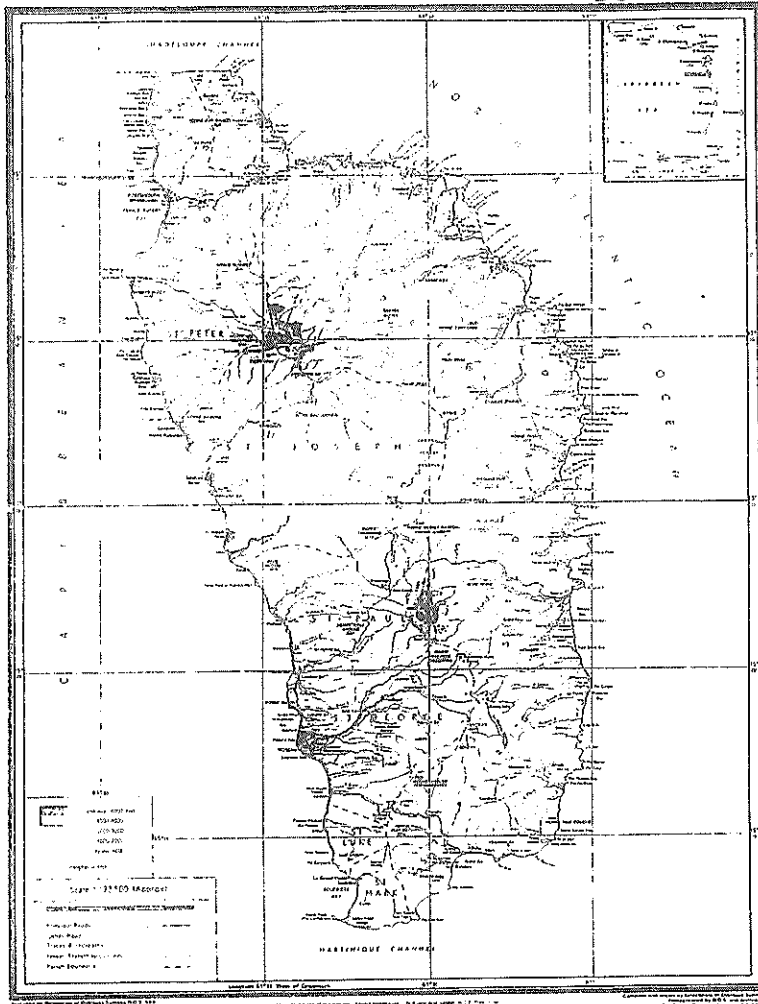


DOMINICA



# The Carib Indians of Dominica Island in the West Indies

Five Hundred Years after Columbus

Simone Maguy Pezeron

VANTAGE PRESS  
New York

1993  
1993  
1993

US\$20.00  
DM  
972-9  
729 841 PCZ  
11428  
Headquarters

To my children,  
Christophe, Stéphane, Georges, and Magali

729 841

FIRST EDITION

All rights reserved, including the right of  
reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

Copyright © 1993 by Simone Maguy Pezeron

Manufactured by Vantage Press, Inc.  
516 West 34th Street, New York, New York 10001

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Catalog Card No.: 92-90792

0987654321

they had to return home in the vans without ever seeing the doctor. There are two health centres in the Reserve, one in Salybia and one in Mahaut River. The doctor visits each of the centres on alternate weeks so that he spends one day in the Territory each week. In terms of administration, four of the villages belong to the district of Castle Bruce (Saint Cyr, Gulette River, Sineku, Salybia) and the other two belong to the district of Marigot (Bataca and Crayfish River).

The doctor is supported in the Territory by the following ancillaries:

- A health visitor who is responsible for all vaccinations in the district; she helps to coordinate the general medical services and supervises the "health passport," which each child must have.
- The district midwife who helps to deliver babies; generally women give birth at home with the midwife in attendance, but if there are any complications, the mother-to-be is sent to the hospital outside the Reserve. The midwife is also responsible for family planning and health education.
- The family nurse practitioner, who comes to the Territory every two weeks, is able to give prescriptions and helps with the treatment of a few cases of tuberculosis and the diabetics.
- The dispenser, who is responsible for the issue of medicines.
- The environmental health officer, who is responsible for environmental matters, like the sanitary conditions in the houses and the purity of the water; he is also in charge of the issue of trading licences for shop-keepers.

There are many health problems in the Reserve, and the doctor believes that an improved provision of water and electricity would not only better the standard life but would also greatly reduce the most prevalent health problem for the Caribs, which is skin infections. All kinds of skin infections, parasites, and worms are widespread among the Caribs; lice are also common. The size of the average family is still very large and there are cases of chronic

illness, such as asthma, diabetes, and tuberculosis. The government encourages family planning and gives free contraceptives, but many Caribs are careless and inconsistent in their use. In order to eradicate venereal diseases, particularly syphilis, blood samples are taken every two weeks and forwarded to the laboratory in Roseau.

Because all of the Caribs have their own gardens, malnutrition is not a serious problem, although they tend to eat too many root vegetables. Most of them do not have refrigerators. Therefore, they have to preserve their meat and fish in salt; this inevitably means that their intake of salt is excessive and it often causes high blood pressure. Breast-feeding has been encouraged because of the risk arising from the careless use of manufactured baby food and the infantile death rate is now low. Not all of the houses in the Reserve possess a toilet, but the government only offers a paltry 10 Dollars E.C. to assist in this matter.

In terms of hospital treatment, there is a small hospital in Marigot, but all serious cases have to go to Roseau. The Caribs are in the habit of only going to the doctor as a last resort and prefer to use their own herbal remedies. Nor is it very easy for them to go to hospital since it takes two hours to walk to Marigot or 30 Dollars E.C. by van. The Caribs drink a lot of rum and they usually smoke; marijuana-smoking appears to be beginning to pose social problems.

## Economic Organisation

### Agriculture

The land of the Carib Territory belongs collectively to the Carib people; they do not have to purchase it and each family has their own plantation. However, in 1902, the 3,700 acres were shared among 400 Caribs, and today there are nearly five times as many

Caribs so that there are frequent land limit disputes between neighbours.

Agriculture is still the main economic activity for the Caribs, and the building of the road that transcends the Territory has greatly improved the efficiency and productivity. Formerly, the Caribs had to carry the heavy bunches of bananas along mud tracks, up and down the hills, to the nearest road. Mr. Jermondois Francis, a former chief, explains: "Now you can see that the plantations are well organised, but when I was young the Carib Territory was just like open bush with houses scattered around it."

The opening of the new road has been a major factor in the process of modernisation and progress in the Reserve, and it has meant that the Caribs are now able to take a more effective part in the economy of the island as a whole. They now bring their bananas to the road where they are collected and taken to one of two boxing plants, one in Salybia and one in Sineku; on Wednesdays and Thursdays each week, the bananas are boxed for export and on these days the vans, which usually go to Roseau, are made available to transport the bananas to and from the boxing plants. The Salybia boxing plant is the only one in Dominica that is not being rented.

It was agreed that the workers should be Caribs, and the descendants of the family whose land was used should be employed until the D.B.G.A. (Dominica Banana Growers Association) stops buying bananas. The bananas are graded into 3 groups: grade A, \$0.38 per pound, grade B, \$0.32 per pound and grade C, \$0.22 per pound. The income from the export of their bananas has encouraged the Caribs to become more professional in the running of their plantations, and they now use fertilisers and insecticides in the cultivation.

Apart from banana growing, the cultivation of coconuts is the next most important activity in the Reserve, and in Dominica there is widespread use of coconuts to make soap and oil. In the Reserve there are special huts for drying the coconuts to produce copra; these huts are made of cement, two metres long, two metres wide,

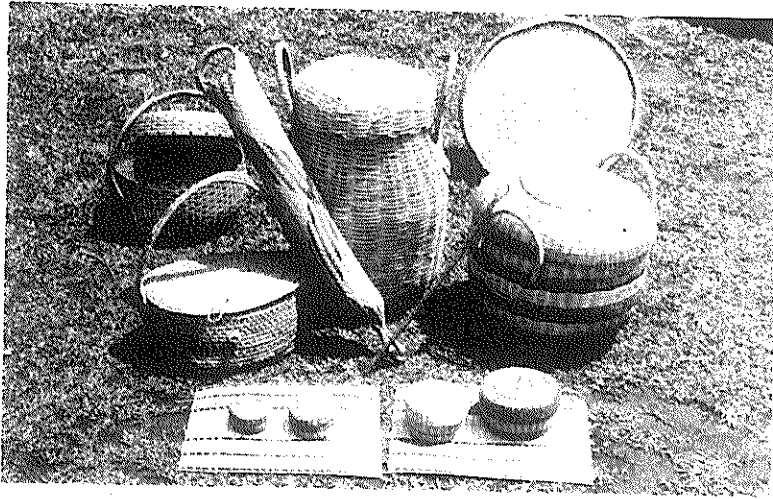
and three metres high. Inside the hut, about half-way up to the roof, there is a grill on which the coconuts are placed, cut in two, and there is a fire underneath the grill that burns until the coconut is dried and it is ready to be put into bags as copra. There are about twelve copra producers and five coconut dryers.

Before Hurricane David, an average of 90 tons per year was reached. Now there is an average of 6 tons per month. It takes 3,000 coconuts to make a ton. When the copra is well-baked, it costs 56.9 cents per pound, otherwise it costs 55.6 cents. Transport in the vans costs three dollars for a small bag, four dollars for a medium bag, and five dollars for the largest one. In the Reserve these correspond to a fertiliser bag, a chicken food bag, and a sugar bag. Unfortunately, many coconut trees were damaged and destroyed by Hurricane David and since they take six years before they produce their first fruit, there has been a delay in production.

The plantations are usually located up the hills, far away from the house, and in addition to bananas and coconuts, they also grow dasheen, sweet potatoes, yams, tannia, arrow-root, manioc, and a few other vegetables. Around their houses they usually grow tomatoes, thyme, cucumber, pumpkin, and some fruit trees; they also keep goats, chickens, pigs, rabbits, and perhaps a cow, but this is usually not enough and they also have to buy imported meat.

## Crafts

Craft-work brings some revenue into the Reserve. With *laouman* leaves as their raw material, they not only make the Carib basket, which is renowned throughout the Lesser Antilles, but also many other kinds of baskets, all different shapes and sizes: baskets for jewellery, for bread or for market, small ones for girls and big ones for dirty linen. With the same raw material, they also make all of the utensils that the Caribs traditionally used to make their cassava: the *hebichette* (a kind of sieve) and the *coulevre* (used to



Crafts



Salybia boxing plant

squeeze the manioc flour); in addition they also manufacture hats and table mats from the *laouman* leaves. They also use the *vetiver* leaves to produce carpets, hats, and table mats.

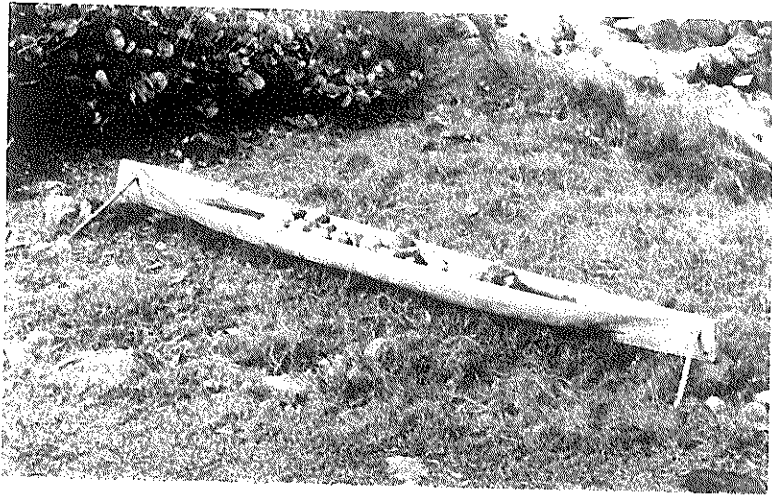
More recently, the art of making basket work with banana fibre was introduced. Both men and women do the craft-work, and their products are sold in small shops in the Territory or are bought up in bulk by outside traders who pick up a van load at a time and sell the goods at much higher prices in Roseau, Guadeloupe, or Martinique.

### Canoe-building

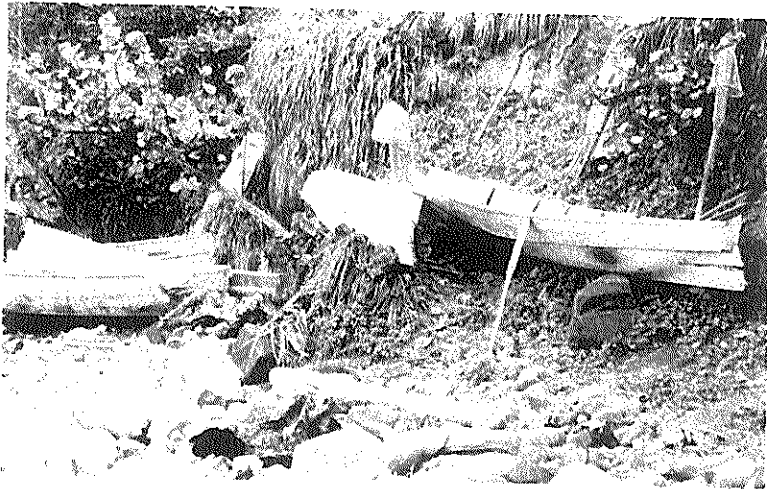
The Caribs still make their canoes in the traditional way. They go to the forest, fell a gommier tree with hand-axes, dig out and shape the trunk, and then carry it down to the village nearer the sea to finish the job. They put water and rocks inside the trunk and heat it with fire in order to open it wider, and when this process is finished, they fix a wooden edge round the outside of the canoe to raise its sides. Since Hurricane David destroyed many canoes in Dominica, there have been many orders for new canoes to be built and this has produced valuable income. The Caribs do not pay any taxes on canoe-building or on any other kind of labour. Because the Caribs are famous for the quality of their canoes, they are often able to sell them to the French islands, especially Martinique; in Guadeloupe they have adopted a rival canoe called the *canot saintois*, which comes from the islands of Les Saintes.

### Hunting and Fishing

The early ancestors of the present-day Caribs did not breed livestock because, apart from hunting and eating birds, they were basically not in the habit of eating meat; it was only after colonisa-



Opening the canoe



Canoes

tion that they began to keep animals to sell to the Europeans. Although they were good hunters with their bows and arrows, they did not practise it very often, only occasionally killing parrots and other large birds. They used the feathers to decorate their ear lobes and the nasal partition when they were without *caracolis*; they also used the colourful feathers for their necklaces and bracelets.

Later, however, they did begin to hunt for food, and at the end of the last century, it was reported that the Carib men would come back from the forest with their *djola* (baskets carried on the back) full of game. The modern Caribs do not hunt very much; they cannot afford to buy fire-arms and they have lost their skill with a bow and arrow. Nevertheless, there are still wild pigs, iguanas, manitous, and agoutis in the forest as well as many birds, and some of the Caribs hunt these with traps and dogs.

The Caribs have always been more interested in fishing than in hunting, and they have always been renowned for their seamanship. With their fish-pots, cast-nets, and bows and arrows, they would set forth in their canoes to catch all kinds of crab, tortoise, fish, and shell-fish; with colonisation hooks were introduced. For river fishing they sometimes used poisonous plants to kill the fish, which were then collected downstream. Today the Caribs who fish do not do it as a livelihood or profession but simply to catch some food for their own family. Usually, they leave Salybia in the morning and return in the afternoon, and now they fish with modern methods, using hooks and lines, nets, and fish-pots. Sometimes traders from outside the Reserve come in to sell fish, drawing attention to their wares by blowing into a conch shell.

### Emigration

The income that the Caribs earn from their bananas, coconuts, canoes, and craft-work is often not enough to make their lives comfortable; it means that they are able to get only the basic

necessities: some clothes, tools, salt, oil, soap, kerosene, cigarettes, and some cheap local rum. Because of this, many Caribs leave the Reserve to look for work, some going to Roseau, some to do seasonal work on the neighbouring islands, and others emigrating farther afield. Thus, it is possible to see Carib girls working in Roseau as housemaids or barmaids, and Carib men still follow the tradition of going to Marie-Galante, Guadeloupe, and Martinique for the sugar-cane cutting season. It is becoming increasingly popular for young Caribs to emigrate to other Caribbean islands where there is a better chance of work, but it is interesting to note that they still migrate less than the other Dominicans and they usually come back home to the Reserve after a period of time away.

## Culture and Collective Attitudes

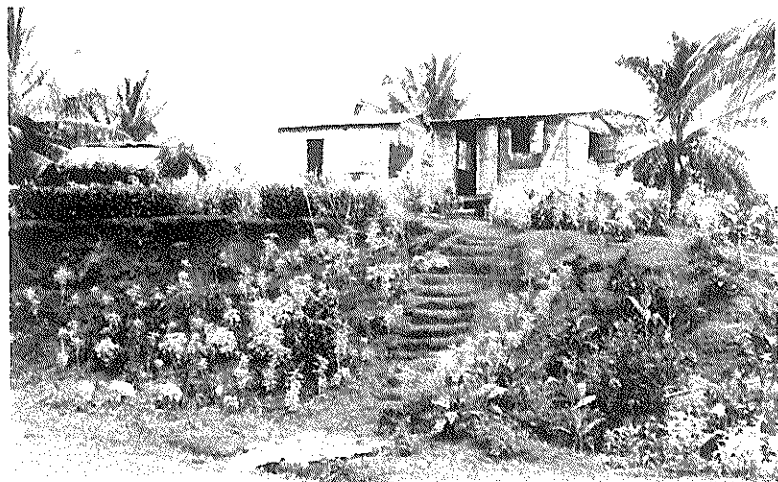
### Culture

It has already been shown how much of the old Carib culture and way of life has disappeared; they are now peaceful peasants rather than great warriors and the Reserve is a quiet place where cases of stealing or killing are not common. Some of the present-day Caribs do not even lock their front door at night; they simply close it, put a stone behind it, or use some string tied round two nails to keep it from blowing open. The traditional Carib features still exist, but there has been a lot of mixing over the years. The traditional Carib village has disappeared, although they can still build *mouinas* or *ajoupa*, which are the original kind of shelter. They now wear modern clothes and they have abandoned their Carib bracelets, necklaces, and decorations.

The Carib language has also virtually disappeared, and they speak instead the local French patois (Creole) and bad English. There are two beauty spots in the Reserve, which tourists always go to see and these places have kept their Creole names: one of them is called "An Ba La So," a beautiful waterfall near the mouth of the Crayfish River, surrounded by rocks; and the other one is called "Escalie Tet Chien" (Stairway of the Snake), which is a group of rocks in the shape of a local forest snake coming in from the sea towards the land of the Reserve. There are some old Caribs who can still sing a few traditional French songs, but their pronunciation makes it difficult to understand them. In church they now sing the hymns in English, but during the wake before a funeral, they still sing French hymns.

The Caribs no longer make their traditional hammocks; these

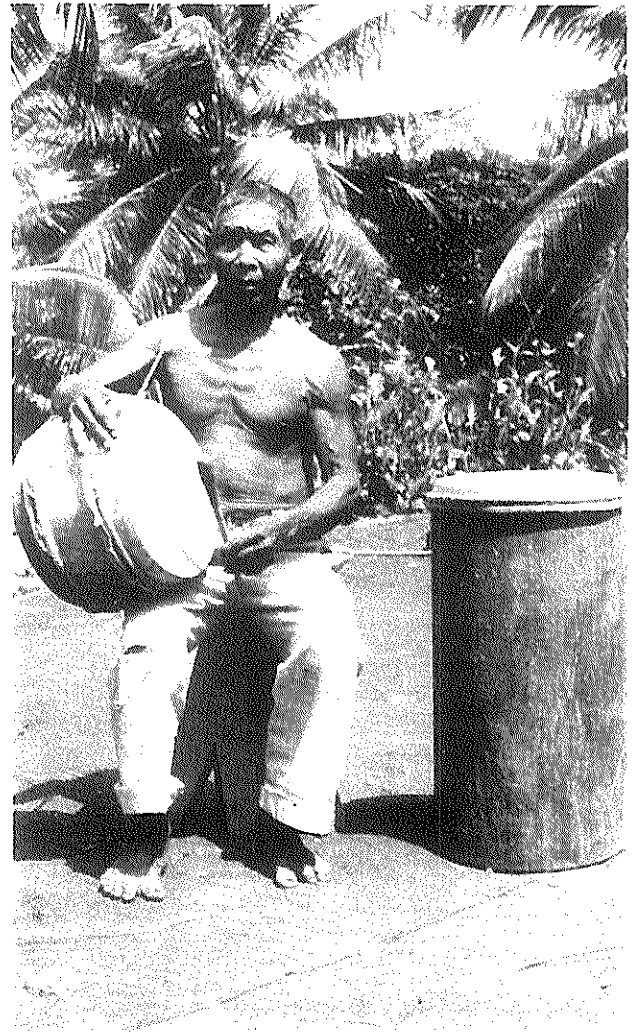




Carib house

were formerly made of cotton, which they spun and weaved themselves and then painted in red and black with *roucou* and *genipa*. Nor do they make their own pottery any more, and the use of the calabash to make bowls and drinking vessels has been virtually abandoned.

One of the most interesting Carib customs, which has now been abandoned, involved fasting on the specific occasions of a birth, a death, and initiation rite at puberty: traditionally, Carib women gave birth easily, with the help of special herbs and natural medicines, so that immediately after the birth, she was able to get on with a housework again; the Carib husband, however, suffered from all kinds of aches and pains at the time of the confinement as if it were he who was having the baby. It was the custom that the father would remain in his hammock and fast for up to a month at the time of a birth. He gradually started to take sustenance again in the form of cassava and *ouicou*.



Mr. Mondesir Daroux with his drums



It was considered as especially important that he eat no birds or animal meat at this time, since there was a superstition that the new baby would look like the animal or bird in question. This was one of the reasons why the Caribs did not hunt very much before the advent of colonisation. Forty days after the birth, the father's friends came, scraped him with the teeth of an *agouti*, and poured a mixture of water and hot pepper into his open wounds.

Similarly, at the age of puberty, both boys and girls had to fast; in addition, the boys were also scraped with the teeth of an *agouti*, anointed with the hot pepper mixture, and then they had the skull of a bird of prey broken across their heads. This custom of initiation was to mark the start of their manhood. There was also the custom of fasting when a relative died: the wives had to cut their hair and the dead body was buried in the foetal position in a big hole under the *carbet*.

The Caribs' religious practices have also changed significantly: in the past they believed in good spirits and bad spirits rather than in one God. They used to hold ceremonies in honour of the good spirits, and they would decorate their skin with black *genipa* stripes on a red background and dance in rhythm with small bells round their waists and ankles. They called the bad spirits *naboyas* and feared them greatly: they were so afraid of these bad spirits that they used to keep the names of their children secret; only relatives were told the names. Adult Caribs sometimes adopted the names of their French or English friends, which explains why the chiefs had names like Henri Comte and Baron.

The modern Carib does not drink *ouicou* nor use the bow and arrow, and they are not polygamous. Their ancestors were able to take several wives, and it was considered important to have a large family. It was also socially acceptable for a man to take his aunt's daughter as a wife. Even today it is possible to find strange man-women relationships in the Reserve so that sometimes a man may have children with his wife's daughter from an earlier relationship, and there are also cases of incest, although clearly, the Catholic

Church disapproves of this kind of irregularity: it is likely that this kind of "in-breeding" is a significant factor in the number of disabled and Mongol children in the Reserve.

We should now consider what features of the Carib culture still remain. They still live in close harmony with nature and spend a lot of their time in the plantations, in the gardens, and by the rivers. In each of the rivers, there is a special area for bathing and another area for washing clothes, and all drinking water is taken from the springs, which run down into the rivers. Unlike the rivers in Guadeloupe and Martinique, those in the Reserve are free of any bilharzia.

The Caribs still make their traditional baskets, although most of them are now produced to be sold to tourists; they still make the *matapi*, the *hebichette*, the *djolas*, and the old-style Carib baskets, and today these are made by the women as well as the men. They still make cassava, but, unlike their ancestors, they do not prepare it every day. Formerly, they used a plank studded with sharp stones as a grater, but today they use a piece of galvanised metal with holes pierced in it; to squeeze the manioc, they no longer use the *matapi* but instead a piece of clean cloth.

The Caribs still produce castor oil, which they use to dress their hair: the seeds of the castor-oil plant are heated in a cooking pot and then they are ground with mortar and pestle until they form into a paste. The paste is put into boiling water and stirred continually until the water evaporates, leaving the paste in the bottom of the pot. At this point the oil separates from the paste and is collected by spoon. Apart from using it on their hair, they also take it as medicine for colds and constipation.

The Caribs are still familiar with some of their ancient legends, and it is interesting to examine one of the best known, the legend of Hiali: each night a mysterious visitor used to visit a young girl in her hut; when the girl became pregnant, the mother decided that she would find out who the father was, so she hid in the corner of the hut one night with black *genipa* juice in her hand, ready to

identify the visitor. When the man came in, she marked his face with the extract, which usually took at least a week to wear off, and the next morning she discovered that the culprit was in fact the girl's brother.

Everyone in the village was very angry about this, and the brother was so ashamed that he went up into the sky and became the moon, which is why the moon has a black face. The girl gave birth to a boy, who was called "Hiali," and he became the father of the Caribs, the original ancestor. When Hiali was young, the small colibri bird took him up to the sky to see his father and as a reward, the bird was given its beautiful feathers and colourful crown.

### Collective Attitudes

The Caribs were often reported in the past as being exceptionally shy and retiring, hiding in panic if they saw foreigners; today they are still very reticent with strangers, but once they are familiar with someone, they are at their ease and very sociable. The Caribs are very polite, and everyone greets his neighbours courteously whenever they meet on the road. They are also very industrious, and the Carib houses are always kept very clean and tidy despite the general poverty.

In the rainy season, when the tracks and the paths get very muddy, the Caribs always remove their shoes before going into a house. The inside of the house is often decorated with pictures and postcards that have been sent by relatives and friends overseas. In front of the Carib houses, there is always a carefully tended flower garden, with a great variety of colours and plants, usually surrounded by a hibiscus hedge, which also serves as a place for drying and washing.

The women work hard cooking on wood fires and sweeping the floors with brooms made from coconut leaves or banana fibre; they also do the washing in the river and prepare cassava, coffee,

castor oil, and cocoa. To make the cocoa, they take ripe nuts from the cocoa tree, take out the seeds from the pulp and dry them in the sun, grill them over a fire to take off their outer skin, and then grind them with a mortar and pestle together with some nutmeg and vanilla. They then shape it into bars and leave it to dry. They grate the cocoa bars, then boil the grated cocoa into a drink for breakfast. Another breakfast food that they prepare is arrowroot.

When there is a particular task to do on the plantation, all the family helps together with some of the close friends. In return the friends will get lunch and some rum. Family life is very important to the Caribs and no child is ever abandoned; illegitimate children are usually taken care of by the father or the father's parents, and there is always someone in the family who is ready to accept and take care of an orphan. The children are brought up in the habit of helping their parents and their grandparents. Adult Caribs are often helped by their children's godmother and godfather (in Creole: *Comme* and *Compe*), and the godmother in particular has an important supportive role as a kind of second mother.

This feature of the Carib social structure stems chiefly from the Catholic church. Many of the Caribs are religious, and there are few cases of legal divorce in the Reserve. Religion plays a part in the life of the Reserve so that, for example, when the new cricket pitch was to be opened, it was first of all blessed and special Mass was said.

The afternoon is normally a time for rest and relaxation after the hard work of the morning: the men go to the rum shops where they drink, smoke, and play dominoes, while the women visit their friends to gossip and watch what might be happening in the village. The women usually smoke cigarettes, but a few of the older ones prefer a pipe. The Carib children play with whatever they can find or make: they roll hoops, make their own wooden scooters, and they have rope swings attached to the tree branches; sometimes they slide down the muddy hillsides, using pieces of cardboard as skis. The boys like to play football, but they usually have only a