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## **Cultural Retrieval among the Garifuna in Belize - an exercise in continuing education**

by

JOSEPH PALACIO

### **Introduction**

An essential aim of the University of the West Indies as envisaged by its progenitors, the members of the Irvine Commission, was engaging in outreach (Sherlock and Nettleford 1990). The University has lived up to this mission during its fifty years under the aegis of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies, which in 1989 became the School of Continuing Studies. A primary reason for the success has been flexibility, given the diversity of the population the University services (located within 14 territories of the English speaking Caribbean) and the equally wide academic background of the faculty in the School of Continuing Studies. In the non-campus countries the Resident Tutor, the University's *in situ* representative, carries out his/her programme based on what he/she can do with available resources. My own bias is on community development.

Underlying the flexibility there is a strong sense of intellectual enquiry about outreach, which seeks to answer the following fundamental questions:-

- How are we as members of the University leaving an impact on the larger society who, while not having access to the services of campuses, are no less sponsors and beneficiaries of the University?
- What methods of delivery are we refining?
- How does what we do contribute to the body of knowledge called (continuing) education?

The fact that Resident Tutors and others do not address these issues sufficiently in conferences and academic writings is less a factor of lacking answers than being burdened with the unending demands of the job that have increased in geometric proportions within the past few years.

I know quite well that such exigencies leave hardly any time for the reflection necessary to see the forest of continuing education beyond the trees of individual workshops and courses. Indeed, it has been five years after doing the project that I describe in this paper and while preparing a paper for a major regional conference on traditional health that I reflected on the remarkable coincidence of

anthropology, the subject of my academic formation, within the scholarly scope of continuing education, my chosen career. It has been truly a product of hindsight to arrive at the conclusion that the thrust of anthropology closely mirrors the mission that underpins continuing education.

With its singular dedication to the holism of human society anthropology includes in its intellectual armory an abiding concern for details. It thrives on investigating who is doing what, why, how and when. To deal with such minutiae it has over the years developed several approaches, methods and conceptual orientations. This in turn has enabled it to address the logic of enquiry in varying degrees of epistemological sophistication. In short, not only does it pre-dispose one to appreciate the wide scope of continuing education it also provides a wide range of tools to engage in the tasks required for research, teaching and analysis.

In this paper I describe a workshop on re-learning traditional skills that the University of the West Indies School of Continuing Studies mounted among the Garifuna in Belize in 1989. There is some emphasis on the context and the mechanics that we applied to it as an exercise in continuing education. There is, therefore, ample material for comparative purposes directed toward colleagues in continuing education. But it was also an exercise in cultural retrieval, an attempt to help the Garifuna validate their culture after being taught not to appreciate it during the past two centuries. Finally it is an essay attempting to link two primary orientations arising from my dedication to both anthropology and continuing education.

### **Anthropology and the Garifuna**

If there had been no anthropology, those interested in the study of the Garifuna would have invented it, so much does it fulfil the curiosity pivotal to the discipline about the beginnings of a people and their trajectory over centuries. Also called Black Caribs, the Garifuna number about 200,000 and are found on the Northeast coast of Central America in Belize, Guatemala and Honduras from where several thousands have migrated to U.S. cities. They are indigenous not to Central America rather to the Eastern Caribbean where their two sets of ancestors, Arawaks/Caribs and maroon African slaves intermixed. The root population numbering 2,026 were shipped by the British in 1797 from the island of St. Vincent in the Eastern Caribbean to Central America<sup>1</sup>(Gonzalez 1988:21).

The enigma of the Garifuna as a people with a culture born from two distinct traditions, Amerindian and African, but integrated into one identity with its own language, food, religious rituals and worldview has been discussed in several volumes. The following are some of the main themes from the anthropological literature. The first is on the formation of a People through biological and cultural fusion on the one hand; and on the other the continuous process of self re-definition

in response to various external forces<sup>2</sup>(Gonzalez 1988 and Gullick 1985). The second is the strength of the consanguineal bond in kinship and household formation (Gonzalez 1969 and 1984: 1-12; Kerns 1984) This topic was a forerunner to the current widespread interest in gender studies. The third and related theme is the transcendence of bonds between migrants, who may be thousands of miles away, and kinfolk remaining in home countries (Gonzalez 1979, Palacio 1991: 119-146 and 1992: 17-26) . Again,, this topic foreshadowed the interest in studies on migration and transnationalism (Georges 1990 and Glick-Schiller *et al* 1992).

As the studies have mushroomed and satisfied the arcane in the intellectual community, they have promoted extensive dialogue among anthropologists and other social scientists. Such dialogue, however is exclusive of the Garifuna themselves because the studies have not been transposed into their vernacular. It is ironic, therefore, that there is an inverse correlation between the growth of studies on the Garifuna and the strength of their self-identity as a people. To a large extent the marginalization and deleterious effect on self-image has been the result of racism by political and military authorities in their respective countries toward them among other minorities. It makes it even the more necessary to ask the question why anthropologists have not adequately engaged their informants in the teaching/learning process necessary for self-discovery. This is a task that falls more particularly within the realm of continuing education. Here stems the need to explore the close fit between the information forthcoming from the anthropologists and the practice of continuing education.

### **The teaching/learning context**

While the anthropologist has not seen as high priority the need to educate informants about themselves local educators are guilty of a similar omission. They have not isolated the culture of the students as a main point of departure. Both the anthropologist and the educator have not heeded the message of Paolo Freire that the immediate environment of the student should provide the main ingredient for education. Even more damaging both are overlooking Freire's further call that education should be the key to the self-realization and ultimate liberation of the student (Freire 1973). Popular culture - particularly the technologies used in handicrafts, traditional medicine, and food procurement has not been on the curriculum of schools in Belize and the rest of the CARICOM region. In accepting the challenge to teach some of these previously "unteachable" skills we were treading on new grounds. Hence, the necessity to describe the aims underlying the project, division of labour, the setting of the workshop, and the mechanics of the teaching/learning process.

As the director of the project my training in anthropology and role as facilitator of Continuing Education coalesced making it difficult to discern where

one ended and the other took over. My main aim was to enable the Garifuna to retrieve aspects of their culture as subjects. In doing so I wanted them to learn about the process as much as possible breaking the norm that outsiders should assume educational initiatives about the Garifuna as objects. It was not only the slippage of culture that concerned me. After all it is an inevitable and pervasive component of culture change. It was the concurrent loss of possibilities for economic self-sustenance. In short, my rationale for the project was that to encourage revival of interest in traditional culture could lead to developing marketable skills and products, which in turn could contribute to the economic development of the community. It is particularly challenging in communities where there is hardly any tradition of generating cash income locally.

For generations, the potential for a sustainable and endogenous economic base had been eroded within Garifuna communities although they have been inserted into the wage labour sector even migrating thousands of miles to other countries in its pursuit. The Garifuna are not unique in this chain of events. Discussions I had with colleagues working in the Atlantic Coast of Central America revealed that this was recurring to other marginalized peoples throughout the subregion. It was more precipitous there than in Belize because of cataclysmic violence during the decades of the 1980's. But it was always not certain what could be done to capture the latent spirit of cultural revindication that existed among such groups and to frame it within an overall programme of economic development. My quest for a link between cultural revindication and economic activities lead to my close association with the National Garifuna Council, a grassroots organization that incorporates advocacy among other objectives for the development of the Garifuna in Belize. Simultaneously I arrived at more defined strategies for intervention after discussions with colleagues in anthropology, popular education, and community development especially those with experience in Latin America.

While the aim for the project was a distillation from several stimuli, the specific objectives were more clear cut. They were to carry out hands-on skills demonstration for students led by master artisans; document the procedures using fieldnotes', still photograph, audio/video equipment; encourage students to produce at least one item from start to finish; and to promote the learning of other aspects of the culture arising from a total immersion within a Garifuna village for a period of six days. Should the students learn enough to produce items for sale, that would be an added endorsement of our aim for economic development. Towards this end we invited the Belize Rural Womens' Association (BRWA) to assist by providing classes in marketing. I envisaged that all students would learn at least one technology and that some would be sufficiently motivated to focus on the entrepreneurial aspect for their own income generation.

I took upon myself responsibility to access the cash necessary to expedite the project. It took the usual route of proposal writing followed by personal contacts with potential sources in Belize City. Invariably the response was that it was a good and timely idea. But it had not been done before and may not be successful; by focusing on one ethnic group among several others it may encourage further cleavage among Belizeans; and it did not fall into the parameters of specific agencies. Bureaucrats at the decision-making level in funding agencies have a predictable response format to such requests. The primary item of expenditure was providing the main daily meal which took about one-quarter of the total budget of almost \$10,000 Bze. The participants provided the other two meals on their own, as part of their investment in the workshop. The second largest item was honoraria to the instructors. The third was contribution toward photographic supplies. Our main sources of funds were the Belize/Newfoundland Linkage and BRWA. The participants paid registration fees. Finally, the School of Continuing Studies contributed substantially in both cash and kind.

There was one important resource that we requested and was granted to us most willingly. It was someone to videocamera the procedure to capture especially the hand movements as a powerful method of documentation. We made the request to the Extension Division of Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland, as part of a reciprocal exchange between the University of the West Indies School of Continuing Studies in Belize and Memorial funded by CIDA. Arriving with camera and other equipment in hand, Mr. Fred Campbell accompanied us for the total duration of the field school. His technical skills and affable personality contributed to the success of documentation via the camera.

Long before the field implementation we had agreed with the National Garifuna Council that it would take responsibility for the logistics of the workshop. It included selecting the students, the skills to be taught, the teachers; as well as planning the day to day schedule of activities and the progression of the teaching/learning process. Through visits to ten communities the president and other members of the executive mobilized the larger membership of the Council. As a programme about which the National Garifuna Council had often dreamed but could not implement, the workshop was truly an idea that was long overdue. In their enthusiasm members made suggestions how to maximize their participation. Through its membership the National Garifuna Council became the mechanism to guarantee participatory involvement in the project.

The Village Council of the Garifuna village of Hopkins accepted to host the field school. They had done so to a similar workshop that we had sponsored two years earlier in 1987. The homogenous Garifuna character of Hopkins made it appropriate for our purposes. More master artisans live there than in other Garifuna communities. Besides it retains a traditional cycle of daily life where the early

part of the day is set aside for chores while there is easy socializing during the evenings. We duplicated this pace within the daily schedule of the workshop. Finally there were several families who agreed to host students from other communities.

### **The Mechanics of Teaching/Learning**

Four men and five women taught various skills during the workshop. Except for three women who were younger than forty the others were older than fifty-nine. Two of the men were over seventy years. All of them had learned on their own and perfected their expertise over several years. To us they were the teachers - the master craftspersons. Our contractual arrangements included that they would provide materials and tools; teach their skills; and - in some cases - use space within their yards as "classroom". They did hands on demonstrations repeating it several times if necessary while explaining what they were doing. Their patience in dealing with beginners was truly remarkable.

The skills were subdivided into five sets of technologies, each with its own type of materials - Johnkuno mask; Johnkuno crown; vegetable materials such as leaves, barks and reeds; stone-on-wood; and assorted materials used to make dolls.

Two technologies provided adornments for the Johnkuno dancer - a mask and head-dress. The mask is shaped out of a sieve which is implanted manually on a wooden mould and painted. The head-dress starts as a crown made from cardboard on which are pasted decorations of feathers, colourful crepe paper streamers and mirrors. (seeAppendix 1)

Several items in the traditional Garifuna household have a vegetable source such as leaves, reeds and thin strips of vine bark. The most common are thin bark strips all of which are plaited, sometimes in one design or combining different materials and colours to create contrasting designs. The resulting products include hats and sleeping mats as well as utensils such as baskets, flat strainers and cylindrical strainers used to separate the poisonous acid from bitter cassava. Similarly finished items are still found among aboriginal peoples in the Eastern Caribbean and in the Orinoco/Amazon basin.

The grater is used in processing a variety of food items, such as coconut and root crops - yam, cassava, ginger, coco, etc. It comes in two main sizes, a shorter table top model and a larger one about 3 ft. in length over which the user stoops. The backing is wood usually mahogany into which small bits of limestone are inlaid providing a tough serrated edge. During the workshop students worked on smaller models.

The art of handmaking dolls had almost become obsolete before its revival by workers in the home economics division of the government Community Development Department in Belize. The teacher in our workshop had re-learned the trade in this revival. Her dolls were made especially to appeal to tourists looking for portrayal of typical Garifuna features. Although it was not a traditional technology, we included it in response to the students' request.

The least traditional technology that became available as the workshop progressed was handling the video camera. Fred Campbell, our Canadian cameraman, taught a few participants who were interested. It was a most welcome bonus to some of the boys.

The daily numbers of students for the entire five-day workshop fluctuated between 40 and 75. They were mostly women between the ages of 17 and 24 representing nine Garifuna communities throughout Belize. Remarkable was a group of older women from Dangriga who participated as enthusiastically as their younger counterparts.

Although there is gender division in traditional Garifuna technologies the students were advised not to take this into consideration in making their choice of what to learn. They worked as groups with individual masters and each was encouraged to perform at least one item. Most accepted the challenge, some working for hours on their items. The incentive was to display one's product at an exhibition at the end of the workshop and to win one of the prizes offered.

Workshops took a greater part of the day. In the early evening students gathered at the community centre building for organized social activities featuring folklore, chanting, dancing and lecture/discussions. The villagers themselves joined these events as participants and spectators- As grand finale there was a variety show where groups and individuals displayed talents in a friendly competitive and festive manner. The standing-room-only audience included scores of villagers.

#### **An exercise in Continuing Education and Cultural Retrieval**

The workshop ended as it started with a formal ceremony complete with speeches and songs. The participants filled in their evaluation forms. Some of the recurring statements were as follows:-

- a) Happy that something was finished but need time to learn all skills
- b) Many thanks to the masters who were such excellent teachers.
- c) Women have taken interest in crafts and should keep it up.

Generally, most people were appreciative of the experience and wanted to repeat it in the near future. The appreciation was mixed with genuine surprise.



Many had not anticipated that within a few hours they could learn the basics of a traditional technology. What had not been taught formally within the school system not only could be taught and learned; it could be learned quickly while having fun in a group. To a large extent the workshop had been a classic case of popular education, one of the most effective methods of conducting continuing education. There was a culturally appropriate setting; the richness of group interaction through encouraging each other to learn; and the use of song, dance and skills to enhance the intensity of fellowship. At the end the emphasis was less on the intellectual aspect than on the socio-psychological. The impact of actually having learned something was probably felt more afterwards than during the workshop itself, when showing items off to family and friends.

Within this context of continuing education, cultural revindication remained as an underlined force. It is probably best expressed in this statement by one of the participants in the evaluation. Garifuna needs to appreciate his knowledge and wisdom and his cultural way of doing things, along with his unique way of mastering his own environment utilizing its resources for his survival. There are so many other skills we have but we have to make the effort to learn them." The skills had merely become media to recapture moments within a cultural frame that had long been denied to the participants. The intensity of the impact arose from the participatory nature of the workshop. As Garifuna, the participants assumed almost full control of the process as subjects. In this regard the role of the masters as intermediaries was pivotal. It needs some elaboration.

Despite their mastery in aesthetic talents, the master craftspersons occupy low status in their communities broken only by occasional requests for their handiwork for which they receive little wages. The workshop broke this monotony. The University of the West Indies requested them to perform and paid them a retaining fee for the few days. Persons from other communities sat at their feet to learn from them. Such validation was a pleasant and heartening surprise. In discussion they admitted that although they were always willing to teach, the youth had showed only minimal interest. The workshop, therefore, gave them an opportunity for optimism especially as a few were well advanced in age and already affected by chronic illness.

Through their participation the unique role of the masters as bearers of cultural tradition was vindicated; and it did not end at the workshop. Participants from one of the villages invited one of the masters to spend a few weeks with them so they could have more time to learn what they had already started in Hopkins. Subsequently one of the students from that group has himself acquired a high level of expertise in plaiting thin bark strips into utensils.

Our own experience with the power of video in depicting how to re-create dying skills led us one step further. With advice, we mounted a special project to re-do all the technologies in a staged manner and making special effort to include other details that we had missed earlier. The result is a full length 120 minute video broken into segments; and done specifically as a self-teaching tool. Copies are available through the School Of Continuing Studies in Belize.

Finally in 1993 we launched a similar workshop among another ethnic group, Belizeans of Yucatec Maya origin. Because there were several similarities with Hopkins, we were much prepared to deal with them.

### **Conclusion**

Conducting workshops is the staple of the Resident Tutor's life. The logistics that we applied in this one were similar to those in scores of others. What made this workshop different were the mechanics - the media of teaching, the skills, and technologies. The technologies are particularly significant being primarily primitive with roots in the Pre-Columbian Amazon rainforest and West Africa, in the case of the Johnkuno adornments. Also worthy of mention was the use of the video-camera as tool of documentation, with focus on the intricate hand movements.

If the mechanics of the workshop were interesting as relatively exotic ways of teaching/learning, there are other aspects of this workshop whose importance arise from examining the broad horizons of continuing education. One is the philosophical underpinning that may accompany a project in continuing education. Here it was Freire's liberalizing ethic on education where the student engages in the serendipitous cycles of self-discovery as subject. This in turn led to exploring two conceptual linkages in the study between cultural revindication and economic development and between social anthropology and continuing education.

The collective feeling of being victorious in having re-captured bits of their quickly disappearing material culture was ever present among the participants. And it became our own yardstick of measuring the workshop's success. The additional expectation that participants would also become inspired to engage in the skills as an economic enterprise was certainly too ambitious for this workshop. Having observed some of our graduates' handiwork several months afterwards, we could now move to the next phase of perfecting the skills focusing on quality control and methods of marketing. The lesson we learned was that the experience of re-learning old skills is so intense that by itself it fills a five-day workshop. Other skills, although they may be related, need another workshop.

There was more success in forging links between the two disciplines of anthropology and continuing education. In its barest outline the project isolated elements in the material culture of the Garifuna and "packaged" them as teaching

lessons for the beginner. Informants who normally provide information about material culture themselves became either teachers or students of it. The procedure necessitated a familiarity with both fields. Even more it needed a predisposition to use a variety of methods, chief of which was participation by the students themselves. Ultimately the beneficiaries were people whose taxes help to maintain the University of the West Indies but rarely participate so actively within its ample resources.

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## Appendix I

### Materials, Tools, and Methods for Technologies

#### WANARAGUA (Johnkuno Mask)

Materials: wire sieve, thin strip of metal from cheese can, paint

Tools: shears, hammer, mould of Johnkuno face, knife, pliers, small mallet, stool for working bench, paint brush

Methods:

1. Cut strip of metal from cheese can
2. Place the wire sieve on the mould and tack on the mould using shoe tacks.
3. Use tacks and hammer to impress on the sieve the nose, mouth, and other contours of the face.
4. When finished forming the face, cut off the mask from the mould.
- 5- Place the thin metal along the edge wrapping it tightly.
6. Paint the mask with the colours of the white man's face and leave to dry. The paint helps to harden the sieve.

#### WABABA (Johnkuno Head-dress)

Materials: cardboard pieces, crepe paper, cloth, material, glue, bird feathers (or painted turkey feathers), thread, paint, tying wire, small and round glass mirrors.

Tools: Needles (small and large), scissors, and stapler

Methods:

1. Cut from cardboard the profile of the head with an elongated crown.
2. Measure the piece around the circumference of the head to make sure that it fits. Leave the elongated part in the front.
3. Cut two strips to be used as handles on either side of the crown. They are also called ears.
4. Cover the crown with cloth and then sew.
5. Tie feathers on the top of the crown with wire.
6. Place paper roses made from crepe paper on the crown to decorate it.
7. Tie the mirrors between the crepe paper roses.
8. Try the headdress to adjust.

**GOUNWERE** (Materials used to make baskets,

hats, strainers, pataki, and other utensils made by plaiting strips of vine bark)

Materials: Two or more types of vines all cut under appropriate phases of the moon to ensure durability; cord string.

Tools: knife, machete, rubber knee pad, file, work bench.

Methods:

Step 1 Preparing the strips for plaiting.

Cut one of the vines into 18" lengths. Split each piece into 4 quarters. Remove the inner flesh with a sharp knife until you reach the bark. The tough flexible bark is the material to be used. For a strainer 10 inches, in diameter 85 strips 18 inches long are needed.

Step 2 Plaiting

Place 9 pieces of the 18" length strips lengthway and face up. There has to be an odd number. Always start from left to right.

Pick 2, skip 2, pick 2, skip 2, and pick 1

Pick 1, skip 2, pick 2, skip 2, and pick 2

Skip 2, pick 2, skip 2, pick 2, and skip 1

Pick 1, skip 2, pick 2, skip 2, pick 1, and skip 1

By now a pattern will have started to form. Just follow the pattern set until you reach ten inches or the desired dimension. Remember that one must always be skipped either from the left or right. Sprinkle what has been done so far with water to hold it together and stabilize.

Variations on this basic occur depending on the end product.

**EGI** (Stone Grater)

Materials: a piece of mahogany board measuring around 9 inches by 6 inches by 1 inch thick; chunks of granite called *cimeral* in Garifuna.

Tools: 4 inch nail, hammer, sandpaper, old machete, file, and hatchet.

Methods:

Step 1 preparing the *cimeral*

Cover the granite with a sack and break into pieces with hatchet, sledge hammer, or axe. Collect the small fine chips and place in a container ready to use.

Step 2 getting the rough serrated edge

Punch half inch holes at a distance of quarter inch apart on the board. Place fine chips into each hole and beat gently with a nail tip and hammer. Keep brushing the fine pieces off the board. Test the strength and the sharpness by grating coconut on it.

#### NADU (Reed Mat)

Materials: dried reed stems cut from the swamp, cord, and four sticks.

Tools: machete and file.

Method:

Set up an upright rectangular frame with the sticks. Have eight strings running perpendicular. Place four reed stems with heads aligned one way on the strings and tie. Always remember to place four heads on one side and four on the other side in alternating pattern.

#### BAISAWA (Brush)

Materials: About five heads of dried salt water palmetto, cord

Tools: long sack needle, thimble.

Methods:

Scratch the palmetto in straight strokes from the head downwards. Continue doing so until it is thinned out in fine strands. Tie about five heads together with cord to form brush.