

# CARIB FOLK-BELIEFS AND CUSTOMS FROM DOMINICA, B. W. I.

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## I INTRODUCTION

IT IS CONVENIENT and often necessary for an investigator to classify his material according to categories, such as "medicine," "magic," "plant-lore," etc., but it must not be forgotten that these and similar abstractions would appear as an unnatural distortion of the facts to the participant in any folk-culture, who rightly recognizes as real only the integral and indivisible phenomenon of his own life within the group to which he belongs. As the scope of this article is limited to selected aspects of belief and custom recorded mainly in a comparatively isolated section of the wildest of the Lesser Antilles, it is indispensable to sketch in rapid outline the physical and social background from which these details are drawn.[1]

The "Carib Reserve" was formed in 1903 to accommodate the remnants of various Carib settlements scattered along the north, east, and southerly shores of Dominica, British West Indies. It comprises 3700 acres of rugged, indented coast-line near the middle of the island's windward (i. e. eastern) side, and is traversed in its breadth by several spurs which descend from a chain of mountains running north and south.

Du Tertre tells us that the Dominica Caribs had, by the middle of the seventeenth century, acquired a few Negro slaves, and it is probably with these that miscegenation started. The process has, at

1 Other publications on the Carib of Dominica by Douglas Taylor include: *The Island Caribs of Dominica, B. W. I.* (American Anthropologist, vol. 37, pp. 265-272, 1935); *Additional Notes on the Island Carib of Dominica, B. W. I.* (American Anthropologist, vol. 38, pp. 462-468, 1936); *The Caribs of Dominica* (Anthropological Papers, no. 3, Bulletin, Bureau of American Ethnology, no. 119, pp. 103-159, 1938); *Certain Carib Morphological Influences on Creole* (International Journal of American Linguistics, vol. 11, pp. 140-155, 1945); *Carib-Creole Tales from Dominica, B. W. I.* (Journal of American Folklore, in press, 1946); *Island Carib Texts and Analyses* (International Journal of American Linguistics, in press, 1946); *Semantic Bases in Island Carib* (same journal, in press, 1946); *Star-Lore of the Caribbees* (ms.); *Columbus Saw Them First* (Natural History, vol. 48, pp. 40-49, 1941); W. Hodge and D. Taylor, *The Economic Botany of the Dominica Caribs* (Botanical Museum, Cambridge, Mass., in press) —Editor.

all events, been hastened considerably in recent times by failure to evict non-Carib families who were living in the territory from which the Reserve was formed, and by the subsequent introduction of Negro schoolmasters and police. Today, the inhabitants number about 450, one hundred of whom may be considered reasonably as "full-blooded" Indians.

For the most part the houses are widely scattered over the hillsides. Clusters, where they occur, are the outcome of extended family groups. Residence is with few exceptions matrilocal; separate houses for conjugal families being built near that of the wives' mother whenever increasing numbers make this seem desirable. Fishing and horticulture are the staple means of subsistence; while canoe-building, basketry, and the sawing of boards and lumber provide a surplus which is sold to outsiders for money, or exchanged for goods or services. Hunting (of wild pig, agouti, and game-birds) has fallen off very much in the past fifty years. Doubtless this is due in part to the fact that the Caribs, having abandoned bows and arrows and being unable to afford guns, are obliged to hunt with dogs alone; but the main reason seems to be that the younger generation prefers dress and alcohol to a meat diet, and therefore increasingly directs its energies toward a money economy. This has resulted in a good deal of indiscriminate lumbering which, on the top of "cut and burn" horticulture, has brought about the progressive deforestation of the surroundings, and so made game scarce.

Land is held in common but produce is personal property, and even young children are encouraged to have gardens, pigs, and hens of their own. The house belongs to whichever spouse has built it or paid for its building, and invariably goes, on the death of both parents, to the youngest child. Although in times of common danger the tribe can still assert itself, the main social unit today is the extended family group; outside of this there is little sense of loyalty, duty, or responsibility. Within it, however, and in spite of a good deal of personal freedom, individualism and individuality alike are frowned upon. An early period of extreme indulgence (say up to five years of age) is followed by a rather abrupt cessation of all outward show of affection, coupled with a demand for conformity to pattern. Perhaps the worst thing that can be said of a person in these parts is that he or she is ʔámię (Carib) or, in French Creole,

*comparaison,* that is to say "other," "singular," the Creole term also containing the implication of a certain effrontery. The process of socialization is effected in the main by the fear of two sanctions: (1) the merciless ridicule of other members of the group; and (2) dire afflictions proceeding from supernatural agencies. The result, in terms of character, is a shy, sly reticence in which all expression of individual thought and emotion is ordinarily inhibited, and which only alcohol can break down. The typical Carib is hospitable but suspicious; generous but irresponsible; usually quiet and well mannered, but super-sensitive at all times and often taciturn; and occasionally becoming, under the influence of liquor, acrimonious, violent, or hysterical (real or pseudo-epileptic fits are common among boys of 17 to 22). He is obstinate and reluctant to adopt new ways, and believes that school education makes children lazy and dependent. Were he to formulate his principal tenets in words, they would probably be: "Keep your eyes and ears open, but ask no questions; follow your first ideas, and keep your own counsel!"

All my informants were agreed that the "old-timers" had been extremely secretive, and unwilling to communicate their crafts, customs, beliefs, and even the Carib language itself to others! The purer among the present-day Caribs say of themselves that drink is their besetting vice, quarrelsomeness and dispute that of their Negro and more mixed associates. These in their turn accuse the Caribs of being unsociable, lazy, and lacking in ambition and forethought; but they do not, as far as I can learn, find any fault in themselves!

Obviously, it cannot be claimed that all the beliefs and customs described below are familiar to the island's—much less to the Antilles' —population as a whole. Many of them have, nevertheless, a wide distribution; and are representative as a whole, I believe, of a stage which has been reached or passed in other communities. At least they form, like the islands' flora and fauna, their inhabitants and the patois they speak, a vivid, ever changing composition into which enter native Indian, European, and African—not to mention other— ingredients.

## II ORIGIN OF MAN

Some of the older inhabitants of mixed blood (although none among the purer Caribs) say that the Caribs are of underground origin *(Yon nation qui sortit en bas la terre);* and that even now some

of them, while you are standing by a pool talking with them are capable of plunging in suddenly and disappearing, only to turn up again somewhere else miles away. A tradition to the effect that there is a subterranean connection between Dominica's "Fresh Water Lake" and a sea-deep called L'Abîme off its southwestern coast may have something to do with this belief. See also the account of two brothers' rejuvenation by plunging into the Orinoco (story of Máruka and Simanári).[2] The attribution of an underground origin to man is, of course, common to many North American emergence myths.

The Caribs themselves have myths which attribute the origin of their breed to the union of a girl with her brother, who subsequently became the moon (see story of Híali); or to that of a girl with the anthropomorphic "master" of *tête-chien* snakes *(Constrictor Orphias:* see IVc 4 and story of Bakámọ).

### III MAGICIANS

The French terms *magnétiseur* or *savant* are employed by the Caribs nowadays to designate the old-time shamans (Carib búye) who claimed to send their souls on flights in search of the uméi (see under IV) or other spirits afflicting their patients, and to call in their own familiars for advice and help. Their prototype, although remembered still by some of the old people (see under VI), can no longer be said to exist. The *docteurs* of today, who combine sympathetic magic with herbal lore, massage, scarification, and cupping (see under IX) are, at the most, *demi-savants.*

As the name suggests, a *divineur* is primarily one who discovers that which is hidden—usually lost property, or the culprit of some misdeed (which itself may be of a magic kind). His usual procedure is, after the recitation of certain "prayers," to open at random and read from the *Imitation of Christ,* subsequently interpreting the passage so as to fit the problem he is asked to solve.

The above categories of individuals may be said to possess a certain esoteric training and power, if only as in the latter case that conferred by literacy. The case is somewhat different with those practices known as kʸẹ́mbwa (or čẹ́mbwa), ó·bia (often spelt obeah),

2 See *Carib-Creole Tales from Dominica, B. W. I.*

and piáy.[3] Be it said at the outset that the first two terms are, today at any rate, synonymous, and used to designate all kinds of sorcery; while the latter is limited to the making and working of black magic. Note that while one "works" ó·bia and "makes" a piáy, the person, animal (such as hunting dog), object (such as canoe), or (e. g., building) operation against which these practices become effective are said to be suffering from a *l'amarrage,* or spell-binding (see section IX). Magical practices intended to ensure fertility, to protect a field or its produce against marauders, or to influence the attitude of person or persons in a particular circumstance (especially that of judge or jury during a trial) would be ó·bia but not piáy. Any person not otherwise endowed can practise such magic, provided he be acquainted with the proper formulæ or recipes and carry them out correctly. These are often taken from the works of the medieval Dominican monk, Albertus Magnus, and even from the prayers and ritual of the church itself; and it is by no means uncommon for a priest to be made their unwitting agent when he is asked to say a mass "on somebody's head," i. e. one whose undeclared intention is that of harming or trapping somebody. In the English islands, the practice of ó·bia (or kʸémbwa) is a punishable offence, while French law ignores its existence as such.

## IV BELIEF IN SPIRITUAL ENTITIES

The Creole term zombi (jumbi in the purely English-speaking islands) is usually derived from Congo nsumbi "devil" (cf. also French *les ombres* "the shades" and Taino zemi "familiar spirit"). Its connotation appears to vary somewhat in different islands; but in Dominica this word is applied indiscriminately to disembodied souls, ghosts of the dead, or independent spiritual beings of divers habitats, forms, and practices. But whatever their particular origin or attributes, and whether met with waking or in dreams, the average rustic West Indian would as soon think of questioning the reality and importance of zombi as would the ordinary urban Ameri-

3 The terms ó·bia and kʸę'mbwa are usually derived from West African (?) obi and kilęmbwa, both said to mean "sorcery." Note, however, that the Island Carib words for spirit, men's and women's speech respectively, were akámbwe and ó·poya, according to Breton, and that Du Tertre spells the latter term ópia. Various forms of the term piáy occur in the Guianas. This word appears to be related to Island Carib abię́ra "to cast a spell on," "to chant;" ibíę "medicine," "color."

can the existence and significance of streptococci. On the other hand, it would appear from his habit of talking aloud to the wind and the woods, the rocks and the rain; from the frequent references in his tales to the "spirit" of a person's spittle, urine, or excrement, which replies in the owner's voice until cold; and from the widespread stories of transformations of and into people, animals, and objects, especially at the time of the moon's eclipse, that the concept of mana is at the basis of much of the West Indian peasant's belief in the supernatural.

(a) *Disembodied Souls.* A woman is said to "run súkwiyą" (this word, often spelt soucouyan, soucougnan, souclian, or soucrian, appears to derive from Latin *succuba,* but is sometimes said to be African: cf. also Carib súkwíra "to tempt," "to attempt") when it is believed that a diabolic power induces and enables her to take off her skin and to flit about by night as a firefly, a bat, or in some other form, sucking the blood and milk of cattle, and the blood or, in the case of men, the seminal fluid of her human victims. While upon their escapades súkwiyą are reputed to make a noise like hens, and may be recognized, like the hebu of the Guiana Indians, by the glowing fire they carry in their hinder quarters. Lights seen moving on a lone hillside by night are usually attributed to them. I knew one old woman who openly declared that she had confessed "running suku' " to the local priest, who had prevailed upon her to give up this sinful practice! These creatures may be caught by finding, salting, and peppering their temporarily discarded skins (hidden as a rule under the mortar), or by placing various booby traps and puzzles (such as sea-sand whose grains they will stop to count) in their way.

A were-wolf *(loup-garou),* in the West Indian sense of this term, is the male counterpart of the súkwiyą, but does not fly and usually appears, unlike the latter, in dusk or the day-time. One informant told me how he and two other men, after an all-night march, had seen one as day opened in the shape of a donkey going along the road alone, saddled, and with a bell in its mouth—luckily they had been able to hide in time! Another man said that one hot afternoon when he was alone in his house, he heard a *loup-garou* rushing through the yard. He did what was considered best under the cir-

cumstances: took off all his clothes, and went out to meet it naked and with a cutlas in his hand. It disappeared, though he heard and followed it for some distance!

(b) *Ghosts of the Dead.* These are very much feared, as their appearance usually indicates that the dead person is dissatisfied with the behavior of the living, is seeking redress for some wrong done him during his life, or has come to fetch a relative or companion. Hence great care is taken that the service (including the wake, the burial, and the eight-day repetition of the wake called *la prière;* for a description of which see section VII) of a dead person should be properly conducted. I know one man who gave a third wake in an outhouse where his grown-up daughter had died months before (the first two having taken place as usual in the main building) because he one day saw her ghost there. It is said that one who leaves a wake early or alone may be followed home by the (affronted?) ghost.

(c) *Independent Spiritual Beings.* This is by far the largest class of zombi, and includes at least eight or nine different species. Whether their origin is to be ascribed to the wanderings of lost souls, or to the continued independent existence of part-souls (having belonged to particular parts of the bodies of men and women long since dead) is impossible to determine today, since those who believe in them have neither notions nor curiosity about this point.

(1) The familiar spirits, male and female (Island Carib iséiri in the men's, sémiį in the women's speech), about which more is said in section VI, have presumably disappeared along with the men and women *savants* whom they served.

(2) Perhaps the most commonly feared kind of supernatural being today is that known to the Carib as máᴘwiya (Breton's mápoya), a word which they themselves translate jab (> French *diable* "devil"), and whose characteristics correspond to those of what we usually call bush-spirits. Their enmity toward mankind is admittedly the outcome of the repeated ill-treatment they have received at the latter's hands; for although they live much longer than men, and have more human powers in some respects, these spirits are said to be easily gullible and not exempt from suffering and death. That there is no natural antipathy between them and

humans is shown by the many accounts of unions between the two "species" (cf. the story of Kàruhú). Indeed, male máᴘwiya are said to be exceedingly fond of pregnant women—a reputation to be accounted for, perhaps, by the fact that Carib women in this condition are left strictly alone by their husbands! Usually invisible to man, the máᴘwiya's approach is heralded by a whistling sound; while its vicinity or recent passage may be known by a peculiarly disagreeable musky odor (like that characteristic of a boa snake) at which the wayfarer turns aside and spits. Sometimes they appear under human or animal form for their own, usually nefarious, ends. When overtaken in the woods by darkness, a Carib may pour out a little rum on the ground, as a sort of libation, to induce máᴘwiya not to molest him. The smoking of tobacco is also thought to be a protection. Those who believe themselves to be already pursued may make and leave behind a leaf-strand puzzle, the attempt to solve which will delay máᴘwiya and give the other time to escape.

(3) Tree-spirits may belong to the above, but more likely form a separate class of zombi. The *figuier (Ficus laurifolia* Lam., a large forest tree) and the *fromager (Ceiba pentandra* L.) are believed to be so inhabited. For this reason they are rarely felled; should this become necessary, an offering would first be made to the spirit about to be evicted. It is also believed that the kapok from the latter tree is not suitable for stuffing pillows, etc., as the person using them would be continually haunted. When this tree loses its leaves for a short time in May or June, the zombi is said to be away from home. In some islands the *z'abricot* tree *(Mammea Americana)* is believed to be similarly haunted; and Joyce says that the Taino of old refrained from eating its fruit, which they held to be the food of ghosts. Among the Carib of Dominica it is believed that the wood of this tree must not be employed in house or furniture, as it would (spell-) "bind" the occupants (see under III above).

(4) The word mᴇt (> French *maître* "master") is sometimes prefixed to the name of a kind of beast to designate what may be termed the spirit-leader of the species. Thus the *maître tête-chien,* the Master *Constrictor Orphias,* is said to appear now as a naked young man (see story of Bakámǫ), now as a gigantic snake with a dazzling diamond crest which he can conceal at will by means of a

sort of membraneous lid (see story of Máruka and Simanári). It is said of him (as of more ordinary members of his tribe) that he may sometimes be heard crowing like a cock. He is the giver of all charms (see section Xc); and it was he who, when the earth was soft, made the *Escalier Tête-Chien* at Síneku (a series of giant steps of volcanic origin extending down from a headland to the sea and for some distance under it).

(5) Used in Haïti to designate the wandering ghost of a girl abnormal enough to have died a virgin, yǫ lajablɛs ( > French *une* [*la*] *diablesse* "a [the] demoness") here signifies a satanic female personality who, often appearing in the form of a beautiful woman, tries to entice men to follow her, only to hurl them to their death from the brink of a precipice. Some say that she gazes unwincing at the mid-day sun; others than she may be recognized (like the Guiana hebu) by the absence of the big toe or some other abnormality of her left foot. A woman "eye-witness" told me how once, while she was working in her garden (i. e. provision-ground), she herself had seen a lajablɛs in the shape of a naked woman dancing alone on a flat-topped boulder. These creatures often visit a bɛlɛ· dance at midnight.

(6) Curiously enough, I have met with little if any serious belief in the Water Mama; although children often play a game called *Maman d'l'Eau* when bathing in river pools. In it one child tries to catch the others, and on succeeding asks the captive whether he or she eats flesh or fish. On receiving "fish!" for an answer, the one who plays Water Mama proceeds to duck the offender (see also the story of Foufou and Maman d'l'Eau).

(7) The bárawi and the kárəwa are, respectively, water-people and their dogs who inhabit river-pools in dark ravines, and are dangerous only to full-blooded Carib girls and women, at their menstrual periods particularly. The former have human form, except that they are covered with long thorns like the glouglou palm *(Acromia aculeata);* the latter are just like very fierce dogs with shining eyes.

Not so long ago [my informant told me] a party of Caribs returning from Marigot stopped to bathe in the Kwária ravine. Among them was a woman who

was indisposed, but she said nothing about her condition, and joined the others in the water. Well, a kárəwa attacked and killed her. Her husband managed to rescue the body, and put it across his shoulder to carry home. The dead woman tried to hinder him by clinging to every branch and bush within reach by the way. When at last the man got home, he prepared the corpse for burial, closed the eyes, then went out to get food and drink and to call people for the wake. When he returned, the dead woman had risen, and was standing upright in the doorway.

(8) The uméi are also dangerous to women.

The uméi look like very big, red áraya (kind of sea-crab), but they really are zombi who live in the sea. They can render a woman pregnant just by crawling up and urinating on her leg. Children produced in this way are just like other people, except that their upper incisor teeth are very short and round, and that they must refrain from eating certain kinds of fish and other sea-food. I knew an old woman who was the child of an uméi, but she is dead now and I know of no other.

The uméi are further credited with upsetting the canoes of those who anger them by pronouncing certain names taboo at sea, or by neglecting certain prescribed "precautions" (see sections VIIb, VIIIc).

(9) The sun, the moon, together with a number of stars or constellations are identified, at least in myth, with legendary Carib men and women such as Bakámǫ, Híali, Bį́hi (see these stories in *Star-lore of the Caribbees*) or with beasts such as the sírik (Pleiades, and a species of land-crab) and the *crabier* (part of Ursa Major, and a kind of heron). This latter bird, or its star-spirit, is still believed to bring thunder storms, and the sírik, heavy rains.

## V DREAMS AND DAYDREAMS

"A Carib does not dream for nothing," one sometimes is told. Indeed, it is believed not only that coming events cast their dream shadows before, but that all manner of warning, advice, help, and in particular herbal remedies, amulets, and charms may be "given" in a dream. One old woman who had, for the past year, been confined to her home with an open leg-sore no antiseptic treatment given her had been able to heal, at last effected what appeared to be a miraculous cure by bathing in a herbal bath, whose ingredients were made known to her by zombi in a dream.

They were like little men and women about four foot high [she told me] and quite naked except for one pot-bellied fellow with match-stick legs who wore only a sort of long cloak which covered his back from shoulders to heels. That was Basil, the one who kills people. He walked about slowly; but the others all danced like mad back and forth, up and down. It was they who told me what to put in the bath that cured my leg.

The Carib's peculiar imagination (and it may well be typical of other woodsmen, fishermen, and peasants) is illustrated by the following "true stories," recounted by a middle-aged man.

I was going up from the Crayfish River one moonlit night, when I saw a little dog whose eyes shone like lamps. He sneaked along beside me, and when I reached the track leading to Yona's house he stood in my way and would not move. I advanced, and he allowed me to pass, rubbing himself against my leg as I did so.

I told this to Yona, who said that it must have been a zombi.

That night as I slept at Yona's house, I dreamt that a man came to me and said he would have thrown me over the edge of the cliff had I beaten him (the dog).

I believe that dog was a dead friend of mine who had taken that form.

The other true story might be described as a day-dream, except that it took place at night!

One bright moonlit night (I had taken nothing at all to drink) I was passing by that same track I know so well on my way to Yona's, when a blade of razor-grass brushed my cheek. Without thinking, I broke it with my fingers. Immediately I found myself off the track in the midst of a thicket of razor-grass and bush, with no way out, try as I would, either up or down. At last I bethought myself to turn my shirt inside out; and having done so, I at once found myself back in the track, and Yona's house only just ahead.

## VI REMINISCENCES

Oh! yes; Petit François was a real *savant* [mused an old woman in answer to my questioning.] While he was Chief the Caribs were strong; and the Creoles, white and colored alike, respected us. When he went down to Roseau, he was accompanied by his valet, Méto; and the white *Général* (Governor) used to invite him to dine.

People here did not get sick then as they do now; and when one was sick 'ti François knew how to cure him only by massage [Creole maye > Fr. *manier* "handle," "manipulate"; but the usual method is a form of massage]. But to do this he first would make the house dark. They say he had a zombi that helped him. When they wanted to consult the spirits, they would first prepare a lot of

food and drink—mostly cassavas and either rum or sákuti [fermented beer made from chewed cassavas, from ripe corossal (*Anona muricata*), or from the sap of the glouglou palm]— and set it at one end of the house on little basketry tables called matútu. Petit François would allow nobody but his friends to come near while this was being done. Then doors and windows were shut fast, and all fire and light extinguished; and 'ti François would sing to make the zombi come down. When they came, you could hear them feasting, though you could not see them; but when they had gone again and light was made, everything appeared as if untouched. That is because they (the zombi) consumed only the soul of the food and drink. Petit François and his friends took what was left—but they must not have mixed with their wives before that!

My grandfather, Michelin, wanted to become *savant;* and Petit François was to have instructed him. But first, so 'ti François told him, he must not mix (cohabit) with women for twice forty days. My grandfather could never take heart for so long, and that is why he never learnt properly.

Petit François used to receive strange visits. He told people it was his friends from the rivers Orinoco and Amazon. Once they sent him the smoked haunch of a woman, and an other time a little lame boy—I forget his name—to make his soup of. However, a priest got hold of the boy and made him baptized; but when the holy water touched him, the boy fell dead.

It was 'ti François who filed down the teeth of the kárəwa [see IV c 7] so that they are no longer so dangerous as they were. And it was he who, when the rats became too troublesome, sent for their Master [see IV c 4] and made him promise to keep better order.

I well knew old Gabriel Jim [she went on, encouraged by a "grog" I pressed on her]. *Jim-la kanari-grand' gueule-dents rondes-poils blancs* [the Creole is here Frenchified for simplicity], the children would call him behind his back (for they were afraid to mock him to his face). Once, when Jim was fishing off the rocks, a young man laughed at his long white moustache; and Jim caused the grin to stick on the young man's face, so that ever after he had a crooked mouth.

Jim was a *savant,* too. He had a zombi which he kept in a sírik's claw, wrapped up in cotton. I do not know what became of it; but I suppose that before he died, Jim passed on the zombi's name and the claw to his son, Déyab, who is still there [alive]. If he left his fishing-lines on the beach, and somebody handled them, Jim knew it at once and could tell you just by smelling them whether it had been a Carib or a Negro. He would call out to his daughter, Andrea: "Come here for me to smell peteroku ["thy rump," Carib] and know if thou hast not taken some big Negro talvan!" [name of a variety of banana].

Once when Jim was very ill and nearly died, he sent a boy with a kanari [round earthenware vessel] to get water from the current of the river. He drank the water and got well.

Jim died very old in my father's house. Already he had fallen into second childhood, and spent his last years just sitting and making *la pite* [variety of wild pineapple] lines of all sizes. He could make them of 2, 3, or 5 ply. When he was dead, they found a huge bundle of line under his pillow.

Perhaps it was because the young men used to mock him that he never showed them the things he knew.

Oh! they were a bad lot though—nothing but old zombi themselves, those old-time Caribs who were unbaptized [she piously concluded]. And the proof of it is that I well remember, when I was young, how the dead would rise at Christmas time and come to dance around their old homes.

## VII THE LIFE-CYCLE

(a) A pregnant woman is considered "good" to sow corn, or to plant generally; or even, in the case of a first pregnancy, to render a barren tree fruitful by placing a stone against or upon its base. She is on the other hand subject to many restrictions. She should not bathe in the sea, as this would cause it to rise (i. e. become rough); handle a new-born infant, who might thereby get colic or convulsions; nor pass her hand through anyone's hair for fear her gesture should make it fall (but compare section VIIIa). She must avoid walking in the bush or high-woods because not only zombi, but also *têtes-chien (Constrictor Orphias)* and *couleuvres* (a local grass-snake) would go after her; and neither she nor the prospective father must kill one of these snakes, or else the child would not learn to walk properly, but "just pull itself along" like a snake. (According to most informants this rule also applies after the birth and until the child can walk.) She must also refrain from certain foods, and in particular from the flesh of animals whose undesirable qualities might be transmitted thus to the unborn infant. Families vary somewhat in this as in other practices, but turtle, iguana, and parrot are always on the forbidden list; the first two because they would prevent or hinder the child learning to talk, the third because the child would inherit its hooked nose! (An odd belief assigns the same origin to turtles and iguanas. It is said that, when the eggs hatch, some offspring take to the sea and become the former, others to the woods where they turn into the latter).

(b) Although interesting from other angles, there is little in the accouchement itself which can be attributed to belief in super-

natural agencies. The scissors with which the umbilical is severed must not be used again until the navel has healed and the cord fallen off. The latter is planted near the house together with a banana-slip for a boy, or a yam for a girl, the eating of whose produce when mature is the occasion of a minor family festivity.

The child is not put to the breast (nor as a rule given any other food except perhaps a little arrowroot) for the first three days, after which a purgative is administered to the mother. Food and other restrictions are imposed on the latter for varying periods, the more severe terminating after forty days, when she is sent to bathe in the sea. Mother and child are bathed for ordinary hygenic purposes immediately after parturition; but three to fifteen days (according to family practice) after having given birth a woman is ritually bathed by the wise-woman in water which contains sometimes as many as twenty-six different leaves and herbs. Mother and new-born must not be visited (much less handled) by those who are heated, weakly, sick, deformed, menstruating, or pregnant. Women in these last two conditions might cause the child to get colic or convulsions. The wise-woman will sometimes treat an ailing infant by blowing tobacco smoke on it.

The father must not cohabit with the mother for at least forty days after the birth, although this is said to be, curiously, for the child's sake. He must moreover avoid all strenuous labor (such as felling or sawing timber or hauling canoes) which, it is considered, might strain the child, until the latter gains in strength. As a precaution against such a mishap he ties a home-made thread of *la pite* (variety of wild pineapple) around his own, and another around the baby's loins. He may, in order to strengthen a weakly child, rub his own sweat onto it, or, if it is old enough to go out, take and bury it up to the neck in the sand by the edge of the sea.

(c) Lactation is supplemented from the outset by arrowroot *(Maranta indica)* or tólomą *(Canna* spp.); and was usually continued, until quite lately, for three or four years. In order to arrest it artificially, a Carib woman will milk herself onto a hearth-stone or into a nest of the so-called biting ants.

To cut an infant's hair too soon would weaken the child. This operation is therefor delayed for a year or more. Carib parents are

always very perturbed if their children seem backward in learning to walk or talk. In order to hasten the former process the soles of the feet may be "swept" with a bundle of fine pointed grass called *z'herbes flèche,* rubbed with the cast-off shell of an áraya (species of sea-crab) or with a live baby sírik zombi (species of river- or land-crab). That it may talk the sooner a child may be given a pipe to suck or have its lips rubbed with a small live river shrimp or crayfish. Similarly, adolescent girls will sometimes catch a young sucker-fish (Carib makúba) while bathing in the river, and pass it over their chests, believing that this will cause their breasts to develop as long as the fish lives and grows (see also the story of the Carib and his Dog). Note that in all cases of a young live creature being so used, it is released into its natural environment as soon as it has served its purpose.

(d) During their menstrual period girls and women must not wander abroad nor bathe in the rivers, being particularly exposed at such times to the attentions of zombi (see IV c 7). Older Caribs indeed declare that they should keep to the house altogether, since other people who might inadvertently walk in their footsteps "would catch swellings in their legs and joints" by doing so. Nor must they eat any game killed by dogs or gun. Were they to do so, these implements of the chase would thereby be "spoiled" for further use unless subsequently "blessed"; while in the latter case the foolish woman herself would suffer the consequences of the broken taboo. Any man so foolhardy as to cohabit with a woman who "is seeing her moon" would be prostrated by severe back-ache and general debility for a good while afterwards. There is a legend, not taken very seriously today, to the effect that men used to menstruate formerly, but ceased because the women laughed at them.

(e) The Carib dislikes and probably fears the indiscriminate use of his name, particularly by strangers. When away from home he often adopts a *nom de voyage* so that "nobody can do him anything." It is usual for him to have at least two personal names: that given by mother or grand-mother at birth and by which he is generally known, and a baptismal name given by the godparent of like sex and which is rarely if ever used again (except perhaps by the priest). In his (or her) own circle, he is addressed by a nickname,

or by a term of endearment or kinship, such as: La Guerre (war), Kalemią, Kurapiáo (kinds of birds), Boy, Jeune Homme, Bébé, Sèsè (sister). Compère or Ma Commère are employed between parents and godparents even when these are siblings. Other forms of address are Cousin (or Cousine) and Dada (child's name for girl or woman who has had most to do with looking after it, be she grandmother, aunt, or elder sister). A person is also referred to by an abbreviated form of his (or her) non-baptismal name plus patronymic: thus Ham Nini stands for Hamilton (son of) Nicolas. Married women are always referred to and sometimes addressed (even by parents and siblings) as Ma' ( > *madame)* N– (non-baptismal name of husband). Surnames or family names, known as "titles," are as yet little used, and in some cases unknown. All those I have investigated are nothing but the personal name of a grandfather or great-grandfather. Different branches of the same family often (and in at least one case two full brothers) attribute different "titles" to themselves.

"To call out the name" of somebody means, in patois and in Carib alike, to abuse that person. While at sea certain names are taboo (e. g., the fish usually known as *daurade* is then called *plate);* and old women about to search for wild yams, called wáwa *(Rajana cordata),* will substitute bį̀hi or kundu for this name, or even say that they are going to *fouiller fourmis,* to "dig up ants"!

It is also believed that, as is the case with men, to know a spirit's name is to have power over it. Old people usually refuse to tell stories in the daytime on the grounds that spirits whose names occur in the tales might be about (the máᴘwiya are thought to be abroad in the daylight, returning to the forest at dusk), and resenting this familiarity, turn the story teller into a basket!

(f) Death is feared less in most cases than is the ghost of a dead person. Its event is announced to the community by six long blasts on a conch-shell in the case of an adult, three blasts for a child. (During the night one blast only is given.) The body is at once washed, combed and dressed. (This is the only occasion on which the now obsolete wáiku [breech-clout] is still worn—underneath a best suit.) This office is performed by a man or woman previously chosen by the deceased, much as a midwife is picked out to assist

in a coming accouchement. The last Chief, who died in 1941, even insisted that this be done for him before he had breathed his last; the old wise-woman in question having spent the last few days in her "patient's" house—not in order to nurse him, but to tell him stories and myths so that, as she explained to me before the dying man, his passing might be a pleasant one!

The eyes of the corpse must be closed and not allowed to reopen, otherwise they would cause the death of whomever they looked at. The cheeks and lips are sometimes reddened with rocou *(Bixa orellana)*. When some one fears the ghost, he is invited to step over *(enjamber)* the corpse. To do this even accidentally to a living person is said to "spoil" him (or her); and a person so stepped across would indignantly demand to be *déjambé* at once (i. e. to have the harm done him removed by the other's stepping back the way he came).

Burial must, by law, take place within twenty-four hours of death; and as large quantities of food and drink have to be provided for the wake, to which all and sundry are welcome, neighbors do all they can to help at such times. French *cantiques* are sung at irregular intervals throughout the night by some of the older people; while others mill around, in and outside the hut, talking, smoking, and drinking. Voices become more raucous as the rum circulates and the night wears on. Now and again some one goes up to the exposed corpse and apostrophizes the dead man: proclaiming his virtues, bewailing his decease, and protesting his own freedom from any responsibility for it. He may even beseech him to take a cigarette, and to join him in "a last little parting drink."

In the morning some friends or kin (never the immediate family) hasten to make a rude coffin of boards, while others go to dig the grave in the little cemetery by the sea. A current opinion that the depth of the grave should accord with the height of the deceased may be a survival from the days when Caribs were buried in a sitting posture. This custom is remembered still by some of the old folk, who say that it was abandoned because the ghosts of those so buried used to trouble people. During the nineteen thirties a man was buried with a cudgel and a bottle of rum by his side so as to enable his ghost to go after those who had brought about his death (i. e., by piáy). As soon as the coffin is removed the women folk (women do

not accompany it to the cemetery) start scrubbing out the house. The men, and particularly those who have borne or otherwise handled the coffin, go to bathe in the river immediately after the interment, and before resuming their ordinary occupations, or more often their carouse.

It was, and in several families still is, customary to set food in the deceased's place daily until after *la prière*. This is a sort of second wake held eight days after the first (although it may be delayed if poverty makes it impossible to provide a fresh supply of food and rum so soon). Flowers and lighted candles, photographs or personal belongings of the deceased take the place previously occupied by the corpse. Singing, eating, and drinking, and for the younger set surreptitious love-making proceed much as on the first occasion. Only at *la prière,* however, does one sometimes see the young people form one or more *rondes* outside the house toward morning, and proceed to *tirer contes*. Two young men are sent into the middle of the ring, and these, having first placed two pieces of wood together one across the other "to act as a door and close them off," start to recite or sing certain farcical pieces reserved for these occasions. When one couple has finished, its place is taken by another. Some say that the crossed woods are supposed to represent a *chantier* (scaffolding for sawing lumber); and certainly a sawing bout between Compère Mouche (fly) and Compère Poulx-Bois (wood-louse) is the theme of at least one such *conte*. These are, properly speaking, neither tales, riddles, nor songs, but a series of versified questions, answers, and jokes accompanied by all sorts of clownish antics. Phrases such as "Whip him! Do not whip him! Not I who killed father!" recur and are followed each time by blows given with a mock bútu (Carib for "war-club") consisting of a knotted kerchief. It seems not impossible that these games should be fragmentary and distorted survivals of ancient whipping rites originally meant to drive away evil spirits, or even the ghost of the deceased himself.

### VIII OMENS, MISCELLANEOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

(a) Like people the world over, the Dominica Caribs believe—some more, some less—in certain signs or portents. Children born with a caul (*coiffé* is the Creole term) will see plenty zombi all their lives unless they be made to eat it. If your ears ring, it means that a

zombi—some say a person—is talking about you, and that if you wish to see him, you must eat gombo (ochra) tops. Falling hair indicates that you will soon get married (cf. section VIIa). Joining hands on top of the head is a sign of mourning; and children inadvertently making this gesture are severely berated and told "I (or your mother or father) am not yet dead!" Yawning is said to show hunger, sweating that you have "plenty blood"; while *l'humeur, chaleur,* or *l'inflamation* are synonyms for a condition whose manifestations are feverishness, pimples, or boils (the latter are said to be one's "children coming out"), and whose cause is believed to be lack of sexual intercourse!

If you burn the milk, the cow will soon go dry. There will be a good catch of fish when the abolo (species of lizard) runs in the bush. The arrival of a visitor is announced by the singing of the zi (a small cicada-like insect that lives in the ground). The *chat-huant* (kind of screech-owl) foretells either a birth or a death: the former by a peculiar ticking noise, the latter by a loud hissing "sh . . sh!" The call of the *coucou-manioc* promises fine dry weather; while the *siffleur de montagne* brings rain when it is mocked; and the *crabier* (species of heron) causes thunderstorms.

(b) There are a number of miscellaneous beliefs and practices connected with everyday life and grounded, for the most part, in sympathetic magic. No one should leave the hair or nail clippings lying about, for fear his enemies might find and use them to make a piáy on him. Nor should these, nor bandages from wounds or sores, be burnt, since this would cause fever and prevent the wounds or sores from healing. Similarly, after drinking from a receptacle any drops left in the bottom should be poured out on the ground. It is considered by many unwise to eat food after dark. The possible consequences of breaking this taboo appear to range from "becoming spoiled," i. e., losing one's luck, to being transformed into an animal (cf. VIIe). Wawa *(Rajana cordata,* a wild yam; cf. VIIe) must never be planted, or your entire family would be likely to die out. Never burn an old axe-handle, or the new one would blister your hands. Salt, if given to a woman on a Friday, may put you in her power should she happen to be a súkwiyą; while salt scattered in the yard will help to rid the house of an unwelcome guest. If you

discover the footprints of a thief, and taking a little of the earth from them, put it into a wood-ants' (termites') nest, the miscreant's feet will swell up and become fissured. Do not feed any pea-pods (*Phaseolis*) to pigs or other domestic animals, as these would make them turn vicious. A male animal soon to be slaughtered would be useless as a sire, since his young would be bound to die also. Grown girls and women must not sit or even lean on a new canoe in the process of being made or opened up to have the sides raised, since the canoe's luck would thereby be spoiled, and this might even spell disaster for its occupants.

Sowing and planting of particular species, hunting and fishing for different kinds of beast, bird, and fish, felling of trees for canoes or lumber, and the taking of ritual baths (see section IX), must be undertaken on the right day of the moon's phases if a favorable result is to be looked for.

The foufou (crested humming-bird) is said to lead lone children astray. No explanation is given for this belief (but see stories of Híali and of Foufou and Maman d'l'Eau). The "seed" of the tree-fern is reputed to be very lucky and to possess magical virtues, but to be obtainable only by spreading a sheet beneath the tree on mid-summer's night. Elsewhere in Dominica, the flowers and seeds of the bamboo are also believed to have magical, but in this case baleful, properties.

The old-world belief that the sun dances on Easter morn is still held in Dominica.

(c) As elsewhere in the world, the hazards of hunting, fishing, travelling by sea and land, fighting, etc., are conjured by a series of particular practices. To ensure or improve his luck a hunter will gash his arms and legs and rub into the wounds a mixture of rum, sulphur, and mercury. His dogs are bathed in herbal baths appropriate to the animal they are to chase; their noses are pricked with a new needle to improve their scent; and they are physicked with *chauffe* (rum in which fierce ants, scorpions, and various hot spices are steeped) to increase their ardor.

When setting out on a hunting expedition, a man must not eat sugar-cane or ripe bananas, cut *bois bandé* (*Richeria grandis* V.), nor catch or kill sírik crabs. If he should eat any game while in the

woods, he must not put any gombo (ochra) in the cook-pot, nor cover the latter while it is on the fire under penalty of having the species of game he is cooking elude him and his dogs in the future. To handle peas (*Phaseolis*) would be disastrous to either hunter or fisher.

The latter must not eat corossol (*Anona muricata*) before setting out, as this would cause the fishes' mouths to be soft and prevent their biting. Until he has gone, those in the house must avoid stepping on pea-pods, sweeping, or even touching a broom; and all the time he is away, they must on no account turn couis (dishes made by cutting a calabash longitudinally in half) upside down, or clothes being washed, inside out. Arms must not be crossed while watching the canoes set out. Fishermen (or others putting to sea) examine the canoe's ballast-stones to make sure that they have not been overturned by chance or mischief, as this is believed to bring calamity in its wake. While at sea, certain names must not be pronounced, substitutes being used (see VIIe); and when baling or drinking, it is imperative that not a drop of water be spilled inside the canoe. Should the first fish caught be a *poisson malheur (Coryphene hippuris)* there will be no luck that day, and the boat will probably give up and return to shore. Incoming canoes are met by women or children, since it is believed that a fisher's luck would be spoiled should he have to carry home his own catch.

## IX SICKNESS AND REMEDIES

Medicine and magic are, as is the case in all folk-cultures, very hard to distinguish, since the proximate causal factors of disease are in the main ignored. By and large any affliction must, from the Caribs' point of view, have either one or both of two causes: an "imprudence" on the part of the sufferer, or/and "wickedness" on the part of another. By the former is meant any disregard (through commission or omission) of the prescribed behavior-pattern, be this of a supernatural or of a rational order. For example, by eating or drinking something—or by performing any other action—tabooed generally or at a particular time or place or under specified circumstances. By the latter (Creole *méchanceté*) is meant black magic, whose technique is here called piáy and the consequences of which are *l'amarrage* (see section III). Moreover, it is possible that the

victim is not the person for whom the piáy was intended; since the latter may be compared to a trap worked by blindfold agencies and released by whomever stumbles across it. What we should call accidents are also put into one of the above categories.

Some diseases are, however, said to "run," i. e., to be epidemic. This concept should not be confused with our own ideas on infection and contagion since neither proximity nor contact are considered necessary for the spread of such a disease. This attitude may be explained, e. g., by the case of malaria spread by anopheles, themselves affected by seasonal climatic changes; but it is just as apt to be taken with regard to intestinal worms or toothache.

Remedies may be classified as follows (1 and 2 being by far the most common): (1) herbal "teas" and other preparations to be ingested. Human (preferably boy's) urine is drunk to relieve indigestion or to hasten parturition. Emetics and purgatives, besides their ordinary uses, are thought to remove any "moral" as well as "physical" disability under which one may be suffering, and are often taken before setting out on a difficult undertaking or voyage. (2) Baths in which from twenty to thirty different herbs and leaves may be steeped. These may be either preventative or curative; and are as a rule prescribed to be given or taken at a particular phase of the moon, or so many days before or after some event. Whatever the supposed cause of the affliction, either or both the above treatments may be employed. By and large, however, such baths are considered to be a *démarrage,* i. e., to undo or to prevent the consequences of *méchanceté;* while "teas" often have real medicinal value and are intended more to counteract the consequences of some "imprudence." Moreover, such ritual bathing is performed, usually secretly, not only in the case of people, but also on hunting dogs and canoes. (3) Sweat baths are taken (often in conjunction with 1 and 2) in case of puerperal fever, chills, swellings or "puffiness." (4) Massage and other manipulations are used for enlarged spleen in men, and for uterine pains in women. (5) Scarification and cupping are usually reserved for local pains and aches. (6) Plasters and poultices made from chopped leaves, together with animal greases or fats, are used on wounds and sores or bruises. (7) Various remedies, such as the blood of a zandoli (*Anolius* sp.) lizard for asthma; rubbing the temples and hands of an epileptic with salt; drinking water from

a mortar or from a burgau-shell to cure stuttering; or applying human urine locally to allay ear-ache, counteract a sting, or to bath the brow in fever or head-ache. (8) Sympathetic magic—such as taking an *Opuntia* leaf of the exact size of the patient's right foot and drying it over a slow fire with a view to reducing an enlarged spleen—may be and often is employed in conjunction with any of the above.

## X AMULETS AND CHARMS

(a) So-called *gardes-corps* are amulets in the form of little bags hung round the neck by a cord, and in which are sewn up a variety of objects intended to protect the wearer. The contents of these amulets is kept a great secret, and may even be unknown to the wearer. Several sceptics who have undone their own or others' *garde-corps* tell me that they contain such things as feathers, bones, or hair of birds, fish, or animals; herbs, pebbles, chemicals (sulphur, mercury, and asafoetida are favorites); and also contain *oraisons* (written invocations to Catholic saints).

(b) Charms fall into two distinct classes known respectively in Creole as *chances* and *charmes*. The first, which consist almost exclusively of herbs carried or rubbed on the body, are intended to bring their user good luck in some specific undertaking, such as travelling or fighting, or in the pursuit of some species of bird, animal, or fish. In the latter case they are carried in the tackle box on every expedition, the hunter using them to rub his gun or dogs, the fisher to rub on his fish-hooks. The second class *(charmes)* are intended to give their user power over a person or persons. They take various forms, and may be employed like *chances,* or ingested. Of the latter type is a love-charm made from the brain and tongue of the crested humming bird (see also the story of the Spirit of the Rock, and that of Ye and the Pumpkins).

(c) Both legend (see story of Máruka and Simanári) and tradition assign to the *tête-chien* snake (or to its mythical Master; see IV c 4) a great role in the origin or discovery of charms, and in particular of that variety of *Maranta indica* known as *l'envers tête-chien,* or *l'envers caraïbe.*

Fairly reliable reports say that large numbers of these snakes are

occasionally found massed together in conclaves called *cavalages,* presumably for mating purposes; further, that the female drops her young in a line, one after the other, then returns and devours all those who have failed to coil up. To this tradition adds that a member of the species guards every mountain top, and warns those below by crowing like a cock; that they have their own snake-doctors to whom they travel for miles when wounded, and by whose ministrations old-time shamans were resuscitated even after death.

Caribs say that the charm-plant called *l'envers tête-chien* (perhaps because its long thin tuber, after descending for two or three feet, coils on itself like a snake, or because of its markings), if it cannot be procured in any other way, may be "planted" as follows:

> Go into the bush on a certain day [of the moon?], and watch for a *tête-chien.* If you succeed in surprising one and cutting off its head with one blow and without its having sensed the danger, the rest is easy; but were it to hiss only once, it would be useless to proceed. Then dig a hole on the spot so as to bury the head without touching or removing it. A month or so later you will find *l'envers tête-chien* growing on the spot where the head was buried. Before removing the plant and for fear it might growl at you, it is prudent to pay it [the snake's spirit?] by burning a little powdered tobacco. Put a small silver coin in the hole where you replant it; and let nobody tend it but yourself.
>
> A little of the starch [obtained as a deposit from water passed over the grated tuber] placed in your mouth or rubbed on your body will give you power over all people with whom you have to do.

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