

# VOYAGES AUX ISLES DE L'AMERIQUE

Antilles 1693-1705

Part 2

## CHAPTER VI

### The Author Goes to Cul-de-Sac Francis [Baie du Francois]. Description of a Carib Hut.

Translation by  
A. Caron  
and I. Dookhan

I left Macouba on December 12 after having officiated at mass. I charged my neighbor, Father Breton, with the care of my parish. I had lunch at Grande Anse (Le Lorrain) while passing through, and I arrived rather early at the village of La Trinite, at Mr. Marevil's. I then went with him and stayed overnight at Mr. Joyeux's on the Galion River.

The next morning we were on our way again. Since Mr. Joyeux did not live in the district where we were going, and since only a commander and some negroes lived in his home with regular supplies which would not have sufficed us, he had taken care to place provisions in his boat which we might need before finishing our business. This was a wise precaution which we came to appreciate three fourths of the way to Cul-de-Sac Robert [Havre de Robert], when we were caught by such a violent squall from the west that had we not reached La Rose Point for shelter, I don't know what might have happened to our boat and all those in it.

This La Rose Point represents the eastern-most side of Cul-de-Sac Robert. A Carib, who lives there, took this name or gave his, I don't know which; however, I do know quite well that this point was of great help to us. We beached our boat and while the negroes were unloading it to pull it higher up, we went into Mr. La Rose's hut. Except for the fright, I was not too unhappy about this adventure since it gave me the means to observe Caribs in their huts after having seen them in their pirogues.

The Carib La Rose is Christian, and so are his wife and ten or twelve children he had of her and some others whom he had before being baptized. He received us with great civility. He had linen drawers over his brand new scarlet suit covering him from head to toe, that is to say, he had just been roucoued as it was barely past nine in the morning when we entered his home. His wife wore a *pagne* around her waist which reached to her knees. We saw two of her daughters, fifteen to sixteen years old, who were clad in the old tribal garments worn when first visited by Europeans, that is to say, the "camisa" [fringed and beaded loin-cloth], gaiters, and the bracelets. However, a moment later, they appeared in *pagnes*. A *pagne* is a piece of linen which women use to wrap around themselves, except for the shoulders. They make two turns with the cloth and cross the ends which are generally tucked inside to hold it fast. The *pagne* generally reaches to the knees. There are shorter *pagnes*, but rarely longer ones. This kind of garment is quite practical; it can be taken on or off easily. Men and women use it equally all along the Guinea coast. La Rose had four big boys thoroughly roucoued with the loin cloth on the small rope [described in the previous chapter]. The other children were dressed as they had been when entering the world, except for their head band. We found a large group of people in this house. There were nearly thirty Caribs who were meeting for the occasion I will describe later.

Carib huts are called "carbets." I do not know the origin of that name. I have never heard it said that, in all of Martinique, there was another one like that of La Rose. This hut was about 60 feet long by 24 to 25 feet wide. It was built like a hall. The small posts reached nine feet above the ground on both sides, the lath was made of reeds, and the roof of thatch reached as low as the beams. One end of the house was completely enclosed with reeds and covered with thatch, except for an opening leading to the kitchen. The opposite end was almost completely open. Ten paces away from this building there was another one, about half its size; it was divided into two by a reed partition. We entered it; the first room served as a kitchen in which seven or eight women or girls were busy making cassava flour. The second room apparently served to house these ladies with their children who were not admitted into the larger hut. There was no furniture in this hut or the larger one other than baskets and hammocks. La Rose had a chest, a gun, a pistol, a saber, and a powder horn near his hammock. His four older sons also had arms and had discharged their duties well when the British attacked the island. A few Caribs were making baskets. It was there that I observed for the first time how they are made. I also saw two women weaving a hammock on a loom in the way I described earlier. The bows, the arrows, and the maces were there in great numbers neatly hanging from the beams. The floor was of beaten earth, quite flat and smooth, except along the edges where it was slightly sloped. There was a rather large fire about one third of the way inside the hut, around which eight or nine Caribs were squatted (just as though relieving themselves) and they were smoking while waiting for some fish, called trunkfish, to be cooked. These gentlemen paid me their usual civility, without changing posture, by saying: "Hello friend, you got tafia?" They knew Mr. Joyeux and liked him because, when they went to his sugar factory, he would give them some syrup to make their "ouicou" [wine made with cassava, sweet potato, banana, and sugar cane] and would never fail to invite them to drink; this is the surest way to gain their friendship.

The fish, I just mentioned, were pell-mell in the fire between the wood and the coals. At first, I mistook them for fire wood. I couldn't imagine that cooking could be done in such a strange manner. I said so to La Rose who answered me that it was their way and that after tasting the fish he was certain that I would find it delicious and that I would admit that Caribs are not as bad cooks as I imagined. Please forgive me if I haven't recorded his words precisely. The meaning should suffice and it is exactly as reported.

Meanwhile, lunch time was getting close and the sea air had given us a strong appetite. Therefore, I told Mr. Joyeux's two negroes to bring a tablecloth. Having seen a beautiful straw mat spread out in a corner of the hut, I assumed that it was where these gentlemen took their meals and that we might well use it ourselves while waiting for them to use it. I had the tablecloth spread over it with napkins. Bread, salt, and a platter of cold meats were brought out. Mr. de Mareuil and Mr. Joyeux urged me to take my place, that is, to sit on the mat. After the usual compliments, I sat down; these gentlemen did the same, and were already eating when we noticed that the Caribs were glowering at us and were talking with much emotion to La Rose. We asked him the reason. He told us there was a dead Carib under the mat where we were seated and that this had greatly angered his relatives. We immediately arose and had our things removed. La Rose had another mat brought in and spread elsewhere. We sat down and continued our meal leisurely and offered drinks to Mr. La Rose and all his company in order to ease the scandal we had caused by sitting on their dead. In this way, we again became friends as before.

During the conversation we had with La Rose while eating, we learned that all these Caribs had assembled at his house to attend the funeral of the Carib under the mat. They were waiting for the arrival of a few more relatives from St. Vincent to bury him together. It is necessary for all the relatives to verify that the Carib had died a natural death since if only one did not, all the others would be unable to persuade him. On the contrary, he would likely believe that they had all conspired to kill him and he would feel honor bound to kill one of them to avenge the dead relative. This extreme sense of honor seemed quite troublesome and impertinent. I believe that our host would have much preferred this Carib had not done him the honor of dying in his house as this large company was appreciably diminishing his manioc supply which was probably just enough for his own family.

After having had dinner, I asked whether, as friends of the deceased, we might not view him. La Rose told me yes and that it would please his company, especially if we were all to drink to his health. He immediately had the mat, as well as the boards which covered the trench, removed. It had been dug like a well, about four feet in diameter and six to seven feet deep. The body was almost in the same squatting posture which I described earlier for those Caribs around the fire. His elbows were pressed to his knees and the palms of his hands supported his cheeks. He was properly painted in red with black mustaches and stripes painted on with a stain other than the ordinary genipa. His hair was tied behind his head. His bow, arrows, mace, and knife were by his side. Sand had been poured up to his knees, enough seemingly to hold his posture, since he was not touching the sides of the pit. I asked whether I might touch him and was given permission to do so. I touched his hands, his face, and his back; all were very dry and did not give a bad odor, although I was assured that no precaution had been taken other than having him roucoued immediately after expiring, following which he was placed in the pit as we saw him. The first relatives to come had removed some sand to examine the body and it had not been replaced to save the trouble of removing it on the arrival of each new relative. We were told that when all have seen him, the pit would be completely filled. We did not fail to drink and toast the health of the dead man after which we replaced the boards to close the pit and respread the mat over it. He had died almost five months ago. We were hoping that some relatives might arrive while we were there so that we might witness their ceremonies, but none came.

Meantime, the fish in the fire was cooked, and since these gentlemen were hungry, the women brought two or three "matatous" [baskets] filled with fresh cassava still warm, as well as two large "couis" [calabash bowls] one of which was full of crab "tomalin" and the other of "pimentade" red pepper sauce. This was accompanied by a large basket of boiled crabs, the trunkfish that was in the fire, and some fish with large scales cooked in the same manner.

Although I had eaten well, I didn't fail to get close to the "matatou" in order to taste the fish and the sauce. They never beg anyone to eat with them, but, on the other hand, they never stop anyone from joining them. Mr. La Rose and his four boys crossed themselves and said the Benedicite. The others refrained as they were not Christians although they had been baptized and they were ready to be baptized as often as they might be given a glass of brandy.

I will explain what "tomalin" is when I mention the crabs. As for the pepper sauce, it is syrup of boiled manioc with lemon juice in which they mash a great quantity of red peppers which no one but they can eat. I have already mentioned that it is their favorite all-purpose sauce. It should be further mentioned that they never use salt. It isn't that they lack it, there are natural salt ponds in all the islands where they could obtain it -- but it isn't to their taste. Neither is boiled meat or fish. I learned from them that, except for crab which is their main food, they eat nothing which is cooked in water; everything is roasted or barbecued. The way they roast is to skewer cut meat or birds, is small, on a stick which is planted in the ground in front of the fire. When the meat is judged sufficiently cooked on one side they turn it over so that the other side may be cooked. However, if the birds are a bit large, such as parrots, doves, or chickens, they do not take the trouble to pluck or clean them. They throw them whole with feathers into the fire, and when the feathers are consumed, they place them on embers and ashes. They leave them in this fashion as long as they judge necessary to cook them, after which they remove them, peel off with ease the crust made up of feathers and skin, take out the guts and the crop, and eat them thus. On several occasions I have eaten some prepared in this fashion and I myself have prepared some as I have just described. I have always found the meat juicy and of admirable tenderness and delicateness. Those who don't believe me can do the experiment at little expense and convince themselves of the truth or falseness of what I am recounting.

I tasted the fish with the large scales [probably tarpon]; it had been scaled as though pulled out of a sheath. The flesh was very good, well cooked and so fat that one might have thought it full of butter. It is true that this fish is ordinarily rather fat but it must be admitted that when it is cooked without water, butter or oil mixed in, it cannot but taste much better.

The trunkfish is so named because it is enclosed in a thin, dry, and very hard shell. It has a triangular cross-section from head to tail, and seemingly has no joints. When I opened one of those served on the "matatou" along the sides, one might have thought that a hot *pate* had been opened. The odor was good, the flesh white and well-cooked. Although this fish is not considered one of the best, maybe because there are more bones than flesh, I found it very good and very succulent.

It was a real pleasure to watch this large group of Caribs, squatting on their haunches like monkeys, eating with an appetite which would have given one to a sick man, not uttering a single word, and eating the smallest crab leg with admirable skill and speed. They rose with as little ceremony as they had used sitting. Those who were thirsty went to quench their thirst with water, a few started to smoke, another group went to lie down, and the rest started a conversation which I could not follow because it was in Carib.

The women came to remove the "matatous" and the "couis", the girls cleaned the place where we had eaten, and all of them, including the young children, retired to the kitchen, where we went to see them eat in the same posture and with the same good appetite which the men had displayed. I was a little surprised that the women didn't eat with their husbands, and if this is a rule with those people, why wasn't an exception made for Mrs. La Rose, a Christian and the hostess. I conveyed my thoughts to her husband who answered that custom doesn't allow it, that wives should never eat with their husbands, and that, when alone, he eats only with his older boys while his wife, daughters, and the rest of the children eat in the kitchen. This custom, although seemingly extraordinary at first, is not so primitive. After some reflection, it seemed to me filled with common sense and quite appropriate to contain this beautiful sex within the bounds of the duties and respect they owe men. The Caribs are not the only ones to treat them thus. I will report elsewhere other examples which Europeans should follow to avoid many aggravations.

We stayed at La Rose's house until three in the afternoon. The wind had died down completely; only the seas were high and quite heavy. However, La Rose's oldest son offered to come with us, and three other Caribs, attracted by the prospect of brandy, made the same offer. We took them at their word and although we already had seven negroes in the boat, we decided that this help would not be useless, that the young La Rose would pilot better than Mr. Joyeux's negro and that the number of our paddlers being increased by four, we would go faster and in greater safety.