Houses and Yards among Caribbean Peasantries

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Today’s rural Caribbean folk may be divided roughly into rural proletarians, who work on and for plantations; peasants, who have access to land and produce their own food and market commodities; and people who fall somewhere between the rural proletariat and the peasantry, and generally both work their own (rented or shared) land and engage in wage labor (Camper n.d.; Comitas 1964; Frucht 1967; Handler 1965, 1966).

Many of the social characteristics of rural Caribbean populations are shared by persons in all of these categories. Others are largely limited to persons in one or another category, for reasons having to do with their particular style of life. Thus, to take one obvious example, control over the labor of one’s family members is much more typical of peasants than of rural proletarians, while the purchase of a large proportion of the family’s food is obviously more typical of rural proletarians than of peasants. Hence any discussion of similarities and differences among rural Caribbean peoples must take account of major differences in the activities associated with making a living.

But there are of course other reasons why Caribbean rural peoples are culturally homogeneous or heterogeneous. We have seen that the origins of these peoples are very diverse, and that the populations of different Caribbean societies have been subject to many different cultural influences. We do not seek to “explain” the presence of African religious elements in Haiti and Trinidad, for instance, in terms of the economic history of these two societies, but in terms of the strength of the particular cultural traditions or heritages borne by those who settled them. Again, that the Jamaican people speak one language, the Haitian people another, and the Puerto Ricans a third is plainly due to the respective metropolitan cultures to which their peoples were subject, rather than to any general feature of economic history, or to any contemporary difference in rural life-style.

Any comparative study of the rural subculture of the Caribbean region plainly requires some plotting of similarities and differences. The historically oriented scholar will want to know how a particular cultural feature became part of contemporary life, and to examine its distribution in the region as a whole. He will recognize that both similarities and differences may be attributable to traditions that have persisted or that have been differentially discarded since newcomers from other parts of the world came to inhabit the islands; or to influences that shaped the life of
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the tracing of African elements in Caribbean life
(cf., for instance, 1930, 1937, 1945, 1947), while
other scholars have been more interested in doc-
umenting the importance of various European
Amerindian elements have attracted the attention
of still other observers (cf., for instance, Taylor
1951; Sturtevant 1969). All of these research
workers have been aware that there was no single,
unified European or African or Amerindian trad-
tion, and each has made contributions to our
understanding of the processes by which one or
another cultural element or complex has been
modified, synthesized, and reworked, in terms
both of its particular form and content and of its
symbolic meanings, values, and associations for
those who perpetuated it. Haitian religion, for
instance, is rich in features that can be traced,
more or less precisely, to the African past, but
these features have rarely survived in any un-
modified, or “pure,” form. The processes of
change are in some ways even more interesting
than the particular origins of one or another trait,
since these processes exemplify a general charac-
teristic of human cultures: their complex capacity
simultaneously to change and to remain the same.

But for reasons unconnected with the intellec-
tual quest itself, retentions are sometimes per-
cieved as more interesting than losses or
replacements in culture, and some cross-cultural
similarities are thought to be more interesting
than others. This may be illustrated with a few
Caribbean examples. Almost everywhere in the
Caribbean, rice and beans (or “peas,” as they are
sometimes called) are a key item in local cuisine.
Puerto Rican rural proletarians call the combina-
tion “el matrimonio” (the married couple), and
clearly prefer the dish to cornmeal, another com-
mon food, which is somewhat disdained. Haitian
peasants eat rice and beans every day, if they can
afford it, and prefer the combination to millet
which, like cornmeal in Puerto Rico, is a less
acceptable common food. Just as Puerto Rican
folk are reluctant to serve funche (boiled corn-
meal) to a foreign visitor or an honored guest,
so Haitians dislike to serve their guests piti-mi
(millet). Much the same is true in Jamaica,
where rice and peas are a preferred item, not
replaceable by “food” (which here means root
crops such as yams and taro, or green bananas,
or breadfruit). These taste preferences are prob-
ably all traceable to the period of slavery, when
rice and beans constituted a luxury dish, as com-
pared to the other foods mentioned. People do
not describe their preferences this way, of course;
but rice and beans were not a traditional dish in
the original homelands of any Caribbean popula-
tion, and the taste was probably acquired in the
islands.

But the interest of scholars in this cross-
cultural uniformity seems slight. They seem to
display far more interest in an item such as akee
(Blighia sapida Koen.), a tree crop of particular
importance in Jamaica, the origin and name of
which is clearly African (Cassidy and Le Page
1967). Akee is usually eaten with what the Jamai-
cans call “salt fish,” which is dried cod, and
which, probably like rice and beans, became
standardized in Caribbean cuisine under slavery.
Yet akee is unknown in the Eastern Caribbean
(where a wholly different fruit, the guinep or
quinepa or kénèp, Melicocca bijuga, is called
“akee”), and it is hardly known in Haiti or the
other Greater Antilles. We can specify easily the
date the akee arrived in Jamaica; apparently it
reached Haiti considerably later. In Jamaica, the
akee remains a comfortably specific African re-
tention; in Haiti, it is not eaten.

Both the Jamaican and the Haitian rural sub-
cultures exhibit numerous features of African
provenience; the differential distribution of akee
is one way in which these societies are unlike; but
the “retention” of akee in Jamaica is somehow
regarded as “more interesting” than its absence
in Haiti. In contrast, the “retention” of akansan, a
cornmeal mush of African provenience (though
corn itself is American in origin) in Haiti seems to
be considered more interesting than its absence in
Jamaica. And the presence of such foods as akra and doukounou in both islands, both African foods, both with African names, is even more “interesting,” it seems, because here we have two parallel “retentions,” surviving the holocaust of slavery in both societies.

Why some of these facts should seem more exciting than others is, indeed, not difficult to determine. Features of Caribbean life that can be traced to the preslavery African past appear as testaments to the toughness and pride of the human spirit – which, indeed, they are. But survivals from slavery seem to be viewed merely as testimony to cultural defeats and losses. The use of words from African languages, the cooking of foods originating in Africa, the worship of gods of African provenience all appear to document the will to endure, to resist; but the significance of survivals from the slavery epoch is apparently diminished by the circumstances of their origin.

However such a view risks belittling the accomplishments of Caribbean peoples during their period of sorest trial. The slavery experience tested to the limit the strength and resourcefulness of millions of newcomers from other lands. The significance of that experience is expressed in the contemporary cultures of Caribbean peoples, just as are both the preslavery and post-slavery pasts. The task of historians of these cultures is to disentangle the origins and growth of the life-styles of the Caribbean region, and to seek to analyze the very complex processes by which cultural forms changed and were consolidated. This is not a different task from documenting the capacity and will of people to resist oppression. To survive at all under slavery was a mode of resistance; the cultures of contemporary Caribbean peoples are in their entirety a testament to such resistance.

Cultures lack pedigrees, and it is not surprising that the Caribbean peasantry of today expend little effort in disentangling the varied sources of their beliefs and practices. Haitian peasants apparently see no contradiction in a religion that contains elements drawn from the African, European, and Amerindian pasts; Jamaican peasants draw no distinctions among words of African origin and words of English origin. Puerto Rican peasant singers worry little that their agui-

naldo are of substantially European derivation, while their plenas are much more “African.” This is by no means to say that consciousness of such differences is entirely lacking. But rural folk in these societies are much more likely to perceive differences of these kinds in terms of differences between rural and urban life-styles, or between one class and another, than in terms of particular historical origins.

Implicit in the above argument is the need to bear in mind certain general points about the nature of similarities and differences in the rural subcultures of the Caribbean region. First, economic, ecological, or demographic similarities and differences unite or divide different rural populations in the same society. Second, there are similarities, either within one society or between comparable peasant sectors in two or more societies, that are traceable to a common cultural heritage predating slavery, as in the case of important features of African origin, including lexicon, cuisine, religion, language, folklore, and music. Third, there are commonalities that may be traced to the experience of slavery itself, as well as to the parallel impact of European domination – as in the case of the common use of Spanish in both Cuba and Puerto Rico, or the parallel proto-peasant adaptation in both Jamaica and Haiti. Finally, there are similarities and differences arising from the conditions of life following the slavery epoch and intermingled with the influences cited in the first point. Thus, for instance, Puerto Rican peasants and rural proletarians share many features of life, but also differ in significant ways. Their similarities are traceable in large measure to common historical experiences; their differences are due in good part to differences in their economic style of life, stabilized during their earlier development, and still operative.

From a systematic or analytic point of view, similarities traceable to the colonial period are as significant as those that hark back to an earlier past. Both similarities and differences are useful and important means for reconstructing the past, be it the recent past, the period of slavery, or the ancient pasts of the homelands – including, in the case of Amerindian cultures, the pre-Columbian pasts of the islands as well.
Though the volume of historical research on the Caribbean region is vast, relatively few books and papers have dealt with the origins and history of peasant subcultures and the similarities and differences among them. Even rarer are historical studies which deal in a detailed fashion with one or another aspect of rural life in the region as a whole. Marshall’s research on the origins of (British) West Indian peasantry (1968) is promising. Wolf’s study of the peasant subculture of Puerto Rico (1956) provides a useful introduction to the structural attributes of one Caribbean peasant society. Several precisely focused and detailed papers, such as Sturtevant’s (1969) on the processing of root starches, and Handler’s on arrow-root (1971), indicate both what is possible and what remains to be done in documenting fully the development of peasant technology in the region. Not only must such research provide a full picture of this development for any one island or peasant subculture, but the studies of comparable phenomena among different island populations must be combined to pinpoint similarities and differences in the processes of development.

Here we need to remember that the peasant subcultures evolved in most cases in the face of metropolitan or insular government opposition, and that observers, both contemporary and in the past, have paid very little attention to the lifestyles of rural Caribbean peoples. Only a few historically minded scholars have sought to get behind the so-called imperial tradition of historiography sufficiently to document what peasant life-styles are really like. Price’s (1966) paper, on Caribbean fishing and the history of Caribbean fishermen and fishing techniques, stresses the growth of a fishing subculture in the margins of Caribbean societies and documents its importance as a way in which local people could escape the tyranny of plantation life. Much the same sort of treatment should be given the peasancies, and the work is only now beginning.

Characteristics of the House-and-Yard Pattern

In the present chapter, a tentative first attempt is made to organize a little of what is known about one aspect of Caribbean peasant life, the house and yard, and the meaning of these for rural people. The importance of the house and yard as a setting for daily activity is obvious: here decisions are made, food is prepared and eaten, the household group – whatever its composition – sleeps and socializes, children are conceived and born, death is ceremonialized. To speak in terms of some common house-and-yard pattern, without taking account of the many factors that produce variation and difference within the pattern, would be entirely unjustified. Yet there are certain very general similarities, even cross-cultural – that is, occurring across the boundaries of different Caribbean societies – that require description and explanation, and it is principally around such similarities that the chapter is built.

But it is also intended to relate the concrete, material character of the house and the yard to the activities which go on in and around them, to suggest the ways that things and ideas are fitted together, made into (and learned as) patterns, as systems and subsystems of culture, and passed on to the next generation. Too often “material culture,” the term by which anthropologists refer to the concrete expression of culture in tangible objects, is seen as divorced from the world of values, ideas, beliefs, and behavior. But it is through such material representations of culture that people relate to each other, express themselves and their values, interact, and carry out their activities. Hence the house is far more than a fabrication of wood and thatch, the yard far more than a locale for the house. Together, house and yard form a nucleus within which the culture expresses itself, is perpetuated, changed, and reintegrated.

A number of writers, some geographers, some ethnologists or historians, have examined the houses of Caribbean rural folk from the vantage point of their history as architectural forms. Doran, a geographer, has interested himself in what is technically known as the “hip-roofed” cottage, a distinctive house-type widely distributed through the British and Dutch Antilles; found less commonly in Haiti, the French Antilles, and Trinidad; rare in the Dominican Republic; and almost entirely absent from Cuba and Puerto Rico (1962). Doran weighs four possible historical sources for the hip-roofed cottage:
aboriginal America, Spain, Africa, and Western Europe. He concludes that aboriginal America and Spain may be discounted as possible places of origin, holds in abeyance the possibility of African influences, and opts for a “circum-English-Channel” hearth of origin. His analysis is based both on the contemporary distribution of the form, and on what can be learned about its historical spread during the seventeenth and later centuries. Métraux, an ethnologist, has concentrated narrowly upon Haitian house-types (1949–51), but has dealt more exactly with details of construction and type variants; though he stresses the importance of European architectural influences, he leaves open the question of African traditions. Métraux expressed the hope that Africanist colleagues would evaluate his Haitian materials in the light of what was known about West African house-types, past and present, but such comparative treatment remains unrealized. Moral, a geographer, has also concentrated on Haitian house-types (1957), but discounts African influences; Revert, also a geographer, reaches similar conclusions for the rural homesteads of the French Antilles (1955). Pérez de la Riva imputes African origins to the rural houses in Cuba (1952), but his argument is poorly developed, particularly since he seems to accept the notion of a single African architectural prototype. All of these authors deal, on one level or another, with the question of origins; all admit that the information is insufficient for any firm conclusions.

The question of architectural origins is, in one sense, fairly straightforward; if we had enough information about African and Caribbean house-types, past and present, we would at least be able to chart similarities and differences, and perhaps to indicate the evidence that argues clearly for one or another place of origin, even if firm and definite answers were not forthcoming. Houses are a useful unit of comparison, precisely because they consist of a limited number of different materials (wood, stone, thatch, mortar, mud, cement, metal, etc.) and elements (roofs, doors, lintels, frames, window openings, floors, stoops, etc.), which may or may not be diffused as interrelated assemblages. Studies of such forms are consonant with North American ethnology’s traditional concern with the origins and diffusion of elements and complexes of culture, and with the way such forms change in space and in time, as they are adapted to new uses or new environments.

In seeking African origins for Caribbean house-types, however, the historical ethnologist or geographer faces certain clear-cut difficulties. For instance, we have no certain evidence that newly arrived Africans were ever able to build their houses according to their own traditions. If African elements are present, we must assume that the migrants were able to retain their architectural knowledge until they became free and could build their own houses, or that some variants of the original types were constructed and the techniques preserved by runaway slaves, by early generations of freedmen, or in some other way. Patterson, who has amassed considerable evidence on the daily life of Jamaican slaves (1967), is silent on this point; Brathwaite (1971) tells us what he can. Research workers on other islands have done little more. The comparable task is probably no easier when we deal with such features of culture as folklore, religion, musicianship, ethnobotany, crop uses, and the like, though the attribution of features, particularly lexical features, can sometimes be more certain.

But the cultural forms of a people are not only historically derived – products or consequences of the past, so to speak – but must also fit in with the needs and beliefs of those who employ and preserve them today. Such needs and beliefs are reflected in use, in behavior, and in the values people maintain. The houses of Caribbean peasantries are more than historical aggregates of past tradition; as the settings for many of the most important contemporary rural activities, they must be studied as behavioral contexts and not merely as historical products. The questions this pursuit raises are concerned more with similarities and differences arising from the differential adaptations of newcomer populations to the pressures imposed upon them by the Caribbean experience, and less with the specific historical origins of particular traits or complexes.

Such an exercise requires that some attention be given to the background conditions of peasant life in the region, the customary or usual distribution of population, and the forms of settlement and land use that peasant populations employ.
Though peasant settlement and land-use patterns vary not only from one Caribbean country to another, but also from one region to another within the same island society, certain general characteristics provide a context within which to examine house uses and the attached values and attitudes of the peasantry. Seven such features are enumerated here, each of which will be dealt with in turn: (1) the peasant adaptation is primarily to the highlands and to sloping terrain, rather than to coastal floodplains and alluvial fans or to intermontane valley floors; (2) main cultivation grounds do not usually adjoin the houses of their owners; (3) house plots are often dispersed rather than clustered and are sometimes scattered along a slope or strung out upon a mountain spur; (4) usually, only one sexually cohabitant couple occupies a house, though several houses (and several couples) may share a yard; (5) each homestead, whether consisting of one house or more, is usually surrounded by at least a small quantity of land, and set off from the outside by a fence, clumps of vegetation, or a hedge or living fence; (6) the yard may be associated intimately with the house, and its land may have important ritual or kinship significance; (7) house and yard often have particular symbolic meaning for local people, though this may be implicit and little noticed by outsiders.

The Highland Adaptation

These seven features may now be discussed at greater length, in order to clarify the place of house and yard in the daily life of Caribbean peasantry, and to indicate something of the history of the features. We have seen that peasant agriculture is predominantly a highland adaptation on the major islands because the coastal plains and interior valleys were frequently taken over for plantation cultivation at an early stage. In general, this division between coastal estates and highland small-scale farming on the larger islands has not varied significantly, except in the case of Haiti. There, the plantation system was largely destroyed by the Revolution, reappeared briefly thereafter, withered away once more, and was then re instituted in certain narrow coastal regions of the north and around Port-au-Prince in the twentieth century. By and large, the countryside remains a peasant domain. In Jamaica, the plantation adaptation is ancient and has, if anything, expanded since the nineteenth century; coastal areas, except in the south, are largely monopolized by plantations. Much the same is true of Puerto Rico, where the expansion has been very intensive since 1900.

In all three countries, however, the peasant adaptation is paramount in the highlands of the interior. Peasant holdings are prevalingly small – one to ten acres, and more commonly one than ten – and owners often cultivate several plots, which may be held by various arrangements, including leaseholding, sharecropping of various kinds, and renting. In some regions, both within these three countries and elsewhere in the Caribbean, the peasant adaptation may rest heavily upon a tradition of rented land; but access to land to permit small-scale cultivation with family labor is very common, even when land is not owned. The agriculture itself is typically very diversified. Such diversification is a means of distributing risk, as we have seen in the case of Jamaican peasant farming; it also provides a perennial trickle of food crops, both for subsistence and for sale; maximizes the utility of the land, relative to the availability of labor; and may even serve to maintain fertility, as by intercropping, the use of catch crops, and the like. Sauer (1954) has suggested that the reputation of Caribbean peasant agriculture as a "land-killer" may be undeserved, arising from the need to cultivate on hilly slopes with sharp runoffs and shallow topsoils, rather than from the agricultural techniques themselves. However, it is true that the failure to use fallowing, fertilizer, rotation, terracing, and other land-protective practices typifies such agriculture; it is also true that the farming of widely scattered plots greatly increases the necessary investment of time and energy – though this difficulty is hardly the fault of the peasants, unless one wishes to hold them responsible for traditional systems of inheritance that often lead to the progressive fragmentation of holdings.

Kitchen-Gardens vs. Provision-Grounds

Normally, agricultural holdings are separate from the houses of their owners, and may even be
located some distance away – as much as ten miles, in many cases. Both in Haiti and in Jamaica there is a clear historical precedent for this separation which does not, however, completely explain it today. We have already seen that estate slaves commonly grew their own subsistence on plantation uplands, using lands judged unsuitable for the major plantation crops. It was on such lands that the slaves acquired or perfected their horticultural skills, developed their own standardized agricultural practices, learned the characteristics of Caribbean soils, mastered the cultivation of new crops, and otherwise prepared themselves for their reconstitution as peasants.

A wholly distinctive crop repertory, adapted to the new settings, was created by combining familiar African crops, such as “guinea yams” (Dioscorea sativa) and okra, with native American crops, including corn, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, and species of Xanthosoma; European vegetables, such as cabbage and carrots; and Southeast Asian cultigens, including the breadfruit. Such agricultural tools as the short-handled hoe, the mattock, and the bush knife were adjusted to new conditions – though we are still uncertain about the provenience of these items. Citrus, avocado, mango, coconut palm, papaya, sourspop and akee trees were cultivated, to provide cover, fruit, and wood – together they illustrate well the intersection of different agricultural and orchard traditions. Techniques of land-clearing – by burning, tree-girdling, and the removal of stones for walls and shelters – were developed, again probably by combining different traditions of land use. Moreover, techniques associated with food processing, storage, preservation, and seed selection were perfected, though the origins of these techniques have never been wholly disentangled.

But these myriad skills and usages took shape during slavery for the most part, either on the plantation uplands where slaves grew their own food, as in Jamaica and Haiti, or in the maroon communities of the interior. We have seen how frontiersmen developed a pattern of casual cultivation in the interior of Puerto Rico – again, outside the normal routine of plantation cultivation, or even in open opposition to it. Pérez de la Riva has developed the theme of the Cuban maroon community, or palenque, as a by-product of the concealed cultivation plots of runaway slaves (1952) – though the role of such communities in Cuba has been overshadowed by the better-known exploits of the maroons of Jamaica, Dutch Guiana, and Brazil. According to Pérez de la Riva, so developed was the palenque adaptation in Cuba that one famous community – Bumba – was able to carry on agricultural trade not only with neighboring haciendas in Cuba itself, but also with Santo Domingo and Jamaica, by means of small craft!

All this, however, is a far remove from the more common pattern of “proto-peasant” adaptation, developed within the confines of the plantation. There, the separation between house plot and provision ground was a clear function of the control wielded by the plantation system over the slaves. The “garden,” or provision ground, was always located in portions of the plantation that were not used for the major crop, and in which it was not normally intended to plant that crop – as we have seen, plantation owners tried to avoid taking up for sugarcane any of the land they habitually provided the slaves for growing their own provisions.

But the huts of the slaves, unlike the provision grounds, were regularly located near the center of the plantation itself, on or near the “plaza” and below the “great house,” where the slaves could be guarded and watched. “Adjoining to the [slave’s] house is usually a small spot of ground,” wrote one Jamaican observer in 1823, “laid out into a sort of garden, and shaded by various fruit-trees. Here the family deposit their dead, to whose memory they invariably, if they can afford it, erect a rude tomb. Each slave has, besides this spot, a piece of ground (about half an acre) allotted to him as a provision ground” (Stewart 1823: 267).

This separation of subsistence plot from house plot, and the use of the house plot for fruit trees (as well as spices, etc.) and as a family cemetery, is typical of Jamaica and Haiti to this day, though probably not at all of Puerto Rico. There is little evidence that the division into house plot and provision ground, so ubiquitous in Jamaica and Haiti, was ever pronounced in Puerto Rico, nor is there evidence in Puerto Rico of familial house-plot burial grounds.
Dispersal of Houses

In many parts of these three island societies, it is difficult to define community boundaries in terms of settlement, particularly in the highland interiors. Admittedly, the coastal plantation areas exhibit nucleated settlement patterns, with rows or clusters of houses formed into company towns, *colonias,* or line villages. Such aggregates are also common along principal roadways, near major towns and cities, and around special enterprises, such as the bauxite mines of Jamaica and Haiti. But the highland countrysides show little comparable nucleation, even though national populations may be quite dense, as in Puerto Rico and Haiti. In Jamaica, the missionary-founded free villages still show coherent patterning and form, as we have seen in the case of Sturte Town; but in general, all three of these societies display scattered highland settlement. This dispersion is revealed in the actual distribution of households: in a straggling row along a ridge; scattered around a central water supply in the form of a spring, well, or standpipe; set unevenly into the side of a hill; or, often, substantially isolated from one another. This is by no means to say either that such settlement is incoherent and random or that people entirely lack a sense of community – but all three societies contain substantial numbers of rural folk who have chosen to remain dispersed in terms of household occupancy.

Household Composition

As yet, we have said nothing about the composition of groups within households. This is obviously a question of very considerable importance in any study of marriage, family, and kinship in Caribbean rural society, and it has received much attention in the literature (cf. particularly Solien 1960, Greenfield 1961). To begin with, one of the most striking characteristics of Caribbean peasant subcultures in these regards is the fact that the domestic unit or kin group housed under one roof only rarely includes more than one sexually cohabiting couple (Mintz 1956, 1960; Davenport 1961). To begin with, one of the most striking characteristics of Caribbean peasant subcultures in these regards is the fact that the domestic unit or kin group housed under one roof only rarely includes more than one sexually cohabiting couple (Mintz 1956, 1960; Davenport 1961). In fact, the rule of independent residence for cohabiting couples appears to hold for almost all rural Caribbean folk, proletarians as well as peasants – as in the case of Cañameral, the Puerto Rican plantation community discussed earlier (Mintz 1951, 1953, 1956). In effect, this signifies that the establishment of new conjugal associations depends on access to an unoccupied house plot and, commonly, to possession of the means to build a house.

Though the point may sometimes be given exaggerated importance (cf., for instance, Otterbein 1965, and Price’s 1970 critique), the linkage between most forms of domestic union and the availability of a house plot or house is nonetheless very significant in Caribbean rural life. In Haiti, Mestral (1951: 116) writes, “the peasant builds his hut when he intends getting married or taking up employment. It represents a young man’s first effort and action to free himself. An offer of marriage is out of the question unless the man proves he is in earnest by laying the foundations of the future family home.” Davenport (1961: 446), writing of Jamaica, describes the invariable rule by which young men set up a separate household when they take wives: “As long as their father remains fully active, they will move out and establish their own households with their spouses, even though this might only be across the yard. . . . The rule of household formation, then, is that no single household will contain more than one active conjugal pair.” Cumper (1961: 398–99) points out that in Barbados, where the definition of a peasantry is open to some question, the establishment of an independent household – usually on rented land, at first – is a customary precondition for the establishment of a family by those who approximate a peasant status. While it is indeed true that some kinds of conjugal union and the fathering of families can and do occur in these societies without the prior establishment of an independent household for the cohabiting pair, the relationship between independent domicile and cohabitation is the basis of certain important types of conjugal union.

But a significant exception should be noted. In fieldwork carried out among Puerto Rican peasants in 1948–9, Wolf found that newly married couples sometimes moved in with the wife’s family: “This ideal form of residence removes the young husband from the circle of his own father’s family and avoids conflicts between the young
wife and her mother-in-law” (1956: 206). Apparently, under certain circumstances neolocal residence near the home of the wife’s parents is also a possible choice; but Wolf gives no figures on the percentages of different modes of residence in the community he studied.

The importance of this exception is twofold. On the one hand, it runs counter to what is otherwise usual in domestic settlement, both peasant and proletarian, in the Caribbean. On the other, it suggests the possibility of the presence of an extended kinship group under one roof: a phenomenon as common in West Africa as it is rare in the peasant subcultures of the West Indies. In fact, the insistence on separate residence for cohabiting couples in Caribbean peasant life stands in stark contrast to what is known of the African past. It is all the more interesting, then, that this exceptional form is reported for highland Puerto Rico, which, in terms of its culture history, is probably the least “African” rural sector of the three societies.

The point, of course, is that a mode of residence, a pattern of settlement, a form of marriage shared by peoples in differing cultures may be traced either to a common origin on the one hand or to parallel or convergent experiences or present-day needs on the other. If Puerto Rican highland peasants do, indeed, display characteristics reminiscent of an African past, such features may be attributable either to that past or – as is in this case much more likely – to local historical (economic, ecological, demographic) factors producing an analogous form.

Contrariwise, the general absence of more than one cohabiting couple within a single household cannot be regarded as an aping of “European” residence patterns. If anything, it more closely resembles the domestic life-style of European urban proletarians than that of the European middle classes; and this resemblance is not likely to be wholly fortuitous, given the historical experience of Caribbean peoples in past centuries.

The value placed on separate residence is expressed neatly in the Puerto Rican pun-proverb, “Que se casa pa’ su casa” – “Let those who marry go to their own house.” But separate residence does not necessarily mean a separate yard, as we have already seen. Often, more than one house occupies a yard, though the occupants of two or more such houses are usually related consanguinely. For instance, the traditional Haitian house-and-yard unit, the lakou, often included several households (Bastien 1951: 29–36; 1961: 481; Métraux 1951: 10). The unit was headed by a senior male, usually with his wife and unmarried children in one house, his married sons and their families, and perhaps other relatives, in other houses. Though this kind of multihouse homestead has declined swiftly in Haiti, losing its organizing influence as an economic, social, and religious unit, Bastien describes a lakou as follows:

In 1948 one was found which still included ten households with a total of twenty-seven members, all related, and belonging to three generations. A father and his four sons held about two-thirds of the whole estate, while the rest was divided between the father’s sister, two nephews, half-brother, and the concubine of one of the sons and her infant. (Bastien 1961: 481)

There may appear to be certain superficial similarities between such a group and the residence group living on indefinitely indivisible family land in Jamaica (Clarke 1957), but analogies of this kind are risky, not only because the actual compositions of such groups are different, but also because their social functions differ as well. The Jamaican residence group normally consists of both the male and female children of the deceased progenitor, who are supposed to share equally in the land, though the land is to be held undivided. But the group cannot be viewed as a corporate group – engaged in common activities as a group – and it is rarely co-residential (in the sense that several homesteads occupy the same plot, as is true of the traditional Haitian lakou). “Family land, in the process of transmission and use has in the main long ceased to have agricultural value,” Clarke (1957: 44–5) tells us, “apart from the economic trees with which it is usually well stocked. It represents security in the sense that any member ‘in need’ can erect a hut on it and live rent free. . . . On the other hand it runs counter to the ambition to own land [individually] and the dislike of usufructuary
communal rights only." In Haiti, a somewhat comparable situation is described by Comhaire-Sylvain (1952). Though Haitian law holds that no inheriting individual need accept a share in undivided property, actually such property may be held unchanged by a group of inheritors for one generation or more (Métraux 1951). Such holdings can come into being on the death of a landowner, since it is customary in Haiti not to divide up such land for some time.

In Jamaica, a man can create family land simply by leaving his property to his children undivided (Clarke 1957). Unless they are willing to undergo litigation for division, the property will continue to be held by several persons, or some inheritors will sell their shares to others. Indeed, there may have been a time when the landowning, land-use, and inheritance practices of the Jamaican peasantry very closely resembled those of their Haitian counterparts. In both Jamaica and Haiti – and far more swiftly in Jamaica than in Haiti – the trend has been toward individualization of land-holdings, more scattered residence, emigration of at least some of the inheritors-to-be (though often retaining continuing rights in undivided land), and the sale of some shared land to other co-inheritors.

The problems of land tenure and the transmission of land rights among Caribbean peasantries remain largely unsolved, in spite of interesting and careful work by such scholars as Clarke (1953, 1957), Comhaire-Sylvain (1952), and M. G. Smith (1956). The distinction between house plots and agricultural land has become more and more widely recognized, but cross-cultural variations among Caribbean peasantries have still been only very incompletely analyzed. Nor is it possible at present to evaluate either general patterns or local distinctions with regard to possible African influences. We can perceive certain systematic contrasts between official legal systems affecting land and its inheritance, and the locally accepted and traditional practices of the peasantries (Clarke 1957; M. G. Smith 1956), but much more work is needed before such differences can be traced convincingly to one or another tradition.

Hence, the relationship of local forms of kinship organization and family structure to the physical expression of the local group’s character, as embodied in house form, homestead, and yard, in these three societies, requires further study. Scholars such as Clarke (1957), M. G. Smith (1962), Davenport (1956) and R. Smith (1956) have demonstrated that the forms of family organization extant in much of the Caribbean are stable in character, and adaptive to the contemporary social and economic circumstances of the societies in which they are found. The analyses of these family forms suggest that domestic organizations go through cycles of development, and that the “family types” to be found in the Caribbean area are probably developmental stages in one or more sequences of domestic organization. Such sequences are intimately associated with particular forms of household. Studies by R. Smith and others have illuminated the earlier period in the study of Caribbean kinship, when it was assumed that family “types” were to be explained in general historical terms, either as the products of North European and African traditions of social organization, or as the results of centuries of slavery. In fact, the importance of specific historical circumstances for particular forms of domestic organization has not yet been properly assessed for Caribbean societies. But the functionalist studies of recent years have put the weight of analysis on the relationships between domestic organization and characteristics of the wider contemporary society.

The House and the Yard

The homestead is a place, a setting: yard and house together define the sphere within which much daily life is lived. They also define (or express) the ways that the personnel of the household are divided up – by age, sex, role, and otherwise. Of Jamaica’s lower-class people in general, Davenport writes:

In physical layout the lower-class household consists of a house, a detached kitchen or cookhouse, and a yard area. Each of these areas is the location of important activities which make up the domestic routine. The house is usually used mainly for sleeping and for storing clothing and other articles of personal value. The poorer the
household, the more the use of the house is restricted to just these activities, while the houses of the more well-to-do will have space and furnishings for additional activities such as relaxing, entertaining, and eating. Houses vary from simple one-room structures made of wattle and thatch and with earth floors to multi-room buildings of frame or concrete construction, metal or shingle roofs, and plank or cement floors. . . . The cook house is usually a temporary structure and has less care lavished upon it than on the living house. It is used for preparing and storing food, and in most poor households, the family eats here in bad weather. It can also serve as a general utility shed and working space when other special structures have not been erected in the yard for these purposes. The yard is the scene of great miscellany of activities. On this swept ground between house and kitchen, the children play, the washing is done, the family relaxes, and friends are entertained. In it and surrounding it a few food-producing trees are grown, the small animals are tethered, and space is given over to a small vegetable garden. The yard is frequently fenced to keep animals in, and neighbors pay respect to this boundary by never entering without being asked. Far more respect, however, is paid to the house, for this cramped space affords the only real sanctum of privacy for the household against the rest of the neighborhood.

The house, yard, and kitchen are dominated by the adult women of the household, for most of the perennial work which goes on in them is in their charge. Women prepare the food, do the washing and mending, tend the kitchen garden, look after small animals, and most important, look after the children. . . .

The adult men and older boys of the household assist in heavier tasks, such as looking after the larger and more valuable animals (if there are any), repairing the house and cook-house, chopping logs, spading a new kitchen garden, and even assisting with the processing of food products which are to be sold. But men's work is not nearly so confined to the round of domestic duties as is the women's. To them falls the major responsibility of the cultivation plot, or 'ground,' as it is called. In many instances this is removed some distance from the house site, and the men go to and from it daily, leaving the women in charge of the household activities and children. Men, of course, do most of the wage work which takes them away from the domestic scene. They alone congregate in one another's yards or at the local shops to socialize. . . .

Although the division of adult labour is not rigidly fixed by sex, it is the context of the household group which makes it clear. The rule, as in many European societies, is that women dominate the services of the domestic scene, while the men are concerned with productive working outside. Each sex may assist the other in some of his or her work, but this assistance is supplementary to the major responsibilities in each sphere. . . . It is this general but flexible plan which enables the household group to adjust and maintain itself in a variety of situations and with a variety of different compositions. (Davenport 1961: 435–37)

This careful description, quoted only in part, reveals well how the house and yard express the division of labor within the household, the flexible character of the household group in dealing with the round of daily and yearly activities, and the different activities for which house and yard are a common setting.

The Yard: Material Uses

The integrity of house and yard as a unit, and its degree of intactness and separation from the outside varies greatly, and cannot be judged solely in terms of its physical form. But usually the peasant homestead is set off from the outside by some physical barrier. Often in highland areas, a visitor is not even aware of the presence of a house until he reaches the barrier which shields it. This barrier may consist of scattered clumps of vegetation, walls, living fences, ditches, picket fences, trees and groves of bamboo, or even the slopes of gullies (Métraux 1951; Mintz 1962; Street 1960). When living fences are used to separate the yard from the outside, they may serve several purposes at once. In Haiti, for example (Mintz 1962), living bamboo is sometimes used for fencing; it can be used to make an important musical instrument (vaksin), for rain gutters, to make carrying baskets for chickens, etc. Sisal (Agave rigida, var. sisalana), commonly grown alongside
living fence, can be cut for sale as fiber, and can be used to make rope, bridle headstalls, and croupiers, and as a reinforcement for baskets. Other plants used as living fences or to supplement such fences have comparable uses; a few are grown largely for their decorative effect, including varieties of croton.

Some plants are commonly grown within the yard, on the house plot. Such plants are to be distinguished in several ways from those grown on provision grounds. Thus, in Haiti, in terms of their eventual use, at least three sorts of plants are grown on house plots: (1) minor vegetables, which may also be decorative, such as egg-plants, hot peppers, and tomatoes; (2) items which may enter into commerce but which also have domestic uses, such as cotton (for lamp wicks), sisal (for rope), and vétiver (for thatch, and to keep out insects); and (3) trees which provide fruit, shade, or craft materials, such as avocados, guavas, coconut palms, and lataniers. Plantains and bananas, which can be stolen easily, are also sometimes planted inside the yard. In Haiti, the minor foods, especially spices, grown near the house are called “diab diab” and often serve as small presents to visitors. The distinction between these kinds of cultivation and the cultivation of provision grounds, principally by men, is quite clear.

The Yard: Symbolic Meaning

But the yard is far more than a site for occasional cultivation. We have seen that the land on which the house stands often links groups of kinsmen. The significance of such links is far greater when the plot has been used as a family cemetery, as is commonly the case in Haiti and as was once the case in Jamaica. The organization of affective and ceremonial life around the yard as a repository of tradition, and as expressing the continuity of a kin group, is one of the most promising subjects of research for those interested in the role of the African past. This is perhaps particularly the case in Haiti, where the yard often served both as a burying ground and as the locus of the vodou temple, which expressed the religious continuity of the family group with its ancestors (Métraux 1959: 59–60). Métraux (1954) also points out that the burying group is considered indivisible and inalienable by Haitian peasants, and that even when the house plot is sold, its burying ground remains accessible to the original owners, even to the right of burying kinsmen there. Some of the same reverence for the yard, especially as a repository of ancestors, is observable in Jamaica as well.

What is more, the yard may express continuity at the beginning of life, as well as at its end. In Jamaica, if a fruit-bearing tree is “given” to a newborn child by burying his umbilicus at its foot, the tree is usually within the yard. The placenta is often buried beneath the door stoop, as are other effluvia of birth, and the protective intent of these procedures is clear in what people say when describing them. The yard thus protects the continuity of the kin group, as well as the individual; the links between dead ancestors and newborn children are represented in the yard, expressed and maintained by the generation which stands between them.

But the wider symbolic meaning of house and yard goes even beyond these quite specific details. What might be called the ritual significance of the yard and house is revealed in behavior. One approaches the yard circumspectly in all three societies, indicating one’s presence in some way before entering the yard, and usually awaiting acknowledgment. In Haiti, the guest shouts “hōnɔ!” (honor) before entering, and does not cross the threshold until he hears the reply “rɛspɛ!” (respect). In Puerto Rico, the peasant’s words for house and yard, bohio and batey, are Arawakan (Taino) terms having a certain emotional significance. The batey, or yard, is where men normally congregate to talk, and the overtones of the word are revealed in various ways. The name of the Popular Party newspaper was El Batey; and Governor Muñoz Marín greeted his party cohorts at the insular convention of 1948 with the words: “How large is our batey.” In Jamaica, the word yard is sometimes used to define one’s total span of activities. When one is told by another person to keep out of his yard, this means essentially to stay out of his way, out of his life. Cassidy and Le Page (1967) point out that yard often means both house and yard in Jamaican speech and thought: /nɔmbəri nɔ da a
yaad nou/ means “no one is at home now”; /wi
kyan go a mis mieri yaad/ means “we can go to
Miss Mary’s place.”

Conclusions

We have argued that the seven features of the
house-and-yard complex stem from the histories
of Caribbean rural peoples, particularly the ex-
perience of slavery and the plantation system, and
the usefulness of the peasant adaptation as a re-
sponse to regimentation and oppression. It re-
 mains to consider some of these features in the
light of this general assertion. The earliest post-
Columbian settlement of the highland interiors of
these societies by independent cultivators was
uncontrolled, irregular, and often secretive. The
Puerto Rican highlander, the jibaro – a word
which, to this day, means “shy” – has remained
a symbol of the half-wild, the cimarron or feral,
the withdrawn peasantry. Though such a peas-
antry has now almost disappeared in Puerto Rico,
and was in any case much overdrawn in the
political propaganda of recent decades, this
image of the peasantry and the stereotypes attrib-
uted to it still persist (Steward 1956). In Jamaica,
the reconstruction of the peasantry began in 1838,
but we have seen that many of the basic skills of
the freedmen were learned before Emancipation,
within the confines of the plantation. Much the
same was true in Haiti, though slavery was ended
there by revolution. In all three cases, there is
substantial evidence of the role of runaway slaves
in creating the beginnings of a peasant adaptation
while slavery was still in its hey-day; and in all
such cases, there are good grounds for supposing
that many continuities with the African (and, par-
ticularly in Puerto Rico, the Amerindian) past
might be best preserved. These are histories,
then, of disengagement and of resistance; and the
characteristic features of the peasant adaptation
are bound up with an escape from various modes
of regimentation. We have seen that the reconsti-
tuted peasantry of Jamaica received strong support
from the missionary churches, and such commu-
nities still manifest, in some instances, the institu-
tional sponsorship they enjoyed. But peasant
settlement otherwise has always been, for the
most part, unorganized, unofficial, and sporadic.

This is the basis, then, for supposing that such
characteristics as scattered settlement, the intact-
ness of yard and house as a unit, the insistence on
separate households for each cohabiting couple,
and the circumspection with which the yard of
another is approached, are all derivable to some
degree from the historic conditions under which
the peasantry was formed. The thought that a
man’s freedom begins inside his own fence has
other origins besides the Caribbean experience;
but it may have taken on additional significance
in terms of that experience. Given the very spe-
cial circumstances by which the ancestors of to-
day’s Caribbean peoples were “modernized,” and
the extremely early development of capitalist
modes of production in the islands, it may
be more apposite than it seems to recall
Luther’s insistence that “good fences make good
neighbors.”

For much of rural Caribbean life, as we have
seen, the house-and-yard complex is much more
the domain of women than of men. Cooking,
garden care, washing, and especially the care of
children are largely in the hands of women; the
“lap-baby,” “knee-baby” and “yard-baby” stages of
childhood typical of the United States South find
their ready parallel in the Caribbean rural setting.
But the activities of males may also be centered in
the yard, even if men frequently gather elsewhere.
If the yard contains fighting cocks, beehives, a burying ground, a ceremonial
temple; if it is what the Jamaicans call a “balm-
yard” (where healing is done; cf. Hogg 1964); if
food or liquor is sold as part of the household’s
activities; if fishing boats are beached or stored
there – in all such cases the yard’s uses are div-
ided and complementary, sometimes overlapping
but more commonly separate. The relationship
between yard and house may thus be viewed
partly in terms of the conjoined activities of
males and females, partly in terms of the different
uses to which each, yard and house, is put by
members of one or both sexes. The house, par-
ticularly among poorer peasants, is not important
in itself as a material representation of the do-
meric group or family; houses are often moved
from one site to another. But the yard is an
extension of the house, and land remains im-
mensely important for Caribbean peasants.
The yard is an extension of the house, just as the house is the living core of the yard; the outer limits of the yard come to represent the outer “walls” of the house itself, as it were.

None of the similarities among Caribbean peasantries with regard to the house-and-yard pattern should be allowed to conceal important exceptions, however, or the very considerable variation within a common pattern. Both the exceptions and variations cannot be written off as deviant or idiosyncratic, but require equal attention as variants. Thus, for instance, the use of the yard for minor subsistence items is clearly correlated with some particular tradition; but the practice does not – indeed, cannot – persist under circumstances of intense crowding of houses, aridity, saline soil, etc. The movement of highland migrants to the sugarcane region of the south coast of Puerto Rico was marked by the transfer of the kitchen-garden habit to the new setting, a setting wholly unsuited for it. Over time the pattern was eroded, and it has largely disappeared. But highland migrants to the coast – most of them of peasant origin – share the coastal pattern of separate (neolocal) residence on marriage, a pattern that seems to typify the proletarian population as well as substantial portions of the peasantry. And whereas fences do not typify all coastal proletarian dwellings in Puerto Rico, migrants from the highlands are accustomed to put them up when they can, and to retain them, even if old-time coastal proletarians do not. Thus the picture is in fact complex, and requires more study.

Under the circumstances, is it possible or useful to attribute a common characteristic of the life-styles of three Caribbean peasant peoples to some general aspect of the past, in view of the many differences among them? The answer must be as tentative as the propositions advanced here. There is need for much more careful study of the intimate life-patterns of Caribbean peasantries; the expressed values and attitudes of the people themselves must be recorded: Until that time, such propositions simply enable us to ask more and, it is hoped, better questions. Because the three peasant subcultures discussed here may differ dramatically from those with which other observers are familiar, and because they often appear to differ in some common direction, there is a strong temptation to generalize about them, and about the Caribbean region as a whole. Only careful functional and historical studies, carried out on a comparative basis, afford the means of assessing the forces that have given these peasantries their form, and of weighing the effects of particular forces over time.

Note

1 In Jamaica, however, the term *yard-child* has a special meaning. A yard-child is the illegitimate child who lives at the house of its father, rather than with its unmarried mother. Those who live with the mother may be called “illegitimate” (Cassidy and Le Page 1967). This curious usage – which may be extremely rare – strikes a different note, for it calls our attention to those children born of cohabiting couples that do not coreside, an extremely important aspect of familial and domestic organization in rural Jamaica, though far less so in Haiti and Puerto Rico. This subject is relevant to present considerations, but cannot be dealt with in this chapter.

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