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***What Liberty Could Mean: Male Slaves’ Struggles for the Right to Form Families Capable of Holding Rights in Early Colonial Saint-Domingue (1697–1715)***

Between 1697 and 1715 a group of military officers transformed the former corsairs’ operational base into the most productive slave plantation economy of the 18th century. They did so by using the slaves’ workforce. During the War of Spanish Succession (1702-1713) slaves constructed plantations, houses, streets, in short the whole built environment which facilitated a spectacular burst of sugar production in 1715.

During the same period of time colonial elites struggled for implementing the regulations of the Code Noir (1685) which among others restricted the freedom of movement of the slaves who were bound to the plantations. Furthermore, it prohibited their right to marry without the consent of their owner. Finally, slaves could not own and inherit something and the children of slave mothers were to be slaves.

Slaves, male and female, opposed these politics by all sorts of resistance. Most interesting is the struggle of male slaves for the right to form families capable of holding rights and to inherit. This surprising because the white working poor in the colony, male as well as female, opposed marriage much to the chagrin of the colonial elites.

In this paper I will examine first how especially male slaves became aware of the advantages of the European concept of marriage and forming a legally protected household by the propaganda from the neighboring Spanish colony of Santo Domingo. There, authorities offered liberty for fugitive slaves from the French colony, expecting to incorporate the freed slaves in the local militia system. Secondly, I will explain how the ideology and legal conceptions of the French officers leading the development process in Saint-Domingue favored the manumission of certain slaves. Thirdly, I will show how colonial elites made use of certain male slaves’ desire to form families and households by offering them posts in the militia and participations in military enterprises which could lead (in case of extraordinary performance) to manumission. These politics led on the one hand to the incorporation of slaves in the system of public police in the colony. Slaves protected slavery and especially the security of the public space in case of inner conflicts and military aggression. On the other hand these politics were at the origin of the creation of the militarily extremely experienced population of free people of color and slaves over the course of the 18th century.