In Matawai society children are highly valued and large families are desired by most people. The fertility level, however, is notably low compared with similar societies. The purpose of this paper is to present and analyse Matawai demographic data in order to understand this discrepancy between motivation and actual reproductive performance. We put forward some hypotheses which relate nutritional deficiencies to reproductive instability, considering the role of men in the agricultural and ecological cycle as an intermediate variable.¹

The Matawai

The Matawai is one of the smaller tribal groups of Bush Negroes, descendants of escaped slaves, who settled along the rivers of Surinam in the 17th and 18th centuries. The Matawai occupy a territory along the Saramacca river in the heart of Surinam's tropical rainforest. The runaways founded the first villages along the Toekoeemoetoe, a tributary of the Saramacca river (see map). They later moved to that part of the Saramacca river which is situated between the mouth of the Toekoeemoetoe and the rapids which divided the Matawai from the plantation colony. After the middle of the 19th century more Matawai gradually settled downstream. During the last few decades a large scale migration to Surinam's capital, Paramaribo, divided the Matawai population into those people residing in the tribal area and those residing primarily in or near the city. The upriver villages are less affected by the move