A Re-consideration of the Native American and African Roots of Garifuna Identity

by

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Introduction

The topic of cultural identity is probably one of the most complex social issues that was unresolved in the last century and which all of us will have to be deal with during this 21st century. The problem about cultural identity is that too many people are talking about it and all of them want to be correct. The state tells you what you are; people in your neighbourhood tell you what you are. Nobody listens to what you are saying about what you are. What is even worse is that your children and grandchildren may no longer believe you when you tell them what they are.

Nowhere is this question as complicated and conflictive as the topic of intermixture across
bloodlines. My topic is the blending of Native Americans and descendants of maroon Africans which led to the formation of the nation called Garifuna (previously called Black Carib in English). At first I review some of the theories that have been proposed to explain the blending. Secondly I compare some historical moments in the formation of the Garifuna with the Black Seminoles in the southeastern United States to arrive at commonalities that underlie such intermixture and the larger conditions that provoke them. Thirdly, I focus on some cultural traits that the Garifuna acquired through their traumatic experience on the Eastern Caribbean island of St. Vincent, where they were formed. Finally, I refer to my findings to show what lessons can be derived for the hemispheric Indigenous Peoples movement.

Theoretical Perspectives on the Formation of the Garifuna

First a brief description of the Garifuna people. They number over 200,000 and are found in communities along the Caribbean coast of Central America primarily in Honduras but also in Belize, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. There are also large communities in United States cities, mainly New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. They are quintessentially the products of the European colonial enterprise in the Caribbean. They are the result of the intermixture of Africans with Native Americans—called Caribs. The Africans and their descendants were fleeing from European chattel slavery and the Caribs had already been decimated from wars, diseases, and their forced abduction by Europeans. They have a language that is primarily Arawakan, diet typified by Caribbean foods, including several varieties of marine and coastal items. They also have a specific kinship system, religion, and wide-ranging artistic expression. As the largest nation in the Caribbean deriving from the intermingling of its first peoples with others, the Garifuna are an anomaly. Everyone thinks that they are so strange that they need to be explained.

Here are some reasons. They are not a plantation derived creole culture, although they live in the Caribbean sub-region. They did not originate from slavery but more so in resistance to the slavery of both Africans and Native Americans. They did not originate in Central America but are found there. They have black skins but are mixed both biologically and culturally. So the riddle keeps coming back—what are they?

If they were to be asked this question, they would appear surprised and answer that they are people, who don’t have to be explained anymore than others should be. Furthermore they would add that they proudly share both Native American and African blood. But this hypothetical answer has not been sufficient to quench the thirst of curiosity coming from observers, researchers and laypersons alike, who in turn have come up with many answers. One is the historically documented fact that their African origin comes from a shipwrecked slaver, from which scrambled hundreds onto the island of St. Vincent in the mid-1600s. Additionally many others escaped from plantations on St. Vincent itself not to mention neighbouring plantation strongholds like Barbados, St. Lucia, and Martinique.

The rise of anthropology to prominence in the United States during the last century saw its practitioners applying their own ways to explain the Garifuna enigma. Under the influence of his advisor Melville Herskovits, Douglas Taylor saw the Garifuna displaying African cultural survivals in their assertiveness as against the reticence of American Indians (Taylor 1951). His main concern, however, was the language and folklore, which revealed the overwhelming Indian component of the culture. Nancie Gonzalez was also impressed with the assertiveness of the Garifuna as field informants. She subsequently found West Indian Afro-American traits among them Gonzalez (1959: 300-307), although her main focus was not on their dual origin but on their trajectory in Central America.

A Guyanese Africanist, Ivan Van Sertima, found evidence through various sources of the actual presence of Pre-Columbian Africans in St. Vincent, among other parts of the New World (1976). So, for him the answer took the African explanation. Van Sertima was under the 1970’s influence to restore to Africans and Afro-Americans “facts” that the white academic establishment had deliberately denied them. This thesis together with his erroneous findings continues to confine him to the periphery in western epistemology. For a detail
rebutter see Haslip-Viera et al 1996: 419-441. In keeping with the swinging pendulum within academic circles, there should now be a thrust to strengthen their Indian origins to counter Van Sertima. I can hear the Garifuna answering should they be asked their opinion at this conjuncture. “We have told you before. We are ordinary people. If you are so keen to find out about our origins, find out about other peoples with similar origins and compare for yourself.”

The Garifuna and Black Seminole – some commonalities

I will follow the hypothetical advice of our Garifuna listeners and do a brief comparison on the maroon history of the Black Seminole and the Garifuna. I rely on a paper that Rebecca Bateman had published on this topic in 1990 entitled “Africans and Indians: a comparative study of the Black Carib and Black Seminole”. My aim is to paint a broad picture of the experiences of these two brave peoples at some of the bitterest moments in their history and pinpoint some specifics that are unique to the Garifuna.

For both peoples the story begins in the 18th century, a period when Britain lost her United States colonies but still maintained vital interests in Florida, further south throughout the Caribbean rim land, and circling north through the Eastern Caribbean. Not only was the region rich in lands producing sugar, cotton, coffee, and cacao that would enable Britain to recoup her loss of the American colonies; it was also a strategic passageway for heavy boat traffic and trade with the Spanish colonies. There were several factors, however, that had to be overcome. The first was Britain’s recurring wars with Spain and France fought mainly on the Continent but the spoils included territories within the Caribbean. The second was the recalcitrant slaves, which were becoming more restive especially under French provocation during the latter years of the 18th century. Closely related to the problem of the slaves were the remaining Caribs in the Eastern Caribbean who continued their periodic insurrections. Despite all of these obstacles, there were moments when there seemed a masterpiece of good luck. An example of this took place with the 1763 Treaty of Paris, when Britain received Florida from Spain and from France it also received St. Vincent, Dominica, and Tobago. The last three were potentially wealthy plantation territories in the Eastern Caribbean.

Reaping the fruits of these newly gained possessions, however, was not going to be any easy task. In St. Vincent there were two groups of Caribs to be dealt with. One was the original Yellow Caribs who had inhabited the island from Pre-Columbian times. The other was the result of intermixture between Caribs and escaped slaves called Black Caribs by virtue of the colour of their skin. Such intermixture had occurred from the 16th century during frequent Carib raids on European plantations but had increased since the 18th century with the escalation of plantations throughout the islands together with the resultant high numbers of fleeing escapees. As the yellows decreased so did the blacks increase exponentially. After several skirmishes both groups had agreed in 1700 to subdivide the island between themselves, the yellows occupying the leeward and the blacks the windward. From now on I will use the term ‘Garifuna’ to refer to the Black Caribs.

Rather unfortunately for the British the windward side was the more fertile and less rugged portion ideally suited for sugar plantations. Furthermore, the Garifuna were most possessive of their lands and resisted all efforts to hand them over to the British peacefully. Despite numerous offers from the British to compensate them in cash, allow them access to the oceans for fishing, to relocate them within the island or away at British expense, and to grant them the status of Free Negroes, the Garifuna refused steadfastly (Kirby and Martin 1972). Between 1763 and 1790 through various ruses the British were able to whittle away on some lands but the rightful owners were finally determined not to yield one more square centimetre of the last portion of their entire 6000-acre territory. The final pleas from the British for re-consideration went unanswered. In fact, the Garifuna were already in full preparation for war with the aid of the French.

The one significant factor to note from this episode was that the British treated the Garifuna as a nation with full autonomy and jurisdiction over their territory. Indeed, the Garifuna regarded the land as their heritage from their ancestors, for which they had fought and from
which they would not part. The other nation that was intimately involved with its own vested colonial interests was the French. The third nation, the Yellow Caribs, gradually lost their earlier influence and joined with the Garifuna at moments during the military struggle, the alliances of kindred overtaking whatever animosity might have existed between them earlier. In short, the multi-national conflict saw contradictory political jurisdictions joining in battle, the sharpest divide being between the Garifuna and the British.

The Second Carib War 1795-1796 was much more definitive in destroying the military power, morale, and the people themselves than the First Carib War of 1772 to 1773. After viciously extricating men, women, and children from their hideouts, the British left 4,338 at Baliceaux, a small desolate island holding station before sending them in exile to Roatan in Central America, a distance of about two thousand miles. For more information on the final routing and travel see Kirby and Martin (1972), Gonzalez (1988: 39-50), and Marshall (1973: 4-19).

The experiences of forced relocation and maroonage among the Black Seminole are far more convoluted than those of the Garifuna partly because there were far more people involved and covered a larger space and time. Readers are encouraged to consult Bateman (1990:1-24) for more information. The relationship between the escaped African slaves and native peoples had started as far back as the 17th century when Spanish-controlled Florida promised asylum to escapees from the British North American colonies, who converted to Catholicism. The black refugees found several settlements of different Southeastern peoples, including members of the Creek Confederacy. The latter actually formed the Florida Seminole nation by the mid-eighteenth century.

There are some comparisons that we can draw at this point between the Garifuna and the Black Seminole. One is that the amalgam that formed the Florida Seminole contrasts with the one nation, the Yellow Caribs, who were the hosts of the Africans. Secondly, the groups making up the Seminole were refugees from a previous homeland. Again, the Yellow Caribs had been long-term residents of St. Vincent and were not in the process of consolidating themselves into nationhood as the Florida Seminole. A third contrast is that both the escapees and the Florida Seminole had extensive plantation experiences by the time they intermarried. This exposure to a strong creolizing influence seemed to have been absent, especially among the founding African population of the Garifuna. The African episode in the early formation and evolution of the Garifuna and the Seminole certainly needs more study.

Finally, the impression one gets is that the fleeing Africans who joined the Caribs were mainly males as against the cross-section of men, women, and children among their counterparts in Florida. All of these elements inevitably contributed to a stronger and more lasting bonding that attended the formation of the Garifuna nation. It is a case where the simpler the elements the easier the bonding. The one Indian anchor of the Garifuna made for a deeper Indian root for them than in the case of the Black Seminole.

Of course, the ruling government authorities provided the context for the intermixture. It is worth giving them a brief overview. The salient point here is that Florida, and especially its northern part including the Panhandle, was frontier territory between often conflicting jurisdictions, who conveniently used both the Indians and blacks for their own ends. At first, Florida was Spanish bordering on British territory. Between 1763 and 1783 it came under British control. This was also during the American War of Independence when hundreds of blacks and Indians moved south into British territory. In 1783 Florida again reverted to Spanish control. In 1821 it was eventually ceded to the United States. It was during the U.S. jurisdiction that both the Seminoles and the blacks experienced the greatest military violence. One sorry episode was during the Second Seminole War from 1836 to 1842, also dubbed the costliest Indian war in U.S. history.

This war started further problems in the formation of the Black Seminole in different parts of the United States, where the extreme racism of the federal government has influenced their cultural identity together with their relations with other Indian peoples. This contrasts with the experience of the Garifuna in Central America, where there was no federal government to provide cash retribution and welfare allowance but also neither to impose stringent legalistic intrusions into their resettlement, movement, and status. On the other hand, the relatively little scope of government intrusion gave the Garifuna a greater opportunity to develop their cultural identity with a certain amount of integrity not available to the Black
Seminole. Further below I will say a further word of the type of government-Garifuna relations that exists in Central America.

**Past Experiences and Cultural Identity among the Garifuna**

In this part of the paper I turn to the Garifuna not as the product of two races but as one people chastened by the bitter events in St. Vincent. It is tempting to ask the question what effect did the defeat and exile of their ancestors have on the formation of their cultural identity. I am doing this for two reasons. The first is my assumption that an experience that traumatic must have left some scars, which they have been attempting to heal. My other reason is my observation that there are distinct differences between the descendants of the Yellow Caribs in St. Vincent, whose ancestors had participated less in the Carib Wars and had not been exiled, with the Garifuna found today in Central America. There is far greater atrophy in traditional cultural identity among them than in Central America. For this topic I include kinship, land, and personality traits under cultural identity. Let me also say that my views here are more reflective of initial thoughts around some research that I am currently doing in Belize.

It is not the first time that this kind of cause-effect processual analysis has been done for the Garifuna. Two such studies are by Nancie Gonzalez (1988), who focuses on themes that include spirituality, the socio-economy, and domestic relations and Gullick (1985), who focuses on the formation of ethnic worldviews. My own current effort circumscribes events surrounding their military defeat, subsequent massacre, and humiliating exile as the causative factors. It is necessary to say at the outset that any extrapolation of cause-effect relations in this case will have to be tempered by the radically different socio-political contexts within the two settings, St. Vincent and modern day Central America. Indeed, an awareness of these two extreme conditions will help us appreciate even more the resilience of people as they form their own cultural traits.

In St. Vincent the Garifuna were a primitive hunting and gathering society, where territoriality harboured the natural resources essential for daily life and community solidarity. They lived in dispersed uxorilocal household groups under the control of a headman. When not engaging in wars, bringing in food from the land as well as rivers and sea, or assisting his wife in swidden agriculture, he spent time in the men’s house with his sons, sons-in-law, and other male relatives (Gonzalez 1988: 148-154). A group of the households belonged to one of the several “tribal” subdivisions headed by a leader, who exerted more authority during war than peace. The territories claimed by these groups were separated by natural geographic features, such as rivers and mountains. The entire nation functioned as one big unit during the several raids and wars fought against Europeans. At such moments men from St. Vincent would join fellow warriors from other islands as reinforcement. During the other times there were frequent squabbles and skirmishes among the several territorial groups (Kirby and Martin 1972).

Today the Garifuna live in developing states that deliver many of the services that they had had to provide for themselves, such as territoriality, security from the enemy, public access ways among the communities, and other basic needs. Most especially, the state guarantees their basic civil rights, negating the need to engage in feuds among themselves. In all the four countries the Garifuna are recognized as ethnic minorities, often held in opposition to indigenous peoples that originated within the immediate sub region. They have minimal control over lands adjacent to their communities and no political autonomy. They are among the poorest of the poor in countries that have to face the overwhelming challenges of a globalizing economy. Three of the four countries–Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua–are still undergoing painstaking reconstruction after the civil wars fought a decade ago. As a result the needs of the minority Garifuna have to be postponed given their powerlessness and dwindling resources in the national treasuries.

With the poor conditions traditionally overcoming them, the Garifuna have left their communities in large numbers to migrate as far north as the United States. These massive movements to various surroundings so different from their Central American habitat present
challenges in attempting to find links that originated one step further back in St. Vincent. My belief, however, is that the links can be found. Some are easily identified while others demand the fine teeth of social science research methodologies.

What are some of these linkages that we can find within the wealth of Garifuna cultural identity? It is not surprising that we start with Chatoyer. The aura around him is a beacon that draws the attention of everyone. In introducing themselves to each other Garifuna men and women say, “We are all the grandchildren of Chatoyer.” In Belize his memory is venerated. Indeed, one of the largest festivals in the country, November 19th, was started to uphold his bravery in alleviating the suffering of Garifuna ancestors.

Not only is Chatoyer a hero in the subliminal sense, the existence of his descendants actually carrying his flesh and blood has always been a part of the collective consciousness in the town of Dangriga and several villages in southern Belize. I came across this information by interviewing the granddaughter of the granddaughter of Joseph Chatoyer’s daughter, who had been known as Gulisi. My informant led me to others who indeed had heard about Gulisi as a daughter or some close relative of Joseph Chatoyer. The study uncovering the wealth of information I collected about genealogy and memories of life in St. Vincent and Honduras has already been published (1999:1-24).

The significance of the Gulisi account for our current analysis on linkages is threefold. The first is to pinpoint continuity in oral tradition between St. Vincent and Belize covering thousands of miles and over 200 years. The second is that she appears as an outstanding mother figure paralleling the father figure that her father maintains. The third is that the genealogy investigation revealed information about the descendants of Gulisi pioneering settlements in several communities in southern Belize. A closer examination reveals that their descendants have retained their family leadership quality, becoming success stories in business, politics, education, Garifuna spirituality and Roman Catholic clergy, among other fields.

The Gulisi story brought out the extended nature of Garifuna kinship ties that goes beyond communities and national boundaries. It is a very strong nucleating force stretching across time and space as it coagulates the peoplehood of the Garifuna. This is a point that still needs further analytical refinement. Certainly the term “kinship” as used in English is inadequate by virtue of its traditionally limited use to persons within family groups and communities but not as a primal coercive force for cultural identity and peoplehood. The term used in Garifuna is iduheguo. A derivative of the term, iduhenyu, is used by the Garifuna to refer to fellow Garifuna wherever they are.

Closely related to the bond of Chatoyer and iduheguo is the use of place names in Belize corresponding to earlier names found in St. Vincent. Examples include Masiraga, a community within the town of Punta Gorda, no doubt named after Masiracaw in southeastern St. Vincent. For more examples see Palacio (1999: 1-24).

Concurrence with place names leads to a remaining awareness of the “tribal” subdivisions in St. Vincent. A few persons in Belize can still identify themselves as originating from a given subdivision within the original Garifuna territory. The most popular is Oreyuna, no doubt a derivation from Owia, a community found in the extreme north of St. Vincent.

The vitality of the linkages around Chatoyer, iduheguo, and place names pales considerably in spotlighting the land relations that the Garifuna maintain in Central America. For a people who had been prepared to give up their life in St. Vincent, why did they not continue that zeal within their new locations? I would argue that their regard for land continued but that they were not given and have never been given the opportunity to exercise it in terms of ownership, inputs, and markets. As a poor, powerless, and black minority, the Garifuna could not compete with others for land within a political economy built on the ownership of land, preferably in large monopolistic portions. It is worth explaining that in the Caribbean coastal part of Central America, where the Garifuna are concentrated, the premium on land has traditionally been on its timber and large scale export agriculture carried out by multinationals. Such a political economy prevailed in both colonial and post-colonial Central America as well as colonial and post-colonial Belize. Differing political and cultural traditions notwithstanding, the one factor that Belize shares with its neighbours is an underlying public
policy historically controlled and implemented by latifundistas.

The existence of the zeal for land ownership was so strong among the third and fourth generations of Garifuna arrivants in Belize that several formed a group and saved whatever little money they had to buy a little less than 900 acres behind Punta Gorda. Quite prudently they agreed that it would be held in trusteeship for the perpetual use of their descendants. One can even hear them say, “So that they may never suffer the indignity that our forefathers did at the hands of the British in St. Vincent.”

Apart from this group effort, the Garifuna were allowed to buy a few acres for some farmlands. The vast majority, however, had to be satisfied with leasing plots that belonged to the state on reservations. There are many examples of their successful husbandry within the small portions available to them, especially when foreign markets were available. Traditionally, they have been allowed to use the beach facing their communities and some adjoining lands for common use of cutting wood for domestic purposes. Further below I will return to this vital question of land and cultural identity. My last comment on this point here is that the impossibility of earning a livelihood on the land led the Garifuna, after several failed efforts, to migrate in search of wage labour throughout northeastern Central America from very early. Several chroniclers remarked about their industry, dedication, and clannishness when compared with other ethnic groups in work gangs.

The final area of linkage to which I turn is one in which I have the least expertise. My discussion will, therefore, be more in a programmatic fashion indicating some questions for further research. It is the effect of St. Vincent on the personality of the Garifuna people. There have been observations about their facility to learn languages and engage in transcultural situations. Obviously, this came from their prolonged exposure to exactly these conditions from the very time of their first formation in the Eastern Caribbean. It became a prerequisite for their survival as a group.

But there are other traits that are not so easily explained. They include an overwhelming commitment to social services in their jobs in education, medicine, the church, and the government service; and their cultural transcendence, i.e. an ability to deal simultaneously within three levels of reality, such as dedication to the ancestors, the problems of the living, and constantly projecting into the future for the welfare of their progeny. Thirdly, there is their very rich artistic expression in literature, music, folklore, dance, and the plastic arts—all done with minimal formal training. I am suggesting that persons with the appropriate expertise look at these qualities and see why a set of people have been able to excel in them as against other fields; and whether there are any historical explanations that could be proposed.

Lessons Learned for the Indigenous Peoples Movement

In 1992 the Garifuna applied for membership within the World Council for Indigenous Peoples based in Ottawa and were accepted. The acceptance was a political victory for them within a primary forum of the hemispheric indigenous peoples movement. It is necessary to emphasize this given the prevailing ambivalence toward blacks who claim Indian origins among a cross-section of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. In the case of the Garifuna they literally had to make a case for their admission. Where whites who claim Indian ancestry can be accepted, it is not easily so for their black counterparts. The larger victory for global acceptance was that the Garifuna were being vindicated for a claim that they had always made. We will recall that the 18th century British and French had given them such recognition, albeit for their own ends. In opening the door, other black Indians could follow suit and exert their rights of belonging among their forty-odd million brothers and sisters recognized as indigenous peoples in the Americas.

The case of the Garifuna amplifies in various ways the definition of indigenous peoples, a task that continues within the hallways of the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and state capitols throughout the Americas. There is a need to look seriously at the often repeated criterion of land-based communal solidarity. In the case of the Garifuna we
have seen that this was important for their early formation but no longer in the portion of Central America where they are now found and where land ownership continues to be denied them. It is extreme for the Garifuna but they are not unique among indigenous peoples, whom history has now made de facto landless. As painful as it is to lose land, many indigenous peoples have shown that they could survive without its ownership and economic use. A similar conditionality of identity is tribal character where kinship and traditional leadership remain. Again there are varying degrees of the existence of this for indigenous peoples. For the Garifuna, as for many others, it is the considered intention to retain what they had lost after more than two hundred years ago. The important point is that as times keep changing, the viability of previous definition criteria changes but not the indigenousness of the people themselves.

More and more the social equity for indigenous peoples will not be land and tribal characteristics. It will be other pillars of anteriority, such as blood ties, hereditary traits, collective memories of previous experiences, and an inner worldview of cultural identity that lies in the domain of cosmology, spirituality, artistic expression and other intangibles, which are yet to be identified. I am in no way descrying the viability of current definitions. Rather I am advocating that we use them as starting points that will lead us further to better know ourselves. As my hypothetical Garifuna listener said earlier, “We are people no different than others but who are share both Indian and African roots.” The pronounced inclusivity among indigenous peoples will continue to challenge purists, who at given moments will feel that they have finally figured out completely who indigenous peoples are.

These exciting and challenging times call for more social scientists from among the indigenous peoples to study their own peoples. It is a cry that continues to be raised in the literature and which many are answering. In my own opinion the reward is an enriching of the various scientific disciplines, as new sets of researchers—differently grounded than the previous set—challenge conventional wisdom and introduce new methodologies that are truly indigenous (see Purcell 1998: 258-272).

As we get more involved in the study of our people, we could embark on another phase that has yet to unfold. It is a comparative analysis of phenomena occurring among two and more of our peoples. My own limited comparison between the Seminole and Garifuna, itself taken from a study done earlier (Bateman) was very exciting. At the least it pointed out to me strategic differences that account for specificities in the evolution of my own people. I would not have been able to arrive at this conclusion otherwise.

This paper started with the question of continuing the struggle to comprehend cultural identity left over from the last century. It has attempted to do so taking as its focus the very core of interculturalism. Furthermore, it has raised the complimentary question of fine-tuning perspectives and methods in the study of cultural identity.
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