

4-2001

# The Garifuna of Belize: Strategies of Representation

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THE GARIFUNA OF BELIZE:  
STRATEGIES OF REPRESENTATION

By

Sharon E. Wilcox

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfillment

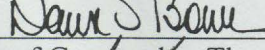
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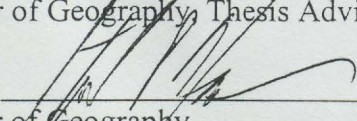
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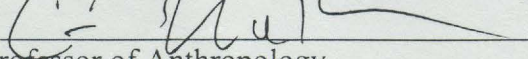
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## Table of Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| List of Illustrations  | iii |
| Figure 1 Map of Belize   | 13  |
| Introduction   | 1   |
| Figure 2 Respects of Arrival, Dangriga, Belize                                 | 32  |
| Approaches to Garifuna Identity and Self Representation                        | 5   |
| Figure 3 A Crowd Gathers to Witness the Arrival                                | 32  |
| Methods of Analysis  | 12  |
| Figure 4 Traditional Procession to the Church for Settlement                   | 34  |
| Case Study: The Garifuna   |     |
| Fig. Background Garifuna-Catholic Ceremony                                     | 18  |
| Fig. Reasons for Representation Menest Day Parade                              | 21  |
| Fig. The Representation Woman in Traditional Dress                             | 24  |
| Fig. Film T.V. Ramos Menegual with Ceremonial Wreath                           | 25  |
| Fig. Internet The Crowning of "Miss Garifuna," 2000                            | 27  |
| Fig. Books Primary School in Barranco, Belize                                  | 28  |
| Fig. Music Young Boys Emulate American Ghetto                                  | 30  |
| Fig. Holidays Main Street in Barranco, Belize                                  | 31  |
| Fig. Representation as a Strategy for Political Gain Council, Dangriga, Belize | 40  |
| The Economic Motivations Behind Representation                                 | 41  |
| Figure 14 Containing Identity?   | 36  |
| Counter-Movements  | 51  |
| Conclusion   | 53  |
| Bibliography   | 57  |



## List of Illustrations

|           |   |    |
|-----------|---|----|
|           | <i>Introduction</i>   |    |
| Figure 1  | Map of Belize   | 13 |
| Figure 2  | Reenactment of Arrival, Dangriga, Belize                      | 32 |
| Figure 3  | A Crowd Gathers to Witness the Arrival                        | 32 |
| Figure 4  | Traditional Procession to the Church for Settlement Day Mass  | 34 |
| Figure 5  | A Garifuna-Catholic Ceremony                                  | 34 |
| Figure 6  | Float for the Settlement Day Parade                           | 35 |
| Figure 7  | Garifuna Woman in Traditional Dress                           | 36 |
| Figure 8  | T.V. Ramos Memorial with Ceremonial Wreath                    | 38 |
| Figure 9  | The Crowning of "Miss Garifuna," 2000                         | 39 |
| Figure 10 | Primary School in Barranco, Belize                            | 43 |
| Figure 11 | Young Boys Emulate American Ghetto                            | 46 |
| Figure 12 | Main Street in Barranco, Belize                               | 50 |
| Figure 13 | Advertisement for National Garifuna Council, Dangriga, Belize | 55 |
| Figure 14 | Combining Identities?   | 56 |



## Introduction

The sun beats down upon the green parade grounds. A crowd pushes in closer, surrounding the sheltered bandstand at the center of the park. A speaker's inspirational words mingle with a warm breeze drifting in from the Caribbean Sea. The faces in the crowd are a rainbow array of colors, representing a broad cross section of people from various backgrounds who attend the event. On the stage, a group looks out on the crowd. Some are national political figureheads here to commemorate this national holiday. Others are leaders from the community committed to promoting the ideals for which this holiday is dedicated. Still others have been chosen to represent the Garifuna; their participation at such a culturally significant activity is an ideal that community leaders feel should be embraced.

Although there are many people gathered in this same location, their backgrounds are often worlds apart. The significance of this event varies based on one's understanding of the people this holiday celebrates. The context of this understanding is framed by personal experience and impressions made by representations in the media. These representations construct and reaffirm the identity of this group. This ceremony is, in itself, a form of representation that attempts to create better self-understanding among the Garifuna, as well as communicate a general understanding of the group identity for those in attendance.

These people are gathered in the Alejo Beni Park of Dangriga, Belize, to commemorate a Belizean national holiday, Settlement Day. This holiday celebrates the history and culture of the Garifuna people. The audience and participants have varied



motivations for attending this celebration based on their prior knowledge, experience, exposure and understanding of the Garifuna.

This study considers representation within the media as a method of fostering a sense of community and identity among a group of people, as well as a strategy to achieve political and economic gains. The subject of this investigation is the Garifuna of Belize and the representation of their identity through various media outlets, including documentary film, websites, news articles, scholarly writing and trade books.

Furthermore, this paper explores the development of these representations of the Garifuna as a strategy for improving the political and economic strength of the community.<sup>1</sup>

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Garifuna face many challenges for their survival as a people with a distinct identity (Sletto 1991, 5). Garifuna leadership expresses a belief that modern economic and social pressures threaten a connection to tradition, identity and community among Garinagu. These leaders are concerned with the preservation of tradition and identity, and also with achieving political and economic gains that will benefit all Garinagu. As Pablo Lambey, former President of the National Garifuna Council explains, culture is “tool for Garifuna development” (Palacio 1992, 41). The Council, comprised of self-appointed members of the community committed to leading the Garinagu into the future while maintaining a connection to the Garifuna heritage, has used representation in the media as a way of gaining social, economic, and political strength. Methods have included documentary film projects, the publication of writings, folk tales, and historical accounts by Garinagu, as well as the creation of websites dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of Garifuna traditions and

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<sup>1</sup>In the literature, the term Garifuna is widely used to refer to the people, culture, and language. Additionally, the term Garinagu is used to refer to the people within the Garifuna community.



history. As bell hooks (1992) argues, this self-representation is important not only to the perception of the Garifuna by those on the “outside,” but also to the Garifuna identity. Self-representation can be a powerful instrument to foster group identity, to gain recognition in the local, regional, national, and international political arena, and to market this identity for economic benefit.

The Garifuna are a self-proclaimed indigenous people united by this ethnic identity and a common history. Located along the Caribbean shores of Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, the Garifuna trace their cultural roots to the Caribbean island of St. Vincent. Exiled from this island during the eighteenth century, they claim to have preserved their identity in the face of adversity. Garinagu proudly proclaim that their spirit was never broken by the shackles of slavery, but their freedom was hard-earned. Today, internal and external challenges continue to threaten the well-being of this community, but its leaders strive to remind people of their heritage. While recognizing the need to accept and incorporate change, this leadership also maintains the importance of retaining a connection to the land, tradition, spirituality, language, song, dance, and dietary traditions.

Defiance of the colonial power was a source of strength among the Garifuna, and despite adversity, they adapted well to their new homes in Central America. Many elements of the traditional lifestyle, such as the planting of the cassava root, thrived in to these new regions. The Garifuna are credited for introducing the plantain, yam, sweet potato, and coconut, as well as cassava to the region. Dietary traditions are crucial to ethnic identity, and the presence of these plants is an important part of the cultural landscape (Sletto 1998, 9). Despite their forced relocation the Garifuna adapted to a new



region, defying opposition from the colonial powers that sought to marginalize, and even eliminate, these communities.

Today, Garifuna leaders have been very involved in attempts to preserve their ethnic identity. They push for understanding of tradition, retention of key elements of the culture, and a fundamental pride in the heritage of the group. They do not advocate cultural preservation, but rather cultural evolution that retains its fundamental identity. One Garifuna leader explained that he was “anxious to teach what it means to be Garifuna ... an effort to be mobile and modern without being rootless and losing valued heritage ...” (Bolland 1986, 59). They want to teach their children to love themselves as Garifuna. The inherent ability within this culture to adapt to new challenges is evident in the traditional Garifuna saying “It is during our journey that we rearrange our burden” (Leland and Berger 1998). On both a community and individual level, a great effort has been made to shift this “load” and carry forward to the challenges now present.

The actions of Garifuna organizations to foster pride and awareness of the Garifuna heritage are important to the survival of tradition. The Garifuna now find their ability to adapt while maintaining a distinct cultural heritage increasingly challenged. The creative leadership of organizations such as the National Garifuna Council is now attempting to construct, and reconstruct, identity through representation in the media as a method of securing the social, political, and economic survival of the community.

The National Garifuna Council is the most prominent source of leadership among Garifuna communities of Belize. The objective of the Council is to ensure that Garifuna maintain a connection to their identity and heritage. Prior to the formation of the Council in 1941, the community had never before had such central organization (Gonzalez and



McCommon 1989, 195). Within the last decade, the Council has turned to representation in the media as a way of attaining its goals. This organization has developed many projects intended to increase awareness, and pride within the Garifuna communities. This includes the production of a documentary film, *The Garifuna Journey*, planning activities for the Settlement Day holiday, and the development of an archival collection on behalf of the "Garifuna Nation" in Dangriga (Leland and Berger 2000, 1). This archival collection is intended to be the crowning achievement of the Council. Open to scholars, students, and local residents, it will provide a venue for talks and symposiums and workshops dealing with Garifuna history, culture, language, and spirituality. The Council expresses hope that this collection will be a tool for teaching about Garifuna traditions and history and life in schools and in communities.

### **Approaches to Garifuna Identity and Self-Representation**

To understand Garifuna motivations for their specific representations in the media that are designed to enhance their social, economic, and political position, this paper first employs postcolonial theory to provide context for how and why such strategies exist. Postcolonial theory focuses on the relation between current imbalances in economic power, political strength, and social stratification. These asymmetries based on race, ethnicity, and gender can be attributed to the effects and legacies of colonialism (Loomba 1998, 2). A brief review of postcolonial theory provides an opportunity to introduce the circumstances that have acted over the past two hundred years to shape the Garifuna identity under British colonial rule. Doing so permits one to appreciate the modern forces that have inspired leaders to look to selective representation as a method of



fostering a sense of identity among the Garinagu, and to gain economic and political strength to improve the position of this group in local, regional, national and international communities.

Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* discusses the founding fathers of postcolonialism (Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha) and their contributions to postcolonial discourse. Loomba identifies key features of the ideologies of colonialism and postcolonialism, from Marxist to feminist theory, and discusses how the interplay of sexual, racial, and class differences intersects within the colonial and postcolonial discourses (Loomba 1998). Her chapter on colonial and postcolonial identities relates the roles of race, class, and cultural difference to the inherent imbalance of power that resulted from colonization. With the influx of colonial power came the reconceptualization and recreation of entire identities as communities were irrevocably altered by colonial presence. Former identities were erased, replaced by representations of identities constructed from a Eurocentric perspective of the invading nations. These representations created a perception of the Garifuna not based in fact, but in tales conjured from the perspectives of the British colonial power. In the years following the official withdrawal of the colonial government, the decolonized people now struggle to understand and represent who they are within the context of this colonial influence. For many groups, this method of self-conceptualization involves a process of negotiating their identity within a context of learned European ideals (Forte 1998). They now attempt to resist identities imposed on them by the colonial presence, replacing it with a construction based on selective historical memory. However, elements from the colonial tradition remain present within these restructured identities.



during In his work *Colonialism's Culture* (1994), Nicholas Thomas returns to the discussion of postcolonial theory. He emphasizes that postcolonial theorists must not overlook the significance of colonialism and its impacts on cultures throughout the world (Thomas 1994, 15). He argues that while study of colonial history and representation has focused on the exploitation and brutality associated with colonization, colonialism was also a cultural process by which societies were altered, displaced, and even created through interaction with colonizing powers (Thomas 1994, 14). The concept of a "Garifuna culture" was altered, and even created, by the intervention of colonizing powers and imperialism. Through both colonial and postcolonial relationships, Garifuna identity has been constructed, and later reconstructed, in relation to the dominant ruling class. Since Belize achieved independence in 1981, Garinagu have had the freedom to represent themselves as they choose and through the mediums that they choose. This freedom has made the "rewriting" of Garifuna history, and the development of a sense of community within a local, national, and global context, a very formidable task for the Garifuna leadership (Pastor 1999). Even as leaders strive to develop an understanding of the history and traditions that are explicitly Garifuna, globalization is undermining efforts put forth by the leadership.

Postcolonial theory attributes much of the modern-day balance of power between developed nations (first world), developing nations (third world), and indigenous communities (fourth world) to the legacy of imperialism. The European belief in social superiority and a related "racial hierarchy" justified the actions of colonization and exploitation. Peter Hulme and Neil Whitehead (1992) and Philip Boucher (1992) explore the relationship between colonizer and the colonized indigenous peoples of the Caribbean



during the colonial period through the use of documents from the period of colonization. As evidenced by these collections, people were classified, and subsequently represented by the colonial powers, based on racial stereotype. The representation of the Garifuna created and circulated by the British became the common perception in Belize and throughout western societies. Garinagu were portrayed as an aggressive, primitive, and even cannibalistic people. Prior to gaining political independence, the Garifuna were not in a position to control how they were represented in the media. It is this legacy that the Garifuna have inherited in the era of political independence, and it is through these materials that the Garifuna leadership seeks to reconstruct a concept of identity and heritage.

Today, indigenous and historically marginalized groups throughout the world are restructuring their identity through representation in the media, asserting their self-identity to the world and to themselves in the absence of a repressive colonial presence. bell hooks (1992) develops this theme in her book, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, which examines the media as a vehicle for representing black people and its implications. She emphasizes that representation is crucial not only to the understanding of a group by those on the outside, but it is also important for establishing a sense of identity within that group (hooks 1992, 5). This point is central to understanding the efforts of the Garifuna leadership to establish a representation in the media that fosters an awareness of the culture outside of the community while promoting self-awareness within.

Race and representation within a postcolonial context are also the focus of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*



(1994). In the chapter "Stereotype, Realism, and the Struggle over Representation," the authors explore both the power and burden associated with representation in the media. Additionally, the authors briefly explore the emerging genre of "Fourth World," or "Indigenous" Media. This genre has, for the first time, allowed these groups to control the representation of their culture, in front of and behind the camera. The fourth world media has given historically marginalized groups a voice through which they may convey representations of their culture that refute claims made by colonial interpretation and representation. The Garifuna leadership has taken advantage of the availability of funding and support from such "indigenous projects" to create a documentary film that attempts to validate their place in the indigenous community.

The scholarly literature available about the Garifuna of Belize is limited. Anthropologist Nancie Gonzalez has written a number of books about the Garifuna, including *Sojourners of the Caribbean* (1989) which considers the roots of ethnicity of the Garifuna. Additionally, Gonzalez examines the patterns of Garifuna migration to the United States and the impact of this movement of peoples on these communities in Belize. This study was preceded by a number of other works, including *Garifuna Settlement in New York, a New Frontier* (1979), *Black Carib Household Structure* (1968), *Rethinking the Consanguineal Household* (1983) that also examined issues of migration among the Garifuna. These studies focus on the implications of migration upon the stability of the Garifuna communities in Central America. Gonzalez was also the first scholar to raise the issue of Garifuna origin and heritage, when she argued that there are many aspects of the Garifuna identity that originated in Africa. Contending with the representation offered by the Garifuna leadership, Gonzalez pondered, "Should



the possibility of an African past be ignored and downplayed as they preferred?" (quoted in Franzone 1995, 18). Gonzalez's work is refuted by Mary Helms (1981) in "Black Carib Domestic Organization in Historical Perspective," which argues that Garifuna rituals, traditions, language, and diet indicate an Amerindian influence. This scholarly debate reflects the continuing tensions as Garifuna leaders strive for recognition as a people indigenous to Latin America, while other Garinagu emphasize the need to reconnect with their African roots.

In her book, *The Making of Belize: Globalization in the Margins*, Ann Sutherland (1998) explores the ethnic and racial tensions that shade Belize's past and continue to color the present. Sutherland also explores the Garifuna origins issue, and examines recent disagreements about the ethnicity of the Garinagu. Sutherland provides explanations as to why the Garifuna leaders have turned to favor an indigenous identity, forsaking their African roots. The historic tensions between the Creole (an African-European hybrid people) and the Garifuna were originally fostered by the British colonial government. This legacy of racism extends far past the color of skin to concerns of identity and association. Clearly, the current concerns with race and ethnicity in Belize are linked to the colonial past and confusion associated with developing a national, distinctly "Belizean," character following political independence in 1981.

Garifuna leaders are responsible for a majority of the published about the Garifuna. One of these is Sebastian Cayetano's *Garifuna History, Language and Culture of Belize, Central America, and the Caribbean* (1997), which provides a written recording of the oral traditions, history, and other traditions of the Garifuna. Another similar work is Justin Flores' *The Garifuna Story: Now and Then* (1979), which also



details Garifuna history and oral traditions. Other works include noted Garifuna storyteller Jesse Castillo's *Garifuna Folktales* (1994), a collection of traditional stories, and Adele Ramos' edited collection of works written by her grandfather, T.V. Ramos, a man revered as an activist for the rights and freedom during the first half of the twentieth century (Ramos 2000). All of the work produced by Garifuna writers share common traits, including a celebratory tone that pays tribute to the idea of the Garifuna as a "vibrant, thriving culture" (Cayetano 1997, 3). The exposure of folktales and recorded history in the media is one method to reaffirm a sense of belonging among the Garinagu while introducing this culture to those outside of the group. In the postcolonial period, the Garinagu are in a position to "rewrite history," reengineering their identity to fit modern circumstances and demands (Pastor 1999, 1).

In 1998 the Garifuna co-produced the documentary film *The Garifuna Journey*, in cooperation with Cultural Survival, an U.S. based organization that supports indigenous peoples worldwide. This documentary introduced an international audience to many Garifuna traditions, as well as the leadership's concerns for their survival. After this documentary was released, the film producer's retrospective "The Garifuna Journey: Perspectives on a Cultural Survival Project" appeared in *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, expressing the film producer's intent for bringing "a voice of authenticity" to the film by incorporating Garinagu into all aspects of the film from content to production (Leland and Berger 2000). In addition to this film, a website known as "Garifuna World" presented the leadership's view of the Garifuna to the world. This wide assortment of media, from internet to documentary film, scholarly writing to folktales, are all self-



representations that “sell” a neatly packaged image of the Garifuna culture, and attempts to fulfill the leadership’s desire to evoke a sense of belonging to their constituents.

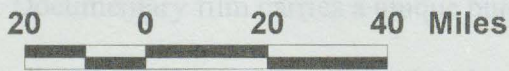
### Methods of Analysis

I initially became interested in the Garifuna culture after viewing the documentary film *The Garifuna Journey*. Impressed by the efforts of these people to preserve their cultural identity, I chose this subject for a research paper for my Latin American geography class. At the end of the spring semester in 2000, I approached my advisor with the idea of expanding this topic into an independent study for the following semester. I was intrigued by the idea of these people valiantly fighting to preserve their identity in the face of the homogenizing forces of globalization, and I believed that my initial paper an excellent outline for further study.

Throughout the summer of 2000, I sought to locate works relating to the Garifuna, but very little scholarly attention has been devoted to study of this subject. I developed a proposal over the summer, requesting funding from Mary Washington College so that I could travel to Belize to conduct a limited amount of fieldwork, in order to provide a greater depth of research to my thesis. Ultimately, this trip would alter the entire direction of my project.

During the fall semester, I received funding from Mary Washington College, which enabled me to travel to Belize for ten days (Figure 1). My thesis ultimately developed from my experience in the field, where I attended national holiday celebrations, visited Garifuna communities, and even stayed as a houseguest of a





- ★ Cities and Villages in Belize
- ★ Garifuna Towns and Villages

Source: Environmental Systems Research Institute, 1998

Figure 1: Map of Belize



gentleman in the Garifuna village of Barranco. This participant observation, although limited, provided a new level to my understanding of the Garifuna that I would not have gleaned from scholarly research alone. I was able to develop a better appreciation for the daily life of the Garifuna and the pressures confronting their survival as a group.

Supplementing the experiences of participant observation was a series of opportunistic interviews. These interviews were not formal events; instead, I interacted with Garinagu in a variety of informal social settings. This included interaction with traditional drum makers, doll makers, and other local citizens. Informal interviews were conducted based on the availability and willingness of local Garifuna citizens to entertain a selection of questions. Additionally, an extremely helpful resident of Dangriga connected me with a well-known Garifuna storyteller, Jesse Castillo, and National Garifuna Council leader, Justin Flores. The interviews with both of these noted citizens were fairly brief, but the insight they provided is incredibly important to my discussion of the representations and the role of the leaders involved in this movement.

The selection of questions asked during these informal interviews depended on many factors, including the subject's relation to the culture (community member, community leader, or "outsider"). Each subject was asked to share their knowledge on a variety of subjects. These included, but were not limited to: information about traditional Garifuna practices still involved in daily life, reflections on the meaning of the Garifuna culture and efforts of the leaders to promote this identity, and discussion of the significance of the Settlement Day celebration and its message.

Documentary film carries a unique burden of acceptance by the general public as an regarding the representation of a cultural group, including the voice, authority, and



authorship within a film (Ruby 1992, 42). What authority does one person have to represent objective look at a subject. This popular conception raises a great deal of ethical concerns someone else, and for what intention? In recent years, the development of “cooperatively produced films” paved the way for historically marginalized groups to assume a role in their own representation (Shohat 1994). However, this method of representation should not be accepted as any more objective than representations in film done by an “outside” filmmaker.

When considering a documentary film, the relationship between the filmmaker and those being filmed must be evaluated (Ruby 1992, 44). Interaction between the two compromises the objectivity of a film because it could inflict an element of the filmmaker’s “vision” on to the subject. Furthermore, when a camera is present, most people tend to “perform” rather than confine their actions and words to accurate self-representation. This is especially true when the filmmaker and the subject of the film share the same motivations (Ruby 1992, 44).

The recent trend in documentary film toward self-representation should also be evaluated for its relation of subject to medium. Through the use of interviews and the interaction between subject and camera, a sense of authenticity is constructed. These films suggest that what subjects say about themselves and their situation should be taken at face value (Ruby 1992, 48). However, a viewer should not assume that representation is any more objective when coming from members of the group, for they too have a vested interest in this film’s purpose. Rarely are people granted privileged insight into their own history, nor are they objective in understanding their motivations. If an “outside” filmmaker is criticized for being too far removed from the reality of a subject,



than a self-represented film can be criticized for being too close to the subject. Again, *The Garifuna Journey* must be understood and interpreted as representation, not as a concrete “truth,” for the group associated with the production of the film, the National Garifuna Council, certainly has political and social aspirations (Ruby 1992, 48).

Many factors must be considered when evaluating a documentary work, whether it was filmed and produced by an outside group, and “insider,” or jointly between the two. The documentary viewer must evaluate the intent and motivations of the filmmaker, and the viewer must also consider the influence exerted by the groups who have sponsored the project, and their motivations in so doing. The intention or motivation for producing a documentary film is rarely stated explicitly, but rather the viewer must consider the factors of sponsorship, funding, and other projects produced by a group to understand their possible intentions. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the intention of Cultural Survival, we can assume that this organization had its own motivations and intentions for producing this view of a neatly packaged case that fits so well with Cultural Survival’s main intentions. This film has been celebrated as a model for the collaborative efforts of outsiders and insiders in documenting a culture (Leland and Berger 2000, 2)

In documentary film, the “Indigenous Power Movement,” is characterized by self-representation films created by marginalized ethnic groups. The motivation is to gain control over the construction of their image, and access to capital and power to support their cause through the sales of the film. This method of representation in the media not only confers value and meaning for the culture in the eyes of the world, but also confirms a sense of identity within the group as well (Ruby 1992, 56).



Jay Ruby (1992) argues for the evaluation of perspective and motivations as a necessary part of understanding any aspect of media that seeks to represent, explore, or examine a cultural identity. Before approaching my analysis of the Garifuna self-representation, I had to examine my own perspectives and motivations. This discussion concerning the representation of culture creates a unique paradox, for even within the context of this paper, my own personal experiences and understandings of the Garifuna cultural identity are qualified by my understandings from the "outside," as an American. In response to this "crisis of representation," I must acknowledge the inability of any person to provide a detached observation (Ruby 1992, 44). I cannot assume to represent correctly the Garifuna group identity, or the nuances of an individual's perspective within the community, or the true reasons and motivations behind the representations of the Garifuna lifestyle. This is a discussion of the role of representation in the media as a method for securing social solidarity, and economic and political strength. It should not be understood to be a discussion of representation versus reality, as representation and reality are both subjective understandings of society that cannot be accurately represented through the interpretation of one author.



## Case Study: The Garifuna

### Background

Historians believe that the Garifuna evolved on the Caribbean island of St. Vincent as a product of the influences and controls of colonialism (Helms 1981, 78). On St. Vincent, native Arawak Indians intermarried with Africans who escaped from slave ships (Hulme and Whitehead 1992, 248). Prior to their expulsion from St. Vincent, Garifuna identity was not distinct from that of the Carib/Arawak Indians residing on the island. The concept of a Garifuna identity first developed following intervention by the British colonial forces at the end of the eighteenth century.

Colonial interest in the island of St. Vincent resulted in violence and warfare on the island, provoking the otherwise peaceful Arawak-African hybrid peoples to fight to defend their lands (Muilenburg 1999, 18). Despite an often heroic defense, the native peoples were defeated in 1796 by the British (Sletto 1991, 20). The British ordered the forcible removal of the dark skinned natives from the island, perceiving them as a savage threat to the interests of the Crown (Hulme and Whitehead 1992, 250). The British feared an alliance between these Black Caribs and the French, which could have been detrimental to British colonial interests in the region (Muilenburg 1999, 21).

Following this altercation, the British government forced over three thousand residents from the island. A British scientist of the time wrote of his certainty that the actions of the Crown had rendered the Garifuna population “nearly extinct,” and it would “soon be forgotten that such a race existed” (Hulme and Whitehead 1992, 229). This prediction was never realized, as the Garinagu fought valiantly to hold on to their lives, their traditions, and their identity.



Set adrift in small wooden rafts, the Garifuna eventually arrived on the shores of Central America, only to find themselves again under British rule (Sletto 1991, 20). The British institutionalized the exclusion of the Garifuna, fearing that they might join with local Creole slaves in an uprising. The Garifuna were excluded from societal interactions and banished to remote locations along the coast of British Honduras (Bolland 1986, 158). Garinagu were forbidden to own land, and treated as illegal squatters (Barry 1995, 78). The British circulated tales of savage violence and cannibalism that encouraged others to exclude the Garifuna (Sutherland 1998, 23). To ensure that the groups would remain separate, Garinagu had to obtain permits to travel north of Dangriga into the areas heavily populated by Creoles (Sutherland 1998, 83). This campaign was so successful that the historic tensions between the Creole and the Garifuna continue to influence contemporary local social, political, and economic conditions and demographic patterns in Belize (Sutherland 1998, 83).

The Garifuna identity developed from a communal bond forged through a shared history, common hardship associated with the removal from St. Vincent, and the need to form a self-sufficient community within a hostile social environment. Their history of exclusion and seclusion in British Honduras is the second instance where colonial powers directly and permanently influenced the development of the group identity. Restrictions against land ownership were originally intended to create a cheap and available source of labor for British logging interests, but the Garinagu resisted all attempts by the British to control their labor (Barry 1995, 78). Despite being treated as illegal squatters, the Garifuna refused to allow legal land ownership to create a barrier to their connection with the land. This isolation severed to foster an even more intense feeling of separateness



within the culture, as they developed without the assimilating effects of other cultural groups (Sletto 1991, 20). Under conditions introduced by colonial rule, the Garinagu were forced to define their identity based on their position in social, economic, and political position (Loomba 1998, 181).

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Garifuna also became the target of the religious zeal of missionaries. Working in the name of the Christian God, the missionaries sought to eliminate the traditional spiritual element of the Garifuna identity. Discouraging the traditional practice of ancestor worship as well as the accompanying traditions and celebrations, the Christian missionaries introduced the Bible, Jesus, and the Saints as a balm for the pagan beliefs of these people. However, the Garifuna would not forsake their rituals of ancestor worship and a hybrid of the two religious belief systems soon emerged (Sletto 1991, 21).

The presence of the missionaries also led to a "Brain Drain" from the Garifuna villages. Often the brightest Garinagu were selected to spread the word of God (Barry 1995, 77). Instead of an education rich in cultural awareness, these students learned of the teachings of Christianity. This policy deprived the Garifuna of potential leaders and citizens capable of worthy contribution to the culture (Barry 1995, 77). During this period of intense cultural, political, and spiritual pressures, the Garifuna identity was further threatened. Incorporating the Catholic religion, the Garifuna identity was changed by the colonial presence. As Nicholas Thomas (1994) suggests, colonialism forever altered the identity of many groups of peoples. The Garifuna were no exception as their traditions and identity were reshaped by the presence of the colonial powers, leading to fundamental changes such as the adjustment of their spiritual belief system.



Racism and social exclusion did not break the Garifuna people apart, rather it brought them closer together, uniting people through their common origins, experiences, and hardships. Over the years certain challenges have been overcome, while new ones have emerged to take their place. The concept of a distinct "Garifuna" culture developed from the prevailing social and political order of the time within the Caribbean region. Although never enslaved, these peoples' lifestyles were forever altered by the intervention of colonial forces. The economic trade patterns of the British brought a new ethnic and cultural presence as Africans were introduced into the region. As Thomas (1994) demonstrates, the Garifuna are a direct result of this colonial involvement. The further intervention of British forces paved the way for the development of a new identity among these peoples, as their forced removal from St. Vincent and subsequent isolation in new lands fostered an identity built upon the grounds of common origin and experience.

### **Reasons for the Representation**

Garifuna leaders express great concern about the younger generations. They lament a loss of a sense of uniqueness, pride and connection to the meaning of being Garifuna (Lopez 2000, 1). Many factors have fostered these changes. The influx of non-Garinagu into areas that had been the exclusive domain of the Garifuna has promoted pan-ethnic friendships for the younger generation. Garinagu youth are also exposed to new ideas and perspectives. They also speak of a social stigma attached to their heritage, leading some youths to deny their heritage. In school, Garifuna children are educated in both English and Spanish, but little attention is paid to their own language, which further



contributes to the inability to identify with their history and tradition. These European languages have become the lingua franca throughout the region, the legacy of the former colonial powers. Here, again, is evidence of the lasting impact that colonialism continues to have upon the social character of this former colony (Sletto 1991, 24).

In the introduction to *Garifuna Folktales*, Jesse Castillo (1995, v) states that the “Garifuna culture is primarily of African origin.” However, there are many other Garifuna leaders who would vehemently dispute this statement. In an interview, Justin Flores, former President of the National Garifuna Council, asserted: “The Garifuna are indigenous. It is important that you know this” (Flores, 2000). The new awareness of a “black” identity has been identified by many members of the Council as contributing to the loss of a distinct Garifuna identity (Sutherland 1998, 83). Although the Garifuna are descended from Africans, the leaders do not consider the Garifuna to be “black” (Sutherland 1998, 83). Instead, they place emphasis on the Amerindian aspects of their hybrid roots in the Caribbean, and downplay the origins of Garifuna traditions that are specifically identified as African in origin. Recent movements toward a “Black Consciousness” throughout the Caribbean have caused the Garifuna leaders to fear the results of being swept away in the tide of assimilation.

Politically, the Garifuna leadership chooses to ally themselves with indigenous organizations, rather than Black movements. The National Garifuna Council expresses a desire for the younger generations to follow this example in the social sphere in protecting what is unique to their identity, and to elevate their status as an indigenous, not African, people (Sutherland 1998, 83). The Council is attempting to define the Garifuna presence in a rapidly changing world, while contending with the development and



expression of their identity in the absence of an oppressive colonial influence. Allegiance to the Indigenous Peoples' movement allows the leaders an opportunity to find a niche for a distinct "Garifuna" identity, while rejecting the homogenizing forces of the international "Black Consciousness" movement. Since independence in 1981, Belize has sought to create an identity that is truly "Belizean." During this time, an emphasis on ethnicity has become more pronounced with groups throughout the country as a way of pronouncing individuality from this new "Belizean" identity (Sutherland 1981, 81). Garifuna leaders emphasize the importance of bringing people together along lines of ethnicity, rejecting identity associated only with skin color. Certainly, the Garifuna past has shown that within the Caribbean colonies, discrimination went beyond the color of skin. History indicates that skin color has never been enough to bind a people together, the ties must certainly go much deeper than that.

As the Garifuna leaders look to representation in the media as a method for reaffirming a sense of their status as an indigenous people assists their intentions. Projects such as the documentary film have revived a great deal of support from outside groups intent on assisting with the survival of indigenous groups. In this network of political connections and funding, the Garifuna leadership has found the opportunity and resources to construct representations that will carry their message to a larger audience.

*We are proud descendants of survivors our ancestors fought to get here and we must in turn put our best efforts forward to preserve it for eternity. Along the way, we have adapted and assimilated. We always did. And as we continue to struggle to survive in an ever-changing technological world, our cultural survival truly becomes a daunting task (Lewis 2000)*



## The Representation

The representation of the Garifuna culture in documentary film, the internet, scholarly writings and news articles all assert the existence of a tightly knit group of people, bound by a vibrant culture and a strong sense of communal identity. Whether or not everyone agrees with this portrayal, this representation is very powerful in shaping the way people throughout the world perceive and understand the Garifuna. For the Garifuna leadership, representation is an opportunity to assert their contention that the Garifuna are an indigenous people, which carries with it a variety of social, political, and economic connotations. This representation creates a sense of common identity among the Garifuna, reasserting the values, traditions, and place of the culture. Popular themes involved in this representation capitalize on two key aspects of the Garifuna identity. The phrase “we were never broken” has developed as a popular theme among Garifuna leaders and historians, for it signifies the Garifuna’s resistance to slavery and the hardship associated with the colonial period. This is used as an example of how the Garifuna must now resist the forces that threaten to annihilate identity through the culturally homogenizing forces of western “material culture.” A second, related, theme is the ability of the Garinagu to adjust and incorporate change into their identity. As keynote speaker Dr. Aaron Lewis explained at the Settlement Day festivities,

We are proud descendents of survivors our ancestors fought too hard to get here and we must in turn put our best efforts forward to preserve it for eternity. Along the way, we have adopted and assimilated. We always did. And as we continue to struggle to survive in an ever-changing technological world, our cultural survival truly becomes a daunting task (Lewis 2000).



In this time of social reconstruction, the Council is building a media campaign that attempts to define the meaning of “being Garifuna” and introduces this tightly packaged image to an international audience. In the postcolonial period, this is part of a process by which this group has developed an understanding for its role on the local, national, and international scale, while developing a standard representation to present to the world.

### Film

In 1998, the film *The Garifuna Journey* premiered at the Field Museum of Chicago as part of the African Heritage Festival (Leland and Berger 2000, 1). Produced with the cooperation of the National Garifuna Council and Cultural Survival, this film was intended to “present the Garifuna culture from an insider perspective” in order to provide the “voice of authenticity” (Leland and Berger 2000, 52). The film included footage of various Garifuna traditions, such as bread making, drumming, and holiday celebrations. This footage was interspersed with interviews with members of the National Garifuna Council discussing their outlook for the future of the Garifuna identity.

Sister Flores of Punta Gorda explained her enthusiasm for the project because “telling the story from my perspective makes me feel legitimate ... it affirms the fact that this group does exist and includes my voice. As simple as it sounds, historically, our voice has not been included” (quoted in Leland and Berger 2000, 52). The Council was very enthusiastic about this project because it was the result of a partnership “based on mutual respect and understanding” (Leland and Berger 2000, 1). In the past the Garifuna people have often been misrepresented by outsiders, resulting in the development and



dissemination of negative stereotypes about the Garinagu people. Often, these negative perceptions have served the economic, political, and social purposes of others.

The motivations for producing *The Garifuna Journey* are shared by many other Indigenous films. *The Garifuna Journey* was created to raise awareness about the presence of this culture, and to reach out to Garifuna people abroad and reaffirm their connection to the community. Sebastian Cayetano, a member of the National Garifuna Council Board of Directors, addresses this in his enthusiastic support for the film: “*The Garifuna Journey* Project has helped us to produce a wonderful, authentic film about our people which validates us and will prove useful back home” (quoted in Leland and Berger 1998). *The Garifuna Journey* begins

Our Children must know the truth  
About their history and their culture  
The truth about our survival  
The truth about themselves  
The truth about our exodus  
From St. Vincent to Belize...  
The truth that we were never enslaved  
Our Children must know the truth about Garifuna (Leland and Berger 1998).

Revealing the intentions of the filmmakers to showcase their culture and to encourage Garinagu to embrace the National Garifuna Council’s mission. This film is to be a sort of “cultural reminder” to the people. Through representation, the Garifuna attempt to validate their claims of being a people indigenous to the region. Again, this is not necessarily truth, but rather an interpretation of a cultural identity intended to attain social and political goals.



## Internet

The Internet is now considered to be a potentially vital link for Garifuna throughout the Americas. "Garifuna World" is a website constructed by a Garinagu in Texas who is interested in providing a connection available to all Garifuna worldwide. This website is fully endorsed by the National Garifuna Council. Today, there are over five thousand websites dedicated to the interests of the Garifuna people as well as sites for showcasing the talents of traditional and nontraditional artistic expression ("Garifuna World" 1997). Other websites provide information about the origin and intentions of this group, while still others provide crucial links to home countries for those living abroad. One can access traditional recipes, native literature, information about national holidays, or sites interested in political empowerment.

These sites are intended to represent the group to people throughout the world, and to provide a source of solidarity. However, the Internet has not yet been able to unify the Garifuna. Instead, the Internet has emphasized social stratification among the Garinagu, as only the privileged have the opportunity, the education, or the technology to access such websites. For critics of the Council, this limited availability represents a common theme with the Council's programs. Rather than being sensitive to the demands of the average citizen, and focusing time and effort on programs that benefit all Garinagu, access to such outreach projects are limited to those who have the money and educational backgrounds to join the "Internet community." While the Council takes the liberty of representing the Garifuna to the entire world via the Internet, a majority of their constituents have neither access to, nor awareness of, this representation. Again, representation cannot be understood as truth, for not all Garinagu have a voice.



## Books

Besides products such as film and websites intended for the global media, the National Garifuna Council also develops many products intended to benefit the peoples' social, economic, and political needs at a local level. A number of Garinagu associated with the Council have published books relating aspects of their heritage and tradition. Adele Ramos (2000) published the writings of her grandfather, T.V. Ramos, and released the book during the Settlement Day festivities in the year 2000. Ramos is revered as the man responsible for modern movements that push for Garifuna pride. His contributions included the establishment of Settlement Day as a National holiday in Belize (Williams 2000, 47). The National Garifuna Council of Belize published this book to make the writings of this significant Garinagu easily accessible to all audiences. The introduction states that these collected writings were intended to be "an educational tool in both formal and informal settings" (Ramos 2000, iii). The introduction continues with the recognition of "Ramos' greatest dream ... the continued recognition of his people." This collection is also intended to instill pride among the Garifuna, for "his achievements are the achievements of his people – the Garinagu." The introduction concludes, "As this book is meant to be a tribute to the great T.V. Ramos, so is it a tribute to the Garinagu of Belize and the rest of the world." Ramos' achievements are intended to be a source of pride for all Garinagu. For the Council, which organizes the Settlement Day celebrations every year, this was an excellent opportunity to promote the basic concepts of the identity of the "Garifuna Nation" that they are committed to advancing in Belize.

Jesse Castillo's *Garifuna Folktales*, published by the Caribbean Research Center, provides the New York City public school curriculum "an opportunity for children to



appreciate traditional lore from other cultural backgrounds” (Castillo 1995, v). However, this collection of folktales, written in both English and Garifuna, has served a dual purpose. The recorded stories preserve Garifuna oral tradition, as well as the traditions associated with the story telling. Castillo felt a pressing need to record these stories, as “very few people are telling stories now and stories are changing” (Castillo 1995, v).

In addition to the works of Adele Ramos and Jesse Castillo, many other Garifuna citizens have contributed to the body of literature concerned with the history of the Garifuna. Sebastian Cayetano’s *Garifuna History, Language and the Culture of Belize*, Justin Flores’ *The Garifuna Story, Now and Then*, and Carla Pastor’s *Expulsion, Displacement, Colonization, and Survival: The Untold History of the Garinagus and their Gubidas*, all relate versions of the Garifuna history as told by Garinagu themselves. All of these works share many common traits. All were produced by members of the community who belong to wealthy families traditionally involved in leadership roles. Furthermore, all of the authors were educated in the United States. These similarities are very significant indicators of the composition of the leadership. Rather than offering a representation reflecting many diverse backgrounds, the leadership is comprised of upper class Garifuna intent on making decisions for the community as a whole. This is also indicative of the manner in which the leadership approaches the subject of history and ethnicity of the people. All of these writings relate the history of the Garifuna people. They deny the traditionally accepted version of the Garifuna’s roots tracing back to Carib ancestors intermarrying with Africans who escaped slave ships. Rather, they support a revised history that speaks of Africans crossing the Atlantic one hundred years prior to Columbus and intermarrying with natives in the Lesser Antilles (Flores 1979, 10). As



Carla Pastor, a Garifuna graduate student studying at East Carolina State University, states in her 1999 master's thesis: "Our history, the true history of the oppressed Garinagu culture, is being rewritten." In the absence of a repressive colonial presence, the Garifuna leadership has discovered a freedom to recreate their identity. Key to this development are works such as these, which seek to record and circulate a version of Garifuna legend, making it a part of the commonly accepted identity and shared history.

### **Music**

The promotion of a musical style known as Punta Rock has emerged as a method of representing Garifuna tradition, and it is a source of pride and celebration for the Garifuna. Punta Rock, a musical style based in Garifuna drum and call-and-response tradition, is now gaining popularity on the international music market (Sletto 1991, 26). Created by Garifuna musicians, Punta Rock carries a message of cultural consciousness, such as those represented in the lyrics "Uwala, Uwala, Uwala Busingano" (Let's be proud, have no shame) (Barry 1995, 78). Success on the international music scene has called a lot of positive attention to the Garifuna musical tradition. This response has in turn fostered a new source of pride in Garinagu both young and old. In Belize, "Punta Till You Drop" t-shirts testify to the popularity of the music, and it has even been embraced as the nation's official music style (Barry 1995, 78). The popularity of Punta Rock has been a godsend for groups such as the Garifuna Cultural Council, whose main objective is cultivating cultural pride (Barry 1995, 78). This has been employed as a method for gaining recognition on the national and international scales.



After three centuries of colonialism, Belize has struggled to find its own identity among the many ethnic identities within its borders (Bolland 1990, 206). Garinagu have contributed to this growing sense of a “Belizean” nationalism through the adoption of this musical form as the official music of Belize. Although Belize has “officially” laid claim to Punta, for the Garifuna this remains one of the most distinct elements of their identity. The leaders hope that Garinagu will take the success of Punta Rock to symbolize how communities can use their culture to gain recognition and economic benefit, adjusting to modern demand without losing awareness for the heritage.

### **Holidays**

Figure 2: Reenactment of Arrival, Dangriga

One of the most significant methods of representation of culture for Garifuna leaders in Belize has been the celebration of Settlement Day. Settlement Day commemorates the arrival of the Garinagu on the shores of Belize and is considered “the best illustration of the true significance of the whole Garifuna identity ... the arrival of the people, the culture, the language, the history to Belizean soil” (Ramos 2000, ii). This is a month-long holiday, cumulating on November 17 with the annual reenactment of the arrival of the Garifuna (Figures 2 and 3). This holiday was officially recognized by the Belizean government in 1956, but started in Dangriga nearly fifteen years earlier. Today, this holiday is an opportunity to celebrate culture, address concerns regarding the future, remind people of their heritage, and reassert the Garifuna presence in the Belizean identity. Each year, the National Garifuna Council selects a theme for the holiday. This theme will be the focus of the seminars and activities throughout the holiday, and it is





Figure 2: Reenactment of Arrival, Dangriga, Belize



Figure 3: A Crowd Gathers to Witness the Arrival



intended to remind people of a goal that they should try to achieve throughout the year. For the year 2000, the theme was “Garifuna Survival: A Challenge for the Youth!” This theme was intended as a “call to arms” for the Garinagu to become involved in educating the youth about Garifuna traditions and heritage. The youth must also do their part by becoming involved in learning about their heritage. The Council believes that the only way that the Garifuna cultural heritage can survive is by teaching the youths about their heritage, and instilling within them a sense of pride.

The final day of the holiday is celebrated by the reenactment of the Garinagu arriving upon the shores, followed by a procession to the Church (Figures 4 and 5). This is typically followed by a ceremony in the town center and a parade, along with exhibitions of cultural traditions and celebration throughout the day (Figure 6). It is a time of celebration when drumming can be heard throughout the day and night, the air is filled with the smell traditional Garifuna dishes being prepared, and everywhere the bright colors of traditional Garifuna clothing gleam in the sunlight (Figure 7). The National Garifuna Council chose Dr. Aaron Lewis, a Garinagu who teaches physics at the University of Belize, to be the keynote speaker for the 2000 festivities. He emphasized the concerns of the elite Garifuna leadership. Acknowledging the past efforts of the Council, Dr. Lewis challenged the audience, “We certainly know from whence we came. The question is ‘Do we know where we want to go and how to get there?’” (Lewis 2000). Dr. Lewis reminded the Garifuna audience of their history, “We are survivors!” but also challenged them to continue to survive in the twenty-first century. He stressed the importance of gaining an education, and contributing to the community, echoing the themes established by the Council.





Figure 4: Traditional Procession to the Church for Settlement Day Mass



Figure 5: A Garifuna-Catholic Ceremony





Figure 6: Float for the Settlement Day Parade





Figure 7: Garifuna Woman in Traditional Dress



Many of the activities, in keeping with the theme "A Challenge to Our Youths" were aimed young Garinagu, including "Culture Nights" that focus on story telling, poems, songs and drama for the youth, all celebrating the history and tradition of the Garifuna. In Dangriga and other Garifuna villages, this month is filled with school rallies, open forums, and youth awareness seminars (Castillo 2000). There is a wreath-laying ceremony at the monument dedicated to T.V. Ramos (Figure 8), guest speakers, and talent shows. Additionally, school children re-enact the Garifuna arrival, and a "Miss Garifuna" is crowned (Figure 9). This is a time of celebration, with dancing and drumming throughout the night.

Garifuna leadership also emphasizes the importance of the Settlement Day holiday for attracting tourists ("Garinagu Celebrate" 2000, 3). However, they bemoan the fact that Garifuna do not take the initiative to draw in tourists, or to benefit from their presence. They encourage residents to explore options, so that the tourist dollar does not only go to bus companies, tour companies, and hotels. Although the National Garifuna Council has encouraged the community to use their "culture as a tool for development" for over a decade, movement in this direction has yet to take place.

Besides Settlement Day, other holidays also create a time to draw people together, reintroduce to them their spirituality, and reinforce a sense of identity. Spirituality and connection to one's ancestors was traditionally an important part of the everyday life of the Garifuna. Age-old spiritual traditions, combined with Catholic influence, have created a unique spiritual character (Sletto 1991, 23). The elders fear that with the loss of interest of the younger generations, the connection to the spirits of their ancestors will be lost and the entire religious element vital to the Garifuna lifestyle will be lost. Fabian





Figure 8: T.V. Ramos Memorial with Ceremonial Wreath





Figure 9: Crowning of "Miss Garifuna" 2000



Cayetano explains the significance of the *Dugu* ceremony as “a family reunion and as a way to express solidarity” (Sletto 1991, 2). Religious holidays, such as *Dugu*, are important for reaffirming the faith in the young. *Dugu* is a feast of reconciliation with the dead that serves as powerful affirmation of Garifuna beliefs and lifestyle, including rituals to appease the dead include song and dance. The involvement of all residents is crucial for the religious ceremony as well as the survival of the entire tradition. The ethnic solidarity fostered by *Dugu* helps to bind this culture together in the ever-increasing pressures imposed by the modern world. The *Dugu* ceremony is still performed every couple of years, especially in the more remote villages. Although the National Garifuna Council does not organize these events, they certainly encourage Garinagu to participate in them and learn of their heritage.

### The Economic Motivations Behind Representation

#### Representation as a Strategy for Political Gain

In Belizean society, presentation and assertion of self is important (Gonzalez and McCommon 1989, 125). The process of decolonization frequently coincides with the building of a nation through the integration of several racial and ethnic groups (Bolland 1990, 192). The salience of race and ethnicity is often heightened during the process of decolonization, and this may result in political competition becoming institutionalized along racial or ethnic lines that developed in a historical colonial context that emphasized racial and ethnic distinctions through derogatory stereotyping and discriminatory practices (Bolland 1990, 192). This racial and ethnic consciousness is often a powerful mode of solidarity and resistance among colonized peoples, such as the Garifuna. In



order to gain political strength within Belize, many Garifuna leaders emphasize the need for solidarity. Proclaiming that the Garifuna are an indigenous people, the National Garifuna Council has become very active in regional political organizations over the past decade. Within Belize, these political alliances include the Southern Alliance for Grassroots Empowerment (along with the Ke'kchi Maya), and the South and Meso-American Indian Rights Center, among others (Sutherland 1998, 81). Some of these organizations are international in scope, while others are more concerned with issues within the borders of Belize. Alliance within these organizations has provided the Garifuna leadership with a stronger voice within local government, while also gaining recognition on the international scale as a part of this growing political movement.

### **The Economic Motivations Behind Representation**

Responding to the economic demands of the global market, many Garifuna have sought migration as a method of financial survival. Garifuna expertise has traditionally been oriented toward boat construction, seafaring and fishing (Merrill 1995, 100). In the market conditions of today's global economy, these livelihoods do not meet the ever-increasing demands of the people. It is estimated that as much as 50% of the Garifuna population has emigrated from Belize since 1950 for financial and education reasons (O'Conner 1998, 1). Facing demands of traditionally large families, many Garifuna men and women migrate to North America in search of economic opportunity (Merrill 1995, 100). Preservationists of Garifuna culture view this movement of people as a great contributor to the breakdown of cultural identity. Some men decide to stay in America,



and bring their families to live with them. Here, the great “melting pot” of America leads many Garifuna to “set aside” their ethnicity, blending into the demands and goals of the American identity (O’Connor 1998, 1). Assimilation carries the threat of cultural annihilation. Children raised in America are often unaware of their roots, including their native language, spiritual beliefs and customs. As migratory workers spread over the continent from Los Angeles to New York, cultural factionalism is often the result as they discard their unifying ethnic inheritance and ties to their homeland (O’Connor 1998,1).

Other Garinagu leave their families to attend school in the United States. The availability of higher education is limited throughout most of Belize. In the more remote regions, such as Barranco and Punta Gorda, education is only available for young children (Figure 10). Teenagers must migrate to more urban areas, such as Belize City, and even Dangriga, to gain higher education at one of the private Catholic schools available in these areas. This situation puts further stress on a family and a community, as they must contend both with the financial responsibility of tuition costs at these academies, and additional financial and social impacts. In order to pursue education past high school, many Garinagu find that they must look to colleges and universities in the United States. The loss of the Garifuna’s “best and brightest” has obviously had a significant effect on the community. Without access to adequate educational resources locally, the Garifuna tend to be dependent on the academic programs of the United States. Many young citizens who could otherwise be active members, participating in activities that would benefit the entire community, are forced to leave in search of opportunity.

When migratory workers arrive back in their Central American villages, their experiences also contribute to the unraveling of the Garifuna identity. Along with





Figure 10: Primary School in Barranco



financial remittances, an exchange of “cultural remittances” also takes place. New ideas, material objects and other influences of the non-Garifuna world are introduced, enhancing the nontraditional lifestyles of the developed world. While the Garifuna have historically adapted well to degrees of change, the wholesale effects these influences have on the younger generations are discouraging for cultural survival. The mass consumerism “bug” has touched the citizens of even the more remote villages. A paradox now exists for the Garifuna: the methods necessary for economic and political strength are the ultimate threats to the well being of the cultural identity that these programs intend to support.

In addition to money, family members also send objects such as clothing, television, radios, compact disks, and satellite dishes back to their homes. The impact of this exchange is immeasurable. As one walks through the streets of Dangriga, it is not unusual to hear American “Pop Princess” voices blaring from radios. Everywhere, people are wearing hats with American baseball team logos, or clothing with American designer labels. The label “Tommy Hilfiger” was especially well represented in the wardrobe throughout the Garifuna communities. Due to the profusion of satellite connections, *Oprah* and the *Cosby Show* are now two of Belize’s most popular television programs, beamed from stations throughout the United States directly to homes along the Caribbean shore (Sutherland 1998, 54).

Exposure to American society has also altered the character of Garifuna identity. The main pockets of Garifuna communities in the United States are located in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. Exposure has lead to a glorification to this “ghettoized” American lifestyle. A group of young boys playing in the sand of remote



Hopkins Village smile for a visitor's camera, proudly posing with confrontational body posture and hands arranged in symbols of gang allegiances (Figure 11). They laugh and smile as they posture, unaware of the significance of what they strive to imitate. Donna Joseph, a prominent member of the Garifuna community in Dangriga, refers to these young Garinagu as "the lost generation" (Joseph 2000). Due to economic pressures, many of these children have grown up living with grandparents, while their parents work in the United States and send money back home. This family structure often encourages these young children to further emulate the American lifestyles that their parents live, creating further distance from the children and their cultural heritage.

As the American money and products continue to arrive in Garifuna communities from family members abroad, the leaders caution of an increasing dependence on this financial arrangement. Even more distressing for the leadership has been the social effects of this exchange. This situation has convinced many that in order to gain a financial and social independence, economic strategies must develop locally. In order to create a financially and socially acceptable plan for economic development, many leaders now embrace the idea of tourism as a tool to promote identity within the community. Tourism has the potential to be a major force in the protection and maintenance of a regional character. This creates a challenge of marketing their image to draw visitors who are interested in experiencing all this community can offer, while at the same time selling the idea to local residents as well. If it were a success, it would create more financial rewards for the community, allowing them to address other issues that threaten solidarity, such as poverty and education.





Figure 11: Young Boys Emulate the American Ghetto



The introduction of tourism to these regions, while also necessary for economic strength, also brings foreign influences into these largely Garifuna areas. The tourism industry is booming in Belize, thanks in large part to the government's promotional campaign inviting tourists to "Belize – The Adventure Coast, Undiscovered and Unspoiled" (Barry 1995, 51). Tourism is now an official part of the government's development strategy (Sutherland 1998, 105). Although originally wary of tourism as a source of income, due in large part to fear of the threat of foreign influences upon a slowly emerging national identity and recently gained independence, Belize now proudly advertises itself as the "Jewel of the Caribbean" (Lewis 2000). The Garifuna, also once wary of foreign "invasion," have now embraced the idea, or at least the potential profits, of tourism.

Garifuna leaders represent some of the "best and brightest" of the community. They tend to come from prominent Garifuna families, and nearly all of them had the opportunity to attend college or university in the United States. While in the United States, these men and women often experience tourism as a method for reaffirming an identity, a policy they wish to bring back to their community (Cayetano 1997, 2). Former National Garifuna Council President, Paul Lambey, described the culture as a "tool for development," and has special plans for ecotourism so that "we may educate others and teach us public and human relations" (Palacio 1992, 41). As the leadership looks to align with government in order to receive both funding and training that could help advance the economic situation in Garifuna communities, Sebastian Cayetano reminds his peers, "We must play an integral part in developing it and ourselves" (Sletto 1991, 42). Through tourism, the Garifuna leadership hopes to gain enough funding and support from the



national government to encourage development within communities, eventually decreasing the level of dependency.

Acceptance of tourists is not enough to create financial rewards, however. Some Garifuna community leaders still voice concerns about the impact of foreign visitors. Sylvia Flores, mayor of Dangriga says: "we must be sensitized to the possible negative effects of tourism, and we must examine what great impact the coming of people from other lands has on our culture" (Barry 1995, 54). Tourism creates a unique dichotomy where the wealthiest members project images of the luxury and leisure oriented vacation lifestyle in a place where people cannot afford any semblance of luxury close to what their visitors expect. Tourism may act as a form of advertising for a modern consumer society, but to an audience that is generally too poor to afford it (Hough 1990, 153). This creates a dilemma where there is a strong urge to conform, and even emulate, this lifestyle, which contradicts with the diversity of lifestyles within the communities (Hough 1990, 157).

As I traveled through a number of Garifuna villages in Belize, I witnessed the dichotomy created by tourism firsthand. In order to experience the Garifuna culture firsthand, I participated in the Toledo Ecotourism Association Guesthouse Program. I traveled by bus to the remote village of Barranco to stay in a guesthouse provided by the village in cooperation with the Toledo Ecotourism Association. When I arrived, I was informed that I would stay as a houseguest of one of the local residents, as the guesthouse was in very bad repair and inhabited by scorpions. The guesthouse was damaged during a hurricane and the residents of Barranco were unwilling to repair the facility because they had not been compensated in the past. I also discovered that the village did not have



running water and there was only one telephone. The Toledo Ecotourism Association's brochure glossed over all of these details. Certainly, the lifestyle I am accustomed to living in the United States is drastically different from the lifestyle of Barranco (Figure 12). My experiences in this village revealed two things. First, the communities must improve the standards of their accommodations if they ever hope to support a tourism program successful enough to provide considerable income. Secondly, despite the National Garifuna Council's encouragement, many Garifuna have not embraced tourism as a method of economic development. Many people were distrustful of the presence of tourists, casting a wary eye and keeping a careful distance from visitors. In order for this program to benefit the entire village, they must all agree to participate. Village members must be willing to work without immediate compensation if they expect to see financial rewards in the future.

A second fear is that in the future, this can create a situation where a developed tourist destination becomes a hyper real space, created and maintained as if it is a "living museum" (Sutherland 1998, 107). At this point, an identity ceases to be alive and a part of the community and is instead something separate, a part of a shared heritage, but not a daily reality. This "culture" becomes glorified and simplified, and ceases to be a part of the everyday life. Such a result would be counterintuitive, for it might ultimately lead to a result of the "Disney-fication" of what the leaders are hoping to reassert back into people's daily interactions. This would forsake the Garifuna principle of "rearranging the load" that testifies to the communities' ability to adapt and change but remain a distinctly Garifuna people. Instead, the impact of becoming this type of destination could





Figure 12: Main Street in Barranco, Belize



destroy the intimacy of the village life, the connection to the identity and history, as well as destroy a sense of pride.

### Counter-Movements

In recent years, the National Garifuna Council has received a great deal of criticism from other Garifuna. They are referred to as the “Gapencille,” a local term for the elite oligarchy. Indeed, the majority of members, past and present, who are active in the organization are from the wealthiest and most privileged of the Garinagu, including the Cayetano, Flores, Lambey, and Palacio families (Elijio 2000, 3). In an article in the local Dangriga newspaper, *The Stann Creek Star*, Wellington Elijio voices many complaints about the organization and their initiatives. He criticizes the Settlement Day festivities for being all pageantry, with little connection to the true needs of the Garifuna (Elijio 2000, 3). He points out that the theme of the annual pageant is never realized, and while people enjoy the celebrations of the holiday, they do not pay close enough attention to the message behind the celebration. Elijio blames intra-community politics and conflict for impeding local development: “While the chiefs quarrel, the queens are getting wet.” He blames bickering and divisions among the leadership for preventing the Garifuna from moving forward. In fact, he cites instances such as the abandonment of the Garifuna memorial in Dangriga as evidence of divisions and pettiness actually moving the community backwards (Elijio 2000, 3). The Garifuna monument, now barren and all but abandoned, was a site that could have attracted tourists. Instead, bickering among factions within the community resulted in the abandonment of the project and all of the



good intentions that had inspired it. He quotes Mary Castillo, who emphasizes that “as long as it is for the greater good of the people we must learn to work together to survive.”

Mocking the representations produced by the National Garifuna Council, Elijio reminds the Garinagu, that “being Garifuna” is more than drumming, tribute to ancestors, and the reenactment of the arrival. He blames representations such as those produced by the Council for stripping the true meaning from the culture. In essence, these efforts have been counter-intuitive, simplifying an identity to a point where it cannot be a part of anyone’s daily interactions.

Elijio is also involved in programs and organizations intended to benefit the everyone. He established the Progressive Garifuna Alliance, which sponsors the annual holiday known as Mali 2000. Mali is a direct rejection of the representations created by the National Garifuna Council. This week long celebration pays tribute to the African-ness and “blackness” of the Garifuna, disputing the National Garifuna Council’s representation of the Garifuna as an indigenous people. The ten days of celebrations include seminars that compare Garifuna tradition, such as Dugu, to related celebration in African culture. There are many days and nights of celebration that includes drumming and traditional dance, again emphasizing the closeness of Garifuna tradition with the African. Other events include workshops in African spirituality and the importance of spirituality development for the survival of African culture. This is a time for Garifuna to reflect upon their spiritual and musical connection to their African heritage. Certainly, these celebrations prove the National Garifuna Council’s claims against their African heritage to be without foundation. Additionally, he has assisted in the development of the World Garifuna Organization, and the newly developed Billy John Martinez Cultural



Foundation. The World Garifuna Organization has been formed to claim reparations from British government, for wrongs, indignities, damages, injustices, and violation that accompanied their expulsion from St. Vincent. Elijio emphasizes a need for focus on “unification, respect, [social], and political, economic and educational development” (Palacio 2000, 4). He believes that the programs developed by the National Garifuna Council do not address the problems and concerns of the people, emphasizing that “we will never put our eggs in one basket, not in [the National Garifuna Council’s] for sure” Elijio emphasizes the need for local development, and asserts that the Council’s methods are not adequate to secure a strong economic and political future for the Garifuna (Elijio 2000, 4).

### Conclusion

A large obelisk stands tall in the center of a field, surrounded by flagpoles as empty as the intentions that originally built this monument. Located along the main road leading into Dangriga, this monument is one of the sites that welcome a visitor into the city. Built to commemorate the Garinagu arrival, the full plans were never realized (Franzone 1995, 232). Although the site was intended to include a museum dedicated to the Garifuna heritage, local politics prevented this vision from taking shape (Elijio 2000, 3). In many ways, the controversy and neglect that surround this monument represent a microcosm for the dissension within the Garifuna community.

Following the official decolonization of Belize in 1981, the Garifuna have struggled to interpret their identity within rapidly changing local and national social, economic, and political conditions. Attempting to negotiate an identity within these



conditions, the National Garifuna Council has turned to representation as a method for asserting this restructured identity in the local community and throughout the world. The leadership uses this representation as a way for securing social, economic, and political strength for the Garifuna of Belize.

Despite the good intentions and best efforts of the National Garifuna Council, the ultimate goal of these programs remains unrealized (Figure 13). Unresponsive to the demands and interests of the community, the Council continues to try to force a sense of community, history, and identity that does not fit with the people's self perceptions (Figure 14). Because the leadership holds a view so at odds with that of the general public, their goals cannot be realized.

As Carla Pastor (1999, 18), states in her master's thesis, the "importance of learning the 'true history' about oneself is the first step towards decolonization." The decades following decolonization have been marked by a restructuring of their identity and a revision of their history by Garifuna leaders. However, even as these leaders develop their versions of history and ethnicity, outside political and economic forces are leading the Garinagu to reformulate their identity according to these demands. Without sensitivity to the needs and demands of the Garinagu, the Council's mission will remain unfulfilled. The fact that the Council's version of Garifuna identity must be forced upon their constituents perhaps indicates that the people do not relate to the image presented by the Council. A people cannot be forced to accept a version of reality. They can only live their lives, and identities, as they see fit. Only by connecting the concerns of their constituents into their concerns for the future of the Garinagu will the Garifuna identity survive outside of representations in the media.





Figure 13: Advertisement for National Garifuna Council, Dangriga, Belize





Figure 14: Combining Identities?



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