

# No Life without Land

## Interview with **Teofilo Lacayo**

Garifuna leader of the Honduran Northcoast organization Iseri Lidawamari (New Dawn).



Photo: Sarah England

Garifuna in the North coast region have carried out a constant struggle to recover confiscated lands

The Garifuna live in 46 coastal communities in Northern Honduras, an area shared by Pech and Misquito peoples as well as ladino colonists. They draw their history back to a mixing of Caribbean islanders and escaped West African slaves, both of whom were displaced through British colonization efforts. Iseri Lidawamari is affiliated with CAHDEA (the NGO working with all the different Indigenous groups in Honduras).

The Garifuna traditionally lived from fishing and cultivating yucca from

*Sarah England conducted this interview in April, 1994 as part of graduate research in anthropology at the University of California, Davis.*

which they make ereba (cassava bread). Many Garifuna communities lost the majority of their productive lands after the construction of roads through their regions--most households in these communities depend on remittances from relatives in the US for survival. Communities near the Mosquito coast are now also facing the loss of their lands. The Honduran government is currently pushing for massive tourist development on the entire North Coast which would displace Garifuna cultivators and force them to take jobs as low-paid workers in the tourist industry. Iseri Lidawamari was founded in the community of Limon both to recover communal land claimed by ladino landlords and to increase Garifuna agricul-

tural production and encourage economic autonomy. They are also struggling to prevent the takeover of their beaches by a powerful Honduran investor who plans to build a tourist resort there.

What problems have the Garifuna experienced following the land invasions?

-Traditionally, the Garifuna lived in their communities and respected the limits of each others' lands. If a neighbor said, "from here to that coconut palm is mine", then no one else would enter where that man was working. They would say to the neighbor: "from there to there you can take". On the other hand, you can observe now that concrete and wire fences are being

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raised in this community. Those did not exist here before. Those belong to cultures copied from the city, copied from idiosyncrasies external to the Garifuna. Of course, now we are also affected by this problem because everybody is putting up concrete or wire fences. The same is happening in the countryside. Before, we didn't put up even one thread of wire. Now everyone has to put up wire because otherwise they will be encroached on.

We were confident in those years in de -facto land ownership, and not in legal rights, so we never demanded titles. Now it is the same situation. Now everyone who goes acquiring their piece of land also has the idea of putting up fencing because they know that without fencing it will be encroached on. Now also the people are procuring titles in order to prevent problems with the ladinos who are invading our community.

This invasion began in the 1970s. It was gradual, nevertheless, it has intensified because those who were already here announced in other regions that there were great expanses of land, and that they were empty. People have come exclusively to make money off the land. I know families who have come, marked great extensions of land and are now enriching themselves selling it.

The Garifuna today, seeing this situation are also concerned with acquiring large areas of land to keep for their children. In general we don't have the inclination to sell land. What one has,

one thinks of for one's children. Which is very different from the people who come from far way to take great extensions of land, and then at some time return to live in the cities. We don't think like that. Land is owned so that it can be worked and so that your children can work.

What is the major land problem that Limon is confronting?

-The problem that the community of Limon is confronting right now is that the former mayor shortsightedly sold 100 hectares of land, only a few kilometers from here in Farallones, for 4,000 lempiras to the largest capitalist in Honduras. This man (Miguel Facussi) is now building a tourist resort in Farallones. Not only is he building there, he's also enclosing the beach which has been free for passage. Near there we have the lagoon of Salado, and Farallones serves as an area of absorption for Salado. Once the forest of Farallones has been cut down, we run the risk that Salado will dry up, and this would be a serious problem because Salado gives us food; in the sense that we fish there, we get sea food, we trap some animals, and we also farm at Salado.

Are there laws in Honduras that protect the lands of ethnic groups?

-The past administration emitted an order in the national congress. This document covered the situation that was occurring in the municipalities of Limon, Tela, Trujillo, and in the com-

munity of Iriona, in which the congress asked that the region's mayors not sell the ethnic groups lands, and in the cases where there were already colonists in these areas, that the state itself ought to clean up the situation--that is recover the lands for the ethnic groups. But they have not done this yet. Possibly there has been a lack of pressure on them from the communities.

What is Iseri Lidawamari's philosophy is relation to the land?

-I don't doubt that there are people who have taken up this idea of marketing the earth. But in the case of Iseri Lidawamari it would be out of the question for our members to sell the lands. The mother earth, within the philosophy of Iseri Lidawamari, should not be sold, it should remain so that the generations that follow us have the space to be able to develop themselves.

The cooperative will be marketing products, but at the communal level. For us, the land's products should be marketed, not the land itself. These ideas that I'm telling you are the orientation of Iseri Lidawamari because while I live, there will never be one inch of land sold within this territory that we are recovering. I would be the first to condemn such an action because I am convinced that it would not benefit the people who are working for development. How will people live from the air? We know well that in any part of the world, if there is no land, there is no life. We need the earth for its ecology, for the wild animals, for everything. So, we should not sell the land. ♡