

# Garifuna Religion

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The Garifuna ethnic group (also called Black Caribs) lives in Central America, the Caribbean and various cities in the USA, Canada and England (a total population of about 100,000-150,000) and can be distinguished by its unique cultural patterns: language, religion, crafts, music, dance and lifestyle.

The history of the Garifuna ("cassava eating people") begins on the Island of St. Vincent in the eastern Caribbean, which was originally inhabited by a mixture of Caribe and Arawak tribes (linguistically Maipuran and Arawakan, or Island Carib) from mainland South America prior to the period of Spanish colonization that began in 1492. Soon after their initial contact with Europeans, the Island Caribs began to absorb individual Europeans (from Spain, France and England) and West Africans (mainly from shipwrecked Spanish slave ships) by means of capture or rescue. By 1700, a new ethnic group emerged on St. Vincent that was racially and culturally distinct from that of the Island Caribs: the Garifuna.

In terms of their language and cultural patterns, the Garifuna are an Afro-Amerindian people (called Zambos by the Spanish) who have blended various traits of their ancestors to create a unique social system with a strong emphasis on music, dance and story-telling, and with its unique brand of religion that consists of a mixture of Indian, African and Catholic beliefs. Another distinctive is that the Garifuna are matrifocal, which means that the women are the center of the household and that descendents trace their bloodline (consanguineal) through their mother's family.

In November of 1997, the Garifuna celebrated the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their arrival on the shores of Central America, after being forcibly removed by the British from the Island of St. Vincent in 1797. After conquering many of the Spanish-held islands in the Caribbean, the British decided to take control of the French-held Island of St. Vincent during the 1770s. By 1783 the British had dominated the French inhabitants and their slaves, and attempted to subjugate about 7,000-8,000 Garifunas. However, many Garifunas were killed in battles with the British or died from European diseases during this period. During 1795-1797, the British hunted down, killed or captured the remaining Garifuna population, destroyed their homes, and deported on eight or nine ships about 2,250 survivors to the Island of Roatan in the Bay Islands, off the coast of Honduras. However, the Garifuna leaders considered Roatan to be unsuitable for such a large population and requested help from the Spanish authorities at Trujillo, on the mainland of Honduras. By the end of September 1797, about 1,700 Garifuna had been resettled near Trujillo by the Spanish, who hoped that the Garifuna would provide them with needed manpower for the development of farming communities on the north coast of Honduras.

By 1900, the Garifuna had established their own settlements along the Caribbean coast of Central America, predominantly in Honduras, Guatemala and Belize (known at that time as British Honduras), but also at Sandy Bay in Nicaragua. The principal settlements were at Stann Creek and Punta Gorda in Belize; Livingston, near Puerto Barrios, in Guatemala; and at scores of locations along the northern coast of Honduras, near the major cities of Puerto Cortés, Tela, La Ceiba and Trujillo. In 1974, it was estimated that the Garifuna population in Honduras was about 60,900, with about 10,600 in Belize, 5,500 in Guatemala, and 800 in Nicaragua. With few exceptions, most of these settlements were located within 200 yards of the sea, at river-mouths, fresh-water lagoons and protected bays. Also, during the 1970s, thousands of Garifuna were reported to have migrated to U.S. cities (New York, Boston, New Orleans and Los Angeles), where the men typically served in the U.S. merchant fleet. More recently, Garifuna families have been reported in port cities of Canada and Great Britain.

Soon after their arrival in Central America in 1797, the Garifuna were considered by the Spanish and British settlers to be "devil-worshippers, polygamists and speakers of a secret language," which strengthened the Garifuna's resolve to live apart in their own settlements, maintain their independence and conserve their culture. The Garifuna songs and dance styles display a wide range of subjects, such as work songs, social dances and ancestral traditions; one of the most popular dances is called "La Punta," which is performed at wakes, holidays, parties and other social events. Some of these traditional dances and ceremonies have to do with the Garifuna's respect for the dead: the Amuyadahani ("bathing the spirit of the dead"), the Chuga ("feeding the dead") and the Dugu ("the feasting of the dead").

The Garifuna perform these religious rites and ceremonies because, like many Amerindian and African societies, they believe that the spirits of their dead ancestors, which are both good and evil and have a direct impact on the lives of people in the living world, must be respected, worshipped and appeased. This religious tradition is known as animism or spiritism.

Although some Garifunas adopted Catholicism on the Island of St. Vincent during the French occupation or after arriving on the Spanish-controlled mainland of Central America, this was more a "political decision" rather than an authentic conversion to Christianity. After migrating to the south coast of Belize and establishing permanent settlements, some Garifunas accepted the presence of Anglican, Methodist and Baptist missionaries in their villages and eventually the establishment of English-speaking Protestant churches and schools, beginning in the early 1800s. Later, the Seventh-Day Adventists and the Church of the Nazarene developed churches and schools in Garifuna villages in Belize. In Honduras, there are a few Baptist churches among the Garifuna, near Tela.

However, the core of Garifuna culture is their traditional Afro-Amerindian rites and rituals that are practiced in every Garifuna settlement, and the *buwiye* or shaman (male or female) is the direct psychological link between the ancestors and the souls of the living. An important part of their religious ceremonies involves the use of songs, drinking and dance, accompanied by drums and other musical instruments, which sometimes induces a trance-like state of consciousness (called "spirit-possession")

during which time a person may enter the spirit-world and communicate with the ancestors, according to practitioners. These ceremonies, which are similar in some respects to Vodou, Santería and Obeah practices in Haiti, Cuba-Puerto Rico and Jamaica, respectively, are used to mourn the dead, heal the sick, protect family members from harm, do harm to one's enemies, discern the future, assure good fishing and harvests, find a mate, help the dead achieve peace and happiness in the next world, appease alienated spirits, etc. Rum is often administered ritually to begin a ceremony or induce a trance; it is thrown out of the doors and windows to attract the spirits; it is sprinkled upon the dancers, drummers and the possessed to cool and sooth; it is used to cure those seeking relief from physical and psychological ills; and it is used to anoint the sacred table at the end of the ceremony. Food, flowers and candles are normally used in these ceremonies as well, but there is no mention of animal sacrifices being used as in Vodou, Santería, and Obeah rituals. Although many Garifuna today speak Creole English and/or Spanish, most continue to use their traditional language, which is a unique blend of Arawak, Caribe, French, Yuroba, Banti and Swahili.

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#### **SOURCES:**

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