



How have the Garífuna identities and diaspora organised their collective progress and histories following exile?

IN WHAT WAYS HAVE THE GARÍFUNA ATTEMPTED TO PRESERVE THEIR HISTORY, AND WHAT SIGNS OF SUCCESS CAN WE OBSERVE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES TODAY?

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Abstract

The Garifuna people have historical roots in St Vincent and have consolidated communities across the Americas. This research project focuses on how the Garifuna community has maintained their cultural identity following expulsion from their homeland in St Vincent, and what signs of success we can see in their communities today. As one of the few peoples indigenous to the Caribbean, the Garifuna are part of a global indigenous community, and understanding how they have survived and maintained their identity after exile can help us to better accommodate authenticity in our communities. In that sense, this research project has mainly used secondary sources and oral history to retrace some of their historical legacies. I argue that there has been some advancement in mass education, and language preservation and at the same time this community has experienced some systematic losses and changes in their cultural identity as a result of discriminatory practices.

Introduction

The objective of the study was to uncover how the Garífuna preserved their history, and if these attempts would be considered successful today. Further research underscored the reality that the Garífuna people's ability to persevere following exile from their homeland may be considered a success in itself, as many cultural traditions, and the language, have lasted the 200+ years since their exile.

An accepted account of Garífuna lineage is that they are descendants of indigenous "Caribs" or "Yellow Caribs" the indigenous people of St Vincent, and slaves who escaped from a shipwreck off the coast of St Vincent and fled to the island [1]. Both groups mixed cultures and intermarried, leading to what some call today "Black Caribs" or Garifuna, people with ancestral lineage to the indigenous people of the island and Africans. The word Carib was given to the population by Columbus [2], to mean "cannibal" although it is widely debated whether the Caribs did indeed practice cannibalism. Sometimes referred to as Garinagu, Caribs, or Kalinago, the Garifuna people were exiled from their home of St Vincent in 1797, following defeat by the British and spread across Central America upon arrival at Honduras, with few remaining in St Vincent. For the report, I do not use "Carib" to name the Garífuna, as I am not Garífuna and to avoid offence.

Methodology

The project is for the Social Mobility Student Research Hub, funded by Research England with the overall aim of improving access to and participation in research, for students from groups that are underrepresented within higher education. I chose to write on the Garífuna to investigate more into an under-researched part of black history and contribute to academia into black history. In this section, the methodology applied in this research will be discussed. Firstly, what types of data were used to support the research, followed by a brief description of the research stages.

This research began with a visit to the National Archives, with Katherine Astbury, Head of the School of Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Warwick, to look at documents relevant to black history, and Garífuna history and inspire the focus of this research. The data available in the archives was rich in historical government accounts of black history. However, this data could not be generalised to apply to situations where black history did not cross paths

with government agencies. Initially, this led me to consider focusing on how a black agency can be observed through the lens of governmental interactions but found that the extent of research necessary to answer this question would be beyond the scope of the research.

The visit to the National Archives presented many gaps in my knowledge, and consequently in my research plan as well. Using the information I gathered, I began my literature review, focusing on topics relating to the decolonisation of universities, social mobility, and black history, especially that of the Garífuna people. Few sources were specific enough to the Garífuna, whilst also imparting knowledge on what more can be done to integrate minority communities. A limitation of my research at this stage is that I applied my experiences to understand what social mobility may look like for the Garífuna community, to which I do not have a connection. Conducting this research with a Garífuna researcher would have greatly benefitted the research, but I knew that this was beyond my resources to accomplish. Hence, I reflected on social mobility in higher education, and the acceptance of authenticity for minority students at university, given the initial context of the research itself.

My research involved primarily secondary sources. Two key sources of information during the research stage were my visit to the National Archives and my virtual attendance at the University of West Indies Open University St Vincent Country Conference. In both cases, I was introduced to knowledge not easily accessible to non-experts; this proved to be a major limitation of my research. Whilst primary research would have provided me with more insight into the Garífuna community and is richer in data, it was beyond the scope of my research, considering the constraints of the project.

Findings

The Role Of Oral Tradition

The Garífuna have a strong history of oral tradition that, I argue, underpins the continued legacy of the entire community. As the Garífuna-centred documentary *Yurumein* demonstrated, Garífuna people today sometimes use through conversations between elders and youth to substitute what they do not learn at school about their history [3]. In some cases, oral tradition has served as the defence against misinformation and attempts to erase Garífuna history. Theatrical pieces such as *Loubavagu: el otro lado lejano* by Rafael Murilloselva Rendón, which tells the story of the Garífuna from St Vincent to Honduras, are creative testimonies of Garífuna history. Linda J. Craft described these kinds of projects as examples of Garífunas “creating an oral tradition they can write down as their history” by creating ethnic discourse despite continued discrimination in their country of residence [4]. Unesco also points out that the language is rich in tales (úruga) “often recited during wakes & large gatherings”, which continues this tradition of storytelling [5].

On the other hand, historians heavily debate the reliability of oral history and tradition as a method of preserving historical integrity. Cornelius Ryan, a military historian, has notably remarked that human testimony is worthless unless substantiated by documents supporting the testimony [6]. In another investigation into oral tradition, Elizabeth Tonkin emphasises that oral tradition permits empathy with communities who are neither book-centred nor literate [7]. Neither Tonkin nor Ryan considers the importance of oral history for non-western communities, who, in the Garinagu people’s case, have actively rejected Western involvement in the making of their histories. The need to substantiate oral history with written documents

also relies on the assumption that oral tradition is not enough for the community that this tradition is already serving. The earliest Garinagu was a pre-literate society, that used oral tradition to preserve their histories. In the community's beginnings, "nothing was written down for posterity" [8] and oral tradition formed the backbone of historical preservation, long before oral history became an international historical movement.

As a lasting legacy, oral tradition remains a part of Vincentian culture, and the act of listening to history continues to be practised. In 2005, Godfrey "Bobby" Fraser produced a radio play for St Vincent's Emancipation Month titled *In the Spirit of Nelly Ibo*, an enslaved woman who killed her enslaver in 1808 and with four women threw him into the sea.[9] Nancy Saul-Demers also documents this tale, passed down through oral history, in her book *Mayreau Memories*, which detailed the personal histories of eight remarkably strong women from Mayreau, St Vincent [10]. Both are examples of Vincentians immortalising an event that was brought to present memory through oral tradition. Until Dr Adrian Fraser, Dr Garrey Dennie and Dr Cleve Scott checked the St Vincent Handbook of 1938, there were no historical documents corroborating the events and the truth of this story.[11] Yet despite this lack, the residents of St Vincent maintained the historical integrity of Nelly Ibo's story through oral history, considered rumours by some. In the case of Bobby Fraser, his choice to make a radio play is interesting to me because "Garífuna songs are most often telling a story" [12] and creating a play for the ears only continues this oral tradition. Considering, Garífuna in St Vincent still do not receive comprehensive education on their history, so storytellers and oral historians are vital to ensuring that Garífuna history is not forgotten.

The existence of this report, and others alike, shows oral tradition is contributing to and succeeding in keeping Garífuna people's history alive. As Myra Khan discusses, the Western world may not respect oral tradition, but oral historians are "the custodians of each individual culture's history and practices for future generations and foreigners alike" [13].

Contextualised for Social Mobility

The above debate surrounding the validity of oral history encourages the notion that there is only one way to document research and history. So in the academic world, opportunities to be creative in the presentation of data are rare. However, when these opportunities arise, what is most important is that they make it possible for students to produce, and reproduce, knowledge which is compatible with one's own background and interests. Before I attended the St Vincent Country Conference, I had not anticipated how valuable it would be to my work, and it was in a less rigorously documented setting than my previous visit to the National Archives. The event permitted me to hear historical accounts as they have been told and passed on within the Garífuna community for years.

Social Mobility Student Research Hub did not prescribe how to present my research. The platform provided me with the opportunity to conduct independent research in an area that invited genuine curiosity and follow my findings. I felt no pressure to write a report; I could have easily produced a film, but what was certain was I would be able to produce a piece of work that reflected the journey I took. I believe that this attitude to research enables social mobility because it avoids creating new barriers for young researchers. There have been similar programmes which invite research by minority researchers, and into minority issues, such as the *Guide to Decolonising Social Sciences*, written by Warwick students this summer.

Allowing researchers to present their work in different manners permits new ways of interpreting information to be introduced to Higher Education, and there are ways to do this

even within the curriculum to benefit a multicultural cohort. For example, at the Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning, students are expected to interrogate their learning respectfully and prioritise multidisciplinary or collaborative approaches. This method differs greatly from established teaching practices in other areas of the university.

By encouraging a mixture of ideas, students and faculty will evolve in their assessment of different cultures and learn to recognise what authenticity looks like across the board. As more programmes like these become available, it will be more feasible for students to bring their authentic selves to academia.

The Legacy Of The Garífuna Language

Unesco proclaimed Garífuna language, dance, and music as masterpieces of the intangible heritage [5]. Loubavagu, mentioned above, is one example of this, using a combination of languages, music, and theatre to keep the Garífuna history documented. Despite Garífuna culture persevering through centuries of discrimination, not every Garífuna can take part in the cultural experience of speaking their language.

The forced exile of the Garífuna in 1797 was the single biggest contributor to the loss of the language in St Vincent. One Garífuna man described the event as a “complete ethnic cleansing” which left the Garífuna as a people with “nothing to hang on to” [3]. Today, the Garífuna language is listed in the Atlas of the world's languages in danger [14] and in St Vincent, the language is completely lost [11]. Ironically, this event was what spread the Garífuna language across Central America, where the language is still spoken in primarily Belize, Honduras, and Guatemala [1], for example.

Despite being an endangered language, the Garífuna community have taken many efforts to make sure that the language does not die. For some in Central America, such as Francisco Ávila López, a Garífuna author, the language is the only tangible connection they have to their past.[11] According to the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, the Garífuna peoples, alongside the Miskitos people, have “preserved their languages and take the lead in demanding political rights” [14]. The Endangered Language Alliance, a New York-based network of linguistic volunteers and researchers, contributed to this revival effort by documenting the language, from Garífuna nursery rhymes to basic Garífuna syntax, on their website.[1] Further South, in the Caribbean, Belizeans are attempting to revive the language in St Vincent by getting the language taught in schools.

Yet, a successful revival of the language has been limited. For example, the Garífuna people in Honduras have taken some steps “to support the development of bilingual education” since 1997, but with limited success.[14] Additionally, the efforts to teach Garífuna in Vincentian schools have been inhibited by the many barriers in the Vincentian education curriculum to integrating new content.[11] The Yurumein Project has also successfully launched classes across Belize and St Vincent with the express intent to “teach the Garífuna language to those who identify as Garífuna in all parts of the world, including St. Vincent and the Grenadines”[15]. Perhaps the choice to not integrate these classes into the Vincentian curriculum eased access to Garífuna who wanted to learn their language.

Even in Central America, where the language use is at its strongest, some older Garinagu in Belize lament today that the younger Garinagu are losing knowledge of their language [16] and more generally, the transmission of the language is declining.[1] Dr Adrian Fraser suggests

that in St Vincent, efforts should be more focused on examining Vincentian culture, which is tied to Garífuna history and developing knowledge on Garífuna history first on a large scale[11], Given that some Garífuna people in St Vincent can still recall being called cannibals[3], it seems correct to focus on re-educating the population before the Vincentian Garífuna can successfully reintegrate their language into the Vincentian culture.

Contextualised for Social Mobility

Educating a population on social matters does not have to be uniquely academic. Lanair Aderemi is a poet and playwright, completing her PhD at the University of Warwick. Her plays and published works are dedicated to “amplifying and archiving untold stories” [17] and through one of her plays, I found out about history that I am connected to. This example serves to illustrate that a lot of re-education happens outside school or university, and it may take years for this knowledge to reach spaces like universities, ready to be taught. For this reason, it’s necessary to highlight other means of cultural engagement. For example, through art.

Contributing to widening participation, in some instances, will look like Warwick connecting students to engaging cultural expositions. Warwick is the place of study for students from many cultures and is blessed with a flourishing creative community. The Arts Centre often celebrates artists from minority backgrounds, and these events sometimes pass under the radar. More exposure to these events may allow students to see themselves represented more in creative ways and introduce new knowledge that may otherwise not exist in their textbooks for many more years.

Advancement In Mass Education

Increasing numbers of conferences are dedicated to shedding light on St Vincent’s history. The University of West Indies Open University (UWI Open University) recently organised a 2-day Country Conference with many presentations focused on highlighting the contributions the indigenous community have made to St Vincent’s history [11]. For the past 9 years, the Garífuna Heritage Foundation has also hosted an annual International Garífuna Conference together with the UWI Open University [18]. What makes these conferences important is that they coincide with international efforts to organise Garífuna delegates, travelling to find out more about their culture. For example, at the time of writing, Edinburgh Caribbean association currently organising a delegation of Garífuna from Central America and NY travelling to Scotland to find out more about their culture [11]. This stems from a historical lack of investigation into and transparency on Scotland’s role in the transformation of St Vincent into a slave society and the slave trade more generally [19]. Secondly, on the 3rd September 2022, tens of Garífuna delegates from Central America are coming to Warwick University for a conference uniquely focused on the Garífuna community. These conferences and collective efforts to connect Garífuna delegates to their history and the public are true advances. However, one cultural advance that I found few instances of is successful efforts to improve the social standing of Garífuna in Central America and St Vincent. Efforts to shine light on this history should continue and be followed up with focused actions targeting the socio-economic of Garífuna people. The Garífuna University Without Walls explicitly states the upskilling of every Garífuna as one of its core goals [20], which makes it a unique provider of educational materials that addresses the key issue of society development.

Some attempts at mass education are less academic but equally enriching. For example, the documentaries *Yurumein* and *The Garífuna Journey* [21] both target the public who may not have enough prior knowledge to take interest in a conference. It is worth mentioning that *The Garífuna Journey* also comes with a study guide, aimed at students [22]. Translations of Garífuna poetry into more hegemonic languages also gently introduce the public and western world to the Garífuna culture [23]. The most impactful introduction of Garífuna history to the western world *The Drama of King Shotaway*, the first African-American play produced in the USA [11], was based on the forceful deportation of Garífuna and the resistance of the indigenous people. The word Shotaway is inspired by Joseph Chatoyer, the Garífuna chief who led the Garífuna resistance against the British and is the only Vincentian national hero.

Social Mobility

The Garífuna people have historically received recognition for their indigeneity, but this has often come with discriminatory practices which do not respect this fact. For example, the peace treaty in 1773 set out the boundaries between the British and Carib lands on the island, and this was later violated as the British infringed on Garífuna territory [24]. Similarly, some believe that the continued narrative of Garífuna extinction in St Vincent serves to justify the exploitation of indigenous land [11]. However, the international Garífuna diaspora has shown remarkable perseverance and been recognised for doing so. Gulisi, the daughter of Chatoyer, migrated to Belize with her 13 children and founded the village of Punta Negra. In her honour, Gulisi Garífuna Museum has been open since 2004[25], dedicated to educating all visitors on Garífuna history.

One behaviour that has helped the Garífuna to persevere and continue to grow in numbers is acculturation. This has helped the Garífuna people integrate into Central American cultures whilst preserving their language, and contributed to the growth of communities before exile as escaped slaves would add to existing cultural traditions [11]. Acculturation is sometimes detrimental to cultural integrity when it is necessary for survival. Some youth deny being Garífuna because of the anticipated discrimination they may face [11]. This fear has a legitimate basis. For example, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* filmed in St Vincent and indigenous people were depicted as savages and cannibals. This depiction was even more derogatory given the fact that some paid extras on set were Kalinago from St Vincent [26]. For international viewers, their first introduction to the indigenous people of St Vincent is through a depiction of cannibalistic behaviour, a depiction which does not rely on historical accuracy.

Despite the damaging practice of misinformation through media and occasionally the education system, the growing recognition that the Garífuna community is receiving internationally is more than a success. As mentioned above, the Atlas of the world's languages in danger recognises that the Garífuna peoples, have “take[n] the lead in demanding political rights” [14] and this spirit of persistence is perhaps a contributor to this success. This is why this community now has a recognised Garífuna Heritage Month in the United States [27], with New York hosting the largest Garífuna community outside Central America[11].

Contextualised for Social Mobility

When social mobility efforts are coordinated, they do a better job at acknowledging the barriers that minority communities face. One of these barriers is the lack of support when raising awareness about social issues, relevant to some minority students.

The recent efforts made by Warwick to support Ukrainian students and Stand with Ukraine have been beyond impressive. Rightly so, as the sovereignty of the Ukrainian people should not be infringed upon, and we should stand up to any power looking to disrupt democracy in any nation. However, it would be a great encouragement to many minority students to feel similarly supported in cases of human rights violations outside of the western sphere. Naturally, Warwick cannot feasibly stand for every known humanitarian cause, but there are some cases when minority students need extra support. For example, when 233 students and academics called for an Israeli Defence Force speaker on-campus event to be cancelled. In cases like these, it would also be right to stand beside students who would be at risk when left unsupported; in this particular example, this would be Palestinian students. At the very least, when there are campaigns on behalf of their communities, it bears listening to efforts made.

Conclusion

Learning about the challenges faced and progress made by the Garífuna people in St Vincent, Honduras, and other cultural hubs was a great springboard for me to consider the attempts made within Warwick to widen participation. I asked myself, how does Warwick support authenticity in an academic space? In an effort to contribute some of the knowledge I gained about this community to the academic space, I have curated a “reading list” for potential further research into this topic, or simply for those exploring their interests in Black History.

1. *The Garifuna Journey and Yurumein*, directed by Andrea Leland.
2. *Crafting our Indigenous Memory*, directed by Akley Olton
3. *The Black Carib Wars : Freedom, Survival and the Making of the Garifuna* by written by Christopher Taylor
4. *The Negro World*, a weekly newspaper founded August 17, 1918, which published on different issues related to people of African ancestry around the world [28]
5. *SYTHESiS*, directed by Akley Olton
6. *MOONLIGHT* (a poor man’s lantern), performed by Darron Andrews [29]
7. Performance of *Loubavagu* [30], and flash animation [31], adapted from the play written by Rafael Murilloselva Rendón
8. *The Garifuna Women’s Project*, Album by Umalali
9. *The Egba Revolt: Protests, Hymns and Caskets*, written and directed by Lanair Aderemi
10. *The Rise and Fall of the Black Caribs*, written by C.I.Martin [32]
11. *Mayreau Memories*, written by Nancy Saul-Demers [13]

While brief, I hope that whoever these support in their exploration of Black History benefits as much as I did in the writing of this report.

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