

# **CULTURAL IDENTITY AMONG RURAL GARIFUNA MIGRANTS IN BELIZE CITY, BELIZE**

**By Joseph O. Palacio**

## **Abstract**

Done as a survey in 1989, this study spotlights the larger social relations of Garifuna migrants from the village of Barranco among themselves and with the larger Belize City society. The information includes where they live, types of occupation; and the family relations within the household, especially the changing socio-cultural relations across age.

## **Introduction**

In discussing the lack of focus on indigenous peoples in the history of creolization within the West Indies, Honychurch (2000, p.18) added, “in this the most colonial of all colonial societies, where the deepest wrong was done, the effects of the process of colonization and the creolization which accompanied it, have -- like the subject peoples themselves -- been marginalized.”<sup>1</sup> This is a concise way of saying that the cultural identity of the region’s indigenous peoples needs to be understood on its own terms as well as being a vital component of the region’s culture. Since 1975 the main focus on the identity of the region’s indigenous peoples has been on their insertion within nation-building either before or after political independence. Examples include Gullick (1985, pp. 5-24) for the Caribs of St. Vincent; Honychurch (2000, pp. 213-222) for the Caribs of Dominica; Forte (1999) for the Caribs of Trinidad; M. Palacio (1995) and Sanford (1975) for the Garifuna of Belize, and Sanders (1987, pp.185-204) for Guyana.

While these studies have taken place among informants within their own communities, there has been hardly any work among those who migrated to urban communities.<sup>2</sup> As in other

parts of the world, indigenous peoples in the Caribbean have often relocated to towns and cities, where they could have better access to jobs, health care, education, and a higher quality of life. Within the Caribbean the Garifuna have been the target of most studies within their migration destination, mainly in the United States (Gonzalez, 1979, pp. 255-263; Gonzalez & Gonzalez, 1979, pp. 18-20; and, Palacio, 1992, pp. 17-26). The focus of this chapter is a study of Garifuna rural folk, who have relocated from Barranco, a village in southern Belize, to Belize City, with emphasis on the transition of their cultural identity.

### **Who are the Indigenous Peoples of Belize?**

According to the 2000 national census there were almost 39,000 persons from a national population of 240,000, who identified themselves as K'ekchi, Mopan, Yucatec, and Garifuna, the four sets of indigenous peoples in Belize. Together they constitute 17% of the national population, the highest percentage of indigenous peoples in any Circum-Caribbean state; and in Central America, the next highest to Guatemala. They are spread over the country with the largest concentration at a high of 72% in the Toledo District. Generally, there is a high proliferation of small rural communities with population hovering less than one thousand each. Only the Garifuna predominate in urban communities.

The Garifuna (formerly called Black Caribs) are at the centre of this chapter. At slightly more than 14,000 they are the largest indigenous nation, making up 6% of the country's population. They are black, showing extensively the results of the blend between their two sets of ancestors, the Island Caribs and maroon African slaves, which took place in the Eastern Caribbean island of St. Vincent (Gonzalez 1988).

Like the other indigenous peoples, who now call Belize home, the Garifuna suffered violent persecution at the hands of the Europeans. But none came as close to them in paying the ultimate price, namely genocide, for their homeland in terms of the scale of persecution and the relative proportions of their dead (Craton 1982). Only about a quarter of the original population in St. Vincent arrived in Roatan, Honduras, having survived the extermination that the British executed. The final ignominy facing them was being unceremoniously unloaded in 1797 on the inhospitable island of Roatan, Honduras, which was then disputed territory. According to the British, it was to be their final death blow (Gonzalez, 1988, p. 41). The sheer determination to survive as a people during their first century in Central America motivated the Garifuna to travel all along its Caribbean coast looking for livelihood. By 1802 they had arrived in Belize.

In adjusting to their new home they have brought to Central America their Antillean component of the Great Amazonian Cultural Tradition (identified by the use of cassava tubers and their complement of food preparation implements together with other traits) to an area that had been the heartland of Mesoamerica. Such intermixture has accentuated the cultural heterogeneity of the Circum-Caribbean region.

Recurrent persecutions in Honduras together with the demand for cheap wage labor in Belize have always pushed Garifuna immigrants to Belize. It is being repeated at this time with new arrivals from Honduras and Guatemala, as part of the historical cycle of migratory wage labor that has conditioned the life of Garifuna everywhere. Traveling within Central America and to the United States for men and women has long been essential parts of their livelihood patterns (Gonzalez, 1979, pp. 18-20). One of the results has been their concentration in urban communities in Belize. As many as 50% live in Dangriga, 30% in Belize City, and the rest in four villages. The heavy influences of urban living have placed the youth in doubt with respect to

their Garifuna identity. It is much more acceptable for them to follow the predominant Creole cultural lifestyle. Being painfully aware of this precipitous slippage, the Garifuna -- both young and old -- have expressed strong efforts at cultural revitalization (Palacio *et al.*, 2003, pp. 25-51).

## **The Study**

I drafted the survey instrument for the study entitled “Survey of Belize City from Barranco Village”. The topics included biography, household, cultural identification, settlement, livelihood, and community activities. The four fieldworkers who did the interviews were villagers resident in Belize City and had previous experience in doing surveys. They did the work within two months in June and July, 1989.

The selection of respondents proved not to be a difficult task. As villagers, the fieldworkers and I knew everyone who had left the village and lived in Belize City. We were able to locate all the addresses and ended up with one hundred percent of our target sample. The person interviewed was either the head of the household or spouse, whoever was the villager. There is a justification for using the term “villagers” for the immigrants: the term they used among themselves was *Barranguna*, “native of Barranco”, no matter how long ago they left the village. In most cases both the household head and spouse were villagers and we interviewed the one available, usually the female. We interviewed a total of sixty persons. With an average of four persons for each household, the total number of persons represented within all the households was about 240.

The motivation to do the study came from academic and personal reasons. Having done my doctoral dissertation fieldwork in Barranco in 1979-1980, I was aware of the presence of

several Barranguna in Belize City. As a resident of Belize City I met many of them frequently. The study gave me an opportunity to know how they were adjusting to city life. Between 1989 and 1991 I represented the University of the West Indies School of Continuing Studies in a joint urban planning study of Belize City with McGill University. While the McGill faculty and students did the urban planning component, we focused on community extension, using our knowledge of groups within the city. This survey added information about one group of immigrants, among others, in the city. After the fieldwork we ran frequency distribution tables including percentages and cumulative percentages of the variables.

## **Migration and the Garifuna**

Before delving into the narrative of the study, it is necessary to see the movement of rural Garifuna to Belize City as part of a larger scale of migration for them in Central America. Following Gonzalez's chronological sequence of Garifuna migrations (1988, p.173), the first phase was extensive traveling along the Caribbean coast stretching from Nicaragua to Belize as hired hands on boats or on their own as traders. In the latter case, their women no doubt also joined on the trips to trade their own agricultural produce. Gonzalez (1988, pp.171-172) attributes these early travels to the tradition of excellent boatmanship, which the Garifuna had used for the purposes of warfare and trading in St. Vincent.

The second phase, which also started as early as their arrival in Central America, was going on seasonal wage labor lasting for the greater part of the year to woodcutting camps along rivers in Honduras and Belize. The third phase started as early as 1910 (M. Palacio, 2002) and picked up momentum after World War 11 (Gonzalez 1988, p. 173), when men left for towns and cities within their home countries as well as port towns in the United States, some staying

permanently. This overview shows that travels by both men and women have always been a way of life for the Garifuna. Where they ended up and what they did depended on opportunities that became available to them, while being completely beyond their control.

The first reference to the Garifuna in Belize was the debate at the Magistrates Meeting<sup>3</sup> on August 9, 1802 to prevent them from coming to the Settlement, in case they committed the same “atrocities” for which they were “well known” in Grenada and St. Vincent (Cayetano, n.d., p.25). Obviously, this resolution did not stop them from returning to Belize and in 1811 the Magistrates further directed that the Garifuna should not remain in the Settlement (at that time dominated by Belize Town) for more than 48 hours (Cayetano, n.d. p. 30).

These restrictions applied to Garifuna men and women, who came on their own as traders and certainly not to those whom the woodcutters brought as laborers to work on their camps dotted along the rivers in the hinterland. The repeated official proscription, however, left a strong impression affecting the free movement of Garifuna to what was eventually to become Belize City. The folk belief became embedded for generations that the Garifuna did not belong in the city and that those, who came to live there, were shedding away their “Garifuneness” to become Creole<sup>4</sup> townfolk. The words of the following song, translated from the Garifuna, elaborate,

Tila, my older sister

You are the only one I hear about from Belize City

They say you now have a Creole man.

You can't even say “Good Morning

So, what will you tell him, Tila, my older sister” (E. R. Cayetano, 1993, p. 91)

The singer is decrying her sister's presumptuous behavior not only to come to live in Belize City but also to live with a Creole man, when she cannot even speak the man's language.

Having moved extensively within Central America, the United States became the next destination for Garifuna migration at first for a few but gradually taking massive proportions from 1960 (M. Palacio, 2002).<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding the economic gains forthcoming from the U.S., the difficulties of migrating there made it a less attractive option over closer destinations. The travel cost -- far beyond the budget of villagers -- had to be met either through savings over a long period of time or by relatives already in the U.S. Many arrived initially as visitors and remained illegally running the risk of being caught by the authorities. There was prolonged separation from one's children and older relatives, who might need close attention. For the Garifuna in Belize, internal migration to local towns and Belize City became a more affordable option with fewer risks; besides, one could more easily return home in case of emergencies.

The village has traditionally been the incubator for Garifuna culture since their arrival in Central America a little over two hundred years ago. On the other hand, the city -- and more especially Belize City, which up to 1970 was the capital of the country -- was the source of governance, cash, imported goods, western religion, and education, all of which influenced every aspect of daily life in the village. The village and the city have been geographically separated not only in distance but also from the difficulties of primitive sea transportation, making the social and cultural gap between them even more profound. Indeed, the process of transition from two diametrically opposed environments presents an unusually rich backdrop to observe how people transform their identity.

### **Barranco and Belize City in the 1980s**

The Garifuna people arrived in Central America as defeated exiles from St. Vincent 1797, a little short of 200 years when I did the fieldwork. Their fault had been to fight off efforts

by the British to take over their lands to subdivide among speculators for sugar plantations. Indeed, their resistance was no different than the reaction of any indigenous people to the usurpation of their lands, the destruction of their political/military infrastructure, the total disregard of their kinship system and distinctive cultural traits, the killing of their women and children, and the wanton destruction of their homes, farms, and boats (Fabel, 2000, pp. 162-205). Since their arrival and self-resettlement in Central America, the Garifuna have been subjected to extreme forms of colonial exploitation in Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Belize. But they have not given up efforts to take possession of lands for their dwelling and farms, to retain community organizations based on kinship, and to retain their cultural diagnostics -- notably language, music, dance, spirituality, and acquiring livelihood through farming and fishing. Besides, they have not forgotten their common origin in St. Vincent. In all of these regards they are a people indigenous to the larger Caribbean region, who have reconstituted their traditional culture wherever they find themselves.

It is not known when the village of Barranco, located along the southernmost coast of Belize, was first settled by the Garifuna.<sup>6</sup> The first recorded settlement started in 1862. The site of the village made it attractive for settlement. It was well drained and provided easy access for good fishing and fertile lands for farming; furthermore, it was far enough from the center of British influence in the capital city to limit the interference of colonial administrators into daily life. Yet it was near enough to sources of wage labor in Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras.

The time of the highest economic prosperity in the village took place from 1900 to 1940, during the banana production period. Since then there have been efforts to revive agriculture and fishing for home consumption and the national market but to little avail. Wage labor migration



started as early as the first settlement and became most pronounced between 1960 and 1975 in response to the deteriorating economic conditions in the village.

Notwithstanding the early reliance on wage labor migration the village retained an inwardly oriented Garifuna culture. The diagnostic cultural traits, as listed above, flourished. The kinship structure was the basis for domestic organization, village community solidarity, and the rights to land. There was an outward orientation to sources of wage labor. To succeed in that market children did well in the primary school, which maintained standards as high as those found in other parts of the country. As in the case of other Garifuna villages, Barranco became well known for its teachers, who worked far and wide within the country. From the teaching profession they moved into other careers in the public and private sectors.

The respondents in our survey were first generation settlers, joining hundreds from other rural parts of the country coming to Belize City after 1970. Belize City had several attractions. There had been a heavy out-migration of its residents to the U.S. from 1960 (Woods, Perry, & Steagall, 1997).

In anticipation of political independence, which came in 1981, the government undertook changes toward a more inclusive national culture. Political leaders gave assurance that the previous “divide and rule” practices of the British would be superseded by a new multiculturalism, encompassing all of Belize’s ethnic groups, including those from the south -- the Maya and Garifuna -- who had been traditionally overlooked. As evidence of such a shift, artistic performances, including items by these two groups, began to be shown in Belize City, revealing a previously untapped source to be accommodated within the national culture. The revitalization of the arts came after political parties had actively recruited their membership from all ethnic groups throughout the country.<sup>7</sup>

The political leaders of nationalism did not impose the iconography of the Ancient Maya, as the first peoples of Belize, to lead the renewed effort at building an overarching multiculturalism. In this case there was a difference with the overt use of Taíno symbolism in Puerto Rico to build its national culture, overlooking the African as a founding culture (Duany, 1999). Honychurch referred to efforts by politicians in Dominica also to use the image of the Caribs, which he described as a “type of idyllic proto-nationalism” (2000, p. 215) as a rallying point for the island’s new national culture.

Another cultural groundswell came with the onset of a Black Nationalist movement in Belize City from 1965, which attempted to bring to the forefront the previously unmentioned significance of black people in Belize’s historical and current society (Shoman, 1994, pp. 241-256). The cathartic influence of this “revelation” was to encourage closer ties between the two black groups in the country, the Creole and Garifuna.

Simultaneously, the Garifuna were consolidating their own *Garifunaduo* movement in the 1970s. Spearheaded by young returning university graduates, *Garifunaduo* promoted investigation into roots and the application of the results to revitalize the culture. Examples included popularizing the use of the term “Garifuna” in English replacing “Black Carib;” the use of Garifuna first names instead of traditional Christian names; and, the use of artifacts as decoration, in many cases uplifting them from the traditional kitchen to the modern living room. One of the several offshoots of *Garifunaduo* was to re-discover the strength of African and Amerindian roots in the formation of the culture in St. Vincent.

*Garifunaduo*, therefore, prepared the way for the Garifuna to accept both black Creoles as well as the indigenous Maya as their brothers and sisters. Toward both there had been more than ambivalence. Taylor recounts the animosity of one of his informants in the Garifuna village

of Hopkins against the Creole (1951, p.39). Garifuna prejudices against the Maya have also been well known. They derived from the position of “bearers of enlightenment” they held as teachers recruited by the Roman Catholic mission to work among the “heathen Indians.” The Maya did not take lightly to this imposition into their communities and reacted with ill will against the Garifuna. In hindsight the ambivalence across ethnic groups was the fruit of both British colonialism and western religion, whittled away with some measure of success by the pre-independence nationalist movement.

The review of these currents in cultural resurgence is important to understand the Garifuna coming from the villages and being met by several kinds of cultural influences within the city after 1970. The city was no longer the bastion of anti-Garifuna sentiment, about which they had heard from their parents. Garifuna urbanites displayed more pride and self-assurance than the Garifuna villagers had anticipated. Furthermore, there was greater scope for acceptance of the Maya and other peoples with whom they interacted as fellow Belizeans. Urban Garifuna thus experienced the rise of the new inclusive multicultural Belize that symbolized the onset of independence in 1981. The importance of this study arises from Belize City being the third largest concentration of the Garifuna, according to the 1991 census. The two communities superceding Belize City in Garifuna population were Dangriga and Punta Gorda. The population of the country was 186,000.

## **Survey Results**

In describing the results of the survey I place the respondents within wider frameworks of interaction starting from the household and ending with the wider urban community.

### *The Informants and Their Household*

Under this subheading I include gender, household headship, type of family, persons who frequent the households, and leisure activities. Among the informants 25 (42%) were males and 35 (48%) females. I did not include age in the questionnaire to limit its sensitivity to the respondents; besides, with the help of the fieldworkers, I was able to arrive at an approximate age range. The respondents were a mixed group. About one-half were men and women 35 years old and older with their children and grandchildren. The remaining were younger men and women living with their spouses and their children. Many of the households were female-headed 29 (48%). Finally, in 39 of the households there were conjugal families and in 21 extended families. In conjugal families the relationship of members to the head is that of spouse or parent. Following the definition of Hammel & Laslett (1974), in extended families there is a wider framework of additional relations with the head. They include consanguineal, i.e. sibling and cousin as well as affinal, i.e. mother-in-law, son-in-law, etc.

The questionnaire asked how members extended their relations beyond the household. The primary group included persons who “dropped by” frequently and those who visited regularly. In the first category I referred to close relatives, infants being cared for either through reciprocity or for a fee, boyfriends/girlfriends, and so forth. There were up to five persons per household and they were mainly relatives and friends from the village. In the second category, namely visitors, they were mainly Garifuna including others not from the village.

The significance of the household as the focal point of activities came forward in response to questions about leisure activities for younger and older members. For the former they were almost all indoor activities, such as reading, listening to music, and watching television. There was minimal mention of outdoor sports. For the latter they were socializing at home with

friends, drinking, having parties, or watching television. Occasionally they went to dance at a discotheque.

### ***Address and livelihood***

The majority lived in the Southside of Belize City,<sup>8</sup> where they clustered in parts of the St. Martin de Porres, Port Loyola, and Lake Independence areas. All of these were newly built up areas reclaimed from the wetlands surrounding the older part of the City. Another four lived in the village of Ladyville located twelve miles from Belize City. As in the case of the Southside of Belize City, it was a newly cleared area. The other ten lived in households in Northside Belize City, where there was a cluster of five along Victoria Street, with the rest scattered in the newer parts of that part of the city.

In summary, the vast majority lived in areas where house lots were more easily available than in the older parts of the city. The land was waterlogged and became easily flooded during the rainy weather, making access difficult. Although they had electricity and piped water, the streets were not paved, becoming alternately dusty and muddy. The houses were substandard, many lacking indoor plumbing. Finally, most of the dwellers were renters. There were a few living in better housing in the Northside but they were also renters.

I asked about three previous addresses to get some idea about the scale of movements within the City. Most had moved at least once but remained within the same general area, with only a few venturing into other parts. Previous renters gave information about their dwelling to others, resulting in the circulation of the same housing within the community of villagers.

In most cases the household head and other members of the household had jobs, half of whom were lower level blue collar. Examples included construction trades, security, gardener,

factory worker, and lower level health workers. There were eleven (18%) white-collar workers, such as teacher, nurse, and banker. Among the remaining, seven belonged to the uniformed services either as soldier or police officer. Nine were self-employed. In this group there were women who cooked food to sell or did laundry, while the men were electricians, mechanics, or engaged in other trades but worked for themselves.

In summary, most of the persons in the sample were working in lower and middle class types of jobs. They were living in rented dwelling, while a few already owned a house in one of the newer parts of the City. To do this they would have lobbied their member of parliament or the government minister responsible for lands and housing loans. Alternatively they would “capture” (i.e. squat on) land with the hope that they could eventually own it legally and that the city infrastructure of streets, drains, and sewerage connection would reach them sooner or later. They clustered near each other where they lived and passed information to newcomers.

#### *Links with the Home Community and the Belize City Garifuna Community*

Older persons in our sample started leaving Barranco in 1943 but the outflow picked up from 1965. The median year of departure was 1970 but the median year for arrival in Belize City was 1980. Belize City became the final destination among others in the chain of migratory wage labor for the villagers. Many had worked for some time in the timber, citrus, and sugar industries in different parts of the country.

It did not seem that many were planning to leave for the most popular destination for Belizeans -- both Garifuna and non-Garifuna -- the U.S. In casual discussion they gave the impression that they regarded Belize City as a distinct improvement over previous destinations in their wage labor sojourn. By and large they might have weighed the risks and costs of going to

the U.S. as against the relative security of staying in Belize City. As one told me, “I feel fairly comfortable here. It would not be possible for me to take the chance to go to America through the back (i.e. by road illegally). Besides, I am closer to my sick mother at home.”

The trips they were making home, however, were not that frequent. About half said that they went home only rarely. The infrequency of visits did not mean breaking contact with relatives. Almost two-thirds were helping to maintain their relatives by sending cash regularly. There was not much reciprocal exchange of relatives sending gifts from the village. Only a quarter said that they received some food items from time to time.

They mentioned that they missed being at home. Almost a half said that they missed the food together with acquiring it through fishing and farming. The food items mentioned included cassava, other root crops, plantain, fruits, and fish. Next in order of frequency were relatives and friends and finally the physical and social environment. By physical environment they meant the sea, seafront, beach, landscape, and the land. The following fall under the category of social environment -- peaceful life, warmth and cooperation of the people, village quietness, and the “good old days”. The focus on the sea and its parts refers to the extended view of the sea, which stretches to the horizon east of the village. The seafront is the area closer to the beach, where people swim; and the beach where fishermen arrive with their boats and sell fish. These functions associated with parts of the marine and coastal environments remained in the mental imagery of the villagers.

If they could not be in the village, the respondents selected friends and visitors from among fellow villagers and other Garifuna. They attended Garifuna cultural events regularly. They were also aware of a primary institution in the city that promoted Garifuna cultural

awareness. Without any prompting the vast majority identified the National Garifuna Council as such an organization.

As expected, the issue of links between themselves and their home community brought a heightened degree of ambivalence among the respondents. At one level, there was still some nostalgia about certain aspects of village life. At the other level, they knew that there was not much future there, given its state of economic stagnation and the lack of prospects for the future. In answer to the provocative question whether they thought that the village was dying, as many as three-fourths said yes. Most attributed this to the lack of jobs, driving away the villagers to places like Belize City. Notwithstanding the bleak prospects, a little more than half said that they planned to return there to retire.

### *Links with the Non-Garifuna Community*

The questionnaire revealed information about the relations of the respondents with their non-Garifuna neighbours, co-workers, and the larger community. Since they had changed addresses in Belize City, I wanted to know the extent to which they were relying on sources within the larger community on the availability of housing. In answer to the question, “Who helped you to locate the addresses where you have lived?” more than half said that it was a Garifuna person.

The friendliness of their neighbors was an important quality they looked for within their neighborhood. Unfriendly neighbors were a main reason for disliking a neighborhood. Another reason for their displeasure was the filth of uncollected garbage, clogged drains, and bushy yards.



There were questions probing how much they participated in neighborhood groups. At that time there were community organizations in some of the areas where they lived, designed to assist with participatory community development projects (Palacio, 1990, pp. 52-67). Most of them had not heard of any. This could be more the result of the community organizations not promoting themselves widely. There was a difference in participation in well-known institutions. For example, almost one half said that they attended church -- mainly the Roman Catholic Church -- regularly. The churches were located in their neighborhoods.

Another component of daily life in which the informants necessarily interacted with non-Garifuna was at work. As in the case of locating their dwelling, I asked who was most helpful to them in getting their job. Almost three-quarter said that they looked around and found it on their own. This contrasts with locating the dwelling, where their fellow Garifuna were most helpful. The next question asked who had been helpful to the other household members in getting their jobs. Again, the answer was they themselves.

There was a question that tested the level of comfort the respondent had on the job, given the tradition of discrimination against the Garifuna in Belize City. The question asked, "Has any working member of the household been discriminated against on the job?" The vast majority (81%) said no. The indication is that they found their jobs on their own and worked in non-threatening situations within a predominantly non-Garifuna environment.

In terms of economic ties with the larger community, I asked about their relations with the neighborhood grocer and savings institutions. Only 17 said that they maintained an account with their neighborhood grocer. Only 17 said that they saved in a "syndicate."<sup>9</sup> They had greater interest in more formal savings institutions. As many as 33 (55%) said they maintained accounts in commercial banks and 37 (62%) in credit unions. Their use of savings institutions also depicts

a savings ethic that they brought from the village, according to my field investigations. During fieldwork in 1979-1980 I observed several children going to save in the credit union every Sunday, bringing along a few coins each, and making the practice as much a ritual as going to the Sunday church service.

Within the overall framework of economic relations, the respondents were able to rely on themselves to obtain a job, the main reason for leaving the village. The reasons no doubt stem from a large enough labor market and their comparative advantage. In the latter case they came with a sound primary school education background from the village. Furthermore, they had acquired a wealth of prior work experience on jobs in various places. For the blue-collar occupations of security, construction trades, machinists, etc. their experience in the Army and Police Force was helpful. Similarly, those who engaged in white-collar jobs as teachers, clerical and administrative public officers, and nurse, had received secondary and tertiary level education.

Having acquired their jobs, they worked conscientiously enough to ward off any discrimination that the non-Garifuna might have wanted to levy against them. From their salary they saved not so much in the informal syndicate but more in the formal credit unions and banks. These are indicators of a group with a progressive economic profile, attempting to achieve main goals they had set for themselves while in the village.

### ***Cultural Identification***

If the respondents were doing fairly well within the limitations of housing and jobs available within the city, I wanted to know what their opinions about cultural identity were concerning themselves and their children. Formulating survey questions about cultural identity

can be difficult. Fortunately, I had observed from the pilot questionnaire that informants felt comfortable introducing the topic using language as a cultural marker. Among diagnostics, language seemed to attract the most attraction as the definable trait. So the first question on the topic in the final questionnaire draft was “Do you speak Garifuna to members of your household?”

I knew that all of the respondents spoke the language having grown up in monolingual households in the village. It was not surprising that three-fourths said that they spoke the language within their household. The answer to the next question showed less use of the language among young persons (i.e. younger than 20 years of age). Fewer than half (40%) said that young persons spoke the language. Having visited several households, my own impression is that even this figure is exaggerated, as there is a general defensiveness among parents about the use of their language by their children. As part of this defensiveness they would say, “Well, they don’t speak the language but they understand it”. In most instances this was not true. On further probing they would say, “You know they need to speak Creole to fit into Belize City. So we don’t discourage them from speaking it. Besides, we don’t have the time to teach them Garifuna.” In reality language use was becoming limited among older family members, who increasingly found themselves talking the Creole vernacular to their children.

The following question went directly to the question of self-identification. It asked whether the respondent thought that the younger members of the household identify themselves as Garifuna. As many as 84% said yes, although, according to them, only 40% spoke the language. The next question probed further why the respondent thought they so identified. The answers took the following patterns. The highest percentage (42%) said that it was heredity; next

came “the use of the language” at 32%; then “being proud to be Garifuna” at 16%; and finally “practicing their culture”.

The answers need elaboration. Heredity means being born Garifuna. In some cases, the respondent would refer to his or her parents, namely the grandparents of the child in the following manner, “I am Garifuna as well as my own parents, so my child is certainly Garifuna”. It is worth noting that claims of heredity had higher value as marker of identity than being able to speak the language. The last two responses -- “being proud of being Garifuna” and “practicing the culture” -- actually stand for “not being ashamed of being Garifuna”. The reference is to the need for the Garifuna not to hide in shame from exposing themselves because of the threat of discrimination. One hears many examples of Garifuna years ago hiding from others in Belize City so as to not speak the language in public. They had been trying to “pass for Creole” and could not be heard talking the language.

Indeed, the final question validates what should the Garifuna display as part of his identity, apart from language. The attributes in order of preference were music and dance 52%, food 15%, spirituality 12%, and attire 8%. Another interpretation is that these are the traits that need to be preserved, according to the respondents. The National Garifuna Council (NGC) has had some success in promoting awareness among the Belize City Garifuna in these and other traits.

A registered NGO since 1991, the NGC has as its main aim the preservation of the Garifuna culture throughout Belize. It has branches in all rural and urban areas, where there are sizeable Garifuna communities. The main activities for which NGC is known take place around the 19<sup>th</sup> of November, which commemorate the arrival of the first pioneers from Honduras to Belize. A public and bank holiday, the day is celebrated throughout the country to share with the

Garifuna what the culture has to offer. After that day, however, nothing is heard from the NGC until the following year. In the public perception of other Belizeans, it exists as an institution that promotes the culture, primarily as a form of large-scale celebrations. From time to time there are efforts to move into areas of other concern, such as community development and interactions with regional cultural organizations but there is little consistency in this regard.

## **Transition and Identity**

Transition into urban society is a complex process, which depends on variables such as the skills or academic qualifications one has at the point of entry, age, gender, the length of time at the destination, and so on. From the nature of the survey instrument we applied it was not possible to bring all of these into perspective. In attempting to analyse the extent of transition in the following discussion, I supplement the cryptic data of the survey with my awareness of life in both the village and the city.

Juxtaposition to other Belizeans on a permanent basis for the first time made cultural identity a topic deserving special attention from the villagers. While at first speaking the language was enough to distinguish themselves from the Creole, their children were losing the ability to do so. As language lost its function as a marker, the villagers were substituting heredity and the ability to demonstrate competence in select traits, such as music, dance, spirituality, and wearing traditional attire. Besides, the displays were no longer as spontaneous as they had been in the village; they were to be held through the aegis of the NGC at specific times. Identity, which previously had been taken for granted in the village, was going through a systematic organization led by the villagers with minimal support available from the larger urban society. The lack of strategic support in this process from state funding sources has made Garifuna

revitalization a small scale and grassroots effort, compared to the case in Puerto Rico (Davila, 1999).

The household was probably the unit that was most transformed in the transition in terms of the family structure and the household function. In the village during 1979-1980 there were 16 conjugal and 31 extended households (Palacio, 1982, p. 24), while in the city survey there were 39 conjugal with 21 extended. Furthermore, the conjugal unit was clearly the ideal in terms of the fluidity of members, who could come and go leaving behind the wife and husband. The interdependence of these two roles coincided with the need to adjust to the demands of city life. The household exists not only for the benefit of family members; it is also a very important place to entertain visitors and to extend some of its functions to others from the larger community. These functions include baby-sitting and offering paid meals or laundry services for a few people. Among our respondents there was selectivity among visitors and to whom these services were provided. The group was small, including close relatives and/or friends, with whom there was reciprocal exchange. The relative openness of visiting and extending household services that took place in the village was limited in the city.

Another major change came from expectations that the cash economy of the city generated. As we have seen from the review of the village as sending society, the villagers were no strangers to the cash economy. The difference was that in Belize City they were living within it far more intensively than in the village. One has to work in the city to be able to meet all household needs, including paying the rent. Besides, one has to be a conscientious worker, avoiding the possibility of blame from the supervisor within the context of an inter-ethnic work environment. One has to save to be able to build the family home, one of the highest priorities for the respondents. All the prerequisites, including getting a lot and the actual construction

means entering into relations with several persons, from politician, to plumber, to painter. The stories from the respondents invariably pointed to deceit and the pitfalls of relying on contractors. To many the exercise became a traumatic awakening to urban society. One trait that enabled them to survive was the ethic of savings they brought from the village. Unlike my expectations, they saved more in the formal systems of banks and credit unions than among themselves.

These experiences are part of what make up *ibagari balici* loosely translated as “life in the city”. By this the villager is referring to the web of Creole culture and society, which consumes everything one does. It includes getting accustomed to the neighborhood, school system, the cycle of ceremonial events, the weather, the high rate of theft and burglary, etc. At moments of difficulties the village aesthetics loom larger in preference -- the landscape, sea, the quietness, and the relative orderliness. These are not available in the lower class neighborhoods, that surround our respondents, especially since they know that there are better parts of the city that are beyond their reach. Being confined within the stratification system of the city was a major source of dissatisfaction for the respondents.

### **Cultural Identity and the Garifuna as Indigenous People**

There is a tendency to regard the cultural identity of indigenous peoples as immutable and self-supporting. Indigenous peoples themselves often refer to attributes as proof of their current rights, ignoring the tendency of people to invent their own identity (Hobsbawm, 1992) or to project what they might have imagined as being a fact (Anderson, 1991). In this study we see parents overstating the competence of their offsprings in the mother tongue, demonstrating how defensive one can be about cultural identity. This chapter makes the twofold argument that the

identity of indigenous peoples changes over time and that the trajectory of change is determined by the social setting in which they find themselves. Such perspective is helpful at a time of overwhelming social forces impinging on the Caribbean and by extension its indigenous peoples. It is further helpful for placing the person within a group as a prime actor within that setting. The primary group in this study is the household.

The Garifuna arrived as indigenous peoples in Central America with an identity severely chastened by their catastrophic experiences in St. Vincent. By the time their descendants settled in Belize City after ten generations in 1990, the culture had changed a great deal; but should it be possible for their St. Vincent born ancestors to visit, they would recognize several aspects of their culture.<sup>10</sup>

The village had provided an auspicious setting for the maintenance of kinship ties, which in turn determined family membership, community solidarity, and rights to land. Inroads from beyond the village, such as cash returns from wage labour and primary school education, were internalized to function for the well being of the community, generating fertile ground for the retention of music, dance, spirituality, worldview, and methods of farming and fishing.

The villagers could not bring the village with them to the city, which became the final destination in their wage labor migration. Instead they brought from it many traits that eased the trauma of their transition. The traits included the close ties among family members, a work and savings ethic, aesthetic imagery of the village landscape, and whatever they could apply from time to time from their traditional food, music, dance, spiritual rituals, and attire.

Practicing these traits became a momentous addition to the multiculturalism that Belize City was concurrently experiencing. The wave of nation-building cultural policy was reaching a crest. Furthermore, a Black Nationalist movement was generating a re-assessment within Belize



City, the largest concentration of black people in the country, of the strength of its African roots. Among the Garifuna themselves their *Garifunaduo* movement was simultaneously widening among them a sense of their African and Native American origins. There was a coincidence of strong cultural movements with people, who could participate in and contribute toward them.

Nevertheless, the urban social setting generated its demands that needed critical response from the villagers. They had to modify the structure of their household so that men and women could coordinate their contribution to the responsibilities, which the extended family would have handled in the village. Gonzalez (1979, pp. 255-263) reported a similar constriction in family types among immigrants in New York. Not only were there more conjugal families, there were more men and women formally marrying. Besides, there were far fewer visitors than in the home village.

Most importantly, the issue of promoting cultural identity among children became a task to be added to the mounting household responsibilities. It was a case where the village was no longer there to help raise the child. Because of the difficulty to retain fluency in Garifuna, partly due to the overlapping workload in the household, it no longer became a prime marker for identity. There was a shift toward the more demonstrative and celebratory aspects of the culture, which took place not in the household but within the public domain. One's heredity became important and even more so the need to publicly display it.

The change did not mean that the Garifuna culture had lost its indigenous base. Rather, it had modified to accommodate the social changes overtaking the Garifuna people. The modification came depending on validation from the larger society. Earlier we saw the generational decline of fluency in the spoken word. Concurrently, Garifuna songs were becoming popular, with music amplified in pulsating rhythms using electronic musical

instruments. The birth of the *punta rock* genre took place and became a popular dance not only in Belize but also throughout coastal Central America and the American diaspora. As language declined in use, music as another form of communication rose in cross-cultural popularity.

## **Conclusion**

What is the cultural identity of a people? One can answer this question by listing traits and subgrouping them into an order showing their significance. This kind of response is inadequate much more for indigenous peoples, among whom identity is invariably a convoluted question of historically denied rights. In this chapter I have attempted to show that it is possible to analyse not only the identity of an indigenous people but also how it has changed when moving from a village to an urban area.

While so far there has been emphasis in this discussion on the cultural changes that the Garifuna have made with their identity, there has not been a corresponding focus on the social and economic needs of the Garifuna as indigenous people. The study shows that villagers have stayed in Belize City and not followed the inexorable urge to proceed to the United States. The expanding economy, geography, and cultural renewal taking place in Belize City enabled them to acquire socioeconomic benefits not available in the village. The National Garifuna Council, despite its strong cultural presence, could not help with the additional problems that they faced. They include revitalizing rights to their traditional lands along the coast and some cayes in southern Belize; special health problems in the high incidence of hypertension, diabetes, and glaucoma; endemic poverty in their communities; and the continued deterioration of home villages from depopulation. Within the city, sectors of their community have mechanisms to advocate for redress. Workers -- both blue-collar and white-collar -- have their labor unions.

Subscribers to credit unions and commercial banks have statutory regulations to protect their welfare. However, there are no government approved organizations with similar functions on behalf of the Garifuna as indigenous people. Such neglect counters the spirit and letter of ILO Convention 169 passed in 1989.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the lack of any state recognition of the Garifuna and Maya as indigenous peoples is conspicuous within the legal and juridical structures of Belize.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the approach by the Garifuna to embrace their African and Native American roots introduces a welcome addition to the spotlight on identity among the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean. There is palpable discomfort within the region to accept black-skinned people as being indigenous (see the chapter on the Caribbean Organisation of Indigenous Peoples in this volume). The volume edited by Haslip-Viera (1999) discusses this issue within Puerto Rico, especially the contribution by Duany (1999). In the English-speaking Caribbean, on the other hand, there is a bias on the Africanist position, mainly in terms of being black-skinned, which similarly provides minimal scope for those having Native American heritage. The response of Haslip-Viera, Ortiz de Montellano, & Barbour (1997: 419-441) to Van Sertima highlights main issues in the ideological Native American vs. African dialogue that now needs to be revisited primarily for the Caribbean. Within extremes of one or the other racial pole, several people in the Caribbean fall through the crack. The story of the Garifuna in this chapter leads the way to spotlight others, who have both African and Native American origins.

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<sup>2</sup> There are few studies on the Garifuna residents in towns in Central America. One example is Khan (1981).

<sup>3</sup> The Magistrates Meeting was a form of local government dominated by mainly white landowners.

<sup>4</sup> In Belize "Creole" refers to the ethnic group, which results from the mixture of former African slaves with their British masters. Their language is also called Creole.

<sup>5</sup> Gonzalez and Gonzalez (1978) estimated that there were about 15,000 Garifuna in New York. There were additional thousands in other cities, notably Chicago, Los Angeles, and New Orleans.

<sup>6</sup> Data on the village comes from oral history and other primary sources, including church records.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the sociopolitical integration of Belizeans within the nationalist movement see Shoman (1994, pp. 199-225).

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<sup>8</sup> Belize City is cut into two parts by a tributary of the Belize River. The Southside is poorer and has more ramshackle housing than the Northside.

<sup>9</sup> The syndicate is an informal revolving savings group popular among Belize City residents.

<sup>10</sup> With respect to language, Taylor (1951, p. 38) mentions that “the dialect of St. Vincent already differed considerably from” the Dominican language in Fr. Breton’s dictionary, which his informants in Hopkins could understand “with the proper phonetic adjustments”. Taylor’s conclusion needs a critical review from linguists.

<sup>11</sup> In fact, only Dominica among Anglo-phone Caribbean territories has endorsed ILO Convention 169.

<sup>12</sup> In 1998 the government set up a commission to review what changes should be introduced to the Constitution. A representative of the National Garifuna Council on the commission argued that there should be added a statement acknowledging the presence of indigenous peoples and their basic rights, within the spirit of the ILO Convention 169. The other members of the Commission vigorously rejected the suggestion. It is worth asking whether the members of the Commission reflected the popular sentiment of the majority of Belizeans on this issue. If it is the case, then a massive re-education effort needs to be implemented to uplift the nation’s consciousness on the rights of indigenous peoples. There would also have to be a direct intervention of the state.