

REVIEWS

COASTAL RICE FARMING SYSTEMS IN GUINEA AND SIERRA LEONE

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Deep Roots: Rice Farmers in West Africa and the African Diaspora. By EDDA L. FIELDS-BLACK. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008. Pp. xviii + 278. £22.99/\$34.95, hardback (ISBN 978-0-253-35219-4).

KEY WORDS: West Africa, Guinea, Sierra Leone, African diaspora, agriculture, knowledge, precolonial.

The role of African technologies and agricultural knowledge in the development of rice farming in the Americas has drawn considerable scholarly attention in the last decade. That Africans might have contributed not just their labor to the tidal rice-farming systems of the South Carolina Low Country but also essential knowledge of the techniques needed to grow rice in that challenging environment is highly appealing. It gives agency to enslaved Africans and recognizes the sophistication of West African riculture. The most recent expression of this idea has been Judith Carney's *Black Rice*.¹ Carney's work has been challenged by David Eltis, Philip Morgan, and David Richardson, who have argued that the number of slaves coming to South Carolina from rice-growing areas of Africa is too small to explain the development of American rice farming.²

Edda Fields-Black's new book contributes to this debate primarily by adding to our knowledge of the coastal rice-farming systems of Guinea and Sierra Leone, where rice-farming techniques most closely resemble the tidal irrigation systems of the South Carolina Low Country. In this part of Sierra Leone, farmers clear mangrove swamps and, through careful control of the movement of fresh water through the fields, drain and desalinate the soil. This is a process that can take years and that can be reversed almost instantly if embankments built to keep salt water out are breached. Managing the water supply to these fields requires careful harnessing of tides in the river estuaries so that salt water is kept out but fresh water is allowed in. Early observers of this system assumed that the stateless societies of the coast were unlikely to have created so complex a technology and that it must have been introduced either by Europeans or by Africans from the states of the interior.

Focusing on the Rio Nunez region, Fields-Black examines the evolution of this system, tracing out a description of the region's inhabitants going back to the second millennium BCE. The earliest inhabitants were not farmers at all, but their exploitation of the coastal environment as foragers created a body of knowledge about the highly saline soils and environmental niches that would later be used by farmers to grow rice and other crops in this area. Between 500 and 1000 CE these coastal communities developed the fundamental technologies and techniques that would characterize tidal rice cultivation. In an argument that consciously parallels

¹ J. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA, 2001).

² D. Eltis, P. D. Morgan, and D. Richardson, 'Agency and diaspora in Atlantic history: reassessing the African contribution to rice cultivation in the Americas', *American Historical Review*, 112:5 (2007), 1329–58.

the debate about rice in South Carolina, Fields-Black asserts that tidal rice farming was not introduced to Rio Nunez by people from the interior or Europeans but was the indigenous creation of coastal peoples who were speakers of Atlantic languages.

Oddly, Europeans visiting the coast seem to have been mostly uninterested in the unique mangrove rice complex. One visiting English merchant who spent a rainy season on the coast in 1794 left an account of mangrove rice cultivation, but otherwise documentary evidence for this region's agriculture is sparse, and environmental conditions in the area do not lend themselves to the preservation of archaeological evidence. Thus, Fields-Black's argument for the indigenous origins of mangrove rice cultivation depends almost entirely on linguistic evidence. Even her dates derive from glottochronology. Some readers will undoubtedly be uncomfortable with the heavy dependence on virtually uncorroborated linguistic evidence.

Despite the heavy reliance on a single form of evidence, Fields-Black's description of rice farming in West Africa is more convincing than her efforts to weigh in on the controversy over the role of African technical expertise in the South Carolina rice industry. Here she argues that Eltis et al. are wrong when they say that very few enslaved Africans from the Upper Guinea Coast arrived in South Carolina ports. She contends that they have looked primarily for evidence of slaves who passed first through the Caribbean and then to the Carolinas and thus have missed voyages from the coast directly to South Carolina ports. This assertion depends on the plausible-sounding idea that direct voyages from the Upper Guinea Coast to South Carolina would have gone unnoticed by metropolitan record-keepers in Britain because they neither began nor ended there. This may be correct, but it is not concrete evidence for the existence of large number of these voyages. Further, she argues on the basis of a single advertisement for an auction that specifies the Sierra Leonean origin of the slaves on offer that there was a specific demand for such slaves in South Carolina. However, Eltis et al. have examined many such advertisements and reached the opposite conclusion, so it is hard to see Fields-Black's one example as definitive evidence. In the end, the book makes a significant contribution to our understanding of rice cultivation in West Africa but leaves unresolved the debate over the role of Africans in the South Carolina rice industry.

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Captives and Voyagers: Black Migrants Across the Eighteenth-century British Atlantic World. By ALEXANDER X. BYRD. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State

University Press, 2008. Pp. xi + 346. \$49.95, hardback (ISBN 978-0-8071-3359-0).
KEY WORDS: West Africa, African diaspora, migration, slavery, slave trade, violence.

Much in the experience of black people moving across the late eighteenth-century Atlantic depended on whether they were captives on forced migrations or voyagers testing the limits of their freedom – but not as much as we might have thought before the publication of this compelling book. The slave trade from the interior of the African continent to the coast, across the ocean, and into a new world brought unfathomable terrors to the captives, commodities who were