
Court and Tomboy

(fl. 1736),

Natalie A. Zacek

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.73713>

Published in print: 01 June 2016

Published online: 31 May 2017

A version of this article originally appeared in *The Dictionary of Caribbean and Afro-Latin American Biography*.

central figures in the 1736 conspiracy of slaves and free people in Antigua, Court and Tomboy attained an unusual degree of autonomy within the parameters of slavery in the Atlantic world. Court, also known as Tackey, was born around 1690 in what is now Ghana, and had been brought as a captive to Antigua in 1701. His master, Thomas Kerby, was the speaker of the Antigua House of Assembly, and so trusted Court that he allowed him to “carry on a Trade and many other greater Indulgencies than were allowed to any Slave in the Island” (Gaspar, p. 235), allowing Court not only freedom of movement around St. John’s, the island’s capital, but also the opportunity to earn and retain his own money. Tomboy, born in Antigua around 1690, was a highly skilled carpenter whose master, the merchant Thomas Hanson, allowed him to take on his own apprentices and pay Hanson a monthly sum, which constituted a fairly small proportion of his earnings. Like Court, his intelligence, skill, and seeming trustworthiness allowed him a degree of mobility and self-determination highly uncommon in Antigua and throughout the world of Atlantic slavery.

In October 1736 William Mathew, governor of the Leeward Islands colony, of which Antigua was the seat of government, claimed that he had discovered evidence of a plot. According to him, hundreds of local slaves and some allies among the island’s free people of color planned to use the occasion of a ball in honor of the coronation of George II to kill the island’s white elite, free themselves from slavery, and seize control of the island. Horrified by what they believed was a narrowly averted catastrophe, the legal authorities aimed to prevent any possibility of future conspiracies by identifying the plot’s leaders and punishing them in exceptionally severe ways. The evidence presented by various Antiguan slaves who claimed loyalty to their masters and wished to prove themselves innocent of involvement in the endeavor asserted that Court and Tomboy were the prime conspirators.

Although Tomboy was supposedly more intimately involved in the mechanics of the affair, as he, in the guise of building seats in the ballroom, had allegedly planted gunpowder throughout the venue that he and his accomplices would ignite to blow up the attendees, it was Court who was said to have been the instigator of the conspiracy. Most notoriously, on Sunday, 3 October 1736, a large number of slaves had assembled on their day off in a pasture outside St. John’s. It was common for slaves to enjoy their leisure with dancing and festivity, but on this day Court, lavishly dressed, danced in the center of a ring of slaves, raised a shield, and was apparently crowned as the king of the Coromantees, the Akan-speaking ethnic group to which he belonged. While some attendees claimed that these actions were a harmless entertainment, the panicked Antiguan authorities, who both admired and feared the supposedly warlike nature of Coromantee slaves, ruled that Court would be executed the next day, 20

October, and Tomboy the following day. Both men were broken on the wheel, their bodies were burned, and their severed heads were mounted on poles and displayed outside the jail in which they had been confined.

Although the conspiracy never came to fruition, and some Antiguan residents were skeptical that it even existed outside the fantasies of the enslaved and the anxieties of their owners, the lives of Court and Tomboy, described by the records of the investigation of their alleged plot, illuminate the possibilities and limitations of slave life in the eighteenth-century Caribbean. The two men's obvious intelligence and commercial and artisanal abilities, combined with many years' performance of loyalty and trustworthiness in the eyes of white society, allowed them to move freely around the island, accumulate significant amounts of money, and live largely independent of their owners. But when trouble appeared imminent, Court and Tomboy's decades of reliable service could not protect them from executions that were brutal even by the standards of slave society. Tomboy was cast not as a skilled tradesman but as a dangerous interloper into the private spaces of the white elite, and Court's dignified demeanor was interpreted as evidence not of his good character but of his true nature as an African warrior who claimed royal authority.

Bibliography

Dyde, Brian. *A History of Antigua: The Unsuspected Isle*. London: Macmillan Caribbean, 2000.

Gaspar, David Barry. *Bondmen and Rebels: A Study of Master-Slave Relations in Antigua*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1985.

Mullin, Michael. *Africa in America: Slave Acculturation and Resistance in the American South and the British Caribbean, 1736-1831*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992.