

Sapali

Sapali hid unpeeled rice grains in her plaited hair. Her foresight made survival possible outside the plantation economy in the forest of Suriname, a Dutch colony on the north coast of South America.

People who freed themselves from slavery are called Maroons. They had to survive in the forest under difficult circumstances where they established their own societies. The Dutch colonial regime fought their existence for centuries. When this did not succeed with brute force, the Dutch tried to subjugate the Maroons through peace treaties.

Women like Sapali played an important role in Maroon societies. They were responsible for growing crops and building up a food supply. The Okanisi Maroons are Sapali's direct descendants. She lives on in their stories, songs and spirituality, and in the Sapali rice named after her. Although we will never know what Sapali looked like, her presence is tangible through the rice.

Detail of a map of Suriname: Maroons forced to defend or flee their villages, Alexander de Lavaux, 1737.

Heavily armed colonial troops on the hunt for Maroons, G.W. Luck, c. 1773-1777

Detail of a map of Suriname: fleeing women, identifiable by their wraps, two of them are taking goods with them, Alexander de Lavaux, 1737.

Stalk of Rice Ma Sapa or Sapali.

Bone comb, probably made by Maroons in Suriname, before 1817.

Rice Spoons Made by Okanisi Women from calabash, before 1883.