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## Nanny of the Maroons

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Despite living in a patriarchal world, there have been women who challenge their assigned roles in order to better the societies in which they find themselves. In addition to experiencing discrimination based on gender, women of color also experience discrimination based on their race. As a result, there are more challenges that they have to overcome. Nanny of the Maroons was no exception to this. In the words of one historian, she was “the most notable rebel woman in Jamaica’s history.”<sup>1</sup> Her story is intriguing, yet shadowed in mystery. She was a powerful woman who transcended gender stereotypes in order to lead her people. However, very little is known about her, since neither she nor her people left a conventional written record. Instead, historians have relied on oral sources to piece together the life of this remarkable individual.<sup>2</sup> Nanny lived a full life, and she helped the people of the Maroons become and remain a powerful source of resistance against colonialism in Jamaica.

Before we can discuss Nanny in much detail, we must first understand the social setting in which she lived. The Maroons of Jamaica were communities of escaped slaves who lived in the more treacherous, mountainous areas of the island. According to historian Karla Gottlieb, there were two main groups: the Windward Maroons (inhabiting the eastern part of Jamaica) and the Leeward Maroons (from the western section of the island). The Spanish ruled in Jamaica for around 150 years, killing off the native population. African slaves were often sent into the mountains to herd cattle and hunt, so many became familiar with the terrain. When the British took control of Jamaica in 1655, the Spanish fled, but most of the slaves remained. They fled into the hills and formed their own community. This group was the foundation of what would become the Maroons. The people of the Maroons would raid plantations and steal guns, ammunition, food, and would free slaves to join them.<sup>3</sup>

The role of women in the Maroons was different than in other western countries. Women were respected, revered, and honored, as Gottlieb tells us in her book, *The Mother of Us All*. The community Nanny would come to call home held women in high regard, allowing them into roles as diverse as Queen, rebel, or spiritual leader. As Gottlieb points out, women were largely responsible for the agricultural success of the Maroons. Without the contributions of women, the Maroons would not have survived.<sup>4</sup>

Nanny was not born into the Maroons, rather she came from Ghana. She may have been a free woman who traveled to Jamaica with slaves of her own. Information about how Nanny

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<sup>1</sup> Diane Watt. “Traditional Religious Practices Amongst African-Caribbean Mothers and Community Othermothers,” *Black Theology: An International Journal* 2, no. 2, (2004): 204.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is based on Jamaican oral tradition. For over 50 years historians have recognized oral tradition and folklores as important, valuable historical sources. Indiana University, for instance, began a degree-granting folklore program, the Folklore Institute, in 1963. For a methodological introduction see Regina F. Bendix, Galit Hasan-Rokem eds., *A Companion to Folklore* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2002). On Jamaican folklore see Olive Senior, *Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage* (Kingston: Twin Guiep, 2003), and William Clements and Thomas Green eds., *Greenwood Encyclopedia of World Folklore* 4 vols., (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Karla Gottlieb, *The Mother of Us All: A History of Queen Nanny, Leader of the Windward Jamaican Maroons* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

integrated herself into the Maroon communities is non-existent. She is only mentioned in text four times: all by British individuals who she encountered.<sup>5</sup> Despite there being little written information about her, Nanny is considered to be “the personified symbol of black resistance against white oppression by the Maroons and others.”<sup>6</sup> According to Mozambican historian and novelist Mario Azevedo, Nanny was known by both her own people and the British as an incredible political and military leader.<sup>7</sup> Gottlieb tells us that Nanny served as Maroon strategist. She did not engage in the fighting herself, although she did kill and have put to death many British soldiers.<sup>8</sup> She is credited with teaching her soldiers, some 3,000 by one count, how to use a cow horn for long distance communication by blowing into it.<sup>9</sup> A British junior officer described her as “[having] a girdle around her waist, with nine or ten different knives hanging in sheaths to it, many of which I doubt not had been plunged into human flesh and blood.”<sup>10</sup> Gottlieb estimates that throughout the fighting, only 100 Maroons were killed in comparison to the thousands of British. Nanny clearly was a formidable foe, but that was not all for which she was known.<sup>11</sup>

Nanny was also the spiritual leader of the Windward Maroons. Gottlieb explains that the Maroons preserved their African heritage, meaning that they believed that the influence of their ancestors could still be felt and that they were sentient beings. Additionally, they believed in an *obeah*, which Gottlieb defines as a “powerful religious figure with strong ties to African spirituality.”<sup>12</sup> Scholar Diane Watt tells us that “Maroons required their leaders to possess a profound understanding of the supernatural,” and we know that Nanny was the leader of the group, so it stands to reason that Nanny served as an *obeah*, or a woman perceived to have supernatural abilities.<sup>13</sup>

There are several myths about Nanny using her abilities to help bring about Maroon victories against the British. One was that she could “keep a large cauldron boiling with her supernatural gifts” and use it to “lure curious British troops to it, resulting in their demise.” The most popular story of Nanny’s gifts, however, was one that explains that she was able to “catch cannonballs between her buttocks and fart them back with deadly force.”<sup>14</sup> Nanny supposedly used her powers to psychologically weaken the Maroons’ enemies and to make her own warriors invincible. She was surrounded by these myths that were carried through the flow of time by oral tradition.

The fighting between the British and the Maroons came to an end in 1739 with the signing of a treaty between the two groups. However, Nanny was not the representative of the Maroons who signed the treaty. Gottlieb and Azevedo both present possible reasons for this. Gottlieb hypothesizes that perhaps because of her distrust of the British, Nanny did not want her name on a treaty that she did not think would be upheld. Instead, she had a lesser chief, Quao, sign it in case the British did not keep up their part of the deal.<sup>15</sup> Azevedo offers another theory. He claims that the British refused to acknowledge Nanny as the leader of the Maroons because she was a woman.<sup>16</sup> While either claim could be accurate, the fact that there are multiple claims is yet another example of how knowledge about Nanny is fractured with most information coming from oral tradition.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 37, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Werner Zips, *Black Rebels: African Caribbean Freedom Fighters in Jamaica* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1999), 154.

<sup>7</sup> Mario Azevedo, *Africana Studies: A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press), 470.

<sup>8</sup> Gottlieb, 43.

<sup>9</sup> Watt, 204.

<sup>10</sup> Azevedo, 469.

<sup>11</sup> Gottlieb, 48.

<sup>12</sup> Gottlieb, xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Watt, 204.

<sup>14</sup> Zips, 155-156.

<sup>15</sup> Gottlieb, 36.

<sup>16</sup> Azevedo, 470.

Dependence on oral tradition does make fact checking difficult—yet these oral sources are all we have. We know for sure that the reason Nanny did not sign the treaty was not because of her death: she did sign a land agreement in 1740. Whatever the case, Nanny was no longer active after 1740, or so we can assume, because oral history does not tell us any more about her after that year.

Nanny transcends gender stereotypes because of her powerful leadership. While she was married to a man named Adou, she did not have any children of her own, defying gender stereotypes of the time. In 1976, Nanny was named National Hero of Jamaica, and she is now on the Jamaican \$500 bill. Women do not end up honored on currency often. The honor is thus significant. Nanny of the Maroons was a powerful, black, female historical figure. While she is left out of most history books, she is no less valuable. The people of the Maroons still honor her to this day, claiming her spirit lives on. Nanny's story is unique and deserves to be heard. To use Karla Gottlieb's words, "Nanny was the Queen mother of her people, the most brilliant strategist and general the British were ever going to encounter (either before or since), and a spiritual guide for her people."<sup>17</sup> Nanny was all this, and a woman, something that we do not see often in history. She was a woman and a spiritual leader, a woman and a politician, a woman and military strategist. She should not be forgotten.

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<sup>17</sup> Gottlieb 38-39.