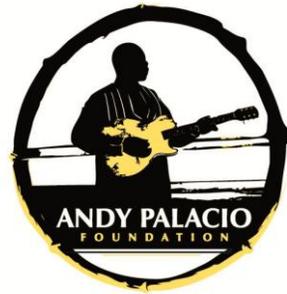


# the ANDY PALACIO lecture



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Image Factory, Belize City

## **Andy Palacio – Globalization and Central Americanization of the Garifuna People** By Dr. Joseph Palacio

### **Introduction**

It is now three years since our brother Andy Vivien Palacio made his transition from this earth on his way to Seiri, the final resting place for all souls, according to the belief of our Garifuna ancestors. It is certainly timely to reflect on some of the profound impacts that Andy left us in Belize and especially the Garifuna people in Central America and further in the diaspora. There are two related themes that I would like to elaborate with you this morning, both of which were dear to Andy as he promoted his music within the wider world. They are globalization and Central Americanization. I am certain that had he been still alive he would be pushing his involvement in these two fields. I will try to do justice to them in a way that he would have approved.

### **Globalization and Central Americanization**

There is no need to start with a definition of globalization and Central Americanization. But there is a need for us in Belize to understand that both are referring primarily to a change of attitude about ourselves and our regional and international environment and commitment. Globalization does not mean flying to Miami or Houston and looking forward to migrating to North American cities where thousands of Belizeans are now found. Similarly, Central Americanization does not mean crossing the border to Melchor de Mencos or Puerto Barrios to purchase consumer goods at lower prices, especially at Christmas time.

Globalization means taking our place as active players at the world stage; becoming the best that we can be; and proving to the whole world that we are the best – that we are numero uno! Similarly, Central Americanization means showing to our neighbours that we have a commanding presence in this subregion and that we are leaders in areas where we want to be. In the rest of my presentation I will give a brief profile of younger Andy as an active player in Central America. I then focus on the Garifuna nation's historical experience of globalization in the island of St. Vincent in the Eastern Caribbean and subsequently

in Central America. Finally, I return to how Andy has championed the Garifuna culture firstly in Central America and secondly at the pinnacle of world music achievement.

### **The Central Americanization of Young Andy**

We start with a spotlight on Andy and the theme of Central Americanization. Everybody has heard the story that it was in Nicaragua that Andy first came face to face with the slow but surely reversible death of the Garifuna language. I quote from writings on the jacket of the world acclaimed Watina CD. "... he travelled to Nicaragua and met an old man who was among the last in the country to still speak the Garifuna language. The elder couldn't believe his ears when he heard the young Andy greet him in Garifuna, crying out, "Are you telling the truth?" Andy replied, "Yes, my uncle; I am Garifuna just like you." And the man embraced him and would not let go. He could not imagine that someone so young could speak Garifuna, having thought that the language would perish with him."

What was Andy doing in Nicaragua at that time when most in his peer group would have been migrating to the United States? He was working with a cadre of young volunteers teaching reading and writing to Creole-speakers along the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. He was part of a team of Belizeans lending much needed support and solidarity to the government and people of Nicaragua. Nicaragua realized that Belize had some talents that it needed and asked us for help. In return we gladly obliged and Andy, along with a few others, was the beneficiary.

Before going to Nicaragua Andy's Central Americanization had started in his home village of Barranco. As a transboundary community in Belize a short distance away from Guatemala, Barranco at that time did much trading in fish with buyers from the neighbouring towns of Puerto Barrios and Livingston. Andy's father was a fisherman who relied on a good part of his annual income from selling corned fish to his customers during the Lenten season. A friend of Andy's confirms that one of his first recollections of Andy was hearing him bargaining in Spanish with a fish buyer from Puerto Barrios.

Facility in the Spanish language came to young Andy from the scores of visitors from the neighbouring Guatemalan province of Izabal, including his own close relatives, who came regularly to Barranco. He would have heard it from the radio stations that beamed their broadcast to southern Belize. It is not surprising, therefore, that he early developed his skills to sing in three languages – Garifuna, English, and Spanish. From these examples that I have given Andy's early introduction to our surrounding portion of Latin America was certainly no different than what continues to take place among young persons living today in the Toledo, Cayo, Corozal, and Orange Walk Districts. Further below we will answer the question what transboundary experience has to do with excellence at the global level.

### **Globalization – the St. Vincent Experience**

Let us make some quantum leaps backwards from Andy Palacio in Barranco to the larger context of the Garifuna nation, more especially its formation within the Eastern Caribbean during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We will show that globalization has always been at the core of the Garifuna experience. At that time the small island of St. Vincent, the home territory of the Garifuna, was the crown jewel of the Caribbean, for whose control the two most powerful empires on earth were vying – the French and the British. For over 150 years the fierce Caribs had held the Eastern Caribbean at bay from European domination and the centre of Carib domain was the island of St. Vincent.

When there were desperate efforts to expand the profitable sugar trade within the Caribbean, only the Eastern Caribbean had new lands that could be converted into sugar plantations. St. Vincent had some

of the richest volcanic soils in the subregion. It had been the most populated during the pre-contact period. And it gave the most problems for subjugation. The Caribs and their progeny, the Garifuna, became experts in playing the two imperial powers one against the other – doing this through negotiations, fighting, yielding territory when necessary, and when possible re-bounding. The image of the Caribs as primitive cannibals wielding bows and arrows was far away from the truth toward the end of the 1700s.

### **Central Americanization of the Garifuna Nation**

Because these experiences inexorably drew the Garifuna into westernization, the Garifuna exiles from St. Vincent arrived in Central America in 1797 as a virtually globalized nation. They had acquired applied expertise in diplomacy; many spoke English and French and quickly learned Spanish in Central America. They were among the best fighters, soldiers, and sailors. Given the relatively low priority that the Spaniards gave to their Caribbean coast of Central America, they relied on the Garifuna to implement the sundry tasks of empire building, such as constructing and maintaining forts, growing and producing food, and starting new settlements. The reality of the Central Americanization of the Garifuna up to this day stems from the fact that along the Caribbean coast of the mainland we make up the largest bloc of black people from Yucatan to Panama.

From the Belize side, the Garifuna people have been among the most influenced by Central America, pulling along a Belize that has always been ambivalent of its Central American identity. The Garifuna who came from Honduras and Guatemala to settle in Belize often went back and forth, forever putting a stamp on themselves as a nation across borders.

On exhausting the mahogany on Belizean territory by the early 1800s, British loggers jumped over to the Mosquitia in the border area of Nicaragua and Honduras, bringing along Garifuna workers from Belize, many of whom had originated in the same parts of Honduras.

The Roman Catholic Church, which has the largest proportion of its adherents from among the Garifuna people, established its large scale presence in Belize from Guatemala through the intermediary of the Garifuna. The first Jesuit priest to start a mission in Belize, Fr. Genon, came this way after working with the Garifuna in the Puerto Barrios/Livingston area. He became convinced that he should dedicate himself to working with them but the only concession that he received from the church was to found the mission in Punta Gorda in 1861. As the only resident priest, for years he travelled bringing the sacraments from Barranco to Dangriga until the church was able to send more priests to assist him. For a long time the Catholic Church was called the “Spanish” church in Belize in contrast to other sects that were not Spanish-speaking. The disproportionate representation of Garifuna among the clergy is a reflection of the prolonged association it has had with the Garifuna people.

### **Andy Palacio’s Globalization**

We have already seen that Andy’s exposure in southern Belize was greatly influenced by the neighbouring parts of Guatemala and Honduras. We can add that his success in Cancun, Yucatan also helped in pushing him toward taking his rightful place as a global musical icon. In the end Andy P was an artist promoting his Garifuna culture whether it originated from Belize or other parts of Central America. He no longer saw Belize separate from Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua. He saw them as all parts of a globalized world. He drew his inspiration, the soul that drove him along, from Central America. But the

exciting challenge for Andy was to massage the source of the inspiration, give it his own unique style and then project it on the world stage. It is the work of the consummate artist.

A brief overview of the work he did on his Watina CD will show his indebtedness to Central America. From the twelve songs on Watina at least three were based in Honduras and at least another two could have also taken place there. Watina [1], Miami [3], and Sin Precio [4] were certainly rooted in Honduras. Watina [1] is the lament of a man refused a ride because of being black and appearing to be poor. Miami [3] is a land claims protest song about a man being prevented from visiting a tourism development project along the north coast of Honduras. Sin Precio [4] is a woman's cry against her poverty and the ill repute she is consequently suffering at the hands of her community. The themes in these songs could be found in any rural community – whether Garifuna or not. Through the Watina CD Andy projected them onto the world stage, giving them a global seal of approval as Garifuna music.

## **Conclusion**

What is my final message on Andy P within the context of globalization and Central Americanization? Andy was a perfectionist. His band members had difficulty keeping up with him as he kept striving for that perfect sound. His aim was to start with concrete situations on the ground and to move them ever higher to reach a world appeal. He took his inspiration from his Garifuna culture based in Central America and moulded it to reach the highest level of excellence. And the world responded giving him the accolades that he truly deserved. Are there still some budding Andy P's out there in Barranco, Seine Bight, Hopkins, Livingston, La Ceiba, Trujillo, and Plaplaya? I think that his humble answer would be in that inimitable smile of his "I tried to show them how to do it and I hope they have learned."

There was another aspect of artistic expression that Andy was painfully aware of. It is the political dimension that is so essential to enable the artist to produce to his best ability. The political directorate can stifle or empower the artist. And – more than we often realize – Andy did pay the price of not receiving political support when he most needed it. But did he migrate to the greener fields abroad? No, he batted down and tried various sources of livelihood while working his music as the opportunities presented themselves through such friends as Ivan Duran. So, we can say that he achieved the global achievements despite not always receiving political support. The lesson for us is that our artists should infuse into our governance system their rightful political space within our democratic framework. In the 1960s and 1970s the refrain was "power to the people". We can now change that to "power to the artist among the people". Thank you.