Heritage rice in Surinam: tracing the history of rice as anti-commodity.

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Abstract: The global trade in rice is historically recent and its total quantity relatively small at the level of 5% and even today only amounts to 7% of total production. Colonial explorations and the industrialisation of north-west Europe in the eighteenth century triggered the emergence of rice as a global commodity. The idea that rice is an important commodity has persistent in the literature and formed the basis for colonial policies for rice improvement that extend till the present day. When governments offer subsidies or regulate prices, production increases are an attractive option for rice farmers. However, there is considerable variation in rice cultivation practices, a large diversity of types of rice produced, differences in productivity levels and unequal opportunities for productivity increases. Rice farmers often have other than commercial reasons to grow rice. The responses of locally produced products in response to global commercial enterprise is called an anti-commodity. Anti-commodity rice implies the capacity to switch between subsistence and market production. Historical sources from the Dutch colonial period are examined, in particular the small colony Suriname and its connections to Africa and Asia. Rice is a major staple crop for Maroon communities in Suriname. Existing information and a recent finding of African rice (Oryza glaberrima) suggest that Maroons grow a large diversity of rice varieties for food and ritual purposes, similar to African rice growing cultures. However, slave-based plantation owners overlooked the importance of rice as a food crop for the African slaves. Likewise colonial planners tried to develop the Surinam colony by importing Asian lowland rice cultivation practices, turning Surinam from a rice-importing country into a rice exporting country. An effective colonial apparatus created commodity rice production and ignored the anti-commodity status of rice in the shifting cultivation practices of the Surinamese maroons and similar indigenous cultures elsewhere.