Chapter Four

Garifuna

An Ethnolinguistic Identity in Flux

The story of the Garifuna communities of coastal Belize is fraught with hardship, migration, and contact with other peoples as the Garifuna moved through various points in the Caribbean and Central America before landing in Belize. Garifuna peoples are believed to have descended from the intermarriage of African slaves with indigenous Amerindian Caribs in the Caribbean, and the contemporary Garifuna language reflects this history as well as the extensive contact with European colonizers in the region. As Escure (2004: 36) notes, the language “has been claimed to have a primary Arawak substrate, combined with other linguistic elements, including Carib, Spanish, French and English.” Over the centuries, Arawakan languages were brought to Central America and the Caribbean through migration; yet Garifuna is the only Arawakan language spoken in the region today. Sometime prior to the 1600s, the Arawak peoples on the island of St. Vincent were conquered or absorbed by an indigenous Carib group. The resulting linguistic blend of Cariban and Arawakan languages was what was found on St. Vincent in the 1600s when the shipwrecked African slaves arrived, and remnants of both Cariban and Arawakan languages are well represented in the Garifuna language today. According to Escure (2004: 46), the grammar of Garifuna appears “to include synthetic Arawakan morphosyntax, as well as lexical and morphological Carib elements.”

Garifuna history prior to 1797 is not clear; however, it is accepted by many historians and the Garifuna themselves that the genesis of the Garifuna people occurred sometime in the 1600s, when two Spanish ships carrying African slaves to the Caribbean were
shipwrecked near St. Vincent. The surviving Africans who made it ashore then mixed with the indigenous Carib-Arawak population on the island, and over several generations they came to be known as “Black Caribs.” In 1797, the Black Caribs were forcibly removed from St. Vincent by the British and mostly relocated to Roatan Island off the coast of Honduras. Farming conditions on Roatan were much less amenable than on St. Vincent, and members of the group very soon moved to mainland Honduras and shortly thereafter began migrating northward to coastal Belize. By the mid-late nineteenth century, groups of Black Caribs had established several communities in Belize, including the village of Seine Bight, which provides the case study for the present work.

**Belizean Garifuna Communities Today**

When Belize gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1981, the Garifuna gained official recognition, and as Escure notes, “Black Carib gave way to Garifuna (and Garinagu) as a sign of respect.” There are several Garifuna communities in Belize today, and they make up approximately 6 percent of the nation’s population, with roughly 19,000 people claiming Garifuna ethnicity around the country (Statistical Institute of Belize 2010). The primary Garifuna communities in Belize are found in the towns of Dangriga and Punta Gorda and the smaller villages of Seine Bight, Hopkins, Barranco, and Georgetown. The last two Garifuna communities listed, Barranco and Georgetown, are small and are commonly represented as having aging populations with little presence of Garifuna youth who speak the language. The Garifuna community in Punta Gorda is substantially larger than those of the aforementioned communities; yet in Punta Gorda, an extremely diverse town of Creoles, Mayans, East Indians, Chinese, Mennonites, and Mestizos, one likewise hears very little Garifuna on the street.

Dangriga, in Stann Creek District, is commonly considered to be the cultural capital of the Garifuna people: the largest Garifuna population is located there, and it is home to the National Garifuna Council, the Gulisi Garifuna Museum, and a bilingual English/Garifuna primary school. Yet, even in Dangriga the Garifuna language
occupies a precarious space. Bonner (2001: 94), for example, relays a poignant story of a Dangriga woman in her late thirties who spoke Garifuna around town as an act of defiance, and who was written off as “crazy” by many in the town. The narrative is worth repeating here:

I never once heard her speak a word of Creole or Spanish. She would walk into the store where we both shopped and give her order to the Creole store-owner, speaking “lone Garifuna” in a voice loud enough to carry out the windows and into the neighbors’ yards. The owner waited on her, a scowl on his face, handing her everything she requested. He had learned Garifuna twenty years earlier, when he was a small boy and his family had first moved from Creole-dominated Belize City to Dangriga to open a grocery store. At that time, Garifuna was unquestionably the language of Dangriga, and those who owned businesses in town had to learn it. This is no longer true. Dangriga is no longer simply the Garifuna town of Belize. It is, rather, a multiethnic Belizean town. Furthermore, in the context of immigration from Spanish-speaking countries, the language that authentic Belizeans are expected to speak is English Creole. Today, this woman’s use of Garifuna is an act of resistance; when coupled with the broader social context, it is dismissed as “crazy.”

This story from Dangriga could be generalized to most of the Garifuna communities in Belize. Escure (2004), for example, remarks that Garifuna is an endangered language in Belize and Honduras, as it is only spoken fluently by those over fifty years of age.

A possible exception might be Hopkins village, which has been claimed to still raise children to speak Garifuna natively, though this claim is not without controversy. There is, however, a clear perception of Hopkins by Garifuna people in other communities as being the last bastion of the Garifuna language in Belize. For example, the National Garifuna Council’s website asserts: “However, it is only in one village—Hopkins—that young children still learn [Garifuna] as their native language” (ISCR n.d.). We heard this same statement—repeated almost as a refrain—by everyone we surveyed in Seine Bight. Further, Ravindranath (2009), who based her disser-
tation fieldwork in Hopkins from 2007 to 2008, reports that many children in Hopkins do indeed learn both Garifuna and Kriol as first languages. She further expresses hope about the future of the Garifuna language in Hopkins. Citing social and economic factors such as changing emigration patterns and the growing tourism industry in the village, she suggests it might be possible to achieve a stable bilingualism in Hopkins and thus continued use of the Garifuna language. The idea is rooted in the belief that the tourist industry could provide local jobs for Hopkins residents, allowing them to live at home and so maintain ties with the Garifuna community rather than emigrating elsewhere for work.

It has been almost a decade since Ravindranath’s work in Hopkins, and to our knowledge no follow-up work has been conducted. The tourist industry is indeed growing furiously in Hopkins, as it is located near some of the most beautiful beaches in Belize. Similar to the situation we will discuss below with respect to Seine Bight, luxury development is fast encroaching on Hopkins as well, squeezing it inward from all sides. As Ravindranath (2009: 179) writes, “The purchase of large pieces of land at the edges of the village by expatriate North Americans, has created a potentially volatile situation in which the village is running out of room in which to grow.” Consider this description of the Plantation, a luxury development planned for immediately north of Seine Bight. The description is taken from a 2011 study on the ecological impact of the proposed development on the peninsula: “The Plantation proposes to add an additional 10,000+ people over the next 5 years to an area that is only 16 miles long and at maximum one-half mile wide. Belizean people will become a small minority of the Peninsula population. If the development capacity of The Plantation is fully realized, this would increase the Peninsula population by about four or five times, ultimately changing the very nature of the entire area forever” (University of Belize, Natural Resources Management Program 2011: 15). This loss of physical space to foreign luxury development—as well as large land purchases by missionary religious groups in other districts—is a recurring problem for Garifuna villages as well as those of other ethnic groups elsewhere in Belize.

In what follows, we report on our recent fieldwork on Garifuna
language use in Seine Bight, as well as the prospects we see for the future of the language there, and the situational circumstances we see leading to this future. As no linguistic fieldwork has been conducted in Seine Bight since Escure (2004), it is worthwhile to revisit this important Garifuna site to reconsider the state of the language.

A Case Study in Seine Bight

Seine Bight village is located approximately halfway out on the Placencia Peninsula in southern Belize. Settled by Garifuna migrants from Honduras in the mid-nineteenth century, it is located approximately ninety miles north of Punta Gorda and forty miles south of Dangriga, the two largest Garifuna communities in the country today. The most recent national census reports approximately 1,300 residents in Seine Bight, with a large majority of these being Garifuna, but also including small numbers of other ethnicities, such as Mestizo and Chinese. The large Garifuna majority in the village, as well as its long settlement history and its current proximity to rapidly growing tourist developments, make it a valuable site for a study of this kind.

Seine Bight is a long, narrow village situated on a peninsula enveloped by a lagoon to the west and the Caribbean Sea to the east (map 3). The village is approximately one mile long and perhaps a half-mile wide in places. Map 3 shows the central core of the village. To the immediate north and south of the village pictured here are rapidly growing luxury developments of mostly U.S. and European ownership. Four miles to the south is Placencia, which was a Creole fishing village until perhaps the 1990s, at which point it began to undergo massive tourist development and is now one of the most popular tourist destinations in Belize, with mostly foreign-owned tourist businesses, including a luxury resort owned by film director Francis Ford Coppola. As Carol Key (2002: 78) writes, “Before 1991 it was still possible for Belizeans to purchase property in [Placencia]; however, by 1994 the price for land had risen beyond what a Belizean could afford.”

Seine Bight villagers historically depended on subsistence fishing and agriculture, with Garifuna men also frequently migrating
elsewhere for work and returning home to the village. In the last several decades this migration has grown to include women and children and has become less cyclical, with migrants often emigrating permanently, usually to large urban areas in the United States such as Los Angeles and New York City. As Escure (2004: 38) writes, “There are no official figures on emigration, but it is estimated that the population living outside Central America is at least as large as that residing in the region.” Today, traditional fishing and agricultural wage labor have largely given way to livelihoods associated with tourism—that is, selling goods to tourists, working in tourist-oriented businesses in Placencia, and so on—with women doing the latter more frequently. The decline in fishing is due to a number of factors. Most prominent is the shrinking numbers of fish in the surrounding waters—due to overfishing, pollution, increased population, and other factors—which makes it necessary to work

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longer and harder to make ends meet as a fisherman. Quite simply, it is easier to earn a living in the service industry (see Key 2002; and University of Belize, Natural Resources Management Program 2011: 33). Remittances from relatives living elsewhere also continue to be a vital contribution to the village economy (see Palacio 1982; Key 2002; and Escure 2004).

Linguistic Fieldwork in Seine Bight

There has been very little work done on attitudes and use of the Garifuna language in Seine Bight, or discussion of its declining status. The closest work we know of is Escure’s 2004 article on grammatical structure in the Garifuna language. Similarly, Ravindranath 2009 discusses language use in Seine Bight briefly; however, the dissertation is primarily concerned with Garifuna language in Hopkins, approximately thirty miles to the north. To get a picture of contemporary language use in Seine Bight, our 2016 fieldwork relied on formal surveys as well as ethnographic observations in a range of social settings. The results of both of these methods suggest that Garifuna language is indeed in dramatic decline in Seine Bight, and that thirteen years later the language is likely in more dire straits than was reported in Escure 2004.

In May 2016, we conducted language status surveys in Seine Bight with fifty village residents. Participants were evenly distributed across gender and divided into two approximately equally weighted age groups: one composed of people thirty-five years and under, and the other thirty-six and older. Surveys contained a total of thirty-three questions. Some of the questions were demographic and required only simple answers. Others invited lengthy discussion. We were primarily interested in finding out who was believed to speak Garifuna (that is, which age group and gender) and in what types of social situations it was likely to be spoken. We also wanted to know what sorts of attitudes residents had toward Garifuna and the other languages spoken in the surrounding area. We used several direct questions, such as (1) “What language do young people speak more?” and (2) “What language do old people speak more?” The survey also included open-ended questions, querying social
situations, such as (3) “What languages are used in school/church/shops/on the street in Seine Bight?” and questions of a more personal nature, like (4) “What language do you use with your/spouse/children/grandchildren?” We also included preference questions such as, (5) “What language would you prefer be used in schools in Seine Bight? Why?” The answers to the first two questions were completely uniform. All fifty participants agreed that young people used Kriol or English, and that only much older people were capable of using Garifuna fluently. Of our fifty participants, sixteen were under twenty years of age, and only five of these sixteen reported being able to speak even a few words of Garifuna. With respect to the third question, the nearly unanimous response was that Garifuna was heard in speech among the elderly or on the national Garifuna holiday, Garifuna Settlement Day, which is celebrated November 19. Regarding use of the Garifuna language in Seine Bight, the result was again essentially unanimous that the speech heard and used everywhere in the village is Kriol. Potentially the most interesting results of the survey came in responses to the fourth question. Among the participants who had spouses, children, and grandchildren, we found that those over fifty reported talking to their spouse in Garifuna, but they also reported talking to their children and grandchildren in Kriol—a couple of participants commented on their surveys that they speak to their children and grandchildren in Garifuna but that the children respond to them in Kriol. A pair of brothers in their late twenties shared a particularly touching story about their childhood, which captures the differing generational abilities in the language and the frustration and regret frequently attendant upon such situations. When the brothers were children, one of their neighbors, an elderly man, would address them in Garifuna, but they would respond to him in Kriol, as they were unable to speak the traditional language. The old man would yell and curse at the children, telling them that they were stupid and that it was their fault that their heritage was slipping away. The brothers attempted to tell this story to us in a humorous way, but it was clear from their silence that followed that it had affected them deeply.

When queried as to why the language was falling out of use, participants invariably responded that their children and grand-
children do not speak Garifuna. The results of this question offer a rather dramatic, cross-sectional depiction of the language as it diminishes across the generations. It is also telling that the villagers are explicitly aware of this intergenerational disruption of the language. We received a variety of responses to the fifth question, which were again quite telling as to the status of the language. Most participants indicated that they would prefer schools teach English over any other language, with female participants choosing English overwhelmingly. In fact, a group of teenage girls we surveyed, who were between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, burst into laughter when asked if they thought Garifuna should be taught in school, saying that there was no reason whatsoever to speak Garifuna. The most common justification given among female participants was that learning English would offer better chances of success for future job opportunities. Male participants, as young as fourteen years old, were more likely to say that Garifuna should be taught alongside English, and they frequently expressed regret that it was not.14

Two young women we surveyed illustrate this gender distinction especially clearly. Both under the age of eighteen, they work at a Garifuna-themed restaurant in town that specializes in Garifuna food such as hudut, a stew of fish, plantains, and coconut. Neither of the young women could speak Garifuna. Over the course of the interview, the girls expressed pride in being able to prepare traditional Garifuna foods, but they nonetheless indicated their preference that students learn English in school.

In sum, the surveys present a picture of the Garifuna language in Seine Bight as something of an artifact of the elderly, with little evidence of intergenerational transmission and bleak prospects for the long-term health of the language. However, quantitative surveys of the type just reported are frequently criticized for a variety of reasons. It has been argued, for example, that direct self-reporting of attitude and usage facts is not always reliable. Survey questions can be worded in such ways that participants do not understand what researchers are asking. Similarly, numerous factors surrounding the context in which surveys are taken have been shown to influence results. Most worrisome, however, is that participants’ per-
ceptions of their own attitude and usage tendencies don’t always match with observed behavior. We therefore followed up on the survey results with ethnographic observations in a variety of social situations. The results of our ethnographic work not only confirm but provide an even starker portrait of the state of the Garifuna language in the village.

Ethnographic Fieldwork

In addition to the fifty quantitative surveys discussed above, we followed up with ethnographic observations in a wide variety of social settings. According to the results of the first question above, it appears that older people in Seine Bight still speak mainly Garifuna and that younger people speak mainly Kriol. Our ethnographic work did not find this to be the case. Certainly the younger people spoke Kriol in all social settings in which we observed them; however, we heard very little Garifuna spoken by anyone of any age.

We observed a wide range of social settings: including those in which the nature of our presence as researchers was known, as well as those in which it was not. For example, when we were invited into people’s homes to talk and spend time with their families, we played a direct role in the social situation and very likely affected the nature of the language that was used. However, we also observed many social situations in which we played no role whatsoever. These were by far the most common, and we mention a few to give the reader an idea of the naturalness of the situations and data. Everywhere we went, we listened, whether we were sitting behind people conversing at a bus stop or whether we were walking in the aisles of a grocery store, having lunch at a Garifuna restaurant, resting on the front porch of a community center during a teen function, watching a softball game as players called to each other as well as observers on the sidelines, standing in the shade on the schoolyard listening to children at play, sitting in a church pew or on the front porch before a Sunday service, observing on the street as mothers disciplined their children, or pausing as the sounds of a violent argument between two lovers spilled out of a house and into the sandy street where we stood. In all such situations, we heard
only Kriol, and no Garifuna spoken by young or old. These kinds of observations—and the distance from which we made them—do much to obviate the problems of the observer’s paradox. The people we listened to were not concerned with us, and we were in no way participating in their lives or interactions. We are confident that the language we heard spoken was natural for the situations, with our presence playing no influencing role.16

This ethnographic experience not only verifies what was found in the surveys but strengthens the claims that can be made based upon them. It is also testifies to the importance of mixed method fieldwork. Survey results suggest that older folk speak primarily Garifuna; yet this was not our experience in any of the numerous situations we observed. This leaves one to conclude that the Garifuna spoken by the older generations is limited to a small number of special or closed-door situations to which we did not have access. It also suggests that the number of situations in which even the elderly find it useful to speak Garifuna have diminished substantially. In essence, the observational work presents an even bleaker picture of the state of the language than is revealed by the surveys, as the observations seem to indicate that most people in Seine Bight do not use Garifuna at all in day-to-day situations.

Pressures on the Garifuna Language in Seine Bight

A variety of factors over the years have adversely affected the state of the Garifuna language in Seine Bight. Some of these could be considered general factors of globalization, which have arguably affected the state of the Garifuna language in most villages in the country, including Seine Bight. Some, however, are factors specific to Seine Bight. We’ll begin with the first group of more general pressures, including cultural contact and erosion, which we suggest have weakened the state of the language in general.

The extensive transnational movements of the Garifuna people are well known. As mentioned above, Garifuna communities in New York City and Los Angeles are now arguably larger than those in Central America. Most Garinagu in Belize have relatives who have emigrated to the United States and are in close contact with
external cultural standards as a result. The easy availability of U.S. media contributes to this contact as well, as television and smart phones, Facebook and YouTube, are ubiquitous in Garifuna households. This onslaught of exposure to influential external belief systems has undoubtedly diminished traditional aspects of Garifuna culture, which in turn undermines a crucial foundation for maintaining the language. For example, the traditional Garifuna religion, which includes ancestor veneration and possession trances, is in sharp conflict with the much larger, mainstream Abrahamic religious systems with which the Garifuna are constantly in contact. Historically, the Garifuna have been able to maintain their religious system even in the face of such contact (see Cayetano 1974). It is not clear that this is still the case in Belize. Nancie González (1988: 92), for example, reports that at the time of her research, the Garifuna dugu ceremonies, which are central to the Garifuna religion and include ancestral spirit possession, were believed by many to have become “big business” and too expensive for most Garifuna to afford. She cites a Honduran buwiye (holy man) who believed that the “Belizean Garifuna had lost the essential holiness of the ritual in their efforts to outdo each other in the amount of money spent.” In a sense, then, although the ritual itself persists, it’s not clear that it holds the same spiritual and cultural weight as in times past.

González also notes that Garifuna religious beliefs are frequently abandoned by emigrants from Central America as they adapt to the cultural settings in their new home, usually the United States. As she writes, “Many of the more widely traveled Garifuna of the past fifty years, especially those who were in more or less constant contact with American or English employers, are openly skeptical, if not contemptuous, of the whole ritual complex” (González 1998: 91). One can imagine, then, the effects of this on their countrymen who remain behind in the village and witness these emigrants returning with an improved socioeconomic status and the prestige that often accompanies it. We suggest that as these cultural underpinnings are muted or spread thin over time, the need and ability to maintain the language is further compromised.

In essence what we are describing is a reduction of situations in which the traditional language is seen to be useful. As we will dis-
cuss below, speaking Garifuna does not seem to provide the people with obvious socioeconomic advantages; and, if important cultural institutions such as religious rites begin to erode as well, it is that much more difficult to see a healthy path forward for the language.20

In terms of socioeconomic advantages, it is not clear what the benefits of speaking Garifuna would be for the residents of Seine Bight. Employment in the surrounding tourist industry requires facility in Kriol or English. This is similarly true for nearby agricultural work, in which the Spanish language would also be welcome. However, there are no local markets, trade venues, or other areas of employment in which speaking Garifuna is a requirement, and thus no obvious platform of support for the language in this area. We can contrast this situation with, for example, those described in Mufwene 2003 with respect to the African languages Lingala, Swahili, and Hausa, in which indigenous languages are similarly in contact with major European languages, but in which the indigenous languages do not seem to be in an endangering competition. Mufwene describes two-tiered economic systems here, in which vital roles for the indigenous languages continue to exist alongside European languages. As he writes, “Despite the dominant use of European languages in the media, the indigenous African languages maintain such an important role in the socio-economic lives of most black Africans that there is no particular reason to see them in competition now with the European languages.” The same cannot be said for the Garifuna language.

Closer to home, a comparison of the Garifuna situation with that of the Belizean Mennonites is similarly instructive. According to the 2010 census, the Garifuna population in Belize is almost twice as large as that of the Mennonites. However, there are more German speakers in Belize than Garifuna speakers. The circumstances of the two communities seem to predict this result. For example, the Mennonites control a large percentage of the agricultural production in Belize. They also mostly live apart from the general Belizean population, with a strong sense of community identity grounded in religion as well as their internal economic establishment. We also see
much less contact with international tourism and miniscule Mennonite emigration to other countries. Lastly, the Garifuna boast a 95 percent literacy rate in English, while Mennonites report only 22 percent literacy. The Mennonites, whose Plautdietsch language seems to be relatively secure, thus contrast with the Garifuna in almost every possible way with regard to language vitality.

Returning to Seine Bight specifically, the rapidly growing tourism industry on both sides of the village and the effects this must be having on Garifuna language and culture cannot be overstated. As you drive into Seine Bight from the north side of the peninsula, you are immediately struck by the high-end real estate signage and sprawl of condominiums and foreign-owned resorts leading right up to the Seine Bight city limit sign. The same is true when one leaves Seine Bight heading south toward Placencia. There is virtually nowhere for Seine Bight to grow, enveloped as the town is between expensive foreign developments. We noted foreign real estate listings within Seine Bight as well, and we were told that this was the first time in recent history that property was listed this way in the town. The effect of approaching Seine Bight and driving through it from north to south is passing from a wealthy tourist destination through a mile of abject poverty and then back to the wealthy tourist destination. It seems only a matter of time before Seine Bight itself will be sold out from underneath its residents.

With such close proximity to the tourist businesses, one might hold out hope that Seine Bight residents will find employment and thus a path toward economic, cultural, and linguistic security. This does not seem to be happening, however. Writing in 2002, Key reported that Seine Bight residents did supply labor to the tourist businesses. In our observations fourteen years later, there seem to be far more Spanish/Mestizo employees in the resorts surrounding Seine Bight. And discussion with multiple tourist business owners revealed attitudes toward both Creoles and Garifuna as “not hard working,” and that “unfortunately” it was better to hire Spanish-speaking immigrants from Guatemala and Honduras or Mestizo Belizeans from Cayo District. Our ethnographic observations in the larger more prestigious resorts on the peninsula confirmed that this
was indeed the case, with the exception of the occasional Garifuna 
woman working in Placencia.

It seems that in Seine Bight, then, both economic and cultural 
forces have conspired to squeeze out the Garifuna language, and 
that barring some large and far-reaching change, the language will 
be very soon lost there.