland, Amerindian allies of the colonists, and their own internecine rivalries. Marjoleine Kars, a Dutch historian who teaches in Maryland, “discovered” the records of the interrogations of some 900 people (230 “suspects” and 650 “detained bystanders”) in the National Archives in The Hague.

After outlining the seventeenth-century founding of the colony, she unfolds the story of the rebellion, almost plantation by plantation (of which there were fewer than 150, most with less than 50 enslaved people), the activities of the main leaders, the negotiations via written letters with Dutch authorities, the armed battles and, ultimately, the defeat of the “rebels,” their interrogations and sentencing, and the grisly executions of 120 men and 4 women.

Kars was faced, much like Natalie Davis in *Fiction in the Archives*, with trying to piece together a story from the extremely freighted words of people testifying for their lives, in this case “mediated by a European clerk, who translated Creole into Dutch, summarized answers, and wrote in the third rather than the first person, ... given that people had every reason to distort, omit, or lie, it is hard to separate truth from fiction” (pp. 4, 251). She is nonetheless able to tell us that their political goal was to obtain “half” (the interior part) of the colony and leave the Dutch to continue plantation slavery in the rest. Indeed, the Creole governor of the insurgents for much of the rebellion, Coffij, had a vision of a state that would continue to grow sugar on its own plantations but, after Coffij’s suicide, his African-born successor, Atta, favored something closer to what Maroons had established in Suriname.

Kars writes interesting pages contrasting what the leaders wanted (“liberty to run a colony of their own with a measure of human bondage in place”) and what “ordinary self-emancipated people wanted (to tend their own gardens)” (p. 5). She describes the dilemma faced by enslaved people about whether even to join the rebellion, suggesting that those who “belonged” to the Company (which owned the colony)—mainly Creoles who had family and other ties to the plantations—were the most reluctant to join. She also shows how, among the insurgents, Creoles and Saltwaters were frequently at odds, with Creoles

at one point threatening to kill the Saltwater leadership. And she describes conflicts among insurgents of different African origins, for example how “Aminas” (from the Gold Coast) and “Angolans” (presumably Loangos, from Central Africa) battled each other, or how the “Creoles had to serve [the Aminas] as slaves” (p. 186). There was even a mutiny among the European mercenaries which led 41 to join the insurgents (who quickly executed most of them).

There are many parallels with Maroon state formation in Suriname, for example, the deep division between those who wished to continue to battle the colonists and those who argued for peace (described in my *First-Time*, which she does not cite), and the intense political rivalry between Creoles and Saltwaters in the formation of the new Okanisi State, highlighted at the exact period of the Berbice conflict in Bonno Thoden van Velzen’s *Prophets of Doom* (2022).

As a proselytizer for the use of oral history, I was struck by the extent to which a book about eighteenth-century Maroons or rebellions that is, of necessity, based solely on archives (documents almost always penned by the oppressors) can tell only a partial story. Think of how much Ken Bilby’s use of oral sources adds to Mavis Campbell’s solid history of Jamaica Maroons, or Thoden van Velzen’s to Wim Hoogbergen’s detailed history of the Boni Wars, or those in *First-Time* or *Alabi’s World* to the archival material in those books. For example, Bonno’s, Ken’s, or my own books about eighteenth-century Maroons are absolutely filled with discussions of “religion” (*obia*, divination, witchcraft, ancestor worship, sorcery, ordeals, shrines, ceremonies for the gods ...). Yet these are barely mentioned for Berbice. This is not a criticism of Kars—how could it be otherwise, given the sources?—, but rather a reminder of how much we are ultimately missing of what really happened, from the point of view of the protagonists.

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