

# **Coastal Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Values - Their Significance to the Garifuna and Rest of the Caribbean Region<sup>1</sup>**

**Joseph O. Palacio, 2002**

---

## **Introduction**

It is becoming increasingly clear that our Caribbean states are having difficulty to integrate people into their development programme. This is leading governments to look at all shortcuts to get people involved in development by finding out "what makes them tick". There are not many communities where this problem is as acute as within coastal communities. Traditionally neglected within development programmes, they are now riveted by initiatives from multinational organizations, the state, and private sector on fishing, co-management of protected areas, inshore mariculture, and tourism. On the other hand, these communities had long been steeped in traditions that are little studied and understood by our researchers, government technocrats, and NGO project persons. It is a recipe for genuine misunderstanding.

Development workers are coming with projects to be implemented within a short timeline. They do not understand that communities need more time to be able to conceptualize projects. Our researchers are unavailable to study the traditions of coastal communities and demonstrate to outsiders the rich value of these traditions. The communities are dismissed as being too traditional and not open enough to accept changes. In the end they are by-passed in favour of more modern and progressive communities. And so the people of the coast lose yet another opportunity to help themselves. The cycle continues.

This study focuses on topics associated with the coast among the Garifuna of Southern Belize. They include settlement, livelihood, fishing, and spirituality. It analyses cultural values and traditional knowledge underlining these topics and their significance to Garifuna peoplehood. Finally, it makes extrapolations on the role of coastal traditions in development within the larger Caribbean region.

## **Sources of Data on the Garifuna**

The Garifuna today number 14,061 making up 6.1% of the Belizean population. It is ironic that we are now discussing their coastal tradition as it is part of the culture, which has been all but forgotten from lack of use. The majority of the Garifuna still live along the coast not in their traditional villages but in the town of Dangriga and Belize City. In both of these urban communities they engage minimally in the primary income-earning coastal activities of fishing and tourism. It contrasts markedly with their earlier customs in which the coast was pivotal. From the sea and

the adjoining land they got much of their food, building materials, and other daily artefacts. They engaged heavily in boat traffic all along the northeast coast of Central America. It was the location of home, where kinship support was available; they could rest during respite from wage labour; and could engage in their ancestral rituals.

In speaking about tradition among the Garifuna there are some factors to keep in mind. One is that much has been written about them during their 203 years in Central America. While much of is by travelers and chroniclers for the government and church, since 1960 there has been a great deal of in-depth studies done mostly by anthropologists. The other is that the Garifuna themselves are a highly introspective group of people, who always want to learn more about themselves. In doing so they often are critical about what others write about them. On the other hand, even Garifuna scholars have paid little attention to the potentially rich mine of oral tradition, belief systems, spirituality, and folklore that is still available within their communities.

In the following discussion I refer minimally to written sources on the topics of settlement and livelihood. On the last two topics — fishing and spirituality — I refer mainly to field data that I collected between 2000 and 2001 in Southern Belize. In not referring to much written data, I am doing so not in any disrespect. Rather, it is in keeping with the need to always question what has been written, generating the kind of critique necessary for the growth of science. It is also in keeping with the overall ideal of interjecting as much new information as possible originating directly from the informants themselves. This will become clearer further below on linking coastal values with cultural identity.

### **Values on Coastal Settlement and Livelihood**

The proclivity of the Garifuna to live in coastal communities in Central America has been discussed by several authors including Davidson (1984: 13-36), Gonzalez (1988), and Palacio (1982). Indeed the impression forthcoming is that the Garifuna have no choice and are culturally compelled to live there. To examine this impression it would be necessary to do much research on such topics as comparing the settlement pattern in St. Vincent with that in Central America during the early years of their arrival; examining closely the language to identify what terms were introduced after arrival; and investigating belief systems, and spirituality to see references to changes. All of these studies call for scholars with an in-depth knowledge of the culture — its language, belief systems, and spirituality.

My own thinking is that the Garifuna have been confined to living along the coast through pressures over which they had no control. One pressure came from landowners in Belize and the neighbouring countries, who monopolized all the "good" land with valuable timber and agricultural potential for themselves, leaving aside the "non-productive" coastal zone for the marginalized Garifuna. This presupposition

follows leads made by Bolland and Shoman (1977) but begs further research. My reason for bringing this up is to show that in all matters affecting the Garifuna there is always need to bring in their relations with those in power, something that not all scholars, especially those who are Garifuna, always keep in mind.

For whatever reason the coast indeed has been the primary habitat of the Garifuna in Southern Belize. It is the setting for their several communities. It would not be too far off to admit that there is hardly a square inch of coastal territory from Honduras to Southern Belize that has not been occupied by them as camping site, bush garden spot, or permanent habitation.

What value do we now see resulting from this extensive continuous occupation for generations spreading over 200 years? Because it has been home sweet home people still feel little need to have official travel documents for transborder travel from Honduras to Guatemala, to Belize. Also there is still a great deal of unawareness to formalize possession of house lots and farm plots by government stipulated lease or purchase. Ownership of land is seen as being secondary to one's birth right as Garifuna.

As in the case of settlement pattern, we still need to know a great deal on the extent of livelihood that the Garifuna derived from the several microenvironments associated with the sea, adjoining wetlands, estuaries, banks, and highlands. My own travels with knowledgeable persons shows that they were all utilized for fishing, farming; and gathering food, herbal medicines, and other resources. Within this extended use of the concept of livelihood what cultural values have survived up to now? There is a sense of the boundless bounty of the microenvironments that are available to the dwellers. No matter how much difficulty one has being away, on arriving home one can get basic needs for daily survival. Traditionally one could get much of life's basic needs while not paying bills for electricity, telephone, water, cable tv, and land tax.

### **Traditional Knowledge — fishing**

The previous discussion has already introduced fishing as a form of livelihood. I elaborate more with information about traditional methods of catching fish, seasonality, location of fish at various depths, and belief systems. This information came from older informants indicating that these skills were still being used as late as the 1940s. It shows that the African and aboriginal roots of Garifuna culture preserve a great deal of respect for tradition.

Handlining has always been the most popular form of catching fish. Earlier they were made from steel wire or cotton and not nylon as the case now. The nylon lines started being used in the 1950's. They made for more efficient means of catching fish. Firstly, they came in various weights so that the fisher could alternate his lines depending on what he expected to catch. Besides, he could put three and more

hooks on one line, something that could not be done earlier. Finally, the nylon lines were cheaper and more plentiful — qualities that made it easier to catch more fish. Other ways for fishing were free diving for lobster and conch and harpooning for bigger species like tarpon and jewfish.

There were other traditional methods that were used in streams, indicating that the Garifuna took from St. Vincent some customs associated with fresh water fishing (Miller 1979). One was called *gunami*. A few men placed a vine upstream that mixed in the water stunning fish, which were collected by others downstream. One could also build a small platform in the river near the mouth where the water is brackish. Craig describes a similar method called *ramas* in Cay Caulker during his visit in 1965 (1966:79). One sinks it for six months or longer while barnacles grow on it. Fish then come to feed on them and are snared by a net. This method is called *wamaredu*. Other snares were used in earlier times, including traps — also called fish pots — made from palmetto in which one places materials to attract fish. The name in Garifuna is *maciwa*.

Nets came in a wide variety of forms. There was the cast net used to catch shrimps and small fish — sprat, mullet, and sardine — used for bait. There was the beach seine. It was handled by at least six men, each with a specific function. It could be very large measuring over 60 meters long and 15 meters wide. Its main characteristic was a sack into which fish are forced. The seine was helpful for species found closer to the beach like snook. There is still being used in a few communities the turtle net. It is set in deeper water with one side being anchored and the other floating. Attached to it are several small wooden turtles that serve as snare to attract the bigger natural ones.

The beach seine and cast net are set to capture their prey at the moment. The turtle net is left for a few days and catches a bigger prey that could satisfy substantial parts of the community at any one time. As a result, it was not used too often. In short the use of these nets was more in keeping with sustainability.

There were two kinds of group fishing. The use of the seine was group effort *par excellence* within a tradition that has always been an individualistic effort and dominated by men. Women and children went on shellfish gathering trips. But they were not at the scale as the use of beach seine in terms of providing substantial supply for home use and sale. The size of the dory was too small to accommodate more than two persons at any one time. Besides, if more than two went, they would be individually doing the same thing, namely using handline. The need to go out in groups and spend longer than one day came with the onset of commercialization. Bigger boats became available together with methods of preserving fish — first in wells within the boat or tugging a smaller boat with holes where fish were kept and later through the use of ice. These boats were also able to go to fishing grounds a longer distance from the shore, reaching closer to the Barrier Reef.

Notwithstanding the wide variety of methods available to the traditional fisher, his efforts were guided more by luck than his own deliberate planning and dexterity. The term "luck" was most often associated with fishing than other economic activities in rural communities. It was incumbent on the fisher to limit the possibilities of bad luck so he could be successful on any day. Limiting bad luck meant, among other things, maintaining respect for Mother Nature. It further meant being aware of the interrelatedness of humankind with the workings of nature that limits him to take only what he needs at any one time. It was the basis of the ethic of conservation that underlined social behaviour in traditional rural communities. This becomes clearer as we follow a fisherman performing his daily routine.

Even before the actual fishing takes place, there are certain prescriptions that the fisherman has to follow to minimize his bad luck. Some of these have to do with his dory, the vessel that carries him fishing and with which he establishes a close working relationship. Women are prohibited from working on the dory — its carving, finishing, and repair. It is a man's world! The irony here is that the dory is female in Garifuna grammar and names applied to it are all the names of women. While working on it in its unfinished state he burns incense and says prayers aimed at protecting it and making it always productive during its endeavours in the sea. Similarly, women are not allowed to touch the fishing gear. Should such transgression take place, the man should tie a piece of his wife's skirt to the hand line as an antidote.

While preparing the evening before he goes out, the fisherman becomes solicitous about the weather that will prevail the following day. He wants to know whether it will rain, at what time the winds will change direction, and at what time the tide will start coming in (which is the best time to fish). The skills of the seasoned man in looking at the clouds at dusk to be able to predict all of these features with incredible accuracy for the following day are indeed remarkable. Of course, he would have verified the moon movements. When the moon is growing and especially close to full moon and a few days afterwards are the best times. In the early morning the last thing he does before leaving home is to look up into the sky one more time to re-confirm his readings of the weather from the previous day. On leaving his house, the fisherman should not return even if he remembers something that is important. He should call on someone to bring it to him. Going back will give him bad luck.

Some men prefer to fish in the night because fish bite more than during the day. It was one of the transitions brought about by commercialization in the village of Barranco, when men fished to sell in the Punta Gorda market in the 1970s. Instead of leaving at dawn as they had always done they left home at 10 o'clock in the night to catch bait; returned home to eat at midnight; and then left to go to the deeper waters to fish. With the darkness they have greater difficulty to locate the rocks for fishing. They throw out the anchor and drag it to see if there is some tension; if it is so, it is a sign that it is caught up in the rocks.

Those who fish later — starting at daybreak — have the advantage to see things around them. Pelicans are helpful to identify where bait can be found. They hover around the spots where sprats and other smaller fish congregate. One goes there, throws a cast net and after a few throws has enough to proceed to the fishing grounds. But some fish make better bait than others. Some are very rank in odour. The men cut them into tiny pieces and throw them into the sea to scent it. Shrimps also make good bait. Near Barranco and Punta Gorda there are spots where one can catch them.

Knowledge of the location of the fishing grounds is indispensable to catching a good amount fairly quickly. But also indispensable is knowledge of the foraging habits of fish, especially the seasons during which they are spawning and appear in greater numbers. In the area from Monkey River to Seine Bight June to December is a time when one catches a wide variety of fish, mainly snapper, grunt, jack, and mackerel. The period November to February is the time for snapper and grouper, while April to June is the time for mutton snapper in Placencia. November to January is the time for mullet and drummer in Barranco. They appear especially after the waters have been stirred by the frequent northerly storms that occur at that time of the year.

During most times different types of fish are available. The species, however, occupy different levels in the sea and will bite according to the tide. For example, jacks remain near the bottom in high tide but come up during the low tide. Besides, some prefer to stay close to the seagrass beds while others prefer the rocks. In the former case, one finds different kinds of snappers while in the latter there are grunt and jewfish. It is also important for the fisherman to be observant of other indicators that may appear from time to time. When the man-o'-war bird hovers it is a sign that jacks are plentiful. On the other hand, wherever there are dolphins, it is a place to avoid because there will be no fish. Dolphins do indicate from which direction the wind will blow. It is the direction from which the dolphin flaps its tail.

There are certain do's and don'ts that the fisherman should abide by. One's first catch for the day is special. One should scrape a few of its scales into the sea to guarantee catching more. Smaller fish should be put back into the sea so they could be feed for the bigger ones. One should not contaminate the waters by throwing back dead fish. It scares the fish away. Some men went further in their explanation saying that they attract sharks, which in turn chase away the fish normally caught. They add that this is the irreversible damage that trawlers are creating in the area of Placencia. In dumping the rejects back into the sea they are creating a vacuum for sharks and other predators.

While at sea the fisherman can be given signs that he may want to note. Manatees and dolphins are usually aggressive to him during his pregnancy. If he has doubts about a pregnancy, the female manatee may jump up in front of him exposing her breasts. On the other hand, if the manatee is only flirting around his dory, it is a sign that his wife is also flirting behind his back. The manatee remains an important part

of the fisherman's lore. If your hearing is particularly good, you will be complemented, "Your hearing is as good as the manatee's".

The list of do's and don'ts changes on arriving at the beach and getting ready to sell. Once the fisherman sells to a customer, she should not return it. That is one way of worsening his luck. He should be generous to the wife of an ailing fisherman or his widow. If he has been having a series of "bad luck days", he should give a few select fish to a poor, old woman, pleading with her to accept his gift. Such an act has been known to redound to the good luck of the fisherman.

### **Traditional Knowledge – spirituality**

The sea is a primary source of food. It also has a sacred place in Garifuna spirituality.

They pay homage to the sea (*barana*) and earth (*mua*) as primary givers of life. It is, therefore, necessary to periodically give offering to the spirits of both as gratitude and as supplication for more blessings. In the case of the spirit of the sea, one should periodically take food, a candle with some overproof rum as libation to the spirit of the sea, while beseeching the spirit to accept them as humble offerings.

In Garifuna theology heaven, called *seiri*, is located a long distance beyond the horizon across the sea. It is not surprising that when spirits come to participate in the ancestral ceremony of placation, the *dügü*, they have to cross the sea on returning to earth. Songs during the *dügü* recount the spirits' travails in crossing the sea. At times those in trance would roll up their pants, indicating that they are just arriving from a sea journey.

A primary component of the *dügü* is for men and women (*adugahatinyu*) to go for seafood that will be ritually fed to the spirits. Among these food items there are special delicacies like *goosa* (hairy crabs), *gawamu* (sea turtle), and *guiwa* (wilk). They are usually caught in the vicinity of the Snake Cayes near Punta Gorda. Most Belizean Garifuna communities have cayes where this type of fishing is done. The *adugahatinyu* accomplish another purpose while they are at sea. It is to serve as messengers and beacon to some spirits, who may need guidance to find the location of the *dügü*. They would have been invited to the feast but might not know where it is or might have gotten lost on the way. On returning to the temple the *adugahatinyu* will be accompanied by these spirits.

In an interview with the captain of the boat who usually accompanies the *adugahatinyu* in Punta Gorda, he recounted how the spirits take control of the trip directing him where to go to catch needed items. He also performs rituals intermittently to ensure a successful trip. Pivotal to the success of the trip is for the party to pay close attention to his instructions and to have complete dedication to the spirits of the ancestors.

The arrival of the *adugahatinyu* bringing the ritual seafood officially marks the beginning of the *dügü*. There are special songs of welcome to the arrivals in which the names of delicacies are repeated. Finally at the end of the *dügü* some of the food is ritually replaced into the sea as offering to its spirit. The rest is buried on land again as offering to the spirit of the earth.

These are only a few indicators of the significance of the sea for the Garifuna during the *dügü*, the most important celebration of their spirituality. We asked questions from other peoples about similar belief systems but they did not know of any. There are other maritime rituals found among the Garifuna. One takes place at the first anniversary after the death of a loved one. During that year women mourners (*ameisarutinye*) would have been wearing black coloured clothing. At the occasion of the first anniversary they will discard that colour for brighter colours. But it has to be done according to ritual prescriptions. Early in the morning at dawn they wade into the sea together with a chaperone (*ebenene*). While there they perform rituals that coincide with the out flowing waves. They also submerge themselves into the sea several times. Then they return home.

In the doorway they remove the black coloured clothing, step on it, and then put on fresh clothes. It marks the end of their mourning within which they had been proscribed from doing many things. The symbolism here is of the sea washing away the close affinity that the mourners have with the deceased relative. Secondly, there is reference to going into the sea and under it to pass from the world of the dead to the world of the living.

### **Significance of Coastal Values and Traditional Knowledge to the Garifuna and the Region**

People are historical beings. They are what they are now because of things that happened to them in the past. People live in communities and it is there where history becomes alive in cultural values and traditional knowledge. What we have discussed so far are only tidbits of what make the Garifuna who they are — a brief visit into their fascinating cultural identity. Even though most have been forgotten by the younger people, one cannot take these precious nuggets away from their collective being as a people.

Unfortunately there is presently hardly any local and national validation given to them for maintaining their identity. More than others they have been most aware of this and, as a result, many have opted not to be Garifuna anymore. Others have been stubborn enough in the true spirit of Joseph Chatoyer, Gulisi, and T.V. Ramos to try to arrest the slippage. It is their inspiration that led the National Garifuna Council to file for recognition in UNESCO's first ever Proclamation of Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. We were successful in receiving the award. However, international recognition has to be funneled at the national and local level to have some impact on the community.



What is the significance of this study to the rest of the Caribbean region? Through the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) extended to the Caribbean states we have far more marine area to tap for development than our miniscule land area. On the other hand, there remains little awareness of this potential. The plan for such exploitation will take place when governments start to take seriously what our coastal communities have been saying and doing.

The story is told of Iceland, now a moderately wealthy state, which hardly has any natural resource apart from its icy seas. The progress of Iceland started around the middle of the last century when it focused on its fishery. It was one of the first countries to agitate for the twelve-mile limit for territorial waters and ultimately for the two hundred mile EEZ. It started by placing fishery tradition on the cornerstone of its national economy and foreign policy (Kurlansky 1979). It is an example that Caribbean countries need to study. Participating in such an exercise would be coastal communities, academics, and NGO's under a fully informed government policy.

---

<sup>i</sup> I am indebted to several persons in communities in Southern Belize, who provided valuable field data. I also express gratitude to Mr. Robert "Coppo" Mariano for his information, excellent fieldwork, and ability to analyse field data.

## References Cited

Bolland, Nigel and A. Shoman 1977 *Land in Belize 1765-1871*. Jamaica: Institute for Social and Economic Research, UWI.

Craig, Alan K. 1966 *The Geography of Fishing in British Honduras and Adjacent Coastal areas*. PhD dissertation, Louisiana State University.

Davidson, William V. 1984 The Garifuna in Central America: ethnohistorical and geographical foundation. IN *Black Caribs — a case study in biocultural adaptation*. Pp. 13-36. New York: Plenum Press

Gonzalez, Nancie L. 1988 *Sojourners of the Caribbean — ethnogenesis and ethnohistory of the Garifuna*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Kurlansky, Mark 1997 *Cod — a biography of the fish that changed the world*. New York: Vintage.

Miller, David L. 1978 *The European Impact on St. Vincent 1600-1763: suppression and displacement of the native population and landscape*. MA thesis University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

Palacio, Joseph O. 1982 *Food and Social Relations in a Garifuna Village*. PhD dissertation University of California, Berkeley.

---

© Joseph Palacio, 2002.

Return to Conference [Papers](#).

HTML last revised 26 September 2002.

This paper was read at the University of the West Indies School of Continuing Studies Belize Conference, held in Belize City in 2002. It can be accessed from Google by searching 'Belize Conference Papers'.