

# THE PEOPLE CALLED GARIFUNA

Presented at Belama Methodist Church

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Myrtle Palacio

On Tuesday November 19, 2019 Belize will celebrate Garifuna Settlement Day. This Day was declared a national public and bank holiday in 1977, but had been celebrated in the south of the country—Dangriga, then Stann Creek Town since 1941 and Punta Gorda 1943. But why and how a holiday? Who are the Garifuna people? The full story of the Garifuna people is yet to be written. This morning I am humbled to give you a short presentation relevant to us as Methodists in trying to answer these two questions of Who are the Garifuna and Why we celebrate Garifuna Settlement Day.

The history of the Garinagu before and after arrival to Belize was one of genocidal antagonism and hostility at the hands of the British. They suffered extreme cruelties and violence. They were banished from the island of St. Vincent, their homeland in the Eastern Caribbean in 1797, and on their mass arrival in Belize around 1832 they were relegated to the south of the country; an area which was still under dispute with Spain, and presently to some extent, Guatemala...we all know about the Sarstoon area situation.

Maltreatment and exploitation marked their interaction with missionaries, primarily the Roman Catholics. The recent news item of access to the Graham Creek School in Toledo, and the inhumane physical surroundings there, sounds like a “love-boat” story when compared to the cruelties both psychological and physical, that Garifuna teachers and their families endured in the name of spreading education and Christianity through Roman Catholicism in rural and urban Belize from the 1930’s. The survival of the Garifuna people with culture intact is a major feat, and due largely to extreme courage—the mettle, valor and resoluteness of community leaders, both men and women.

So it was that leaders advocated for recognition and betterment for the people from the Colonial authorities—pleading for land, improvement in health services, and other social situations, through organizations such as the Carib Development Society. It came to pass that four leaders emerged, and with the support of the Dangriga Garifuna community advocated to recognize the Garifuna people’s contributions to Belize, starting with the minimal gesture of declaring a day of recognition to the Garifuna people. The Four advocates who represented the people to the British Governor and his Executive were leaders of the Dangriga community, namely *Thomas V. Ramos, Mateo Avaloy, Pantaleon Hernandez, and Catarino J. Benguche*. This was in the 1940’s, which meant travelling oftentimes in adverse conditions on several occasions to Belize City, until the minimum request, which was a day of public recognition of the Garifuna, was granted.

Garifuna men and women participated mainly as lower level workers in the mahogany and sugar industry in its heyday. They were in the forefront of organizing support for the refugees of

the devastating 1931 hurricane who came to Dangriga from Belize City seeking a sanctuary. They also participated actively in Garveyism (UNIA, Universal Negro Improvement Association), unionism (GWU General Workers Union), and in our democracy, since adult suffrage, via the political movement from its inception in 1950's, at the local and national levels. Presently, due to prevalent interethnic mixing especially with the other black group, the Creole, it is no longer easy to identify a Garifuna or a group of Garinagu purely by physical look or by surname. Yes, in present day Belize the traditional colonial definition of Garifuna and Creole has changed; unfortunately, we have to admit that there remains discrimination between these two peoples.

According to the "The Centenary Number of the Methodist Record", the Wesleyan Methodist Church was "first proclaimed in Stann Creek by Captain Beni (father of Mr. Santiago Beni (deceased) and Grand Uncle of Mr. Simon Ventura.....in a humble hut built of salt water Pimento in the year 1828." It is important to note that this was before the start of the Roman Catholic Church in southern Belize. Other early Wesleyan preachers and teachers mentioned are: B.C.O Blanco, Theodor Martin, Simon Ventura, G.A. Nunez, Alexander Castro, Marcus Ramirez and Florencio Thomas. The Garifuna leader TV Ramos himself was a Wesleyan Methodist preacher and composer. I am proud to inform this gathering that my paternal grandfather Lorenzo A. Cacho, contributed to the building of the Wesley Church on Albert Street in 1951. I hold in my possession a certificate to that effect which deemed him a "builder of Wesley". Of course, we cannot forget that our Belama Methodist Church is located on Thomas Vincent Ramos Street. So with the historical involvement of Garinagu in Methodism, it is only right for all of us to pay tribute.

Presently the Methodist Church of the Caribbean and Americas (MCCA) boasts 3 Garifuna Ministers. They are our very own Bishop Moses Benguche, Bishop for the Honduras District, but also Rev. Frederick Francisco and Rev. Angus Cayetano, all from Dangriga. Along with Rev Otto Wade our former Bishop of the MCCA, Rev. Ernest Belisle, Rev. Elswith Clare, and Rev David Goff, as well as our Pastor Joan Leslie, there are 8 Methodist Ministers from Dangriga who have served or currently serving our Methodist Churches.

I would like to conclude with this question, if TV Ramos and the other Garifuna leaders mentioned above would return back to life, what would he/they think of today's Belize and the legacy they so patiently created for the well-being of all of us?