

LUCCL

LEIDEN UNIVERSITY
CENTRE FOR LINGUISTICS



FRIDAY AFTERNOON LECTURE

Local plant names tell us how enslaved Africans familiarized themselves with the New World flora

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16.00-17.00 hrs

Lipsius/001

When enslaved Africans were brought to the New World, they were not only challenged to maintain their culture and beliefs under severe circumstances, but also to find useful plants similar to those of their motherland. One of the most intriguing ethnobotanical questions is how the forced migration of nearly 11 million Africans to the Americas influenced their knowledge and use of plants. Studying vernacular plant names sheds light on the process of recognition, the acquisition of new knowledge and replacement that must have taken place since the first Africans set foot on American soil. To trace back the origin of Afro-Surinamese plant names to those used by local Amerindians, Europeans and related groups in West and Central Africa, we analysed vernacular names from literature, herbarium collections and names documented during recent fieldwork in Suriname, Ghana, Benin and Gabon.

Our results show that although half of the Afro-Surinamese local names were derived from European lexical items, enslaved Africans must have recognized a substantial part of the Surinamese flora from their motherland. This is not only reflected in the Surinamese plant names that are still used for botanically related plant species by Africans today, but also by the translation of African plant names into Dutch Creole and direct references to the African origin of some species. We found more African retentions in Maroon plant names than in Creole ones.

The acquisition of new ethnobotanical knowledge is captured in names for American plants that are made up from African-derived lexical items and the naming of plants after specific persons, which explains the frequency of Akan day names in Afro-Surinamese plant names. The occurrence of plant names that consist of combinations of African, Amerindian and European words reflects the Creolization process, in which ethnobotanical skills from diverse geographical and cultural sources were merged into a new Afro-Surinamese knowledge systems.