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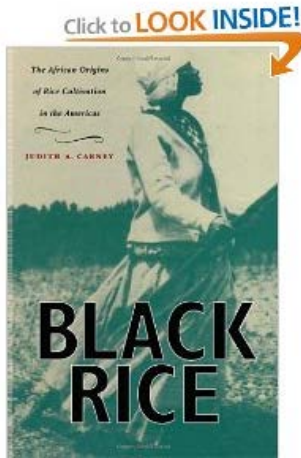
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Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas [Paperback]

[Judith A. Carney](#) (Author)

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Book Description

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Few Americans identify slavery with the cultivation of rice, yet rice was a major plantation crop during the first three centuries of settlement in the Americas. Rice accompanied African slaves across the Middle Passage throughout the New World to Brazil, the Caribbean, and the southern United States. By the middle of the eighteenth century, rice plantations in South Carolina and the black slaves who worked them had created one of the most profitable economies in the world.

Black Rice tells the story of the true provenance of rice in the Americas. It establishes, through agricultural and historical evidence, the vital significance of rice in West African society for a millennium before Europeans arrived and the slave trade began. The standard belief that Europeans introduced rice to West Africa and then brought the knowledge of its cultivation to the Americas is a fundamental fallacy, one which succeeds in effacing the origins of the crop and the role of Africans and African-American slaves in transferring the seed, the cultivation skills, and the cultural practices necessary for establishing it in the New World.

In this vivid interpretation of rice and slaves in the Atlantic world, Judith Carney reveals how racism has shaped our historical memory and

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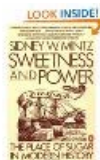
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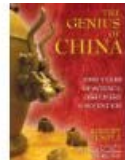
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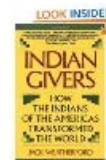
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From Bondage to Freedom "Among the longstanding themes in African-American history is the debate over cultural survival and acculturation," observes UCLA geography professor Judith A. Carney in the introduction to *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas*. Contrary to common belief, she explains, rice was not brought by Europeans to the Americas by way of Asia, but rather was introduced here by Africans and cultivated by African-American slaves, particularly in South Carolina, where rice crops proved to be one of the most profitable plantation-based economies. Though this is a scholarly work, Carney's clear, uncluttered prose invites a wider readership. Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. --*This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.*

Review

>*Black Rice* is an original, knowledgeable, exciting, and important addition to the literature of the making and remaking of the Atlantic world. Judith Carney demonstrates how the trans-Atlantic transfer of rice cultivation marked not simply the movement of an important crop across the Atlantic, but also the relocation of an entire culture.

--Ira Berlin, author of *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (20010219)

An intrepid and observant researcher who links African rice to North and South America in fresh and convincing ways, Judith Carney's work is wide-ranging, provocative, and clear. *Black Rice* is a wonderfully rich and creative book about an amazing crop and the people who labored to grow it. You will never look at a bowl of rice--or the entire Atlantic basin--in quite the same way again.

--Peter H. Wood, author of *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (20010820)

Black Rice is a luminous, brilliant account of innovation, resistance, and identity linking Old and New Worlds. Carney has unearthed a compelling, and hitherto neglected, aspect of Africa's contribution to the agrarian history of the Americas. A magisterial geographical history of the Black Atlantic.

--Michael Watts, University of California, Berkeley (20050605)

If there were a field of "Trans-Atlantic Subaltern Studies," *Black Rice* would represent both a foundation stone of the edifice and one of its most impressive achievements.

--James C. Scott, Yale University

Among the very finest examples of what African Diaspora Studies should be: multidisciplinary, multilingual, broad in geographic scope, and focused on Africa and Africans as vital, active contributors to the technology and culture of the Americas.

--Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, author of *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*

With a fusion of highly original geographic, ethnographic, and historical analysis, Carney powerfully traces the provenance and provisioning of rice in the Americas, the profound role that it played in defining gender roles, and the myriad ways that slave labor altered the once hidden political ecology of rice landscapes.

--Karl Zimmerer, author of *Changing Fortunes: Biodiversity and Peasant Livelihood in the Peruvian Andes*

Exploring crops, landscapes and agricultural practices in Africa and America, [Carney] demonstrates the critical role Africans played in the creation of the system of rice production that provided the foundation of Carolina's wealth...This detailed study of historical botany, technological adaptation and agricultural diffusion adds depth to our understanding of slavery and makes a compelling case for "the agency of slaves" in the creation of the South's economy and culture.

--Drew Gilpin Faust (*New York Times Book Review*)

Contrary to common belief, [Carney] explains, rice was not brought by Europeans to the Americas by way of Asia, but rather was introduced here by Africans and cultivated by African-American slaves, particularly in South Carolina, where rice crops proved to be one of the most profitable plantation-based economies. Though this is a scholarly work, Carney's clear, uncluttered prose invites a wider readership. (*Publishers Weekly*)

Black Rice sets out to discredit for good an old Southern recipe for history that depicts slaves as mere laborers who dumbly performed work their masters conceived. Carney tells it the other way around. After years visiting West African rice fields, then digging in archives on both sides of the Atlantic, she has emerged with evidence that early slave traders sought and seized Africans who had the abilities to grow a

specific African rice...*Black Rice* might be called an agricultural detective story. The historical crime--and that's clearly how Carney sees it--is the relative lack of attention given to African rice.

--Allan M. Jalon (*Los Angeles Times*)

Judith A. Carney's *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation* in the Americas...describes how the South Carolina rice industry was built not only on slave labor but on the agricultural and technological knowledge brought over by the Africans...[It] changes our understanding of the black contribution to American life.

--Barry Gewen (*New York Times Book Review*)

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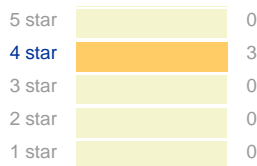
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★★★★☆ **The African Connection** March 31, 2008

By [Robert S. Newman](#) [VINE™ VOICE](#)

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Not long ago, it was common belief that rice was domesticated in Asia and brought to other parts of the world either by Muslims or European traders. Thus, if rice were cultivated in the Carolinas from the late 17th century on, the presence of that crop was due to some European intervention. Carney explodes this myth. Showing the existence of rice cultivation in West Africa for at least two thousand years and proving that a) the variety of rice plant is not the same as the one in Asia and b) that a vast body of knowledge about rice growing existed in West Africa when the Portuguese first arrived there, she lays firm groundwork on which to build her idea that it was African slaves who taught the English planters in the Carolinas how to grow rice, built all the waterworks and field irrigation systems, passed on knowledge about milling the crop, and cooking the rice as well. She concludes that a whole system of knowledge was transferred from West Africa to North America's southeast coastal swamps (and to Brazil and Suriname too). This knowledge belonged especially to women of certain peoples who lived in the coastal rice growing zones of the area between Senegal and the Ivory Coast (and also in the interior [...] delta area of Mali). It was appropriated, just like the bodies of the slaves, and falsely said to originate with the white planters. How a bunch of ship captains and slave traders would have time to master the art of rice cultivation and bring it to the Americas was never explained by traditional historians. And the rice paddies of England somehow do not loom large in British legend. Africans---again---were erased from history. Carney has re-written them into the record in a very interesting book. The transfer of rice from Africa resulted in South Carolina being the richest of the colonies; it resulted in a black majority population for some time with the concomitant fear of rebellion among the white slave owners; and just for a

short time, it allowed slaves to bargain with their owners to get some free time to attend small gardens of their own. Husking the rice by pounding it, a daily task for West African women, became a day-long, exhausting job for slaves in the Carolinas, part of the reason for the high death rate. In terms of breadth of research and the very topic of research, this is a five star book.

There is one fly in the ointment. I think this book could have been cut, or at least, more carefully edited. There is a very large amount of repetition. The same ideas, even the same phrases, appear many times and it becomes tiresome to be told the same thing yet again. Many times I felt like exclaiming, "OK, OK ! I get it." This aside, BLACK RICE is a fine book. If you are interested in American history or African/American connections, if the transfer of agricultural knowledge systems intrigue you, you can't afford to miss it.

1 Comment | Was this review helpful to you?

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★★★★☆ **Rice and the African Connection** July 21, 2006

By [David W. Barber](#)

Format: Paperback

Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas. Judith A. Carney. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. xiv and 240 pp. Notes, references, and index. (ISBN 0-674-00452-3)

Reviewed by David Barber, Graduate Student, The University of Southern Mississippi; Hattiesburg, MS.

Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas, By Judith A. Carney, investigates the historical origins of South Carolina's rice industry and the role African slaves played by providing the knowledge and technology of rice cultivation in the Americas. From a personal background, Judith A. Carney is a professor of geography at UCLA. Carney's main argument focuses on the African slaves' contributions to the rice industry, their introduction of rice to the Americas, and their cultivation technology that provided the driving force behind one of the most profitable cash crop commodities in the South. Carney's book dispels the false, popular belief that rice was introduced to the Western Hemisphere by European traders. However, the book is limited, somewhat, as a source for studying the history of American cooking. Although Carney's book provides a valuable insight into the history of rice cultivation in America, it provides very little information regarding the usage or consumption of cultivated rice by the American society.

Judith A. Carney is a professor of geography at UCLA. She earned her Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley. In *Black Rice*, Carney utilizes a variety of primary sources, as well as secondary sources to support her findings. The book contains an introduction, six chapters, notes, references, and an index.

In the first two chapters of *Black Rice*, Carney describes rice cultivation in Africa, mainly on the African west coast. In Africa, rice was cultivated mainly on rain-fed uplands, tidal floodplains, and inland swamps. The cultural/gender roles in western Africa positioned women as the dominant laborers of rice cultivation. In addition to describing the diffusion of rice cultivation throughout Africa's many ecosystems, a large focus is placed on the mangrove ecosystems of West Africa, due to their similarities to tidal swamps in South Carolina.

Chapters three and four examine the skilled labor of African slaves producing rice in South Carolina and the organized gender division of labor that remained intact within rice cultivation in America. By seeking African slaves taken from the rice producing regions of Africa, primarily females, plantation owners sought specific slaves knowledgeable of cultivation and technologies necessary for rice production. In comparison to cotton plantations, the labor practices on rice plantations allowed the slaves to concentrate on his or her personal needs once daily task were completed. The slaves on cotton plantations labored from dawn to dusk. This element helped African slaves to maintain a certain level of cultural identity, an uncommon freedom granted to few slaves during the era.

The final two chapters of the book focus on the introduction of rice seeds to the Americas and the return of African slaves to the rice cultivation regions of Africa by abolitionist societies. Carney argues that rice cultivated in South Carolina was introduced by slaves entering the New World via slave ships. The origins of rice cultivation in South Carolina did, in fact, stem from slaves

cultivating rice for personal use in the small garden plots allowed by plantation owners. To the African slave, rice symbolized freedom; in particular, the Carolina Gold variety introduced in Africa by returned slaves.

The value of Black Rice can be found in the knowledge and understanding it provides of rice's introduction, cultivation, and technology supplied by African slaves in the Americas. From its introduction by African slaves, initially in personal garden plots, rice has become one of America's main staple crops. However, once noticed for its potential, rice cultivation on Atlantic plantations became the primary focus for many plantation owners. Although the initial labor practices benefited slaves, economic demand for rice ushered in an increase measure of labor and output that resulted in many slaves dying in the disease infested conditions. Nevertheless, these conditions isolated some slaves and provided opportunities for them to maintain some of their African, cultural traits.

As a historical source for the study of American food history, Black Rice possesses many limitations. The book does not provide the reader with many examples of how cultivated rice was utilized by the consumer society, once it was produced. Aside from cereal, the book does not mention any meals that include rice as an ingredient. Although the author mentions many regions in the Western Hemisphere, the book's focus is limited to rice cultivation in North America and Africa, mainly rice cultivation in South Carolina.

Sense its introduction in the Americas by African slaves; rice has become one of the main staple crops utilized in American culinary practices. From this book, the reader gains a better understand of rice's origins, cultivation, and the technologies introduced by African slaves that made it possible prior to industrialized, mechanized methods of harvesting and production. However, the book pays little attention to the crop as an ingredient in American culinary. Carney does not provide the reader with any information regarding different classes of society utilizing rice differently or how it was incorporated into their diet. Rather, she focuses on rice as a symbol of freedom, allowing some Africans to maintain certain elements of their cultural identity. Throughout the book, the author's consistently argues the importance of female slaves and gender roles that were maintained in rice cultivation, until an increased demand required the incorporation of male labor into the system. Nevertheless, the material covered in the book is informative and interesting, providing the reader with a greater understanding of how one of our most popular staple crops originated in America.

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★★★★☆ **An interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspective** February 8, 2009

By James Hoogerwerf

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Carney's thesis is that it was African rice, glaberrima, and African slave knowledge that developed the crop in the Americas, not Asian rice, sativa, or Portuguese traders. Her perspective is interdisciplinary and cross-cultural and establishes a foundation of African rice growing experience that migrated with slaves across the Atlantic.

The distinctive shovel or hoe called the kayendo, described in mangrove rice cultivation by Venetian Chronicler, Cadamosto in 1455, supports her premise. It vouches strongly for the fact that irrigated rice cultivation preceded Portuguese arrival. Irrigated rice and the concomitant social development, establishes the presence of an African rice species and native African cultivation well before the Portuguese could have brought seed and rice growing expertise from Asia.

The keyendo was a key tool in the highly productive mangrove system of rice production. The men aerated the soil, built embankments and ridges and turned over soil to bury weeds. The kayendo, Caney notes, is still in use today. While the kayendo was used by men to prepare the heavy clay found in costal mangrove areas in Africa, rice was primarily a woman's task. Carney notes similar gender roles and attitudes in the American plantation system.

Use of the keyendo demonstrates the early sophistication of African rice production. Mangrove rice cultivation required extensive field preparation and management. This knowledge was transferred to the American continent. It contradicts the claim of Portuguese and plantation origins of American rice production with Asian seed. The rice, Carney argues, was of African origin and she points to the critical role of slaves in adapting it to the New World.

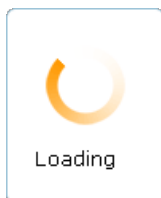


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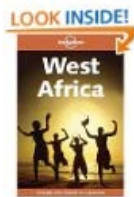
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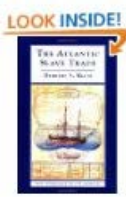
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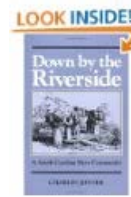
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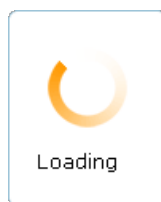
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