

## TO ETHNIC OR NOT TO ETHNIC “New Identity Formations—the Giau-rifuna of Belize City?”

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*“Ethnic has a familiar meaning for actors ... a possible motivating factor in behaviour, an indubitably shaping factor in cognition, and an apparently deep-seated factor in effect”. Karen Blue (1981: 218)*

### **KOHM EEN DA MEE MEK AHM**

Recently, I overheard a conversation which goes something like this.....

*Comment:* Nice looking, brown skin Kriol, what’s your name child?

*Response:* Me? Elijio Miss, but me da noh Kriol, me dah Garifuna.

*Comment:* Well I be; anh you young lady?

*Response:* Me dah Bradley, Miss

*Comment* Cho! You noh look like wanh Bradley. Your friend yes, could pass, but noh you. What a funny thing dis, aye?

And so it goes, but it is not a funny thing. It is called Belizeanization. It can occur through interethnic marriage or through assimilation. According to socio-cultural anthropologists, an offspring of two or more ethnic groups has three options to legitimately claim ethnic identity. The first is that an individual may claim an ethnic identity if her immediate ancestors possess such an identity. Secondly, if an individual’s ancestors have several ethnic identities, she is entitled to select from among the various choices. Lastly, an individual may identify with all her ancestors’ ethnic identities. So if you are mixed with Creole, East Indian, Garifuna, then you can legitimately claim all three, or any one or two of these groups.

### **Giau-rifuna or Gari-kriol**

Interethnic mating and mixing between Belize’s two black groups the Creole and the Garifuna, stem back to the days of the mahogany camps. This has continued and is more prevalent today, particularly in Belize City, than we would want to accept. How do offsprings from the union of these two groups, who are phenotypically the same, identify?

The offsprings studied did not perceive themselves as ‘half-breeds’ or half-and-half as exists in the literature. Notwithstanding the surnames, their choice of ethnic identity is one or the other—Garifuna or Kriol, but not both. Contrary to what is always assumed, they did not necessarily choose their mothers’ identity, even when she is the nurturer.

Their ethnic options were individually determined, and influenced by personal, lived experiences. Some preferences, listed in order of choice are: discrimination by relatives, the social value attached to one group or the other, the influences of friends and community, and solidarity with the nurturer.

In one case study, a Kriol Mother had three children, two fathered by a Kriol, and one by a Garifuna. The offsprings all identified as Kriol. The second case study was a household consisting of a Garifuna mother and Creole father, and their four children. The one and only daughter identified as Garifuna, in solidarity with the grandmother; one son identifies as Garifuna, while the other two identify as Kriol.

The predominant socio-cultural features among all offsprings in the study were some form of Kriol, but not the traditional qualities as recalled by parents. The first language, and in all cases the only language was Kriol, but one that is loaded with North American slang. Also they had embraced non-traditional Creole and/or Garifuna cultural traits that were more, South Central, LA type, in dress, food and language. They had deconstructed Creole culture and the traditional Garifuna culture on one hand, while constructing their own, on the other hand. Groups are defined as much as by who they are, as by who they are not. There is a new socio-cultural formation worth observing.

What does this say for ethnicity in post-independent Belize? What is forging is an emerging Belizean identity.