

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The role of crop diversity in escape agriculture; rice cultivation among Maroon communities in Suriname

Harro Maat¹  | Nicholaas Pinas^{2,3} | Tinde van Andel^{2,3} 

¹Knowledge, Technology and Innovation Group, Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands

²Naturalis Biodiversity Center, Leiden, The Netherlands

³Biosystematics Group, Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands

Correspondence

Harro Maat, Knowledge, Technology and Innovation Group, Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands.

Email: harro.maat@wur.nl

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Societal Impact Statement

Agricultural techniques are inherently connected to social organization. Under colonialism, broadly understood as foreign powers suppressing (parts of) a local population, escape agriculture offers a way to avoid despotism by producing food and other produce in independent and sustainable ways. Crop diversity plays an important role in escape agriculture, demonstrated here by the variation of rice varieties on Maroon farms in Suriname. Histories of Maroon agricultural practices, and similarly marginalized groups in (formerly) colonized regions, are informative for current interventions in agriculture. Agronomic support to marginalized groups will only be successful when addressing historically grown social disengagement.

Summary

- **Rationale:** Food is essential for successful *marronage* and produced by means of escape agriculture. Today, communities in the interior of Suriname continue to farm by following practices of escape agriculture. Our study traces the historical development of these farming practices, in particular the extensive cultivation of rice. Our aim is to show that the diversity of rice varieties used in their fields reveals the sophisticated farming techniques and social significance of escape agriculture.
- **Methods:** We visited about 60 farm plots upstream the main rivers of Suriname where we interviewed the person in charge about the rice varieties grown in their fields. We asked about origin, names, and characteristics of each rice variety. We also screened historical sources, primary and secondary, as well as anthropological accounts of these communities for historical evidence of rice cultivation and varietal diversity.
- **Results:** Plots were farmed primarily by women and contained a broad range of different rice varieties. Naming and origin stories show a clear reference to the escape from plantations and the leading role of women in farming and food security. In some fields, a small patch was reserved for a rice type with very dark grains, used mostly for ritual purposes. Results also show adoption of more recently introduced rice varieties.

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- **Conclusion:** Rice plays a key role in escape agriculture as practiced by Maroon communities in Suriname. Rice varieties are used as agricultural markers of difference.

KEYWORDS

Caribbean, colonial history, Maroon societies, marronage, rice varieties, Suriname

1 | INTRODUCTION

The settlements of European colonizers on the Guiana coast in the 17th and 18th centuries, connecting the current territories of French Guiana, Suriname, and Guyana, developed into a substantial plantation economy. Arriving ships brought enslaved Africans to enter the repressive labor system of the plantations; outgoing ships transported plantation products to overseas, mainly European, markets. The plantation population, free and enslaved, relied on imported and locally produced food. Imported food consisted of items that could endure the voyage, many of which processed for conservation, such as dried and salted meats. Fresh food was acquired from what the forest and rivers provided and from cultivated food crops (Berlin & Morgan, 1991; van Stipriaan, 1993). Food production was also crucial for those who self-emancipated from slavery, forming Maroon communities in places beyond control of plantation militia and colonial armies. Marronage, the act of self-emancipation, was a common phenomenon in the Americas in the period of slavery, but communities could last only in conducive environments (Price, 1996; Thompson, 2006).¹ Slavery was gradually abolished, initially in British slave colonies in the 1830s, followed by other colonial powers in subsequent decades.² In most post-abolition societies, Maroon communities ceased to exist as separate entities, except in Suriname and French Guiana. Based on data recently collected in fields from Maroon communities, combined with historical sources, we characterize the Maroon food production as escape agriculture. To explain what the term means and the insights it offers, some more details about food production in slave-based plantation economies are given first.

Food produced on plantations generally took two forms. Plantation owners reserved fields for producing food, often urged by colonial regulations, to ensure basic dietary needs. In these fields, using the enforced labor of the enslaved, a small variety of starch-rich crops were grown, mostly plantains, cassava, and other root and tuber crops. As an organized element of the plantation, these fields are overall well represented in the records. The other form were places where enslaved worked at their own discretion, growing a variety of different crops, many of these crops introduced from other continents (Carney & Rosomoff, 2009). These fields could be assigned by plantation owners, for example deserted plantation fields, or they could be

pieces of land selected by the enslaved themselves. These fields, unsupervised by plantation overseers and tended during off-hours, are not often in the canonical historical record. Information about what was grown, by whom and how, is scattered and indirect.

The overall picture from Suriname is similar to other plantation regions, suggesting that fields were richly varied in crops and medicinal plants. Moreover, enslaved producers did not just grow for their own survival. Descriptions about slaves' festivities and ceremonies mention many dishes and food items on display or eaten. Over the course of the 18th century, lively (Sunday) markets emerged in most plantation areas, where enslaved and free non-Europeans exchanged produce (Berlin & Morgan, 1991; Fatah-Black, 2015; Mintz & Hall, 1970; van Stipriaan, 1995). Food, in other words, had (and has) a social and economic purpose beyond basic nutrition, and this would also have been reflected in cultivated fields.

The food produced by the enslaved plantation workers in the unsupervised fields seems to have much in common with the farms established by Maroon communities. The latter were located at a safe distance from plantations, scattered around Maroon settlements. In Suriname, most of these fields were created by clearing a piece of forest or by tilling spots not overgrown by forest, for example, swamps that were suitable for rice cultivation. The unsupervised fields on plantations and the Maroon fields, we argue, are connected cases of escape agriculture. As defined in the works of James Scott (2010) and Paul Richards (2022), escape agriculture is a specific farming technique, developed in response to repression from governing powers, and a foundational practice for establishing different ordering principles for the economy and society. Escape farming techniques involve the avoidance of visibility through sparse use of fire, using multiple fields at different locations and hiding crops by reduced clearing and weeding of other vegetation. Escape agriculturalists cultivate a range of different crops and crop varieties, enabling subsistence and sociality in relative isolation.

The focus of this paper is on the rice crop grown by past and present Maroon groups in Suriname. Suriname and French Guiana are the two countries where Maroon groups continued their distinct way of living until the present day.³ Although violent assault and state repression ended when slavery was abolished, Maroon farming still reveals many features of escape agriculture.⁴ These features, we show

³The study underlying this paper also includes data collection in French Guyana, but results presented here are from Suriname only.

⁴Post-slavery instances of repression against Maroons arguably continued in concealed manner. Two more overt instances of state repression, involving forced movement, resulted from the construction of a large hydropower dam in the 1950s and the interior war of the 1980s.

¹Mountains, dense forests, and swamps strongly reduced the military effectiveness of colonial powers and thus offered the best protection.

²Abolition was in most places a drawn-out process. Colonial powers practically extended bondage for another 10 years after formal emancipation, hideously termed apprenticeship.

in this paper, are clearly visible in the rice cultivation practices. Rice, like other food items produced from escape agriculture, is valued differently than the commodified food that was imported or produced by the plantation regime (Hazareesingh & Maat, 2023).

We are not the first to study the social and cultural history of Maroons in combination with their agricultural production (e.g., Carney, 2005; Hurault, 1965; Price, 1991). These studies mainly focused on the cultural differences among various Maroon groups or the hypothesized African origins of these practices. Our account of escape agriculture frames the Maroon fields, like the fields tended by the enslaved workers without supervision, as an outcome of conflicting social principles that continue to resonate today. In the context of slavery, escape agriculture was about the extreme opposites of slavery and freedom (Thompson, 2006). Legally, there was a clear dividing line between one and the other, but the reality of plantation societies was much less straightforward. As argued by the Haitian scholar Jean Casimir (1992), the gradations of suppression and violence endured by the enslaved created a deep-seated antagonism between plantation and counter-plantation that had long-lasting effects on these societies that are still felt in the present. We witnessed this antagonism in our interactions with Maroon women and men, for example when they expressed their aversion to rice sold in shops that had been produced by commercial farms elsewhere. Their own rice tastes better, they say, and eating from their own farms confirms the distinctiveness of their agriculture. Escape agriculture thus continues to be visible in the composition of and value attributed to food items, which extends to food production practices and specific crop varieties.

Our study of Maroon rice cultivation practices in Suriname as escape agriculture is also informative for a better historical understanding of the food production by enslaved workers unsupervised by plantation overseers. The names of some rice varieties and the origin stories Maroon farmers tell about them reveal narratives about acts of escape from plantations by individuals as well as the enduring connections between Maroons and the enslaved on plantations, for example, family members who did not manage to get away. The many rice varieties grown by Maroon communities in Suriname and the diverse stories attached to these varieties reveal the inventiveness and importance of escape agriculture.

2 | METHODS

The field data consist of interviews and rice samples taken from different Maroon villages along five major rivers in Suriname. Most members of a household are involved in farming, but women perform most of the farm operations. Men are involved in creating new farms by felling trees, clearing and burning the underbrush, after which women take over. We interviewed mostly women, and by the time of writing this paper (fall 2022), 67 interviews are transcribed. The five main locations for data collection are villages alongside the rivers Tapanahoni, Marowijne, Suriname, Cottica, and Saramacca. Each location has multiple villages, and people belong to one of the main

Maroon groups, Ndyuka, Pamakka, Saamaka, or Matawai. Each of these groups was established at different moments during the 17th and 18th century. Community formation was never a single event. Marronage, individually or in groups, happened continuously and later runaways joined existing Maroon settlements or formed their own (sub-)communities. Also rivalry, conflict and reconciliation between Maroon groups influenced the sizes and markers of cultural distinction. Respondents were selected by contacting farmers by mobile phone. Farm plots are typically scattered over a rather wide area surrounding Maroon villages. Few villages have road access, and the majority can only be reached by boat. Access to farms requires an additional walk, occasionally up to an hour, or a short boat trip.

Interviews were mostly done at the farm plot during the harvest season and included questions about the number of rice varieties grown, their names and meaning of the names, and seed sources. Permission, by oral consent, was requested for interviewing and taking samples. Samples were taken in duplicate and consisted of seed samples and uprooted rice plants, processed into herbarium vouchers, one deposited at the National Herbarium of Suriname (BBS), the other at Naturalis Biodiversity Center, the Netherlands. Seed samples were deposited at the National Rice Research Center (ADRON, Suriname) and one at Naturalis Biodiversity Center.

For additional oral histories about rice varieties, we also interviewed people who have leading positions in Maroon communities, intellectually and politically. Further historical reconstruction involved analysis of primary and secondary sources. A more elaborate analysis of naming conventions for Maroon rice varieties is published elsewhere (Pinas et al., 2023).

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Evasion of work and marronage

Plantations in Suriname were located mostly in flood-prone coastal lowlands along the main rivers. Farming these wetlands required canal structures, sluices, and elevations to control the water. Land preparation and water control put an additional heavy toll on the enslaved labor force, in addition to tasks for tending, harvesting, processing, and transport of the harvest and other items to and from plantations (Oostindie and van Stipriaan, 1995). Growing food crops on plantations was common practice until the beginning of the 19th century, when food increasingly came from specialized food plantations and imports from other parts of the Americas (van Stipriaan, 1993; Coclanis, 1993). A detailed account of plantation farming in the 18th century is from estate manager Anthony Blom. He noted (Blom, 1787) that food was produced on two types of plots, estate food plots (*kostgronden*) and fields for “negro food” (*negerkost*). On estate food plots, starchy crops like cassava, plantain, and taro were produced by slave labor. Food on the other plots was grown by the same enslaved workers but unsupervised by estate managers. Blom only included estate food plots in his calculations to show his readers how to manage an estate economically. For the slaves' food plots, he

mentioned that slaves grow pulses, root crops, okra, yam, groundnut, sesame, pumpkin, and watermelon and tended the fields on Sundays, the only day they were discharged from plantation labor.

The suggestion of an orderly estate structure with some additional Sunday farming on the fringes no doubt was the ideal image of plantation owners. In reality, the plantation order was anything but self-evident and was an ongoing search for balance between overburden and repression from the side of estate managers and evasion of work, revolt, and escape by the enslaved workforce. The outcome could differ between one plantation and the next. The kind of plantation crop to be worked on made a difference too. By and large, more repression was needed for heavy duty and risky tasks. Sugar estates were notorious for the ongoing rush to get harvested cane to the mill, where the crushing of the cane caused frequent injuries. The furnaces where cane juice was boiled to make sugar were typically characterized as hell on earth. On the other end of the spectrum, timber estates likely provided substantial space for negotiation and self-determinacy by the enslaved workforce. Logging was done by teams of workers, overseers typically being older and experienced but equally enslaved, who were sent out to fell trees, often deep in the forest where they camped and stayed for several days. The timber estates in Suriname were also known for growing surplus food (Boomgaard, 1992; van Stipriaan, 1993). But whatever estate managers did to ensure compliance, inherent in the systematic violence of the plantation system was the risk of revolt and escape (Thompson, 2006).

Beyond the control of estate managers, the food plots where the enslaved could work in their own time must have played a crucial role in evasive behavior, temporary escape from plantation work (*petit marronage*), and permanent escape leading to the formation of Maroon groups. These unsupervised fields formed a valuable resource for food. The location of these fields varied, and there are accounts of food plots far away from the estate premises on deserted pieces of plantation land or new fields opened up in the forest edge. Some of these fields could have been initial sources of food for runaways. There are frequent accounts of groups of Maroons hiding “behind” plantations (Hoogbergen, 2015). Visits of Maroons to plantations are mostly portrayed by colonial accounts as violent looting. However, testimonies from recaptured runaways also reveal congenial exchanges between Maroons and the enslaved plantation workers (Hoogbergen, 2015). Based on 18th-century observations of similar food plots on Jamaica, Mintz and Hall (1970) infer that these plots were under custody of enslaved elders and functioned as tranquil places for socialization of new arrivals from Africa.⁵ Fields located out of sight from estate managers and away from the plantation also might have functioned as a buffer food stock for newly formed Maroon groups before they had found a safe space further inland and started farming there.

The same strategy of locating food plots away from the main settlement was applied by Maroon groups. The extensive accounts of military expeditions chasing Maroons in the late 18th century show

that the Maroon defense strategy was to send older men, women, and children to the food plots deep in the forest, whereas the main settlement was defended by the younger men (Hoogbergen, 2015; Price, 1991). If the refuge was not discovered, lives were saved and could rely on the available food while starting new farms and building a new settlement. Arguably, the military expeditions gained more from destroying food plots than from exhaustive pursuits of the Maroon people, who were superior in navigating the forest.

Where does rice fit into this history? Rice was a victual on slave ships, especially ships arriving from West Africa, and experiments with growing rice in Suriname are documented for the 1680s (Mouser et al., 2015; Oudschans Dentz, 1944). The sources from Suriname in the 18th century show an interesting contrast. Rice appears in many reports of military expeditions destroying Maroon settlements but is mentioned more sparsely in descriptions of the food available on plantations. The abundance of rice fields encountered in Maroon plots suggests that rice must have been one of the crops grown by enslaved plantation workers in unsupervised fields. The likelihood that some rice was grown on the unsupervised food plots becomes apparent in colonial descriptions of the slaves' festivals and ceremonies, when extensive meals were prepared, with cooked rice being one of the dishes (Hartsinck, 1770; Herlein, 1718; van Andel et al., 2012). We can only speculate how much rice was grown by the enslaved workforce, but the crop must have been present and could well be unnoticed by plantation owners when farmed at the fringes of plantations. Deserted pieces of plantation land, for example, naturally get overgrown with grasses, making them very similar to a rice field, certainly from a distance.

After abolition, in Suriname in 1863, less condemning descriptions of Maroon villages appeared. The sawmill owner A.M. Coster documented his visits to Maroon villages in the 1860s, noting the extensive agricultural activities across the year with rice and cassava grown in the rainy season, supplemented by *napi* (*Dioscorea trifida*), yams, and tayer (*Colocasia esculenta*) a range of leafy vegetables and peanut (Coster, 1866). Studies from researchers with a specific interest in the Maroon culture appear in the 1930s. A book by the American anthropologists Melville and Frances Herskovits (Herskovits & Herskovits, 1934) provides similar details of the range of food crops grown by Maroons. The linguist André Vaillant (1948) described rice varieties of Maroon groups in French Guyana and Surinam in the late 1930s, and in the 1950s, entomologist Dirk Geijskes (1955) also discovered the variation in rice and other crops: “From a more historical perspective it is relevant to point out some imported plants from Africa that are used by the Bush Negroes [*sic*], such as *agobo* [Bambara groundnut, *Vigna subterranea*] and *bongila* [sesame]. It is likely that there are also varieties, of crops still cultivated today, from the time the escaped slaves took them from the plantations” (Geijskes, 1955, p. 144). Results of our data collection indeed suggest that some rice varieties are maintained over a very long period, potentially going back to the earliest formations of Maroons (van Andel, van der Velden, & Reijers, 2016). As an inbreeding crop, rice varieties remain relatively stable even when several varieties are grown together; the small percentage of outbreeding nonetheless can

⁵In the words of Mintz and Hall, “The new slaves thus became operators on the households' provision grounds, and later, perhaps, as heads of the households in a succeeding generation, inherited the right of the use of the land.”

change the entire varietal stock over the years unless prevented by seed selection.

3.2 | Rice varieties and escape agriculture

The information collected from field visits and interviews confirms the overall image of Maroon farms incorporating a wide set of rice varieties, several of which Maroon people today associate directly with the period of slavery, revolt, and escape. In the interviews, these stories frequently came up when asked for the meanings of rice variety names. Still, not all women narrated about the deep heritage nor was there uniformity in their accounts. All sampled fields contained several rice varieties, mostly in the range of 4–10, with few fields with only one variety and some fields having more than 15 different named varieties. The women occasionally also mentioned names of varieties they did not grow in the season we sampled. The greatest number of unique rice names was found in fields of Saramaccan (143) and Ndyuka farmers (66), representing the largest Maroon groups. The other, smaller groups grow mostly named varieties shared with other groups, but each group grows a few uniquely named varieties (respectively, 16, 13, and 8 for Matawai, Aluku, and Pamakka). Naming conventions also follow clear patterns. The most frequent categories of names, respectively, accounting for about 40% and 30%, refer to either the variety's morphological features or to women (and we explain the latter naming convention below). For example, *lebi alisi* in Ndyuka and *bě alisi* in Saramaccan both mean “red rice” and describe the husk color of this variety. The Saramaccan name *hánza-a-bandja* means “wings on the side” and refers to glumes that spread out like wings from the grain. The Saramaccan name *jööjööö* (long hair) is given to a variety with very long awns.

The other names often refer to morphological traits indirectly. For example, the name *awéi máun* (Saramaccan and Matawai for “making the hands tired”) refers to the heavy panicles, which increase the weight of the bundles when harvested. *Kasihánsi* (“itching hands”) refers to the hairs on the leaves that itch when touched. Another example of a naming convention is the reference to animals, which occurs in about 13% of the names, as for example *pingo puuma* (bush pig hair), *djampö* and *pakia*, different names for the white-lipped peccary (*Tayassu pecari*), a pig species living in the Suriname forest. These varieties have long awns associated with the hair of the animal. Likewise, the name *watadagu* (river otter) is a variety with stiff awns, referring to the animal's whiskers, whereas a variety with softer awns is called *puspusi* (cat). Some animal names were explained to us with short stories, as in the case of *Apiikutu* (*futu*), the (foot of) the green-rumped parrotlet (*Forpus passerinus*). The bird feeds on rice by squeezing panicles with its feet. One of the interviewed chiefs explained that long ago, a farmer had caught one of the birds, and when cut open, they found the stomach filled with rice that was then used as seed to become the variety named after the bird.

A substantial share of the names refers to acts of escape and African origins. Direct associations are found in names such as *Baákápáú tjaka*, *Agbosótjaka*, *Mbotombolia*, and *Afanti sacca*, referring

to groups of runaways that joined Maroons in different periods. The *Baákápáú* were a group of people who escaped from the Tout Lui Faut plantation in the 1690s (Price, 1983). The prefix *Agbosó* comes from Abomey, a runaway group that joined the Saamaka around the 1750s and that took its name after the capital of the Dahomey kingdom in Benin. The *Afanti* or *Fante*, one of our respondents explained, escaped from the Tempati region and joined the Ndyuka Maroons. The suffixes *tjaka* and *sacca* are generic indications for rice. When asking our respondents, no one could explain the origin of the suffix. It likely comes from *saka*, a general indicator for rice in several West-African languages, likely originating from the Portuguese *sacudir*, literally meaning to shake and referring to winnowing. Another option is origins from Mende groups in West Africa. Richards (1986) describes *yaka* varieties as being popular for high yields, although the taste is considered inferior, for which reason the rice is often sold rather than eaten by those who grow it. Projected back in time, this could be the kind of rice purchased by slavers as victual.

The most prominent connection with Africa we found was the variety named *baaka alisi*, a black or African rice, known by all Maroons as spiritual rice. An earlier sample of this rice revealed it is a variety of the *Oryza glaberrima* species that is native to West Africa (van Andel, Meyer, et al., 2016). We also collected several varieties with the name *pende*, referring to the dark spotted husks. In Sierra Leone, the name *pende*, meaning dark or dusk, is associated with a local variety of *O. glaberrima* (Richards, 1986). The *pende* varieties we found in Suriname all belong to the *O. sativa* species.

The names referring to women, the second largest category, also contain references to escape from plantations. Some rice varieties have names referring to stories about women who escaped the plantation regime. Examples are the varieties *Ma Paánza* (Mother Paánza) and *alisi Seei* (rice from Seei), both names surrounded by stories of escape, bravery, and canny (van Andel et al., 2023). Anthropologists who documented such stories are known and read in Suriname, also by educated Maroons, and it is therefore not unlikely that a “feedback loop” emerged in recent decades that makes the stories wider known today than in earlier periods (Price, personal communication). Overall, rice varieties with names of women and female characteristics signify the importance of women in farming.

These observations reveal important features of seed selection by Maroon farmers. The spiritual function of *baaka alisi* makes clear that the women also maintain one or more varieties for other reasons than agronomic functionality or food security. Escape agriculture reflects this significance beyond subsistence farming, highlighting the historically grown cultural roots of Maroon rice cultivation. The same historical significance is reflected in the names of ancestral women given to some of the rice varieties. These stories are shared and retold from generation to generation. In other words, knowledge transfer requires the exchange of seeds and exchange of information that goes with it. These are two related but very different acts. The first is a one-off gift, the latter an agricultural education process that starts at a young age. Seed names are identifiers for varieties as well as reminders of the (extensive) information about each variety, shared within and between communities. When seeds

travel over larger distances, the attached information may transfer only partially, depending on how advanced individual(s) taking the seeds with them are “educated.” That is why a rice variety may change its identity when it travels, and names may shift from one variety to the other. The overall effect is visible in the observed irregularities in variety names (Almekinders & Elings, 2001; Mokuwa et al., 2014).⁶ The mentioned *pende* varieties as they exist in Sierra Leone and Suriname are potentially an example of such an identity shift due to travel across the Atlantic. However, such shifts and irregularities are not crucial for Maroons to preserve and cultivate a broad range of rice varieties and narrate the stories and information attached to them. As becomes clear in the next section, this process of preservation, new introductions, and reconfiguration is continuous up until the present.

3.3 | Post-abolition escape agriculture

From the 1870s, after the 10-year period of apprenticeship following abolition, the immediate threat of prosecution and re-enslavement ceased to exist. Maroon people were reluctant to move back to the coastal zone and for good reasons. The Suriname Creoles, as the social group emerging from freed slaves came to be known, were given little incentive to develop into new professions other than re-entering the plantations as contract laborers and mostly refused. The labor shortage on plantations was filled by migrant workers from Asia. The Dutch used the channels of the British empire to recruit laborers from India, with the first ship arriving in Suriname in 1873. The Dutch also recruited in their own colonized territory in Asia, resulting in an equal labor supply from Java, effective from 1893. Close to half a million laborers from India were shipped to the British Caribbean and Suriname, with nearly 240,000 ending up in British Guyana and over 30,000 in Suriname where, over a longer period, a similar number of Javanese workers arrived (Hoeftje, 1998; Northrup, 1995). The inflow of indentured laborers from India stopped after 1916, but the Dutch kept on recruiting Javanese laborers until the late 1930s. Few of the Asian contract laborers extended their contract period, with many of them moving westwards where they settled as smallholder farmers, growing rice in the coastal wetlands.

Asian laborers brought their own rice varieties to Suriname and initially received support from the colonial government through land entitlement and infrastructural investments. From about the 1910s, Dutch agronomists also collected rice varieties from Suriname, British Guiana, and other places to test, select, and breed new varieties for the emerging smallholder rice economy. In the 1940s, a large mechanized rice scheme was set up to further boost rice as an export crop (Maat & van Andel, 2018). The new Asian-style rice farming had effects on Maroon farming as more rice varieties entered their fields.

The Asian influences are visible in some of the variety names we encountered; for example, the name *kuli kuli* has a clear reference to coolies, the (derogatory) name for Indian contract workers. A link to the Javanese workers is found in the glutinous (sticky) rice named *katam*, close to *ketan*, the Indonesian word for sticky rice. Interestingly, a variety widely grown on Maroon fields is *alekisoola*, a variety most likely named after Rexora,⁷ a variety introduced from the United States where it was developed in the 1920s for rice farms in Louisiana (Coclanis, 2015). The agronomist Stahel sent a bale of *Rexora* to the Saramaccan village Ganzee in 1936 (Stahel, 1944). This tall variety preceded the later, short-straw varieties developed for mechanized rice farming. There are some short-straw varieties in Maroon fields, one of them named *asidon atafa*, meaning “sit down at the table” that, we were told, had arrived as seed acquired from the city.

4 | DISCUSSION

The response from enslaved plantation workers to the oppressive plantation regime, through evasion and escape, hinged on the availability of food. Some of the available food was produced on fields without surveillance by colonial authorities and plantation overseers. Escape agriculture, the notion we presented as an appropriate characterization of this type of food production, is most prominent in Maroon farms, continuing to function until today as Maroon people's breadbaskets. In the period of slavery, Maroon fields likely had their mirror image in the unsupervised plantation fields. Exchanges between Maroons and the enslaved workforce were a common feature. The close but antagonistic connection between plantation and counter-plantation was also visible in the peace agreements of the 18th century between the colonial government and Maroon communities (Jagdeu, 2014). Today, visiting the communities and farms requires boats the capacity to navigate the Suriname rivers and permission from Maroon elders. The dense boat traffic on the rivers may suggest that Maroon communities in Suriname are fully integrated into the national economy. However, divides remain tangible. In conversations with Maroon people, “the city” (Paramaribo) not only signifies a faraway place but also a different social reality, and “better food” is often mentioned as a reason the village is preferred.

Characterizing the Maroon farms as escape agriculture emphasizes the intricate connection between social organization and agricultural techniques, in particular the capacity to adjust and innovate food production in proximity to a hostile plantation system. Agronomists might recognize Maroon agriculture as an instance of agroforestry, also known as slash-and-burn farming, shifting cultivation, or swidden farming. In many areas, these practices are under pressure due to competing claims on forest areas and an overall negative perception of swidden farming (Adams et al., 2013;

⁶This touches upon the more general difference between farmers' classification of varieties, rooted in tradition and local knowledge, and classification by experts trained in the conventions of science.

⁷Rexora and Rexoro are both used, the first mostly in Dutch sources, the latter in US documentation.

Peterson & Heemskerk, 2001). The resilience and sustainability of Maroon farming, we showed in this paper, is rooted in the farming and crop selection techniques and roots in the distinct history of Maroon communities.

In recent years, the importance of crop diversity, and the diversity of crop varieties, is proposed as a viable alternative to intensive, commercialized farming systems (Altieri, 2018; Wood & Lenné, 1997). Escape agriculture and our case study of Maroon farming in Suriname reveal that such alternatives have a long history. As details of these practices in earlier times are not very well documented, reading historical sources “against the grain” and combining social-economic, agronomic, and botanical approaches help to reveal these important histories. Today, escape agriculture is more commonly framed as alternative agriculture. What they share is an aversion against the plantation system and its descendant, agribusiness monocultures.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare they have no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The rice specimens that support the findings of this study are openly available in the online collection database of Naturalis Biodiversity Center at <https://bioportal.naturalis.nl>, by searching for “Oryza” in the Genus field and “Pinas” in the collection field. The data on the farmer’s interviews are available on request through contacting the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study followed the general rules of the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2018). We obtained written permission from the local Maroon authorities (paramount chiefs) to collect samples and interview people from villages. We also obtained oral consent from each individual farmer to use the shared information for research purposes. Collected rice specimens are deposited in the ADRON germplasm bank (living seeds) with the associated “rice passport” data: a spreadsheet with information on the characters and properties of each Maroon landrace, collection locality and personal data of the farmer, to protect intellectual property rights and preclude patents by commercial breeding companies or germplasm institutes.

ORCID

Harro Maat  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7338-7910>

Tinde van Andel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4951-1894>

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