

The Threat of Progress: Visiting Garifuna Country in Honduras

By Tory Russell (First published February 2006)

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/the-threat-of-progress-visiting-garifuna-country-in-honduras>

- **Emergency funds needed to support OFRANEH**, as they search desperately for four Garifuna land defenders, forcibly disappeared on July 18, 2020, by heavily armed, Honduran regime-linked forces. (<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/four-garifuna-youth-kidnapped-disappeared>)

Here, Rights Action re-publishes “The Threat of Progress: Visiting Garifuna Country in Honduras”, written in early 2006. Author Tory Russell wrote this vivid account of Garifuna life, culture and land, based on a 2005 year-end visit she made to the north shore of Honduras to provide human rights accompaniment to Gregoria Flores, former general coordinator of OFRANEH, shot twice on May 30, 2005, in La Ceiba. Gregoria survived the assassination attempt, but was forced into hiding. In late 2005, Gregoria traveled to her home community of Triunfo de la Cruz to attend to unfinished business, before going into exile in the US where she applied for asylum.



Since 1998, Rights Action has supported and accompanied OFRANEH, lead Garifuna organization working and struggling since the 1970s in defense of land, territory, human rights and the environment.

Then, as now, many OFRANEH land defenders have been killed, shot, criminalized and jailed; many have been forced to flee. This ‘as-yet-never-ending-repression’ against the Garifuna

people aims to force them from their ancestral lands to make way for violent, corrupt national and international tourism businesses and investors, and for the 'for export' production of African palm.

Then, as now, this ethnocidal repression is carried out by these private sector business interests in conjunction with the corrupt, military-backed Honduran regime – a “democratic” government that maintains full political-economic-military relations with the US and Canada, the European Community, the IMF, World Bank and IDB, and countless global companies in the sectors of tourism, 'for-export' food production, 'maquiladora' garment sweatshops, dams and mining.

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It is year-end holiday time and Grahame, Scott, and I travel to the northern coast of Honduras, to visit with Grahame's friend, Gregoria. We get off the bus in Tela to catch a taxi into Triunfo de la Cruz. Triunfo is a town of over 10,000 Garifuna folks, but it's not listed in the official Honduras tourist guide, and no street signs indicate the turn off the highway toward the sea...

Triunfo is missing on many maps, and development interests threaten its very existence.

The road into town is a rough ride; the huge potholes are like small ponds. We go by some cultivated fields, a soccer match in process, people stare at us blankly: three white people in a taxi jostling by. We ask directions to Gregoria's place from a bunch of people hanging around the store porch. They stall: humming and hawing, they look around.

Then this woman in a big moomoo dress with a bandana covering her head approaches us from the other side yelling: “Get on over here right now, get outa that car”. Grahame disappears in a hug, and everyone smiles, for clearly, 'Goya', as she is known, has been expecting us. Everyone knows everyone in this town, but they also have reason to be suspicious of strangers.

We walk into a house undergoing a major overhaul. Young men are working away. Dissembled furniture is stacked. Fresh paint slapped up is dripping down the walls, the fridge is an island in the middle of the room, and electrical wires dangle. They are using grant money donated by a human rights foundation for victims of repression, to renovate and provide increased security to Goya's home.

Goya is a community leader, and she was shot and wounded under suspicious circumstances last year [on May 30, 2005, in La Ceiba], but now is not the time to talk about that. She tells us: “Welcome, here have a cookie, that's your room over there” pointing around bed frames

and doors. She is speaking rapid-fire Spanish, her second language, over a loud stereo. We eat our cookies, nod, put our bags down and head to the beach.

The Caribbean is right across the street. We can see how the lawns and the road have been washed away; we can see debris swept up. We had heard about the torrential rains from a storm called "Gamma" last season. Right now the ocean is looking inviting, playful and welcoming, and we head right in.

Triunfo, like most Garifuna communities along the Atlantic coast of Central America, is strung along the oceanfront on communal lands where the same families have been living for over 200 years. There are fishing boats, coconut trees, thatch roofed huts, and hammocks; we adapt quickly.

By sunset, we return to a transformed house: beds are made, tables and couches arranged, and photos of graduations stand proudly. We are sitting around eating nuked Tamales when four women in red and white check dresses wander into the house. They greet everybody as they head through to the back room where Goya's Mom has lived for years, a victim of polio as a child and no longer walking. The four women disappear into the room. "Come!" Goya says, "They're going to sing".

We squeeze into the back room, we settle on the bed, and on the potty, as the women start singing in Garifuni. This is their first language, the main language around here. It sounds African, like a talking drum, but is actually a unique blend of African and Caribbean Indian languages.

The Garifuna people are a hybrid culture of escaped African slaves mixed with Arawak Indigenous peoples of what is now called the Caribbean. The first slaves escaped in the 17th Century from Spanish shipwrecks off the coast of an island the newcomers would call St Vincent. The escaped men found refuge on the island and started mixing with the Caribbean Indians, together fighting off waves of different colonial powers moving through the region: the French, English, Spanish...

A Garifuna elder told me that at first, the Arawak and Africans fought each other as well, and the Africans were better fighters and so ultimately won the women. The women taught their language and traditions to the children, and these are what we are hearing now.

In 1797, just over 200 years ago, the English evicted some 5000 Garifuna from St. Vincent, forcing them to move to the island of Roatan and to the north shore of Honduras. The Garifuna peoples thus joined survived, and spread up and down the coastline, where they have lived independently ever since.

In the back room, the four women sing, swaying, holding baby fingers, hands rising and falling. Their voices wax and wane together, then separate, like braids of a river. There is silence broken by a solitary wail, joined by a low moan, then fingers start to tremble and shake...

After a couple of songs, the women clear their throats loudly and agree they all need a beer. Happily, they raise their bottles and launch into another song. There is a song about going to visit a friend and meeting only a closed door, there is a song about a boat lost at sea, there are drinking songs, history songs and everyday songs.

The women burp a bit, they fart, their engines are turning over nicely now, and they start to move easily, these large older women with lots of experience. Their hips start up, swaying, swivelling. They are a group, they have been singing together for years, in their 'uniforms'. Goya and her mom sing along with some of the songs. There are other singing groups in Triunfo, too. Setting up a group is not formal; friends just ask one another, select fabric, sew dresses and start it up, together for life.

The dancing is not suggestive; it is downright frank. Bumping and grinding in an unmistakable way, the women shimmy over to Grahame, place hands over his temples, gyrate at eye level... Laughing, they turn to one another: high five, back slap, hip check, this is FUN! "Another coupla songs!"

After their goodbye song, they shake everybody's hand and move on... to the next house.

The community has reason to celebrate: many loved ones are back in their hometown of Triunfo, visiting from work that literally takes them all over the world. Many men crew ocean liners, and some families are visiting from the U.S. The festivities are as they have always been for the Garifuna: homemade fun singing and dancing their own songs and stories in a walk-about that takes them to every house and family in the community.

Outside firecrackers are going off in the dark. Mostly the guys like them, they set them up in the intersection known as 'Hot Corner' next to Goya's place, and let them rip and shatter and rat-a-tat-tat at the night. The air is full of smoke, it looks like a battle scene, and their strange fascination makes me feel old.

We snack on fish and yucca cake, then meander over to the community hall. Thirty or more women, several groups, are dancing and singing together. Their backs to us, they are facing the men playing homemade drums. Three guys are beating separate rhythms that overlay one another in rich and unpredictable ways. Every now and again, someone picks up a conch shell to sound and it carries true through the hall.

The local liquor makes the rounds: a bottle of rum stuffed with hairy roots and herbs. A woman pours out a little glass of gifidi for each of us... it tastes of anise and nutmeg and liquorice and I want more.

These people are going to be playing and dancing and singing and sipping all night long, but we go to bed. This culture is so strong and intact, unlike anything I have ever seen! There are three hundred thousand or more Garifuna living up and down the coast, up into Guatemala

and Belize, down into Nicaragua and Costa Rica: speaking their language, communicating with their ancestors, dancing, singing, and playing these songs, for generations.

The remoteness of the Atlantic coast of Central America was probably beneficial for the survival of Garifuna culture, for the most part out of sight and out of mind of the national and international governments and covetous business interests.

This land by this sea is the setting of their songs and dances and stories, it is the source of their food, the resting place of their ancestors and the birthing place of their children.

Next morning, 6AM, and the singing, dancing and drumming crew from last night come noisily down the street. They wake us up, so we look out the window and see them set up across the corner. The flag bearer is out front waving yellow, the drummers place their seats, the voices are a little hoarse by now but still carry well, the dancing continues... we go back to sleep.

In the afternoon, we walk around with Goya. Everyone wants to greet her: she went into exile after being shot last year and people are glad to see her back. Everyone speaks Garifuni. Most speak Spanish as well, and they try out their few English expressions with us. We see damage from Gamma, stagnant pools of trapped water left behind. The run-off flooded down from the mountains, taking out bridges, roads, crops and houses on the way to the sea.

There is a new river through Triunfo now, where there never was one before. People wonder about this new river, and tell a story that might explain its origin. A few months before the storm, the river closest to Triunfo had suddenly dried up: no water for the crops. The men went up the river bed and discovered all the water had been diverted by the richest guy in the country, Facusse, uncle to the last President, who had planted a cash crop of African palm on the environmental reserve next to Triunfo, land that is owned by the Garifuna.

This is monoculture launched as an 'environmental project', a venture that involves a variety of legal infractions, but no one is taking the richest guy in the country to task for any of them, not even for stealing a river, taking the water supply of 10,000 people living a subsistence lifestyle from the sea and a few yucca crops.

Nature abhors a vacuum though, people say, and Gamma floodwaters certainly sought and filled that stolen river's void violently. The resulting river cutting a new trail through town has been named after the storm. One job was created: ferry man. Several houses were lost. The elders think there would have been less damage to the community from Gamma if the waterways had not been disturbed...

The people who lost their homes are living with family and friends. We pass one woman forlorn in her auntie's yard. "Where you from? I want to go to the States", she says. There are big communities of Garifuna folks in the Bronx and other places who might help her. It is just that a woman like this with no home, no job, two little kids, and no money... people like this

never get visas, and so they travel the dangerous life-threatening illegal way. It is not that they are criminal, it is just that from their perspective it is the only positive option.

Walking back to the 'Hot Corner' by Goya's house, we come across masked dancers getting ready to start up their tour of the town. These are young men dressed up as women, their disguise for war dances, from when their ancestors were defending St. Vincent all those years ago. They have on skirts and frilly blouses; they are wearing made-up masks under great tall headpieces... Below it all, you can see footwear ranging from sandals fashioned from car tires, to the latest Nike just-do-it shoes probably sent by a relative in the States.

The music is the same as last night – the drummers, the women swaying and singing, with the young men in a circle around them. One by one, each guy goes into the circle to 'bust a few moves'. It is an old tradition, but it is just like hip hop too, they move their feet lightening fast, they roll their spines to jump and twist and curl in the air, then they're out of the centre and the next guy is in...

We head back to the house for a little coffee. When the masked dancers come to perform at Goya's place, they wait for her Mom to get set up in a chair on the porch. There is a huge women's group with them now, wearing Santa hats with their gingham uniforms. These women are in their 40s at least and older, and some of them are really big, with powerful NFL sized shoulders, and they can really move.

We are behind the drummers now and I think I understand the rhythm changes: the men are trying to follow the women's hips, the world moving through a woman's hips: the drums testify! The women's faces shift from stern to uproarious with celebration.

In 1992, Triunfo de la Cruz achieved (with courageous effort, while suffering racism and violence) an official communal land title, and an extension to it in 1996. Communal land titles are supposed to be inalienable; the sale of communal land to outsiders impossible.

Lately though, the eye of 'development' has turned toward Triunfo - 'progress' is coming, and the Garifuna are under siege. The house containing the communal titles mysteriously burned down. The government 'lost' its copies of the titles. One community leader was shot and killed, another leader, Alfredo, spent 7 years in jail on trumped up charges without due process. Another leader's house was illegally searched, and Goya, our hostess, was shot and wounded last year coming home from a hearing to get Alfredo released.

There have been no investigations...

Armed men with masks open fire on their meetings. Fences are put up on their land in the middle of the night; their orchards are cut down. So far, 'progress' has not been kind.

Meantime, different levels of governments, financial organizations and covetous business (national and international) are busy creating legal techniques to circumvent communal title in

order to get on with business ventures, sometimes euphemistically called 'development'. They rezone land, write new chapters of property law, create means for public private partnerships, and access 'development' funding from the World Bank...

Nearby there is a tourist mega-project in the works on land that was (indeed is) Garifuna land and then became a buffer zone of a national park, and now is slated to be transformed into a golf course and luxury hotels. The environmental impact statement was glowing and the silence from environmental groups who protect the National parks conspicuous: business as usual in Central America.

Tourism may be a logical industry here; it is after all the Caribbean coast. The Honduran Government is advertising to retired North Americans to come out here and live in gated communities they have started to build on Garifuna land... There is even a Garifuna Eco-Tourism company that has been successfully operating for several years: it is owned by Italians who never asked permission for, nor paid rights for using the Garifuna name!

Eco-Tourists beware: research your product! Garifuna Tours doesn't even employ a token black person, though they do drive through Triunfo to see the locals in their native environment...

In one part of town there are high walls topped with shards of glass, broken by fancy gates and armed guards. Rich folks bought parcels of Garifuna communal land from the municipality nearby. It was illegal, of course, but with so many to choose from, the Garifuna leadership are careful when they pick their battles.

Out of necessity, the Garifuna people and its leadership, the Honduran Fraternal Black Organization (OFRANEH) are becoming legal experts in their efforts to protect their land from all this threatening development and progress coming from the nearby municipality, from the richest families in the country, from the federal government, from foreign investors, and from World Bank projects...

OFRANEH is a community-based organization that, since the 1970s, has accompanied the struggles of Garifuna communities fighting for their survival as a people. It is an uphill battle all the way, armed with no copies of their community titles, having to explain to impoverished neighbours that they are better off resisting offers of quick cash for parcels of land...

People in Triunfo pay taxes but get nothing but trouble in return. There is no road maintenance, no water delivery or sewage treatment, no high school, no health centre, and no garbage pick-up...

We learn about all these harsh political realities on our pleasant walk around town on a sunny afternoon. The injustice seems so incongruous with our experience here. In all the festivities, we see people celebrating each other, it is no show.

Nightfall finds us back on Goya's porch eating fish soup. We are sitting just off centre stage now watching the whole cast of the town's characters parade through the street light: horse drawn pick-ups, Rastas, a gang of kids all on one bike with the littlest one wobbling in the basket out front. Dogs in heat scoot past, a stately elder gentleman wearing a pressed suit touches his bowler and bows slightly as he paces by, there are chickens, lovers, drunks, a weird guy with a pleading expression and white powder all over his black face, all are moving through the light...

Goya's kids are getting ready for the DJ dance. It is taking them hours. Finally, her son walks out dressed up like a philosopher: hat, glasses, goatee, tie... and his grandma's walking stick to complete the look, even though it floats above ground when he holds it. Goya grabs the cane and starts yelling, brandishing the stick, and the philosopher cowers.

The young man returns the cane to his grandmother, restores his dignity, and steps out into the darkness. Goya calms down, laughs, and tells us what phase the moon is in. She says the elders have told her it is just the right time to visit with the ancestors... would we like to get up before dawn to come with her to honour them?

It is raining and dark as we walk through the quiet neighbourhood. Two families are paying tribute to people they lost seven years ago. Next to each house are two small newly dug holes, symbolic graves. We all take turns pouring three kinds of water into these graves. We pour fresh sweet water, salt water, and a tea made with a special herb. Then we enter the lean-to kitchen next to one house for hot sweet coffee and buns; it is time to visit.

Folks all talk Garifuni, so I just settle quietly into the heat of the fire and watch the coming dawn. A bottle of Gifidi makes the rounds so I chase my coffee with a small glass of that.

Grahame is talking Spanish with a woman by the stove. She asks him: "Do white people do this too?" She has never met a white person to ask before, and just wants to know how we visit our dead.

After hot drinks and conversation in each house, we head out in the morning light to go home. The boys are up, doing more renovations. The stove is back out in the middle of the living room; they are repairing the wall, mixing cement on the kitchen floor.

In 48 hours, we have seen years of Garifuna history and culture, we have seen a vital culture celebrating itself. It is a poor community, it looks a little scruffy, and many people are illiterate...

One thing only is keeping this community together: the land. It is their home; it is where they speak their language, the base of their identity. It is under attack, and no kind of progress or development could ever compensate for its loss.

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More information

- OFRANEH (Organizacion Fraternal Negra Hondureña): @ofraneh, garifuna@ofraneh.org, www.ofraneh.org, <http://www.ofraneh.wordpress.com>
- Honduras Solidarity Network: Karen Spring, spring.kj@gmail.com, @hondurassol, www.hondurassolidarity.org
- Rights Action: Grahame Russell, info@rightsaction.org, www.rightsaction.org

Emergency funds – OFRANEH

Even as Rights Action continues to send funds for Covid19 response work of long-term partner groups in Honduras and Guatemala (including OFRANEH), we request funds now for OFRANEH as they respond to the forced disappearance of four land defenders from Triunfo de la Cruz.

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