

Getting with the beat at a bar in Barranco. Music is seen as an important way of keeping the Garífuna language alive



When Egbert Valencio shakes his head, the braids in his hair fall forward and swing to either side of his face. 'Let's try that again,' he says, looking up. Valencio is smiling, but he is also embarrassed.

He has just been asked to say a phrase in his native Garífuna language but, perhaps overwhelmed by my reporter's microphone or a lack of practice, he has stumbled and lost his words halfway through. 'It's a painful feeling,' he adds, staring at the ground, 'when I'm not able to say certain things in Garífuna.'

Valencio is in his early thirties, but it is only in the past few years that he has made a conscious effort to speak the tongue native to his community, the Garífuna (or Garinagu) of Central America's Caribbean coast. 'I am not satisfied with the way I speak Garífuna,' he says firmly. 'One of the ways I think I will master the language is when I am able to think in it. That's when I will really become Garífuna.'

A rooster's crow breaks the silence around us in this village of 150 people. Barranco, near Belize's southern tip, is one of the country's last traditional Garífuna communities. In the mornings, men in the village still haul their dugout canoes to the shore to catch their evening meals. And, in thatched-roofed houses, cassava roots are still crushed to make the crisp flatbread that is a staple of the traditional diet.

Barranco is also Belize's first Garífuna community. Walk past the community telephone and the village notice board – there is a town hall meeting tonight to discuss a response to government plans to test for oil in the surrounding area – past the largest Garífuna temple in the country, and you will eventually reach Barranco's highest point, jutting out over the Gulf of Honduras. From here you can see the shore where, 200 years ago, Valencio's ancestors followed the waves in their dugout canoes and landed for good.

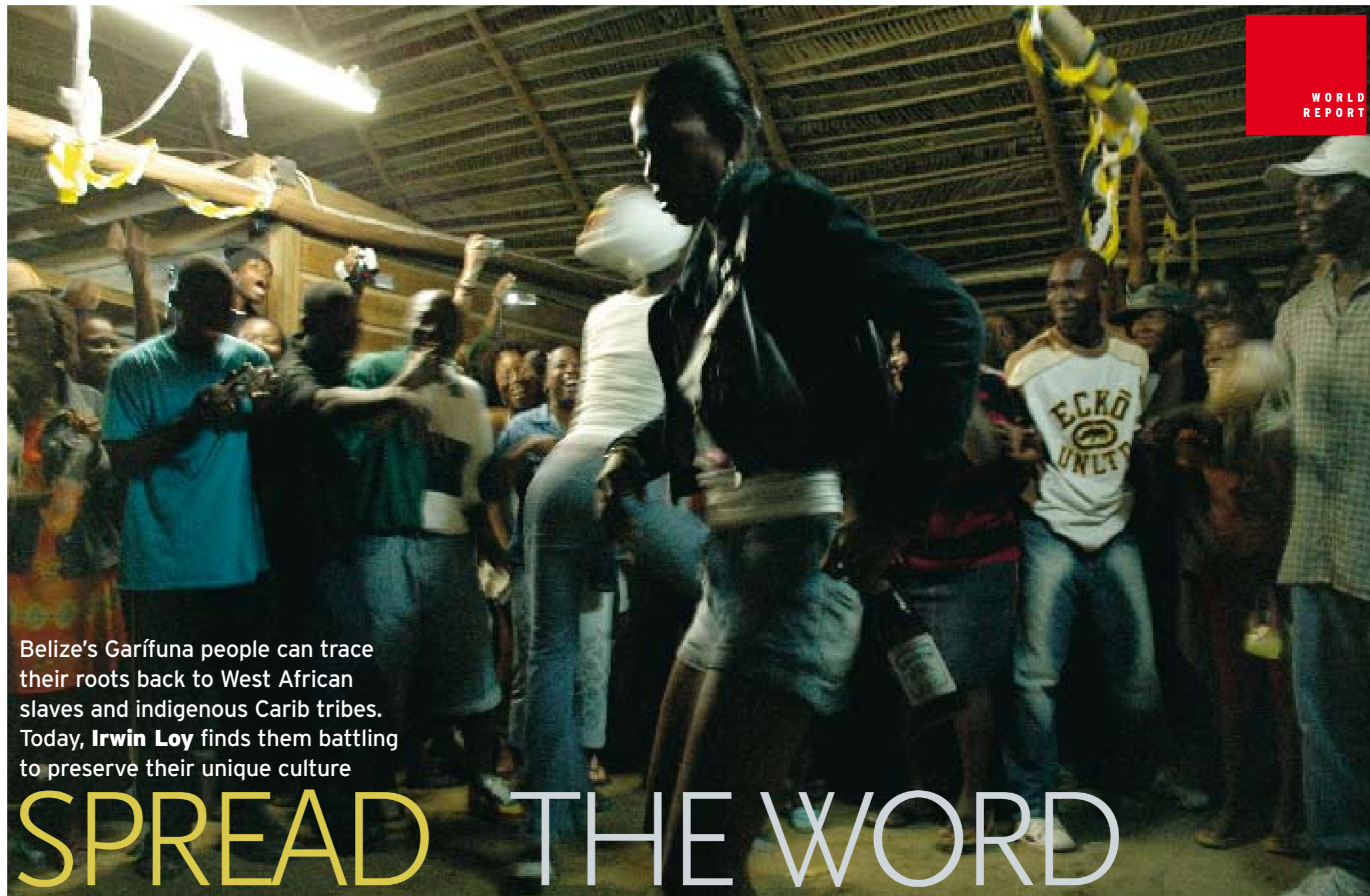
The British authorities called them Black Caribs. They were the Garífuna, descendants of West African slaves, who had either escaped to or were shipwrecked off the Caribbean island of St Vincent in the 17th century, mixed with indigenous Carib Indians. In the colonial struggle for power in the region, the British deported them to the island of Roatán, off Honduras – it was from here that they paddled to Belize.

It is the language spoken by these original settlers – Arawakan, an indigenous South American and Caribbean language – that Valencio wishes would flow effortlessly through his mind.

Traditionally, Belizean Creole and English have dominated the linguistic culture of Belize, itself a country made up of diverse cultures. For Valencio and many of his generation, learning these two languages left little time for Garífuna.

'I guess my interest was not really there as a child,' he says. 'I tended to want to speak in English. That was what we learned in school. In a sense, my Garífuna had died out, and my interest died with it.'

Valencio clears his throat and tries again. This time, the words flow more confidently. They roll off his lips like fingers rapping a drum skin, pocketing beats between syllables where, in English, there had only been open space. 'With the help of God, he will save and help us with all the struggles we're going through as a Garífuna people,' he says, translating.



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Belize's Garífuna people can trace their roots back to West African slaves and indigenous Carib tribes. Today, **Irwin Loy** finds them battling to preserve their unique culture

SPREAD THE WORD

The pungent scent of fried fish and cooking oil lingers inside Irma Gonzalez' kitchen. 'I don't know what we can do to ensure that our language survives,' she says, eyeing the sofa where her granddaughter sits, working her way through her homework in front of the television. A Spanish drama is showing tonight.

'I have a little grandson here. I'm speaking to him in Garífuna, but he'll answer in Creole. I think it's an epidemic,' she says, with a smile. 'The kids understand what I say but they can't respond,' she adds. 'I think probably when they get older they'll be able to converse in Garífuna. They'll speak it. Just give them time.'

One person who was not prepared just to sit back and let events take their course was Andy Palacio, the Garífuna musician and cultural campaigner who died suddenly in January 2008, aged just 47.

Two decades ago, Palacio took a trip to visit Garífuna villages in Nicaragua. There he came face to face with a vision of his own community's future: the extinction of its traditional culture. He could find fewer than 10 people who could still speak the language. None was younger than 50.

'There was a consciousness of a community identity and some of the origins,' Palacio said, when I spoke to him only a few months before his death. 'People said they knew they were

Garífuna, but they felt they had lost much of their identity and they were very apologetic about that. This could easily be where our community in Belize is heading.'

But something different is also happening in Belize, where a surge in national pride accompanied the country's independence from the UK in 1981. The voices of the Garífuna, long just a part of a wider Belizean mosaic, are growing louder.

Two decades after his trip to Nicaragua, Palacio was serving as the deputy administrator of Belize's National Institute of Culture and History. As an acclaimed recording artist, he had helped shift Garífuna culture into the mainstream. Today, Belizean pop radio leans heavily on Punta Rock, a frenetic dance music ➤

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that combines electrified instruments with the intense beats of *Punta* – a traditional Garífuna music.

I'm not a Garífuna,' says the man driving the old American school bus that is taking me on a dusty four-hour ride north, his radio blaring. 'But the music is good, man.'

When I arrive in Belize's cultural capital, Dangriga, the sound of Punta Rock is everywhere. The town is the unofficial capital of Belize's Garífuna and, this weekend, it is buzzing with energy. It will soon be Garífuna Settlement Day, the day the country's Garífuna community celebrates its arrival on these shores.

At the town's football stadium, the local team is taking on a side from a nearby village. In the stands I meet Charles Mariano, who tells me what the day represents. 'It's a big celebration for us,' he says, proudly. 'It commemorates the arrival of the Garífuna in Belize in 1802. It is recorded that, on 19 November of that year, the first group of 150 people arrived in Belize. We could say they are the forefathers of today's Garífuna in this country.'

Like Valencio and others of his generation, Mariano, a primary school teacher, did not speak Garífuna until he was an adult. Now that he has children himself, he wishes children would learn the language in class. 'They're losing the ability to speak it,' he says. 'The main route to cultural awareness is to know your language. We're supposed to know where we come from, who we are. If I don't know my language, then I don't know my culture. My history will not make sense to me.'

As a town councillor, it is Barbara Norales' job to promote Garífuna culture in Dangriga. But she is yet another who did not learn the language as a child.

'I never really paid attention to who I was until I was older,' she says. Now she tells her 20-year-old daughter to learn their language the same way she did: through the music of Palacio and other pioneering musicians. 'I say to her, look, I don't speak Garífuna to you every day, but the easiest way to pick it up is to learn through the songs. You discover what different

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GETTING THERE

You could take an express bus from Belize City to Dangriga, but then you would be missing out on the regular bus route and the most scenic drive in the country: the Hummingbird Highway, which passes through rainforests as it winds its way to the coast.

Village life

Many villages in Belize's south let tourists stay in village guest houses for around BZD\$20 (\$10) a night. Arrange to stay in Barranco, the last traditional Garífuna village, or nearby Kekchi and Mopan Maya villages, through the Toledo Ecotourism Association. ttea@btl.net
www.southernbelize.com

What to eat

Just try to spend a week in Belize without finding the Creole staple, rice and beans, on your plate. Garífuna cooking is hearty and tasty. Look for hudut, mashed plantain dunked in a rich coconut and fish broth. Snacking? Buy a packet of fried plantain chips on the street, doused in ketchup and Marie Sharp's Hot Sauce (a local favourite).

WHERE TO STAY

Luxury resorts catering to foreign tourists are popping up along Belize's coast. For a more colourful experience, most towns have excellent guest houses and budget hotels. If you are coming to Dangriga for Settlement Day, be sure and book a place to stay well in advance. Louise Belisle's Bluefield Lodge is friendly and meticulously run. Rooms from BZD\$30 (\$15). Tel: (+501) 522 2742. bluefield@btl.net

Vanishing languages

Researchers estimate that on average one of the world's languages vanishes every two weeks. According to the UN, about 97 per cent of the world's population speaks 4 per cent of its languages. 2008 has been proclaimed by Unesco as the International Year of Languages.

words mean, and you know what the song is saying. It has worked for me.'

Norales is in buoyant mood as we drift down St Vincent Street, named after the island where her shipwrecked ancestors first found a temporary home. We stop where a crowd has gathered under a thatched roof on the side of the street. I had heard the sound from blocks away: a steady, resonant boom; a high, hollow chime; a looming rattle.

'You have to listen to this,' Norales says, excitedly, before vanishing into the throng. I am trying to figure out a polite way to squeeze into the mass, when a hand reaches out from a gap in the wall of bodies, grabs mine and pulls me in.



The Garífuna can trace their ancestors back to an initial landing in 1802

Hot air hits my skin as I kneel on the sand. The crowd, sticky with sweat from the evening air, has formed a circle round a group of drummers beating out the rhythm I had heard from so far away, on mahogany drums, turtle shells and shakers.

There is a raucous cheer. An elderly woman in the middle of the circle – she must be well into her seventies – is dancing. She is doing what look like one-arm push-ups on the sand. She pumps her hips as a drummer strikes his palm against the skin of his drum. Again her hip hits the sand as the drummer smacks his instrument in time.

Norales leans in towards me. 'Listen to the women sing,' she says, a smile spreading across her face. 'This is Garífuna culture, right here.'

The women stand behind the drummer, their flowing dresses move with their bodies in a stream from side to side. One woman calls out; the others answer. Their voices crest and follow as the lead voice recedes. Again the leader calls out, louder this time, her pitch swelling over the other women's falling chorus. Their answer is a wave, crashing onto the shore and skimming the soles of our feet.

I look towards Norales and her voice is rising in time as well. Her words are Garífuna. ■

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