

Famous Black Britons: Nanny of the Maroons (c. 1686 - c.1750)

Much of what is known about Nanny of the Maroons comes from oral accounts and little written evidence of her life survives. According to Maroon tradition Queen Nanny was born into the Akan people about 1686 in present day Ghana, West Africa. Some accounts insist that Nanny was never enslaved, but it is likely that she was brought to Jamaica as an enslaved person and escaped from slavery shortly after arriving on the island. She and other enslaved people who escaped slavery lived as members of free Maroon communities in the mountainous areas of Jamaica. The Maroon communities cleared land to grow crops and raise animals. They also hunted for food and sent traders to nearby market towns to exchange food for weapons and cloth. From 1655 until they signed peace treaties in 1739 and 1740, Maroons led most of the slave rebellions in Jamaica, helping to free slaves from the plantations. They raided and damaged lands and buildings held by plantation owners.

By 1720, Nanny led a Maroon community, later given the name Nanny Town, in the Blue Mountains. The site of the settlement had a strategic location overlooking Stony River via a 270 m ridge, making a surprise attack by the British very difficult. At the same time that Nanny headed this community, other Maroons (sometimes referred to as her brothers-in-arms) Cudjoe, Accompong, Cuffee and Quaco led other Maroon communities in Jamaica. She may have married a Maroon man named Adou but it is not known if she had any children.

Jamaican oral histories say Queen Nanny used intellectual and physical approaches to defend her people and attack her enemies. Nanny was said to be a great obeah (African diaspora religion for spiritual healing and ensuring justice) woman who worked magic to protect her warriors. She had a reputation as an expert military strategist, causing much confusion amongst British soldiers, who were often surprised by her warriors who were trained in guerrilla (sudden and unexpected) warfare. The Maroons were experts at camouflage and the British soldiers told tales of forest trees becoming alive (with Maroon warriors) when they were attacked. Another Maroon advantage over the British was their ability to communicate over long distances using a cow horn called an abeng. This horn with a hole drilled in one end was blown by Maroon lookouts to send signals which were not understood by the British.

The British fought Nanny and her Maroon troops from 1728 to 1734. The British captured Nanny Town several times but faced with numerous Maroon guerrilla attacks were unable to keep control of the town. The Maroons were better equipped and more knowledgeable about the mountains than the British. Much of the success of the Windward (eastern) Maroons during the First Maroon War (1728-1740) has been attributed to Nanny's leadership. She became a folk hero among the Maroons and the enslaved people on the island. According to

some accounts in 1733, or 1734, about 300 Nanny Town Maroons travelled across Jamaica on what is known as the 'Great Trek' to join the Leeward (western) Maroons. In 1734, the British destroyed Nanny Town and Nanny and other survivors took refuge, it is believed, near the Rio Grande in Jamaica.

Having failed to defeat the Maroons, the British sued for peace and signed a treaty with the Leeward Maroons in 1739 and another with Nanny's Windward Maroons on 20 April 1740. The treaties ended the fighting, provided for state sanctioned freedom for the Maroons and granted 500 acres of land to Nanny and her followers. Nowadays, the village built on this land is called Moore Town. It is also known as the New Nanny Town. In 1781, the town Assembly agreed to purchase an additional 500 acres from neighbouring planter Charles Douglas to increase Moore Town's communal land to 1,000 acres. Modern residents of Moore Town celebrate 20 April 1740 as a holiday. The Maroons of Moore Town keep their history alive through songs and the spoken word. Nanny is regarded as a Priestess and Queen Mother by the Maroons.

The exact date of Nanny's death is unknown but it is likely that Nanny died of natural causes around 1750. According to Maroon oral history, Nanny's remains are buried at 'Bump Grave' in Moore Town and the site of her grave is still revered. The government of Jamaica declared Queen Nanny a National Heroine in 1975 and a Memorial was erected. Her portrait is on the 500 Jamaican dollar bill which is colloquially referred to as a 'Nanny'. Nannyville Gardens, a residential community in Kingston, Jamaica, was founded in 1977 and named after her. A ship in the Jamaica Defence Force Coast Guard is named after Nanny: HMJS Nanny of the Maroons.

Notes on biography

All information assembled by the Schools and Young Audiences Team at the British Museum.

The brief biography above has been written using a range of published sources (print and online). The biography seeks to present an introduction to the life and times of the person and further information is available in other sources (for example printed, online, lectures).

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