

**Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas.** Judith A. Carney. Harvard University Press, Cambridge. Pp. xiv, 240, photographs, maps. ISBN: 0-674-00452-3 (\$37.50, cloth).

African slaves introduced the rice technology that made the Carolinas great in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This has been known for two decades, but only now has a book appeared that treats adequately the botany and technology as well as the history and food ethnography involved. Judith Carney's work is a major achievement. Not only does it complete the effort of restoring to prominence an African-American contribution to American life; it also stands as one of the best short studies of the way a particular crop and its production technology influenced history.

African rice, *Oryza glaberrima*, was domesticated at least 2,000 and probably more than 3,500 years ago in West Africa, quite independently of the earlier domestication of *O. sativa* in East Asia. To produce it, process it, and cook it, complex and sophisticated technologies developed, especially along the coasts of Senegambia and Guinea. The Wolof, Mandinka, Baga, Mende and Temne were among the major peoples involved. As rice developed in the Carolinas, slaves from this region became more important, and eventually most blacks in the United States were from the "rice coast." Carney does not elaborate on the cultural effects of this beyond food technology, but it is to this that we owe the distinctive quality of black culture in the United States, especially in music, folktales, folk speech, and visual art. The blues derive from Senegambian traditional music, the banjo was a Senegambian instrument, and the words "hippie" and "hipcat" may be Wolof loans in English (see e.g. Palmer 1981).

Carolina rice was almost exclusively *O. sativa*, apparently derived from Madagascar and India, but Carney shows that *O. glaberrima* was locally grown there and elsewhere in the New World. Eventually, *O. sativa* made it back to West Africa, where—alas—it now threatens to replace *O. glaberrima*, including many wonderful varieties developed over the centuries.

The Carolina rice industry was thus built on the skills of the African slaves—as well as on the horrific exploitation of their labor, death from sheer exhaustion being common and routine in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, a brilliant and successful industry developed in Africa and America, but its developers got little beyond torture and death for their contributions.

This book will surely become a classic in the literature on history seen through particular crops. It reminds one of the longer and more comprehensive works of Salaman (*The History and Social Influence of the Potato*, 1985), Mintz (*Sweetness and Power*, 1985) and the Coes (*The True History of Chocolate*, 1996).

A small irony says it all. On page 72, we meet Captain John Newton, who in 1750 "bought nearly eight tons of rice for feeding 200 slaves" on his ship. Captain Newton was later to repent of his horrible trade, and spend years in deep depression and guilt. Finally finding solace in religion, he wrote the song "Amazing Grace." This song, often sung in thoroughly Senegambian-derived style, remains vitally important in African-American communities today. Human achievement is a strange, ironic, often cruel thing, but sometimes it can—in the words of another spiritual—"outshine the sun."

This book adds to the many that document the African Diaspora's contributions to the New World. Until recently, African contributions were widely thought to be minimal. Pioneers in research in this field, such as Melville Herskovits and Harold Courlander, were ignored or depreciated. Apologists for the plantations and for racism denied that Africans could contribute; worse, many well-meaning writers were so anxious to show blacks as 'victims' that they ignored or dismissed Black cultural legacies. Today, many ethnobiologists, as well as musicologists, art historians, and others, have documented a great range of contributions.

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