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Haiti: Brache
(October-December 1947)

Brache, the location of an ancient sugar plantation, is situated in the Plain of Léogane, two miles to the East of the town by that name. The town itself is located at a distance of 30 miles to the west of Port-au-Prince. Erika worked in the area in the period of October-December 1947. The location was chosen through contact with a family, some of whose members lived in Port-au-Prince. The house used ([PH716/](#), [PH720](#), [721](#), [722](#), [723](#)^{*}, [724](#), [725](#), [726](#), [727](#), [728](#)) was partially built and completed with a contribution by Erika. She also required the construction of a latrine. Houses in this area are made of wattle and daub, ideally covered with whitewash, which must be renewed frequently. They have earthen floors and roofs covered with banana thatch. Small lizards in the thatch catch insects. The wooden doors and shutters, which were bought from a sawmill and installed by a carpenter, were the most costly part of these constructions. Houses have overhanging roofs creating verandas (Cr. *galri*) where people may sit in the evening when mists are considered to be dangerous and believed to cause fever. In this subtropical region there is little seasonal variation in hours of daylight. In December, sunset was at ca. 7pm, and sunrise at ca. 6am.

Sugar has been cultivated here since colonial times and the names of colonial plantations have survived so that some locations are still known by their names. The fields extend from the town of Gressier to Léogane, from the motor road, and parallel freight rail lines, in the South to the seashore in the North. Sugar fields and access roads dominate the landscape ([PH704](#), [705](#); [PH712](#); [PH718](#), [719](#)). Local people live on lots of varying sizes interspersed in the fields, a pattern that dates from colonial times ([PH702](#), [PH724](#)).

* Note: Numbers without links refer to negatives in the collection, available in Rare Books and Manuscripts at The Ohio State University, but not yet scanned.

In 1947 sugar production was controlled by the Haitian-American Sugar Company (HASCO). The company was established in 1920, during the American occupation, when it acquired long term leases from various small-scale landowners and entered into sharecropping arrangements with local people. In the 1960s and 70s HASCO abandoned the area. (For a history of the area and its current condition see K. Richman 2005.)

In 1947 the company had an American manager, long resident in the area. He and his wife, only recently arrived from Louisiana, lived in a house situated near the motor road. Houses of the peasant were dispersed throughout the area in a series of hamlets of varying sizes. Yards with houses (*Cr.lakou*) varied in size, but included grounds for growing food crops and trees. On some properties there were masonry tombs, often quite ancient, with land set aside for family cemeteries. While some yards and fields are tiny, a number of owners are more prosperous and their yards have several houses. Better off people have tin roofs ([PH703](#)), cement floors, furniture, and/or kerosene lamps.

The hamlets were separated from each other by as much as an hour's walk or more. A larger cluster of houses, called Masson, was located at some distance from the road and an hour's walk from the sea shore. Other houses were arranged in a row along a wider transportation area.

According to the American manager, 1947 was a drought year so that there was a water shortage. The water in the irrigation canals, which periodically swamps the fields, is diverted by the government from the river. Landowners pay a monthly rate. According to the peasants, HASCO had used too much water and there wasn't enough water for them. Irrigation water is the principal source of water for many people and used for all domestic purposes as well as irrigation of their fields. Some have water holes and a few have wells ([EH741](#)).

“Periodically the Léogane River is diverted to water the cane fields; this diversion turns the paths into impassible swamps. The autumn rainy season intensifies the periodic swamping of the region and malaria is rife. Some of the water used for irrigation reaches

the peasants huts through the irrigation ditches. This is almost the only water available and is used for all domestic purposes, from bathing and laundry to cooking. It is also used to water the small peasant holdings in which they grow their food stuffs and raise some chickens, an occasional pig and keep a donkey or even a horse” (PH712, 713, 714, 715). (Edited field notes.)

Men hoe (PH701), women plant and harvest garden crops (PH706) and sell the occasional surplus, such as small quantities of eggs and vegetables. Women’s work also includes domestic tasks: preparing coffee (EH732, 733) and cooking on charcoal braziers (EH730, 731). Houses are surrounded by banana and plantain trees (PH702), breadfruit trees (Cr.: *pie veritab*), (PH708), mangoes, coconut, and some others. Some large trees, e.g., silk cotton trees (*mapou*) have ritual as well as economic significance. People grow beans, Congo beans, peas, maize, and millet as well as ground crops such as yams and manioc. Plots are often surrounded by living hedges of prickly pear cactus (PH701). Banana leaves are used for thatching.

Men worked in the sugar field seasonally, especially during the sugar cane harvest in January. This was preceded, in December, by the laying of temporary rails for the transport of the cut cane. These rails lines connect to the HASCO-owned tracks leading to Port-au-Prince and the wharf. Some transport, however was carried by oxcart (PH703). There was no motorized transport. Work supervisors circulated on horseback.

Along the shore, several land owners engaged in trade. One man sold sand for construction and transported it to Port-au-Prince. He also carried passengers to the city on his boats. His house, of the same materials as the others, had a tin roof.

Another landowner, a middle aged widow wealthy by local standards, claimed that she held land in trust for various *vodou* spirits for whom she sponsored an extensive series of rituals in December of 1947. It was said that such a ritual for the family dead and the family spirits had not been held since before the American Occupation (1915). An event of this magnitude involves major expenditures including the killing of many animals for

sacrifices and food, such as a bull, a pig, two goats, and chickens. Among visitors from the city was the sponsor's niece and goddaughter and presumptive heir ([EH738](#)). During the rituals, two women ([EH739](#)) with appropriate accoutrements represented a group of spirits known as *Gédé*. The sponsor of these rituals too owned boats and sold sand for construction in the city.

(For a description of parts of this ritual see E. Bourguignon 1979, p.237.

For a painting representing a ritual of feasting of the gods, see [UH510](#). The artist here depicts many events occurring over several days. The walls of the house are removed, so as to show activities in the interior. The woman in the red dress dances to the drums and is about to enter possession trance. The snake is quite imaginary.)

The fieldwork period close to the end of the year involved much ritual activity, including Christmas. This brought numerous visiting relatives to the area, to attend *vodou* rituals conducted by the *vodou* priest, the leading member of the family, who lived in Masson. Since he had a large following and an active practice, people came from quite considerable distances. They came from Port-au-Prince as well as from the Island of La Gonave.

Cooking is conducted out of doors, on a brazier, using charcoal, the only available fuel ([EH730](#), [731](#)). Cooking after dark is considered shameful and suspect. Cooking and eating breadfruit is considered an admission of great poverty. ([EH734](#), [735](#)) shows Josilia, a family member, harvesting breadfruit using a bamboo pole. (Historically, breadfruit trees, requiring little cultivation, were imported as food for slaves. Breadfruit trees are native to Tahiti. Captain Bligh's mission was to bring seedlings for Jamaican plantations).

The hamlet in which this house was located included three others: a larger, only partially completed one a few yards at the back, together with some cultivated land. This was the house of Josilia, the younger sister of Antoinette, with whom Erika had come from the city. Antoinette brought her little daughter, Alta Grace ([EH736](#)).

Josilia is one of three co-wives of an older richer man who lives in another hamlet. She has a little garden and also works occasionally as a seamstress. The plots on which these houses were constructed belonged to the mother of these two sisters. She now lived in the city with her youngest daughter and was a successful market woman. The three daughters and one son were the surviving children of a total of ten.

The father now lived with the son and his family, in another hamlet.

A third house close by, in somewhat worn condition, was owned and lent out by a richer woman. It was inhabited by two unrelated people, a man and a woman originally from another area ([PH728](#)). She stands to the right of the group, with Paul, Antoinette and her child. The woman wearing a hat is a visitor. The woman, a widow, made mats from banana leaves, when these were available. In payment she gave back one mat of every three—she was able to make 2 mats a day, and sold them at 1 gourde (\$.20) a piece. She also made rope from palm fronds. She also has a small garden. The man worked seasonally for HASCO.

A fourth, half-built construction, decorated with conch shells, served as an Episcopal church to which people from the region came on Sunday mornings, bringing their own chairs. Conversion to Protestantism involves rejection of both *vodou* and Catholicism. *Vodouists* consider themselves Catholics. None of the people living in this hamlet were Protestant converts.

The family had numerous other relations in the area. In Masson, the *oungan* (vodou priest) Victor was the brother of this family's father. During the period of the fieldwork, he conducted a large Christmas ritual. (For a description and analysis of this event, see E. Bourguignon, 1976/91, Chapter 2.) In addition to leading various rituals, Victor conducted "treatments," that is, he divined causes of illnesses and troubles and performed curing rituals. His teenage son has attended trade school in the city and is semi-literate. His father was preparing him to succeed him as *oungan* of this *vodou* community

([EH740](#)). (Sixty years later, he is a prominent *vodou* priest and significant numbers of his community live in Florida as migrant workers. [Richman 2005]).

References:

Bourguignon, Erika. *Possession*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press. 1976/1991.

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Richman, Karen E. *Migration and Vodou*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press. 2005.