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# Maroon Women in Suriname and French Guiana: Rice, Slavery, Memory

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**ABSTRACT**
Given the few written documents left behind by those who escaped slavery, the analysis of African agency in the transfer of crops and knowledge in the successful establishment of Maroon communities benefits from other disciplines, such as oral history, ethnobotany and linguistics. In this article, we report the way stories of enslaved women, who escaped in the early periods of slave rebellion in Suriname, live on in the names of specific rice varieties. Such stories pay tribute to the crucial role women played in ensuring food security for their runaway communities. We combined information from ethnobotanical surveys, Maroon oral history, archival documents and published accounts to show how Maroon farmers today safeguard their agricultural diversity and cultural heritage by planting rice varieties that still carry the names of their female ancestors. We focus on a selected number of rice varieties named after the Saamaka ancestors Seei, Yaya and Paanza, Tjowa of the Matawai, Sapali, Ana and Baapa of the Ndyuka, and describe the stories attached to them.

**KEYWORDS**
Maroons; rice; oral history; female agency

## Introduction

The material identification of the African diaspora in the New World, and particularly tangible objects that represent freedom from enslavement and cultural survival, have received increased scientific attention.[1] As the histories of enslaved Africans are poorly documented in colonial documents, and those who escaped bondage left little written records, Watkins and Carney suggest to look beyond the archives and include oral history, archeology, linguistics and ethnobotany in the comprehensive analysis of African agency in the transfer of crops and knowledge in American plantation societies.[2] Documenting Maroon oral history often reveals detailed information on how displaced Africans and their descendants maintained their traditional cultures in unfamiliar environments.[3] Studying Maroon plant use sheds light on the ethnobotanical knowledge and environmental practices that enabled the

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African diaspora to survive and adapt their agricultural systems to ensure food security.[4] Traditional rice cultivation has always been largely women's work, both among West African and Afro-American farmers.[5] Therefore, the study of Maroon rice can contribute to the knowledge of the African diaspora and fill the gap in early modern women's history in the Caribbean.[6] As many more men than women were sold into slavery in western Africa and only a minority of the runaways were women, the early Maroon communities had a severe shortage of women.[7] In this article, we trace the histories of several of these women, who played a key role in the distribution of rice to their nascent Maroon communities and are still remembered today in the names of rice varieties.

The largest communities of Maroons are currently found in Suriname and French Guiana. Six groups are distinguished. People easily self-identify with these groups, but official statistics are lacking. The following estimates from 2018 were made by anthropologist Richard Price: Saamaka (or Saramaccans – 115,500), Ndyuka (Aucans or Okanisi, – 115,500), Matawai (- 8,500), Pamaka (Paramaccans – 11,000), Aluku (Boni – 11,600) and Kwinti (- 1,200). About one-third of these people still live in the forested interior of both countries.[8] The oral history of the Maroons has been studied extensively by anthropologists, which has resulted in a substantial body of scientific literature, mostly published in Dutch and English, and to a lesser degree in French.[9] Recently, artists and NGOs have collected accounts of Maroon oral history by means of movies, interactive community mapping and online storytelling.[10]

Even though shifting cultivation was crucial for the enslaved runaways to survive in the forest, scholars have paid little attention to Maroon farming systems.[11] Rice was first mentioned as their staple crop in the 1770s and has traditionally been the domain of women.[12] Although women played a crucial role in Maroon societies from the early beginnings, published accounts on the history of *marronage* largely focus on male activities, such as raids, clashes with colonial militia, peace negotiations with the Dutch authorities and religious movements.[13] This explains the male bias of archival sources and, subsequently, scholarly accounts, but Maroon oral history is also stated to be the exclusive domain of men. Women are prohibited from entering deeply in the world of 'first-time' knowledge.[14] In this article, we show that Maroon women's agricultural knowledge also harbours 'first-time' knowledge, particularly on women's agency during *marronage* and the successful transfer of crops to the forested hinterland.

Recent research has revealed that Maroon women in Suriname and French Guiana cultivate one type of black or African rice (*Oryza glaberrima* Steud.) that is genetically very similar to a variety grown in Ivory Coast.[15] They also grow many white or Asian rice varieties (*Oryza sativa* L.), whose geographical origin is still unknown. Some of these Asian rice types are named after enslaved women who, according to the oral tradition, were hiding rice in

their hair when they escaped from their plantations.[16] In this article, we trace some of these oral histories about enslaved women of African descent, who escaped in the early periods of slave rebellion and gained a heroic status by ensuring food security for their runaway communities. We carried out ethnobotanical surveys among Maroon rice farmers and compared these data to archival documents and published (oral) history accounts to build our narrative on the relations between Maroon women and (agri-) cultural survival. We show how Maroon farmers safeguard their heritage in a locality-specific way, as they continue to cultivate rice varieties that still carry the names of their female ancestors who allegedly took along these seeds during their flight to freedom.

## Methods

After obtaining written permission from the traditional Maroon authorities and oral consent from each individual farmer, we conducted semi-structured interviews among Maroon rice farmers (almost all women) in 2013, 2017, 2021 and 2022. Informants were recruited through snowball sampling. Farmers were compensated for their time spent with the researchers. We documented local names of rice varieties, their translations and meanings, and recorded songs and stories about Maroon rice and its origins. We deposited living seeds at the SNRI/ADRON rice germplasm institute in Nickerie, Suriname, and herbarium specimens of rice plants at the National Herbarium of Suriname in Paramaribo, Suriname and at Naturalis Biodiversity Center in Leiden, the Netherlands. The digitized specimens can be viewed by typing their barcode (e.g. L.4428885) in the online database of Naturalis (https://bioportal.naturalis.nl).

The stories that Maroon farmers told us varied in detail and length, and we later discussed this variation with them and with several Maroon men, including village captains and the paramount chiefs of the Ndyuka, Saamaka, and Matawai. We reviewed the literature on the anthropology and oral history of the six Maroons groups for information on rice, women and their role in self-liberation. We compared these written sources with the stories we heard during our fieldwork. We searched archival material for evidence of rice fields during the early periods of *marronage* (1650-1758) in the specific areas where these women were said to have lived. From these different data sources and (historic) maps of Suriname, we constructed the possible escape routes of these women, using Adobe photoshop.

We transcribed and translated audio and video material about rice and *marronage*. To trace the potential African origin of the women's names embedded in the Maroon rice varieties, we searched the African Origins database (https://www.slavevoyages.org/past/database), which contains details of 93,605 Africans taken from captured slave ships or from African trading posts, including people's names, age, gender, and places of embarkation and disembarkation.

## Results

### *Saamaka: Seei and Yaya (1684/1690–1782)*

The origin of the Saamaka Maroons is attributed to the escape of a single man named Lanu. He escaped around 1685 and, guided through the forest by a spirit named Wamba, found refuge in an indigenous village. Lanu was soon joined by his younger brother Ayako (1666-1757), who escaped from plantation *Waterland*, situated along the lower Suriname river (Figure 1).[17] In 1690, there was a revolt on a plantation along the Cassewinica Creek, during which its Jewish owner Immanuël Machado was killed and many enslaved Africans escaped, 'taking along everything of value'.[18] Ayako took this opportunity to liberate his sister Seei and her daughter Yaya. They formed their own settlement with Lanu along the Matjau Creek, where they burnt patches of forest, planted crops and raised poultry.[19] They allegedly spoke Twi, an Akan language presently found in southern Ghana, and became the ancestors of the Saamaka Matjau clan.[20] About two decades later, the French attack on Suriname in 1712 was an opportune moment for many enslaved Africans to escape. The Maroons at the Matjau Creek were joined by people from plantation *Vredenburg*.[21] On 4 March of the same year, the Jewish plantation owners Nassy and Cardoso organized a military raid against the rebels and found a village

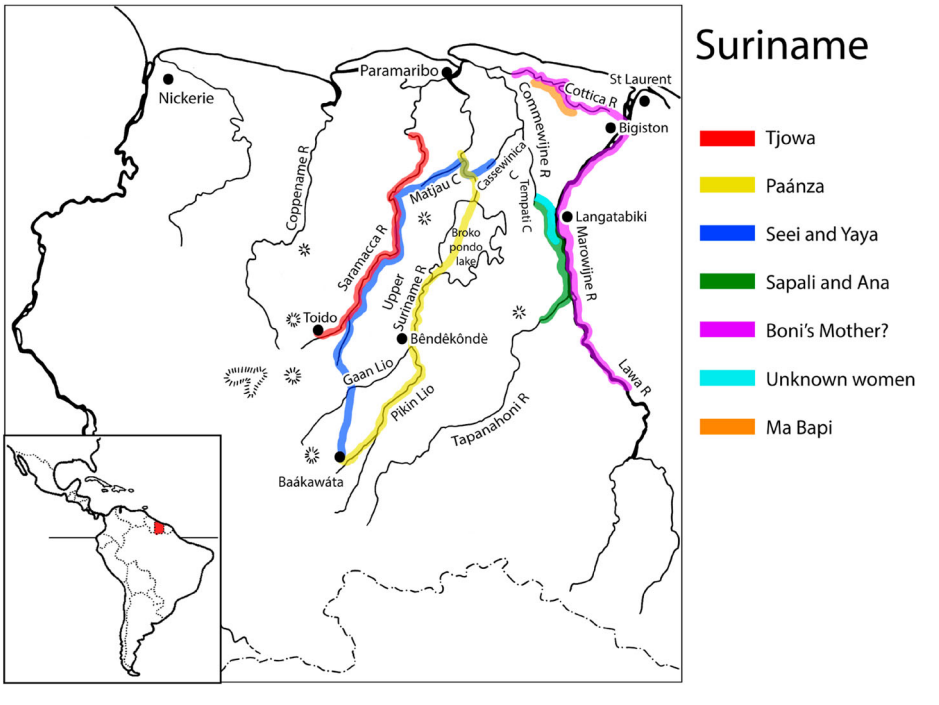


**Figure 1.** Map of Suriname indicating the escape routes of the female runaways in the early periods of marronage (1690-1740). Design: Michiel van der Hoeven.

between the Suriname and Saramacca Rivers. The village, led by a man called Claas, who fled around 1690 with a group of people from plantation *L'Espérance* along the Coropina Creek, was empty, but they did encounter large provision fields with tobacco, rice, oil palms, bananas, oranges, poultry and goats, which 'were too large to destroy'.[22] According to Saamaka oral history, Claas and his people were fed badly cooked rice at *L'Espérance*.[23] It is unclear whether the Matjau lived in this village too, but the report of the military raid provides the first written evidence of rice grown by Maroons in Suriname. According to Albert Aboikoni, paramount chief of the Saamaka, the growing Matjau group, including Seei and several children born in the forest, trekked southwards for a few years until they settled at Baakawata, far up the Pikin Lio (Figure 1).

A rice variety named *alisi seei* was first documented in 1967 by anthropologist Sally Price. She described it as an old variety grown along the Pikin Lio and referred to as 'true rice' (*alisi* is the general Saamaka word for rice).[24] In 2021-2022, we met several Saamaka women who cultivated *alisi seei*, and indeed translated it as 'rice itself' or 'the original rice'. We identified this variety, which had a white, hairy husk and seeds with a dark red bran, as *Oryza sativa* (Figure 2). Norma Main from Pambooko, upper Suriname River, stated that '*alisi seei* was our first rice'. Several farmers told us that this was the rice that their ancestor Seei had brought with her. Some Saamaka women said they had abandoned the variety because it had scabrous leaves that itched the skin during the harvest and was difficult to mill by hand. The Matawai grew a similar-looking rice variety, *alisi seepi*, also translated as 'rice itself', and said it was an old rice taken along by runaways. The Saamaka and the Matawai first formed one group along the Saramacca River. They separated in the 1760s, when the Saamaka travelled to the upper Suriname River.[25] This happened decades after Seei allegedly introduced her rice to the interior, so both rice types may be strongly related.

Seei's daughter Yaya, also known as Jaja Dande, is also an important woman in Saamaka history, as she had the capacity to communicate with forest spirits.[26] Sally Price also mentioned rice named *mayaya* and *tyaka majaja* grown along the Pikin Lio.[27] We met one farmer at Palulubasu, Pikin Lio (Figure 3A), who grew 20 different varieties on her field, including one named *Ma Yaa* ('mother Yaa'). She said that this rice, with a glabrous husk, white awn and bran (Figure 3B), was first introduced to the community by a woman named Yaa. We assume that this name refers to Yaya, while the term 'tyaka' or 'saka' for rice is a general West African trading term for rice.[28]

### *Saamaka: Paanza (1705–1775/1780)*

The Saamaka paramount chief Albert Aboikoni told us the story of Paanza, another important ancestor, who brought along rice with her:


**Figure 2.** Alisi Seei (*O. sativa*, NP112, L.4428891), collected on a Saamaka rice field in Santigron (2021). Photograph: Nicholaas Pinas.

The second Saamaka runaway Ayako had a son named Adjagbo. He was a child during the escape, but had become an adolescent by the time they reached the upper Pikin Lio. There were few women among the early Maroons, and Adjagbo created problems when he started to harass the wives of other men. The elders were annoyed by his behavior and threatened to kill him, but Adjagbo promised that he would end his problematic conduct if he could get back his childhood sweetheart Paanza, who was left behind in slavery. His father Ayako undertook the dangerous journey back to the Jew's Savanna [the area along the Suriname River where many Jewish-owned plantations were located] to search for Paanza, the daughter of plantation owner Enrique del Castilho and an enslaved African woman, who knew Ayako from Africa. Paanza was so beautiful that her owner was afraid she would be taken away by runaways. Therefore, she was guarded by a watchman during her work at the rice field that formed part of del Castilho's plantation. Ayako, however, made an *obia* (magic medicine) that made the watchman fall asleep. Only after the third attempt he slept soundly enough, so Ayako could get Paanza. Before she took off, Paanza harvested some rice panicles, which she hid in her hair, because she had no bag to carry them along. How exactly she did it, I don't know, because she was a mulatto and had hair that spread out widely. Once back in Pikin Lio and reunited with her lover Adjagbo, Paanza took out the rice seeds from her braids and planted


**Figure 3.** A. Saamaka rice farmer Okinta Main, 2021. B. Grains of Ma Yaa (*O. sativa*, NP179, L.4428885), grown by Okinta. Photograph: Nicholaas Pinas (a); Tinde van Andel (b).

> them. She had experience with rice cultivation, so she did not eat the first harvest, but guarded her seed stock until she had a large field. Then she invited all the other runaways and threw a big party. They ate the boiled rice and sang songs, some of which still exist today. At that time food was scarce, there was some cassava and yam that they had exchanged with the Native Americans, but not much. Paanza's rice variety was a strong rice. She handed out seed stock to everyone. It is a dangerous and noble rice: if you plant it, you can be 100% sure that your harvest will not fail.[29]

The Saamaka had settled along the upper Suriname River some 25 years before Paanza arrived with her successful new seed stock in 1739. Ma Paanza is still a popular rice among Saamaka farmers, although there are different varieties of *O. sativa* that carry her name. A type with white, hairy husks and red bran (Figure 4), also known as *Ma Paanza kwandjaa* ('red-seeded Paanza') looks quite similar to *alisi seei* (Figure 2). Other types named after Paanza have white bran and glabrous, orange husks. According to many Saamaka farmers, Paanza's brought her rice all the way from Africa.[30] *Ma Paanza* is traditionally the first rice that is sown in a new provision field. The similarity between the rice types *alisi seei* and the hairy, red-seeded *Ma Paanza* may be the reason why Saamaka farmers often consider them as one variety. According to Jeanette Pansa from Santigron, Paanza brought *alisi seei* to the Saamaka community. Another descendant of the famous Saamaka ancestor, Jaai Pansa from Awai (Pikin Lio) explained: 'Paanza planted one type of rice, *alisi seei*, but when it was time


**Figure 4.** Grains of a red-seeded Ma Paanza variety (*O. sativa*, NP121, L.4434534), grown by Jeanette Pansa from Santigron. Photograph: Nicholaas Pinas.

to harvest, different types of rice were present on her field. This still happens: you plant one, you harvest different ones'.

In the movie *Stones have laws*[31], Saamaka women sing a song about Paanza, that they composed from an older, secret one:

> She brought rice seeds. Ma Paanza brought planting stock to cultivate her seeds
> She planted in two separate rows … . She did not share it after the first harvest
> Only after the second one, she divided the rice among her people
> [… could not be translated … .] Did she bring her knowledge from Africa?
> The enslaved people who ran away [… ..] Makeba
> She tied panicles of rice. She brought it inside her hair
> When they arrived [in the forest] where they could sleep
> She loosened the seeds by combing her hair. And planted the rice grains

The song also stresses the importance of not directly consuming the first harvest, but multiplying the crop until there was enough rice to share among all runaways. Typically, in Saamaka, the phrase *fu kiija di bongo* can mean both 'cultivating seeds' and 'raising children'. An older song about Paanza,

composed by the famous Ndyuka artist Sa Awowi (Lina Toto, 1950-2014), was sung for us by Nelda Majokko from Be Goon (Gaan Lio) in April 2022. This song not only praised enslaved African women for their contribution to agriculture, but also for their knowledge of medicinal plants.

> Paanza brought rice seeds in the hair of her head.
> Ma Susana carried a bundle of herbal medicine on her back all the way to Suriname.
> Those women had great wisdom.

Richard Price reconstructed Paanza's life from archival data and Saamaka oral history.[32] She was born in 1705 on plantation Hebron as the daughter of the Jewish slave holder Moses Nuñez Henriquez and Lukeinsi, an enslaved African woman. Her father sold her to another planter, Joseph del Castilho, who from 1737 owned the plantation D'Apas. Del Castilho used Paanza as his mistress. Although her name was not mentioned in the archives, Price wrote that Paanza escaped 'shortly before 28 October 1739' with her half-brother Kofi Tjapaanda and travelled with Ayako to the Pikin Lio to become Adjagbo's wife.[33] From the archival data, however, we deduce that Paanza's escape might have been before 19 October 1739, as that day a militia was sent to the Jewish plantations to prevent further problems, as 'angry runaways recently killed a white person and took away some negroes on the plantations of Joseph [del] Castilho up the Suriname River'.[34]

Paanza settled in Baakawata (Pikin Lio), where she had several children with Adjagbo, and died between 1775 and 1780.[35] Paanza's descendants, some still carrying the family name 'Pansa', settled in the villages Bendekonde and Asidonhopo, and later in Kapasikele, which now lies submerged under the Brokopondo reservoir. Each year at the first rice harvest, people in Bendekonde organize a celebration at Paanza's shrine, with drumming, dance, food and offerings to honour their ancestor.[36] According to Ndyuka oral history, the Saamaka Paanza had a younger sister, Pikin (small) Paanza. She and her brother Kofi Tjapaanda joined the Ndyuka. Her descendants now live in the village Fisiti, along the upper Tapanahoni River.[37] It is not known whether she also brought rice. Ndyuka do not grow any rice variety named Paanza.

### *Matawai: Tjowa*

Richenel Adama, a Matawai man in his fifties, told us what he knew about his first ancestors who brought rice.[38]

> My uncle Leo has explained that life was very hard during the times of slavery. People were abused and did not get paid for their work. Thus, they decided to escape. Some persons had already figured out in which direction and along what trails they could run away. At that time, they made rice granaries [at the plantations]. One day an enslaved woman came back from her bath in the river and walked underneath a granary that was built on pillars. She found some rice grains in the sand [that probably

> had fallen through the wooden floor] and hid them in her hair. Because you cannot just grab a whole bundle of rice if you plan to escape, that would be too obvious, someone would see that. A man could not braid rice grains in his hair, but a woman [who has longer hair] could do so [unnoticed]. A respectful woman: they called her Mama Tjowa. She took the rice, until they found a safe space where they made a forest camp. There she loosened the rice grains from her hair and planted them. They had to wait four to five months before the rice was ripe, and after the harvest they could go deeper in the forest. I don't know what variety of rice Tjowa took along. Sometimes when you plant one variety, you see different colors of rice during the harvest. This is how rice produces offspring, so Tjowa could have brought one variety, which later evolved into different types.

Augustina Henkie from Bethel, in her late seventies, was certain that these runaways had brought rice:

> Because women had tied it in their hair. When my mother told me this story, she said that the whites chased our ancestors for a very long time. They constantly had to move farther into the forest, build new camps and make new provision fields. At one moment, when they realized the soldiers had discovered them again, one woman [Tjowa] thought: this is going too far. She got the idea to take some rice from her field and braid it into her hair. She grabbed her child and held it very tight, jumped into the river and started to swim across. When she reached the other side, she and the others started to run again along the other bank of the river, until the evening. They broke wood [they had no axes or machetes], made fire, spent the night there and the next morning they trekked further. One evening, they arrived in a safer place, and spent the night there. On the spot where they had made a fire the previous night, Tjowa dug a hole and planted her rice in it. They made a camp there, so they could wait a few months until the rice was ripe and ready to harvest. Afterwards they divided the rice among each other and decided to stay there. This place became known as Toido, the first real village of the Matawai. It is upstream from Pusugrunu, I have never been there, but my son has.[39]

There was some confusion between Augustina and her niece Sonja Henkie, who did not know what type of rice her ancestors had brought, or whether it was still grown by the Matawai. Then Augustina quickly went to her house and picked up a plastic bottle with black rice grains that she had harvested earlier that year. She said: 'As far as I know, the *fositen alisi* (rice of the ancestors) is black rice. In the beginning, this was the only rice the ancestors had. *Hendi Mama tja: baaka alisi* ('this is the rice that Mama [Tjowa] brought: black rice'). Sonja added: 'We had almost lost the seeds of black rice in our community. Luckily Augustina has planted some this year'. According to Augustina, 'other women later brought the other rice varieties' (Figure 5).

Augustina was certain that *baaka alisi* was something completely different than *matu alisi*, the Saamaka term for *O. glaberrima*. For the Matawai, *matu alisi* was a wild, inedible grass that grew in forest clearings and savannas, loved only by birds. *Baaka alisi* was edible, but people did not consume it as much as in the past. Nowadays it is more often used for medicinal and ritual purposes. The seeds were roasted until charred, then powdered and sprinkled on skin burns. A bottle with black rice grains hung above the front door

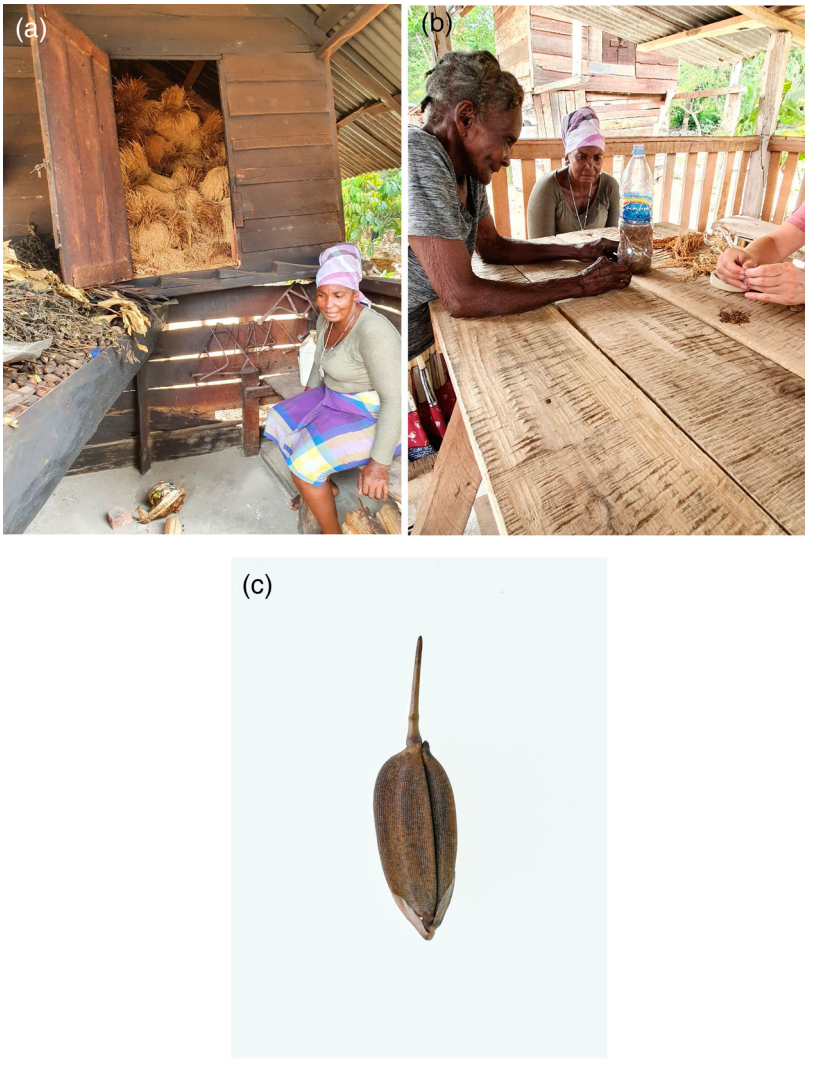


**Figure 5.** A. Sonja Henkie sitting next to her rice granary. B. Augustina Henkie (left) showing her bottle of black rice to Sonja and the first author. C. The variety of African rice (*O. glaberrima*) that is grown by all Maroons in Suriname and French Guiana. Photographs: Harro Maat (a, b); Marlies Lageweg (c).

would prevent bad spirits from entering the house. Although neither Augustina nor Sonja had heard about a rice variety named after Tjowa, another Matawai farmer, Thelma Eva from Comsarsikondre, told us that when she was young and growing up in Pusugrunu, her mother grew a rice variety named *Tjowa*.

Augustina, Richenel and Thelma added more detail to the story of Tjowa, which was documented earlier.[40] These published versions do not mention any specific rice variety, but consider Tjowa as 'the mother of all Matawais' and 'one of the original runaways', accompanied by her husband Akwali, his brother Kwaku and his wife, and/or by the later Matawai leaders Beku-

Musinga and Oko. Apart from rice, Tjowa also braided maize in her hair before she left the plantation, and covered her head with a cloth. While escaping up the west side of the river, the party discovered a place of fallen trees. After they burned the trees, Tjowa loosened her hair and shook the rice seeds onto the ground. The group remained there until the first harvest. Then they took the crops further upriver with them, planting them occasionally along the way and living in secluded, temporary camps. Matawai say that today they plant and eat the same rice that Mama Tjowa brought for them to survive. A Matawai song about Mama Tjowa illustrates her courageous flight:

> Mama Tjowa, Mama Tjowa, we thank you, Mama Tjowa,
> The water was high, the road was dark [dangerous]
> There were no people, you [alone] walked that path [in the forest]
> Evil was lurking on that path, it tried to possess you
> [but] Your spirit found peace
> Mama Tjowa, Mama Tjowa, we thank you, Mama Tjowa.[41]

The escape of the first Matawai was dated around 1700 from the plantations Poesoegroenoe, Uitkijk, Hamburg or Sukugoon (sugar field), although no such names are documented on historic maps of the lower Saramacca River.[42] Around 1730, Tjowa's group had increased substantially with other refugees, and they built a village near Djibi Creek. Here they eventually split into two groups: those that later became the Saamaka crossed the mountains and went eastwards to the upper Suriname river, and those later known as the Matawai created the village of Toido around 1740 along the Tukumutu Creek (Figure 1). Toido was a large village, where several clans of runaways had separate landing places for their boats. Price spelled this village as 'Tuido' and argued that it was named after *Toledo*, a plantation along the Suriname river from where some of the Matawai may have escaped.[43] Augustina and Richenel pronounced the village name as Toido (*te wi doo*), and translated it as 'where we arrived' [in a safe place]. 'Toido was so big that it took half a day to cross it'.

Tjowa raised eight sons and eight daughters in freedom.[44] If she indeed had brought African rice (*O. glaberrima*), her seeds could have been the origin of the black rice grown by the Matawai and Saamaka today, but not the ancestor of their Asian rice varieties (*O. sativa*). It is likely that other female runaways also carried rice. Some of Tjowa's sons later stole women from plantations in the Pará district, who may also have brought Asian rice varieties.[45] Claas and his Loango runaways had also moved to Toido, and they had been growing rice since 1712.[46]

### Ndyuka: Milly

During our fieldwork in St. Laurent du Maroni, Ndyuka traditional healer Ruben Mawdo invited us to come to his village Bigiston on the Surinamese

side of the lower Marowijne River. His son Brian took us to his wife's rice field, where we collected several different specimens. One variety with pale and slightly hairy husks (Figure 6A) was named *Milly*. Brian explained:

> Milly was the name of a runaway woman who brought this rice. She lived in times of slavery, when our people did not yet live in the forest, when they had not yet made villages in the woods. Not everybody likes this rice, as it tends to break easily during milling. It should also be planted on time, otherwise the seeds become black.[47]

We did not hear this rice name anywhere else in Suriname or French Guiana, nor did we find information on an enslaved woman named Milly. Her name may have been spelled 'Melie' or 'Merie', derived from 'Mary', a common name on the lists of enslaved females on the plantations *Vossenburg* and *Wayampibo*, from where several people escaped in the eighteenth century to join the Ndyuka and the Pamaka.[48]

### *Ndyuka: Sapali and Ana*

On the same field in Bigiston, Brian showed us *Sapali*, a rice variety with dark orange, black-tipped husks (Figure 6B). He explained:

> Sapali was the name of an enslaved woman who brought this rice. When the people escaped into the forest, they encountered a savanna, a very large desert. In some parts of this savanna, they found this rice. Sapali, one of the runaways, took the ripe seeds and shared them among the others and then they ran further into the forest. Although


**Figure 6.** Seeds of two Ndyuka *O. sativa* rice varieties, collected in Bigiston, Marowijne River, July 2017. A. Milly (TvA 6760, L.4434570). B. Sapali (TvA 6761). Pictures: Marlies Lageweg.

> this is a fat and clean rice, it is difficult to husk, you must find a machine to mill it. When you harvest this rice, the leaves scratch your skin.[49]

We did not encounter another rice variety named *Sapali* anywhere else in Suriname or French Guiana, although Ndyuka farmer Jomea Nyanfai (Lawa River) said that she was 'surprised that people still grow this old-fashioned rice with scratchy leaves'. Her mother planted *Saapa* rice, but the itching during the harvest made her abandon this variety. In 1961, Ndyuka along the Cottica River told anthropologist André Köbben:

> The women who fled from the plantations were braver than the men, because they also took their small children with them, strapped on their back, while the men wanted to leave them behind or kill them. In the beginning, the runaways were hungry, because they had to live from only hunting and gathering. Luckily Sa Sapá (a woman) had hidden rice grains in her hair before she ran away, and in this way, they had rice to sow'.[50]

Sapali is not mentioned in any other published oral history account. Köbben's version suggests that Sapali brought rice from the unnamed plantation from which she fled, instead of discovering the crop during her flight. According to Ndyuka musician André Mosis, Ma Sapa must have fled from the Tempati Creek:

> Here some plantations consisted of forest, where timber was harvested. The enslaved population had large provision fields and more freedom than on sugar estates. When the owner of the timber fields sold his laborers to a nearby sugar plantation where the regime was much more severe, they broke out in rebellion and ran away.[51]

Anna Prisirie Samson, a 96-year-old Ndyuka lady born in the Cottica region, told us:

> 'Sa Pali and Sa Ana [sister Pali and sister Ana] ran away together. They were not abducted or persuaded by men to come along. Ana had escaped first. During her flight she met Sa Pali, who was still working on a provision field at the edge of the plantation near the Wayambo Creek. Both women later merged into the Misidjan clan and migrated further to the Tapanahoni River.[52]

Occasionally during ritual ceremonies, Ndyuka get possessed by the spirit of Sapali, which allows others to get into contact with their ancestor and express their gratitude and respect.[53] The ancestors of the Misidjan clan escaped in 1707, probably from plantation *Palmeneribo*.[54] Ruben Mawdo's aged sister, Agnes Abiten Awedu, knew that Sa Pali lived in the Tapanahoni River village of Da (A)Pagi, but this was after the Ndyuka made peace with the whites in 1760. Agnes remembered a white and a black variety of *Pali* rice in her birth village Benanu along the same river.[55] No Ndyuka rice variety named *Ana* was ever documented.

*Wayambo* is the name that the enslaved Africans gave to the sugar plantation *Wayampibo* along the upper Commewijne river, close to the Tempati Creek.[56] Several enslaved women named Ana lived at *Wayampibo* in the course of the eighteenth century, but the names of the runaways were not mentioned.[57]

The fact that Ana and Sapali escaped together makes their story exceptional. Women seldom ran away on their own initiative; instead, they were mostly kidnapped or liberated during rebel attacks.[58] The Tempati Creek revolts and the subsequent military actions to recapture the early Ndyuka Maroons have left ample archival evidence. In 1758, soldiers discovered large rice fields with wooden granaries in the village of rebel leader Kormantin Kodjo.[59]

### *Ndyuka: Ma Baapa*

Lene Keeswijk, a Cottica Ndyuka woman in her sixties said that 'Maroon rice had its beginning in the time of *marronage*. An enslaved woman named Ma Baapa brought rice to the area around Moengo; she held it hidden in her hair when she escaped. Men did not bring rice; they did not have that possibility.'[60] She did not know from where Baapa had fled, and no rice variety named after her was grown by Cottica rice farmers. A Maroon rice variety named *Ma Bapi* is stored in the SNRI/ADRON seedbank (IZC-2278), but there is no further information.

### *Pamaka: Unknown Enslaved Woman*

Little research has been done on the Pamaka Maroons. Their ancestors either escaped towards the end of the eighteenth century or around 1810-1830.[61] The early Pamaka consisted of people who fled from the plantations *Arendsrust* (*Hantros* or *Antoisie*), *Hazard*, *Mollenhoop*, *Copie*, *Bedo*, and *Wayampibo* along the upper Commewijne River, Cottica river and Tempati Creek.[62] These plantations likely had large provision fields to feed the owners and the workforce and smaller gardens where the enslaved could grow their own food, but we could not trace whether rice was grown there. The enslaved labourers at these estates remained in close contact with recently escaped runaways who hid in the nearby forest. Together they coordinated the 'surprise attacks' by these rebels on the plantations. On the day of the raid, the enslaved workers brought extra supplies of food and tools to the provision fields, which they intentionally abandoned in the confusion of the attack and left for the rebels. In one story, an enslaved woman at the sugar plantation *Arendsrust*, who had very long hair, would each day conceal rice panicles in her braids. On the provision fields where she had to work, she would quietly remove the rice and add it to the supplies that would be picked up by the Maroons later.[63] The name of this woman or whether she ever escaped was not documented, but members of the Antoisie clan now live on the island Langatabiki in the Marowijne River. Their clan mother was named Ninne or Ma Asa, and fled from *Arendsrust* around 1830, but whether she brought rice remains unknown.[64]

When the last author interviewed Pamaka rice farmers in August 2022, none of them recalled this story. Some knew the Saamaka story of Ma Paanza, and

others said that rice had been present during the times of slavery, but they could not name any of their own ancestors who had brought rice, nor did they know rice names that referred to women. The farmers recalled that their mothers and grandmothers grew much more rice than they did. Nowadays, more time was dedicated to the production of kwak (toasted grains of bitter cassava) as this could be sold for a high price to Brazilian goldminers in their territory. Rice cultivation among the Pamaka is generally on the decline, although a small project was subsidized to grow rice for the domestic market.[65] Whether the absence of rice named after Pamaka ancestors is caused by the loss of traditional knowledge or by the fact that the woman who provided this rice never left her plantation remains unknown.

### *Aluku: Boni's Mother?*

Bokilifu Boni (c. 1730–19 February 1793) was a freedom fighter, born in the forest and ancestor of the Aluku Maroons. His enslaved African mother escaped while pregnant from her Dutch master, either from plantation *Nessencamp* along the Cottica River or from *Barbakoeba* (also known as *Anna's Zorg*) along the Warappa Creek, but her name remains unknown.[66] The guerilla war between Boni's group and the colonial military forces has been described in detail as well as their subsequent migration up the Marowijne river and their conflicts with the Ndyuka, leading to Boni's mysterious and violent death.[67] Little is known, however, about the origin of their rice. Did Boni's mother bring rice when she joined the Maroons?

The first published account of rice as a staple crop among Maroons was in the diary of the Scottish mercenary John Gabriel Stedman, who discovered enormous rice fields in August 1775, when he chased the Aluku in the Cottica region.[68] In 1773, the group of Kormantin Kodjo, known for its rice fields, joined the Aluku to fight the planters collectively. They built a village named *Reise Kondre*, which means 'rice village'.[69] In their current villages along the Lawa river, the Aluku grow various types of Asian rice and one variety of African rice.[70] Aluku rice farmers told anthropologist Marie Fleury that African women had braided rice in their hair before they entered the slave ships, and thus brought the grains to Suriname. They also mentioned that their ancestors had found black rice in the wild in a wet savanna. Fleury did not report any rice variety named after an Aluku ancestor.[71]

### *Kwinti: Unknown*

The Kwinti Maroons escaped from the coastal plantations from 1743 onwards and hid for decades in a swamp west of Paramaribo. In 1761, soldiers raided the Kwinti villages and reported extensive food gardens.[72] After 1790, the Kwinti settled along the upper Coppename River, where

missionaries reported in the 1890s that they were growing rice, and they were still doing so around 2000.[73] The Kwinti are the least studied group of the Maroons. Today, most of them reside in Paramaribo, while a few hundred people are thought to live in their traditional villages. We have not done any fieldwork among the Kwinti, and no names for their rice varieties or stories about female ancestors carrying rice have been documented so far for this ethnic group.

## Discussion

### *Contested Female Agency in Maroon Agriculture*

By linking Maroon oral history to written documents and specific rice varieties, we reconstructed the stories of several brave, self-liberated women who managed to bring along their beloved staple food during their flight to freedom. Whether they took seeds during their escape from bondage or found them along the route, they secured the survival of their descendants by transferring their abilities to cultivate and process rice. Our findings provide further detail to the agency of enslaved Africans in establishing rice cultivation in the Americas.[74] The early discussion on African agency in American rice farming, also referred to as the *Black Rice debate*, primarily focused on rice as a plantation crop in parts of the United States and Brazil.[75] By contrast, the narratives of the women emerge from the context of escape, *marronage* and an agricultural system in which rice was a food crop. On the plantations, enslaved women were often responsible for cooking and tending the provision gardens, so they had access to food sources and crop seeds.[76] During attacks by rebels, it was the women who had to remove the food stocks from the villages and harvest as much as they could from the cultivated clearings before joining the runaways.[77] The primacy of women in myths on the beginnings of agriculture elsewhere in the world underlines their importance as farmers and innovators in crop cultivation, food processing and preservation.[78] Maroon agriculture, however, is not solely a female activity: men fell trees and burn a piece of forest for the provision field, while women sow and harvest the crops.[79] Similar gender divisions of labour were observed in West and Central Africa in the slave period, although there were striking regional differences.[80]

The legend of women hiding rice grains in their hair in Africa or after disembarking slave ships was first documented in French Guiana and later also in Brazil.[81] The validity of these stories was doubted by Eltis et al.[82]

> Actually, the so-called Maroon belief that African women came to Suriname with rice in their hair derived from a visitor who spoke not a word of any Maroon language; and the Saramaka Ur-woman who brought rice in her hair for the Maroons carried it from a plantation, not from Africa, and it was commercial rice she was cultivating.

Rice was never a plantation crop in Suriname, but was probably cultivated and traded locally as bulk food for soldiers and the enslaved. As large amounts of rice were shipped from West Africa to the Americas, the provision grounds of the Surinamese planters (such as del Castilho) likely contained Asian rice of African origin.[83] Price wrote that he was unsure about the meaning of the bringing of rice seeds in women's hair, as for ancestor offerings, Saamaka preferred African rice, so Paanza's (Asian) rice must have been an important new variety.[84] Typically, Price recorded oral history on Seei and Yaya, while his wife documented rice varieties with these women's names in the same villages, but they never made the connection between these two. African rice must have been used in the early days of *marronage*, as Tjowa's story suggests it was cultivated when the Saamaka and Matawai still were one group.

It is unlikely that a single Maroon ancestor could have been able to transport rice in her hair before she was captured in Africa and bring it all the way to the Suriname forest.[85] Maroons have often 'merged' important ancestors into one person, as they prefer to tell that they all descend from 'one common mother', even though many female runaways smuggled crop seeds and produced offspring.[86] The legends of these female ancestors strengthen the importance of women in the survival of Maroon communities. Not only were women indispensable for reproduction, to maintain or increase the Maroon population size, they were equally indispensable for food security. The successful establishment of runaway communities in the late seventeenth century coincided with their ability to grow rice. These legends fit the general Maroon idea that 'rice is a woman.'[87] Maroon women today still know the specific braiding style that allows for handfuls of crop propagules to be stored invisibly in the hair: this includes not only rice but also cassava cuttings and other crop seeds.[88]

Crops only survive if planted every year, and no formal seed exchange facilities exist in Suriname or French Guiana. As these rice varieties were kept alive for over three centuries, we can consider them tangible markers of Maroon identity. As a material object of freedom from slavery, Maroon rice has figured in recent narratives on resistance and survival in exhibitions on slavery.[89] It is not possible to verify whether the current Maroon rice varieties named after female ancestors are indeed descendants of the seeds introduced by these women. Genomic analysis, however, can reveal more about their geographic origin, and indicate whether they are genetically similar to rice varieties currently grown in West Africa, Asia or elsewhere.[90]

### *European Versus African Names*

In spite of the recent digitization of some of the colonial archives, the names of runaways are mostly untraceable, except when they were captured and brought to court to report on the whereabouts of their fellow freedom seekers.[91] Enslaved Africans often received new European names, but in the safety of their household

they were often known under another (nick-)name. When they fled from slavery, they often dropped their European name and regained their secret African name.[92] This was also a safety measure, because if one of them was caught and forced to betray the others, the colonial authorities could not trace them to a specific plantation. This also complicates the identification of self-liberated people in archival documents. As a result, we did not find any direct written evidence for the existence of the nine women whose history we have sketched in this article. They have only survived in oral accounts and as rice varieties.

We did encounter several African names similar to those of the Maroon women in the African Origins Database. The name 'Panza' was listed for a girl shipped from the Windward Coast on a Spanish vessel in 1812.[93] Two women named 'Sapa' and one named 'Saba' from the Pongo River (Guinea) were sent to Cuba on a Brazilian schooner in 1841.[94] The name 'Yaya' frequently appears on lists of enslaved people from Lagos (Nigeria), Benin and Guinea Bissau, while 'Bapa' is mentioned once for a 15-year-old girl from Calabar (Nigeria) in 1813.[95] Names resembling Seei and Tjowa were not found. From the Windward Coast (currently Liberia and Ivory Coast), the Pongo River and Guinea Bissau, rice farmers were captured and sent to the Carolina rice fields.[96] The DNA of the Surinamese sample of African rice was traced back to the Ivory Coast.[97]

## *More Crops, More Stories . . . .*

Of the 284 names for rice varieties that were documented among Maroons, 53 had a women's name.[98] Several of those names represented women who had first seen a specific rice variety in their field, either resulting from a spontaneous crossing between two varieties or from adulteration of their planting stock. Some rice names, however, referred to female ancestors that we were unable to trace, as their identity has been forgotten by those who grow them.[99] Probably, there are more songs and oral histories on women who smuggled rice or other crops from plantations or exchanged them with Native Americans, for example in unpublished field notes of (deceased) anthropologists and other informal documentation. Evidence of rice on plantation provision fields may be hidden in the undigitized Dutch archives. More research on rice cultivation by the Pamaka, Kwinti and Aluku Maroons is needed to verify whether they also link their rice varieties to their female ancestors.

We therefore consider our research as a starting point for further research, preferably done by Maroon students and researchers, and especially among the less-studied, smaller Maroon groups (Kwinti, Pamaka, Aluku). However, stories about the early ancestors tend to be secret, even dangerous and some can only be mentioned in whispers.[100] As our translator Edith Adjako explained: 'Stories about the early runaways and their smart way to escape slavery often are told as proverbs, to prevent outsiders from understanding how they did it. What if slavery would come again? How could they ever escape if they already have told all their secrets?' On the other hand, traditional knowledge is disappearing due to urbanization and

globalization, and Maroons now acknowledge the added value of recording their oral history.[101] According to the Matawai paramount chief Lesley Valentijn: 'It is time that those things that only women know also get documented'.

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