

## Garifuna Folk and Traditional Healing

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To the Garifuna people, healing remains in the realm of the divine. Spirituality and healing to the Garifuna cannot be separated, and are one in the same. Illness is believed to be caused by the loss of connection between realm of man and the realm of spirit, it is blocked. Healing is merely the reconnection of these two realms. The role of the healer in this tradition is to reopen the connection, and thereby restoring health to the complete individual. Indigenous Garifuna healings are usually conducted in the context of a ceremony, where the ancestral spirits of both the healer and the heal-ee are consulted with for help, and the assistance of animal spirits, as well as the four elements of earth water, fire and air is utilized. The healing practices of the Garifuna have always been wholesome and nature based. What follows is a glimpse at the life of a practitioner in the Garifuna tradition.

Isabela Roches was born to the first generation of Garifuna people who had just arrived in Central America after being exiled by the British from their homeland of St. Vincent in 1797. Her ancestors, the Arawaks from Venezuela, came St. Vincent 500 years prior. They traveled north on the Orinoco river, bringing along their cultural and medicinal traditions. Isabela, or Gutu as she was affectionately called, was a great Garifuna medicine woman who descended from a long line of matriarchal traditional healers. She was a midwife, an advisor, and herbal healer. She held the secrets of painless childbirth by using certain herbs and massage in perfect combination. In her lifetime, which lasted 108 (documented) years, she delivered over 400 births without the assistance or help or use of drugs or doctors. Using the tools given her by *her* grandmother, she delivered the entire population of a village in Honduras, where she lived. Her approach towards childbearing was filled with reverence and dignity. She felt every child inside a womb was the beginning of a new universe, and her job was to enable that universe to come through.

For more than eighty years, Gutu provided the health care functions of prenatal care, post partum care, assisted labor, and delivery and after birth, continuing care for newborns, and tended to the ills of the people of a small Garifuna village in Honduras. Gutu was my first teacher and my great grandmother, and she did not work alone. She used the help of ancestral spirits and the assistance of animals for her diagnoses, mostly ants and other insects. Everyone who came to see her had to urinate in a pot. The urine was then taken and poured under the huge tree under which the helper ants lived. I was her assistant, and my job was to watch the ants and tend to the urine. I would pour the urine on the side of the anthill, over to the side as to not drown or upset the ants. A small number of ants would come out first, and she would greet them as her helpers. Other ants would come out later, but she said they were just being nosy, and I was to pay no attention to them. During the information exchange between my great grandmother and the ants, there would emerge different patterns made by the helper ants over the urine. She would talk to

them in Garifuna, the Arawakian language still spoken today. She insisted it was the only language the ants understood. She would tell the ants about the person's complaint, and we would wait patiently for the ants to respond. Somehow, from the patterns they formed and the overall behavior of the ants, she could read the illness and know what remedies to prepare for the person. She would always thank the ants before going back in the house to prepare the remedy as the ants advised.

The most popular prescription from the ants was that people eat coconut and drink lots of coconut water and bathe in the sea. If the person had a cold they would prescribe one tablespoon of coconut oil mixed with one tablespoon of honey and one tablespoon of lemon juice. Of course it was expected that all of these ingredients would be fresh. These three ingredients would be whipped with a fork until the mixture was cloudy and thick. The person would take one tablespoon three times a day. The mixture had to be made everyday, but people of that time did not mind making their own medicine. The coconut honey lemon mix was a popular remedy amongst the children because it was so sweet and tart and tasty. Sometimes the ants recommended a rub down, and were very particular about which oil to use. They would advise things like rubbing the person's chest and hair with coconut oil or almond or rose oil or shark oil. The coconut oil was always in stock, and it was easy to make almond oil, but for the rose and shark oil we had to go into town.

She consulted with the ants only on serious matters as she did not like to bother them. In cases where the complaint was upset indigestion or the presence worms, she would make roasted pumpkin seed water, which the person had to take followed by a teaspoon of castor oil before going to bed. Most times though, she would just give you a pulpy seed of the cana-fistula like it was candy. The Cana fistula would always elicit a massive bowel movement and digestion was restored. I once watched her take out a worm several feet long by placing a piece of raw pork on a stick and holding near the anus of a woman. The worm came out and wrapped itself around the pork. It took hours for the entire thing to come out. There was no such thing as a colicky baby on her watch, for she had the perfect remedy for colic; the chichimorra seed. She would scratch the inside part of a chichimora seed with her pinky finger nail, dip it in honey and then stick it in the baby's mouth and let the baby suck on it. It worked in calming the baby every time. If somebody had a bad cold or anything like it, she would walk with them to the sea and dunk them in the cold salty water, and then rub them down with coconut oil and send them to bed.

My older brother had a bad ear infection. We thought he would die from pain the way he held his head and cried all day. She sent me to look for a beetle that she described to me in great detail. It had to have so many sections on its back and looked almost like a miniature black turtle. I went outside and found the beetle. She took one look at it and set it free saying that it was not the one. I went out again and brought back another beetle. She set that one free too and sent me out again and told me to look harder. This time I looked under the house, under rocks and under so many other things and found a beetle I had never seen. It was smaller than the others found earlier. This one flashed a bluish iridescent shimmer when you held it up to the sun. That was the one. Then she took the

beetle that I so painstakingly searched for and captured, and squeezed it between her thumb and fingers until its guts came out. She put the empty carcass of the beetle down on the table, and took the white pus like guts of the beetle and inserted it into my brother's ear. She then stuffed some cotton with either camphor or asafetida behind it, don't remember which, it could have been a combination of both. There were no special instructions after that one time application. My brother and I were able to go out and play, and his ear infection disappeared. My brother is 52 years old and has not had an ear infection since.

My great grandmother not only brought people into the world and took care of their health; she also saw to it that they departed this world with dignity by tending to and overseeing the ceremonial rituals of the dead. When a messenger, usually a child, would come to tell her that someone was close to death, she would grab her medicine bundle, and we would go. At the home of the deceased, she would burn certain herbs for the releasing of the spirit, so the person would not suffer their death. I remember smelling copal, myrrh, wood scents like Palo Santo, and the leaves of lavender and fumitory. After the person had passed it was my job to pick the flowers for the dead. These were big bright colored, strong scented marigolds we used to make the flower water for bathing the dead. The water is made by placing the marigolds in a bucket of rainwater allowed to sit outside overnight to collect moonlight. The infused flower water is used to wash and prepare the corpse for the next phase of its journey, to join the ancestors.

Reverence of the ancestors plays a major role in the Garifuna healing system. The Garifuna are one of the few Central American indigenous groups that still maintain a degree of integrity in their healing practices. Traditional healing is still the major provider of healthcare in most Garifuna villages. Present day descendants of the exiled Garifuna nation, which now number over three hundred thousand, can still be found living in the original villages, which are distributed along the Atlantic coastal regions of Belize, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. There are over one hundred and fifty thousand dispersed throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. Most all Garifuna descendants still practice or at least have some knowledge of their indigenous ceremonial healing practices. I am one of them.

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