
Nanny of the Maroons

(c. 1680–1750),

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the first and foremost leader of the Windward Maroons of Jamaica, an autonomous community of self-emancipated slaves, was likely born into an Akan group in present-day Ghana. Nanny's historicity and legendary status blend into one another. To write her biography is to oscillate self-consciously between the past and the present, between history and myth, recording Nanny's deeds and remarking upon their lasting effects and current retellings.

Dispossessed of her homeland some time around the turn of the eighteenth century, she survived the Middle Passage across the Atlantic. In the legend that distinguishes Maroons from Jamaicans, Nanny and her sister, Sekesu, arrived in Jamaica. Nanny escaped into the mountains, establishing the lineage of Maroons; Sekesu remained a slave, establishing the lineage of Jamaican non-Maroons. Alongside this mythical arrival in Jamaica, a growing consensus among contemporary Maroon leaders argues that she arrived in Jamaica with her brother, Kojo. Whether he was her biological brother or assumed the classificatory status of brother to justify their paired ruling over the Windward and Leeward Maroon communities of Jamaica remains uncertain (Zips, 2011 , p. 167).

Nanny and Kojo plagued the British plantation owners and soldiers so fiercely that they forced the British to draw up a treaty with the Maroons, formally declaring their autonomy from the Crown in 1738 and 1739, and again in 1796. A 1741 land grant stipulates the gift of five hundred acres to Nanny and her people. This area, originally called New Nanny Town, is now called Moore Town, and on the annual Jamaican observance of National Heroes Day in mid-October, locals celebrate Nanny Day, commemorating the founder of their community. At some point during her life in Jamaica, it is possible that she married a man named Adou. She had no children, and yet all "true-born Maroons"—those who can trace an endogamous Maroon genealogy—claim her as their ancestor. It is believed that she died sometime in the 1750s. The original Nanny Town is the site of Nanny's grave, though another grave for her can be found in Old Town in the Leeward area of the island. Neither grave can be approached by anyone but the true-born Maroons.

Nanny has acquired a number of appellations. Maroons who continue to pass down her stories call her Grandy Nanny, a "great scientist," and the mother of all Maroons. "Scientist," according to Jenny Sharpe (2003 , p. 3), refers to Nanny's abilities to invoke and command dead ancestors to heal the sick and influence the outcome of certain events. Scholars who trace the rearticulation of African social organization and gender roles in Jamaica describe her political power in terms of the Akan Queen Mother, or *ohemaa*, a powerful woman who rules alongside and advises a male chief. Colonial ideology that seeks to barbarize and disempower African women informs the descriptions of her in the British colonial record as an "old hagg" or an "obeah woman" (Thicknesse and Thomas, quoted in Brathwaite,

1994). Kamau Brathwaite's tenacious historical research, published as *Wars of Respect* (1977) proved the historicity of her personage and led to the Michael Manley government claiming her as a Jamaican National Hero in 1975. As of 2015 the Right Honorable Nanny of the Maroons remains the only woman, and the only Maroon, in this national pantheon.

Nanny's Maroon Town grew in the first half of the eighteenth century, following the social organization of matrifocal Akan society, and swelling to the size of between eight hundred and a thousand people. Protecting Nanny Town from invasion and administering spiritual and physical sustenance through natural and supernatural means marked the parameters of Nanny's responsibilities. While the colonists referred sparingly and negatively to the Maroons in their records, enforcing a kind of discursive invisibility on them and rendering them without history, the Maroons themselves made judicious use of the tactics of invisibility in guerilla warfare to obstruct the colonists' desire to find, overtake, and enslave them. Nanny strategically positioned her community along a 900-foot precipice that overlooked the Stony River. From this position and from others nearby, she advised her Maroon warriors on the techniques of concealment, misdirection, and ambush. She covered them in branches and leaves, cloaking them from soldiers' sight, and used an *abeng*, a cow's horn also used among Akan tribes, to signal the moment of surprise attack.

Nanny is mentioned four times in the colonial record between 1733 and 1741. A 1733 entry in the *Journals of the Assembly of Jamaica* reports that Cuffee, a "very good party Negro" or a man acting in sympathy with the British, killed "the rebels [*sic*] old obeah woman" (quoted in Brathwaite, 1977 , p. 16). In January 1735, Nanny appears in the Colonial Office Papers, which suggest that the announcement of her death two years earlier was incorrect. Here, an escaped Igbo slave named Cupid reports that he witnessed Nanny put three white men to death. The text in the Colonial Office Papers reads that Cupid, an Igbo slave, "saw three white men ...putt [*sic*] to death by Nanny." When the 1735 Calendar State of Papers repeats this event, "Nanny" is changed to "hanging." Even though her place in the official record again becomes precarious, Brathwaite insists that the graphematic similarities between "hanging" and "Nanny" suggest that the substitution results from a mistaken transposition from writing to typeface. He imagines that the "N" could be mistaken for an "h," the "an" would remain the same, and—at his most conjectural moment—the "ny" at the end of Nanny's name could be transformed into "ging" (Brathwaite, 1994 , pp. 124–125). The 1735 Colonial Office Papers also report that Adou was Nanny's husband.

In the 1738 and 1739 treaties that the British signed with the Maroon leaders Kojo and Quao, Nanny is conspicuously absent from the record. This is interpreted as a refusal on her part to engage in treaty negotiations with the British, or as evidence of her authority as a kind of Queen Mother of Nanny Town. Still others suggest that Nanny could have refused to sign the treaty so that she would not be specifically held to its articles. She is again found in the colonial record for 1741, which shows a land patent by which the Crown gave Nanny 500 acres of land in Portland Parish. She disappears from colonial annals after this moment. She reappears in eighteenth-century ethnographies by Bryan Edwards, Edward Long, and Philip Thicknesse, and in a nineteenth-century exoticist travelogue by Herbert Thomas. These discursive appearances and the gathering oral histories composed by Maroons paved the way for twentieth-century figurations of Nanny in the Afro-Caribbean world.

In the long-standing oral tradition recomposed by Windward and Leeward Maroons, Nanny is a central figure and the foremost ancestor of both groups. Several stories about Nanny recur, and some of them have their roots in the colonial writings on Jamaica. In colonial discourse, these stories seek to prove

Nanny's diabolical use of obeah, a British term for West African-based witchcraft, but here referring to what Maroons describe as Nanny's oracular wisdom and science, or the mixture of natural and supernatural practices that make up her abilities. These Maroon stories reveal Nanny as an astoundingly gifted leader of her people, at times magically saving them from certain death. Three stories were transposed from the oral tradition and published in the *Daily Gleaner* by the Maroon Colonel C. L. G. Harris in 1967, reformatting Nanny's achievements into written form, which catalyzed the effort to historicize this legendary figure of Jamaican national identity.

In the story of Nanny's pumpkin seeds, the First Maroon War is nearing an end, and Nanny's people, besieged by the British, are starving. Under the direction of a divinely inspired dream, Nanny finds three pumpkin seeds in her pocket. Planting them on what would become known as Pumpkin Hill, they produce miraculous fruit, a manna that vines across the earth and feeds the Maroons through the end of the war. In the legend of Nanny's pot, a mysterious substance that continually boils without fire is contained in a cauldron and placed on a narrow pathway. British soldiers, who must pass by it single file, are drawn to the boiling pot, and as they peer into it, they fall from the edge of the precipice. In other versions, the pot contains herbs whose soporific effects drug the soldiers and cause them to fall into it. Nanny allows one soldier to live so that he may return to his compatriots and pass on the story of this weapon.

The story that is most repeated in the oral histories, and most critiqued by scholars of marronage, concerns Nanny's ability to catch and fire bullets with her buttocks—a tale that did not appear in print until Thomas's *Untrodden Jamaica* (1890). Twentieth-century writing on Nanny regularly refers to her bullet-catching abilities. Kamau Brathwaite and Carolyn Cooper have led the efforts to critique this talent rather than simply repeat it. In *Wars of Respect* (1977), Brathwaite suggests that while Nanny's abilities as a bullet catcher can be traced to similar alleged feats reported among African military maneuvers, the reference to the power of her buttocks is an attempt in colonial discourse to vulgarize and denigrate the fearsome power and presence that Nanny commanded. By focusing on one part of her body at the expense of considering the whole, colonial discourse and the oral histories of the Maroons commit a synecdochic violence on Nanny, eliding her other major qualities, such as leading, nurturing, and healing. Cooper highlights the empowering possibilities inherent in bodily acts committed by women, placing Nanny at the beginning of a practice by which Jamaican women assert authority through the self-conscious vulgarization of their own bodies. Brathwaite joins Cooper in consensus on this point in a 1994 reflection on Nanny, when he suggests that her bullet-catching feat is at the root of the Jamaican woman's practice of showing her backside to express insult toward another.

As a powerful Maroon leader and a Jamaican National Hero, Nanny is celebrated in oral history, scholarship, and imaginative writing as the quintessential Jamaican woman, and as the figure through which African traditions are translated into a Caribbean setting. To begin the study of Jamaican resistance history with Nanny argues that the story of the African diaspora begins not with "slavery and conquest, but [with] the common human heritage of freedom and exploration" (Cooper, 1994, p. 109). By this logic, the upright and powerful image of Nanny, refusing to countenance the British while nurturing her Maroon community and its descendants, replaces the paradigmatic image of the man in chains.

In the 1980s, Caribbean fiction began to incorporate Nanny and the stories associated with her as a way of reanimating folk traditions, histories of resistance, and feminist genealogies in the region. Victor Stafford Reid's 1983 novel *Nanny Town* celebrates Nanny for her combination of domestic and

military arts, ensuring the nurturing and survival of her people. Other imaginings of her consider her role as a Jamaican rather than specifically Maroon woman. It is this figure of powerful Jamaican woman, in control of her domicile, that the writers Louise Bennett, Lorna Goodison, and Grace Nichols imagine in their poems that feature her: "Jamaican Oman" (1982), "Nanny" (1986), and "Nanny" (1990), respectively. Honor Ford-Smith, a Jamaican writer and actress active in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, voices a more circumspect Nanny, one who writes back to the stories of her prowess against the British and confesses that terror is the bedfellow of bravery. In her "Message from Ni" (1996), Ford-Smith investigates the vulnerability that persists beneath the discursive veneer of courage. In Michelle Cliff's Clare Savage novels, *Abeng* (1984) and *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), Nanny appears as the spectral presence of refusal and resistance that guides the protagonist toward reclaiming a Jamaican identity. The Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé takes a more critical approach to Nanny in her novella *Nanna-Ya* (1999). Though none of Nanny's achievements are diminished in the novel, she has become an ancestral figure used by the modern-day Maroon characters to distinguish themselves from Jamaicans, cleaving national identity into those descended from freedom fighters and those descended from slaves.

It is likely that Nanny died in the 1750s, but she has become a uniting figure for the Windward and Leeward Maroons. Her status of National Hero expands her influence into a figure of unifying Jamaican identity. Given the continual advocacy among Maroon communities for their autonomy from the Jamaican state, Nanny's expansive influence across both identities is perhaps another supernatural feat conjured by her person. Since its introduction in 1994, she has appeared on the \$500 Jamaican note of currency.

[See also Bennett, Louise Simone; Brathwaite, Edward Kamau; Cliff, Michelle; Condé, Maryse; Goodison, Lorna; Manley, Michael Norman; and Reid, Victor Stafford .]

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See also

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Goodison, Lorna <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-74062>>

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