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# **Ethnic Difference at the Center of Land Struggles in the Americas: A Complex History of Marginalization and Multidimensional Challenges among the Garifuna in Northern Honduras**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Across the world, natural resources play a critical role in shaping livelihoods among the ethnic and indigenous communities. This article highlights the struggles Garifuna in northern Honduras face regarding land ownership, despite being constitutionally recognized yet ignored by the government. For them, land struggles are also their racial struggles. Contested land ownerships are the outcomes of historical discriminations, leaving Garifuna vulnerable to violence. This article addresses the multidimensional aspects of land-based struggles that have resulted in social, cultural, and environmental damage, creating insurmountable pressures on local Garifuna livelihoods.

## **KEYWORDS**

ethnic differences; Garifuna; land struggles; minority; multidimensional challenges; northern Honduras; state

## Introduction

Land rights disputes and struggles are increasingly common in the contemporary world (Sassen, 2014). Deepening poverty, inequality, marginalization, violence, and expulsions from lands are often the result. In this situation, ethnic and racial minorities along with other disadvantaged population groups are the major victims (Ahmed et al., 2021; Coulson-Drasner, 2018; Memon et al., 2019). In the process of land rights and ownership disputes, particularly among minorities or disadvantaged groups, the lack of recognition of ancestral territories by the government play a vital role ( Lastra-Bravo, 2021; Thorne, 2007). Therefore, in many societies, land rights struggle is also a racial struggle (Mollett, 2006).

It is equally true for the Garifuna, an Afro-Caribbean disadvantaged population group known as “Black Caribs” that live across coastal areas in Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras. This article particularly focuses on the Garifuna in Honduras. Currently, they are one of the nine officially recognized “ethnic groups” in Honduras (Loperena, 2016). The Garifuna are the descendants of Afro-Carib populations from the Caribbean Island of St. Vincent, who were exiled to the Honduran coast in the eighteenth century (Brondo, 2013; Iqbal, 2020). However, two different waves of African people arrived in Honduran land. Spanish colonizers brought the first wave of these Afro-descendent Garifuna in 1540, and the British colonizers brought the second in the 1700s (Fraser, 2014; Hulme, 2000; Taylor, 2016). Today, many Garifuna do not label themselves solely as African descendants anymore, rather embrace the unique identity of “Garifuna” that recognizes both their Afro-descendant and Carib ancestry that resulted from these two separate waves of Garifuna arrival (Williams, 2014).

Before 1992, none of Honduras' Garifuna communities held definitive land titles. The first titles to be granted were titles of occupation, issued by the National Agrarian Institute (Instituto

Nacional Agrario or INA) in the 1970s (Quartucci, 2021). Land titles are different from the general land laws to which the mainstream population is subjected. With land titles, the government grants recognition of a community or group occupying the land but does not give the right for full, legal ownership of that land. Such identity differentiation has implications in land ownership and dispute of territory, as the government does not consider the Garifuna as Honduran citizens.

With a regional focus in northern Honduras, this article investigates Garifuna's land rights and ownership disputes while also remarking their overall struggles as a historically marginalized group. Using the theoretical arguments of political ecology, which informs how unequal power relations shape the distribution, control of, and access to natural resources at various political and economic scales (Stonich, 1993; Zimmer & Bassett, 2003), this article aims to provide a deeper understanding on the driving forces of inequality and marginalization among the Garifuna community that result in unequal and contested land ownership challenges in Honduran society. Findings suggest that a long colonial history of slavery, oppression, exploitation, and neoliberal economic forces are the primary drivers of contested land ownership rights among the Garifuna. Despite its geographical focus and relevance to a particular population group, this article provides a broader understanding on how and why minorities and other disadvantaged population groups face resource marginalization and exploitation across geographies.

This article first looks at the geographical, historical, cultural, and political contexts of Afro-descendent Garifuna in northern Honduras. Then it outlines the multidimensional causes for land marginalization that the Garifuna face due to neoliberal development and structural inequality in the local society. Specifically, it focuses on the constitutional conflicts that this minority group is

subjected to and the foreign investment and tourism industries that have displaced Garifuna individuals from their ancestral lands from northern Honduras, and presents associated struggles for their land ownerships. Finally, this article addresses the vast array of social movements and mobilization efforts, from frontline protests to virtual media movements, of the Garifuna communities in their fight for land rights and autonomy.

## **Garifuna in Northern Honduras**

### ***Geography***

The Garifuna in Honduras currently live in four major divisions (*departamentos*), Cortes, Atlántida, Colon, and Gracia a Dios, spread across different villages, making them the third-largest indigenous community within the nation (Minority Rights, 2018). While some villages of Garifuna live more inland, most Garifuna communities are located along the stretches of white-sand Caribbean beaches (Loperena, 2016; Thorne, 2007). Recent data shows that the Garifuna population was estimated to be about 300,000 (OHCHR, 2021). However, there are incidents of high levels of outmigration and displacement among the Garifuna, particularly among the men and young members of the community (Brondo, 2013; Williams, 2014).

Environmental challenges, such as droughts and seasonal hurricanes have been part of local migration, displacement, land disputes, and other socio-political conflicts in Honduras. The climate of Honduras is tropical, and the northern coast, where the majority of Garifuna inhabit, is sweltering with rainfall for most of the year (World Bank Group, 2020). As for water, Honduras has long had abundant access to water resources. The country is divided into two parts, the Atlantic and the Pacific sides of the region. The Atlantic side, where the Garifuna live along the northern coast, is home to 13 different river basins that empty into the Caribbean Sea, accounting

for 87% of surface water in Honduras (USAID, 2016). The Garifuna's unique positions on the coastline should provide them with significant access to freshwater systems. However, access to water in Honduras is threatened by mismanagement and environmental pressures. Over 80% of water use in the country is from groundwater, the primary source for communities without access to water systems (USAID, 2016).

## ***History***

The Garifuna that now populates Honduras historically originated as survivors of cargo shipwrecks during the Slave Trades in the 17th and 18th centuries (Ramírez, 2020). They are the descendants of West Africans who found refuge on the island of St. Vincent after escaping from slavery (Iqbal, 2020; Loperena, 2016). At that point, they integrated into the indigenous Kalinago-Taino (Carib) population and developed a new Afro-indigenous culture, known as the Black Caribs, or Garifuna (Belfi & DeLuca 2020; Minority Rights, 2018).

Not long after their integration, British military powers arrived on St. Vincent, seeking to possess the island as a part of their colonial expansion efforts (Taylor, 2016). Due to the high resistance, the British and the French had no choice but to consider St Vincent as a Neutral Island. Eventually, after facing intense pushback from the Garifuna inhabiting the island, conflict erupted between 1769 and 1772. The battle, known as the First Carib War, ended in a treaty between the two parties in 1773 (Kim, 2013). However, this "treaty of neutrality" did not last long. In 1779, the French captured St. Vincent during the American War of Independence. Eventually, the island was later reclaimed by the British by the Treaty of Paris in 1783. The Carib, or Garifuna, population resisted their encroachment, which they viewed as a violation of their original treaty, resulting in another conflict, the Second Carib War from 1795 to 1797 (Kim,

2013). Despite being allied and supported by the French, the Caribs were outnumbered by manpower and weaponry, leading to their inevitable surrender to British forces. The remaining Caribs were deported to the nearby island of Roatán, in the bay of Honduras, later settling on the mainland of modern-day Honduras (Taylor, 2012; Thorne, 2007;).

### ***Culture, language and religion***

The culture of the Garifuna of Honduras is incredibly distinct from other groups in the region. As one of the two Afro-Honduran groups in the nation, the Garifuna follow many Afro-Caribbean traditions with influences of South American culture. The Garifuna culture is very closely tied to music and dance, and they're known for their use of traditional percussion instruments. Punta, a traditional form of African music, is integral to their musical culture often accompanied by dancing (Romero, 2019).

The Garifuna language is a mixed result of their historical migration and displacement. The official Garifuna language classifies as a part of the Arawakan (or Maipurean) language family developed among indigenous peoples of South America (Romero, 2019). While mostly following the phonetic style of Arawakan, Garifuna also incorporates vocabulary and language styles of the Carib language of St. Vincent and traces of French, Spanish, and English.

The religion of the Garifuna is a mixture of African and Amerindian religious systems with elements of Catholicism as well. Their spirituality is traditionally expressed through rituals, music, dancing, and the arts (Brondo, 2013). The Garifuna people maintain their unique cultural identities, which include their language, a particular set of religious beliefs and practices, including culturally-specific festivals. Many of these beliefs and practices are directly or indirectly linked to their attachment to their land and territory (Thorne, 2007), such as, *dugu*,

which is their two weeks long ritual to honor their ancestors, who are ill or suffer from pains that are non-treatable by modern medicine (Mollett, 2014).

### ***Politics and economy***

Since they arrived in Honduras, the Garifuna have experienced severe discrimination, often in the form of being denied social and civil rights (Oro, 2021). People in most of the Latin American countries are characterized as *mestizo* (being of Spanish and indigenous descent). As non-*mestizo*, the Garifuna are considered a racial minority in the region (Loperena, 2016). Being of African descent, they have long been excluded from the national identity and face high levels of racism in their country. The racism and discrimination the Garifuna face has been compared to Black Americans' racial climate during the Jim Crow era (Oro, 2021).

Historically, Garifuna's marginalization has taken the form of low-wage labor works, lack of access to public spaces and opportunities, including an exclusion from higher education (Thorne, 2007; Minority Rights, 2018). Not only is marginalization a problem, but violence against the Garifuna has risen dramatically throughout the years. Many Garifuna members have been abducted and murdered, and Garifuna women are also victims of gender-based violence (McVicar, 2020).

In addition to this social oppression, the Honduran government does not currently recognize them as people, let alone as citizens of Honduras. The government justifies this *status* because according to the Honduran government, the members of Garifuna communities came from elsewhere, so non-native to Honduras (Minority Rights, 2018). This has created a myriad of issues for the Garifuna as they lack representation in their government, have inadequate access to public services, and rarely see justice regarding crimes and rights abuses against them.



As for the economic aspect, the Garifuna communities in northern Honduras continue to live off subsistence agriculture and fishing and remittances from the massive Garifuna diaspora, who are currently residing in the United States (Kinosian, 2018). However, the unemployment among the Garifuna in Honduras is still high, causing most men belonging to Garifuna kinship networks to migrate and find employment elsewhere. As a result, the current resident Garifuna in northern Honduras are a traditionally matriarchal and matrifocal community, with mothers and grandmothers as the heads of families/households (Oro, 2021).

### **Multidimensional causes for land marginalization**

Many of the issues that the Garifuna face is tied to land rights and ownership of their ancestral lands (Minority Rights, 2018). History of colonialism, slavery, environmental stresses, and neoliberal developments have decimated indigenous Garifuna land in Honduras for decades, resulting in a current climate fraught with discrimination, displacement, violent threats, and abundant human rights violations. The situation has intensified so much that in July of 2019, the Global Witness declared Honduras the most dangerous country per capita for human rights and environmental defenders (McVicar, 2020). Further discussions are as follows:

#### ***Constitutional rights, protections, and the missing realities***

Honduras is considered one of the most dangerous countries for indigenous groups, minorities, the media, and activists. Recently, governmental officials have been accused of violating human rights and engaging in severe human abuses. Such violations include, according to the U.S. Department of State (2020):

*“Unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings; torture and cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrest or detention; killings of and threats to media members by criminal elements; criminalization of libel, although no cases were reported; serious acts of corruption including by high-level officials; lack of investigation of and accountability for violence against women; and threats and violence against indigenous, Afro-descendant communities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons.”*

Garifuna community leaders have become victims of kidnappings, torture, and murder. Some of the evidences are as follows:

- On 14 October 2017, Garifuna leader, Silvino Zapata Martinez, was murdered by two unidentified men in the community of Masca. Martinez protected his community’s water resources, which halted the development of *Hidromasca*’s hydroelectric plant nearby (El País, 2017; Civicus, 2017).
- On 8 September 2019, Mirna Teresa Suazo was murdered in her restaurant by unidentified hitmen. Suazo was a Garifuna activist and president of the Masca community (La Vanguardia, 2019). Days before her death, two other Garifuna activists were murdered as well. On 7 September 2019, Nayda Reyez Jiménez was kidnapped and murdered along with her husband in Masca. On 6 September 2019, Gima Cacho and her five-year-old daughter Fiori Amaya were murdered in their house in the community of Santa Rosa de Aguán (Fernández, 2019).
- On 12 January 2020, Garifuna fighter and member of OFRANEH (La Organizacion Fraternal Negro Hondureno), Ignacia López Martinez, succumbed to her injuries after getting shot by a group of unidentified individuals on 28 December 2019 in the

community of Masca. Ignacia and her sister, Amada López Martínez (also a member of OFRANEH), were attacked four times before the fatal incident (García, 2020).

- Alberth Sneider Centeno, president of the Triunfo de la Cruz Garifuna Community Trust; Junior Rafael Juárez Mejía, Suamy Aparicio Mejía García and Milton Joel Martínez Álvarez were all kidnapped on 18 July 2020. According to witnesses, the victims were kidnapped by men dressed as policemen. Only one person has been arrested in connection with the kidnappings, but answers are yet to come. Nobody knows whether the kidnapped men are still alive or not (Díaz, 2020).
- On 19 June 2020, the body of Garifuna leader Antonio Benárdez was found near the Punta Piedra community after missing for six days. Authorities believe that Benárdez was kidnapped from the community of Río Miel (Cespad, 2020).

As an indigenous minority group, the Garifuna are supposedly entitled to certain rights and freedoms under the Honduran Constitution as well as the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 169, which protects indigenous and tribal peoples. The Honduran government signed the ILO Convention No. 169 in 1995 (Mowforth, 2015). Article 346 of the Honduran Constitution states that the government must protect indigenous rights and the lands they have settled in. However, due to the Garifuna's contested legal status as citizens, the Honduran government has yet to uphold these rights. Further, Article 107 of the Constitution of the Honduran government states that the sale of coastal land to foreigners is considered illegal (Minority Right, 2018). Unfortunately, many foreign investors seemed to have found loopholes and have done so nonetheless.

Many Garifuna have petitioned the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) for more protection various other times due to the constant violations of their human rights (Brondo, 2006; OAS, 2019). In 2015, the IACHR issued an official ruling that mandated the Honduran government must compensate the Garifuna people for their stolen land and issue land titles to the community (Belfi & DeLuca, 2020). By 2016, however, the OFRANEH reported that the Honduran government had yet to follow any of the orders mandated by the court (Brondo, 2006). Further, even more recently, Joseph Berra, director of the Human Rights in the Americas project, reported that the Honduran state “subsequently failed to comply with the IACHR order, which has aggravated conflicts” (Lakhani, 2020).

### ***National development policy & foreign investments***

It has already been mentioned that before the 1990s, the only land titles the Garifuna held were titles of occupation, which did not designate any ownership of ancestral land to the indigenous communities. In the 1990s, however, the government began a communal land titling program that awarded Garifuna communities with communal lands that could only be passed down through inheritance and not sold off. While promising on the surface, these titles did not recognize ancestral territory and were often used to mislead Garifuna communities into giving up larger portions of their territory in exchange for such titles. This titling program was part of the free-market approach to a development policy that ran rampant in the 1980s and 90s. Specifically, communal titles were used as a mechanism to promote private investment in Garifuna territory by legalizing community limits and enhancing land security.

Around the same time, the government implemented other neoliberal reforms, such as the Congressional Decree 90-90, which reversed the law in Article 107 of the Honduran Constitution

that previously prohibited foreigners from purchasing coastal and beachfront lands. This amendment, combined with the titling program and other development initiatives, led the way for the current boom in housing and industrial development and coastal tourism investments in Garifuna lands (Brondo, 2018).

In 1992, the Honduran government passed the Law for Modernization and Development for the Agricultural Sector (LMA), also called the Agrarian Modernization Law, which allowed for further encroachment of investors seeking privatized, often indigenous, lands (Agudelo, 2019). This occurred through a loophole in the policy in which the government supposedly claimed that the law permitted the Garifuna to obtain “full control” titles of land. However, this did not include any lands used for fishing, subsistence activity ritual practices, nor spiritual culture. These restrictions made it impossible for the Garifuna to keep their ancestral land, and thus, foreign investors rushed to take ownership of any lands that were not titled (Agudelo, 2019). This reform was then coupled with a later initiative in 2004 when the government enacted the Land Administration Process of Honduras (PATH), which included a provision that formalized the sale of collective property lands belonging to indigenous groups and the Garifuna (Agudelo, 2019). Most of the neoliberal interventions limit the opportunities for Garifuna to remain in their ancestral coastal territories, and maintain a subsistence livelihood (Brondo, 2013).

### ***Tourism***

Latin American countryside are experiencing some major structural changes last several decades. Previously, those areas were expected to be the source for farming, timber, and other raw materials for urban centers. In recent decades, in the name of environmental protection and

economic growth rural residents are expected to sacrifice their access to natural resources that are critical for their subsistence (Haenn, 2004; Puig-Cabrera & Foronda-Robles, 2020).

There is no major exception in Garifuna context. One of the biggest threats facing the Garifuna today is the tourism industry in Honduras. Due to their prime location on the scenic northern beaches of the Caribbean, ancestral Garifuna land has been targeted as of late for the encroachment of developers looking to expand new housing developments associated with urban sprawl and the emerging tourist destinations (Brondo, 2013; Thorne, 2007). The state allowed foreign ownership of coastal lands through a specific provision in Article 107, which declared coastal lands as “tourism priority” (Mollett, 2014; World Bank, 2007).

Tourism in Honduras has been growing exponentially in the last two decades. The National Tourism Institute reported that in September 2021, tourism generated about \$554,162.76 in the country (Instituto Hondureño de Turismo, 2021). Tourism has become the second-largest source of national income. In 2017, the Honduran government passed the Tourism Incentives Law, which provides drastic tax benefits for tourism-related investments and related initiatives. As a result, the tourism industry in the country grew from \$685 million in 2016 to upwards of \$700 million in 2017 after the law’s passage (Iqbal, 2020). While the government has projected that the tourism boom will attract millions of tourists to the area and create thousands of new jobs, the industry presents a profound danger by causing lasting impacts on local Garifuna communities and their livelihoods.

With such high demand for lands to develop, the Garifuna have faced drastic displacement from their homelands, including constant threats of eviction, land invasions, intimidation, bribery, and outright violence (MacNeill, 2020; Thorne, 2007). One actual incident of this land being encroached upon occurred in 2014 when armed police forcibly evicted nearly 400

Garifuna individuals from the Tela Bay region and eventually sold that land illegally to businessmen (Minority Rights, 2018).

As a result of these tourism efforts, Garifuna communities now face the threat of complete disappearance (Minority Rights, 2018). On top of this, the recent rise of “eco-tourism” has decimated Garifuna territory and identity. This industry prides itself on its supposed “green” efforts of drawing people to fragile and often endangered ecosystems. However, this practice displaces Garifuna individuals as the government makes way for classified national parks to attract tourists to the land. Such areas include the Honduran Caribbean Biological Corridor, the Jeanette Kawas National Park, and Cayos Cochinos Marine Protected Area (Iqbal, 2020). The designation of these areas as national parks and tourist destinations has led to bans on fishing and marine extraction being implemented, significantly hindering Garifuna activities such as fishing and cultivation. This restriction drastically affects the Garifuna communities, particularly who rely on fishing as their primary subsistence activity and main source of protein and income.

Honduran officials have also been using Garifuna culture to attract more tourists near Garifuna communities (Loperena, 2016). Due to the sudden cultural recognition from the Honduran government, the tourism boom in Honduras has also forced Garifuna individuals to work for the industry. Employment opportunities for Garifuna individuals include diving, deep-sea fishing, and working in souvenir shops. Often though, Garifuna employees are heavily underpaid and work under extreme conditions. Employment in the tourism industry is not stable for Garifuna individuals as well. For example, Garifuna divers lack proper safety equipment, limits to the number of dives in a day have not been implemented, and many divers have not received essential certifications needed for diving. This has led to over 400 Garifuna diving deaths and 700 diving accidents (Green Grants, 2005).

Constant displacement due to tourism has impacted negatively the Garifuna community economically as well. Displacement has forced Garifuna communities to abandon their subsistence agricultural activities and turn to deep-sea fishing for food and economic purposes. Oceans have been polluted due to increased tourism, affecting fishing opportunities for Garifuna communities (Green Grants, 2005). Access to ocean waters and rivers has decreased for Garifuna communities throughout the years as well. This has affected fishing opportunities for Garifuna fishers, thus jeopardizing their overall income and food resources. Displacement from foreign investors has also caused Garifuna communities to leave jobs and look for employment opportunities elsewhere. They also need access to their righteous coastal lands to have proper access to coastal and marine resources. Land recognition also assures Garifuna communities with stable jobs (Mollett, 2014). The racialized dispossession of lands of Garifuna communities suggests their blackness "...is simultaneously an asset and a liability for the state" (Loperena, 2016: 189).

### ***Palm production, environmental damage, and human rights violations***

The Garifuna of Honduras have long been exploited by neoliberal development initiatives, often in the oil industry, that pose harm to their lands and villages. Specifically, the massive rise and implementation of the palm oil industry in Honduras has drastically displaced Garifuna communities and caused severe environmental degradation. During the series of initiatives of Honduras' Agrarian Reform in the 1980s and 90s, African palm was introduced to the area as a prospective crop to yield high economic benefits (Araya 2019; Sanders 2020). After the passage of the Law of Modernization in 1992, roughly 28,000 hectares of African palm were planted on Garifuna land in a period of only five years (Iqbal, 2020). High world prices made palm oil the



most profitable crop in Honduras since the late 90s. Thus, between 2000 A.D. and 2019 A.D., palm oil production in Honduras increased from 148,000 MT to over 580,000 MT (Sanders, 2020). Today, Honduras is the top producer of palm oil in Central America and seventh in the world (Araya, 2019).

The production of palm oil comes at the expense of the Garifuna culture, lifestyles, and economy, as the majority of African palms are consolidated along the northern coast, where majority of the Garifuna reside. As a result, by 2018 A.D., over 190,000 hectares of palms have been planted among northern Garifuna lands (Grandes, 2020). While economically beneficial for the government of Honduras, the Garifuna bear the brunt of the environmental and cultural harms that this industry has produced. In order to make way for palm oil plantations, the industry decimated the coconut plantations that previously lined the coast, a crop that the Garifuna survived off of and used culturally for generations (Grandes, 2020).

In addition to this, the production of palm oil has severe environmental implications. Since this crop is planted by means of deforestation, it is a major driver of environmental change and increased vulnerability of local communities (Gies, 2018). On top of this, palm is a crop that does not allow other crops to grow in adjacent areas, causes soil acidification and contamination, and uses large amounts of water to maintain its cultivation (Grandes, 2020; Gies, 2018). This has led to irreversible damage to wetlands and mangroves on the Northern Coast, a rise in food insecurity due to displaced agricultural production, and nearly all rivers in the north to completely dry up (Daser & Fouts, 2021; Grandes, 2020). While this represents the environmental pressure of African palm oil production, the industry also presents cultural and territorial issues as well. The presence of large oil corporations and investors has led to violent land grabs that displace Garifuna communities and exacerbate human rights abuses in the region

(Daser & Fouts, 2021). According to Human Rights Watch, over 100 people have been murdered since 2009 during conflicts over land taken by agribusiness for African palm production (Clark 2018; Gies, 2018).

### ***Increasing environmental stresses***

The consequences of climate change affect indigenous communities and minority groups, such as the Garifuna, substantially (Iqbal, 2020). To top that, the presence of foreign investors in Honduras has led to the mistreatment of Garifuna lands, which has caused substantial deforestation, dried-up river basins and has jeopardized food security as well (Brondo, 2006). Agriculture and sea life provide food security and income for Garifuna communities. However, the involvement of foreign corporations and foreign investors has threatened the livelihoods and sustainability of Garifuna communities.

A rise in sea surface temperatures has caused an increase in cyclones and other major storms within the Atlantic Ocean (Sawal, 2020). These tropical storms often end up hitting the coastal regions of Honduras, an area where over majority of the Garifuna settlements are located (Wrathall et al., 2014). In fact, Honduras was considered one of the countries most affected by climate change for twenty years straight (1996-2015), according to the Global Climate Risk Index of 2017. Honduras endured 61 extreme weather-related events throughout this period, resulting in about 301 climate-related deaths per year (Kreft et al., 2017).

Garifuna communities face a greater risk of extreme weather since their settlements are considered the frontline of exposure. Severe weather has left the Garifuna settlements with a high number of casualties, flooding, droughts, crop shortages, and widespread destruction (Wrathall et al., 2014). Garifuna communities were left to fend for themselves during Hurricane

Mitch, a climate disaster that devastated Northern Central America in 1998, leaving many casualties, severe crop losses, homelessness, and food shortages (Miller, 2018). In the aftermath of the Hurricane Mitch and as the result of complete social exclusion by the Honduran government, Garifuna women were encouraged to organize a committee known as the Comité de Emergencia Garifuna Honduras (CEGAH). Working alongside other humanitarian organizations such as UNICEF, CEGAH provides Garifuna settlements with shelter, food security, and medical emergencies (United Nations Development Programme, 2012).

Despite this organizational progress, however, Honduras and the Garifuna continue to experience climate change effects and displacement, with the most recent disaster in the form of Hurricane Eta, closely followed by Hurricane Iota just two weeks later. In November of 2020, Hurricane Eta first hit land in Nicaragua before sweeping across Central America, hitting the coastal regions of Honduras on the Caribbean Sea (Cuffe, 2020). As is often observed, it is those communities that contribute the very least to climate change, often indigenous, that bear the brunt of climate-induced disasters the hardest, and the Garifuna were no exception. As with Hurricane Mitch in 1998, Honduras was hit the hardest by Eta just last year. Data shows that roughly 3.3 million Hondurans were affected by the storm and 450,000 were displaced from their homes (Eulich, 2020). Evidence from UNICEF showed that indigenous, especially Afro-Honduran, communities were among the most vulnerable and hardest hit groups by these storms (UNICEF 2020).

## **Garifuna agency against land-based injustice**

Despite Garifuna community's ever-lasting struggles and fight against land-based injustice and ownership disputes, they have not succumbed to structural pressures and inequalities without resistance. Throughout history and even now, the Garifuna continue to organize against the systematic dispossession of their ancestral lands.

OFRANEH, which is the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras, is the most active organization in the Garifuna's land defense movement (Palmer, 2019). It was officially established and recognized in 1980 as an activist organization fighting for Black workers' rights in Honduras. In the '90s, they shifted focus from labor to land rights issues and autonomy struggles. Since then, the key strategy of the OFRANEH has been via "land occupations" in resistance to Garifuna ancestral land grabs and dispossession. The organization uses the alternative term "recuperations" for their reclamation of land to denote the importance of pre-existing land rights and titles. This tactic is of the utmost importance to their non-violent direct-action movements. When conducting a "recuperation", the OFRANEH provided community members with copies of their collective land titles, whilst preparing legal counsel and land defenders in the case, since their claims are contested. This "office" work is then followed by community members resisting on the ground by entering their target land, singing ancestral songs, and waving both Garifuna and Honduran flags. They then present any "third persons" on the land their title claims to make intentions known. This, however, is often met with aggression, but the Garifuna continue this practice nonetheless (Palmer, 2019).

One of the more successful recuperations by the Garifuna was that of the Vallecito village. Vallecito has long been considered the Garifuna's "sanctuary" village where their ancestors resided long before Honduran independence. In the 1970s, this land became occupied by palm

oil baron, Miguel Facussé, for palm plantations (Gies, 2018). In response to such land invasions, a group of Limoneño Garifuna organized for land defense efforts, and with the support of the OFRANEH, and after a lengthy conflict, the state agrarian authority confirmed their legal land rights. The conflict involved petitioning the state agency, going to Honduran courts, and eventually executing direct action by recuperating the land with roughly 200 Garifuna families until their case was granted. Nonetheless, the case of Vallecito reflects as “...one of the first OFRANEH-supported “recuperations” of ancestral Garifuna lands...” (Palmer, 2019: 92).

OFRANEH is an organization of much importance, however, its leader, Miriam Miranda, must also be noted as an equally significant force in the Garifuna fight for land. As a notable feminist and environmental advocate, Miranda serves as a figure leading the movement against natural resource and land exploitation along with her OFRANEH and Garifuna communities. She hails climate change as a primary driving force behind Honduras’ vulnerability and instability as a nation. In response, a cornerstone effort of hers has been mobilizing Garifuna women to partake in cultivation roles, conserving coconut forms African Palm trees, one of the most demanding natural resources in Latin America (Agentes de Cambio Honduras, 2020). Such conservation is not only vital for the environment and the restoration of Honduras after an expansive history of palm oil extraction, but provides Garifuna communities with sufficient food supplies and income opportunities as well.

The struggles of these Garifuna communities, however, should not be viewed as antiquated efforts. As the globe modernizes in areas of progression and technology, as have the Garifuna, and they have begun to use this advancement in their fight for autonomy. In recent years, cases of violence and kidnapping have risen drastically in Garifuna communities, as their oppressors continue to assassinate key community leaders and land activists. As noted earlier, in the summer

of 2020, five notable Garifuna community leaders (and OFRANEH members) were kidnapped in Triunfo de la Cruz from their homes by armed officers, later identified as agents of the Honduras Investigative Police Agency (DPI) (Conexihon, 2020; SOA Watch, 2021).

While these men have still yet to be found, their abductions sparked massive protests by Garifuna activists and international supporters alike, both on the ground and in the virtual world. That same summer, Garifuna leaders and community members protested the kidnappings by taking to the streets of Tegucigalpa, Sambo Creek, and Triunfo de la Cruz, and in solidarity, the Honduran Garifuna community of New York enacted a peaceful protest to demand their return (Conexihon, 2020). The OFRANEH has also ignited action by raising awareness about both the abduction cases and the general struggle of the Garifuna via social media. Hashtags such as #LasVidasGarifunasTambienImportan, #VivosLosQueremos, #TuLuchaEsMiLucha, #TodosSomosGarifunas, and #CuidemosNuestrasCulturas have now gone viral, indicating the urgency of the situation and amassing support from around the world (Conexihon, 2020; SOA Watch, 2021).

Another saving grace may also come in the form of the newly elected Honduran president, Xiomara Castro, the first woman in the Honduran presidency. Elected just this year (2022), Castro comes from the Libertad and Refundacion, or Libre, party, in near direct contrast to the politics of former president, Hernandez. Castro's administrative agenda includes her pledge to convene a National Constituent Assembly in order to rewrite the national constitution. Other initiatives involve the recognition of the ILO Convention 169 that Honduras never actually implemented, which would guarantee the Garifuna, and other indigenous communities, the rights to free, prior, and informed consent and the ability to weigh in on territorial development projects. Finally, Castro has vowed that upon being elected, she will propose the formation of a

Congress of Afro-descendant and Indigenous Communities that would have official power to create autonomous land zones in Honduras (Villeda, 2022).

## **Discussion**

The scholarship in political ecology acknowledges that “struggles over resources are struggles over meaning and representation” (Eriksson, 2000: 215), which tells the exact experiences of the Garifuna communities in northern Honduras. Since their arrival on the Honduran coast in the eighteenth century, the Garifuna have been subjected to a vast array of discriminatory practices, human rights abuses, and violent campaigns by the majority population and government of Honduras. The Garifuna community currently face drastic land rights and ownership issues in Honduras primarily due to political, cultural, economic and historical factors. Political marginalization has isolated the Garifuna as a racial minority, creating social tensions between this group and the majority population. Even further, their historical origins, having migrated to Honduras from nearby Caribbean islands, have resulted in exclusionary practices against the Garifuna, often in the form of discrimination, violence, and lack of recognition of this indigenous group in its entirety. The most extreme form of this exclusion resides because the Honduran government has long refused to acknowledge the Garifuna’s identity and citizenship, despite numerous civil cases. Because of this, the Garifuna do not enjoy the protections of the Honduran Constitution that would otherwise preserve their land rights and access to official land titles. Combined, these factors have made the Garifuna highly vulnerable to the state and, thus, a target for land encroachment and invasion.

The rise of neoliberal economic development and policy at the turn of the century led to a multitude of reforms in Honduras, most of which have been implemented at the cost of

indigenous peoples. The promotion of foreign investment, development initiatives, and the growing sectors of tourism and palm oil production has decimated the land that the Garifuna have long held sacred to their ancestral culture. This has been coupled with severe environmental disasters, namely Hurricanes Mitch, Eta, and Iota, that further imperiled this indigenous group, leaving them fragile to conflict over territorial lands.

As a result, the Garifuna currently live in a climate of environmental degradation, food insecurity, resource exploitation, and ever-increasing acts of violence by the state and foreign entities. Despite this, the community has yet to give up on protecting and taking back the land that is rightfully theirs. However, with so many factors working against them, their vulnerability and resistance efforts have turned the Garifuna into victims of displacement, forceful eviction, bribery for land, and ultimately, heinous violence.

Despite these seemingly insurmountable tragedies, the Garifuna have remained resilient, as discussed, and continue to fight against their oppressors. Whether through territorial “recuperations,” land-based direct-action protests, or virtual movements, the indigenous community has yet to concede. Numerous successes, no matter how minute, have contributed to the Garifuna’s resilience, alongside OFRANEH leader, Miriam Miranda, and the rising numbers of those in support of the Garifuna’s indigenous land struggle.

## **Conclusion**

As one of the major minority groups of Honduras, the Garifuna are a highly oppressed and marginalized indigenous group currently facing territorial land disputes. Having arrived on the coast of Honduras in the late 18th century as escaped African slaves from the Caribbean Island of St. Vincent, the Garifuna are culturally and ethnically distinct. Representing an Afro-



Indigenous, or Afro-Caribbean heritage, this group is persecuted on the basis of race in comparison to the majority mestizo population of Central and Latin America. Over the last two centuries, the Garifuna have endured severe marginalization as an unrecognized minority that has yet to be granted citizen status by the state of Honduras. As a result, the Garifuna are increasingly losing ancestral land to neoliberal development policies and economic and agrarian reforms from the last several decades.

Land is crucial to the survival of the Garifuna and for the conservation of their cultural heritage. Since they largely rely on subsistence agriculture and marine activity for their food and livelihoods, crop cultivation is central to their culture and economy. However, being located on the long-sought-after beaches of the northern Honduran coast and having no official, state-recognized ownership to the territory, the Garifuna have been vulnerable to encroachment by tourists, foreign investors, and developers. Various development projects initiated by these groups have decimated the water sources, croplands, and marine and terrestrial biodiversity that the Garifuna depend on for their livelihoods and basic survival.

The indigenous Garifuna, however, are not a docile and submissive group and have fiercely resisted these operations in order to protect their lands and communities. Forms of resistance include on-the-ground protests in Honduran Garifuna communities and territories, global movements by means of social media and outreach, and the pioneering leadership of OFRANEH.

However, in most cases, their efforts to defend their lands and communities against any neoliberal development, foreign investment, and tourism have only been met with further violence. Over the years, a growing number of Garifuna members have been evicted from their homes, forcibly displaced, and even kidnapped or murdered by outside parties for attempting to

protect their land. In recent years, these acts of violence have escalated dramatically, garnering international attention to the severe human rights abuses occurring in Honduras. Many legal battles have been brought to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and while some concessions have been made in favor of the Garifuna, there is little compliance by the state of Honduras to follow out any court orders.

To make a meaningful change for the lives of thousands of Garifuna in northern Honduras (or other ethnic or indigenous communities across the world), structural reforms are necessary to regain ownership of their ancestral lands and to be granted the full rights they deserve as inhabitants, and more importantly as citizens of Honduras. Without intervention on an international scale to award the Garifuna the protections and recognition necessary to maintain their livelihoods, this vulnerable population faces a long and unjust road ahead as they fight for land rights and ownership.

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