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## Land Loss and Garifuna Women's Activism on Honduras' North Coast

By Keri Vacanti Brondo<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract<sup>2</sup>

This paper reports on the gendered impacts of Honduras' neoliberal agrarian legislation within the context of tourism development. It draws on ethnographic research with the Afro-indigenous Garifuna to demonstrate how women have been most affected by land privatization on the north coast of Honduras. Garifuna communities are matrifocal and land had historically been passed through matrilineal lines. As the coastal land market expands, Garifuna women have lost their territorial control. The paper also treats Garifuna women's activism as they resist coastal development strategies and shifts in landholding. While women have been key figures in the Garifuna movement to title and reclaim lost ancestral land, the movement as a whole has yet to make explicit the gendered dimensions of the land struggle. The neglect may be attributed to the activists' adoption of an indigenous rights discourse.

*Keywords:* Women's Activism, Land Rights, Garifuna Indigeneity

### Introduction

On May 30, 2005, Greogoria Flores, the head of Fraternal Black Honduran Organization (OFRANEH), a grassroots organization working to promote political and land rights of Garifuna communities, was shot and wounded in La Ceiba on her way to collect testimony to present before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. A few months prior to this incident, the home of Miriam Miranda, OFRANEH's second in command, was searched by masked agents of Honduras' Criminal Investigative Division. The authorities, claiming to be searching for weapons and stolen goods, showed a search warrant that was signed by a judge but not directed at any particular individual. After the act of intimidation was publicized, the judge who signed the warrant explained it was an "intelligence error" (Human Rights First 2005). On August 6, 2006, 19-year-old Mirna Isabel Santos Thomas was forced out of her home in San Juan Tela, a Garifuna community on the coast of Honduras, by a group of masked men armed with AK-47s.

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<sup>2</sup> This paper was inspired in conversation with Helen Safa, and I thank her for encouraging me to see that it come out in print. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for JIWS, and my colleagues Tara Hefferan and Katherine Lambert-Pennington for their thoughtful feedback and suggestions that have helped me to refine my arguments. Most importantly, I am indebted to the residents of Sambo Creek, and in particular to the mothers and daughters of the community, who welcomed me into their homes and shared with me their experiences. The work of the many female activists who stand up for injustices imposed upon the Garifuna community cannot go unrecognized, and I thank them for sharing their struggles with me. Any errors in the paper are my own responsibility.

She was found dead alongside a road outside of town the next morning (CODETS 2006). All of these women were targeted for their connections to the struggle to reclaim lost ancestral lands and resist Honduras' neoliberal policies that have enabled the increased privatization of communally held land<sup>3</sup>.

While land loss has spurred Garifuna women into action to defend and recuperate lost resources, Garifuna mobilization has not yet fully outlined how the processes of privatization and land loss have been gendered, with women bearing the brunt of the loss. This article considers the marginalization of gender-based issues in the struggle for Garifuna territorial recognition and recuperation on the coast of Honduras. Data on land ownership and land loss patterns from Sambo Creek, a Garifuna community located on the north coast of Honduras, are presented to illustrate the gendered effects of neoliberal agrarian legislation and land titling initiatives in Garifuna communities. Oral history accounts center around women's land loss, a point that is absent from the Garifuna movement to reclaim ancestral territory. The argument set forth here is that while territory in Garifuna communities is a "women's issue," highlighting this could serve to rupture a unified movement of indigenous peoples.

### **Background and Context**

The Garifuna are descendents of Africans and native Carib and Arawak Indians who have lived along the Central American coast since 1797, with communities dotting the coastline from Nicaragua up through Belize. Honduras has the largest Garifuna population, living in 48 distinct communities along the north coast. They have maintained a distinct cultural heritage and strong collective identity, which was internationally validated in 2003 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declaration that they possess an "intangible cultural heritage" (see Cayetano and Cayetano 2005 for a discussion of the history behind the declaration). This proclamation recognizes that many key religious and cultural practices are inextricably linked to the land, and collective claim to community territory.<sup>4</sup> Collective rights to territory for indigenous and ethnic people has been confirmed through a series of international declarations and conventions, including the United Nations' Universal Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, UNESCO's Declaration of San Jose and the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (commonly referred to as ILO

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<sup>3</sup> These three cases are pulled out as illustrative of a theme. Other Garifuna activists, both female and male, involved in the land struggle have also suffered attacks.

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO defines an intangible cultural heritage as, "...the practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills, that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage... [such an intangible heritage is manifested through] oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; traditional craftsmanship... The intangible cultural heritage is transmitted from generation to generation, and is constantly recreated by communities and groups, in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their historical conditions of existence. It provides people with a sense of identity and continuity, and its safeguarding promotes, sustains, and develops cultural diversity and human creativity" (United Nations Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, <http://portal.unesco.org/culture>).

#169).<sup>5</sup> Honduras has ratified all of these important conventions, providing a legal structure through which indigenous groups can make their claims.

Despite the international legal infrastructure that “protects” Honduran Garifuna collective territorial rights, Garifuna territory has undergone massive privatization. Traditionally, Garifuna land has been held in common with use rights granted to individual families, who could pass their rights to subsequent generations. In the past 30 years, much of this land has been privatized through what Garifuna activists refer to as “irregular processes.” Such processes include encroachment, the use of intimidation, trickery, or outright theft by gunpoint to usurp land, and pressurized sales. Honduras’ 1990s agrarian legislation has quickened the pace of privatization. The legislation discussed here falls in line with what Deere and Leon (2001) suggest are characteristic of nation-states that are seeking to redesign their agricultural institutions in order to facilitate neoliberalism.<sup>6</sup> “Getting agricultural institutions right” entails two processes: 1) dismantling the effects of the agrarian reform of previous decades, and 2) creating the conditions to enliven the land market.

The first significant move to “get their agricultural institutions right” was the 1992 passage of the Law for the Modernization and Development of the Agricultural Sector (LMA). The LMA promoted foreign and domestic investment in agriculture by accelerating land titling and enabling land cooperative members to break up their holdings into small plots to be sold as private lands. At this time, many small landowners suffering from economic hardship chose to sell their land. The passage of this law effectively ended the agrarian-reform legislation of the 1960s and early 1970s which regarded agricultural resources as fulfilling a social function; the new legislation privileged the law of supply and demand over redistribution programs aimed at addressing inequalities for the “common good.”

The LMA legalized the process of land privatization in favor of investment, providing an impetus for increased privatization of Garifuna lands by foreigners interested in tourism and housing development. According to Garifuna activists, the lack of definitive property titles led national and international businessmen, military, and politicians to harass Garifuna into abandoning their lands (ODECO 2002). The data presented in this paper suggests that this process was gendered. While Garifuna land is held in common, use rights were historically passed through the matrilineal line. It is therefore women who were harassed into abandoning or selling their resources, and for the most part, their property was transferred to male hands.

At the same time as the LMA was passed, Honduras’ National Agrarian Institute (INA, in its Spanish acronym) began issuing communal land titles of *domino pleno*

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5 ILO 169 is the most significant international convention ratified by the Honduran state with regard to the Garifuna territorial struggle. It was ratified by Honduras in 1994, after successful mobilization at the capital by Honduras’ ethnic and indigenous groups. ILO 169 states that governments must respect the cultural and spiritual value that indigenous peoples attach to their lands, territories, or both, and in particular, the collective nature of that relationship. Furthermore, they are tasked with safeguarding and guaranteeing the right of indigenous peoples to ownership of both the land they currently occupy as well as areas that they traditionally accessed for subsistence and other activities. See Brondo and Woods 2007 and Anderson 2000 for further discussion.

6 Neoliberalism is used here to refer broadly to economic policies rooted in classical liberalism that replace state-led development programs with market-friendly approaches that emphasize free trade on the global market.

(definitive titles of ownership) to Garifuna communities. Today, there are a total of 52 communal titles.<sup>7</sup> Recognizing land under a communal title means that improvements to the land (e.g., houses or other buildings) can be bought and sold by individuals within the community, but that the land remains inalienable and theoretically cannot be sold. All land, including that occupied by houses or other structures and land under cultivation, is held under the *Patronato* (i.e., village government) and use rights are passed through inheritance.

While on the one hand, it appears as though the communal titles were a positive gain for the Garifuna community (and in fact the titling programs did begin after significant mobilization efforts on behalf of Garifuna organizations), the communal land titles were actually another move to “get it right.” The communal land titles created legal boundaries (i.e., titles that could be upheld in court) between Garifuna territories and areas of potential investment, and provided the security necessary to encourage foreign investment.<sup>8</sup>

Garifuna activists have rejected the communal land titles for two important reasons. First, the land titles leave out significant portions of ancestral territory. Second, communal landholding does not apply to land already privatized. That is, if a plot was privatized prior to the issuance of the communal title, it can be sold to non-native community members. In many cases, the vast majority of land within the borders identified under the communal land titles had already been privatized.

Today the coastal region is being promoted by the Honduran government and international lending institutions for massive tourism development, which further threatens their collective rights to land.<sup>9</sup> In July 2001, under the Honduran Poverty Reduction Strategy, the World Bank approved the Sustainable Coastal Tourism Project, a four-year program to enable the “development and management of tourism along the North Coast mainland, and the offshore Bay Islands of Honduras.” The document advised that “a major land titling diagnostic on indigenous communities of the North Coast should recommend actions to formalize recognition of indigenous land rights, as well as satisfactory conflict resolution” (World Bank 2001). The World-Bank financed Honduran Lands Administration Program (PATH) respects land titles granted to outsiders within communal lands and permits the individualization of community land. PATH is the most recent attempt to “get it right” in Honduras, the effect of which has been to undermine Garifuna rights to collective territory and further disenfranchise women.

Both privatization and loss of ancestral cultivation and harvest land through the issuance of communal titles that exclude such territory are gendered processes, and these are the issues that female Garifuna activists are dying over. There are two main organizations that represent Honduras’ Garifuna: the Honduran Black Fraternal Organization (*La Organización Fraternal Negro Hondureño* or OFRANEH), and the

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7 Before communal land titling began in 1992, Garifuna communities only held titles of occupation, which had been issued by the INA in the 1970s. However, titles of occupation are not secure documents; they merely state that a group of people occupies the land, but they do not grant ownership of that land to those people.

8 Economists studying Honduran agricultural development (e.g., Lopez and Sanders 1992) have argued that the disincentive to invest in land that is not securely held translates into production inefficiency, defined as the land not meeting its potential for market output.

9 Tourism has become Honduras’ second largest source of foreign exchange, and is now a national development priority, with the government projecting the industry to generate 70,000 new direct and indirect jobs (Thorne 2005).

Organization of Ethnic Community Development (*La Organización de Desarrollo Etnico Comunitario* or ODECO). OFRANEH is the older of the two organizations and is a grassroots organization working to promote political and land rights of Garifuna communities. ODECO splintered from OFRANEH in 1992 because its founding members had a different vision of how the Garifuna population should interact with development policies and the land struggle. ODECO's approach draws more on inclusion and integration into development planning and programs, while OFRANEH emphasizes resistance to Honduras' neoliberal economic development model (Brondo 2006: 114-140).

### **Data and Methods**

The data presented in this paper was collected during thirteen months of fieldwork between June 2000 and October 2002, and the archiving of public activist statements through January 2005. Multiple methods of data collection were used, including interviews following a semi-structured protocol, unstructured interviewing, archival research, direct observation, and participant observation. Ninety-one interviews were conducted with the following groups of people: Garifuna and Mestizo community members in Sambo Creek, tourism operators, hotel owners and staff in La Ceiba and Sambo Creek, organizational leaders and activists from Honduras' two Garifuna organizations, ODECO and OFRANEH, officials from the Honduran Institute of Tourism, and officials from the regional office (i.e., La Ceiba) for the National Agrarian Institute. The majority of interviews were not tape-recorded, and therefore many of the quotations offered in this text are not verbatim and were transcribed from handwritten notes.

A significant portion of the data presented in this paper draws on a household sample in the community of Sambo Creek. Sambo Creek is located on the North coast of Honduras, 20 kilometers from La Ceiba. La Ceiba is the third largest city in Honduras and a popular tourist destination. Investment in tourism infrastructure is on the rise in areas surrounding the city, much of which is Garifuna ancestral land. With its proximity to La Ceiba, Sambo Creek has witnessed significant changes in infrastructure, demographics and land tenure. The population has grown steadily over the last few decades. In 1981, McCommon (cited in Anderson 2000:88) reported a population of 1,196, stating that ninety percent were Garifuna and ten percent were Mestizo. In 1996, Anderson (2000:88) reported a population close to 2,500, with Mestizos comprising between thirty and forty percent. At the time of the research presented here (2002), Sambo Creek's population was estimated by the Central American and Caribbean Research Council to be roughly 5,000, at least forty percent of whom were Mestizo (CCARC 2002). This estimate included both Sambo Creek residents living in country as well as those living abroad. The population residing in Sambo Creek at the time was roughly between 2,000-3,000. This estimate is supported by a 2005 community census that reported 607 households and a total population of 2891 (Scheerer 2005).

The Sambo Creek household sample (n=55) was designed to sample each geographic section of the community. What was important in this study was representation from every section of the community, not necessarily a representative sample of adults. This was of interest because the various settlements expressed class distinctions, but also because the surrounding areas of the community had unique

histories in their transformation from cultivation land to living space. For example, the settlement called *Colonia Libertad* was donated to the community by the government and then the *Patronato* distributed plots to families without homes; some areas of *Colonia Suazo* that were once under cultivation were purchased and privatized by well-off community members; and, areas of *Corinto* were usurped through Mestizo encroachment and are now home to Mestizos of varying wealth.

Interviewees were recruited in approximately every fifth household. Within these household interviews, representation by age, gender, and ethnicity was ensured through a strategy of rotating interviews by gender and then by age group.<sup>10</sup> Despite an attempt to rotate between female and male adult members of the household, Sambo Creek has far more female permanent residents than men, and the sample was therefore weighed more heavily with women (i.e., 35 women and 20 men). This is because in certain areas of the community there were several consecutive houses without a male resident. Rather than leaving out large sections of the community, the woman head of household was interviewed.

### **Transnational Migration, Matrifocality, and Women's Connection to Land**

Migration has long been a part of Garifuna society, beginning with seasonal migration in Central America in the 1800s and early 1900s, and expanding to include migration to the United States since the 1950s (England 2000: 93). Research on Garifuna migration (e.g., Kerns 1983, Gonzalez 1988, and England 2000) suggests that poverty was not a motivating force behind their labor migration until recent decades. Rather, the Garifuna have used migration to obtain industrial goods and supplement their already adequate subsistence economy (England 2000:93). However, in recent decades, neoliberal economic reforms have resulted in uneven distribution of land, which has negatively impacted the Garifuna subsistence economy. The subsequent result is that transnational migration is now necessary and in many cases remittances from abroad is the sole income for Garifuna families remaining in Honduras.

The *Patronato* estimated that remittances from abroad serve as the only source of income for approximately fifty percent of households in Sambo Creek. Still others supplement wage labor with remittances. The *Patronato's* estimate is aligned with the data I collected: 59.57% of the households I interviewed were receiving money from family members who had migrated to one of Honduras' major cities (i.e., Tegucigalpa or San Pedro Sula) or to the United States. In Scheerer's 2005 household census, she found that 49.9% of all households in Sambo Creek were receiving remittances on a regular basis, and 94.6% of the remittances were coming from the United States (Scheerer 2005).

The migratory process in which more men leave natal communities than women has strongly influenced Garifuna society and culture such that women play important roles in the local economy, subsistence activities, and religious practices. Women are also responsible for teaching the language and cultural practices to future generations. Although it is generally expected for women to remain monogamous, men frequently have sexual relations with more than one woman, and it is not unusual for a man to have children by two or more women (Anderson 2000:76). Thus, many of the Garifuna homes

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<sup>10</sup> Three age groups were sampled: ages 20-29; ages 30-50, and over 50 years of age.

in Sambo Creek consist of generations of women and their children; in short, women have come to form the stable core of Garifuna homes, communities, and culture (Kerns 1983, Gonzalez 1969). In 1988, Gonzalez (1988: 8-9) observed that among the Garifuna:

Women have become central, perhaps by default...if one were deliberately to set out to “feminize” an entire sociocultural system, there could be no other way than to remove the institutionalized male functions. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, men alone hunted and fished, served as religious leaders, as warriors and as headmen. In the earliest days of migratory wage labor (eighteenth century) it was also a masculine endeavor, and one which led to both economic success and personal glory. But bit by bit these roles have been either removed from the Garifuna culture completely, or, as in the case of migration and religious leadership, women now participate as well. As one male informant put it in 1975 – there is nothing a man can do that a woman can’t do as well or better...A basic feminist argument today is that the overall status of women in a society is related to the nature of the roles that they are allowed to fill. The Garifuna case is almost a mirror image of what has more often happened to women since the onset of the industrial revolution. That is, the roles assigned to men have been deleted or diluted to the point that men as a class seem somehow less important than women. The general situation which remains has struck many observers, themselves members of a different kind of social order, as being “matrifocal.”

Within Honduras, Garifuna organizational leaders support Gonzalez, claiming that Garifuna gender relations surpass Mestizo gender relations. In 2005, Thorne (nd.) was told by OFRANEH leadership that, unlike *ladino* men,

Garifuna men ‘respect’ the views of women and work in a mutually supportive way around community issues...that when Garifuna women meet, men are not excluded, but are often present, playing a supporting role and encouraging women’s involvement.

Although it is true that women do hold a relative degree of power within the community, Sambo Creek has yet to have a female President of Patronato. Outside of the political sphere, women do serve as the core of the community and children become obligated to their mothers more so than to their fathers. In Anderson’s (2000:76) description of gender relations in Sambo Creek, he notes:

When husbands are present, women still maintain their own spheres of social and economic power, particularly when their children become working adults. Children (male and female), typically develop close relationships to their mothers, maternal grandmothers and aunts and acquire obligations to support them through financial or practical means (i.e., helping build or repair a house, clearing a garden plot). They almost always speak in terms of sending money to their mother or building a house for their mother rather than for their parents, or, certainly, their father.



Anderson's observations are in line with the property history data presented here, which was collected five years later. Interviewees spoke almost exclusively of mothers and grandmothers when providing home and property histories.

Garifuna women's activities connect them to community territory (land or sea) in a number of important ways. Women sow the land, care for and harvest crops, prepare food, and sell traditional food products. Access to land and sea are required for women to prepare traditional foodstuffs, such as *ereba* (casaba bread made from yucca), *machuca* (mashed green plantains served with a seafood and coconut-based soup), *pan de coco* (coconut bread), and other dishes. Foods are important in multiple contexts, including secular celebrations, everyday nourishment, and religious ritual (Gonzalez 1988:98). Women are also connected to the land and sea through their ancestral religion, *dugu*. There are various rituals that require access to the earth and sea in order to fulfill the requests of ancestors. The three main ancestral rites that are practiced are the *Amuyadahani* (bathing the spirit of the dead), the *Chugu* (feeding the dead), and the *Dugu* (feasting the dead), which all require feeding the ancestors traditional foodstuffs (Cayetano and Cayetano 1997). Re-enactment ceremonies marking the Garifuna settlement require access to land and sea, because ancestors arrive from land (Amerindians) and sea (Africans). Women play key roles in these ceremonies, preparing foods, singing, and performing gender-specific dances for the ancestors. A woman can fill the role of the *buyei* (shaman), who leads the ceremonies. While men's activities also connect them to the land and sea, it is still women who are cited as the responsible parties for teaching traditions to children.

### **Feminist Mobilization and Women's Land Rights in Honduras**

The 1970s and 1980s Latin American feminist movements were characterized by a broad agenda of equal rights for women, empowerment, and economic redistribution (Schild 2000, Barrig 2001). Feminist struggles centered on empowerment and consciousness-raising workshops (Alvarez 1998, Schild 2000) where women's "invisible" issues (e.g., domestic violence, health and reproduction) were addressed, thus fostering a sense of solidarity among women and a platform on which to move forward. Latin American feminist movements of this time also focused on ascertaining new institutional and legal frameworks to secure women's equal rights to men (Barrig 2001). In the 1990s, neoliberalism, structural adjustment programs, the decreased regulatory role of governments, and the increasing sovereignty of the market significantly altered feminist movements in Latin America. Women's ability to define the scope and content of the gender equality agenda has been replaced by institutionalized gender-equity agendas that are geared toward training women to access the market by encouraging women to rely on market-based solutions to all of their problems (Schild 2000). [Such is the way in which the World Bank and Honduran government are attempting to address gender inequity. For instance, the Honduran Social Investment Fund (FHIS) holds workshops in Garifuna communities to provide Garifuna women with hospitality training in preparation for receiving tourists, and the World Bank encourages indigenous groups to engage in handicraft production and ecotourism. All of these are market-based strategies that "sell" Garifuna women's indigenous knowledge and cosmology to consumers.]

Although women's land rights were addressed in all moments of international women's organizing, they only became a central issue in feminist movements in the

1990s, influenced by the indigenous movement. By this time, nation-states were being tasked with establishing means through which gender equality in land ownership and use was ensured. It was in this time period that women's access and control over resources became internationally recognized, shifting from a focus on women's ownership as a means to increase productive efficiency to attention to productivity as an economic right of women. Women's landownership thus became thought of as a means to empowerment (Deere and Leon 2001: 32), an argument put forth Bina Agarwal's 1994 seminal book, *A Field of One's Own: Women and Land Rights in South Asia*.

While still following strict neoliberal principles, the legislation passed in the 1990s departed from past agrarian laws that privileged men by designating the beneficiaries to be household heads, who were usually men. In the new legislation, landownership has been vested in all natural or juridic persons and both women and men may own land and be beneficiaries of state programs. The Honduran Agrarian Reform Law of 1991 explicitly states that men or women older than sixteen may be beneficiaries of state programs, regardless of their marital status. Additionally, the Honduran legislation makes it explicit that the peasant category expected to benefit from land distribution or titling efforts includes both *campesinos* and *campesinas* (Deere and Leon 2001:38-39). When you compare the neoliberal agrarian legislation to that of the past, it is now more gender-equitable. However, changes in legislation do not necessarily mean landownership is more egalitarian in practice.

Deere and Leon (2001:42) offer a gender comparison of beneficiaries of land titling since neoliberal agrarian reform in Honduras (the authors analyze data from 1995 to 1997), showing that men received 75% and women 25% of the titles granted. Deere and Leon explain that this number is low compared to other Latin American nations because in Honduras, there are no mandatory mechanisms of inclusion. Countries such as Chile and Ecuador saw a more even distribution of titles by gender (43% to women in Chile, 49% in Ecuador), which have mandatory mechanisms of inclusion, such as an explicit priority to titling poor peasant households headed by women. Honduras' law is gender-blind, which explains the lower percentage of women benefiting from land titling. However, Deere and Leon (2001: 44) point out that although these numbers are low in comparison with other countries, they are still markedly higher than in past reform periods when women represented only 3.7 percent of beneficiaries, perhaps a reflection of the international feminist agenda tricking down.

Although Honduran women in general are making some headway in terms of receiving private land titles in their names, Garifuna women are actually losing land rights as a result of neoliberal land titling programs. This is because while Honduran legislation (e.g., the LMA and PATH) recognizes women as producers, the laws are aimed at modernization, globalization and the privatization of the economy, and focused on the issuance of private land titles as opposed to communal land titles with matrilineally-based use rights. Garifuna women lack the conditions necessary to benefit from these laws – specifically, education, experience in a market system, access to credit, and investment capital. As the following data from Sambo Creek shows, the drive to privatize land has actually disempowered women (i.e., the counter effect of Agarwal's thesis). Garifuna women are now losing lands they held without legal title to both Mestizo and Garifuna men who are purchasing private titles.

## Garifuna Women's Land Loss: Stories from Sambo Creek

Historically, community members held use rights to communal land that they used for settlement and cultivation; use rights to both were typically passed through the maternal line. Prior to the 1980s, Sambo Creek's settlement was restricted to a small plot of land between the beach and the railroad tracks. The railroad was built in 1910 by the Vacarros Bros. Fruit Company, when they established banana plantations nearby. (These plantations were abandoned in the 1920s when disease destroyed the crops (Anderson 2000)). From initial settlement through the 1930s, the Garífuna cultivated the majority of the land immediately surrounding the community. When the banana companies withdrew in the 1930s, work as laborers on plantations and docks largely disappeared for Garifuna men, and women lost opportunities to sell food products and refreshments on the plantations. Wealthy Mestizos began to usurp the lands, including land used by the Garifuna for cultivation and harvest. According to local oral history, a Mestizo associated with the National Party of the President and dictator Tiburcio Carías Andino (1933-1949) appropriated a large portion of the community's cultivation lands to use as a cattle ranch (see also Anderson 2000). The elder Garifuna residents (i.e., 70 or older) that I interviewed recalled the National Party representatives and La Ceiba police forcibly removing Garífuna farmers from these lands. The appropriated lands included what are now known as *Colonia Libertad*, *Colonia Suazo*, and *Corinto*. Much of the land remained unused throughout the years, passing through the hands of cattle ranchers and other powerful outsiders.

In the late 1970s, community activists began petitioning the National Agrarian Institute (INA) for the recuperation of their illegally seized lands. During that time, Felipe Suazo,<sup>11</sup> a wealthy Garífuna resident, bought a large portion of this land (i.e., what is now Colonia Suazo and Corinto) from a Mestizo owner who was threatened with losing the entire plot to the community. According to McCommon (cited in Anderson 2000:87), Suazo divided and sold this land to individuals on the condition that they build cement homes with zinc roofs. The costs imposed by this conditionality prevented those who most needed land from obtaining it, and as a result, the area is starkly differentiated from the rest of the community, with large, well-built homes and gated yards of the well-off Garífuna (who are typically those who have worked for many years in the United States). Sixteen percent of households surveyed (9 of 55) obtained their land through a private purchase exchange with Suazo.

Interviews and informal conversations revealed that some poor Garifuna families lost their land to Felipe Suazo through a loan process. Six individuals told me that they heard stories of women signing over their family's cultivation plot to Suazo in exchange for food, medicine, shoes, or other necessary supplies.<sup>12</sup> When they could not pay back

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11 Pseudonyms are used for all names and some identifying details left out to protect the anonymity of individuals. However, I am using correct names for stories that have been documented and publicly published (e.g., the stories of Suazo, Sampson, and Castillo are published cases. See for example, Anderson 2000; CCARC 2002.).

12 Community residents reported that it was not uncommon for individuals to use their cultivation plots as collateral. A negotiated fee to the President of Patronato could secure a stamped document from the Patronato authenticating individual rights to a plot. This document could be used to file for a private land title with the municipality. This process reportedly was how much of Sambo Creek's land came to be held under private land titles, even land that was originally held in common (although lacked a communal land title).

the money they owed for the items, he took control of the land. For example, one young man told me that his mother sold his family's land for 100 *lempiras*, so that she could buy his sister a pair of shoes, leaving he and his siblings without an inheritance. Exchanges such as these facilitated privatization of communal lands.

In 1982, the community succeeded in recuperating some of their illegally seized and lost land. They secured rights under a communal title to what is now *Colonia Libertad*. The land was recovered via the National Agrarian Institute after several years of community petitioning (petitioning began in the late 1970s). The *Patronato* was given authority to divide and distribute the land amongst landless community members, and Garífuna and Mestizo residents entered a lottery to receive individual plots. Although the land was originally envisioned to be dedicated at least in part to cultivation, it has become primarily a residential area (see also Anderson 2000). Today much of the land has been further divided and sold as private land. Seventy-one percent households surveyed (39 of 55) reported living on private land, even though all of these homes were located within the confines of the 1997 communal land title. Significantly, the rules of communal landholding and use rights apply only to land that was not previously privately titled. Nearly 100% of the land within the boundaries of the 1997 land title had already been privatized, making the title useless in the community's eyes.

Two sets of evidence demonstrate that the trend towards privatization has been gendered. First, survey data on homeownership and inheritance patterns reveals that Garífuna women were more likely to control use rights to both household settlement plots and cultivation plots. Recall that historically households were located in the center of the community (i.e., between the beach and railroad tracks), and cultivation land was in the surrounding area, or what is now the settlements of *Colonia Libertad*, *Colonia Suazo*, and *Corinto*. In the 2002 household survey, women were reported more often than men to be homeowners. Of the fifty households for which data was collected on homeownership, thirty (60%) were reported to be female-owned (all but two of whom were Garífuna), twelve (24%) were reported to be male-owned, and eight (16%) were reported to be jointly owned. Of the twenty-six Garífuna female interviewees, fifteen (58%) reported living on land they inherited matrilineally. The other eleven women lived on purchased land in *Colonia Suazo* or donated land in *Colonia Libertad*, but prior to obtaining their own plot, they all reported living in the homes of female relatives, supporting a trend of female homeownership. The means by which male homeowners acquired plots further supports the tradition of matrilineal inheritance and that men were largely responsible for the private land sales of cultivation plots. Three of the men who were reported as homeowners bought their homes from women, two lived on donated land (*Colonia Libertad*), and two others bought their land from Suazo and Fernandez.

The second set of evidence that supports the gendered nature of privatization is oral stories surrounding loss of cultivation plots. Every Garífuna individual interviewed (in household surveys and oral histories) reported accompanying their mother and/or grandmother to the mountain or *Corinto* area to tend to or harvest crops and fruits. While it is true that men also participated and continue to participate in agriculture, female ancestors were mentioned most often in stories of land loss. Seventy-four percent of my interviews contained statements like the following.

I remember very well going to the mountain with my grandmother. We'd go early, while it was still dark. We would cross the road and go through the woods to get to our plot. One day we got there and a man was there saying that it was his. He said that Valentin<sup>13</sup> [a member of the Patronato] sold it to him for 70 lempiras<sup>14</sup>! I was so mad, but I couldn't do anything because I was little. And my mom didn't do anything and neither did my aunt. I was so angry! For 70 lempiras! (25-year-old Garifuna woman; author's translation from Spanish.)

My grandma said that all that is here...all of these haciendas and where the hotels are now...it was all cassava. My grandmother planted yuca there during her lifetime. But people came and threatened them, telling them that they had to leave or sell...they were scared and didn't know how to defend themselves... (Garifuna woman age 32; author's translation from Spanish)

After listening to such comments, I followed with direct queries for concrete examples of stolen lands. This 46-year-old Garifuna woman provided an example:

When I was a girl, we worked the land with my mother. This was a long time ago. We would get up at 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning and go to the other side of the road to collect the cassava, plantains, guineo...When I was around 39, I stopped planting. We had to stop because people moved in on the land and robbed us of the land. Sampson, for example. He was a teacher here in our school. [Therefore] we trusted him. He went around to all the parents of the school and collected our signatures, about 500 or so, asking us all for ten lempiras so that we could get [potable] water. We all agreed and we trusted him. But he ended up stealing the land from the people (Garifuna women, age 46; author's translation from Spanish).

The story of Mr. Foráneos Caso Sampson trickling the community by alleging that community members were signing a petition to bring in external aid for local development projects was well known. Most of those whom I interviewed recalled this petition, saying Sampson went around to the mothers of school-age children, claiming that he would bring potable water to the community. Later, Sampson returned with documentation citing his ownership over a significant track of land in Corinto. This land is now private. The case of Sampson having obtained land through irregular processes, unlike the following, has yet to be taken up in court.

In 2002, at the time of the research presented here, the most contentious conflict was over the lands of Castillo, a politically connected Mestizo who had illegally extended his holdings with private gates and hired a watchman to guard the land. Community members were prohibited from crossing the land to access the sea or river. Many stories circulated in the community regarding how Castillo obtained the land. Abuse of power and authority, exploitation of Garifuna poverty, and racial discrimination were central themes in these stories. Marta, a 35-year old Garifuna woman had heard the story from her grandmother:

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13 A pseudonym – refer to footnote 11 for pseudonym usage.

14 Slang for lempira, the Honduran currency.

In the land of Castillo there was a Garífuna woman that was the original owner of this land. A neighbor's pig came into her lands and was destroying the land, eating her yuca. She hit the pig, but then the neighbor got mad at her and she became frightened, and ended up abandoning her lands out of fear. Afterwards, this neighbor took the woman's lands and passed the land to their kids and then to their grandkids. Eventually the land was lost (author's translation from Spanish).

Notice that the original owner was cited to be a woman. Women were the central victims even in stories told by men. The following is an example.

Consesa Buity was the original owner. She did not have any money, and she did not sell the lands. What happened was that her husband died and she didn't have money to pay for his coffin. At that time a coffin cost 7.50 lempiras. Miguel Fernandez bought the coffin on loan for her land. But then Consesa died and her daughter was afraid of Fernandez, so she did not recuperate the lands. So after time Fernandez sold the land to Castillo, about 25 years ago. Flores was a lawyer and so he worked on the papers to do this process (author's translation from Spanish).

Stories such as these circulated among the community as to how Fernandez and then later Castillo came to own the land in Corinto. According to a report from the CCARC (2002), the land passed first to Suazo, the local storeowner and moneylender who later sold it to Fernandez.

The above stories and the accounts of Suazo's land ownership and subsequent sales to outsiders reveal that what is taking place in Sambo Creek is more complicated than Mestizos exploiting Garífuna through physical threat and political sway. Although it is true that much of the community's ancestral lands are now in the hands of Mestizos and foreigners, Suazo, a Garífuna man, facilitated some of this transition. Stories of land loss center around women because land loss, whether to a Mestizo or to another Garífuna (like Felipe Suazo) is a process by which women have lost resources to men.<sup>15</sup>

The migratory pattern which takes more men than women out of Sambo Creek in search of wage labor leaves a disproportionate number of women and elders behind to care for children. For women who do not have partners working elsewhere who send back remittances, their most valued resource is their land. When a woman is faced with dire situations, like the need to buy her child food, shoes, school supplies, or medical attention, she will trade her only resource, land. Moreover, as women see land prices skyrocketing (by local standards), some sell their plots for quick cash.

### **Garifuna Women's Activism and the Limitations of Indigenous Rights Discourse**

While Garífuna men are making arguments similar to those this section presents from female activists, my focus is on Garífuna women. Casting our gaze here is

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that Suazo was not perceived of as a ruthless landowner by any means, and was held in high regard by residents. Elsewhere I discuss how comparisons of average purchase prices support what residents claimed about Suazo's land sales – that is, “he looked after the Garífuna community” by buying their ancestral lands back from the Mestizo who claimed them and then selling it back to the Garífuna at a low cost (Brondo 2006: 148-153). Yet, this does not deny the fact that through land sales in general, including Suazo's, the trend in property movement was from female to male hands.

important for two reasons. First, Afro-descendant women are frequently overshadowed within black movements, which are typically led by men (Safa 2004).<sup>16</sup> Second, Garifuna women, who in the past were said to “avoid” politics are currently full center in Garifuna mobilization. With regard to gender and Garifuna politics, Francesca Gargallo (2005) recently argued:

... we, as women, feel slightly apprehensive about politics because we identify it with practices of representative democracy from which we are left out. In fact, politics for Garifuna women rather than being a “man’s thing” has a different feeling; it is a way to organize through actions that belong to a world that is neither feminine nor truly Garifuna. It is interesting to note that Garifuna women regard “politics” (or the dominant values that identify with it) only as something useful, such as a possibility to work or to showcase their artistic activities, and only after they have finished their work at home (Gargallo 2005:154).

Gargallo suggests that Garifuna women avoid politics because it is an arena that they do not identify with, finding themselves more closely associated with matters of the home. If we take this as factual, one could easily extrapolate that since Garifuna communities are matrifocal, a woman’s responsibility is not just to her household, but also to her community. Therefore, once community well-being becomes threatened, Garifuna women are forced into the “political.” And so, in the case of this study, Honduran Garifuna women have been moved, by circumstance, into action to defend their land.

Women fill important positions in both Honduran Garifuna organizations. Women constitute half of ODECO’s leadership positions, including the organization’s legal advisor in charge of all matters surrounding Garifuna land rights. Women are also heavily present in OFRANEH, with their two topmost positions held by women. OFRANEH’s female leadership has become internationally renowned. Despite the centrality of women in Garifuna organizations, and what seems a clearly gendered resource struggle (with women losing land to men), the gendered nature of the land struggle is glossed over or hidden in Garifuna mobilization. The work of some scholars (Deere and Leon 2001; Richards 2005) has shown that the implication of these broadened spaces is that gender can get lost, and gender issues become subordinated or downplayed in order to advance other, more universal goals of a particular movement. Warren and Jackson (2002:29) discuss this as a collision between international development discourse and local expectations where indigenous groups must repackage their concerns and identities in order to access wider audiences and resources.

The indigenous rights movement, and discourse that surround it, provide the Garifuna with powerful legal tools to reclaim lost territory within the context of development agendas. Mobilizing as indigenous peoples, therefore, has been a very

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<sup>16</sup> Despite the growing number of Afrodescendent women involved in Latin American NGOs and ethnic organizations, there has been very little written on this topic. Most of the literature that is available is focused on South America, and Brazil in particular (e.g., Pitanguy 2002, Baldez 2003).

effective strategy in gaining international recognition and support for a “local” struggle. However, unifying as indigenous peoples first and foremost has meant the differences in how Garifuna women and men experience land loss and privatization go unrecognized.

Additionally, a common occurrence in cases where gender differentials are subordinated to unify indigenous identity is that women become essentialized. Indigenous women are valorized for their role in the reproduction of indigenous culture and as the main agent of socialization (Moya 1987 quoted in Deere and Leon 2006:51). Taken together, the following two quotes from OFRANEH’s female activists illustrate these processes. The first quote is excerpted from an interview I conducted in 2000 with a key figure from OFRANEH that was focused on the organization’s position regarding the national development agenda. The second is an excerpt from a 2002 statement issued to former President Ricardo Maduro demanding territorial recognition (OFRANEH 2002).

Development can destroy and most often does destroy culture, customs, folklore, and spirit...For example, many people think putting latrines in pueblos is development. It isn't enough. The communities need sustainability, education, sources of food... Some people think that the Garífuna communities that do not have electricity need it, thinking this is development. But I disagree. Electricity isn't automatically development. Our communities have certain traditions because we do not have electricity. Women all gather together at night to talk beneath the moon. If you bring electricity to their community, they will stop, and this will destroy their traditions. Their kids will be watching television all the time (author’s translation from Spanish).

...of the 48 communities in which you’ll find our population...28 of them are within protected areas or tropical zones. This is a clear signal of the role that we have played in the conservation of natural resources and how our traditional knowledge is essential in the management of coastal and marine ecosystems. Unfortunately, our lack of territorial and ecological control has resulted in agricultural colonization...The erosion of biodiversity and the destruction of ecosystems affect the development of the tourist industry, as it depends in great measure on the supply of this country’s environmental and cultural wealth. To date, Garifuna communities have preserved the traditional culture of our people, which was declared last year by UNESCO as “the cultural patrimony of humanity.”...we can play an essential role in strengthening the processes of nature conservation and implementing new ways of obtaining foreign currency, such as tourism...(OFRANEH 2002; author’s translation from Spanish).

In the first statement “development” is contrasted with cultural survival, and women’s traditions (e.g., sharing stories with their children under the moonlight) are drawn out as playing a key role in teaching Garifuna culture to future generations. These arguments adopt international indigenous rights discourse which tend to essentialize women as bearers of culture and responsible for the survival of the Garifuna people. They also adopt international development discourse which pits development (read: modernity) against a static indigenous community (read: tradition). By representing their struggle in this way, women’s traditions – such as talking beneath the moonlight, the making of



*ereba* or *machuca*, dancing *punta*, or enacting the *dugu* – are implicitly assumed to be the transmitters of “culture.” OFRANEH’s female leadership signals to the nation-state that Garifuna women’s knowledge is central to Honduras’ successful development of cultural and ecotourism initiatives, and points towards the international resolutions (e.g., ILO 169, UNESCO’s recognition of the Garifuna “intangible cultural heritage”) that validate this relationship. While women’s traditions are implicit in the activist’s demand for territorial recognition (as they are tied to “cultural survival”), the gendered nature of the loss of territories goes unsaid.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that contrary to past claims that “Garifuna women avoid politics,” Honduran Garifuna women are deeply embedded in political struggles (so much so that they have taken bullets). While Garifuna women have indeed moved into the political sphere, it serves to note that their organizing efforts have yet to engage with the gendered dimensions of the land struggle and how shifts in coastal land ownership (past and current) affect men and women differently. The explanation for this omission could be found in one or more of the following observations.

The omission of the gendered nature of the land struggle may be a symptom of the infancy of Garifuna mobilization and the fact that Garifuna women are only just now sorting through their mobilization strategies. But perhaps more accurately, the lack of explicit attention to gender may reflect a broader reality about the way in which indigenous rights struggles are framed. Generally speaking, collective action in indigenous movements is generated by an emphasis on shared ethnic identity, and gender and class differences are often ignored or overlooked. However, in this moment, the adoption of an indigenous rights approach by Garifuna activists is likely the most effective resistance strategy. International audiences and funding agencies are currently concerned with “cultural survival,” and therefore organizations like OFRANEH or ODECO increase their opportunities for funding and publicity by placing their struggle squarely in the indigenous rights movement. Gender is hidden in the broader struggle for Garifuna rights as indigenous peoples, because it is gender that cuts within the indigenous movement, with Garifuna men (in some cases benefiting from Garifuna women’s land loss).

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