

The Economic Context of Fertility Patterns  
in a Rural Haitian Community

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(Note to students in the Anthropology of the Caribbean. I prepared this field report while I was still a graduate student doing fieldwork in a Haitian village.)

This research is being carried on as part of an Overseas Population Internship in the Department of Population Planning at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, under the academic guidance of Dr. Samuel Wishik, of the International Institute for the Study of Human Reproduction, Columbia University, New York City; and Dr. Lambros Comitas of the Department of Anthropology, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City. The fieldwork in Haiti is being carried on under the auspices of Dr. Ary Bordes, of the Centre d' Hygiène Familiale, Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Economic Component	4
Demographic Component	14
Ideological Component	30
Implications for Family Plan- ning Programs	43
Implications for Research	58
Appendix I: the census	65
Appendix II: Fertility Differentials	72

Tables

1. Breakdown of the Population by Age and Sex	15
2. Males: Marital Status by Age	20
3. Females: Marital Status by Age	21
4. Currently Mated Adults: Religion by Marital Status	23
5. Males: Mating Status by Age	25
6. Females: Mating Status by Age	25
7. Male Fertility and Infant Mortality	29
8. Female Fertility and Infant Mortality	29
9. Male Fertility Stratification on the basis of children everborn	73
10. Female Fertility Stratification on the basis of children everborn	73

## INTRODUCTION

The following pages will briefly sum up and analyze the information relevant to family planning gleaned in several months of fieldwork in a Haitian hamlet. This period of exploratory research has been a useful preliminary not only for settling in, learning the language, and becoming acquainted with and acceptable to the members of the research community, but also for isolating and clarifying the genuine issues around which the success of a program of voluntary fertility control will ultimately hinge. These issues, which should be the object of more exact study, are by no means self-evident. On the contrary it is very easy to misconstrue the problem. It will be argued in these pages that one widespread stereotyped image of the Haitian demographic situation--namely, that of a fatalistic population whose religious, child-hungry men and women continue to produce offspring at a blind, self-destructive rate--is a serious distortion. It will be pointed out that the support given to this distortion by pieces of attitudinal research such as that of Stycos ("Haitian attitudes with regard to family size were studied by a student of his) is largely a result of ignoring important spheres of data because of an exclusive attention to the "cognitive" and "attitudinal" spheres.

The proper framework in which to construe the reproductive habits of the Haitian villagers, it will be argued,

is in the dual context of their economic activities and high mortality rates. In this sense the information in these pages constitutes a "background" for a more exact quantitative study of the economic repercussions of the raising of children in rural Haiti.

This paper is based on data which, because of its special relevance to the question at hand, has been selected from the very wide range of data collected in the course of ethnographic inquiry. Three types of data will be presented and related to each other:

- a. Quantitative demographic data collected in the course of a census of the entire village population. (See Appendix I for a discussion of the census).
- b. Data on the details of the economic organization of local peasant life collected during daily observations and lengthy tape-recorded interviews with both men and women.
- c. Attitudinal data concerning family size preferences elicited in the course of informal conversations with some two dozen villagers spanning both sexes and different age groups. At this stage of the research we have avoided identifying ourselves with "family size research" and have collected attitudinal data in the course of normal conversations.

While at a more advanced stage of the research more direct interview questions concerning family size will be asked, in the beginning it was deemed best to avoid the danger of influencing answers by identifying ourselves with family planning research. Thus my wife and I have tried to elicit relevant information in the context of conversations. The uniformity obtained in the responses thus far strongly suggests that the figures arrived at in extensive samples would not differ greatly from the average obtained by the two dozen individuals whose attitudes have already been "surreptitiously" elicited.

The three types of data mentioned above will be presented in separate sections. But it will be shown how the three spheres of information are related to each other; and the guiding theme of this paper will be that family size is not a free-floating parameter that can be manipulated independently of the economic context in which it occurs, but rather that it is one component of a system. To change it, or even adequately to comprehend it, one must take into account the global context in which it is embedded.