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**History Honours Dissertation: The Mutiny on the *Meermin***

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## Chapter 1

During February and March of the year 1766, a Dutch slaving vessel, the *Meermin*, was to be the site of an act of violent resistance, murder and an abortive bid for freedom. Approximately 140 Madagascan slaves revolted against the VOC crew manning the vessel and assume control of the ship; they were subsequently deceived by a Dutch crew desperate for their lives, transported to a region far from the island kingdoms that they regarded as home, and ultimately violently defeated on the coast of a foreign land, a land where many were to remain and die, recaptured by those over whom they had, for a brief moment, won such a devastating victory. Their grasp for liberty thwarted by an almost fantastic mixture of cunning, firepower and luck, they were ultimately to submit to the authority of the cause of their oppression, and to remain in the land from which their attempts at flight had been directed. This land was the Cape Colony, under the hegemony of the VOC in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century; and on its coast, at the southernmost tip of the continent at Cape Agulhas, is the scene of this, one of the most violent, improbable and yet compulsive acts of resistance to occur in the early history of what is today modern South Africa.

Acts of slave resistance have in many ways assumed a position of prominence in the popular consciousness. In films such as *Amistad*, we have portrayals, albeit in historically-distorted fashion, of slaves making desperate and idealistic bids for freedom and liberty; and, very often, such popular portrayals encapsulate the experience of slave resistance and rebellion within a broad language of freedom and self-determination that finds resonances with contemporary audiences. Such an event as this certainly provides much from which one could produce an exciting and

compulsive narrative, one that re-inscribes the themes that animate our popular conceptions of oppression and freedom. The actual historical reality of an event such as that of the *Meermin* may, however, do as much to undermine the standard narratives of slave resistances as to corroborate or substantiate them. The purpose of this essay is thus partly intended as a critique of what is so often taken for granted, of what is constituted of fantasy and passed as reality. Through a rigorous examination of historical sources that detail the events of a particular slave mutiny that occurred off Cape Agulhas in 1766, a narrative will be constructed that will be as faithful as possible to the actual events as they were recorded. From such a narrative, one will be able to examine aspects of slave resistance and mutiny that are illuminated in the light of this particular incident, an examination that may do something to debunk the myths that conceal and distance as much as they may inspire.

What adds significance to this project is the current attempt to uncover the wreckage of the *Meermin*. Jaco Boshoff, a marine archaeologist, is currently engaged in a project to locate the site where the *Meermin* may be buried, and then, if successful, to excavate whatever remains of the vessel. The purpose of this paper is thus two-fold; while it is to be submitted for university assessment, it is also intended as a research project into the events of the uprising and wreck of the *Meermin* that will be used by those involved in the recovery scheme both as essential historical background, and as material from which various educational products relating to the event can be constructed. It is the hope of all concerned in the project that the recovery of the vessel will stimulate interest in both the specificities of this case, and in the broader issues surrounding the maritime world of the VOC that gave it birth.

The primary sources on which I have relied on order to reconstruct the events of the uprising fall into three categories. Dan Sleight, who has written an unpublished account of the mutiny, has consulted the same sources as I have; however, for academic purposes this is the first time that they have been directly consulted with the intention of producing an official narrative. While a few basic summarised versions of the story have been produced, they rely on the primary sources only in a marginal sense. Firstly, I have examined the court testimonies of officers and crew of the *Meermin*, compiled after the events had occurred and the slaves and crew had been transported back to Cape Town<sup>1</sup>. Two of the officers concerned, *Gesaghebber* Gerrit Christoffel Muller and *Onderstuurman* Daniel Carel Gulik were charged by the Court of Justice for negligence and for allowing conditions on board such that the murderous rebellion was made possible. In addition, two slaves, although not formally charged, were exiled to Robben Island in order to be observed by the Dutch who, even when the event was over, remained somewhat mystified by the way in which the slaves had so successfully mutinied against the European crew. Because criminal proceedings and interrogations were conducted, a substantial amount of relevant material is available in the records of the Council of Justice for 1766. Many of the surviving crew members, including *Adsisistent* Olof Leij, a man who was to play a prominent role in wresting control of the ship back from the mutineers and enabling their recapture, testified before the court, and the records contain detailed transcriptions of their testimonies. Those provided by Muller, Gulik and Leij are among the most lengthy and comprehensive, and provide much in the way of detail as to the events as they occurred aboard the ship, as well as the actions of officers and

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<sup>1</sup> The Court Minutes for the year 1766 contain details regarding action taken against the skipper of the ship and one of his senior officers, as well as two of the slaves who appeared to have been leaders in the rebellion. The reference for the minutes is CA CJ 48. Testimonies recorded from the officers and crew of the *Meermin* are contained in CA CJ 390.

crew and the motivations that guided and shaped such actions. However, due to the fact that these testimonies were recorded after the events occurred, and present particular perceptions of the uprising and wreck of the *Meermin* that are at least partially intended to convince the court of as great a degree of personal innocence as possible, they are less illuminating of the specificities of the actions of slaves, crew and the Dutch forces on the shore as they occurred day after day, than one is able to obtain in other records more suitable for this task. Hence they have assumed something akin to a secondary importance in the second chapter of my narrative, where the daily progression of events after the ship anchored in the Soetendaal's Valleij (the site of the landing and wreck) assumes primary significance, while still serving to illumine the nature of and motivations behind specific events and actions as they unfolded.

As far as considering the specificity of the landing and final wreck of the *Meermin* is concerned, the most important source is the letters written both between the site of the events and the authorities in Cape Town, as well as those written between Cape Town and the Soetendaal's Valleij and between Cape Town and other VOC authorities, particularly those stationed in Batavia<sup>2</sup>. The Landdrost of Stellenbosch and Drakenstijn, Le Sueur, despatched letters every couple of days from the Soetendaal's Valleij, to which he had travelled in order to oversee the quelling of the uprising and the attempt to save the ship and crew, to the Cape, detailing events as he observed them from shore. Similarly, once the mutineers had surrendered and the surviving sailors had been brought to safety, the officers of the *Meermin* despatched a missive detailing the events on the ship and the eventual surrender of the slaves to the Dutch

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<sup>2</sup> The letters written between the Soetendaal's Valleij, the site of the eventual wreck of the *Meermin*, and the Cape, are contained in CA C 516. The outgoing letters from the Cape, despatched both to the Soetendaal's Valleij and to Batavia, are to be located in CA C 1681 and CA C 1682.

forces. Contained in this collection of letters are two documents, written by the sailors on the ship and flung overboard in bottles, which were recovered by Le Sueur and his men on the beach. Such letters, containing the sailors' desperate pleas for assistance as well as their plans to thwart the intentions of their captors, are evocative of the urgency and almost fantastical circumstances that permeated both the consciousness and the resultant actions of the sailors; indeed, one could extend this appraisal to the entire range of sources that are contained in the letters, reflecting as they do a desperate, rapidly escalating reality of danger and menace. The frequency with which Le Sueur wrote to the governing authorities at the Cape is itself a telling indicator of the significance that Company officials ascribed to the events of the uprising while it was in the very process of unfolding, and the sense of gravity, growing desperation and imminent catastrophe conveyed by the letters are, in some ways, as important as the factual information that they contain.

The letters despatched by the Cape government to Le Sueur and the overarching authorities in Batavia are perhaps less important, in that they serve to summarise much of what recorded in the other sources. However, they also contain instructions determined by the Council of Policy and subsequently despatched to the Soetendaal's Valleij; these instructions bear further reflections of the serious weight conferred on the incident by none other than the supreme governing body of the entire region.

Written in response to the letters of Le Sueur, and in many cases responding affirmatively to his specific requests for assistance and oversight, they illuminate the measure of cooperation achieved between these two separate districts of the Cape in the face of such a grave disaster, as well as recount the various measures undertaken by the Cape government in the hope of securing the release and safe recovery of their

crew, ship and, it should be noted with some degree of emphasis, their goods. Thus, the letters received and despatched by the Cape of Good Hope during the year 1766 are the best means of obtaining a reliable, regular and chronologically accurate account reflecting nature and specificity of the events as they unfolded and the charged atmosphere that permeated this little corner of the Cape during this short time. For this reason they form my primary source for the second section of the narrative, and I make use of other records to supplement and add further detail and texture to the material that they contain.

The third significant primary source to which I have devoted my attention are the records of the Council of Policy at the Cape, again primarily for the months February and March 1766, but including various other resolutions both predating and succeeding this specific time period<sup>3</sup>. The Council of Policy, the most senior decision-making body at the VOC settlement at the Cape, adopted a number of resolutions during this period directed at resolving the situation in the most effective manner and salvaging as much of their equipment and merchandise as possible. Many of these resolutions were adopted in response to the letters of Le Sueur, and their directives are contained in the letters despatched from the Cape to the Soetendaal's Vallej. The Council of Policy records also contain the report of Philip van den Berg, a senior ship's carpenter who inspected the wrecked vessel and arrived at the conclusion that it was irrecoverable, as well as further details relating to the sentencing of Muller and Gulik. There is also information relating to previous activity of the *Meermin*; she had been equipped from 1761, and did not suffer the violent misfortune of 1766 while celebrating her maiden voyage. As has been mentioned, much of what one reads in

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this project, the resolutions that I have consulted are found in C 144.

these records is contained in the letters despatched from the Cape or is reflected elsewhere; however, they are useful as records of the decisions undertaken by the Council of Policy in relation to the disaster, and reflect the interests and preoccupations that Company officials foregrounded while the events were unfolding. The frequency of the deliberations are evidence themselves of the immense significance of the disaster to VOC operations; and the decisions and actions implemented by the Council of Policy are the best reflection of the ways in which the *Meermin* uprising and shipwreck impinged upon, and ultimately damaged, Company interests and agendas, and the measures adopted by the Company to alleviate as far as possible the effects of such damage, that are available in the historical record.

The narrative of the *Meermin* has been documented several times, with varying degrees of accuracy and completeness. The ship has sometimes been confused with a later vessel, also named the *Meermin*, which was in operation during the 1780s; thus one account, located in the *Readers' Digest Illustrated History of South Africa*, records the events of the uprising and shipwreck, but in a relating illustration makes some confusion with a record that relates to the second *Meermin*. This account is brief, but fairly accurate in its rendering of the events. However, the ship's log that is referred to in the illustration belonged to the second *Meermin*; no logbook has been recovered from the *Meermin* of 1766, and so no daily log is contained in the historical record. In addition to the brief version of the events contained in the *Readers' Digest*, an unpublished narrative has been written by the historian of Dutch rule at the Cape and recently published novelist, Dan Sleight. This narrative, comprising 16 pages and written in Afrikaans, provides for a detailed and yet concise summation of the mutiny and the subsequent events culminating in the wreck. Sleight's account relies primarily

on the sources that I have mentioned; his narrative is this founded on the actual historical record, and is the most complete and comprehensive account that is currently in existence. His perspective provides for a helpful balance to the details that I have gleaned from the primary sources, and grants one an overarching narrative structure that imparts coherence to the tangled myriad of events that are contained within the source material. Sleigh's account is thus an additional secondary source that draws directly on the primary material to which I have devoted my attention; its primary value relies in its chronological and narrative function, one that I have employed to cross-reference the actual events that I have derived from the historical record, and to include additional material where necessary. His account has also been employed by Jaco Boshoff and those involved in recovering the *Meermin* as further background material.

## Chapter 2

The *Meermin* was not an exceptional vessel, nor was it, by any means, embarking on any particularly unusual or dangerous operation. It was a *hoecker*, a small, probably two-masted multipurpose vessel that had been adapted and rigged for slaving expeditions<sup>4</sup>. Outfitted in Amsterdam in 1761, the *Meermin* had already engaged in a number of slaving expeditions during the years preceding her fatal voyage of 1766. Hence, one may suppose, the complacency of the crew, a complacency that was ultimately to cost half of them their lives.

The mutiny and ultimate wreck of the *Meermin* was enabled, in a number of ways, by sickness. The *Gesaghebber*, Gerrit Christoffel Muller, was not a well man; he claims, in his plea before the court penned in the minutes for the Council of Justice in 1766, that he had been sick for some time before the mutiny<sup>5</sup>. This appeal to his own lack of well-being as a mitigating factor for his poor performance is apparently his primary justification in his plea for a measure of clemency. Whatever degree of seriousness this sickness may have entailed, it is clear that the *Gesaghebber* was not in a fit frame of mind or body; and his own lack of willingness or ability to lead his men due to his illness is the first indicator of a slackened atmosphere of discipline aboard the ship, an atmosphere that could be manipulated towards one favouring the success of an open rebellion.

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<sup>4</sup> As shall become clear later in the narrative, the *Meermin* had more than one mast, which would indicate that it must have been a two-masted vessel. A *hoecker* could also have a single mast. For technical information on these vessels, see Haalmeijer and Vuik, *Fluiten, katten en fregatten*, pp. 41-45.

<sup>5</sup> CA CJ 48, ff. 126-128, Court Minutes.

It was not only Muller who was suffering in such a manner. On-board illness was certainly a common feature in seafaring expeditions of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and any infection could rapidly spread among the inhabitants of such a small, enclosed space with no natural outlet and little in the way of effective medicinal practice<sup>6</sup>. So it was that the slaves, chained and cooped below deck in conditions of undoubted discomfort that are difficult for the present-day observer to imagine, fell prey to some form of disease<sup>7</sup>. When one takes subsequent events into account, one is tempted to consider the possibility that the slaves may have been faking the symptoms of illness in order to obtain the degree of freedom necessary to stage a mutiny. No matter how convincing such a thesis may appear in the light of the events of the *Meermin*, it would be difficult to substantiate fully in the lack of definitive evidence. The crew, and in particular the officers under Muller, were obviously convinced that the slaves were ill and in need of some ameliorative treatment. Again one is tempted to conjecture, to suppose the possibility that Muller's heart was filled with compassion for the large number of those who were sharing a similar condition as that which he was suffering himself. Such suppositions aside, it was decided that the slaves could be freed of their chains in order for them to gain some fresh air and to recover as much as possible<sup>8</sup>; the Madagascan slave route often experienced large losses of slaves en route, and no doubt the officers were determined to preserve as much of what was now Company property as was humanly possible<sup>9</sup>. The slaves were released; the wheels were turning, and the conditions necessary for slave mutiny were as ripe as is perhaps on a slaving vessel of this era.

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<sup>6</sup> Leuftink, *Harde heelmeeesters: zeelieden en hun doktors in de 18de eeuw*, pp. 45-53.

<sup>7</sup> CA CJ 390, f. 1302, Testimony of *Gesaghebber* Gerrit Christoffel Muller.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> See Ravell, "The VOC Slave Trade Between Cape Town And Madagascar, 1652-1795", especially pages 36-37 and 56, as well as his historical overview of the slave trade itself. I will be examining Ravell's work more closely later in this paper.

It was *Gesaghebber* Muller who authorised the unchaining of the slaves, who were subsequently allowed to walk around on deck<sup>10</sup>. It was his first major blunder, the fatal consequences of which he could not possibly have foreseen at the time. The Company issued fairly strict regulations regarding the securing of slaves on board ship; and while it does allow for slaves to be brought on deck under certain conditions, it stresses that such a practice is to be limited, and that on such occasions that slaves are brought on deck a careful watch must be maintained at all times<sup>11</sup>. The document highlights the propensity for slaves to hurl themselves overboard as the most pressing concern with regard to them being brought above decks; a concerted mutiny is not mentioned, and one can presume that the likelihood of such a fatal turn of events had not impressed itself on the writers of the document. Certainly, one would be inclined to view Muller's decision to free a large number of slaves and allow them free movement on deck as a clear breach of Company principle, hence the harshness of his sentencing. Granted that he, like many Company officials, would have in all likelihood viewed the outbreak of a slave mutiny as a virtual impossibility, his decision to allow such uncircumscribed freedom to recently purchased slaves was perhaps motivated by the combination of an understandable concern for the maintenance of Company property with a lax attitude to the regulations governing slaving conduct, a laxness perhaps shaped by his own deteriorating condition. In fact, there was a precedent to suggest the possibility of violent insurrection; in 1753, a slave mutiny had occurred on the vessel *Drie Heuvelen*, which was suppressed before

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<sup>10</sup> CA CJ 390, f. 1302, Testimony of *Gesaghebber* Gerrit Christoffel Muller; Sleight, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> CA CJ 390, ff. 1153-1155, Copia Instructie (Instructions regarding the management of slaves on ship).

the slaves were able to gain control of the ship<sup>12</sup>. The fact that such a rebellion had occurred less than fifteen years previously makes Muller's conduct appear all the more foolish. One must presume that, as a Company servant, he considered the slaves in his charge as powerless and as mere physical entities incapable of human-motivated action, despite the historical evidence to the contrary. Muller had overstepped the boundaries of acceptable practice; the environment for mutiny had been set, with slaves walking the ship of their captors with greater freedom than one would expect a responsible captain to have granted them.

The atmosphere instigated by the actions of Muller were not of themselves sufficient for mutiny, although it is a matter of fascinating conjecture whether another form of rebellion would have occurred had *Commies* Crause not embarked on his disastrous course of action. If there is a man whose actions propels him beyond the sphere of the inept and hurls him headlong into the role of the buffoon, then such a man is *Commies* Johan Godfried Crause. The Readers' Digest Illustrated History of South Africa describes Crause as a man who took "Muller's casual attitude" to "ridiculous lengths"<sup>13</sup>; and while Muller certainly stands out as a captain whose authoritative ineptitude created an atmosphere conducive to mutinous violence, Crause has to be credited with not only allowing such a mutiny to happen, but also, quite literally, with supplying the slaves with the tools they required to turn their dreams of personal liberation into a reality. These tools were, naturally, weapons; and it was Crause who, deciding that the Madagascan weapons obtained at the purchase of the slaves required some maintenance, put forward the idea, in itself no sign of stupidity, that those best

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<sup>12</sup> See Ravell, "The VOC Slave Trade Between Cape Town And Madagascar, 1652-1795", pp. 15 and 38.

<sup>13</sup> *Reader's Digest Illustrated History of South Africa*, p. 52. While this text is obviously not of great academic merit, its summation of Crause's actions is, I think, particularly apt.

qualified to clean Madagascan weapons would be those hailing from Madagascar<sup>14</sup>. The only problem in Crause's scheme was that the only Madagascans in any kind of reachable distance were the slaves aboard the *Meermin*, a group who, one would suppose, the Dutch officials may have suspected of harbouring at least some measure of resentment or anger. Perhaps such suspicions never entered the head of Crause, in which case he is a man whose naivety is almost unbelievable; or perhaps he simply did not consider the possibility of violence as one that had the least chance of assuming reality. Whatever his mental processes at the time, one can reasonably assume that his understanding of the slaves mentality was minimal, and that he must have been a man of limited imagination.

It was Tuesday 18 February 1766, the first truly significant date in the course of this unfortunate voyage. Koksmaat Harmen Koops describes how, with the *Gesaghebber's* approval, *Commiss* Crause requested that he bring the weapons up on deck for the slaves to clean<sup>15</sup>. Dan Sleight explains that some of the slaves had already been put to work on board by Muller, who no doubt saw no reason for them to wait until arriving at the Cape before being assigned to labour<sup>16</sup>; he highlights the fact that Massavana and some of his contemporaries had been assigned to controlling and maintaining the sails. Thus, in addition to their being allowed on deck, the slaves had been granted considerable freedom of movement on the ship; instead of being herded together under the watchful eye of a VOC officer, as one would have reasonably expected, the slaves were distributed around the vessel and had been allowed what amounts to a free reign. Such a situation certainly indicates a *laissez-faire* attitude

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<sup>14</sup> CA CJ 390, ff. 1302-1303, Testimony of *Gesaghebber* Gerrit Christoffel Muller; ff. 1245-1246, Testimony of *Assistent* Olof Leij; Sleight, p. 2. All the major sources indicate that Crause organised for some of the slaves to clean their assegais, with Muller's approval.

<sup>15</sup> CA CJ 390, ff. 1262, Testimony of *Koksmaat* Harmen Koops.

<sup>16</sup> Sleight, p. 2.

amongst the officers, an attitude indicative of a remarkable detachment from reality and an absolute absence of suspicion that the slaves may take advantage of their radically altered circumstances.

Harmen Koop brought the weapons, which were in the main Madagascan assegais, and Muller and Crause assigned five slaves to clean them under the supervision of some sailors<sup>17</sup>. Crucially, some of the senior officers were present while this undoubtedly irregular operation was put under way. Koop describes how Crause had disappeared to have a meal after assigning the slaves to this task, and was only to appear, to his ultimate detriment, when the attack commenced<sup>18</sup>. Muller claimed to have been gazing out over the sea when he was attacked by the slaves, and stabbed severely<sup>19</sup>. Muller's narrative of the events is of a retiring nature in which he seems to be abrogating responsibility; the sense one gets from his own testimony is of an entirely passive figure, shattered from his reveries by the point of an assegai. His ascription of the responsibility for the disastrous cleaning scheme entirely to Crause is equally revealing, for he describes how Crause had wanted the weapons cleaned and had engaged the slaves' services on his own account<sup>20</sup>. He also reiterates the debilitating nature of his illness, as though he were unable to effectively intervene either in the enactment of this disastrous course of action, or in the violence that followed<sup>21</sup>. All in all, we are being presented with a picture of Muller, reflected as much in his own words as in those of his contemporaries, that is decidedly unflattering. In attempting to rescind any responsibility that may have been his,

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<sup>17</sup> CA CJ 390, ff. 1262, Testimony of *Koksmaat* Harmen Koops; CA CJ 390, ff. 1303-1304, Testimony of *Gesaghebber* Gerrit Christoffel Muller; Sleight, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> CA CJ 390, ff. 1262, Testimony of *Koksmaat* Harmen Koops.

<sup>19</sup> CA CJ 390, ff. 1304, Testimony of *Gesaghebber* Gerrit Christoffel Muller.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 1303-1304.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 1303.

Muller comes across as someone with a decided lack of control over his own vessel, a passive captain scarcely aware of the goings-on aboard his own ship.

Those of the crew who survived were those who managed to barricade themselves in the *Constapelskamer*, a chamber where they were to spend a good few days. As far as one is able to make out, *Gesaghebber* Muller, *Onderstuurman* Gulik and *Assistent* Leij clambered into the chamber through the windows, while a number of others, including Hofmeester Harmen Koop and the Bottelier Jan de Leeuw, were to add to their number. Gulik, too, had been wounded; he was cut above the eye, which he must have obtained in what he describes as a particularly violent struggle<sup>22</sup>. Only those who had attained the relative safety of the *Constapelskamer* survived, and it is clear that several had suffered wounds of varying degrees. The remainder perished.

According to Sleight, Crause was one of the first to be killed, dropped with an assegai after emerging to attempt to talk with the now-armed slaves<sup>23</sup>. It is difficult to find direct references in the testimonies of Muller, Gulik and Leij as to Crause's death, but is clear that he perished, along with those members of the crew who were too far from the *Constapelskamer* to make it to safety. Others who perished include *Onderstuurman* Bender and *Onderstuurman* Albert; it would appear that Gulik was the only member of that rank to survive the attack<sup>24</sup>. The ferocity of the battle itself appears to indicate a tremendous anger and rage on the part of the slaves, who seem to have demonstrated little consideration for the benefit that might be theirs should they preserve the lives of the crew. All members of the crew who did not make it to the

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<sup>22</sup> CA CJ 390, ff. 1283-1284, Testimony of *Onderstuurman* Daniel Carel Gulik; Sleight, p. 5. It is Sleight who specifies that Gulik had been wounded near the eye; Gulik, in his account, mentions that he was wounded, but it is difficult to garner the specificity of the wound from his words.

<sup>23</sup> Sleight, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> CA CJ 390, f. 1283, Testimony of *Onderstuurman* Daniel Carel Gulik; Sleight, pp. 3-4.

place of safety were stabbed and/or thrown overboard. The slaves may have been seizing a most opportune moment for regaining their freedom, but the battle was as much a direct assault on their former overlords as it was a bid for liberty. While it would reinforce a crass stereotype to over-emphasise the bloodthirstiness of the slaves, it is not so impertinent to highlight what was undoubtedly a savage and ferocious battle. The intensity of the anger manifested on the *Meermin* on 18 February 1766 is certainly difficult to imagine for a contemporary audience not directly acquainted with the brutal realities of the slave trade; and perhaps all that one can do is note the manifestations of what was not a wholly rational and pre-conceived plan of action, but the consequences of a particularly unique set of circumstances that brought to the surface those violent and brutal undercurrents that underpinned the practice of 18<sup>th</sup> Century VOC-directed slavery in a horrific, and yet at the same time deeply revealing, moment of spontaneous slave resistance. As is often the case, the tensions and social fractures implicit in an unjust institution were illuminated in all their stark actuality through circumstances that allowed the workings of the subconscious to be manifested at the level of exterior behaviour. It will be sufficient to conclude that the violence of the manifestation is itself testimony to the immense tensions and indeed hatreds that girded the slave trade and guided the behaviour of both its promulgators and its victims.

Those crew members who had survived were by now secreted in the *Constapelskamer*, barricaded against the slaves who had assumed control of their vessel. There is a rather gory interlude, during which the slaves captured sailors who had secreted themselves in the rigging and, after binding them, stabbed most of them

to death<sup>25</sup>. Of the five who remained, three were hurled overboard after the slaves, led by Massavana, cast lots to decide their fate<sup>26</sup>. Rijk Meyer, who was able to swim, managed to grab on to a rope dangling from a window of the *Constapelskamer*, and, avoiding the shots of the slaves, was pulled up to rejoin his fellows<sup>27</sup>.

As one could imagine, the crew were in a rather desperate state regarding food and water supplies. There were now approximately 30 crew members in the *Constapelskamer*<sup>28</sup>, and they were forced to subsist on raw bacon and potatoes and a cask of arak<sup>29</sup>. The situation was beginning to look bleak, not to mention the increasingly obvious evidence of the inability of the slaves to sail the ship; and, after a failed attempt on Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> to gain food supplies, things were coming to a head. It was at this stage that the crew began to debate the options open to them, a course of action that, perhaps as much to their surprise as to that of anybody else, was to instigate a series of events culminating in their regaining of their liberty.

The skipper advocated a course of violent resistance. It was now Thursday, and Muller was of the opinion that the crew should arm themselves, break out of the *Constapelskamer* and retake the vessel<sup>30</sup>. The sailors evidently possessed some arms in their refuge, weapons that must either have been stored there or which the sailors

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<sup>25</sup> Sleigh, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, pp. 5-6.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> There is some confusion in the sources as to the number of sailors who were able to obtain refuge in the *Constapelskamer*. Later in the narrative, I shall describe how two letters written by the sailors reached the shore close to where the ship came to be anchored; one of these letters numbers the crew as 32, while the other gives the total as 30. Sleigh, on the other hand, estimates the number of sailors to be not more than 25. The testimonies do not, as far as I can tell, provide details in this regard. The respective references are: CA C516, ff. 83-84; Sleigh, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> CA CJ 390, f. 1286, Testimony of *Onderstuurman* Daniel Carel Gulik; Sleigh, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> CA CJ 390, ff. 1230, Testimony of *Quartiermeester* Jan Herman Toome; Sleigh, p. 6. In the light of their reticence to take a lead in such a resistance, it is interesting to note that both Muller and Gulik downplay their role in instigating this battle in their respective testimonies.

must have been carrying at the time of their dramatic flight to the *Constapelskamer*. Muller himself, due to his injury, was rather conveniently not in the position to include himself in the planned offensive, as was Gulik. Despite the obvious seriousness of his wound, it is fascinating to note, perhaps too cynically, Muller's reticence to directly command any offensive against the mutinous slaves who had successfully overrun a vessel under his command. By now, one can begin to observe such behaviour as sadly characteristic of the man. His lack of vigilance and decisive leadership had created an atmosphere on his ship that had resulted in what must be, apart from complete destruction of the vessel, the worst possible disaster that he would have been able to imagine; and now he advocated a plan of violent resistance in which he refused to play a direct role. The ineptitude and, for lack of a better word, passivity of Muller becomes all the more apparent as the narrative continues.

The armed assault was a complete failure. A *Bootsman* Laurens Pieters had volunteered to lead a group of armed sailors in the wake of Muller's and Gulik's professed incapacity to do so<sup>31</sup>; and they proceeded out of the *Constapelskamer*, shooting at any slave within sight. The slaves fought back; Pieters was brought down, followed by another sailor, both of whom were left on the deck<sup>32</sup>; and another sailor, wounded but having managed to retreat with his fellow combatants back to their refuge, died surrounded by his fellows<sup>33</sup>. Twelve sailors had engaged in the mission; the only outcome was that the remnant of the crew was now three men poorer for their exertions.

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<sup>31</sup> CA CJ 390, f. 1284, Testimony of *Onderstuurman* Daniel Carel Gulik; Sleigh, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> CA CJ 390, f. 1247, Testimony of *Adsisistent* Olof Leij.

<sup>33</sup> Sleigh, p. 7.

Faced with the loss of three of their men, the crew of the *Meermin* were not to be deterred. Instead of retiring, they hit upon an even more outrageous plan. Again with the affirmation of the captain, they placed some gunpowder beyond the *Constapelskamer* with the intention of igniting it, and thereby terrifying the mutinous slaves into submission. This plan was to meet with a similarly dismal end to that which had preceded it. Sleigh claims that a *Bootsman* Gulik was burnt in the face, to the extent that he was blind. Gulik's testimony does refer to his being burned by the fire when the gunpowder was ignited; however, the extent to which he was injured is not altogether clear, or whether any blinding or disfigurement was permanent<sup>34</sup>. It therefore seems likely that Sleigh denoted Gulik with the incorrect rank at this point in his narrative. Certainly, one gets a sense that Gulik was enduring more than his fair share of hardship, and one cannot help but entertain the notion that at this moment he might have considered himself better off lying at the bottom of the sea with his erstwhile contemporaries. He must have expressed his unhappiness with the way events had turned out, for this course of action was ultimately abandoned. Such a heightened atmosphere of tension must have affected the crew, who probably saw their repeated attempts at intimidation as endangering their chances of survival to an even greater extent than the danger to which they had previously been subjected. Needless to say, the failure of both these operations had impressed their true condition on the collective consciousness of the crew and officers. Gunfights and explosions having led to no significant improvement in their condition, the only option remaining was the humiliating, but potentially life-saving course of negotiation.

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<sup>34</sup> CA CJ 390, f. 1285, Testimony of *Onderstuurman* Daniel Carel Gulik; Sleigh p. 7.

The crew were in possession of a slave woman who they had conveniently retained when barricading themselves in the *Constapelskamer*; the Dutch had assigned a number of female slaves to the *Constapelskamer* when loading the slaves in Madagascar, and it is clear that a number of these had remained under their authority after the uprising<sup>35</sup>. This slave woman was to become the primary instrument of negotiation between the sailors and the mutinous slaves<sup>36</sup>. The crew were evidently not yet willing to enter into negotiations that would accede to the reality of their situation; rather, they initiated proceedings with a perhaps not untypical stream of threats and demands. Their experience with the gunpowder having met with a certain degree of success, a fact that the upper hierarchy as represented by Gulik was only too aware, the sailors demanded the immediate surrender of the slaves<sup>37</sup>. They threatened that, in the absence of such a surrender, they would proceed to blow the ship up with their gunpowder<sup>38</sup>. The evident absurdity of this threat was obviously not lost on the slaves, who had been witness to the crew's distinct discomfort at the result of their pyrotechnic experiment. Calling their bluff, they answered that they had viewed the fear that the explosion had instilled in the sailors, and were not prepared to do what was requested of them<sup>39</sup>. Nevertheless, for all their bluster and mock bravado, the crew had embarked on a course of action that would ultimately save their lives. The slaves wanted to negotiate<sup>40</sup>; the opportunity for deceit and manipulation was near at hand.

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<sup>35</sup> Sleight, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> CA CJ 390, f. 1306, Testimony of *Gesaghebber* Gerrit Christoffel Muller.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*; Sleight, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>39</sup> Sleight, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*.

At this stage we are witness to a shift in overt leadership, a shift that will further illuminate the tensions among the officer base. It has been noted that both *Gesaghebber* Muller and *Onderstuurman* Gulik had been injured; both were severely incapacitated, to the extent that they were unable to exert any form of capable leadership. Any active contribution to the sailors' preservation would have to be undertaken by another, a man more capable than his superiors in both body and mind, in securing the confidence of both the crew and the slaves to reach some kind of settlement.

It is thus that *Adsistent* Olof Leij enters the frame of action as a major player. Sleight refers to him as a clerk<sup>41</sup>, while certain subsequent references would indicate that he was some kind of *Commies*, associated with Crause, who had been employed in the capacity of slave purchase and management. He would thus have been already personally acquainted with the slaves; as such, he would have been the most capable candidate in the eyes of the sailors to undertake complex and indeed disastrous negotiations of this nature. The sailors would have been fully aware that this was an operation in which their lives were at stake; they had failed to defeat the mutineers violently, and the slaves had called their rather unconvincing bluff. One of Leij's skills was that he spoke a smattering of Malagasy, the lingua franca of Madagascar, the rudiments of which he must have picked up in the course of his career as a slave procurer<sup>42</sup>. The only possibility for obtaining life and liberty were thus secured in his hands, as he was assigned the unenviable task of negotiating for his and his compatriots lives with those whose possession he had negotiated only a few days previously. This time, he was in a less comfortable position in the negotiation process

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

than that which his previous experience would have enabled him to grow accustomed to.

Leij tends to be a narrator who is rather sparing on the details, and he does not accord significant detail in his testimony to the nature of the negotiations that he conducted with the slaves. What he is clear about, and what is reiterated by other sources, is the demands that the slaves placed on the crew in return for their security. The slaves wanted to be returned to Madagascar, to the shores of then island that they still considered to be their home<sup>43</sup>. This was their demand. The rage that had been unleashed when circumstances enabled it had faded somewhat; and while the slaves must have felt something a little more intense than animosity towards their one-time captors, they now evidently saw the preservation of the enemy's lives as a tool that they could employ to their benefit. Looking beyond their immediate anger and rage, they saw cooperation with the crew as their best chance of going home, and of reversing the terrible misfortune that had befallen them. Hence their willingness, on witnessing the botched attempts of the sailors to regain the vessel and their subsequent helplessness, to enter into an agreement.

There would no doubt have been a subconscious desire on the part of all the slaves to return to their place of origin and escape the destiny of lifelong servitude that awaited them at their destination; indeed, Sleigh refers to Massavana as possessing a distinct, articulated desire to obtain some means of returning to Madagascar<sup>44</sup>. As one of the identified leaders of the mutiny, Massavana would no doubt have been at the forefront of these negotiations, where he most probably would have articulated the collective

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<sup>43</sup> CA CJ 390, f. 1249, Testimony of *Adsisent* Olof Leij; Sleigh, p. 7; the other testimonies record similar details.

<sup>44</sup> Sleigh, p. 3.

desire on the part of the slaves to return to Madagascar. The slaves made a number of demands of Leij; they instructed the crew to return them to their own land, and furthermore they instructed that the entire must bring themselves on deck, carrying with them their entire store of gunpowder, and that the gunpowder be them thrown overboard<sup>45</sup>. Leij relayed this series of demands to Muller; and, exhibiting some measure of decisiveness at last, Muller hit upon the opportunity for deceit that presented itself to him. It had already pressed itself upon the crew that the slaves possessed little in the way of seafaring or navigational skills; and it would not have appeared outrageous to consider the slaves incapable of being able to locate their position within the wide expanse of the ocean. Hence, the possibility to deceive the slaves into thinking they were being taken home, while actually sailing for a place of refuge that would be more hospitable to the Dutch than to the Madagascans was finally given expression, at this juncture, by Muller. Once the sailors were in the position to regain control of their vessel, even though under the orders of the mutineers, they were to set a course of N.W., one that they estimated would take them to a place of refuge beyond Cape Agulhas, in a vicinity of the Cape with a Company presence<sup>46</sup>. What they had been unable to accomplish through force, the crew were to secure with deceit.

It would appear that Leij assumed a measure of command over the crew on deck, while nominally under the authority of the leader of the slaves<sup>47</sup>. (As will be

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<sup>45</sup> CA CJ 390, f. 1249, Testimony of *Assistent* Olof Leij; CA CJ 390, f. 1306, Testimony of *Gesaghebber* Gerrit Christoffel Muller; Sleigh, pp. 7-8.

<sup>46</sup> CA CJ 390, f. 1307, Testimony of *Gesaghebber* Gerrit Christoffel Muller; CA CJ 390, f. 1250, Testimony of *Assistent* Olof Leij. Sleigh, p. 8. Sleigh who refers specifically to Table Bay, False Bay or Saldhana Bay as the intended destination of the crew. Muller, in his account, makes no such specific reference, although it is clear that he wanted to bring the ship to a position in the vicinity of Cape Agulhas; Leij refers to False Bay and Table Bay as their possible destinations.

<sup>47</sup> CA CJ 390, f. 1307, Testimony of *Gesaghebber* Gerrit Christoffel Muller; CA CJ 390, f. 1249, Testimony of *Assistent* Olof Leij.

examined later, the leader of the mutineers is killed on the beach near Cape Agulhas, where he was shot dead by a commando; he remains nameless in the historical record.) With instructions relayed to him from the *Gesaghebber*, Leij instructed the Stuurman on the course to set; they set sail in a northwesterly direction, in the hope of coming across some land<sup>48</sup>. Sleigh records that Leij was required to ask the leader of the mutineers for approval for any decision he wished to take on deck; the slaves had evidently instituted a structure of authority on board, and assumed a level of control that stands in stark contrast to that of Muller<sup>49</sup>. It must have been a source of some delight to the slave leaders to so visibly exert such authority over their former captors; but, apart from whatever enjoyment it may have instilled in them, it is clear that they had organised an internal system of authority and order, and were determined to assume control in such a way as to prevent any reversal to their fortunes. Had it not been for their evident ignorance in the field of maritime navigation, one gets the sense that the sailors would not have been able to pull off their ruse so easily. It was, in many ways, largely a matter of a technical expertise lacking among the mutineers that enabled the sailors to undermine their intentions; had such expertise been more evenly balanced, the outcome of the rebellion would have been far different, entailing vastly dissimilar fates for the protagonists of the conflict.

Leij was also gradually replacing Muller as the authority in the sailors' hierarchy. While accepting Muller's guidance, particularly in the practice of the deceit (a deceit for which he is ultimately as responsible as is Muller), it was now he who issued directives and who assigned both crew and slaves to their particular tasks. Muller's authority was gradually being undermined, although not overtly but rather through a

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Sleigh, p. 9.

cooperative arrangement, a kind of coalition of the willing, stemming more from Muller's own incapacity to lead than from any attempt on Leij's part to usurp his authority; and the sailors, who had been subject to Muller's ineptitude, could very well have appreciated an injection of decisive, capable leadership on the part of Leij.

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### Chapter 3

At the beginning of March, Johannes Le Sueur, the *Landdrost* of the District of Stellenbosch and Drakenstijn, decided to travel to the Soetendaal's Valleij, a region just east of Cape Agulhas that is close to present-day Struisbaai. His journey was motivated by a letter that had been despatched to him on the 27 of February by a local official named Hentz. The letter detailed a series of events that would have been of the utmost concern to a district magistrate. A ship that bore no flag had moored offshore; officials on shore having been alerted of such a strange occurrence, a commando comprising of local burghers had been assigned to patrol the beach<sup>50</sup>. These vigilant measures were not to have been taken in vain; a large number of slaves<sup>51</sup> came ashore in two light vessels, whereupon they were accosted by the commando who had been alerted to their presence<sup>52</sup>. A battle ensued, in which a number of the slaves were killed; the remainder had been captured, and were being stationed on a neighbouring burgher's farm<sup>53</sup>.

Such a report must have been of significant concern to Le Sueur; indeed, one could go so far to say that the import of the letter would have been enough to shock him profoundly. The chief official responsible for maintaining law and order in the district, he was being faced with an event of unprecedented proportions. Details were yet scarce, although it was clear that slaves had successfully instigated a violent uprising and forcefully commandeered a VOC vessel; such information must have resonated with the fears of any colonial official holding such a position as his, where

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<sup>50</sup> CA C 516, ff. 67-69, Letter from Hentz to Le Sueur, 27 February 1766.

<sup>51</sup> The total number of slaves was 70, as later letters from Muller and Leij indicate. See CA C 516, ff. 90-93, Letter from Muller and Leij to the Cape.

<sup>52</sup> CA C 516, ff. 70-72, Letter from Le Sueur to the Cape, 1 March 1766.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

the prospect of violent rebellion was always a very real possibility to the propagators of a system of institutionalised oppression. Not unsurprisingly, Le Sueur considered the matter to require the greatest attention that could be accorded it. He thus decided that it would require nothing less than his personal attention, and made plans to depart for the Soetendaal's Valleij at the greatest possible speed. It would probably be safe to say that the events that were to unfold over the next two weeks would comprise the most challenging, harrowing and indeed the most strange experience of Le Sueur's career.

By 2 March he had arrived in the region and installed himself in the home of Barend Geldenhuijs, a local farmer<sup>54</sup>. From Geldenhuijs, he proceeded to the property of another burgher, Wessels Wesselsen, on which the recaptured slaves were being sheltered<sup>55</sup>. At the farm, he observed 18 male slaves, whom he interviewed in order to ascertain the situation that prevailed on board the *Meermin* and that had enabled these slaves to row to shore from a vessel on which they were supposed to have been secured as prisoners<sup>56</sup>. The details provided by Le Sueur relating to this interview are sketchy, but to the *Landdrost* newly arrived from Stellenbosch with little idea of the cause for such a strange and dangerous occurrence they would have been disconcertingly revealing. Through an interpreter, he was led to understand that many of the Europeans were ill; a phrase used in the letter translates as "partly dead", indicating either that a large number had been murdered, as has been observed, or that many were sick to the point that they were approaching death<sup>57</sup>. He also records that, at sight of land, the slaves had forced the European sailors to approach the shore;

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<sup>54</sup> CA C 516, ff. 73-74, Letter from Le Sueur to the Cape, 2 March 1766.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

furthermore, he notes that the slaves gave their total number as 150, of which a significant number had remained on the ship<sup>58</sup>. He further adds that an additional amount of 14 slaves, including women, had been recaptured by the commando<sup>59</sup>; this is to be a recurring feature of Le Sueur's correspondence, as he periodically records subsequent recapturing of slaves as they occurred sporadically throughout the period that he was to reside at the Soetendaal's Valleij.

While it is difficult to penetrate Le Sueur's mental world through his letters (which possess predominantly factual content, and appear to be intended to appease a dissatisfied and distinctly unhappy Cape government), it would be useful at this point to consider what an event such as this would have entailed for him. While mutinies are by no means unheard of in the VOC era, they are certainly rare; and while a slave uprising had occurred in 1753 (referred to above), it had been quelled with relative ease, and little in the way of mutinous violence had occurred in the direct vicinity of the Cape up to this point. Le Sueur was thus faced with a disaster of unprecedented extent, and furthermore a disaster that was yet in the process of unfolding. In addition, he was equipped with only the sketchiest of details regarding the actual condition of the ship and the crew as well as the events that had culminated in the fatal overthrow of a VOC-mandated authority. All he knew was that slaves from Madagascar, who had been bound for the Cape, had risen up, murdered many of the crew and commandeered the vessel; and, to his even greater stupefaction, they had weighed anchor off Cape Agulhas and come ashore. This very fact that the slaves had come ashore must have been something of a mystery to Le Sueur, who would have found it difficult to comprehend the circumstances that would compel mutinous slaves to moor

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

their vessel in the very territory governed by those whose official representatives had negotiated their enforced state of servitude. Of course, it is more a matter of speculation than of actual historical investigation to decipher of what Le Sueur's internal state would have comprised. Suffice to say that, in the light of his own testimony regarding the gradually unfolding nature of events that were being made known to him, and taking into account the magnitude of the *Meermin* mutiny and the significance such a disaster must have entailed for a legal official of the VOC, one can surmise that he would have been somewhat daunted by the task that presented itself before him. As subsequent letters demonstrate, his frequent and detailed correspondence with the Cape government, and his repeated requests for assistance and advice, allow one to construct an admittedly sketchy portrait of a senior official who displays a sense of acute discomfort, a man inhabiting a situation in which he is somewhat out of his depth. As shall be demonstrated further, he is very much a spectator to the outrageous events of which he, on the landward side, is chief witness; and one cannot but possess some sympathy for a man confronted with such a gargantuan challenge. Only as days went by and events began to unfold would he begin to grasp more firmly what had brought this strange, violent episode to the shores of his territory; and the circumstances that lead up to his being able to piece together the story of the mutiny are themselves as surprising and unbelievable as any others that have been here recorded.

By 3 March, Le Sueur had arrived at the farm of yet another burgher, Matthijs Rostok, who owned land near the beach of the Soetendaal's Valleij<sup>60</sup>. The participation and cooperation of the local farmers and white citizenry becomes more and more evident

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<sup>60</sup> CA C 516, ff. 76-77, Letter from Le Sueur to the Cape, 3 March 1766.

as one progresses through Le Sueur's correspondence. At this stage it will suffice to say that Le Sueur was relying heavily, if not completely, on local farmers, both for hospitality and for physical aid in the recapture of the landed slaves; and that the rescue operation that he would ultimately oversee was not a VOC-dominated manoeuvre facilitated by officials and workers of the Company, but rather was a cooperative venture heavily reliant on the local farmers for manpower and expertise. When he reached the beach, Le Sueur was able to view the ship for the first time. He estimated the vessel as being anchored one hour off shore and out of any immediate danger<sup>61</sup>. On the beach he found the "*barcas*" and the "*schuit*", the two landing vessels employed by the 70 slaves to come ashore, of which the former was deeply buried in the sand<sup>62</sup>. A sailor, who had been picked up by a commando on the beach, was also brought to Le Sueur; he had come ashore with the slaves, and had managed to escape once they had reached the beach<sup>63</sup>. He claimed that he had the intention to proceed with all speed to the Cape, but that, due to some problems with his legs, he was unable to do this<sup>64</sup>. Having gained all the useful information that he could from him, Le Sueur despatched him to the Cape to report to the governing authorities<sup>65</sup>. With some knowledge as to the nature of the uprising and the condition of those remaining aboard the vessel, Le Sueur was forced to wait on the beach until he could devise some means of approaching the *Meermin* and, either by negotiation or by force, securing the release of the crew. Significantly, there was no boat suitable enough to mount any kind of naval offensive in the vicinity; and in order to proceed with any definitive plan, one of the *Meermin*'s own landing vessels, now on the beach, would have to be repaired.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

At some stage after the original party of slaves had gone ashore, the slaves who had remained on board decided to try and find out exactly where they were situated. To do this, they constructed a raft from some wood, and sailed to the shore<sup>66</sup>. On their return, they informed the slave body that they were indeed in Madagascar; they had seen a black sheep herder, but he had fled before they had been able to communicate with him<sup>67</sup>. This was a stroke of good luck for the crew; had the slaves been able to catch the sheep herder and attempt to speak with him, they would have come back possessing a vastly different frame of mind. As shall be seen, it was as much sheer luck as it was ingenuity on their part that ultimately enabled them to survive their ordeal and escape a wrath that the slaves, had they known their true situation, would most definitely have exhibited towards them.

At this stage there is a significant gap in the correspondence, with no relevant letter reaching the Cape between 3 March, when he first inspected the beach, and the 7<sup>th</sup>. In the meantime, the Cape had not been idle in responding to Le Sueur's missives. A decision was undertaken in the Council of Policy to embark on two actions. Firstly, on March 3 they despatched two *hoekers*, the *Nepthunus* and the *Snelheijd*, with a Sergeant, 2 Corporals and 25 soldiers, to provide naval assistance in the defeat of the mutineers and the recovery of the *Meermin*<sup>68</sup>. There is little that one can say about this expedition, precisely because by the time these vessels reached the Soetendaal's Valleij the action was all over. The vessels had struggled to find the precise location of the *Meermin*'s anchorage, and sailed up and down the coast while Le Sueur was

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<sup>66</sup> CA C 390, f. 1291, Testimony of *Onderstuurman* Daniel Carel Gulik.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*; CA C390, f. 1174, Testimony of Bottelier Jan de Leeuw.

<sup>68</sup> CA C 144, ff. 125-139, Resolutions of the Council of Policy, 28 February 1766; C1681, ff. 26-29, Letter from the Cape to the Soetendaal's Valleij, 2 Maart 1766.

struggling to obtain some means of rescuing the Europeans held captive. By the time the *hoekers* reached the Soetendaal's Valleij, all had been resolved, upon which receiving such news they sailed back to the Cape<sup>69</sup>. Where naval power may have provided a different denouement to that which shall ultimately be witnessed, conditions prevented the narrative from assuming this particular shape. As with so much in this account, luck and chance are by no means minor players; arguably, circumstance is the true author of the form that this account ultimately assumes.

The second action undertaken by the Cape was to despatch, by land, three ship's carpenters led by Philip van den Berg, the head of the ship's carpenters on the Company Wharf at Cape Town, as well as 2 "*stuurlieden*"(pilots), a quartermaster and 20 sailors<sup>70</sup>. This party, having left on March 4, was to reach the Soetendaal's Valleij without the navigational difficulties that were obviously experienced by the *Nepthunus* and the *Snelheijd*. While most of this body were to remain spectators to the events that were to follow, the ship's carpenters were to provide much-needed assistance to Le Sueur, an assistance that would indirectly shape the uprising's culmination.

On the 7<sup>th</sup>, Le Sueur resumes his correspondence with the Cape to recount a remarkable series of events that had begun on the 6<sup>th</sup>. He refers to the carpenters as inspecting the "*barcas*" and the "*schuit*" on the 6 March, indicating that they had arrived by this date and were engaging themselves with examining the *Meermin*'s landing craft with the intention of repairing them in order to invade the vessel by

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<sup>69</sup> For information regarding the *Nepthunus* and the *Snelheijd*, see the summary of the *Meermin* uprising that is contained in CA C 1682, ff. 92-104.

<sup>70</sup> CA C 144, ff. 154-159, Resolutions of the Council of Policy, 6 March 1766; C 1681, ff. 43-46, Letter from the Cape to the Soetendaal's Valleij. According to the summary contained in C 1682, ff. 92-104, the ship's carpenters and their entourage left the Cape on March 4.

sea<sup>71</sup>. He had descended to the beach to examine these operations, when he was approached by a “Hottentot” carrying a bottle in his hand<sup>72</sup>. Inside the bottle was a letter, signed by the Bottelier Jan de Leeuw on behalf of the crew<sup>73</sup>. Even more unexpectedly, this find was supplemented by another, also a bottle containing a letter, this one signed by Olof Leij<sup>74</sup>. Evidently the letters had been written by these two officers, placed and sealed in the bottles and tossed overboard with the hope that they would be discovered by allies on the coast. The sheer improbability of even one bottle being recovered on the shore in such a fashion must be evident to even the most imaginative observer; the fact that both reached the shore in fairly close proximity to one another, and were both discovered by their intended recipients, is truly remarkable<sup>75</sup>.

Both letters were, in effect, pleas for help. However, they did not merely beg for any measure of assistance that those on shore could devise from their own efforts. Rather, both the letters enjoined a particular plan of action that the sailors felt could enable their escape, but that relied for its success on the cooperation of friendly forces on the shore. After briefly detailing the violent uprising and the decision by 70 of the slaves to journey to shore<sup>76</sup>, details with which Le Sueur was naturally already acquainted,

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<sup>71</sup> CA C 516, ff. 79-82, Letter from Le Sueur to the Cape, 7 March 1766.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> In an event that is certainly not lacking in surprising circumstances and eventualities, the secretement of letters in bottles that are thrown overboard and then actually found by friendly forces on the shore reads like something from an adventure yarn or a fantastical seafaring narrative along the lines of Treasure Island or Sindbad the Sailor. The fact that such an imaginative gesture was actualised in reality is testimony to history’s recurring propensity to surprise and, although it may be too strong an expression for a case as ultimately tragic as this, to delight.

<sup>76</sup> It is in these letters that one first reads that the number of slaves who left the vessel totalled 70; it is also here that one is provided with contradictory estimates of the total number of crew who had managed to reach the *Constapelskamer* during the uprising. Leij claims that 30 crew members survived by barricading themselves in the *Constapelskamer*, while de Leeuw claims that the number was 32.

both letters outline what the crew requires of their landward allies<sup>77</sup>. In effect, both letters requested that three fires be lit on the shore; they claim that the “*Swarten*”, a term commonly used by the Europeans when referring to the slaves (“*Neegers*” is another commonly employed term used in similar fashion; the racial connotations of both expressions are obvious), do not know about the presence of local farmers in the area, and that if these fires are lit the slaves will bring the *Meermin* close to shore<sup>78</sup>. Little else, in the way of information or supplication, is provided; and Le Sueur, dumbfounded as he must have been at the improbable means by which he had arrived at this direct communication from the stranded crew, was forced to act on little more than faith. His own letter of March 7 describes his ambivalence towards the sailors’ requests, and of he struggled to interpret a reasonable explanation for an appeal that he no doubt found to be somewhat bizarre<sup>79</sup>. In possession of only the barest of details, knowing that some of the slaves had already come ashore but unaware of the intentions of those who remained aboard or of the motivations of the crew in making this supplication, he was forced to consider his next move in what might be considered an epistemological vacuum. No request for advice from the Cape would be of much benefit; he evidently noted the urgent tone discernable in both letters, and realised that he would have to act quickly and decisively. It is probable that it was this very urgency on the part of the crew as expressed in their writing, an urgency that evokes an atmosphere of such desperation that a plan as outrageous as this could be considered, that ultimately decided Le Sueur’s hand. He decided to light the three fires as requested. Early in the morning on March 7, the fires were lit on the beach

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<sup>77</sup> CA C 516, ff. 83-84, Letters from de Leeuw and Leij. In a later letter written by Muller and Leij to the Cape, they claim that they observed the fires the morning after they had thrown the bottles overboard. As the fires were lit on the morning of March 7, it is probable that the crew wrote the letters on the 6<sup>th</sup> of March.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> CA C 516, ff. 79-82, Letter from Le Sueur to the Cape, 7 March 1766.

where they would be easily visible from the *Meermin*<sup>80</sup>. Shortly after the fires had achieved a strength and brightness significant enough to be viewed from the vessel, those on the shore witnessed the *Meermin* being set towards the beach and sailing to a position that Le Sueur estimated to be a musket shot from their vantage point on the shore<sup>81</sup>. It was the first time that the ship had altered position since it had first entered the bay and dropped anchor. Evidently, the lighting of the fires had produced its desired effect; what was not yet clear to Le Sueur and his contemporaries was how and why the ship was moved to a position of such increased vulnerability to attack than that which it had previously occupied.

As events were to turn out, from this moment Le Sueur had to do very little but wait; it is almost as if events garnered their own momentum, a momentum that became possessed of the inevitability and catastrophic destiny of an epic tragedy. After the ship had dropped anchor, those on shore observed some figures on the *Meermin* chopping down one of the ship's masts<sup>82</sup>. Whatever surprise this action might have caused was soon to be eclipsed by the events that were to follow. A sailor swam to shore and, on arriving at the beach, was brought to Le Sueur<sup>83</sup>. What this sailor had to tell provides further fascinating detail into the means by which the crew had been able to manipulate the plans of the captors in such a way as to ultimately bring about their downfall. The sailor, who remains nameless in the correspondence but who de Leeuw names Rijk Meyer, claimed that he had been sent ashore by the slaves to ascertain whether their comrades (by which one presumes he meant the slaves who had sailed

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

ashore a few days earlier) might be on shore<sup>84</sup>. However, his intentions went far beyond satisfying the demands of the mutineers. Prior to his departure from the vessel, he had made a secret agreement with the crew that, should he discover friends on the shore who were able to provide assistance, he would provide a signal to his fellows on board to indicate to them that the opportunity for their rescue was near at hand<sup>85</sup>. The means of this signal is not detailed in the correspondence, but de Leeuw and Sleigh describe how Meijer had agreed to wave a handkerchief around his head as a means of signalling his fellow sailors<sup>86</sup>. The irony of this situation is rather striking. Both groups aboard the *Meermin*, the slaves and the crew, hoped that their compatriots were at hand; and yet while one sense of expectancy was based on an accurate knowledge of circumstances and of the actual location of the *Meermin*, the other was founded on a misguided fantasy that had been fuelled both by deceit and by a devastating lack of formal knowledge and capability, a lack that had made this very deceit possible. It was ultimately within the sphere of knowledge that the decisive role in the entire affair was played; and it was this strange mixture of accuracy and misjudgement, of a realistic assessment of geography and circumstance and a fantasy that had been fuelled by eager hope and cruel deceit, that charges the entire narrative with a particularly tragic irony.

The signal was given, upon which a canoe was lowered from the *Meermin* and guided towards the shore<sup>87</sup>. In the canoe were six mutineers and one of the sailors, who were viewed to be rowing towards a high sand dune where, coincidentally, a commando

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid; CA CJ 390, f. 1175, Testimony of Bottelier Jan de Leeuw.

<sup>85</sup> CA C 516, ff. 79-82, Letter from Le Sueur to the Cape, 7 March 1766.

<sup>86</sup> CA CJ 390, f. 1175, Testimony of Bottelier Jan de Leeuw; Sleigh, p. 11.

<sup>87</sup> CA C 516, ff. 79-82, Letter from Le Sueur to the Cape, 7 March 1766.

had been posted<sup>88</sup>. The letter details the following events as the inadvertent result of a bungling of orders, albeit a bungling that was largely inevitable. The commando had been ordered to hide in the eventuality of a landing party approaching from the vessel<sup>89</sup>. As the *Meermin* was now only a short distance from the shore, it would no doubt have been in the interests of the Dutch to conceal their presence and thereby not alert the mutineers to their presence and thus disclose their error to them. Such an eventuality would undoubtedly lead to an aggressive response on their part, giving rise to a sudden desperation, and would likely culminate in a violent finale. Le Sueur does not specifically claim that he had issued this order; but his emphasis on it having been given, particularly in the light of what ensued when it was, by virtue of circumstance, discarded, can be viewed as an attempt on his part to absolve himself of responsibility through emphasising the measures that had been adopted to prevent just such a setback from occurring. As it was, the canoe approached the sand dune at such a rapid rate that the commando was provided with no opportunity to conceal themselves<sup>90</sup>. As a result, they were forced to attack the mutineers as they stepped out of the canoe onto the sand<sup>91</sup>. A short battle ensued that was fierce enough to result in death and injury, as well as to alert both Le Sueur and his cohort on the shore and the sailors and slaves who were still aboard the *Meermin*<sup>92</sup>. One slave was shot dead, while another was wounded and two were taken prisoner; two were unaccounted for, one of whom had managed in the confusion to swim away and one who simply could not be found and was considered either to have drowned or to have swum back to the ship<sup>93</sup>. No reference is provided as to any deaths or casualties on the part of the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

commando, and one can therefore presume that all of the European combatants survived the skirmish unscathed. If these brief details are anything to go by, it would seem that the slaves, expecting to find themselves in friendly and familiar territory, were taken by surprise by the commando, despite the fact that the burghers had been unable to conceal themselves. Thus disadvantaged, and coupled with the fact that they would have been significantly outnumbered, it was a brief and sudden defeat that the commando inflicted on the slaves, and one whose ultimate significance they could not have foreseen at the moment that they were thus engaged. In the aftermath of the skirmish, one of the sailors who had come ashore identified the dead slave as none other than the leader of the mutineers<sup>94</sup>. Such a definitive identification is some indication that Massavana was not considered, at least by the crew, to be the leader of the mutineers, although other documentary evidence situates him and Koesaj as highly significant players. Unfortunately, this leader remains nameless in the historical record; thus the coordinator of one of the most significant events in 18<sup>th</sup> Century South African history has passed into posterity with not so much as an initial. Nevertheless, one could certainly point to this skirmish as the ultimate deciding factor that sealed the fate of the mutineers and enabled the Dutch, both on shore and on the *Meermin*, to gain the initiative; a fact that must have been all too apparent to the remaining mutineers, who proceeded to give vent to their displeasure.

Le Sueur and his men could now hear sounds of violent conflict carried across the waters from the *Meermin* lying a short distance away<sup>95</sup>. It must have been clear to them that the skirmish on the beach had alerted the mutineers to their presence, the knowledge of which would have finally enabled them to realise the manner in which

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

they had been deceived. It is difficult to grasp the complete shock and sense of helplessness and defeat with which the mutineers must have reacted on seeing their fellows defeated by a large force of white men, who they would naturally and correctly have associated with their original captors. Until this moment, the slaves still on board were firmly of the belief that they had arrived at their own country; the fact that they had despatched a canoe on the word of a sailor who, it was now evident, had been involved with his fellows in double-crossing them, is testimony to the extent to which they had been deceived. On witnessing the subsequent battle, and possibly the death of their leader as well (it is difficult to ascertain the likelihood of their having been able to witness such detail, but as the ship was certainly close to the beach this is not an eventuality that can be completely discounted), they would have been forcefully confronted with the stark reality of their situation, one that would have effected a radical alteration of consciousness and provoked a sense of collective desperation. What one is witness to here is a profound shift in consciousness that must have taken place in a matter of minutes, one that revealed to the slaves that they had been duped and that they had no means of escape. Faced with such a horrifying, completely unforeseen reality, the slaves did what perhaps one could only have expected of those finding themselves in such a position: they aggressively attacked those responsible for deceiving them so heartlessly, who of course happened to be the crew. A fantasy in which they had placed their hope had been revealed to be a chimera; and the subsequent battle is thus in many respects similar to that in which they had gained control of the vessel, in that its dominant emotive content was the expression of anger and rage, governed by a terrible sense of powerlessness towards the agents of their deceit.

Le Sueur heard the sounds of battle taking place on the *Meermin*, and describes how the air would be continuously pierced with the sounds of gunfire<sup>96</sup>. It had also become clear to him that the *Meermin* had become wedged in such a manner that it was no longer capable of movement in any direction. He devised that the ship must have become lodged on a sandbank; this was confirmed by one of the sailors who had made it to shore, who described the vessel as “digt”, or closed, indicating that indeed it had become immobile<sup>97</sup>. The attempt at deceive the mutineers into coming ashore and into the hands of the Dutch having been thwarted, Le Sueur and his compatriots were left with one advantage, this being the fact that the *Meermin* was incapable of sailing away beyond their reach. In effect, they had a captive target aboard the ship. Their one exceeding disadvantage, a circumstance that was only too evident to him, was that there existed no able means to board the *Meermin* due to their lack of adequate sea transportation. Le Sueur and his men had no idea what damage the mutineers might do both to the crew and to the vessel itself now that they had been made aware of their true condition; and his sense of urgency is reflected in his letter of the 7<sup>th</sup>, in which he asks for advice from the Cape and describes how he is engaged in repairing the “*schuit*” for the purpose of invading the *Meermin*<sup>98</sup>. In effect, until such repairs were completed, Le Sueur had little option but to wait and hope for the best.

As it turned out, Le Sueur’s concerns turned out to have been misplaced. The rapidly escalating situation aboard the *Meermin* was defused not by any effort on his part, but rather by the initiative of the sailors, who were in a position more ably suited to an active engagement with the mutinous slaves, and who were further motivated due to

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

their experiencing the rather intense pressure of the slaves' anger more keenly than their allies on shore. Le Sueur was to play a role in this epic event's conclusion in much the same way as he had been during the entire account, acting as little more than a spectator bound by the whims of chance and circumstance.

By the 9<sup>th</sup>, the “*schuit*”, which had been worked on continuously by van den Berg and the two carpenters, was deemed to be in a suitable enough condition to attempt an invasion of the *Meermin*<sup>99</sup>. Had such an invasion occurred, it would undoubtedly have made for some gripping reading; but circumstances were such as to provide the historian with a rather more staid finale. While Le Sueur was overseeing the readying of the “*schuit*”, the *Commies* and the *Onderstuurman*, together with some other members of the crew, approached the shore in yet another canoe, albeit one that bore what would be a more successful delegation than that borne across these same waters two days previously<sup>100</sup>. By *Commies* one can presume Le Sueur is referring to Leij, as Crause was obviously in a state that precluded him from including himself in such an activity, and because various documents seem to indicate Leij as the *Commies*<sup>101</sup>; while Muller, in his testimony, claims that Gulik went ashore at this point with Leij and a “*scheeps jongetje*”, indicating that it was Gulik and Leij who were in the canoe<sup>102</sup>. The news brought by these men must have come as a tremendous relief, for one gets the impression from his frantic letters that had events adopted a more dangerous course Le Sueur would have made a reluctant hero. The slaves had viewed the readying of the “*schuit*”, and could foresee the intentions of those on the beach; realising that the end of their wild bid for freedom was near at hand, a more rational

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<sup>99</sup> CA C 516, ff. 86-89, Letter from Le Sueur to the Cape, 9 March 1766.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> In Le Sueur's letter of the 7<sup>th</sup>, he refers to Leij's letter as being written by a *Commies*. See CA C 516, ff. 79-82.

<sup>102</sup> CA CJ 390, f. 1310, Testimony of *Gesaghebber* Gerrit Christoffel Muller.

spirit assumed shape where rage had previously prevailed, and the slaves handed themselves over willingly to the sailors<sup>103</sup>. On grasping the proximity of their approaching defeat, the slaves would have abandoned their violent tactics as much in the interest of self-preservation as from any sudden loss of resolve. The imminence of their recapture must have impressed upon them the magnitude of their actions, as well as the extent of the retribution that they could reasonably expect the Dutch to consider suitable for the violence and immense losses perpetrated by them on VOC personnel and property. In such a frame of mind, it is likely that the slaves decided that minimal further resistance would be in their best interests, and surrendered themselves in the hope of a degree of future clemency.

With the surrender of the slaves, Le Sueur's agitation would finally have been eased. For two traumatic weeks he had been casting around, anxiously seeking guidance from Cape officials and desperately seeking to obtain some means of reaching the vessel so as to prevent what could easily have erupted into a wholesale massacre. As it was, direct intervention on his part had not been necessary; the uprising had fizzled out, in a relatively bloodless settlement for which he must have been entirely grateful. Not a man who appears given to a love of excitement or adventure, he had been relieved of undertaking any violent invasion, with the negotiated surrender providing a neat and tidy conclusion to what is otherwise a fantastic and yet a sordid affair. All that now remained was the mopping-up operation; an exercise that was to prove something of an additional challenge, albeit one that lacked the imminent sense of violent disaster that had characterised those that had preceded it.

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<sup>103</sup> CA C 516, ff. 86-89, Letter from Le Sueur to the Cape, 9 March 1766.

The slaves had surrendered on 9 March, and the foremost task that confronted the Dutch was to transport them to shore and secure them in an adequate location. While the “*schuit*” had been repaired, it was deemed not suitable because the weather had turned and the sea was becoming increasingly rough<sup>104</sup>. In fact, the *Stuurman* had attempted to reach the *Meermin*, but the boat had become swamped and he was pulled back by a rope that connected the boat with the beach<sup>105</sup>. It was put forward, most probably by the ship’s carpenters, that this boat would only be able to be repaired thoroughly in a dry dock which, given the remoteness of the Soetendaal’s Valleij and its lack of formal infrastructure, would have proved to be an impossible task<sup>106</sup>. The “*barcas*”, as has been mentioned, was buried so deeply as to be irrecoverable in the limited time required for the transport of the slaves, and the canoes that had been brought to shore were far too small to be adequate for the transportation of such a large congregation of people<sup>107</sup>. A compromise had to be devised; and so it was that the burghers, who had played such a prominent and, in the eyes of the Dutch, exemplary role in facilitating Le Sueur’s efforts, were engaged in another cooperative venture. Without any suitable boats, it was decided that the only option would be to assist the slaves through the surf manually, and so bring them safely on to the beach<sup>108</sup>. Volunteers were asked for, and the detachment that was thus formed comprised in large part of local farmers<sup>109</sup>. Apart from other important considerations, this willingness demonstrates that many of the local farmers were thus able to swim; an operation such as this would have required a degree of familiarity with the sea and

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

with the movements of waves and currents, and the farmers who volunteered must have been capable of some dexterity within the water.

A rope was anchored to the shore, and the volunteers swam with it out to the ship where they passed it to the crew<sup>110</sup>. Many of the slaves were unable to swim, hence the need for a large volunteer contingent to ferry them to shore. The ship, of course, was not far from the shore, and furthermore it was low tide; both circumstances considerably eased the process and limited the danger of drowning or injury. The crew helped the slaves one by one into the water, where volunteers assisted them, carrying them if necessary when slaves were completely unable to swim, and drew themselves and their human cargo to the shore by means of the rope that linked the *Meermin* with the beach<sup>111</sup>. One could metaphorically conceive of this rope as a lifeline or an umbilical cord, an image of the rebirth of the crew as they prepared to step ashore after close to three harrowing weeks of captivity and imminent death; but one can equally suppose, not unreasonably, that few of the participants in this venture were given to meditations of the symbolic at this point in time.

Le Sueur totals the number of slaves recovered as 53, comprising both genders and including a number of children, who are described as being carried on the backs of the volunteers to the beach<sup>112</sup>. A fire was stoked for them on the beach, and they were brought refreshments<sup>113</sup>; such a description cannot but conjure up images of a dignified tea party, perhaps an organised reunion, in which the guests of honour happen to be responsible for the deliberate murder of a good number of colleagues of

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

the hosts. What is evident from this good treatment is the importance that Le Sueur and Muller (who had come ashore, together with his crew, after the slaves had been successfully transferred to the beach) placed on preserving the strength, and hence future profitability, of what was now once again Company property. Now that the slaves had effectively been disempowered of any further means of resistance, they could now be considered as the physical objects of labour for which they had been purchased. The brief flame of personal agency, which had impressed on the crew all too clearly the humanity of the Madagascan slaves, had been extinguished; from this moment, one learns little about their fate. They were divided into two groups and allocated to separate farmers for temporary accommodation; in the meantime, three wagons were organised for their transport to the Cape<sup>114</sup>. By the 12<sup>th</sup> of March, the slaves had been sent back to Cape Town.

Now that disaster had been averted and the traumas of the past two weeks had been brought to a satisfactory conclusion, Le Sueur and the Cape authorities were anxious to piece together what had been occurring on the vessel while such a great deal of drama had been taking place on shore. This they were able to do, although to a limited extent, now that the crew had been recovered. Both Muller and Leij had reached shore safely, where the former was noted by Le Sueur to be visibly wounded, indicating that his injuries had been of a serious enough nature as to be unable to heal sufficiently while he had been on the *Meermin*<sup>115</sup>. These senior officers now safely on shore and able to enjoy an environment of greater comfort than that which they had been forced to endure for the previous three weeks, they immediately despatched a brief report to

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

the Cape, providing some much-desired detail as to the cause of their misfortune and to the role they had played in securing the surrender of the slaves and their release.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Muller and Leij provide little detail about the mutiny itself, and absolutely nothing regarding the environment on board ship that had enabled such a rebellion to take place. This glaring omission surely has something to do with their own culpability, particularly on the part of Muller, in enabling the uprising to be realised. Maybe they had agreed to bide their time, hoping to devise some explanation or excuse that would cohere with the events and that would have minimised any retributive action that the Cape officials may have entertained as suitable punishment. In the end such intentions, if they existed, did not pay off in any satisfactory fashion.

On sighting land on the 25<sup>th</sup> of February, the slaves demanded that the anchor be dropped, making clear their intentions to proceed ashore<sup>116</sup>. The crew had been hoping to reach a region where there was a greater chance of decisive intervention by VOC forces, such as Table Bay or False Bay; as it was, they were forced to anchor just off what they recognised to be Cape Agulhas, near a region that they must have inferred was populated in the main by farmers. It was not ideal, but the slaves were determined; furthermore, the sailors realised that a chance whereby they might be relieved had indeed presented itself to them, and they thus reinforced the mutineers' notion that this was indeed the coast of Madagascar. So it was that 70 slaves went ashore, to meet ultimately with imprisonment and death; the crew, except for the sailor who was forced to accompany the expedition and was ultimately picked up by a

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<sup>116</sup> CA C 516, ff. 90-93, Letter from Muller and Leij to the Cape, 9 March 1766.

commando, remained on board under the watchful eye of the mutineers<sup>117</sup>. The agitation of both slaves and crew was further aggravated when one of the anchor ropes broke, impressing upon them the danger of shipwreck<sup>118</sup>. A further plan was evidently necessary in order to save their lives and, say Muller and Leij in their report, the ship's goods, although one suspects that they inserted this concern for the merchandise in order to ingratiate themselves with the Company officials who they would be reading their report, and that they were in fact a great deal more preoccupied with the former concern than they were with the latter<sup>119</sup>. The growing desperation of their situation gave them cause to devise a plan of unusual proportions; they decided to attempt some means of communicating with any potential who may be on the shore, requesting that they light three fires in the hope that it would convince the mutineers that their fellows were safe and content, encamped on the shore, and so motivating them to bring to bring the ship to a distance close enough to the shore for the crew to attempt some means of escape<sup>120</sup>. As has been noted, de Leeuw and Leij wrote separate letters that detailed the same request, the letters were inserted in bottles and the bottles were thrown overboard in the hope that they would be carried to shore and discovered by a party able to intervene on their behalf<sup>121</sup>. In effect, the crew were engaging in a massive act of faith.

A faith evidently not misplaced, for on the 7<sup>th</sup> they observed three fires on the beach<sup>122</sup>. Probably as much to their astonishment as to their relief, they realised that allies were indeed positioned on the shore, and that they had found at least one of the

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

bottles and thereby been alerted to their situation. Perhaps fearing that some unforeseen eventuality may yet scare the slaves into removing the vessel from the region, or perhaps simply desperate enough, now that they had proof of the close proximity of friendly forces, to regain their liberty as soon as possible, they cut the anchor rope and set the vessel towards the beach<sup>123</sup>. Out of fear that the ship would lose its balance in what must have been an increasingly rough and turgid sea, they also proceeded to chop down on of the masts in the hope that it would rectify any instability in the vessel's motion<sup>124</sup>. As it turned out, they were unable to save the *Meermin* by this dramatic attempt; the ship became lodged in a sandbank, and would ultimately be irrecoverable.

Of course, the slaves were now able to view the coast in far greater detail than they had been able to do previously; and, after their leader had met with such an ignominious and for them tragic death, they realised their error and attacked the crew<sup>125</sup>. The rest has been described. The crew having negotiated the surrender of the slaves, they were brought to shore and transported back to the Cape. Muller and Leij add that seven members of the remaining crew were either ill or wounded, a number that one can presume to include both Muller and Gulik.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of October 1766, Muller and Gulik were tried for negligence and for neglecting to follow correct instructions and procedures for slaving expeditions<sup>126</sup>.

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> CA CJ 48, ff. 126-128, Court Minutes.

Both were demoted, which entailed being deprived of rank and wages<sup>127</sup>. Muller was forbidden from serving in the VOC for the remainder of his life, and was banned from the Cape, while both were to be put on the first ship returning to the Netherlands where they would serve for their passage<sup>128</sup>. Furthermore, both were to lose one month's wages and were to pay the costs of the case<sup>129</sup>. The severity of the sentence, particularly in the case of Muller, bears testimony to the significance that the Company officials gave to the disaster. Although neither Muller nor Gulik had been directly responsible for the loss of the *Meermin*, they were deemed culpable for enabling a situation to arise whereby the Company lost a good number of sailors, a portion of recently purchased slaves and, perhaps most important from a fiscal and commercial perspective, a vessel that would cost a great deal of time and money to replace. Muller's career in the seafaring world of the VOC was effectively over, and it remains a matter of conjecture as to the employment that he undertook after his return to the Netherlands. It is possible that he would have served on a vessel flying under a different flag, although it is equally probable that he opted for another means of supporting himself, one that would have been less likely to cause similar grievous injuries to those that he suffered in 1766. Whatever it was that he did, one cannot help but consider it unlikely that he ever opted to partake in a slaving expedition again; or, in the remote chance that he did, that he was sure to keep himself well and active, avoiding any chance of contracting an illness such as that which instigated the events that had so nearly cost him his life.

The slaves were not criminally charged; and, with the exception of Massavana and Koesaaij, it would appear that they were merely absorbed into the Company slave

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

population at Cape Town. Massavana and Koesaaij were despatched to Robben Island, there to be observed in the hope, so the records say, of shedding further light on the matter<sup>130</sup>. The Dutch authorities evidently did not possess enough in the way of direct evidence to convict these two slaves in a criminal court, and so they settled on surveying their behaviour and attempting thereby to attain some clarity as to their role in the mutiny. These two figures remain something of a mystery, as representatives of this group of mutinous slaves, the primary agents and ultimate victims of this tragedy, who are yet difficult to penetrate by means of the historical record. Nevertheless, it is possible to examine, through a balanced reading of secondary material as well as a close exploration of certain features of the narrative, certain historical patterns and tendencies that are present in their actions, as well as in those of the crew. A considered historical appraisal of the social structures and individual actions of both crew and slaves in the light of additional, historically-based material is necessary to come to grips with a case of this complexity; and it is to such an analysis that I now turn.

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<sup>130</sup> CA CJ 48, ff. 103-105, Court Minutes.

## Chapter 4

So it was that the violent and tragic affair was brought to what amounts to a fairly neat and conclusive finale. It is almost as if the various players had been acting according to a particularly imaginative script, and were subject to the whims of a capricious and yet enlightening narrator capable of evoking an entire panorama of human behaviour and motive. Indeed, if the events here recorded were in fact a work of fiction, it may well have constituted a masterpiece of the tragicomic.

Yet it is not the product of a fictional mind, which makes the narrative all the more remarkable. As an event in history, the mutiny of the *Meermin* reveals as much, if not more, than any work of the imagination about the historical reality that gave it birth. While a number of themes present themselves for a historically founded exploration, it would be wise to begin with an outline of the Madagascan slave trade as it existed during the era of VOC trade hegemony.

Little historical work has been conducted on the Madagascan slave trade. While many adequate primary sources are in existence, few have undertaken to explore this significant historical sphere in any great detail. There are a number of exceptions to this trend; Robert Shell makes a number of references to the trade in his volume *Children of Bondage*, while James Armstrong and Nigel Worden, in their chapter on Cape slavery published in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840* examine the influence of the Madagascan trade on slave society in the early Cape. Another contribution has been provided by James J. Ravell, a South African exile who, while residing in the Netherlands, began to collect historical data

on this slave trade with the eventual purpose of submitting a thesis for university assessment. Ravell died tragically before he was able to complete his research, and so a prime opportunity for uncovering the historical details of this little-known trading network was lost. However, he had completed a working paper, entitled “The VOC Slave Trade Between Cape Town and Madagascar, 1652-1795”, and it is primarily on the findings articulated in this document that I am reliant in describing some of the features of the trading network in which the *Meermin* was a participant.

According to Armstrong and Worden, Madagascar was a primary destination for the acquisition of Company slaves<sup>131</sup>. The close proximity of the island to the Cape was a major stimulus to its being targeted by Dutch traders, who were further encouraged by the fact that one could navigate within the island’s vicinity with relative ease<sup>132</sup>.

Endemic warfare on the island provided a steady stream of human cargo for those engaged in slaving; thus the Dutch were not the only foreigners purchasing slaves on the island, but had been preceded by Islamic and Portuguese slave traders<sup>133</sup>. As much as 65 % of slaves obtained in slaving voyages directly sponsored by the Company at the Cape originated from Madagascar<sup>134</sup>.

Robert Shell claims that Company slaves, in contrast to the majority of the slaves who were owned privately, possessed a degree of commonality in their culture<sup>135</sup>. He claims that this was because such slaves originated from the same geographical region, which naturally entailed that they shared cultural characteristics<sup>136</sup>. This place

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<sup>131</sup> Armstrong and Worden, *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Edition, p. 112.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, pp. 112-114.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, p. 112.

<sup>135</sup> Shell, *Children of Bondage*, p. 49.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

of origin, at least in the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries, was Madagascar; by 1766 there was a significantly broader cultural and geographical range of slaves living in the Lodge, but the cultural foundation with which such a Company slave culture originated was, in many ways, Madagascan<sup>137</sup>.

As the title of Ravell's paper suggests, the Dutch-Madagascan slave-trading network was facilitated throughout the era of VOC dominance at the Cape, from van Riebeeck's landing in 1652 to the defeat of the VOC by the British invading forces in 1795. During this period the trade experienced varying levels of activity and profitability, and the fortunes of the slave traders fluctuated considerably. What is most striking about Ravell's account is his emphasis on the problematic features of the trade; for it would appear that despite the profits that the Company made (the extent of which Ravell is uncertain), the trade was beset with difficulties. Such difficulties, however, were not necessarily particular to the Madagascan trade, but were general features of slave trading networks throughout the world during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

The period 1740-1785 was a period of renewed slaving activity between Madagascar and the Cape, following a slump that had characterised the years 1716-1739. By 1766, then, the slave trade was a sphere of great activity, with a little more than 100 years experience of the VOC in procuring slaves from the island. This trade intensification had been stimulated by an acute labour shortage at the Cape that began to be felt from the early 1750s, compelling the Company to increase the number of slaving

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

expeditions to the island<sup>138</sup>. Interestingly, a slave mutiny occurred on the VOC vessel the *Drie Heuvelen* in 1753, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August; the mutiny was quelled and one of the leaders was killed, while the other was broken on the wheel, given the coup de grace and then thrown overboard<sup>139</sup>. Ravell refers to the *Meermin* mutiny as well; however, he lacks the details of the wreck, and subsequently confuses the vessel with a second *Meermin* that plied the Madagascan route in the 1780s. The *Meermin* of 1766 was thus engaged in a period of great slave traffic, a traffic whose intensity would increase during the 1770s and 1780s; and it sailed thirteen years after a previous slave uprising had met with an ignominious end<sup>140</sup>. The significance of 1753 could not have featured too highly in Muller's list of considerations, as is evidenced by the slack measures that he tolerated on his vessel. Thus, two themes are evidently at play during the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century: firstly, a labour shortage resulting in a marked increase in trading expeditions, indicating a decisive intent on the part of the Cape-based VOC to obtain and maintain as many slaves from Madagascar as possible; and, secondly, a recurrent outbreak of violent mutiny, demonstrating a capacity and determination on the part of certain Madagascan slaves to give vent to their frustration and to attempt to regain their liberty. Both themes are played out in the mutiny of the *Meermin*, in which the factors inherent in each of them motivate and direct the action by turns.

The considerably decent treatment applied to the surviving slaves after their recapture is indicative of the significance that the labour shortage in the Cape entailed among VOC officials. One could be tempted to think that, given the violent, retributive nature of justice that prevailed at the Cape during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the slaves would

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<sup>138</sup> Ravell, "The VOC Slave Trade Between Cape Town and Madagascar, 1652-1795", p. 15.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

all have been treated in the harshest manner imaginable. As it was, they were refreshed and then transported back to the Cape in wagons; Muller and Leij suggest that this decision was taken partly for the sake of the women and children, who would have found walking back to Cape Town an arduous task. However, an intense labour shortage could very well have compelled the Dutch officials to act in a manner different to what one might otherwise have expected of them. The slaves were treated in such a sensitive fashion, it would thus seem, because they were once more property of the Company, whose labour usefulness and value would need to be maintained if the VOC was to make any future profit out of them.

Both crew and slaves were afflicted in a large measure by illness, which often resulted in death<sup>141</sup>. Armstrong and Worden claim that illness, as well as slave resistance, accounted for a large proportion of the risk that the VOC undertook when engaging in slaving expeditions to Madagascar<sup>142</sup>. There were a number of factors that aggravated the spread of disease. For crew members, the tropical climate, which was unfamiliar to those recently arrived from Europe, was the main cause of their discomfort. Such a climate was responsible for the contraction of fever among many European sailors and officers plying the route between Madagascar and the Cape. In the case of Muller, one can suppose a high probability that his illness was some kind of tropical fever. He does not refer explicitly to any symptoms; thus, one would be led to believe that he would have been suffering from a not uncommon ailment, which in this context would have been likely to have been a case of tropical fever. The fact that it was not fatal would indicate that he was suffering from a mild variant; or perhaps it was the adrenaline of three weeks' trauma that kept him alive.

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Armstrong and Worden, *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Edition, p. 119.

More importantly, illness affected the slaves as well, causing significant loss of life on the voyages from Madagascar to Cape Town<sup>143</sup>. While the heat of the tropical environment no doubt played a large role, the chances of contracting deadly illnesses were greatly aggravated by the conditions that the slaves were forced to endure while on board ship. The slaves were secured in overcrowded chambers below decks, where natural heat was greatly intensified and where sickness could spread extremely rapidly<sup>144</sup>. Such illness often ended in death, as it did with the crew; and Ravell provides some detail in his paper about the large numbers of Madagascan slaves that were lost during the return of trading expeditions to their port of origin. He calculates the average death rate to be 15, 67%, a significant statistic<sup>145</sup>. Couple this with the fact that many slaves died of illness within their first few years at the Cape, and one begins to gain a picture of a slave route that was prone to significant losses in human merchandise, engendering an obvious concern about maintaining its profitability<sup>146</sup>. It is against this background, then, that one must place Muller's decision to free the slaves and allow them on deck. Due to the labour shortage, he would have been intent on preserving as much of his human cargo as possible; perhaps he wished to impress the Company officials with his ability to not only facilitate the purchase of suitable slaves but to maintain their numbers over the course of the arduous journey home. This could be a reason for the extraordinary conditions that he allowed to prevail on his ship. What is significant is that there are no recorded deaths of slaves by illness on the *Meermin*, and that the total number of slaves purchased was accounted for, either through their violent death or through their eventual recapture. Muller's efforts at

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<sup>143</sup> Ravell, "The VOC Slave Trade Between Cape Town and Madagascar, 1652-1795", pp. 36-37.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

preserving his slaves from succumbing to illness were, to his ultimate detriment, successful.

Ravell also devotes some attention to the ways in which Madagascan slaves would resist the imposition of servitude on them. We have two accounts of slave mutinies, that of 1753 and that of 1766; and while most slaves did not resist the VOC in so dramatic a fashion, they employed other means in attempting to secure their escape<sup>147</sup>. There are recorded instances where some went so far as to refuse all food and water, to the point of death<sup>148</sup>. This is the ultimate form of passive resistance, a means by which slaves would sacrifice their own lives so as to escape lifelong servitude and to deprive their masters of their recently purchased labour. It thus constituted an aggressive act of resistance, albeit one that was passive in its manifestation. Ravell also refers to instances where slaves would free themselves of their shackles and leap overboard in an attempt to reach shore while the ship was still anchored off the Madagascan coast<sup>149</sup>. Slaves would be severely punished for attempting to escape, usually through subjection to a cruel beating; such punishments would be inflicted after the slaves had appeared before the *scheepsraad*, a council of ship's officers that constituted the second rung of authority under the captain himself<sup>150</sup>. While some of these manifestations are unusual, they serve to reinforce an understanding of the slave trade, in Madagascar as anywhere else, as constituting a highly contested space; and, given the propensity for slaves to resist in a variety of forms, they highlight the ineffectual means adopted by Muller and his officers in stemming what they must

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<sup>147</sup> While they don't provide detailed descriptions of slave resistance on Dutch slavers, Armstrong and Worden refer both to slave revolts and to escape as two means by which Madagascan slaves resisted the Dutch. See Armstrong and Worden, *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840, 2<sup>nd</sup>. Edition*, p. 119.

<sup>148</sup> Ravell, "The VOC Slave Trade Between Cape Town and Madagascar, 1652-1795", p. 37.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

have known to be a very significant danger. Particularly when considering that a slave mutiny had occurred on the route less than fifteen years previously, the nonchalance of the *Meermin* officers and sailors is all the more startling.

It is also of interest to note that the Madagascan trade accounted in large part for the significant numbers of female slaves who inhabited the Slave Lodge<sup>151</sup>. Shell describes how the Malagasy traders would manipulate negotiations such that the Dutch traders would buy a good number of women, despite the fact that their preference was for the male gender<sup>152</sup>. Malagasy authorities did this, so Shell claims, in order to free themselves of what he describes as ‘unneeded or “troublesome” women’<sup>153</sup>. The large number of female slaves on the *Meermin* would indicate that such practice on the part of Malagasy traders was still in effect in 1766.

## Chapter 5

The social organisation of sailing vessels during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century is a theme of considerable importance in relation to the *Meermin* mutiny; for, as has been mentioned a number of times, had it not been for a particular atmosphere prevailing on the ship the revolt of the slaves, had it occurred at all, would probably have been crushed with significantly greater ease. While the available literature on VOC maritime authoritative structures is somewhat limited, it is possible to examine the particularity of the *Meermin*’s experiences in the light of academic work that has been engaging with trading vessels and the merchant marine of European powers during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, and thus to highlight those aspects and features of the ship’s communal structure that deviate from the norm and that were culpable in enabling a

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<sup>151</sup> Shell, *Children of Bondage*, p. 68.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

successfully violent uprising against established authority to occur. In a sense, what I will be attempting is a historical investigation into the mentalite of the *Meermin*'s crew.

By all accounts, discipline and authority aboard VOC merchant vessels was enforced by measures that were, for the most part, brutal and violent. C. R. Boxer, in his significant work *The Dutch Seaborne Empire 1600-1800*, claims that “the ships’ officers usually relied on severe discipline and savage punishments to keep their men in order”, an attitude adopted by many a skipper towards sailors, who many considered to be the lowest form of life possible<sup>154</sup>. As sailor crews often consisted in a large part of foreigners, harsh discipline was considered appropriate, both to consolidate what may otherwise have been a divisive and unruly bunch, and out of a certain distrust of those not born in the Netherlands<sup>155</sup>. The punishments dealt out to those considered to have been tardy in fulfilling their duties was particularly severe, and by the standards of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century brutal and barbaric. Despite nominal regulations governing the conduct of conduct of captains and other maritime authorities, skippers were prone to exercise their powers with considerable force and lack of restraint, and to ignore those restrictions that had been places on their authority<sup>156</sup>. Shipboard life was certainly harsh, a harshness that was deemed necessary to maintain the social structures essential for both safety and success.

Due to the nature of his work, Boxer provides minimal detail regarding shipboard structure and discipline. What he does include, however, coheres to a remarkable degree with the findings of historians who have focussed their attentions on the

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<sup>154</sup> Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire 1600-1800*, p. 70.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, p. 71.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 72-73.

Anglo-American maritime world of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. When one reads such accounts one is struck by the degree of similarity that existed simultaneously in the reality of sailor experience and consciousness in both the Atlantic and Indian Ocean trading spheres. While any comments that I make in relation to this historical work are thus contingent on these generalist similarities, they are useful in constructing a grantedly minimalist image of shipboard reality with which can compare and contrast specific features and realities that are evidenced in the narrative of the *Meermin*.

Two of these historians are prominent in the disciplines of both maritime history and the history of rebellious and revolutionary activity within the same spatial-temporal sphere, and indeed are noted for bringing the two apparently dissimilar fields together into a coherent and unified subject of historical analysis. They are Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker; they have worked together on a collaborative project entitled *The Many-Headed Hydra*, a work that brings these aforementioned spheres together with specific relation to the Atlantic Ocean, while Rediker's previous publication *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* is an excellent resource on the same geographical and thematic region for the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Both works devote the detail to maritime life, authority and discipline that is necessary to fill in the gaps in Boxer's account, from where one can investigate the place that the *Meermin*'s experience occupies in such a world.

Perhaps the most obvious, and yet equally the most important, feature of shipboard life is the enclosedness of the vessel, the fact that crew, officers and captain were compelled to work together in incredibly close proximity in an atmosphere from which there existed no means of direct escape. Linebaugh and Rediker describe the

This increasingly autocratic and dictatorial frame of authority was certainly not uncontested, and Rediker devotes a significant amount of attention to the ways in which sailors would resist the violent measures adopted by particularly brutal captains. However, this hierarchical structure of authority was to become embedded within maritime practice to the point that sailors, no matter how much they resented it, were forced to endure the almost unrestricted capacity of their captain to direct and discipline according to his own preferences and prejudices. Rediker includes as many accounts of sailors who accepted their harsh and brutal punishments as of those who attempted to resist, indicating that despite any revolutionary ideals that may have come into circulation, many sailors acquiesced to the structure that was imposed upon them. While sailors were to construct an oppositional culture that was collectivist and anti-authoritarian<sup>161</sup>, the hierarchy of authority and discipline was very much a reality for them, and was mediated as much by accommodation as by resistance.

The *Meermin*, when examined in the light of these details, begins to seem like something of an anomaly. In fact, it could be seen to exhibit a counterpoint to many of the tendencies that were typical among maritime endeavours of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.

What we see aboard the *Meermin* is a marked absence of the disciplinary measures that had been evolving to govern conduct and productivity, an absence that was itself a governing principle of the atmosphere that prevailed on board and that was to instigate practices of a decidedly dangerous character.

Sailors who had become accustomed to the brutal, restricted life on board merchant vessels must have found themselves immersed in a radically altered disciplinary

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<sup>161</sup> For detail on the construction of this culture, see Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, pp. 243-249.

reality aboard Muller's vessel. To use an over-used phrase, Muller's authority is conspicuous by its absence. If one examines the way that he ordered his vessel, that he related to both his officers and to his crew and even in the way that he carried himself and his position, then one becomes convinced that this man lacked the necessary authority that the crew would have expected of a typical captain. What is most ironic about his situation is that many of the not infrequent mutinies instigated by sailors during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century were motivated by a dissatisfaction on the part of sailors to a particular captain's brutality and excessive manifestations of authority and discipline. Muller, as it would appear from the records, was not a captain prone to excessive and aggressive acts of punishment, nor did he exert his authority in any tangible, not to mention over-exertive, manner. He thus managed to avoid mutiny on the part of his crew, but this proved to be of little advantage to him; for, whatever his lax authority may have meant to the sailors, it sent a clear message to the slaves. Muller's reticence and nonchalance created the conditions whereby the slaves could enact their rebellion, a rebellion that, in comparison with most mutinies, was in all probability far bloodier and more devastating than any that the crew may have enacted had they been so inclined.

Further illuminations can be gained if one examines Muller's relationship with his senior officers, and particularly with *Onderstuurman* Gulik. When both men appeared before the Council of Justice to plead their cases, a mutual tension and animosity emerged from their testimony<sup>162</sup>. *Onderstuurman* Gulik blamed Muller for not supplying him with the necessary instructions to fulfil his tasks; furthermore, he claimed that, after the uprising, on every occasion that he inquired of the

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<sup>162</sup> CA CJ 48, ff. 126-128, Court Minutes.

*Gesaghebber* as to his orders he was told to mind his own business and to remove himself from Muller's presence<sup>163</sup>. Muller's response is equally accusatory, for he claimed that he had issued Gulik with the necessary instructions, implying that any failure in duty must rest with the *Onderstuurman*<sup>164</sup>. This exchange is no doubt coloured by the environment in which it was conducted; both men were being tried for negligence, and would have been attempting by any means to shift the blame of the accusation so as to minimise their own personal punishment. Nevertheless, a distinct tension is very evident, and reflects what appears to be a divergence in opinion over the correct roles and conduct invested in the captain and his mate. Taking into account what has already been explored about Muller's nonchalant and reticent posture (a posture whose reality is reinforced by his testimony, in which he claims to have abrogated his authority to Commies Crause due to his incapacitating illness<sup>165</sup>), it is not an unlikely possibility that he had failed to issue Gulik with the necessary instructions, or that if he had then that the instructions were insubstantial and lacking the necessary weight. Of course, Muller claimed that he had issued the instructions; and whether he was lying, or whether Gulik was manipulating, distorting or even fabricating evidence in an attempt in an attempt to ameliorate his own punishment, is difficult to ascertain from the records. Whatever the truth or falsitude of the statements of either men, a mutual distrust, even antagonism, is evident between the captain and one of his senior officers; and although such a tension must have been exacerbated by the slave mutiny and the brutal realities that they were subsequently forced to endure, given Muller's own admissions about his attitude to his position and responsibility it is probable that these tensions, which could very well have characterised the relationships of a more extensive cast than just Muller and

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<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

Gulik, predated the actual mutiny itself. The fact that Leij rose so readily to the fore is evidence of an authority gap, a space in the social organisation and constitution of the vessel that had been relinquished by those assigned to it and that needed to be filled.

Tensions within the officer corps would have exerted a definite influence on the crew who served beneath them. To return to Rediker's about the constitution of maritime authority, the hierarchical structure that was developed on ships during the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century both reflected and was a direct product of the dissolution of earlier forms of paternalist authority and its gradual replacement with structures based on the dictates of wage labour<sup>166</sup>. There was no absolute division between the disappearance of the one system and its replacement by the other; rather, the vocabulary of the first came to signify the developments of the second, as the reality of social organisation and labour authority began to shift and reconstitute according to altered norms<sup>167</sup>.

Rediker characterises this shift as one that introduced "the novelty and the uncertainty of the increasingly stark opposition between boss and wage worker"; it was thus a period of significant flux and confusion, particularly for the sailors working on what were in effect prototypes for labour organisational structures that were to become standard during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>168</sup>. While the *Meermin* mutiny occurred in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the year 1766 is still close enough to the half-century mark that the processes Rediker claims as typical for the years 1700-1750 (his analysis is, of course, deliberately bounded by neat temporal dimensions that render his project more manageable) would no doubt still have been in evidence in trading vessels such as the *Meermin*. The sailors and officers of such vessels were, in effect, negotiating a

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<sup>166</sup> Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, p. 207.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, pp. 207-208.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, p. 207.

complicated new commercial reality, the processes and specificities of which they would only have been partly aware.

Rediker refers to a “stark opposition between boss and wage worker”; on a ship such a relationship would have been personified between the captain and his crew, including his senior officers. Thus, class divisions were in emergence on ships, from where, it is argued, they were extended to the factories of the industrial era and from there entrenched into societal structures throughout Europe. T. H. Wintringham, in a historical overview of mutinies he wrote during the 1930s, views the class structures and divisions that evolved on ships as a key factor in both the cause and form of the mutinies that litter naval history<sup>169</sup>. While one might consider his comments somewhat dated, they certainly shed light on the social realities that governed sailors’ lives and that moulded their thoughts and actions in particular directions. While the *Meermin* mutiny was not a mutiny of sailors, the class tensions noted by Wintringham are evident in other ways. Wintringham quotes Hilaire Beloc as referring to the “close quarters” and “small units” in which sailors lived and worked; while such features of communal life could instigate mutiny due to the lack of personnel movement and turnover, they could also exacerbate internal tensions, particularly between the different levels of authoritative hierarchy, that would prove all the more difficult to dissolve. What is most striking about the social organisation aboard these ships is the constitution of space through which such organisation was mediated. The *Meermin* was a hoeker, a small vessel even by the standards of the time; and while these disparities in social rank existed, status and authority, the people who occupied such a diversity of positions lived in incredibly close proximity to one another. Wintringham

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<sup>169</sup> Wintringham, *Mutiny*, pp. 347-350.

describes officers and crew as living “almost on top of each other”, and explains that such a spatial configuration could bode good or ill for the crew concerned<sup>170</sup>. Thus, says Wintringham, “the antagonism between sailor and officer should usually be sharper than any similar antagonism in the armies”<sup>171</sup>.

We are thus aware of class constitution and differentiation that was occurring on board ships during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, as well as the tensions that such processes engendered and the ways that the spatial configuration of such vessels could exacerbate the antagonisms and difficulties that were both a product of such social constitution and, of course, of individual temperaments. On the *Meermin*, tension between the captain and at least one of his senior officers is evidenced by the historical record, indicating a fracture in the upper echelons of the hierarchy that would have impacted on the social and psychological reality of the crew as a whole. Thus, personal aggrandisements were coupled with a social reality that favoured the breeding of resentment while reproducing a structure of repression that was itself being undermined through the inability, or lack of will, of the captain to play the role expected of him, to create an atmosphere that could not have been conducive to the running of the vessel according to practices that had come to be accepted as normative. Such a reality must have engendered a paradoxical, ironic reaction from the crew; the paternalistic, often brutal authority expected of their captain would stimulate antagonism and resentment, and yet, in the absence of such an overt and over-arching authority, a significant degree of confusion as to role, rank and function became manifest. The very lack of that which they no doubt detested was to be the means of their undoing.

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid, pp. 349-350.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, p. 349.

Rediker describes how creating a division in the command was a tactic employed by sailors as a means of resisting a captain's authority<sup>172</sup>. Such tactics sought to divide the crew into two groups, one of which would continue to support the captain and the other that would support the mate<sup>173</sup>. Such tactics, when successful, would curtail the authority of the captain and loosen discipline aboard the vessel<sup>174</sup>. While there was no apparently deliberate attempt on the part of any of the *Meermin*'s sailors to employ such divisive tactics, it is clear that there did exist a division in the command; and thus it is certainly probable that the lax discipline aboard the vessel was as much a consequence of this division as it was of Muller's direct ineptitude. The *Meermin* was a vessel whose crew were caught in a space where the expected norms of authority and discipline had been suspended, where a division existed between the captain and his officers and where regulated conduct and decisive leadership did not occupy the positions of importance that the sailors would have ascribed to them. Lack of leadership and a divided authority coalesced to create an atmosphere in which discipline slackened, guidelines and regulations were forsaken and a laissez-faire attitude prevailed over all activities, including the oversight of the slaves. The freeing of the slaves and the granting to them of access to the ship and even, eventually, to their own weapons was the ultimate consequence of the conduct of a crew that had come to operate according to norms that were foreign to the conditions that such a context demanded. Slack discipline and a retiring, bed-ridden captain may have been enjoyable for a time; but what the *Meermin* mutiny truly demonstrates is how fractures in a ship's command and an absence of a recognisable and accountable authority could create conditions that would lead to a more bloodily humiliating

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<sup>172</sup> Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, p. 240.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

experience than the captain, in all of his feverish indolence, would have found imaginable.

While the authority, or the lack thereof, on the *Meermin* created the conditions that enabled a mutiny to be realised, it was of course the slaves who made it happen.

Without any overt act of defiance and collective resistance on their side, no matter how lax discipline was on board the *Meermin* would have reached the Cape safely, and this voyage would have passed into the historical record without signifying anything particularly remarkable.

While slave mutinies occurred during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the available historical literature is somewhat restricted. Such rebellions were not, of course, limited to the Indian Ocean world of the VOC. Eugene Genovese makes a passing reference to the existence of a number of cases where slaves on ships in the slaving network of the Americas would mutiny and, when successful, steer the vessel for Haiti or for a British territory where they would be assured of protection<sup>175</sup>. Slaves who did stage mutinies on slaving vessels were thus enacting a particular form of resistance, a resistance that was specific to the conditions in which they were located. While the circumstances guiding and enabling the *Meermin* mutiny are particularly unique, the motives of the mutineers and the progression of their plans and actions reveals a deep affinity with those methods of rebellion by other slaves reacting against similar conditions.

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<sup>175</sup> Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, p. 6. Genovese is obviously referring to the years following the abolition of the slave trade by the British, when they would have provided protection to escaped slaves. Of course, the *Meermin*'s mutiny occurred many decades before such legislation was enacted at a time when the British were still very much involved in the slave trade, and so no such option would have been available to the mutineers. Nevertheless, the general import is clear; slaves who staged successful mutinies would often make for a place of definite refuge at the greatest possible speed.

The setting of the mutiny is imperative for, as has been emphasised, a ship is an enclosed space entailing very conditions that would govern the course of an act of resistance. The slaves on the *Meermin* were not in contact with any larger, broad-based movement; although they would have originated from a broadly similar region and culture, they were cut off from their local communities and from familiar social and political structures, on a strange vessel governed by hostile agents who were transporting them to a location the nature of which they were wholly unaware. In a state of such dislocation and personal trauma, and given the course of the rebellion and the verbalised intentions of the mutineers, one can ascertain that the mutiny was not motivated ideologically. The key to piecing together the content of this mutiny can be found in the slaves' actual demands. They wanted nothing more, it would appear, than to be taken home. In this sense of a specifically psychologically induced motive, the uprising was impelled by factors that were strictly personal.

Of course the term "ideology" is itself weighted with contextual interpretation, and different levels of significance are applied to it by historians engaged within a variety of contexts. What I would maintain is that any comprehensive revolutionary act that this mutiny articulates would represent the potential for ideological shifts only in their earliest, perhaps one could even say crudest forms. The mutiny on the *Meermin* does not constitute a revolutionary act in the sense of a desired reordering of society according to altered norms. Rather, it was an act of resistance that sought to restore a previous state of existence, one that had been robbed by these interlopers from across the sea. To examine more closely what such an interpretation of this event entails, it is necessary to examine the arguments of historians who have considered the sphere of

resistance. Their work has not necessarily been conducted on slave mutinies, or even on slaves themselves, but their comments illuminate the processes that one observes in the slave mutiny of 1766.

Nigel Penn's analysis of the *droster* gangs of the Cape interior highlights a feature of resistance that is applicable, in a generalised form, to the *Meermin* mutiny. According to Penn, early 18<sup>th</sup> Century *droster* gangs, consisting in the main of runaway slaves and deserters from VOC service, sought to create a haven for themselves beyond the confines of the Cape's urban settlements<sup>176</sup>. Some of these slaves even attempted, without any measure of success, to reach their native lands, including some who attempted to journey back to Madagascar<sup>177</sup>. The action that dominated this resistance was flight; and while these bands would prey on European settlers and Khoi, causing significant problems for the VOC authorities, they did not seek to directly attack political and cultural institutions or introduce radical social structures. Penn's comments echo those of Genovese, albeit to a limited degree. Genovese describes the creation of what he calls "maroon societies", communities of runaway slaves who had fled to a hinterland beyond the reach of colonial surveillance from where they organised their own societies and waged guerrilla warfare<sup>178</sup>. In terms of specific content, the affinities between Penn's *droster* gangs and Genovese's maroon societies are minimal; the latter were self-propagating units who often formed functional, albeit fragile, polities, while the former usually consisted of no more than a dozen members and were curtailed by geographical circumstances from forming structured communal networks. However, a similar impulse can be located as the foundation for these divergent manifestations of early slave resistance. They both reflect a compulsion to

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<sup>176</sup> Penn, *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways*, pp. 73 and 86.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid*, p. 74.

<sup>178</sup> Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution*, p. 51.

flee beyond the confines of structured and coercive labour control and to re-create the sense of freedom and personal autonomy that they considered their legitimate right. As such, they predated the social revolutionary activities that would come into play particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, such as the Galant revolt in the Cape hinterland.

One might ask what rebellious activity on land has to do with a slave mutiny that occurred at sea. While the material conditions that invest acts of resistance with their particularity are undoubtedly different, a decidedly familiar impetus is in play at the level of the collective motivation of the mutineers. One could view the mutiny on the *Meermin* as a manifestation of resistance as flight, albeit one that is transposed to a small vessel with no immediate access to a place of refuge. The desire to return home that is evident in some of the *droster* gangs is articulated by Massavana and his mutineers; however, their freedom of movement and means of resistance was severely curtailed by the enclosedness of the vessel, an enclosedness that restricted their options to virtually one course of action. The slaves could not flee of their own volition and attempt to make their own way back home, while they were simultaneously bound together as a single unit by their circumstances and were unable to fragment into different gangs and communities. All this, surely, goes without saying; and yet it is imperative to emphasise the way that geography, physical position and material circumstance both determined and mediated this act of rebellion. The only way that these slaves could flee their impending servitude and return to their homes was by employing the services, and indeed the very mechanical apparatus, of those who had enforced such a state upon them in the first place; material circumstances did not allow any other course open to them. Of course a violent mutiny manifests a vastly dissimilar social and psychological reality than does a mere

nostalgic longing for a familiar geography and community, and such a reality is best comprehended as a product both of historical circumstance and context and of personal agency. It will serve to note that the mutiny reflected an intent on the part of the slaves to return to liberty in their own land, and not to press for any movement larger or more over-arching than this. As such, while the mutiny certainly constituted a contribution to the later organisation of resistance and, eventually, revolution geared towards political change of the sort that is explored by Linebaugh and Rediker in their work, it was not in itself an act of revolution, but rather an act of restorative rebellion. It is important to clarify the category of resistance if one is to best comprehend the processes at work.

In order to illuminate what such an act entails within its historical context, it is useful to examine the work of an eminent historian whose work yet focuses neither on slaves nor on mutinies. I am referring to Eric Hobsbawm, the economic historian whose various works have reshaped the academy's perceptions towards the great processes that had shaped the last few centuries of world history. He has also written a fascinating text the content of which impinges on certain features that have been discussed in these pages. The work I am referring to is *Bandits*; while one might be inclined to consider a work with such a title inappropriate for this subject, and while the mutineers of the *Meermin* were not bandits in any conventional or, indeed, Hobsbawmian sense, their actions and, particularly, their motivations reflect an undercurrent that Hobsbawm's work will assist in clarifying. The so-called "restorationist" project that marked the mutiny on the *Meermin*, and that has been demonstrated to characterise the resistance efforts of slaves more generally, was not purely located among slave resistors, or even deserters or mutineers of any kind.

Rather, it is within the sphere of a larger social mobilisation that Hobsbawm historically locates a resistance that he labels “social banditry”.

Crucial to Hobsbawm’s thesis is his assertion that bandits are not “ideologists” or “prophets”, and are thus not concerned with devising and enacting revolutionary social or political visions<sup>179</sup>. Such rebels “have no ideas other than those of the peasantry ... of which they form a part”; thus, they do not seek to alter the society of which they are a part, but rather to protect it from forces of disruption<sup>180</sup>. In this sense, there are affinities between Hobsbawm’s social bandits, Penn’s *droster* gangs, Genovese’s maroon societies and, although in highly altered geographical and social circumstances, the slaves of the *Meermin*.

Where Hobsbawm’s analysis is most relevant is in his succinct summation of the social bandit’s project. Its affinity with slave resistances of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century resides in its lack of an ideological foundation; in Hobsbawm’s words, it is the “defence or restoration of the traditional order of things ‘as it should be’”, and thus does not consist of revolutionary content<sup>181</sup>. This is perhaps the broadest, and yet at the same time the most exact, description that one could apply to the *Meermin* mutiny in terms of its general features and affinities with other social movements. In the *Meermin*’s context, the “traditional order of things” was, of course, the life of liberty on the island that the mutineers had enjoined prior to their enslavement; and their violent act of rebellion was in fact a form of defence, a defence of a state of existence that had been threatened and, indeed, usurped by exterior forces. The demand for a safe return to Madagascar was itself a restorative act, a bid for a return to the accepted and the

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<sup>179</sup> Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, p. 24.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

familiar; there are no articulated motives to revolutionise either local society on the island or indeed the one that the slaves had constructed for themselves to facilitate the mutiny. Bearing in mind, of course, that slavery was still an accepted practice on Madagascar, and would remain so for a good time to come, these slaves were rebelling not so much against the institution of slavery as they were against their own personal enslavement, an enslavement that had removed them from the traditional sphere of community and society and had placed them in an alien and brutalising environment. At the risk of becoming redundant, let me conclude with one comment; that, while this mutiny and others like it may have constituted, in part, the seeds of what was to become popular revolutionary activity with a mass appeal, it was not conceived nor enacted with such motivations in evidence. The mutineers of the *Meermin* sought to restore what had been taken from them, to defend a conception of justice rooted not in revolution but in preservation; whatever revolutionary or ideological undercurrents one may be tempted to glean from the narrative, such undercurrents were not enjoined by the active participants at the level of self-awareness.

To complete the analysis of the mutiny, it is necessary to examine how the slaves enacted their rebellion and the means by which they organised and constituted their collective action. In the narrative, I placed great emphasis on the apparently spontaneous nature of the mutiny. This is not to claim that prior to gaining access to weapons the slaves had no active intent or desire to return home; Sleigh's account notes that Massavana was very much intent on obtaining some means of freeing himself and of returning to the island, and it would certainly not be unreasonable to

suggest that the majority of his contemporaries shared his aspirations<sup>182</sup>. Whatever inner compulsion there may have been to fulfil these ambitions, however, the evidence would suggest that the mutiny, when it occurred, manifested more in the way of anger and rage than it did of a predetermined plan to obtain a means of returning home. Circumstances were ripe, and were seized at an opportune moment; the ensuing massacre reveals much about the impulses that governed the slaves' actions during the mutiny itself.

Some of the features that I noted in the narrative require further exploration. Firstly, the slaves who had gained access to the weapons attacked the sailors immediately and, it would appear, indiscriminately. They even went so far as to wound Muller severely, a man who, had they been considering the possibility of enjoining the crew to return them home, would have been the most useful man to spare from injury. One could go so far to say that the slaves acted wholly out of malicious intent, although it was not a malice that had not been founded on good reason. Such aggression must have been the natural response of the slaves when provided with a means to retaliate against those who had inflicted such cruelty upon them. Revenge, it would appear, was the dominant expression of the collective will; as has been described; the sailors who could not obtain refuge in the Constepelskamer were killed mercilessly, while the act of casting lots as to the fate of the five survivors is an indication of the apparent gratification that the mutineers took in exerting absolute authority, to the point of the granting of life or death, over the sailors. What one is witness to here is a kind of euphoria stemming from this sudden reversal of fortune and position; and the

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<sup>182</sup> Sleight, p. 3.

casting of lots demonstrates the deadly playfulness with which the mutineers celebrated their incredibly sudden occupation of the position of supreme authority.

Secondly, the temporal moulding of events would itself have shaped the form that this, mutiny assumed. The slaves were no doubt becoming accustomed to the conditions that Muller authorised on his ship, whereby they had been allowed on deck and indeed been assigned tasks at various locations on the vessel. The lax discipline must have impressed itself upon them; perhaps even the friction between Muller and Gulik, as well as any that may have existed between the captain and other members of his officers and crew, may have been noticeable among the more sensitive slaves. Thus, they would have accustomed to the evident lack in vigilance and overt authority, and this may well have stimulated Massavana and others, those who were to form the leadership of the mutineers, to more definitive speculations about the possibility of overthrowing Muller and his compatriots and thus regaining their freedom. Whatever the truth may be, the actual act of mutiny was defined by a particular opportune moment, when *Commissaire* Crause assigned the slaves the task of cleaning their weapons and then left them without adequate supervision. It is almost as if time compresses around this point; the frustrations, anger and possible schemes that were slowly coalescing among the slaves fused at this particular moment, and an action was undertaken according to the dictates of opportunity, and not by a considered enactment of a pre-determined course of action. Such an opportunity was something that the slaves no doubt had not been banking on occurring; the mutiny of the *Meermin* is thus centred around this moment, a seizure of opportunity and a resultant violence that is its own expression of the fraught reality of which the space occupied by crew and slaves consisted.

It was only after the bloodletting that the slaves articulated their demands; and it is in the process of negotiation and the events that followed it that one can analyse the ways that the slaves organised themselves so as to most ably realise their intentions. In a narrative that is replete with paradox, we are confronted with yet another irony that startles as much as it reveals; that is, the fact that it was the ascension of the slaves to command that saw the return of discipline and overt authority to shipboard life that had been degraded under Muller's command. This followed a period culminating in the negotiations between the crew and the mutineers, during which the slaves consolidated themselves into an organised and hierarchical unit that would form a formidable force, one that could only be defeated by guile and deceit.

In the organisational structure that the mutineers adopted there are certain affinities with features of sailors' mutinies that are explored by Rediker. Successful mutinies are not ad hoc affairs with no direction or supervision from above; on the contrary, the authority of the captain is challenged by another authority figure, one who has gained the assent and support of the crew and is viewed as a more capable leader than the incumbent. As Rediker describes it, in the mutinies he examines "self-consciously organised centres of authority and control emerged from below to challenge for power"; without a challenge from such a "centre of authority", the mutineers would have lacked the collective will and communal discipline to maintain their control over the vessel<sup>183</sup>. Of course, the mutineers did outnumber the sailors significantly, which is why, once they were armed, they were able to defeat the sailors so convincingly; but their numerical superiority was organised in such a manner that the sailors, even

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<sup>183</sup> Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, p. 233.

when allowed to return above decks, found no opportunity to confront the mutineers in any convincing way. It was referred in the narrative how, when Leij was directing the sailors and the slaves in the pretence of returning to Madagascar, the move of every European was under constant surveillance from the mutineers' authority. The crew were never in the position whereby they could have led a concerted offensive on the slaves to regain control of the *Meermin*, and this was largely due to the authoritative presence of the mutineers, a presence that is markedly different from that of Muller.

From what is possible to gather, three leaders of the mutineers stand out. The first, the man identified as the leader at his death on the beach of the Soetendaal's Valleij, remains nameless; about him very little is revealed. What one can deduce from his existence, however, is that he personified a very definite centre of authority aboard the vessel, to the extent that a sailor would label him very specifically as the leader of the mutineers. The fact that he was recognised as such indicates that authority was centralised, and not dispersed throughout the slave body.

The two names that are recorded are, as has been mentioned, Massavana and Koesaaij. These two men were banished to Robben Island after their return to Cape Town, not under a direct criminal sentence but so as to be monitored for an indefinite period of time<sup>184</sup>. The reason for this rather unusual measure is the uncertainty that persisted in comprehending the role that these two played in the mutiny. In the minutes in the Rolls for 1766, it is recorded that they are "believed" to have been highly involved in the uprising, in the seizing of the vessel and the massacre of the

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<sup>184</sup> CA CJ 48, ff. 103-105, Court Minutes.

crew; however, due to a degree of uncertainty and insufficient evidence to actually impose a sentence, the authorities remained unsure to what extent they were involved, and of the specificities of the authoritative relationship that they had engaged with the other slaves<sup>185</sup>. While it is clear, then, that an authority did exist, the actual positions occupied by Massavana and Koesaaij within this authority structure remains something of a mystery. It was decided that they would be closely examined on Robben Island, in the hope of shedding further light on the matter<sup>186</sup>. While one is thus limited by the apparent incomprehension of the record keepers in constructing an exact analysis of the mutineers' authority, there is enough evidence to indicate that such a structure did exist, that it was recognised as such, although to varying levels of detail and degree, by the crew and officers who provided the court with testimonies, and that it constituted enough presence to articulate a desired goal and then to ensure that the means to realising such a goal were followed by all concerned. It was the mutineers' lack of navigational skills juxtaposed with the sailors' possession of them that was their undoing; this was the extent and the success of the crews' guile, and it was this, rather than any obvious weakness or deficiency on the part of the mutineers, which enabled their recapture. Whether the consolidation of such a central authority reflected a hierarchy already present in the slaves' ranks, or whether it developed during the course of the voyage or in the interim period between the massacre and the negotiations, is difficult to uncover to any definite degree. Bearing in mind that the slaves would have hailed from a variety of different communities and regions, it seems likely that the authority became centred around a number of capable and decisive leaders whose talents would have emerged at varying degrees after the *Meermin* got underway, and whose authority would have manifested itself at the

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

moment of crisis, after the massacre when the slaves would have been forced to figure out a coherent plan of action. Such an authority could very well have reflected social and cultural norms in Malagasy society; it was, of course, male dominated, which is probably to be expected. What is perhaps most significant is the extent to which this mutiny, as bizarre as its particular unfolding may have been, reflects tendencies and principles that are common to other acts of resistance that occurred at a similar period in history; and that such resistance was not configured according to an anarchic principle of diffused authority throughout the mass base of the resisters, but rather according to a centralised authority that reacted against, and succeeded in overthrowing and replacing, the one that had been established. The short tenure of the mutiny does nothing to moderate the existence of such affinities, not does it diminish the rebellion's achievement.

The uprising of the *Meermin* provides what must be one of the most exciting historical events of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century in what is now the Western Cape. Not only is it a stirring narrative, however; it also reveals a significant amount about the maritime world of the VOC during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century and the commonalities it shares with that of the Atlantic, as well as about slave consciousness and the dynamics that drive certain forms of slave resistance. The uprising proves the extent to which violent and dramatic events illuminate the processes and social movements that remain hidden in much of history. As such, it is far more than a gripping yarn; it is a vitally important contribution to this nation's history and heritage. It is the hope of the author that this narrative, and its accompanying analysis, does something to shed light on a history that has not been completely written. Furthermore, it is hoped that it contributes to the existing historical work that has been conducted on slavery and on the social world of

the VOC, a world that, as has here been so clearly demonstrated, was marked by tensions that could very easily erupt into violence and bloodshed.

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