

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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 Pôrto de Galinhas II

Recife,
 Pernambuco.

4th. June' 1966.

Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
 Institute of Current World Affairs,
 366 Madison Avenue,
 New York 17.

Dear Mr. Nolte,

On our arrival in North East Brazil we looked for a field-site with the following characteristics: It was to be a village economically dependent upon fishing. If possible it should still use jangadas, the pre-Columbian fishing rafts still in use along the North East coast of Brazil from Bahia to Ceara. The other pre-requisite was that it should be within reach of Recife, preferably using that city as a market. In such a village we intended to make a socio-economic survey of the whole community, but concentrating especially on the fishing industry, and its systems of boat ownership, distribution of catch, and marketing. All this would entail living on the site for at least a year.

It proved more difficult to find a suitable site than we had imagined. Villages tended to suffer from one or more of the following disadvantages. Their size was wrong: they were either too small to be interesting units, or they were too large, and were economically dependent on other industries as well as fishing. They were too near Recife and had large numbers of weekenders affecting the economy, or were too distant or isolated to have access to Recife as a market.

After searching up and down the litoral of Pernambuco, we finally found one which has turned out to suit our purposes admirably: we moved into Pôrto de Galinhas, or Port of Hens, early in February of this year. In this newsletter I propose to describe the life and people in the village, and in my next, I intend to give an account of the fishing industry.

The village lies only about seventy kilometres South of Recife, but, due to its appalling roads and consequent inaccessibility, it has been little affected by the state capital. The small entrepreneurs that come down to buy fish have hardly altered the way of life. The nearest bus service is two hours' walk away, and although some families have horses or mules, the majority wanting to go shopping, visit friends or catch the daily bus leaving at six a.m., make the journey on foot. Communications are at the moment being improved, and in five years' time the influence of the city will undoubtedly be much stronger.

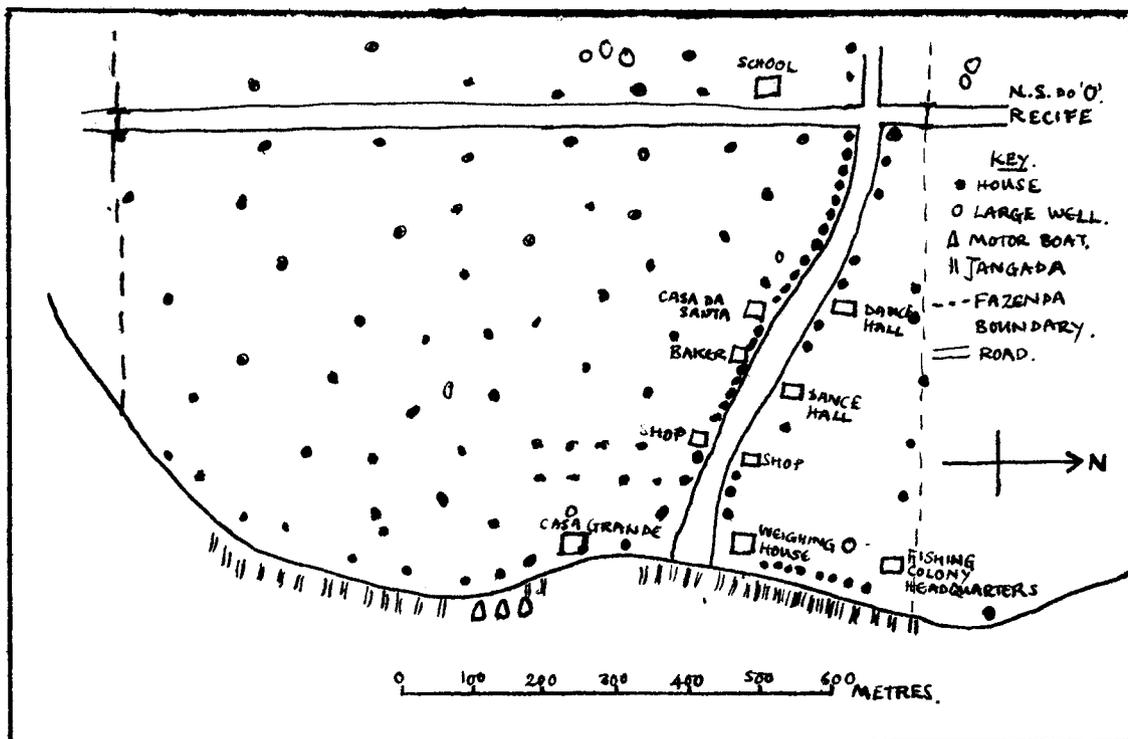
The site of the fishing community is a coconut palm plantation lying on a wide, shallow bay some fourteen kilometres across. The houses are scattered amongst the trees themselves, which in addition to providing a welcome dappled shade, make an invaluable contribution to daily needs. Their fruit is used for food and drink, their leaves for

building houses, both the walls and the roofs, and the husks and leaves are use for fuel. Among the children playing under the palms there is a large docile animal population of dogs, horses and mules, goats and chickens, together with zebu oxen from the neighbouring fazenda wandering about at will. A maze of footpaths worn through the coarse grass undergrowth lead between the scattered houses and the numerous wells. Fortunately, there is no shortage of water, although most of it has a high salt content, and the only water suitable for drinking lies right at the back of the site. Running water and electricity are still things of the future.

The sketch map below shows the approximate lay-out of the village. the one main street, at right angles to the sea, contains almost every Building of importance, except for the new school and the medical post. The jangadas are dragged up onto the beach when not in use, and only the three motor boats lie at anchor. The population of the village is about 750, and is distributed among 140 households. The majority of these have at least one man engaged professionally in fishing, either as a fisherman or as an entrepreneur.

Most of the land on this part of the coast is sandy, and although suited to little else, is ideal for coconut palms which thrive upon it. Consequently a strip, perhaps a kilometre wide, adjoining the sea along the length of the state, has been divided up into coconut plantations, or fazendas, of varying size and character. Some are very similar to cane plantations inland, with an autocratic landowner, either absentee or

Sketch Map of Porto de Galinhas, Pernambuco



living on the site, and wretchedly poor peasants, often paid well under the legal minimum legal wage, and living in huts of coconut leaves. Such owners usually discourage fishing, and in some cases have actually forbidden those living on the fazenda to fish, as they are economically independent of the owner, and contribute nothing to his land. But there are also owners who are not concerned with the presence of fishermen, but only with obtaining the maximum crop from their coconut trees. The workers are much less servile, and the padrao-trabalhador relationship is very much weaker.

Porto de Galinhas is a good example of the latter type of fazenda. The owner, an ailing but charming old man of seventy, lives in Recife, and either he or members of his family come down to the village for odd weekends four or five times a year. The plantations come onto the market very rarely, and this one has remained in the hands of the same family for the past hundred years. The former casa grande has been washed away by the strong erosive action of the sea, and only its solidly built foundations are uncovered at exceptionally low tides. The present house is a relatively modest building that is very seldom used. The owner's knowledge of the community is comparatively slight, and his control loose.

The effective control is held by an able and popular administrator, whose popularity can be judged from the fact that he has at least one godchild in every house. He lives a few miles away on his own small plantation, but nevertheless probably knows more about the life of the community than any resident. Although only a dozen men are employed by the owner to work on the fazenda, and the rest are fishermen, or workers employed on the neighbouring fazendas or engenhos, the administrator is responsible to the owner for the acts and welfare of the entire population. Until the resident nurse arrived, he used to act as doctor, delivering babies and giving injections, in addition to having mandatory police powers. Playing his cards carefully, he has managed to remain popular with the owner by increasing the coconut harvest. His popularity with the local population rests on his turning a blind eye to immigration, and only interfering to a minimal extent. It is widely known that a number of houses have been bought 'for the owner', and then rented out by the administrator, but nobody objects. The owner's only interest lies in the prosperity of his coconut palms; anything beyond this is only brought to his notice by the administrator.

To me, one of the attractive elements of the village is its complete lack of any form of class structure. Some families tend to be richer than others, and some by weight of numbers hold representative posts more often. Certain individuals through strength of character are better known than others, but people, without exception, treat each other as equals. Moreover, there is no hierarchy of any kind, nor any recognised form of leadership. Evils inherent in class-structured societies, such as show of material wealth, are still pleasingly absent.

The most expensive houses, but not necessarily those owned or inhabited by the richest families, are built of taipa (clay and sticks), with a covering of a soft type of plaster, and whitewashed. Floors are cemented, and roofs tiled, but have no ceilings. The square windows

are protected only by wooden shutters. The poorest houses are built entirely of coconut leaves, and have mud, or occasionally sand, floors. They have no windows, but are left partly open at one end to let in the light. The doors are also made of coconut leaves. Between these two extremes are the majority. These have untreated taipa walls, coconut leaf roofs, and earth floors. Structurally, the interiors of all types of houses are the same. Behind the front room, euphemistically called the sala, is a small, partly partitioned off dining space. A wall, of eye level height only, divides this off from two or three small bedrooms, and a kitchen at the back. The lavatory is a coconut leaf, roofless box in the back yard.

Even the meanest houses have two or three rooms inside. Furnishings and possessions give a more accurate indication of wealth than the houses themselves. Armchairs and rocking-chairs are owned only by the richest households. Kerosene-burning mantle lamps, and gas or kerosene stoves are also luxuries that can only be afforded by a few. Most houses only have wooden chairs or benches, wick ~~lamps~~, and wood or carbon burning stoves. Many people, especially children, sleep in brightly coloured hammocks: the remainder have either collapsible camp beds, or beds with straw ~~m~~ mattresses.

Items, apparently worthless, are carefully preserved and put to other uses. Every piece of paper is used two or three times before it is so torn that it has to be thrown out. Tins are highly valued objects: Porto de Galinhas is in the tin age rather than in the pot age. Every tin goes through two or three metamorphoses until, completely eaten away by rust, and broken, it is finally cast away. Kerosene cans, once empty, are well suited to carrying water from the wells. The women, after years of practice as children, are able to balance twenty litre cans on their heads for long distances. The most popular containers for lifting water from the wells are empty tins of 'Alliance for Progress' oil, widely distributed in the village, which are ideal in size and shape for this purpose. The last phase of life, after water carrying or storage, or both, is as a flower pot to grow young trees, or to protect plants from ants and termites.

Bicycles are becoming popular, especially among young men. They are covered in flags, hooters, lights and stickers, and are used for journeys up and down the main street or for races along the beach at low tide. For women, the major consumer durable bought with available money is a sewing machine, whilst almost every house that has not yet been able to afford a radio would give it very high priority.

Houses are sparsely furnished. However, with the number of people living in them, it is probably a good thing that they do not contain more objects, for when the whole family is present, bodies take up most of the available space. To a certain extent houses can grow with the family: taipa or palm leaf construction is an easy matter. For example, lacking a bathroom, we hired a couple of men to do this for us. The whole operation, including the building of a tank and the fitting of a lavatory took two days.

Walls are usually bare. Occasionally they are hung with some tinted family photographs. These, in hideous gilt frames, look down from the

heights at a perilous angle, and invariably give the impression of being taken at least forty years ago. They all have a curious propensity to make the subject look like a criminal. Sometimes out of date calendars serve as mural decoration. Other houses consider it enhancing to cover part of the wall in old sheets of newsprint, frequently without any photographs: an odd form of primitive pop art. A habit, also, of arranging the family's toothbrushes in a prominent place in the front room, is almost universal here. Some houses have elaborate wooden stands, expressly made for this purpose. The custom must have originated from the time when very few cleaned their teeth, and wished to show it off. Now even the most primitive houses boast their row of tooth mug, paste and brushes.

Fish, naturally, is the main food. During the Summer a considerable variety of these are caught, the most common being a large mackerel, mullet, and agulha (like large sardines with sword noses). Occasionally octopus, turtle meat and crabs are obtainable. During the Winter, large numbers of fresh water shrimps are trapped in the mangrove swamps at the back of the village. With the fish are eaten rice, feijao and farinha, and sometimes bread fruit or macaxeira - a type of non-poisonous mandioca root. Some richer families supplement this with tomatoes, onions and peppers, but no green vegetables are eaten. Bananas are brought from the local engenhos, and cost little. During their respective seasons men bring round mules bearing panniers of mangoes, potatoes and Indian corn. All other fruits are gathered wild in the woods nearby or grown in people's back yards. These are either eaten raw, made into ponches (fruit drinks), or boiled up with a great deal of sugar and very little water into doces. Numerous Indian foods made of farinha into cakes and biscuits are cooked as luxuries,

Trousers on women are thought daring, and are seldom worn. Women generally wear shapeless cotton dresses and go barefoot. A few people of either sex walk about in Japanese rubber sandals, and everybody, however poor, has at least one good outfit which is carefully preserved. Girls show much ingenuity with their best dresses on a minimal budget. Children are seldom clothed until they are five or six, the boys going naked, and the girls wearing only a pair of pants. Hair curlers have recently arrived, and they are so much of an innovation that, far from being only worn in bed where they cannot be widely appreciated, the more fashion-conscious girls wear curlers all day and only take them out at night. One girl even wore them to conduct public prayers, and had a large group of admirers complimenting her in front of the altar.

Almost all household needs can be obtained locally, for in addition to the three proper shops and two bars, numerous private houses sell specialised items from cloth to mandioca root extracts. The appearance of the shops belies the large range of goods that they stock. Rusty biscuit tins protect everything from the destructive humidity, and it is even possible to buy iced beer and alka seltzer. However, stocks tend to run out rather too frequently and prices are high, due both to high transport costs and to monopolistic exploitation. As all the shops are also bars, prices tend to fluctuate with the state of the shopkeeper: the drunker the cheaper. The baker is very fond of hunting and fishing, and any excuse not to bake is taken. One after another his ingredients run out, and then the rumour that 'they say there is a national holiday' is considered

Children in Sunday Clothes Outside the Bakery

adequate. Those selling fish in the local markets prefer to do most of their shopping there, as the choice is greater and prices are lower.

There is a curious mixture of primitivity and development in the fields of education and medicine. Very few members of the adult population are literate, although most can write their names for official purposes. Very few can tell the time from a clock, but most can judge it fairly accurately from the sun. For a time evening classes were held for adults, which were relatively popular, having ten or a dozen regular attenders. Most were as anxious to learn to do sums to help them with their business, as to learn to read. However, the teacher left the village, and the classes were discontinued. Only once have I ever seen anybody reading. This was a strange, rather effeminate fisherman who always carries a notebook and pencil in his shirt pocket and wears dark glasses, who was sitting outside his house reading the Bible.

The reasons for illiteracy in the older generation are different from those which account for the illiteracy of so many of the present school age children. Whereas formerly there were not enough schools to cater for all children, there are now too many, and they are all of an abysmally low standard. Catering for a school age population of about 150, there are no less than four schools, each with one teacher. There is a place for every child between the age of seven and fourteen, and some older and younger are also attending. One school is run by the State, two by the local municipality, and one theoretically by the federal government for the children of fishermen.

Of the four teachers, only one has received more than primary education herself, that of the state school. The other three are all fishermen's wives who have obtained their posts by various dubious channels, including one who, already middle-aged, has only recently started. She had a cousin working in the municipal offices who managed to arrange a salary for her as a teacher. Another, the federal school teacher, has received no pay for the past five years, as the whole system of schools for fishermen's families is in a state of flux. She has nevertheless been continuing to teach for fear of losing all claim to back pay when the situation is resolved. In the meantime she is receiving a purely nominal (four dollars a month) salary from the municipality. The state school teacher is from a very different background and attended a 'normal' school, but she is nevertheless extremely unimaginative and narrow minded. She took the job over from a less qualified teacher as, at the age of fifty, she deserted her husband and family to come and live with an eighteen year old fisherman's son here.

One of the municipal schools only teaches children in the first grade: that is, those who are completely unable to read or write. The other three teach up to the fourth grade, but at least eighty per cent of all the children are still in the first grade. The state school is generally considered the best, and most parents ambitious for their children try to send them there. But even in this school, all the children are taught together regardless of age or standard. All the schools offer only two to four hours of tuition a day, and all the numerous national holidays are observed, as well as the unofficial holidays when the teachers have to visit Recife for materials or for their salaries. Only the state school has a proper building; the other three are in the teachers' houses. Equipment and visual aids are non-existent. It is not surprising in the circumstances that eleven and twelve year olds are bored stiff with trying to learn to read, after four years of irregular attendance in which they have learnt nothing. These distract the others, who in turn do not pay attention and therefore learn less. Few parents compel their children to attend regularly, and there are several cases of sixteen and seventeen year olds still in the first grade attending school voluntarily, wanting to learn to read, and regretting the earlier lack of discipline.

There are five grades in the primary stage of education, so that not one of these schools even prepares a child for secondary education. If he wishes to continue beyond the fourth grade, a child can either go to the local market town or to Recife, or, if he has suitable connections, he can perhaps obtain a scholarship for a year at a free boarding school inland. But the last possibility is only for a year, and the other two involve expense well beyond the means of a fisherman's family. With this lack of future in front of them, there is little incentive for children to work. Yet, the ambition of most is not to follow their fathers, but to have a shop or drive a vehicle. Fishing, to them, offers an income too irregular and uncertain, and little or no hope of becoming rich. But if these ambitions are to be realised, at least a minimum of literacy is a pre-requisite for both professions, and most children now of school age will certainly not have sufficient skill to achieve this.

Radios in a quiet way are helping to broaden the outlook of the community. Since books are never read, and current newspapers never seen

knowledge of the outside world is very limited. News brought by word of mouth from Recife was the only source of information. Radios, mostly bought on the black market, are now owned by over a quarter of the households. They are turned on loudly the whole day, and almost everybody has access to one in a friend's house. Compared with most Brazilian communities in the interior, curiously little interest is shown in news or facts; they are normally background noise. Never have I seen a group of people tensely listening to programmes on Government policy or internal affairs.

Radio stations are commercialised, and broadcast popular music alternating with advertisements. Serials and news bulletins occur at intervals. The latter are rattled off at top speed in a sing-song voice, and it is not surprising that they are frequently misunderstood. Often it is the unimportant little bits of information that are most readily absorbed. For example, a woman announced to me that the radio had said that it was forbidden to use razor blades for cutting bread before it was baked, and how wicked it was of the local baker to continue to do so. People's conception of the government is distinctly hazy, but a few now know the name of the President of Brazil.

Medicine is in a stage of transition between faith healers and modern medicine. At the moment the one complements the other, and the absence of the latter accounts for the continued trust put in the former. There is a self-trained nurse in the village, provided by the Federal Government for the families of fishermen. Although formerly a doctor and a dentist used to visit the village once a week, all the duties of both now fall on the nurse. Whenever the nephew of the owner, a paediatrician, comes down, he holds a clinic and distributes free medicines; but apart from him no doctor ever visits the place. The nearest doctor and hospital are in Recife, and both the time wasted and the expense of the journey are a considerable deterrent except in the most urgent life or death cases.

The lack of doctors, however, does not account for a great deal of the unnecessary suffering that exists. Ignorance and apathetic neglect are the prime causes. Nothing is done about a disease or wound until it is frequently too late. Almost every wound goes septic, and limbs have been amputated as the result of a small cut. Even if they are offered free medicines, people have been too lazy to collect and apply them.

To the local population there are two panaceas which between them cure everything. Penicillin is taken for almost every ailment, including rheumatism. Although, not unsurprisingly, it often has little effect, it is nevertheless, impossible to shake their faith in its powers. One of the poorest families insisted in spending their hard earned money on penicillin tablets for a girl with mumps, despite earnest entreaties not to do so. The other indiscriminately used, but not mutually exclusive, remedy is injections. In common with a great many Brazilians, people take an almost masochistic delight in them. They are given for everything not covered by penicillin tablets. The contents, other than penicillin, differ occasionally, but since the liver is primitively believed to be the source of most evils, the needle is usually used to inject some liver medicine, even if the complaint is a swollen leg.

There is but one cure for toothache: extract the tooth. This simple remedy has had the foreseeable result of well over half the population being toothless by the time they are thirty. Strong boys of eighteen grin out of toothless gums, and none bother with false teeth. When I announced that I was going to have a tooth filled, some agreed that it was a good idea, but others thought it much better to get to the root of the trouble, and extract the tooth straight away, as the trouble would only recur again later.

The alternative method of healing is by benzedores (blessers). Four or five oldish people in the village have the power to bless the sick and to pray for their recovery. Long incantations are offered to different saints for different diseases. Each Benzedor has his own speciality: for instance, one concentrates on the teeth and eyes, and another on children. The ceremony is very informal, and there is very little religious awe. The prayers, in rhyming couplets, are repeated rapidly in a loud whisper with no expression. Whilst doing this the benzedor wipes the afflicted part of the body with sacred herbs dipped in water that has seen the rising sun. The village benzedores only bless and pray for the patient, but really serious cases are blessed by a more powerful benzedor from outside, who also prescribes treatment and states whether the victim will be cured.

Without exception, everybody believes that benzedores do good, but the amount of faith held in them compared with doctors varies very greatly. With some, blessing is regarded as purely supplementary to medical treatment, and with these it can do little harm. On the contrary, it does good in that it reassures the patient, or the patient's parents. With others, however, the blessing is considered more important than other medical advice, and at times even considered sufficient alone.

Local cures, mainly different forms of tea, are frequently prescribed for common ailments. When I lost my voice, I was advised to take brick tea. This, made by pouring boiling water over a brick, was brought round to me on three nights by a friend. I drank the tasteless liquid whilst quietly taking more orthodox remedies: I still do not know which cured the throat.

Health is poor, and infant and child mortality especially high. Very few women who have had more than three children have not at least one dead. Often, of eight or nine born alive, five are dead before they are adults. Again, much of this is due to neglect and ignorance. There are no prams or play pens, and until they can walk, children are either held in their mother's arms, or left loose on a bed. They learn to walk before they are a year old, and from then on they are allowed to go anywhere, doing what they like, and naturally playing amid hens, animals, and dirt. They all have pot bellies from worms picked up from the ground and from the untreated water. The more intelligent families are now beginning to treat worms regularly, but it is impossible to avoid them altogether. The close supervision needed would be well beyond the powers of a mother with six or seven other small children to look after at the same time. Children look sickly until they are about six years old: if they survive to this age, they seem to miraculously recover, and flourish thereafter.

Diseases are various. Well known tropical diseases such as malaria and yellow fever have been wiped out, thanks to national campaigns. Epidemics of measles and mumps, and other universally common illnesses break out periodically, but apart from these, the two most frequent causes of suffering are anaemia and boils, both partly the results of malnutrition.

If asked their religion, most would say that they were Catholics: a few of the old men and women, if asked, laugh and say that they are nothing. But Catholicism to almost all the rest, is invariably linked with festas. There is no church. Although the municipality did start to build one some years ago, some bureaucratic hitch prevented its completion. For some time a hull with three foot high walls remained, but bit by bit the bricks were removed and put to other uses. Now only the foundations remain.

Instead a casa da santa, a taipa hut, is used for masses held two or three times a year, and only on major feast days. For these, a priest is summoned from a monastery nearby. No church is much less than an hour's walk away, and these only celebrate mass once a month. People consequently tend only to go to church for feasts, and none go more than four or five times a year.



Fishermen by a Jangada

The only strict religious observance by all is that of baptism. Not one child in the village has not been baptised, either here or in the local market town. Compadre ties, the relationship observed between a godparent and the parents of a godchild, are generally weak, except in cases where there was already a close friendship between those concerned. It is not normally a way of increasing a friendship. Many compadres live outside the community, a result of the recent immigration of most families.

Religion is rarely discussed, and knowledge of religious matters is slight. All believe in God in an unquestioning way. Birth and death lie in God's hands: trust in his powers is demonstrated by their faith in benzedores. As is almost universally true, the women and children take a much larger part in religious activities than the men. May is known as the Month of the Marys, and nightly prayers are held in the casa da santa. They were

led this year by a girl of twenty five, and whenever I went, the congregation consisted entirely of women and children, with more of the latter. A few men looked in through the doors, but not one entered. The occasion was very informal: small children wandered around climbing onto the laps of relatives, and dogs sat around washing themselves near the altar.

In the last two or three years Protestantism has been gaining recruits. There are now eighteen Baptists and Members of the Assembly of God, jointly known as Crentes - believers. They are looked at askance by the rest of the population who consider baptism by total immersion in the sea a very odd procedure; also, since Crentes are forbidden to drink, smoke, dance or gamble, some find the prospect of membership unattractive. Without exception they are all negroes. I am quite sure this is not because they are banding together as a minority group, but because the evangelical quality of the service appeals more to them than to the non-negro element. The Crentes hold well attended weekly meetings with a literate pastor from outside, and the time is spent singing jolly, tuneful evangelical hymns, and reading from the Bible. A spirit of enjoyment rather than deep religious fervour is prevalent, and many non-believers go just to listen to the hymns, and watch the people taking part.

People are extremely tolerant and easy going. None have the somewhat unpleasant servility of the engenho workers, but are polite autocrats. Although poor, few go seriously hungry, leading a rather Bohemian life and living from hand to mouth. Most are highly improvident with any money that they have, and any surplus is immediately spent on some small luxury. They are natural optimists, but where there is little ground for hope, they are fatalists; I have never heard any hints of pessimism. Much mutual help is given, especially among members of a family. Those who cannot provide for themselves are helped by small presents of food from a wide variety of sources, and small gifts are often given between friends. After a good day's fishing, a sizeable amount of the catch is usually given away to the fisherman's family and other friends. Fruit grown and gathered locally is also distributed generously. Presents are given on a rough exchange system within a certain circle of friends and relatives.

Few houses have the normal nuclear family with a married couple and their children. Few couples live with one partner for life. A little over half the couples living together are married either civilly or in church, and the remainder are unmarried, living in an amasiado relationship. This is sometimes because there is no divorce in Brazil, even if they wished to go through the process, and sometimes it is simply due to laziness. The marriage ceremony appears to have little effect on the duration of the partnership. Several elderly couples who have remained together all their lives have never been married: others have married and parted within a year.

The weakest of sanctions prevent men and women from deserting their partners for others, and, as a result, children are seldom brought up by both true parents. Grandparents often help families with a great many children by adopting one or two; parents support their daughters with illegitimate babies. There are a large number of these, and little stigma is attached to their status. Nevertheless, girls who sleep with

men whilst not forming a long term liaison with them are frowned upon socially.

Girls leave home young, and many have had children by the time they are sixteen. By the time they are thirty five or forty they have had at least nine usually, and look very much older than they are. Attitudes to birth control are fatalistic. Women would generally prefer to have only three or four children. One told me how she had prayed for few children, and that God had answered her prayer. Men are less concerned with the problem. One fisherman felt it his duty to the nation to produce as many children as possible 'to make Brazil a strong country'.

Family surnames are sometimes not known, and nobody knows the surname of other families, as they are never used except to differentiate several people with the same Christian name. These latter fall into two very distinct categories. It is safe to say that two thirds of the male population are Jose or Amaro, and the same proportion of the females are Maria or Amara. It is not uncommon for parents to give two or more children the same name, distinguishing them only by nicknames. These compensate for the dullness of the proper names. For example, Amaro Bon-Bon, Pinto (Chicken), Bacalhau (Cod), and Trouxe Burro (Brought a Donkey), are all Amaros. The remaining third, especially the men, have names as exotic as the others are dull. We have Napoleon, Procopius, Apollonius, and Anatolio to mention but a few. A small girl is called Esclandinava. Her father had read it on a ship, and thought it was the ship's name: he had never heard of the group of countries. Universally common names such as the Portuguese equivalent of Peter, Paul, Ann or Catherine are not found.

Houses, though small for the extended families, are adequate for their needs. From the age of a year onwards children play outside among the coconut trees or on the beach. They possess very few toys, but show great ingenuity in making model trucks and boats out of cotton reels and old tins. Men also spend little time in the house, and are either out working, or congregate to converse or mend nets. They meet in the bars to drink Pitu, a very cheap spirit made from sugar cane, or they sit near the weighing house by the beach, and mend nets, converse, smoke, or often just sleep. This leaves only the women, the infants and the very old in the house during the day. The population lives by daylight hours, rising early and going to bed early. Night life, except when there is a full moon, centres around doorways and in shops: by nine o'clock most families are asleep. However, during the period about full moon, the whole village suddenly comes to life, and spends the nights fishing on the reef, and promenading along the beach.

Perhaps one of the reasons for certain predominating characteristics is the amount of movement into and out of the village, especially the former. There is only one family of any size that has been established in the community for more than three generations, and immigration in the last twenty years has been extremely high. Provided houses are available, the effects of immigration tend to be self-generating. Part of a family arrives, discovers the undoubted advantages of the place over many others, and gradually the rest of the family follow. This process has resulted in

A Typical Coconut Leaf House

there being three large parentelas (extended families) in the village, but very few individuals are without even a cousin in the place. Families have come from a variety of backgrounds, but these are predominantly of two types. The most numerous group are those who were land workers on nearby engenhos, who, fed up with the servility and the poverty of their positions, have come to the beach in search of freedom, and perhaps a little more money, but primarily independence. Most of the remainder come from other beaches in the area. They left either because fishing was poor, or because they were prevented from fishing by the owner of the fazenda. Finally a few have come from much further afield, from the Agreste and the Sertão, from which they fled as flagelados during the droughts. Not one family has come from Recife or any sizeable town. But equally significantly, I have not yet discovered one family that has left to go anywhere but the city, except for reasons beyond their control.

The population is a complete racial mixture from pure negro to very blond, with strong Indian features in some. There are remarkably few mixed couples of very light and very dark, although people of slightly different shades live together. The majority are moreno. There is complete racial tolerance, and no differentiation of treatment of people of different colours. One is admired for being fair by some, but only in the way that in England a woman would be admired for being beautiful. A slight, but by no means universal feeling exists that fair people are more beautiful, but there is no belief that in any sense morenos or negroes are inferior.

Our own reception here was extraordinarily warm and friendly, and it was very much easier to establish contact than we had dared to hope. The woman who cooks for us is a great gossip, and has lived here for twenty years so that she is a mine of information. She very quickly realised that we wanted to know everything that was happening, and even if some of her stories are untrue, they at least provide a basis to work from. There is a widespread tendency to lie, not maliciously, and to exaggerate, and all stories, therefore, have to be checked innocently two or three times.

At the beginning we had very considerable curiosity value. Both adults and children would stare in through the windows for hours on end, apparently fascinated by our most everyday behaviour. Fortunately as the novelty wore off, the audience diminished, and we are now generally left in peace. Any visitors however, are still brought round to 'spy on the English', as one of the permanent sources of village entertainment.

Language was a problem for a time. Apart from the amusement of hearing us converse in English, they had never heard foreigners trying to speak Portuguese before. Some suffered from a complete mental block and would not even try to understand us. One old woman that I was questioning about her family was conversing quite happily, when suddenly she stopped and said: 'But I can't go on, I don't understand a word you say'. I reassured her that she was in fact understanding, and she immediately looked relieved and continued perfectly happily.

England is an unbelievably long way away to people. The only other foreigners who had been here were a group of Japanese with interpreters, looking for possible fishing grounds. Therefore, rather to our initial surprise, we found that all our foreign characteristics were compared to those of the Japanese. The greatest distance conceivable to most is Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo. Knowledge of other countries is negligible. They are staggered that any place in the world can take fifteen days to reach by sea, and a common question asked is how long it would take to drive to England by car. We have explained a great many times that all our relatives live in England, but even so, whenever we have visitors they are always assumed to be relatives, usually siblings. An older Brazilian sociologist who came down one day, was universally assumed to be my husband's father.

Pieces of information have gradually spread through the village, both from what we have said, and from added interest in news items about England heard on the radio. A girl knew that Princess Margaret came from there; but she did not know that there was a Queen of England, and had never heard her name. Two of the best remembered facts are that few families have more than two or three children, and that the climate is very much colder, and for some curious reason, these have now been causally related in the minds of some.

The subject matter of this letter is parochial, but the life described is basically similar to that of any jangada settlement. In writing of such a community, one is torn between a general account

of life, and the minutiae which bring it alive. After living in the place for a month, the basic strangeness of life wears off, and it is taken for granted: it is the details that from then on absorb one's attention. It is difficult to find a happy compromise in which the finer points are set against an adequate background without stating banalities which the reader would have taken for granted.

As I said at the beginning, I intend next month to give an account of the social organisation and economic activities of the jangada fishermen.

Yours sincerely,

Fanny Mitchell.

Fanny Mitchell.

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