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"Deep Roots:" Rice Farmers in West Africa and the African Diaspora

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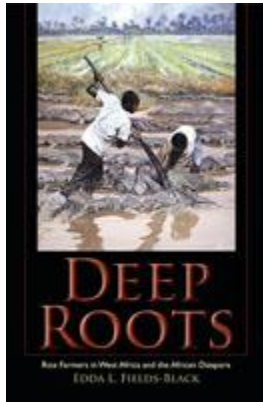
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Book Review



Edda L. Fields-Black. "Deep Roots:" Rice Farmers in West Africa and the African Diaspora. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008, 296 pp., \$34.95 (cloth) ISBN 978-0-253-35219-4.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Andrew Agha, Brockington Associates, Inc., Mt. Pleasant, SC.

In 1794, a slave trader named Samuel Gamble detailed Baga rice growing techniques along the Rio Nunez River that he witnessed. An image he recorded of their fields is known mostly as being the cover of Daniel Littlefield's pivotal book, *Rice and Slaves* (1981). *Deep Roots*, the new work by Edda L. Fields-Black, expands on this historical account a thousand fold, as her dissertation fieldwork, in support of this book, was conducted on the same river Gamble wrote about. In doing so, Fields-Black portrays one of the most detailed ethnographic studies of rice growing today in West Africa, and attempts to apply what she learned through the language involved with rice agriculture to the Americas. She takes Littlefield's thesis, that Carolina planters wanted Windward Coast slaves because they knew how to grow rice, and expands on it by studying a specific group of West Africans and their historical development as rice growers. Her main data set is language -- root words and roots of words specifically -- and through Historical Linguistics, she is able to show how involved the history of rice growing in West Africa was.

Although at first glance the reader may think that her research has uncovered the "missing link" of how rice and the knowledge of it passed from Africa to Carolina, instead what *Deep Roots* is about is how rice growing started, and later evolved, for one river system on the coast of Guinea-Bissau. The central theme of the study are the processes of 'Inheritance and Innovation,' where people and cultures inherit ideas, traits, and technology from others that came after them, and how they then use innovation to create new, hybridized forms out of the old. Fields-Black references Judith Carney a great deal, and by doing so, opens up her readers to a seemingly similar study. However, rather than being a straight forward historical study of West Africa and its rice agriculture, it is instead an in depth study of historical linguistics, where the data discussed are the words and word origins for rice and everything related. In the end, Fields-Black portrays in great detail one microcosm of the diverse and varied landscape of Old World rice agriculture in West Africa, but does not show exactly how those techniques crossed the Atlantic to be adapted to New World plantation practices. Instead, the reader must take the West African techniques and decide if they were employed in the New World.

The introduction to this book recounts historical information and facts that some scholars and researchers familiar with rice studies will find refreshing, and possibly new, when seen in context with the new research outlined in this book. The reader must pay close attention to her description of the methods involved in her linguistics studies, and what it means to

the study of rice, as a fair amount of readers of this book may not be inclined in the field of linguistics.

In Chapter 1, Fields-Black describes in great detail the ecology of the Rio Nunez and the agricultural place it holds in West Africa. She details how 'origins of rice' studies relate to this region, as well as what peoples from the interior regions have to do with this coastal setting. Being an avid researcher of rice agriculture myself, her photos and descriptions of rice growing techniques are some of the best examples of the technology I have ever seen in any publication. She outlines the fact that the Rio Nunez region has grown rice for many centuries, but how they came to grow rice is outlined in Chapter 2.

Her basis for Chapter 2 is determining whether or not rice came to the coast from the interior, if it appeared on its own, and how rice was grown as a strategy against famine. Here, her work in root words comes into play, as she attempts to find out what words originated on the coast versus those from the interior. This is important when showing how a complicated crop like rice was adapted to different mangrove swamps, what kinds of tools were needed, and how the technology began and then advanced once new people with new things, ideas, and words, migrated to the coast.

Chapter 3 is a focus on the interior people, how they worked their mangroves, what their survival skills were, and how they influenced the Rio Nunez region. Like Chapter 2, this chapter is very involved with historical linguistics, and the origins and changes of rice-related words. She is able to prove that words specific to cattle grazing, iron technology, and ecological farming practices are a result of interior people moving to better places along the coast. Fields-Black shows that rice was the end result of these migrations of words, ideas, technology, and people.

The book is an excellent example of the use of historical linguistics studies to develop insights into a non-linguistic topic, revealing, in this case, the complexity of rice cultivation. Chapter 4 shows the author's true strengths as a historical linguist, as she discusses how the creation of States and social centers in West Africa played major influences on rice development. The Rio Nunez was not an urban center like its counterparts in the interior, so the story of how it grew rice is an interesting one. She is critical of archaeologists throughout the book, but mostly in this chapter, citing their ignorance of non-urban sites and the need to know more about them as being pivotal to fully understanding societies like that at the Rio Nunez. She references the collaborative efforts of settled people and migrants to create innovative terminology for cultivating rice -- terminology that went hand in hand with technology.

Chapter 5 is the culmination of her West African language study, where Fields-Black is able to show that rice did evolve independently on the coast as a cooperation of different people from different places, and not primarily from foreign introducers of technology and ecological strategies. Again, the work she has done on root words across ethnic groups, and on who taught what to whom, is excellent. Although her work on defining who grew rice in the Rio Nunez region is thorough, her link between all of this technology in West Africa to South Carolina and Georgia is not as complete. Chapter 6 attempts to define that link.

In Chapter 6, Fields-Black discusses the role that ships and captains played in the transfer of rice knowledge and technology -- a group of people that rice historians and anthropologists have yet to divulge into for new directions in rice research. She explains that the captains procured enormous amounts of rice for their holds to feed their crew, and, their cargo of captives. This process was way more complicated than is usually discussed, and along with defining it well, she also points out how the process affected West Africa, which negatively altered their rice economy and changed it forever. Recent historians have argued against the prevalence of West African rice knowledge in Carolina in the early, formative years, which goes against Judith Carney's ideas on the origins of rice in the colony. These historians have shown the bold claims to be problematic through their use of the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade* database. With newly refined numbers from the database, she is able to show that the majority of slaves entering the ports in Charleston, and later Savannah, came from rice growing West Africa. Although this data, she points out, does not include the ships that went unregistered, and does not take into account that slaves at ports might have never grown rice themselves, the data does help to reinforce the idea that slaves from West Africa knew how to grow rice, and that their influence in numbers here coincided with the boom of rice as a commercial, industrial enterprise in the later half of the eighteenth century.

The Conclusions summarize the major points of the book by dealing with the important concepts that to scholars versed in Historical Linguistics may seem to be rudimentary, but to others, not so clear. The main thesis of the book -- Inheritance and Innovation -- is found here, and she does a good job defining the main thread of her argument. She was able to show that the *inheritance* of words, traits, skills, and technology by the people of the Rio Nunez and their neighbors gave way to *innovation*, where the words themselves show how traits changed, skills were improved upon, and technologies advanced. These concepts are laid out well in the Conclusions, but not anywhere else in the book. Instead, the beginning of the book reads like it will be a new historical study, but then quickly changes into a study of language that may not be so clear for the avid reader and student of rice culture and cultivation.

Being a historical archaeologist in South Carolina, who has researched and conducted fieldwork on Inland Rice plantations in and around the Charleston area for the last 12 years, I have to take very seriously any new work that deals with Africans and the transfer of rice technology. This book appeared to hold an answer to long sought after questions, or have ethnographic data that could potentially help us understand the Colonial-era fields in the Lowcountry. Fields-Black only touches on South Carolina and Georgia lightly, perhaps waiting to explain the linkages between the Windward Coast and the Lowcountry in her next book, which focuses on American rice culture more directly. However, although light on Lowcountry-African connections, her analysis of the Rio Nunez region of West Africa makes her possibly one of the best rice historians of that continent. She details methods and techniques that may have been used here in South Carolina or Georgia, and although we have no clear evidence of these skills, we can take the ethnographic data she has presented and try to apply it to our problems with the lack of documentation for the 1690-1760 period. If you want to learn a lot about how rice was and still is grown in a small region of West Africa, this book is an excellent choice.