

CHAPTER THREE

THE SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF ST. BARTHÉLEMY

3.1 SCHOONERS

When I was young, there was no trade, the only thing was to go sailing or stay here and do little carpentry jobs. There was no future here. I was 16. My parents didn't want me to sail. I learned to be a joiner in Guadeloupe. When the St. Barth boats came in, I used to go down and help them out. One day they offered me a free trip back to St. Barth, if my mother let me and she said, sure you can go. And that was the beginning. Seven people worked on a schooner; there were six schooners. It was a competition to get the freight—it was a fight. Every 8–10 days back and forth to Guadeloupe. We leave here loaded with salt. On the deck a load of cattles, goats, chickens, sheep everything. Trade was strong between St. Kitts, St. Thomas and Guadeloupe. We export from here liquors to St. Thomas and from there we buy flour, general merchandise, cigarettes, everything. On this island, I could say we were lucky. We always had the best schooners around, nicely kept in good order and we haven't lose much people at sea—in my lifetime none. St. Kitts didn't have any port so they couldn't have any schooners. St. Martin had one schooner called Javelin belong to Constant Fleming who was the mayor—that's all. They depended on our fleet.

The first days I started sailing I regret that I didn't learn at school because when they wake you up at the squally nights and you have to go and stay to the halyards—and we didn't have no nylon ropes in those days, just those ropes with little thorns all in it, stick in your poor little fingers, blisters all over. I regret that I didn't learn to be in a office or somewhere else, I tell you. When we load the cattles, you have 40 cattles on this side, 40 on the other side. And they must stand there. If you stay 15 days, they must stand because if one falls, it's like the dominos—we are in trouble. They gonna mash up one another. We slept on deck. If there were any cabins we rented them out to the passengers—that meant our clothes were always wet—they'd dry on your body in the sun and then get wet again. And when we meet heavy seas, the scuppers will be stop up with the grass and so, and we have to clear them, otherwise the ship would turn over with the load of water on the deck and get top heavy and turn over. So you have to go cleaning that and then the cattle pee in your head, shit in your head. It was something terrible.

I fell in the Anegada Passage one day, bending on a jib. And the weather was so rough we had blown away a jib and we were putting on a new one. There were two men forward watching the seas and telling us when to hold on. But this time there's a big sea came down and ship throws me off. I flew out in the air in the sea. But you don't have to get scared and I hold on to bobstay when I get a chance, got a chance. The boat plunged me, plunged me. And when I got up on the deck my two legs was trembling like that. I was lucky, yeah. That was the only time I fell in the ocean, I tell you.

(After the hurricanes in 1950 and 1960), trade was declining so most schooners were not replaced. And it is expensive to keep a boat under the French flag—you have to pay the government a lot of money—you have to register the people for retirement, insurance and all this. (Gustavia male, age about 68.)

3.2 INTRODUCTION

To most contemporary St. Barths, the existence of a number of language varieties in a small population is unremarkable; for them, it has always been that way. But linguists would maintain that the persistence of distinct language varieties over centuries in a small, apparently homogeneous community must reflect strong social divisions. Since there are no records that authenticate these divisions and no collective memory to explain them, the social ecology that produced them has to be reconstructed. In section 3.3, we begin with the earliest French missionary accounts describing social groups in the French Caribbean colonies in the 17th century. Next, the diaries of Swedish visitors to St. Barth in the 18th and early 19th centuries are examined for clues about the island's social environment; the context of slavery is described as well. There are also reports from St. Thomas about the St. Barth immigrants who arrived there in the mid 19th and early 20th centuries. We also have mid-twentieth century reports from anthropologists and sociologists. All these reports provide outsiders' perspectives on the social context of the island.

In section 3.4 we can get some insider perspectives, in particular, the views of St. Barth women about their lives. This section examines the lives of girls, the lives of women and the consequences of their social structures for the linguistic patterns of the island. To exemplify these structures there are narratives from four women from different parts of the island describing their lives. Since these women were born between 1903 and 1924, they provide a perspective on life on the island in the early to mid twentieth century.