

The Black Caribs of Honduras

INTRODUCTION AND NOTES BY DORIS STONE ETHNIC FOLKWAYS LIBRARY FE 4435



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COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE

THE BLACK CARIBS OF HONDURAS

Introduction and Notes by Doris Stone

The Black Caribs are a hybrid people who emerged as an ethnic group in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century on St. Vincent, one of the Windward Islands. Their very name denotes to a certain extent the racial mixture although one component of this group, the Arawak, are not suggested.

About a hundred years before the time of Columbus, Carib Indians from south of the Amazon and the Guianas invaded the lesser Antilles. These islands were already inhabited by Arawak tribes, also of South American origin. The Caribs killed the men and kept the women. Around 1661, two African slavers were shipwrecked off of St. Vincent. History in a sense repeated itself. The Negro men seized the Carib women and the Black Carib people, as distinct from the Indians or Red Caribs, began. The group was soon augmented by fugitive slaves from French and English masters.

Between the Red and Black Caribs there was little love, but both joined forces against what appeared the common enemy, the British, who took over St. Vincent in 1763. The French attempted to cajole the islanders to their side until finally in 1779, they succeeded in winning them as allies and reconquering this territory. The treaty of Versailles in 1783, however, returned St. Vincent to England. The English, determined to stay and to control, deported the Black Caribs, who racially dominated the population, to the small island of Balliceaux in 1795, and in 1797 to Roatan, one of the Bay Islands of Honduras.

The Bay Islands by virtue of their geographical position, first as sentinels on the routes of Spanish shipping from the rich Captaincy-General or Kingdom of Guatemala and then as an outpost of the Crown Colony of British Honduras, had long served as a stronghold for freebooters and contrabandists. They were, by various treaties, unquestionably Spanish, but England, at odds because the Spaniards claimed certain damages as a result of their mutual allegiance against France in 1793, was prone to annoy her erstwhile ally. This arbitrary dumping of an alien population on what Spain considered her own territory caused Spain to take immediate action.

An armed force was sent against the Black Caribs on Roatan. It was a singular occurrence, for the attackers instead of receiving battlefire were met with open arms and expressions of genuine friendship. To the Black Caribs, the men of Spain were reminiscent of their old allies the French. Certainly they were very different from their enemies the British. It would never have done, however, to allow these strangers, no matter how amiable, to remain on such insecure land as an island in the Bay. It was better to have them nearer to the larger concentrations of Spanish men and arms. The Spanish commander invited the Black Caribs to the Honduran mainland. The majority accepted and were transferred to Cristales Creek by Trujillo from whence they spread along the coast.

Royalist Spain was not to last much longer in the New World. The States of Central America combined and fought under the Honduran patriot, Francisco Morazan. Many of the Black Caribs took a decided part in the war for independence, unfortunately on the Royalist side, and were forced to flee. Some went east to the territory of the Mosquitas, but the greater portion went to the only region of the Caribbean coast which had not been Spanish, the Crown Colony of British Honduras.



Black Carib Dancers

Today, Black Carib settlements extend from the Black River in Honduras to Stann Creek in British Honduras including the north coast of Guatemala. This short account is based on the groups in Honduras where the oldest settlements of these people are to be found and where their culture has stayed more orthodox.

Language: The Black Carib language is even more hybrid than the people and is further complicated by a male and female tongue. This is not to be confused with genders which exist in both dialects. Each language is stocked with borrowed terms from French, Spanish, and English. These have been incorporated into the grammar as stems to which are added the gender, tense, etc. Most words are polysyllabic and the majority end in a vowel. Red Carib which has a certain percentage of Arawak, forms the base of the speech. A more exhaustive linguistic study is necessary to distinguish the extent to which African elements remain.

The woman's language is disappearing in the villages where non-Carib peoples are close neighbors.

Mode of Life: Many details of the Black Carib life suggest their South American background. Traces of the couvade are still discernible. After childbirth both the father and mother adhere to a diet, but the mother resumes her normal work at the end of three days while the father refrains from fishing and his accustomed tasks for three weeks, staying in or near the hammock. The method of planting, the preference for tubers, the use of a magical stone in curing, the ancestor cult, and some of their legends also point to the south.

On the whole, the life of this people is closely bound to the sea and their culture is that of an islander. Boats, primarily dug-out but also planked, are their one universal means of transportation. They are built of mahogany or cedar and vary in size from that for a single person to a small sailing vessel. It is interesting to note that the translation of the Black Carib word for train is land boat. Women often accompany the men fishing but do not go alone in a boat.

Subsistence: The mainstays of Black Carib diet are fish and shell fish, cassava, and coconuts. The man fishes with hook and line and a cast net. He downs the forest preparatory to burning the brush, which along with planting and harvesting is done by women. Besides cassava, sweet potatoes, malanga, plantains, and pineapples are usually grown. Hunting is done infrequently and restricted to small animals.

Coconut water and the grated meat are used in the majority of dishes, while cassava not only furnishes the bread but also is fermented and supplies a beer or chicha. The preparation of this bread is a group affair. The women grate the tubers over a large wooden trough on individual plank graters set with small rocks. They accompany the work with songs known as áhorohani or grating songs. The residue is put into hollow tubes woven of reeds, and then made into flat cakes and baked on iron griddles. The bread is especially suitable for canoe trips and damp weather.

Dwellings: These people do not marry outside their racial group. A man usually has a woman in each Black Carib village. His obligation to a woman is to supply her with fish and to give her a house. The building of the home, however, is a community affair in which the greater part of the village including small children join. The houses are oval or rectangular and are generally made of palm wood or with a cane framework faced with mud, a dirt floor, and a palm leaf roof. There are some cane and plank houses but these are in the minority.

Religious Life: The soul plays a basic part in Black Carib ceremonials. Their three main rituals are chiefly concerned with the family dead, for although nominally Roman Catholic or Protestant, the ancestor cult predominates their beliefs. Spirits, both of family and of outsiders, are fundamental in curing the sick. The most important ritual is known as "refreshing the dead soul" or amuiadahani which through the scent of offertory food propitiates the spirits. It is distinct from other ancestor rites in that it concerns only the immediate family and is carried out without song or music. Prayers in a neighboring church are said in connection with this. The Cugú and the Dógo rites are also greatly concerned with ancestors. They require the presence of buiai or shaman and have songs but the Dógo has in addition, drums and a dance.

There are two kinds of sickness both due to spirits, the difference being that one is the result of the family dead who have not been properly attended while the other is due to evil spirits, generally mafia. The buiai is necessary to cure the second type, whereas the first is dealt with in amuiadahani rites. The buiai works with spirit helpers and exercises his powers with the aid of the rattle, song, and drum.

Diviners, (surusia) both men and women, or soothsayers whose job entails duties such as pointing out the whereabouts of lost objects and people, and who cure with herbs and medicines also form a part of Black Carib culture. Aside from these, the Roman Catholic priests and occasionally a Protestant pastor guide the spiritual life of these people and in a sense are responsible for the Black Carib's apparent conformity with his non-Black Carib neighbors.

Song and Dance: The chief characteristic which distinguishes the Black Carib is that song and rhythm form vital parts of his life. The mediums of music and dance again recall the curious cultural mixture that distinguishes these people. Black Carib music is strongly derivative of West Africa, but the more ancient dance steps, done in a circle or Indian file, suggest the rain forest homeland of their Carib and Arawak ancestors. The wooden drum covered with hide and played by hand without sticks both in a single steady rhythm and in a polyrhythm, the gourd rattle, pebble or grain filled, and the guitar and flute, borrowed from his non-Black Carib neighbor but never used in ceremonial song and dance, form the principal musical background to this outward manifestation of his emotions. Almost all important acts of everyday life such as bread-making, house-building, as well as ceremonial occasions and curing the sick or honoring the dead, have song or a dance and song connected with them.

Among what can be classed as religious or semi-religious songs are those known as abaimahani. This type of song is considered the property of the individual female who composes it or, to whom it appears in a dream. It is first sung by the owner in a dogo rite to honor the request of a dead relative and is sung by a group of women either with or without drums. It is used to help cure the sick, to calm the disgust or anger of another person, or simply to recount an ancient or past happening. Some abaimahani songs become so popular that they are heard repeatedly at these rites, fame gathering with their spread through the Black Carib villages.

When singing such songs the women stand in one or two rows or in a semi-circle. Each participant holds the thumb of her neighbor or puts an arm around the shoulder of the women beside her. All keep time by rhythmically swaying the body. Either manioc beer or aguardiente (sugar cane alcohol) is continually passed down the line and the singers drink as they desire.

One of the gayest Black Carib celebrations takes place during the period between Christmas and New Year and is known as Janqunu or Guanaragua. Both names signify maskers or masquerade. Although the first is possibly a non-Black Carib word it has been incorporated into the man's language in Honduras. It is a carnival with drums, revelry, painted and masked faces, and gay costumes adorned with shell anklets, necklaces, etc. There are a series of acts and songs in connection with this festival which include Ulliamo, Malad-uana and Ladino.

Dance steps in themselves are simple, following for the most part the rhythm of the drum and consist of throwing the weight on one foot while the other makes quick easy movements to keep time. Often there is only a swaying of the body from the hips down. Dances connected with important rites are done first in Indian-file forming a circle and then changing direction at given intervals. The drum keeps a steady beat during these rites.

Secular dances have varied steps, although many follow the general technique of throwing the weight on one foot as in the religious dances.

It is interesting that with the tendency of these people to work as seamen on modern ships, and despite the proximity of the radio and phonograph in many Black Carib neighborhoods, music and song is still an essential part of their daily life, and the adoption of new instruments and rhythms has only added to their scope.

Side I, Band 1: AHOROHANI. Women singing. This is a Punta used as an ahorohani or working song, in this case for house-building. Recorded at Cristales (Trujillo), Honduras.

Marudunbadiwa	luma
No show we will	to him
(We will not show him)	

Maredutunu	Mabunaditimuna
Not good with me	Not build--he like house
(He's not good to me)	(He doesn't like to build a house)

Mati	Mayoritetima
No brother No uncle I have	
(I have no brother nor uncle)	

Lun	labunu	muna
To	build	house

Maredutunu	eieri	luma
Not good with me man		for that
(I won't be good	(for that man)	

Side I, Band 2: ABAlMAHANI SONG. The Little Drunks of Masca. Recorded at Masca (near Omoa), Honduras. Women singing. The following is a free translation:

Now the women of Masca are going to enjoy themselves.
In this manner they speak for us
But it does not matter if they talk
Because we are making merry
The foreigner is looking at me
Is it that he pities me?

Side I, Band 3: AFEDUANI SONG. Recorded at Cristales (Trujillo), Honduras. Women singing. Each person dances alone. This is done at Christmas time and at special celebrations.

Barutinagurasu	loagu	gufere
I console	on my	godfather
	(literally this signifies Sp.	<u>compadre</u>)

ligidgu	laburemebai	durelumuti
is him	the owner	he owes

labunáha	baba	lum
burial	of my father	to the

ubau.
world.

Bunahaliga	linadiri
Put it in (the ground)	plant

ligia	maburemeiahale	ubau
he	no got owner	world

laburemebai his owner	buidu fun	arimahali is all over
ciluhali he came	idatilira how is that	iseri new
uarihene we see	lira that	magusiribaifuname nothing left
uribate is bad	lisinu destiny	garifano Carib
agambahavarugute they heard about him only		loagu. for him.

This is a song about someone who is frightened and to whom another person has come to give consolation.

Side I, Band 4: ABAIMAHANI SONG. Prostrate in a Hospital. Recorded at Masca (near Omoa), Honduras. Women singing.

Gabanato bed that	oiohabadina were holding me	ospital hospital
toguanu she nursing me		
labunesandigu with sickness my		sunebenanugane thought I
nauveiala I was dying		
ciluguatinu came they		enfermera trained nurse (Sp.)
alugudana ask me	loagu for my	nesandigu sickness
sinamumutinu couldn't	aunaba answer	laduga because
naiahunala. I was crying.		Hanufudeguadina. I was frightened.

A free translation is:

I thought I was going to
die in the hospital bed
Trained nurses came to ask me
about it.
I could not answer them
because I was crying
I was frightened.

Side I, Band 5: ABAIMAHANI SONG. Men and women join hands and sing without drums.

Gundetuaga happiness on	iseri new	amarieidetu marriage
loagu for	biaen two	marauveu days
harugarugaro and tomorrow	ahumbucatuago she will be tired	loagu for
lebugunuua walking	huma. the street.	

Side I, Band 6: CORRAPATIA. Recorded at Travesia (Puerto Cortes), Honduras. Drums only. The name is taken from the Mexican Jarabe Tapatia and the participants are clad in all sorts of costumes in the manner of a masquerade. It is generally done by men only, but sometimes women join. It is danced alone within a circle of people.

Side II, Band 1: PARRANDATINU (serenade). Recorded at Travesia (Puerto Cortes), Honduras. The Black Caribs call this type of song a parrandatinu, a word taken from the Spanish parranda signifying "spree." This type of song, however, is better interpreted in English as a serenade. Both the idea of the serenade as well as the instruments used, the guitars, are borrowed from their Spanish-American neighbors. This is about a girl who did a favor for and was good to a man, but then turned on him.

Side II, Band 2: JAQUNU SONG. Recorded at Travesia (Puerto Cortes), Honduras. This is a woman telling her son that his father died pitifully alone in a foreign land.

Gudemé Is pitiful	laubeni dead	eieri man	lidaguaraeulalubaigia in foreign land
	niniamama I say mama		
Nesturu. Ernesto.	Gudemete It is pitiful	lauvebuguci when your father died	
uaua son(pet name) here you were	iabarebuga going to	ligirora leave us	
ia rigu here Puerto Castilla is called <u>rigu</u> in Black Carib		buguiale and you are	

inglima
alone (this
signifies also that he was the
only son; therefore it is
single).

Nunimage
This word has no meaning. It is used because it is euphonic as a filler-in before the song is repeated.

Side II, Band 3: ST'AN BEIT (Stand-by dance). Recorded at Travesia (Puerto Cortes), Honduras. This is done as a rule on Sundays before Christmas and can be danced only by men. It takes its name from the fact that the participants must "stand-by" before they enter the ring or dance space. There is no special step but the distinguishing factor is the time. All dancers must be in time at the moment and after they start. They sing:

Mamaia	lidicella	giriga
Is very	far	Santa Fe. (This is a place name)

Iarabuda

This word has no meaning but is used for euphony and before repeating the first phrase.

Side II, Band 4: PUNTA. Recorded at Travesia (Puerto Cortes), Honduras. This rhythm is a popular secular dance which probably has its origin in the Punta of Central America which is seen in varied forms from Panama to Mexico. It is danced by a single couple. There is a certain amount of mimicry involved as the man pursues the woman who in turn flirts with him. The words of this particular song refer to a man who thinks himself better than anyone. The woman laughs at him and tells him it doesn't matter how high the floors are from the ground. One day they'll fall and the crows will take care of everything. The first part of the song is:

nuruhuma	arihei	habuidumenina
sit down	see	the enjoyment

mafarulubadena	lamise
won't kill me	misery

huarinugune	tilive	uauai
in the sky	the flowers	tree

cameasagare	naumaluleno
who will reach it	my brothers

labruhaba	luba	uadubiregunie
will fall	for	the crow only

lun	lasagerone	arenseba
to	reached to it	prepare your

biludo	berona
mourning	(name of a woman)

Side II, Band 5: PARRANDATINU (Serenade). Recorded at Travesia (Puerto Cortes), Honduras.

Ianonligalasu	ianusimise	ligiagu
Here are your pants	Here is your shirt	he is

numaribai.	iabanabunuua	irahu.
my man.	they will bury me here	girl.

libidinasabun	loagu	besinielanu
you don't know	that	I love you

gadambalina	buma.	Ianonligalasu
for that	with you.	Here are your pants

ianusimise	ligiagu	numaribai
Here is your shirt	he is	my man

iabanabunuua.	Rosita	ugune
they will bury me here.	Rosita	boat

barubana	lobaragu	bari
take me	over	Barrios (in Guatemala)

barubana	agura	lobaragu
take me	put me	over

sampuli	ariha	namugaitemeru
Sample(near Barrios) to see		the way to our

uaba.	Nitu	irahu
house.	Sister	girl

libidinasabun	loagu
you don't know	that

besinela	gadambalina buma.
because I love you	for that.



Black Carib Dancers

Suggested Reading:

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