JAMAICA'S TRUE QUEEN

Nanny of the Maroons

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Queen Nanny is credited with being the single figure who united the Maroons across Jamaica and played a major role in the preservation of African culture and knowledge.

**Background**
Queen Nanny of the Windward Maroons has largely been ignored by historians who have restricted their focus to male figures in Maroon history. However, amongst the Maroons themselves she is held in the highest esteem. Biographical information on Queen Nanny is somewhat vague, with her being mentioned only four times in written historical texts and usually in somewhat derogatory terms. However, she is held up as the most important figure in Maroon history. She was the spiritual, cultural and military leader of the Windward Maroons and her importance stems from the fact that she guided the Maroons through the most intense period of their resistance against the British, between 1725 and 1740.

Queen Nanny is presumed to have been born around the 1680’s in Africa’s Gold Coast (now known as Ghana). She was reported to belong to either the Ashanti or Akan tribe and came to Jamaica as a free woman. It is possible that Queen Nanny brought slaves of her own, reportedly being of royal African blood. It was not uncommon for African dignitaries to keep slaves. She was said to be married to a man named Adou, but had no children. She died in the 1730’s.

Moore Town is now the primary town of the Windward Maroons – it was founded in 1734 after the British destroyed the original Maroon town, which was known as ‘Nanny Town’.

Slaves imported to Jamaica from Africa came from the Gold Coast, the Congo and Madagascar. The dominant group among Maroon communities was from the Gold Coast. In Jamaica this group was referred to as Coromantee or Koromantee. They were fierce and ferocious fighters with a preference for resistance, survival and above all freedom and refused to become slaves. Between 1655 until the 1830’s they led most of the slave rebellions in Jamaica.

Spiritual life was of the utmost importance to the Maroons which was incorporated into every aspect of life, from child rearing to military strategies. Almost every slave rebellion involved African spiritual practices. Leaders, such as Queen Nanny usually practiced Obeah and were able to instill confidence in their followers. Spiritual practices such as Obeah (and voodoo in Haiti) evolved from Africa, and during slavery times were of great significance to the black population. However, under colonial rule as Western culture was imposed on the Caribbean, these African practices became ‘outlawed’ and took on negative connotations.
Historical Maroon Identity and Culture

Among Maroon culture, their ancestors are revered and their importance to everyday life is recognized. The past is a source of pride which is both taught and shared. Amongst modern day Maroons, the history of their resistance against slavery is an extreme form of pride that forms a large part of Maroon identity. The story of the Maroons endurance and ability to hold off the British troops for almost eighty years is one that has never been repeated in history. What saw the Maroons through to freedom were their unfailing courage and determination. Their resistance to slavery drew on the strength of their memory of Africa and its culture. Their African culture and identity instilled in them great confidence and self esteem. So much so, that this diluted the stigma of inferiority imposed by the plantocracy. Therefore, the resistance against slavery by the Maroons was a defense of their culture and identity, their spiritual and political values and preservation of African civilization. This is why Maroon ancestors are an integral part of their day to day lives. At each annual Maroon celebration of the 1739 Peace Treaties there is a ‘private’ element of the festivities at which only Maroons may attend, where the ancestors are said to visit, including Queen Nanny who is honored.

The Significance of Women Maroons

On the plantations women did not escape the brutality of slavery. Marriage and partnerships among slaves were prohibited. For those that managed to form unions in secret, they were forced to endure the removal of their offspring who were separated from their mothers soon after birth and sold into slavery. Many women opted for abortions rather than see their babies endure the same fate (slavery) that had befallen them. Furthermore, women on the plantations were physically exploited by their slave masters by rape and other sexual practices that were often quite sadistic. They too endured hard physical labor within the household doing domestic work and rearing the children of their slave masters. Some occasionally worked on the plantation itself.

By contrast, the Maroon women raised crops and were responsible for most of the agricultural output within their communities. The men hunted wild hogs and raided the plantations for food and supplies and to free slaves.

Often, the plantations were ‘raided’ to bring back women into the Maroon communities, without which they would be unable to increase their numbers and ensure the survival of the Maroons as a race.
Maroon warriors who raided the plantations and freed slaves, wielding huge knives that they used to cut off the heads of the British. The strength of women in Maroon communities stemmed from their position within traditional Ashanti or Akan culture. The Ashanti culture was based on a tradition of warrior nations and a history of proud and respected women. Many Ashanti elements were retained in Maroon language and culture.

The Legend of Queen Nanny

Queen Nanny is credited with being the military leader of the Windward Maroons who employed clever strategies which led to their repeated success in battles with the British. She was a master of guerilla warfare and trained Maroon troops in the art of camouflage. Oral history recounts that Nanny herself would cover her soldiers with branches and leaves, instructing them to stand as still as possible so that they would resemble trees. As the British soldiers approached completely unaware that they were surrounded they would swiftly be picked off by the Maroons.

Maroon settlements were sited high up in the mountains with only a narrow path leading to their town. In this way, the British soldiers could clearly be seen on approach as they advanced in single file, allowing them to be picked off one by one. This method was particularly successful with large numbers of British soldiers being killed by a comparatively small number of Maroons.

A famous legend about Queen Nanny is that during 1737 at the height of the Maroon resistance against the British, Nanny and her people were near starvation and she was on the brink of surrender, when she heard voices from her ancestors telling her not to give up. When she awoke she found pumpkins seeds in her pocket which she planted on the hillside. Within a week the seeds grew into large plants laden with pumpkins that provided much needed food for the starving community. To this day, one of the hills near Nanny Town is known as ‘Pumpkin Hill’.
There are two versions of the story of Nanny catching bullets. The first is that Queen Nanny was able to catch bullets with her hands, which was a highly developed art form in some parts of Africa. The other story is that Nanny was able to catch bullets with her buttocks and fart them out again. Renowned historian Edward Braithwaite suggests that the original story took a vulgar twist on account of British colonialists who were known to detest Nanny and were being deliberately offensive about her when they relayed this tale.

Queen Nanny myths and legends

Queen Nanny is wrapped up in myths and legends, many of them surrounding fertility and the giving of food. Nanny as an historical leader is not limited to history books and textbooks; she is alive and is spoken of as if she were part of the living Maroon community. Queen Nanny is buried in New Nanny Town (Moore Town), and two glasses are put on her grave site so that she may drink if she gets thirsty. One observer, an anthropologist from Boston College, noted this phenomenon in 1931 and wrote,

They claim that Nanny, the historic and celebrated woman general of the former Maroons, who carried on a lot of weird practices and thus was able to escape from her enemies at all times, was buried on a certain hill in the village, near which the soil has never been tilled, nor homes erected. They further claim that vessels were placed by the graveside so that Nanny might convert them to her own use whenever she desires to refresh her spirit, which vessels may be seen to this day. Such superstition I suppose is a part of the legacy inherited from their ancestors. Since this 1931 observation, the practice of leaving Queen Nanny glasses from which to drink from is still adhered to and her grave site is treated as a sacred spot.

Queen Nanny's significance to the people of Moore Town can be seen in her persistence within the everyday language that is spoken. As previously mentioned, this great leader, unlike even the most renowned other military leaders of the Maroons, has numerous things named after her - there is the Nanny bird, Nanny Thatch (a particular kind of house), Nanny Pot, as well as the Nanny River and of course Nanny Town. In addition to these tangible objects that bear her name, phrases referring to Queen Nanny are also commonly heard in Moore Town.

For instance, in Moore Town, if one is acting unreasonable towards another, one might be told, Granny Nanny didn't catch bullets for you alone. At another time, the present Colonel of Moore Town, C.L.G. Harris, was commenting on the determined and forthright nature of a particular Maroon, and said, We sometimes say she is the reincarnation of Nanny. Nanny is used in everyday language through these expressions, but more importantly she is repeatedly singled out as being the most important means by which the Windward Maroons achieved their independent status. Certain phrases are often repeated to outsiders, including the fact that Maroons were never slaves and that Granny Nanny and our grandparents fought for freedom. Queen Nanny as she existed in history, through actual writings and not through oral histories or legends, will be analyzed in the following chapter, in order to understand this persona who has reached a legendary status within the Maroon communities.

The last legend about Queen Nanny is that she placed a large cauldron on the corner of a narrow mountain path near the edge. The pot was said to be boiling even though there was no fire beneath it. British soldiers approaching would curiously look inside, fall in and die. Some were said to collapse and fall over the hill. There have been suggestions that the pot contained special herbs with anesthetic properties, as Nanny was said to be an herbalist. Contemporary historians maintain that the pot was in fact a circular basin formed by the hollowed out rocks of the Nanny River, joined by the waters of the Stony River. The continuously flowing river kept the water constantly frothy, giving it the appearance of a boiling pot.

A Tribute to Queen Nanny

Ever heard of a Maroon? No, I’m not speaking of the color. A Maroon is defined as: *Any of a group of blacks, descended from fugitive slaves of the 17th and 18th centuries, living in the West Indies and Guiana, esp. in mountainous areas.* Maroon is derived from the Spanish word “cimarron,” which means wild or savage.

The Maroons were runaways, rebels unwilling to yield to the oppressive forces of slavery. The most famous Maroon military leader was a woman, that’s right, I said a woman – Grandy Nanny. The British lived to regret the day they put Nanny on the slave boat.

Nanny was born in Africa (of the Ashanti tribe) and brought to Jamaica as a slave. The Ashanti’s were one of the most powerful tribes of West Africa. Their women were held in the highest regard and participated in all facets of tribal life, even fighting and leading battles.

After arriving in Jamaica, Nanny discovered that here, women were no longer the highly respected vessels through which life begins, but instead reduced to laborers and breeders. Of course Nanny wasn’t having any of this, so together with her five brothers, escaped to the mountains and began the first of many Maroon communities made up of escaped and freed slaves. This first settlement, nestled in the Blue Mountains of Jamaica, was called Nanny Town.

Now that she was free, besides defending the emerging Maroon locations, she never wavered in her mission to entice other slaves to escape.

Nanny was a military genius and held power for over 50 years, taking on the roles of organizer, nurse, military and spiritual leader. Her soldiers were the first known to use camouflage when fighting and often bested the British because they were better at fighting in the rainy mountains.

In 1734 Nanny Town was bombed with cannons and destroyed, but it is said that Nanny and some of her followers escaped. Discouraged, but not beaten, they rebuilt. Nanny’s people resettled on other parts of the island. United, the remaining Maroons continued to ensure preservation of African culture and knowledge through the coming generations.
In 1994, Nanny’s image was forever cemented on the Jamaican $500 bill.

There’s so much more to learn about Nanny – her family, her reported supernatural powers, her strategies. Don’t let the lesson end here.

Read more about Nanny:

**Queen Champong Nanny**

Queen Nanny was described as a small, wiry woman with piercing eyes. It is believed that she was born in Ghana of the Asante people and brought to Jamaica in her youth. Queen Nanny, also affectionately known as Granny Nanny, was a brilliant military and spiritual leader of the Maroons during the 18th century. She provided a strong and united opposition against British domination and slavery. Queen Nanny’s leadership was most important during the First Maroon War between 1720 and 1739.

Around 1728, Queen Nanny emerged as the primary general, leader, and obeah woman of the Windward Maroons, her reign extending until around 1740, shortly after the Maroons signed a peace treaty with the British. This period, particularly from 1728 to 1734, was representative of the Maroons in their greatest glory. (Cary 1970, p. 20) In order to understand the context of Queen Nanny’s emergence as a central figure in Jamaican history, it is important to have rudimentary knowledge of Maroon history in Jamaica and an understanding of the specific African ethnic groups that influenced the Maroon identity.

**The Legacy of Queen Nanny**

Queen Nanny is credited with being the single figure who united the Maroons across Jamaica and played a major role the preservation of African culture and knowledge. She was hated by the British. Early historians wrote in derogatory terms about the Maroons, trying to present them as savages no better than animals. Queen Nanny was often portrayed as being bloodthirsty. Thickness’ journal published in 1788 described an encounter with a woman presumed to have been Nanny herself, wearing bracelets and anklets made from the teeth of British soldiers. "The old hag had a girdle around her waist with nine or ten different knives hanging in sheaths to it, many of which I have no doubt have been plunged in human flesh and blood".

Much of the work compiled by Edward Braithwaite was instrumental in seeing Queen Nanny made a National Hero of Jamaica in 1976. This brought about a national recognition of the contribution made by the Maroons in securing liberty from slavery from the British.
The Windward Maroons with Queen Nanny as their leader are a role model for resistance, rebellion and survival. Queen Nanny herself is a symbolic figure for all those who suffer from oppression. Whilst Queen Elizabeth I dispatched the pirate John Hawkins on her own ship, the SS Jesus of Lubeck to Africa with orders to transport Africans to Jamaica, Nanny of the Windward Maroons was empowering her people to resist slavery at all costs. Therefore, Queen Nanny is the true Queen of Jamaica.

http://www.jamaicans.com/articles/primearticles/queennanny.shtml

Acknowledgements
The following excellent books were the main sources of information which formed the basis of my article:

- A History of Queen Nanny, the Mother of Us All, by Karla Gottlieb
- ‘Black Rebels, African Caribbean Freedom Fighters in Jamaica’ by Werner Zips

NANNY - THE MAROON

Granny Nanny was born in Ghana, West Africa, as a member of the Ashanti tribe, part of the Akan people. She was enslaved and brought to Jamaica. Experiencing the cruel treatment of slaves on the Jamaican plantations, she and her five brothers, Cudjoe, Accompong, Johnny, Cuffy and Quao decided to join the autonomous African community of Maroons.

The Maroons ... have for three centuries maintained their historical allegiance to the Ashanti, the principal ethnic group represented among the Coromantee in Jamaica, and have retained numerous West African, especially Ashanti, elements in their language and culture.

In Ashanti Culture, before decisions are made, the words, “Ye kop bisa aberewa”, meaning, "We are going to consult the old woman", are spoken.

"This statement places the woman as the final arbiter in all decisions in the Ashanti community. When a tribunal sits to settle a case, its members finally retire to make a decision and this final act culminating in giving justice is referred to as "consulting the old woman." The woman is the custodian of all knowledge and treasures of the community. Women are known as reputed connoisseurs and must not be challenged in their specialty. It is only among themselves that criticisms may be whispered and even insinuations made. However inferior an Ashanti woman may appear to an outside observer she is the final decisive factor in all the activities of, and the arbiter of what is good or bad for the whole community. Queen Nanny was about to open a can of “you know what”, on her captures."

Queen Nanny was enslaved, along with her five brothers. Instead of being a respected vessel, through which life began, women in Jamaica were reduced to laborers and breeders. Queen Nanny was not having any of this, and together with her five brothers escaped to the mountains. They started the first of many Maroon communities made up of escaped and freed slaves. The first settlement, nestled in the Blue Mountains, was aptly named Nanny Town.

Nanny Town was a village in the Blue Mountains of Portland Parish, north-eastern Jamaica, used as a stronghold for Maroons (escaped slaves) led by Granny Nanny; the town held out against repeated British attacks before being destroyed in 1734[1].
Queen Nanny - Leader of Jamaica's Maroon Community

Maroon is taken from the word marronage, or Spanish word Cimarron, and means fugitive, or runaway. This is probably a derogatory word, similar to some used to described escaped slaves in America. It was a term given to slaves who escaped into the Mountains in Jamaica, who formed independent settlements together.

Many of the ancestors of present-day Jamaicans, like the Maroons, came from Africa. However, because of the characteristics of the culture, their ancestors brought and preserved, historians have been able to identify these forced migrants, including many of the Maroons, as "Koromantis", people from the Akan (Ghanaian) culture. Because of the persistence of earlier generations, present-day descendents are able to see how their modern culture came about.

Jamaican planter’s use of the term Koromanti was to refer to slaves purchased from the Akan region of West Africa, presently known as Ghana. In the earliest years of the British settlement, the Koromantis were the most stubborn, and yet, the most respected. Many of them were experienced with military methods because of the fighting and wars they encountered in Africa. They were a very proud and disciplined group. The British felt these characteristics would make them good slaves; the Koromantis’ pride and discipline might make them want to do their work to the best of their ability.

Slave owners often put them in charge of a certain section of a plantation to make sure the others were working properly. Nevertheless, the Koromantis, who came from an environment very similar to that of Jamaica, were also able to rebel against slavery and create a Maroon community in the Blue Mountains, as well as the Mountains of, St. Ann, Clarendon, and Elizabeth. While the planters feared to pursue the runaways into the hills, the Koromanti used the mountains and their own disciplined way of life as an advantage. In the mountains, they developed their own way of life by incorporating the various cultures with those of the other runaway slaves who made up diverse Maroon Cultures.

This community originated from people formerly enslaved by the Spanish, who had refused to submit to British control. This community developed as many more slaves escaped the plantations and joined the Maroons. By the time of the First Maroon War, the newly run away slaves were also known as Maroons.

The section under The Maroons above describes Queen Nanny’s exceptional skills in leadership. It is also believed that she had supernatural power and both the British and the Africans that assisted them against the Maroons feared Queen Nanny. Spending her formative years in Africa, Queen Nanny would have learnt about the presence of the ancestral spirits and their ability to intervene and assist in the life of the community. Along with her belief in a Supreme Power, Yankipon, she could call upon these forces, which gave her wisdom as a warrior and spiritual leader.
As with any good leader, Queen Nanny was strong willed and independent in her thinking. In 1739, when her brother, Quao, signed the second Peace Treaty with the British, Queen Nanny was very angry and in disagreement, because she did not trust the British. She was proved right, because it did not take long before the British started mending the treaty in a way detrimental to the Maroons.

Queen Nanny spent her last days visiting Maroon communities throughout the island as a spiritual leader. The Jamaican government declared Queen Nanny National Heroine of Jamaica in 1975 and her portrait is on the Jamaican 500 dollar bill.

THE MOTHER OF US ALL: A HISTORY OF QUEEN NANNY

Chapter 1: Introduction

By Karla Gottlieb. Africa World Press, 2000

Before exploring the roots of Jamaican marronage, it is important to review the framework from which it evolved. An alternative to slavery, escape offered Africans an empowering resistance to the ideology set forth by the colonial slavocracy. As Richard Price, a leading authority on Maroon communities in the New World, notes:

Throughout Afro-America, such communities stood out as an heroic challenge to white authority, and as the living proof of the existence of a slave consciousness that refused to be limited by the whites' conception or manipulation of it. (Price 1973, p. 2)

Mavis Campbell, a more recent authority on Jamaican Maroon society, sees the definition of marronage as the process of flight to erect black African hegemonies in the mountains of Jamaica or elsewhere in the New World, and as the creation of a New Jerusalem, where they could live in liberty, however precarious, and where they could live within the matrix of their cultural imperatives. (Campbell 1977, p. 392) The history of marronage in Jamaica, then, should not be limited to an analysis of the practical reasons slaves wanted to run away.
The very act of being of a Maroon was an act of ideological defiance that questioned the validity and survivability of the colonial slave system. The study of marronage is an important aspect of black history, because it offered Africans and Afro-Americans a unique opportunity to create their own societies outside the control of plantation America, [so that] it adds a dimension to our plantation-bound vision of black history and culture. (Kopytoff 1978, p. 288)

Nanny was born in Africa (of the Ashanti tribe) and brought to Jamaica as a slave. The Ashanti’s were one of the most powerful tribes of West Africa. The women were held in the highest regard and participated in every aspect of decision-making, even fighting and leading battles.

Nanny's family then made the decision to split up in order to be able to organize better resistance to the plantation economy across Jamaica than was possible if they stuck together. Cudjoe went to Clarendon where about a hundred Maroons from Cottawood soon joined him, while Accompong went to St. Elizabeth, while Nanny and Quao made their way to Portland.

By 1720, Nanny and Quao had organized and gained control of this town of Maroons located in the Blue Mountains. It was around this time that the town was given the title of Nanny Town. Nanny town encompassed more than 600 acres (2.4 km²) of land for the run away slaves to live as well as raise animals and grow crops. Due to the town being led by Nanny and Quao, it was organized very similar to a typical Ashanti tribe in Africa.

The Maroons were able to survive on the mountains by sending traders to the cities to exchange food for weapons and cloth. The Maroons were also known for raiding plantations for weapons and food, burning the plantation, and leading the slaves back to Nanny Town. Nanny town was an excellent location for a stronghold due to it overlooking Stony River via a 900-foot ridge making a surprise attack by the British virtually impossible. The Maroons at Nanny town also organized lookouts for such an attack as well as designated warriors who could be summoned by the sound of a horn called an Abeng.

Granny Nanny was very adept at organizing plans to free slaves. Over the span of fifty years, Nanny has been credited with freeing over eight-hundred slaves. Nanny also helped these slaves remain free and healthy due to her vast knowledge of herbs and her role as a spiritual leader. However, freeing slaves upset the British very much. Between 1728 and 1734, Nanny town was attacked by the British repeatedly, but not once was it harmed. This was accomplished due to the Maroons being much more skilled in fighting in an area of high rainfall as well as disguising themselves as bushes and trees. The Maroons also utilized decoys to trick the British into a surprise attack. A non-disguised Maroon would run out into view of the British and then in the direction of the fellow Maroons, who were disguised, thus repeatedly crushing the British.

In 1994, Nanny’s image was placed on a Jamaican Five-Hundred Dollar bill. This gesture immortalized her in the hearts and minds of the Jamaican people.
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