

The Black Caribs of Central America: A problem in Three-Way of Acculturation (Ruy Coelho) Presentation

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“The Black Caribs of Central America: a problem in three-way acculturation” (1948), by Brazilian anthropologist Ruy Coelho (1920-1990), is the first systematization of his ethnographic materials. The text also presents a research agenda that the author developed more clearly in his doctoral dissertation, “The Black Carib of Honduras; a study in acculturation” (1955), defended at Northwestern University, under the guidance of the renowned Africanist Melville J. Herskovits (1895-1963). I found the original version of this paper in Coelho’s personal files,¹ during a broader study of his academic training, professional trajectory and intellectual production, focusing on the seven years he lived abroad (in the United States, Honduras, Puerto Rico and France).²

I was never be able to determine why or for what type of publication the paper was written. Nevertheless, an indication in its heading *For D 35 - January 5, 1948*, indicates that it was possibly prepared for the interdisciplinary course, “The Psychological Basis of Society and Culture” taught jointly by Melville J. Herskovits (Department of Anthropology), Kimball Young (Department of Sociology) and Bob Seashore (Department of Psychology), at Northwestern University.³ It is known that the course promoted a “great arena of debates”, to which these professors and their “respective cohorts of assistants and candidates for higher degrees” converged.⁴ What is striking is that, in January 1948, Coelho was living in Trujillo, Honduras, where he was conducting his ethnographic fieldwork among the Garifuna (the ethnonym for those currently known as the Black Caribs) between September 1947 and August 1948. I believe that there was some mistake with regard to the date indicated, since the amount of ethnographic data presented would only be possible at an advanced stage of research.

Regarding the theme of this dossier, Ruy Coelho was a pioneer in two ways: in addition to being the **first** Brazilian anthropologist to do fieldwork research in the Caribbean, he was also the **first** anthropologist to study the Garifuna population of Honduras. Until then, the Black Caribs had appeared in reports and records of travelers, missionaries and writers, whose observations were undoubtedly accurate, but who often offered representations made through distorted and prejudiced lenses.⁵ As an exception, the well-informed articles by Eduard Conzemius were the first to accurately described aspects of the language, historical background,

1 Part of his personal files are held by the Sociedade Rorschach de São Paulo, located in São Paulo, of which Coelho was one of the founders.

2 This research was conducted while I was a post-doctoral fellow at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of São Paulo (USP), between 2014 and 2018. Funding was provided by the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP).

3 Cf. Northwestern University Bulletin (1949).

4 Cf. Coelho (1963).

5 Cf. Amaya (2007a).

physical characteristics and the most notable cultural and religious practices of the Black Caribs (or Garifuna, the name he was the first scholar to use), without, however, placing them in a broader analytical and interpretative framework.⁶

Ruy Galvão de Andrada Coelho was born in the city of São Paulo, on December 21, 1920, in a prominent family.⁷ After earning bachelor's degrees in philosophy (1942) and social sciences (1943) at the Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Letters of the University of São Paulo (FFCL-USP), on September 15, 1945 Coelho embarked to the United States, with scholarships from the Institute of International Education and Northwestern University, to join the Northwestern University graduate program in Evanston, Illinois. In the United States, in addition to attending courses at the Department of Anthropology at Northwestern University, in June 1946 he enrolled at the Rorschach Institute of New York, directed by German psychologist Bruno Klopfer (1900-1971), where he deepened his knowledge of projective psychological tests. Immediately afterwards, he participated in a short-term field research project coordinated by anthropologist Alfred Irving Hallowell (1892-1974) among Ojibwa, from Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin.⁸ The team used current ethnographic techniques and methods, and particularly Rorschach tests and free drawings to obtain information about repercussions, on an individual level, of changes experienced by the group.

As mentioned, between September 1947 and July 1948, with financial support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York, Coelho worked in Trujillo, researching the acculturative processes that affected the group's socioeconomic organization and belief system. Originally from the island of St. Vincent, in the Lesser Antilles, the Garifuna arrived at the Island of Roatan, on Honduras' northern coast, in April 1797, after being deported by the British navy. They are defined as an autonomous and distinct ethnic group due to specific socio-cultural attributes resulting from the encounter between Africans who escaped, in the first half of the 17th century, from wrecked slave ships in the turbulent waters of the coastal region of St. Vincent; with runaway slaves who fled the plantations of the surrounding islands; and aboriginal Indians who descended from Caribbean-Arawak. In two centuries of contact, during which they resisted successive armed attacks of the French and English, the Garifuna largely assimilated social practices and institutions of the native American populations, and the Caribbean-Arawak language. In the late 18th century, when the British Crown decided to conquer St. Vincent, most of the group's contingent was captured and deported to the Island of Roatan, from where they spread, in a few years, along the entire Honduran coast, and to settlements in Belize, Guatemala and Nicaragua.

It is quite likely that Coelho's decision to travel to Honduras was taken in conjunction with Melville Herskovits. In the second half of the 1920s, Herskovits began a program of studies on the problems of cultural change – or acculturation –, preservation and reinterpretation of African cultural institutions and practices in the New World.⁹ He advocated the combination of historical and ethnographic methods to trace ethnic origins, geographical provenience and the cultural specificity of these “survivors”, which he called “Africanisms”. Herskovits was particularly interested in the religious, family, economic, linguistic and artistic dimension of the phenomena of cultural change and retention, and forged or refined an ensemble of concepts including: “cultural focus”, “cultural tenacity”, “reinterpretation”, “socialized ambivalence” and others.

6 Cf. Conzemius (1928; 1930; 1999).

7 His illustrious origins lead us to Joaquim Bonifácio de Andrada e Silva (1763-1838), considered the Patriarch of Independence of Brazil (1822), and Frei Galvão (1739-1822), canonized as a saint by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007.

8 News (1946).

9 Cf. Herskovits (1930; 1937).

Since the early 1940s, he was interested in conducting an in-depth study of the Garifuna people.¹⁰ Indeed, Herskovits tried to send one of his students, the African American Hugh Smythe (1913-1977), to Honduras. Nevertheless, his efforts were thwarted by the Honduran government, which did not authorize Smythe's entry and refused to provide him a visa because Article 14 of the country's 1934 Immigration Law, prohibited the entry of Negroes into Honduras' territory.¹¹

The title "The Black Caribs of Central America: a problem in three-way acculturation" indicates the central issue faced by Coelho: the apprehension of the successful acculturative process that the group had gone through, to the point that it was possible to state that "even though their culture has a hybrid origin, the degree of unity it has achieved is very impressive". "It is inexact", Coelho asserts, "to talk of syncretism in relation to it; here the acculturative processes produced a true synthesis". In line with Herskovits' research program on the dynamics of cultural change, Coelho retraces the historical path of cultural elements that have stabilized, syncretized and shaped the body of Garifuna traditions.

In Coelho's "sketch", which, as he says, does not "convey the richness of the Black Carib culture", we can find most of the subjects that were explored, with a greater profusion of details and descriptive vividness, than in his dissertation and in articles derived from it. These include: the particularities of the language (its dual origin; gender markings); the prominence of religious life (the main doctrinal concepts; the profusion of supernatural entities; the rites and their officiators); the general principles of social organization (polygamous family organization; the sexual division of labor); and the calendar and mosaic of festivals (both incidental and solemn ones).¹² Were it not for Honduras' turbulent and explosive political situation, caused by the end of the long military dictatorship of the caudillo Tibúrcio Carías Andino (1876-1969), it is likely that Coelho would have remained for a few more months in Trujillo.¹³ The article thus highlights one of Coelho's main qualities as an anthropologist: his sagacity and sensitivity in focusing on and describing "cultural themes" that are pivotal to the socio-cultural continuity of the Garifuna's society, which are still considered to be decisive by the Garifuna themselves.¹⁴ It is no coincidence that his pioneering study continues to be influential. Since its translation in the 1980s in Honduras, it has been used as a bibliographic source for the group's poorly documented socio-cultural history of the first half of the twentieth-century. It also offers an ethnographic portrait of great evocative power that is unusually up-to-date. The importance of Coelho's work, since its translation into Spanish by the publisher Editorial Guaymuras in 1981,¹⁵ is indicated by the fact that many of his research themes and explicative principles are considered by contemporary Honduran researchers, especially Garifuna intellectuals, including the most prolific among them, E. Salvador Suazo (1992; 1996; 1997).

With the publication of "The Black Caribs of Central America: a problem in three-way acculturation", we hope to contribute to the centennial celebration of Ruy Coelho's birth. Furthermore, we hope to demonstrate his pioneering presence in the anthropology of the Caribbean, an ethnographic region that, as this dossier attests, is increasingly attracting the interest of Brazilian anthropologists.

¹⁰ Cf. Herskovits ([1941]1958). In 1946, in a letter addressed to Douglas Taylor (1901-1979), a diplomat, linguist, and English researcher, resident of the Dominican Republic, who shortly afterwards began fieldwork among the Garifuna in Belize, Herskovits wrote: "The Black Caribs, I may say, have been a group I have wanted to see studied for many years. I even had a field trip all lined up for a young man who was taking his doctorate here. The unbelievable prejudice of the Honduras Government in refusing him a visa, even for research on the ground that he was colored, prevented the realization of this work. I am hoping that it may be possible in the future to get someone among them. They are one of the most strategic areas for study in the whole Afro-American field" (Northwestern University, Africana Manuscript 6 - Box 41 - Folder 44).

¹¹ Cf. Anderson (2008). For the racial legislation and racism on Honduras' northern coast, see: Euraque (2004); Amaya (2007b).

¹² Cf. Coelho (1949; 1952a; 1952b; 1961).

¹³ For a closer look at the political and social tensions at that period, see Ramassote (2018).

¹⁴ Cf. Andrade Coelho (1981).

¹⁵ Cf. Andrade Coelho (1981).

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