

Garifuna in Peril: The 22nd LLAFF Grand Finale

Silvia Rothlisberger

On the last night of The 22nd London Latin American Film Festival a film about Garifuna Indigenous People of Central America was premiered to the world in YAA Centre.

People from different paths attended the night, from the directors and producers of the film, who came all the way from LA, California; to the Ambassador of Honduras and the High Commissioner of Belize in the UK.

Nonetheless, the star of the night was the film *Garifuna in Peril* which soundly projected Garifuna history, customs and problems.

The day after the festival's closing night and a few hours before he took a flight to New York to present the film during the African Diaspora International Film Festival (NYADIFF) I met with Ruben Reyes, an indigenous Garifuna who was the film's co-director, co-producer, co-writer and also main actor.

Reyes is a senior teacher at the Garifuna Language & Culture Academy of Los Angeles. He is considered an authority on the Garifuna language, and recently published a trilingual dictionary (Garifuna-English-Spanish).

LLAFF: Who are the Garifuna People?

Ruben Reyes: Garifuna People are children of African and Arahuaco indigenous people.

When Africans were brought to America to be sold into slavery they took over the ship and arrived to the island of St. Vincent. They embraced the Arahuaco language, customs and culture in order to be accepted by them. The Africans married Arahuaco indigenous peoples and from this union was born the Garifuna People. The Garifuna People are located in Honduras, Belize, Nicaragua and Guatemala. The majority are in Honduras with 43 Garifuna communities, Belize has six communities, Guatemala has two and Nicaragua three.

LLAFF. How did the film *Garifuna in Peril* come about?

RR. I met Alí Allié [the film's co-director, co-producer and co-writer] when he presented the film *El Espíritu de mi Mamá* in the year 2000 during The Pan African Film Festival (PAFF). I really liked the film but I complained about the film being in Spanish instead of being in Garifuna language.

When I raised the issue to Alí, he answered to me: "well, that is what you are here for. If you want a film in Garifuna language, why don't you do it?"

That was a valid argument and I took it as a challenge. We became friends and started working on this film. During almost 10 years we developed the script and three years ago we started the process of making the film.

Although Alí is American he has a Garifuna background because since he was a boy he has been to Honduras many times, and he volunteered in an orphanage there. Afterwards, he married a Garifuna woman; all these experiences have made him very fond of our culture. He has adopted it.

LLAFF. Living in LA, how do you help your people in their struggles?

RR. One of the ways I help my community is through the film because it is a medium that has no frontiers, it's a medium where we can capture our thoughts and inform about our problems.

LLAFF. What is the biggest challenge of the Garifuna People?

RR. The loss of identity through the loss of language and the violation of our land rights.

Garifuna People have lived in ancestral lands for more than 200 years. In the past, no one cared about these lands and the Garifuna People were located there to take care of the coasts, because they were warriors and they defended the maritime coasts in Central America. So these lands were allocated to the Garifuna People by Constitutional mandate. Nowadays the international community, specifically the tourist industry see in these lands the potential for tourism and the government is making it easy for local and foreign tourist industries to have access to our lands.

LLAFF. How are Garifuna People defending their lands?

RR. We have an organization called OFRANEH -Organización Fraternal Negra de Honduras – (Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras). This organization defends our land in all the Garifuna territory. They had to take the fight to the International Court of Human Rights because there is corruption inside Honduras and it is hard to defend our rights. This International Court has issued rulings in favour of Garifuna People and we are trying to hold titles over our lands because cities are illegally expanding into our territories and that does not bring any progress to our lands.

LLAFF. Tell me about the trilingual dictionary you recently wrote and published...

RR. The trilingual dictionary has the function of preserving the Garifuna language; it is a tool for educational institutions. It is also an updated dictionary because when the language was formed, there was no television, radio or telephones. Nowadays these artefacts exist and my dictionary includes these terminologies.

Also, through the dictionary I contribute to the unification of the different Garifuna communities in the world because while Garifuna People in Belize speak English-Garifuna; in Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua we speak

Garifuna and Spanish; then the dictionary unifies the Garifuna community through the language.

LLAFF. What projects do you have for the future?

RR. Alí Allié and I are working on two more Garifuna films.