Ideological Component: Beliefs and Attitudes.

The third component includes those cognitive and attitudinal phenomena usually included under the rubric of "ideology." Here we are primarily interested in the beliefs and aspirations of the Haitian peasantry with regard to the number of children they have. An effective social system insures the participation of its members by several means; one of these is to inculcate in them beliefs and attitudes and aspirations which are in accord with, and result in, the behavior which the system requires of them. In the present context, this means that we would expect ideals concerning family size to bear at least some relationship to the actual families that are produced.

When the conclusion of an anthropological or sociological study is that the beliefs of a group are somehow unfathomable or weird, there is something fishy about the study. There exists such a piece of research about rural Haiti, in which the men and women in a Haitian village are depicted as being fatalistically and religiously indifferent to the number of children they have---as being in fact unaware of the whole question of family size. (Stykos, M.J.: "Haitian Attitudes Toward Family Size," 1962).

Stykos' respondents (or rather those of his students) were first given a projective test and subsequently asked direct questions about how many children they desired. In the projective test they failed to talk about family size
Several people have expressed, in a very cautious manner, curiosity about the possibility of not having any more children. There are no widely-known local folk-contraceptives, though at least some people have talked about abortives. This latter is considered sinful, but there is no evidence that this attitude has been instilled by the local priest. It is more likely of local origin. People have vaguely heard about the possibility of going to a doctor so as not to make any more children; this is seen as a sensible move. But it is also believed that the "wire" he puts in your stomach (I.U.D.) will hurt some women and make them not be able to have children in the future. In short, there is an interest on the part of villagers to cease making children, but a fear that the methods used by doctors will result in physical harm. And these methods have been merely vaguely heard about. For the most part they have the very realistic notion that conception is something over which they have no control.

As was to be expected, conception, being out of the control of humans, was placed in the hands of God. "It is God who makes babies, not us." And since it is in the hands of God, many women and girls have made a pilgrimage to Kalvè (a shrine on the southern part of the Cul-de-Sac plain), where they have petitioned God either to send them
a child or to stop sending them children. But even this is seen as a slightly dangerous move; many people feel that if you ask God for few children he will send you many, and that if you ask him for many, there is a good chance he will send you too few. (Though the religious idiom in which this is construed will strike many as pre-scientific, the observation itself—namely, that the opposite of what was prayed for may occur—has a very solid empirical base.) Thus the safest course is to keep one's preferences to oneself, and assure God that He is the Boss.

This is precisely what Stykos' respondents did, and it is precisely what the people of La Hatte do if they are directly questioned as to how many children they want. "Whatever God sends me. If he sends me ten, I'll be happy; if he sends me two, I'll be happy." To take this type of statement at its face value as an expression of some inner conviction is to miss a very important sociocultural point: power to affect the will of God is attributed to words. Though rural Haitian culture gives its own slant to this belief—i.e., don't even suggest that your will could differ from God's—this habit has strong analogues in our own culture, as is exemplified, for example, by people who hope that prayer (words addressed to the Divinity) will cure sicknesses which medicine can't handle.

At any rate to infer from such statements that the
Haitian villager has no preferences as to the number of his children is to display a lack of insight. The social, economic, and personal consequences of having ten as opposed to two children is too great in any culture to be of no concern to the people involved.

The trick is to phrase the question in a way which is not exposing the respondent to divine retribution. "Before you were married, how many children did you ask God for?" "How many more children will you have before you ask God to stop you?" Questions such as these usually evoke instantaneous answers. For the respondents who say "No, you shouldn't ask God...", the following approach was found to work. "Well, suppose God speaks to you in a dream and tells you 'I'll give you as many children as you want,' what will you say to him?" In all cases the answers vary between three and five, as mentioned above.

While some might find this behavior on the part of the respondents as "superstitious," in another sense it is rational. Childbearing has in effect been an event over which they have had no control, and God has frequently acted contrary to their wishes. The best approach is to avoid the expression of any opinion in a matter so vital. Certainly it would be the height of folly to risk unknown punishment by giving a public answer to the dangerous question posed by an intruding interviewer.
In short there is enough information to justify the statement that the ideological component of the system that is under investigation here is in fundamental harmony with the economic and demographic components. In the symbolic representations they give to fertility related matters, the people of La Hatte display a consistency and an awareness of the repercussions of having different numbers of children. While the religious idiom in which they insist on construing these matters may strike secular observers as being somewhat bizarre and "exotic," stripping their statements of this idiom, we see that they have accurately perceived their helplessness in this matter and sensibly avoid making statements that could call down divine wrath on them. At the same time it is clear that they do harbor preferences, that these preferences are consistent with the realities of their life, and that if an inexpensive, effective, and physically safe method of realizing these preferences is made available to them, they will take advantage of it.

The observer who is searching for quaint exotica will find much that lends itself to easy caricature in rural Haiti. The uniqueness of Haiti's historical situation has given rise to patterns of action and speech which if ripped from their context appear frankly bizarre.
Even the sympathetic observer can easily distort and misinterpret what he sees and hears unless a constant attempt is made to place phenomena in their context. Stykos fell into this trap when he tried to study "attitudes" in isolation. Far from decrying any alleged irrationality or irresponsibility, the observer who takes a synthetic, integrated look at the economic, reproductive, and ideological facets of the lives of the Haitian villagers can only be amazed that the medically helpless domestic groups in this population have achieved such a close overall fit between what is economically convenient, what is normatively desired, and what is demographically achieved.