

Gender and Spirituality in Garifuna Music and Dance Culture

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[Wabafu Garifuna Dance Theater](#) by [NPGallery](#) is in the public domain

Introduction

The Garifuna originate from the Caribbean coast of Central America. Spanning across Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras, the Garifuna diaspora is home to rich cultural practices surrounding music, gender, dance, and spirituality. For example, in some ceremonial practices, spirituality and music play a key role in the way Garifuna people honor and communicate with their ancestors. Additionally, in some music and dance practices certain roles are designated for men while other roles are delegated to women. Using a few of the Garifuna's many rich cultural musical practices, one can gain an understanding of how music, dance, spirituality, and gender roles intersect in Garifuna music and culture.

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Spirituality and Music In Garifuna Culture

For Garifuna people, there is a distinction between spirituality and religion. Most Garifuna people identify as Catholic while maintaining their Garifuna spirituality, beliefs, and ritual/ceremonial practices. One of these practices key to Garifuna spiritual practice is the creation of sacred music. There are two ways sacred music is created. It is either composed by an individual –usually a woman–or delivered to individuals by ancestor spirits in the form of a dream. If it is received in the form of the latter, it does not belong to that person but to the culture at large and must be taught to the family, the community, and later absorbed into the ever-evolving repertoire of Garifuna sacred songs. This approach of communal ownership in Garifuna spirituality goes beyond the context of sacred music. “Both the social organization of the vocal group and the lack of vocal polyphony are traits having clear historical connections with Amerindian music. Unlike most West African call-and response patterns, there is little space for vocal elaboration by a soloist in Garifuna song.” (Jenkins & Jenkins, 1982 as cited in Poluha, 2015, pg. 68)

The most important and most defining instrument in Garifuna music is the **garawoun**. The garawoun are drums used in both sacred and secular practices. Traditionally crafted from mayflower or mahogany—although other woods are used today—a solid piece of wood is carved to make the drum. One side is tapered while the wider end is covered with animal skin from a deer, goat, cow, or sheep. The skin is tied to the wood with dried vine. Garawoun distinctively have metal wires or fishing lines stretched as snares across the head of the drum which produces a buzzing sound when played. That buzzing is what calls to the **ahari** which are the ancestral spirits.

Dugu

As with every culture, funerary customs serve an important role for the friends and family of the deceased. In **Belize**, the Garifuna perform the **Dügü** ceremony in the **Dabuyuba** temple as a way to venerate ancestors and those who have recently passed. The ceremony proceeds a nine day funeral and a mass where families pray for the soul of the recently deceased. A large gathering made up of members of the community joins the family, following them with festive singing, dancing, drumming and food sharing. In addition to providing ceremony goers with something to eat, cassava, bananas, coffee, and bread are given as offerings to the ancestors. It should be noted that the Dügü ceremony is only performed if the deceased requests their family to do so. The Garifuna believe that if the deceased’s request is not heard a family member will suddenly fall ill or have a near death experience. If these experiences continue, the family seeks guidance from a spiritual healer. This healer is called a shaman. The shaman performs the Arairaguni, which consists of an invocation ceremony and communicates with the deceased. In doing so they’re able to stop the family from experiencing bad luck (Green 12).

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[The Voice of the Ancestors Drum Circle led by Kelsie Bernardez of Libaya Baba](#) by [Elvert Barnes](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

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Music and gender roles play an important role in the Dügü ceremony. Keeping pace with the **Chürürüti** drums, the family of the deceased dances and sings along to celebrate and communicate with their ancestors. Drumming and singing, performed by men and women respectively, take place in alternating periods of 30 to 45 minutes. During this ceremony men play the drums as it is believed they have better resistance to spiritual activity and as a result are less likely to be possessed by any spirits present. Women, on the other hand, are considered to be more susceptible to possession due to lower resistance to spiritual activity. Because of this, women's role in this ceremony is to accompany the drumming of the men with singing.

Abeimahani is another aspect of the Dugu ceremony. It is a sacred performance where music and gender roles play an important role. During this performance songs are performed by women. While singing they stand side by side and incorporate the use of hand gestures throughout the performance.

Punta Rock



[Grupo de Garifunas haciendo una demostración de Punta en una playa Hondureña](#) by [Alvaro Dia](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

Men and women also play important roles in the Punta genre. Men and women are the protagonists of this dance, as they stand at the center of a circle surrounded by an audience. The men and women stand facing each other moving their hips, posterior, and legs to the beat of drums and the rattle of maracas. When one of the two dancers finishes or does not want to continue dancing, another person enters the circle and the dance continues. If they prefer, dancers can choose to dance alone. As the Punta genre has evolved, children have been allowed to take part in the dance. Additionally, despite the dance traditionally being between a man and a woman, women have come to dance with one another in the center of the circle, breaking traditional Punta gender norms. This genre incorporates Afro-indigenous dance and

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cultural music originating from the Caribbean island of Saint Vincent. It is most popular in Honduras, Guatemala, and Belize.

Dancing, as with the ceremonies and celebrations previously mentioned, plays a key role in this genre of music. As the genre has evolved, people of all ages have begun to take part in the dance.

Spanning across Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and Nicaragua, the Garifuna diaspora has ties to unique customs surrounding spirituality, music, and dance. With growing populations in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, music is used by Garifuna people as a means to maintain ethnic identity and culture despite being far from home. Garifuna people have been successful in their efforts to preserve their culture by modernizing their customs. The evolution of Punta serves as an example of U.S based Garifuna peoples efforts to modernize their music and dance culture. Punta is the most popular genre of music in Garifuna dance culture with songs traditionally composed by women. A symbol for the cock and hen mating call, the dance is described as a sexual dialogue between man and woman as they attempt to outdo each other. The dance involves the use of one's feet, hips and legs while keeping a stiff torso. These movements are also found in a number of traditional African dances.

As previously mentioned, Garifuna people have sought to maintain cultural practices and customs through modernization. Punta Rock, developed in the 80s and 90s, is the result of teenage and middle aged Garifuna peoples efforts. While Punta traditionally uses songs composed by women, Punta Rock deviates from the norms of the genre as it is dominated by songs created by men.



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Wanaragua

Another ceremony celebrated by the Garifuna is Wanaragua. Wanaragua is a ceremony that takes place on December 25th in Dangriga. Dangriga is a town in Belize known as the heart of Belize's Garifuna culture. The name Wanaragua can be translated as "mask" reflecting the exaggerated wire masks worn by ceremony goers. These masks consist of colorful cotton, paper mache, and head wraps, forming a face. During this ceremony, male dancers wear long-sleeved shirts, black or white pants, and large black, pink, or green tail ribbons. These ribbons form a cross in front of their chests and around their waists. Some men opt to wear gloves and tennis shoes. In Guatemala and Honduras, however, this ceremony is carried out with slightly different customs. In Honduras and Guatemala, the costumes traditionally used remain the same structurally. However, the use of long dresses and bright clothes differs from how Wanaragua is traditionally celebrated.

Although the Wanaragua dance is used to celebrate Christmas, this type of music does not have any connections to Christianity. Instead, it represents a struggle between good and evil, telling the story of the British empire's control of enslaved Garifuna people. This dance is said to have been brought to Belize and other countries across the Garifuna diaspora by Jamaicans who call it Jonkunnu. During the 18th century, African slaves performed Wanaragua on plantations during Christmas festivities to mock and imitate their enslavers (Green 22).

The Wanaragua dance is performed by men who follow the rhythm of drums. Typically the dancer leads to the primero drum and the rhythm is harmonized by the vibrating shells attached to the dancer's knees. Families can be seen sitting on their veranda or gathering along the streets, waiting to decipher the direction from where the sound of the beating Garifuna drums is coming.

Conclusion

Wanaragua, Dugu, and Punta are few of many practices important to Garifuna spirituality and music culture. As Garifuna music, dance, and spiritual culture continues to evolve within and without the United States and Central America, it is important to recognize these cultural expressions for the value they bring to the Garifuna community. Not only do these practices allow the Garifuna to feel tied to their enslaved ancestors, as was seen with Wanaragua, or venerate the recently dead, as was seen with Dugu, but they allow for the upholding of a rich culture that has faced suppression and marginalization time and time again. In learning about these practices, one can come to understand how other cultures outside of one's own approach gender roles, religion, spirituality, music, and dance.

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