

Ancestor rice of Suriname Maroons traced back to its African origin

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Maroons, the descendants of escaped African slaves who live in the interior of Suriname today, grow their own rice. In addition to many types of Asian white rice (*Oryza sativa*), they also cultivate a species with black grains (*Oryza glaberrima*). This 'blaka aleisi' is rarely eaten but instead offered to ancestors and used in spiritual herb baths.

Historical documents suggest that the black grains originate from African rice, once bought by slave traders along the coast of West Africa to feed their slaves. For centuries the liberated Maroons cherished the African crop as a tangible reminder of their past. But from which African country did the rice originate? And who were the ancestors that picked up the remaining grains from the hull of the slave ship and kept the crop alive?

Several Suriname black rice grains were cultivated into fully grown plants in the Hortus Botanicus in Amsterdam. An international team of scientists, led by Tinde van Andel (Wageningen University & Research and Naturalis) and Eric Schranz (Wageningen University & Research), compared the DNA of these plants grown in Amsterdam with over one hundred varieties of *Oryza glaberrima* from across West Africa, from Senegal to Chad. The Suriname black rice was shown to be similar to a specific type of black rice that derived from the fields of Mande-speaking farmers in Western Ivory Coast.

Although Dutch slave traders bought most of their African slaves from Ghana, Benin and Central Africa, the recently digitised log of the

Zeeland vessel D'Eenigheid indicates that rice and slaves were also occasionally purchased along the coast of Liberia, the country west of Ivory Coast. At the time Mande speakers were known as good rice farmers and highly sought after by slave traders.

This combination of ethnobotanic, historic and genetic research can help trace the unwritten migration history of people and crops. It also shows that the history of Suriname can be found on the fields of the Maroons. The scientists believe that the white rice, bananas, beans and tubers grown on these farmlands today still have many more stories to tell.

Provided by New York University

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