

## **Coastal Imperative Lost? : Village Abandonment among the Honduran Garífuna**

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### **Introduction**

During the almost two centuries that the Garífuna have been along the shores of the western Caribbean, they have established, or have been placed in, at least 62 sites with the intent of permanent settlement. Today (1976), 54 places remain inhabited predominately by the Garífuna. Only eight settlements have been abandoned, or taken over by non-Garífuna. However, there is evidence that Garífuna withdrawal from the coastal habitat is beginning to quicken. This paper explores past and present settlement abandonments to gain insights into the factors that have brought about changes in the pattern of Garífuna settlement.

Two approaches were employed to understand settlement desertion. First, the historical record was surveyed to learn why now-relict villages were vacated. Second, from recent field observations and census materials, the present situation was viewed to judge modern propensities to migrate, and to seek ideas on whether the processes involved in early abandonments are similar today. By definition, a Garífuna settlement must at some time be inhabited by a population that predominately speaks the Garífuna language. If this prerequisite is met, the social life, economic orientation, and resulting material culture of the village and surrounding lands will also exude the distinctive Garífuna character.

### **The Relict Villages**

Among the eight sites, once Garífuna but now abandoned by them, four -- Tulián, Cieneguita, and "Caribal" (all in northwest Honduras), and Irióna Puerto -- are now inhabited by Spanish-speaking Honduran agriculturists recently migrated from the interior. Within these four villages, only one Garífuna family remains--in Tulián--and that family recalls well when their neighbors were all Garífuna. As they tell the story, "Garífuna began to leave the Tulián area when the "Spaniards" (ladinos, or Spanish-speaking Hondurans) began to dominate the settlement. That this is a typical reason for Garífuna withdrawal is also confirmed by former residents of the other villages mentioned above. The one important difference between Irióna Puerto and the other three villages, which are all located on the northwestern coast of Honduras near the concentrations of Spanish Honduran population, is that Spanish in-migration into the Mosquitian settlement occurred for political reasons, rather than as a natural movement of Spanish peasant farmers into less populated, good-quality farmlands along the north coast. Irióna has been the traditional political center for northeast Honduras for over 100 years. Many of the details are yet lacking, but the complete abandonment of the village to Spaniards is an accomplished fact. The 26 residents, who function as government

officials and part-time agriculturalists, have been assigned to the outpost from as far as Siguatepeque and Colomoncagua, near the Salvadoran border.

Of course, not all relict villages have been threatened by Spanish in-migration. In Belize for example, there are two Garífuna sites that have been altered by totally different means. Newtown, a small village established just south of Stann Creek (Dangriga) at the close of the 19th century was destroyed by a hurricane in 1941. It is now an uninhabited site, the government having relocated the entire population at Hopkins on slightly higher land a few miles to the south. A sixth former Garífuna settlement, also in Belize, is Silk Grass, located about seven miles inland from Hopkins. Silk Grass was constructed as a hurricane refugee settlement, with intent to be permanent, after hurricane Hattie (1961) devastated Hopkins. For a brief period during the early 1960's, the village was dominated by former Hopkins residents. But today only eight Garífuna families remain. As the former residents, now comfortably situated back in Hopkins, put it: "we could not bare living away from the sea breezes." On the other hand, the other 1961 relocation, from Seine Bight to Georgetown, which is located just to the south of the Hopkins-Silk Grass project, is apparently maintaining its majority Garífuna population. Of course, Seine Bight remains a vibrant site as well.

The final two now-uninhabited sites, one formerly known as Urraco, a small settlement just west of Punta Piedra in Mosquitia, and South Standing Creek in Belize, have not been discussed satisfactorily in the historical record to understand their demise.

### **Modern Perspectives of Abandonment**

Ladino In-Migration. To test the proposition that Spanish in-migration causes Garífuna out-migration, eight predominately Garífuna settlements were selected for study: in western Honduras (Masca, Travesia, and Saraguina); in eastern Honduras (Rosita, Irión Viejo, and Buena Vista); on Roatán Island (Punta Gorda). These particular settlements were chosen because they were well-spaced along the coast and all were included in the 1974 census, to which I had access. Each settlement was visited and at least twelve individuals were interviewed in each (124 interviews total, see the table).

Three prominent generalizations emerged from the census data and interviews.

- 1) The eastern areas (Mosquitia), represented by Buena Vista and Irión Viejo, are still relatively free from Spanish in-migration. The region is beyond the settlement frontier of interior Honduras, and quite difficult for the bulk of the Spanish population to reach. The major exception, of course, is Irión Puerto, which can be explained by political considerations. The coast from La Ceiba westward is more easily accessible by interior populations and is backed by higher densities of rural, mobile population.
- 2) Wherever Spanish settlements have been long-established near Garífuna villages, even in areas of recent and current Spanish in-migration, Garífuna villages are not entered or altered to a great extent. For example, Travesia, near the Honduran city of Puerto Cortés, is in an area of high Garífuna in-migration, yet remains relatively free of Spaniards. Also, these Garífuna settlements are most likely to be the recipients of Garífuna leaving other villages such as Masca.

TABLE. — Proportions of Garífuna and Spanish Honduran residents in selected Garífuna Settlements, and Record of Garífuna desires to move from settlements, 1974.

| Settlement              | % Garífuna population | % Spanish population | Desire to Move     |                        |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
|                         |                       |                      | number interviewed | number wanting to move |
| Buena Vista             | 100                   | 0                    | 12                 | 0                      |
| Punta Gorda, Roatán Is. | 98                    | 2                    | 25                 | 1                      |
| Iriona Viejo            | 94                    | 6                    | 12                 | 1                      |
| Travesía                | 92                    | 8                    | 18                 | 2                      |
| Nuevo Go                | 84                    | 16                   | 13                 | 2                      |
| Saraguina               | 66                    | 34                   | 13                 | 3                      |
| Rosita                  | 54                    | 46                   | 12                 | 7                      |
| Masca                   | 50.1                  | 49.9                 | 19                 | 16                     |
|                         |                       |                      | 124 Total          |                        |

Sources : field work, and the March 1974 census of Honduras.

3) There is a direct correlation between high proportions of Spaniards in Garífuna settlements and Garífuna desires to leave the settlement. In other words, Garífuna interest in moving is most intense in Masca where the Spanish proportion is highest, second most intense in Rosita, and so on until Buena Vista, where there are no Spaniards and no Garífuna expressed interest in leaving.

One must be cautioned, however, that not all out-migration by Garífuna is the result of Spanish pressure. Other less widespread movements can be expected in Honduras because of:

- 1) infringements of modern coastal developments, particularly tourism,
- 2) alterations in the natural habitat, and
- 3) the lure of urbanization and labor outside the villages.

**Coastal Developments (Tourism).** New coastal projects for economic development that apparently have the greatest potential for disruption and relocation of Garífuna are the large tourist resorts now being planned. The largest project, known in Honduras as the Tornasal Project (which derives the first part of its name from the Garífuna village of Tornabe), is a \$ 400 million investment just west of Tela. Included within the zone for tourism are three Garífuna villages and the lands and waters from which the Garífuna acquire their livelihoods. The planners naturally wish to preserve the cultural integrity of the Garífuna, but from past studies we know well that international tourism is primary method for altering local economies and cultures.

One settlement already encroached upon by North American tourism is Punta Gorda, offshore on Roatán Island. There is however, no indication that the small, relatively isolated hotel is having serious effect on the village. Certainly, no one has left the village because they were disturbed by the presence of the resort. Perhaps, more

serious for the viability of the settlement are the land purchases made by developers and speculators in the near vicinity of Punta Gorda. Settlement expansion will soon be virtually impossible.

**Physical Changes in the Coast.** There have been examples of seaside villages that were destroyed by hurricanes or eroded away by changing currents in the sea, but today there are apparently very few coastal alterations of a magnitude to cause the abandonment of a Garífuna village. A hurricane could easily bring temporary desertion but only Newtown, Belize, has remained permanently unoccupied because of a hurricane. Fifi, the highly-publicized storm of September 1974, followed the most dangerous route possible for the settlements of northern Honduras, yet there was no loss of Garífuna life, and very little property damage. Modern residents of Seine Bight, Belize, remember when their village was 300 yards seaward, but as the beachfront eroded, they have simply moved their coconut palms and dwellings inland. At Sangrelaya in Mosquitia, the opposite is occurring; beach accretion has placed some 400 yards of sand dunes between the village and the coastline. The villagers probably have not noticed the slow movement from the beach, but visitors immediately perceive the hotter temperatures that result from the lack of sea breeze and moderating influence of the sea.

The only movement of Garífuna population underway today that can be traced to changes in the physical environment is occurring between Tornabé and a new settlement, Miami. Located at the mouth of a large coastal lagoon, Tornabé has benefited from the accumulation of freshwater fish nearby. The original establishment of the village is probably related to the presence of the lagoon mouth and abundant fish supply. But in 1968 an opening to the sea developed 12 miles to the west, and the lagoon mouth was closed permanently by a bar. Over the first 3-year period nearly 200 residents from Tornabé were drawn to the new settlement, named Miami, so say the inhabitants, because of the nice beach there. It seems quite possible that eventually the seasonal encampment at Miami will become a large permanent settlement and eventually drain Tornabé of life

**Urbanization and Economic Opportunities.** At the moment Irión Viejo, Sangrelaya, and Santa Fe are the primary source villages for temporary migrants in Honduras -- and there is no serious Spanish in-migration in those areas. For the most part, these migrants are captured by the lure of better economic opportunities in the larger towns along the coast, La Ceiba and Puerto Cortés, and especially in the interior cities, San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa. According to Teller (1972: 45), San Pedro Sula has become approximately three percent Garífuna within the last decade, that is, perhaps 4500-5000 people. For the most part, teenagers and young men are migrants, while the older women remain in the coastal villages. Some barriozation of Garífuna has taken place in La Ceiba, San Pedro Sula, and Tegucigalpa, and apparently most living there anticipate extended stays away from their villages. If permanent jobs remain available in the urban centers, Garífuna village life could become drastically altered. Temporary travels for wages have been customary among the Garífuna for their entire

existence in the western Caribbean, but word of recent successes in urban areas is spreading, and the flow of migrants from the villages is increasing.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Garífuna devotion to their home territory along the coast might be abating. In *Future Shock* (1970) Toffler instructed us that man in the future will be "less geographical." By this he meant that we, by becoming increasingly mobile, will lose our sense of "belonging" to a place. The Garífuna have always been known for their mobility and all indications are that they are becoming more so. That their love of home, their strong sense of territory, might be declining is only now being suspected. There is evidence that the periods between visits home for festivals and rituals and permanent return migration are growing longer. It might be that in the near future as economic position, better transportation, acculturation increases, the Garífuna will completely abandon their littoral villages. But they are a very unusual people and how well they will fit the world model of "development-acculturation-urbanization" will be shortly learned.