

Afro-Hondurans

Profile

The Garífuna and the Bay Island Creoles are the only Afro-Hondurans regarded as distinct ethnic groups within the country, having preserved an ethnic and cultural difference from the mestizo mainstream. They are also associated with 'traditional ancestral lands'.

The majority of Bay Island Creole communities have more in common with other English-speaking zones along the Caribbean coast of Central America than with the Honduran mainland.

They have maintained their essentially Afro-Caribbean identity and linguistic separateness despite pressures to assimilate. Along with working on foreign vessels, fishing has been a major source of income. Nearly 20 per cent of Bay Island Creole males still work on merchant ships, which perpetuates the tradition of finding employment off the island and sending money home.

Significant mestizo migration to the islands, lack of employment, the decline in fish stocks and the ongoing destruction of the coral reefs is especially affecting the ability of Bay Island Creoles to maintain their livelihood and culture.

The Garífuna are the largest ethnic minority in Honduras. They are the descendants of African-Carib populations from the Caribbean island of St Vincent who were exiled to the Honduran coast in the eighteenth century.

While there are significant Garífuna populations in the cities, most are located in coastal communities extending from Nicaragua to Belize. Garífuna are distributed in some 43 villages in Honduras mainly in the departments of Cortés and Gracias a Dios. With an estimated 100,000 Garífuna living in the United States, millions of dollars from this group are pumped into the Honduran economy annually through transfer payments to relatives.

Rural Garífuna communities live mainly on subsistence agriculture, fishing and foreign remittances. Unemployment is high, and many men emigrate in search of income reinforcing the traditional matriarchal structure of the Garífuna family.

Historical context

Early Spanish colonial Honduras initially held great promise as an abundant source of precious metals. The first Africans arrived in 1540 to replace the rapidly declining enslaved indigenous labour pool especially in the silver mines, which proved more promising than gold retrieval. By the 1600s, many enslaved Africans had escaped and mixed in with indigenous people, poor Spanish migrants and freed blacks to form the range of mixtures that constitute the mainstream Honduran rural mestizo peasant culture.

The second important stream of Africans was brought by British colonists. They came to the Bay of Honduras in the 1600 and 1700s for plantation work and natural resource extraction. Many of these

mixed with the Miskitu.

Garífuna

The Garífuna waged a 40-year war of resistance against invading colonial powers until improved cannon technology forced them to accept permanent exile as prisoners of war. In April 1797, over 5,000 Garífuna were transported on British ships and left on the then deserted Honduran Bay Island of Roatan. Many later moved to the mainland and became allied with Spain.

The Garífuna fought with the Spanish against British pirates and military attacks. They also took the Royalist side against the independence-seeking local '*criollos*' and became a highly marginalized population in post-independence Honduras. This support for the defeated Conservative forces prompted a further dispersion to Nicaragua, Guatemala and Belize.

On the relatively isolated coast of Honduras and other countries, Garífuna were able to maintain their language and other cultural practices. In their communities women did agricultural work, men engaged in fishing and artisan activities.

In the 1900s Garífuna men began seeking income opportunities in Mosquitia logging camps and the US company banana enclaves in Honduras. This included becoming merchant mariners on fruit company boats and migrating to the US. As a result, Garífuna society has remained strongly matri-local and oriented regionally rather than just focused solely on Honduran national society.

In 2001 The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared Garifuna culture one of nineteen Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. Among other factors this was due to their "outstanding value, roots in cultural tradition, affirmation of cultural identity, contemporary cultural and social role, excellence in the application of skills, and risk of disappearing."

Bay Island Creoles

The other important Afro-Honduran group to arrive during the colonial era were English-speaking Afro-Caribbean Creoles. These were free persons who migrated to the Bay islands in the 1840s, along with a few white Cayman Islanders. Later they were joined by other Creoles from Jamaica and the Mosquitia.

Bay Island Creoles practised a self-sufficient lifestyle centred on fishing and agriculture and produced many of the basic commodities they needed. Throughout the nineteenth century they existed as an autonomous economic and cultural entity with little or no contact with the Spanish-speaking Honduras, preferring to link their culture and economy to Belize.

From the 1920s, Bay Island Creoles began to abandon their agricultural based lifestyle. English language skills enabled better-paying jobs for males on the Honduran mainland plantations and merchant ships.

Although Honduras was given sovereignty over the Bay Islands by the British in 1860, in exchange for Belize, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that the first official steps were taken to hispanicize the islands. Starting in the late 1940s, Bay Island Creole children were routinely punished for speaking English in school, and language instruction was forced underground into private home schools.

Nevertheless, assimilationist measures and hispanicization did not gather significant momentum until

the 1990s, with considerable mestizo in-migration prompted by the rapid growth of tourism. Mestizo immigrants from the mainland now comprise over 60 per cent of the Bay Island population.

These changes have prompted Bay Island Creoles to redouble their efforts to maintain their cultural identity and language preferences.

Garífuna and Creoles, as Afro-Hondurans, have a history of organizing together against racial discrimination. In the 1970s they founded La Organización Fraternal Negro Hondureño (OFRANEH) (Fraternal Black Honduran Organization) which is still active.

Garífuna social struggles, which gathered momentum in the 1980s, have increasingly centred on the holding onto scarce land resources and fishing rights, which has strengthened their links with indigenous groups.

Current issues

Positive developments have been occurring in Honduras where the authorities have increasingly created national programmes for indigenous peoples and people of African descent.

Being recognized as an autochthonous 'indigenous and tribal people', Garífuna have been able to guarantee their rights and freedoms through the national constitution as well as through ILO 169, of which Honduras is a signatory. This has enabled them to gain title to some of their ancestral lands. Furthermore, during the 1990s state infrastructure has increasingly reached many coastal villages.

However, despite also being recognized as autochthonous with a history of acute marginalization, English-speaking Bay Island Creoles are not yet similarly organized to address their social and economic issues as a distinct population group that uses this instrument.

After ten years of negotiation primarily by the Native Bay Island Professional and Laborer Association, progress has been made in the development of the Cultural Bilingual Education Program for the Bay Islands, and increased special training for education and health workers. This points to the growing official acceptance by all levels of government in Honduras of the multicultural and pluri-linguistic nature of Honduran society, and the right of its ethnic groups to preserve their identity.

On the other hand the Bay Island of Roatan is now an attractive tourist destination and locale for expatriate residents. The 1998 amendment to the Honduran Constitution allowing foreigners to own property has resulted in 75 per cent of the land on the Bay Islands now being foreign-owned. Afro-Honduran Creoles and Garífuna hang on to a modest 14 per cent share.

These local groups had traditionally maintained ecologically sustainable practices and are now particularly concerned about the increasing housing density and the deterioration of the terrestrial and marine ecology, which is permanently altering the overall physical and cultural environment.

Perils of Tourism

Tourism related issues pose a much greater danger on the mainland and at least four Garífuna communities on the north coast of Honduras are under unprecedented threat of disappearance.

For over two centuries the remote isolation of the Honduran coast and the social marginalization of Garífuna beach front communities served as a measure of protection. However a new dynamic began to emerge following 2001 public statements from the Honduran Tourism Secretary which claimed that

hundreds of kilometers of pristine sun drenched North Coast beaches were being wasted and should be “developed for strong tourism.”

In the years that followed plans have proceeded to develop the Tela Bay region in northern Honduras into a major tourist destination. These include plans for a massive US\$ 161 million, hotel complex funded in part by the Inter-American Development Bank.” The Tela Bay Touristic Development Society (DTBT) expects to set its new mega-tourism complex on top of four Garifuna communities (Miami, Barra Vieja, Tornabe and San Juan).

The Tela Bay complex, called the 'Micos Beach & Golf Resort' will extend 3.2 kilometers along the beach between the Garifuna communities of Tornabé and Miami. It will include 360 villas a shopping mall, casino and at least four luxury hotels(4-5 star). The first hotel should be finished in 2010 along with an 18-hole golf course.

The lands for the tourist complex were first taken away from the Garifuna community of Tornabé by government and declared a National Park and an environmental protected area. This property was then later transferred to the Honduran Tourism Institute (IHT) and an edict issued entitled the Area Under Special Management (ABRE) which permitted joint ventures between the IHT and private sector interests.

To circumvent the reality of communally held property, the DTBT first divided community land into individual square blocks and issued one title per family. In the small remote beachside community of Miami, most of the cash strapped residents ended up selling their individual plots to the DTBT opening the way for the investors. Those who did not sell found themselves surrounded by sold lots and in the face of veiled threats from real estate companies eventually succumbed.

Repression has continued against Garifuna leaders and communities working to defend communal territory, resources and culture from the mega-project.

In November 2005 an arson attack destroyed the property of Garifuna leader, Wilfredo Guerrero.

Organized in the Land Defense Committee of Triunfo de la Cruz (CODETT) Prominent Garifuna activist Alfredo Lopez who spent seven years in jail on trumped up drug charges before winning his case before the Inter-American Human Rights Commission in 2003, has continued to campaign against the land acquisition strategies via the Garifuna community station Radio Faluma Bimetu, (the Sweet Coco) and the regional-wide Radio Progreso.

Garifuna community leaders in San Juan have also continued to denounce the tourism real estate company PROMOTUR (owned by a powerful Liberal politician, landowner, banker and media mogul) for its aggressive incursions onto community lands.

In January 2006, masked paramilitaries armed with illegal AK-47 rifles who work for a PROMOTUR entered the community, erected a fence around a section of community land desired by the company and fired weapons at San Juan community members

In March and June 2006 Jessica García, one of the Garifuna leaders, was harassed and threatened at gun point to sign over land belonging to the community. Three young members of the same community were killed in 2006 and police officers have been charged in connection with these killings.

The deforestation process to begin construction of Micos Beach & Golf Resort started on January 2008. It involves filling of 87.5 hectares of the Micos Lagoon wetlands which will leave neighboring Garifuna communities and the complex itself unprotected from the copious runoff produced by the rising number of tropical storms and hurricanes which now hit the Caribbean Coast.

According to government officials, the project will create “6 thousand direct and 18 thousand indirect jobs and will also stimulate infrastructure and public service improvements for the neighboring communities.” However in light of past experiences Garifuna community organizations like OFRANEH are highly doubtful the complex will employ local Garifuna preferring instead to bring workers from

outside.

As the project presses ahead in June 2008 Amnesty International reported that Garífuna community activist Santos Feliciano Aguilar Álvares of San Juan, Atlántida department, was abducted, held against his will, beaten and threatened with death allegedly by private security guards working for the local real estate company Álvares had accused of pressuring Garífuna to sell their land. His injuries required hospital treatment and AI believes his safety and that of other members of the Garífuna community is at risk. Amnesty International has called for immediate steps to implement the protection measures ordered by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to ensure the safety of the Garífuna community.

ALBA Initiatives

Meanwhile in August 2008 as part of the Honduras-ALBA initiative President Manuel Zelaya Rosales opened the first hospital built for Garífuna. It is located in the north coast community of Ciribolla in the Department of Colon. In addition Garífuna students who have traditionally had difficulty gaining entry into the medical faculty of the Honduran National University have increasingly been able to obtain their medical training at the Escuela Latinoamericana de Medicina (ELAM) in Cuba.