



ANDY PALACIO

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AN AFRICAN DIASPORA TREASURE DIES

BY IRMA MCCLAURIN

"...Down Albert Street, the main thoroughfare in Belize City, the 'punta' sounds of Andy Palacio and Chico Ramos can be heard rocking the streets." (Women of Belize: Gender and Change in Central America, p. 34).

I remember vividly finally mastering the undulating hip and shuffling feet movements that are the trade mark of punta, a dance form in Belize, Central America popularized by Andy Palacio, a local artist.

On Saturday, January 19, 2008, at the very young age of 47, Andy Palacio, a Belizean national treasure, died. His was an

influence that resonated across many different borders inside Belize, and touched the hearts and souls of African-descended people throughout Central and South America, the Caribbean, the United States, Canada, Europe and Africa. Andy, and his people represent the spirit of resistance, creativity and innovation that we know is part of the character of the African Diaspora. The origins of the Garifuna people are complicated, and filled with many serendipitous events, resistance, will power, and genius.

As the story goes, West African slaves believed to come from "the Yoruba, Ibo and Ashanti tribes" were shipwrecked off the coast of the Island of St. Vincent. ▶

They came ashore and were protected by the indigenous population of Island Caribs with whom they formed strong alliances. The Island Caribs were an amalgamation of Carib and Arawak Indians that occurred sometimes through warfare, with Arawak women often taken as war prizes. As a result, the Arawak-Carib women spoke a different language than men. This women's language pattern survives into the present. The intermixing and intermarriage of the maroon (escaped) Africans and the Island Caribs resulted in a new people -the Garifuna- whose language drew upon its African roots mixed with Carib and Arawak. Sometimes called Karaphuna, according to one source, " 'Gari' is African for food," and "Garifuna roughly translates into 'cassava-eating people.'"

Anthropologists labeled this newest group "black Carib" as a way of distinguishing them from the original indigenous populations of St. Vincent. This distinction would later have dire consequences. Over time, the Garifuna adopted the term Garinagu to describe themselves as a group, and Garifuna to refer to their language and culture.

While the Red, Yellow, and Black Carib co-existed peacefully with the French, they were in constant battle with

British forces, especially after the signing of the 1763 Treaty of Paris that gave the British control of the island.

The French allied themselves with the Caribs, and in 1795, despite a previous treaty, a major final battle over land

occurred. The French surrendered one year later, but the Garinagu continued for another year. Despite their surrender, the British decided to exile the survivors. According to anthropologist, Mark Anderson, the British "seized upon the blackness of the Garifuna to question their [ethnic] purity and legitimacy and to justify their expulsion."

In 1772, the British, distinguishing the Red and Yellow Caribs from those who appeared Black to them, separating families and loved ones, placed 4,338 people on a boat to the Roatan, one of islands off the coast of the Honduras. Only 2,026 people survived the journey. As I've written elsewhere, they "... were able to do so because of the cassava plant that they were able to hide among their clothes, keeping it moist through the sweat of their own bodies." The importance of cassava bread continues among Garinagua today.

Only a small group stayed to found what would become Punta Gorda, the oldest Garinagu town; the majority moved on, establishing themselves along the coast of Guatemala, Nicaragua, and much later Belize. It is this latter group who in 1832 arrived in Belize (formerly the British Honduras, and the only country in all of Central and South America where English is the national language) and took up residence in the district known as Stann Creek, but now called Dangriga, to which the late Palacio traces his cultural and historical roots.

What the Garifuna carried with them, as they formed a diaspora scattered throughout Central America (Spanish Honduras, Guatemala, and Belize, formerly the British Honduras), was a rich cultural tradition of music, foodways (especially their survival food- cassava bread), and *dugu* (or ancestor worship), which they mingled successfully with their beliefs in the Anglican church. And, of course, music.

Belize mourns the loss of Palacio. He was only 47-years-old; those who had the good fortune to meet him would attest to his modesty and humility despite the popularity of his music. And most of us remember his passion for preserving Garinagu culture and music.

In a January 21, 2008, interview for "All things Considered" on Minnesota Public Radio, Said Musa, former Prime Minister, and now president of the National Institute of History and Culture, called Andy "a cultural activist."

Indeed he was that and much because of his unwavering commitment to preserve the Garinagu history, language

and culture. But Palacio was much more. For those of us in the African Diaspora in the United States who may never travel beyond the boundaries of our neighborhoods or regional and national borders, Andy's music was a window into our dynamic African Diaspora past, present and future. He proved through his music how resilient African culture could be and how relevant it still is to contemporary culture.

Andy's work and his music will serve as an inspiration for us to think about ourselves as an African Diaspora people who have given

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the world tremendous cultural riches. He will always be a Belizean national treasure. But he is also an African Diaspora treasure. He joins the ranks of some of our own Black American departed greats: Paul Robeson, Marian Anderson, Luther Vandross, and James Brown, to name a few.

We shall miss you Andy, even as the sounds of punta rock on.

Irma McClaurin is the author of Women of Belize: Gender and Change in Central America. As an anthropologist, she has conducted research in Belize since 1991. She joined the University of Minnesota in December as the new Associate VP for System Academic Administration and Executive Director of the Urban Research and Outreach/Engagement Center in North Minneapolis. The opinions expressed here are entirely her own.

For more on Andy Palacio, his music and his country, visit:

- <http://www.cumbancha.com/welcome.php>
- <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18287881>
- <http://soundroots.org/2008/01/remembering-andy-palacio.html>
- http://worldmusiccentral.org/article.php/andy_palacio_seriously_ill

YouTube:

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3N065Jdm50>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nt6oOzyG9ec>

