

Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project
Interview with Elga Garcia by JahAsia Jacobs
Conducted on June 4th, 2023 in Atlanta, GA

[00:00:00] **JahAsia Jacobs:** Okay, thank you so much for joining me today. I'm here with Elga Cacho Garcia. Elga Cacho

[00:00:07] **Elga Garcia:** Garcia.

[00:00:07] **JahAsia Jacobs:** Yes. Yeah. Okay. The date is June 24th, 2023. Correct. And we are sitting in a building at Spelman College, but more importantly, we are near the Victory Garden here on campus. And so, yes, to start, I guess, would you say a little bit about yourself?

[00:00:27] **Elga Garcia:** Thank you so much, JahAsia, for reaching out to me. Again, my name is Elga Garcia, Elga Cacho Garcia. I am a Garifuna woman. I was born in Honduras, in the city of La Ceiba. At the very early age of five years, I moved in with my grandmother in her village of Santa Rosa de Aguán. Uh, It's a very prominent Garifuna community in Honduras. My mom had to make the decision to emigrate to the United States of America early, I want to say 1984, um, to reach out, uh, for better job and better opportunities for her and her family.

So by the time I was 11 years old, she, uh, decided to bring us with her. We moved to the Bronx, in New York in, in December of 1990. So, uh, pretty much I've lived most of my life here in the States. I've had to learn a new culture, right? be able to adapt to the weather. As of, I want to say 1990. 497 was it? I graduated high school. I went to college in New York City.

Um, I was the first one in the family to obtain a bachelor's degree, so that was like a milestone. And, by 1999, I had my son. I have a 24 year old. He's in the Navy right now. It's been a quite interesting journey, to say the least, right? To be able to grow up in a village and then come live in a major, you know, global city like New York and, and to adapt to that, to learn a new language. Right?

And so, I feel fortunate, to have had the support of my family to help me grow and, and make good decisions by myself. And so, it's been also great that I've been able to still speak the dialect.

So, I'm trilingual. I speak Spanish, English, and Garifuna. And so, my mom was very intentional in ensuring that we kept most of our identity as, as Garifuna people. And so, I, I cook Garifuna meals, I dance Garifuna music, and I practice Garifuna rituals, if you will. So, pretty much I, I, I can say, I'm proud to say that I live the culture. Yes. So, um, I recently moved to Atlanta in 2021, by way of Houston.

In 2008, I relocated to Houston to my job. I've lived there. I raised my son in Houston. I worked in Houston. And then, during the pandemic, you know, things were a little bit shaky and so the decision was for me to move wherever the opportunity will come. So here I am. I'm learning the

city. I'm getting acclimated with the culture in Atlanta is, is different than New York, is different than Houston, but, it's, it's beautiful.

So, and happy to be here at Spelman as well, you know, given the historical aspect of it. And, I appreciate, you know, education and, and having the understanding that higher education really opens up the doors for, for people like me, for women like me. So, I'm happy to be here to be able to talk to you about my culture, what I do and, and, you know, especially about food.

I'm a major foodie, so I love to eat. So, um, it'll, it'll be my pleasure.

[00:04:14] **JahAsia Jacobs:** Ooh, so many places to go. How about, could we revisit, let's say, when you were growing up, how did you learn to speak the dialect? Uh huh. Maybe if you could, uh, recall some memories about the process of learning Garifuna? Not just the language, but as you said, the rituals, the dances, the music, and also preparing the foods and vegetables.

[00:04:38] **Elga Garcia:** I can tell you, I can, I can clearly remember because I was born in the city and in the city they speak. Spanish. And so, as I was growing up, my mom did not speak to me in Garifuna. It was all Spanish.

It was more so when she made the decision to leave, to come to the U. S. and for us to stay with my grandmother, then I had to be shoved in, basically, into the culture in the village, right? I remember clearly asking her, oh mom, I was playing around one afternoon and then I got tired and it was, you know when your body knows this specific time of the day that you have to watch cartoons, right?

So I'll be running around. I'm like, I left my friends. You know what? I'm done with you. I'm ready to go to watch Tom and Jerry. Cause it was like my favorite cartoon and that time. And then I said to her, I'm ready. Like where's the TV? And she was like, honey, I'm sorry to burst your bubble, but there's no TV in the village.

There's no electricity here. Like. You can't, this is it. And I was so heartbroken. It was like, oh my God. And so I had to go back and play with the kids in the neighborhood. And then I remember they were talking, but I couldn't understand what they were saying. And, and then eventually, somebody cursed me.

I remember it was like, I won't say it here, but it was like, huh? And there's some, you know how words and action mark an experience in your life? That was one of those for me. And since that day, I don't know how it happened, but a couple of days after, I just learned and I was able to communicate with the kids.

So I was, I want to say, five years of age, going on six, that I started to learn how to speak Garifuna. Uh huh, I can say,

My name is Elga Cacho, my mother is Erica Cacho. I am Garifuna and I was born in Santa Rosa de Agua, Honduras.

So, when I speak like that, even to now in my adulthood, and then when people hear me speak in Garifuna, they're just shocked, they're like, how can you speak it so well? Like after so many years that you left Honduras. But once we came to New York, my mom, again, was very intentional then to speak to us in Garifuna and so in the household, it was mostly Garifuna and then in school, English and then, you know, social life was a little bit of all three.

Yeah, so, um, and so that's how it was. And then I got to understand how people in the village lived, right? The men will go out fishing. out into the sea. And then the women will wake up early and go out into the field, like literally getting the canoe and, you know, go out. They have land and plots where they will grow the food.

So women doing the planting and growing the food and men will be doing like building houses or going out fishing or if there was a craftsman person building canoes, that's what we do. And other people, you know, making fishnets and so on and so forth.

And I also got to understand how community worked, right? So that if there was a group of women that had a task to make cassava bread. So, let's say one person will tell two or three of her friends, Hey, this is my project. I want to be able to make this much. Do you think you can help me? Or you can go to your plot and give me some of your yuca, and then next one is your turn and I'll give you.

And so there was an exchange of some sort. Right? And so this one woman will go out, all three, four or five women, go out, bring the cassava or the taro or the cassava root and then they will tell other people in the community to come in and help peel, because it's a whole process, right, to peel it, to grate it, to remove the juices out of it, to then refine that cassava flour, if you will, to make cassava bread.

So that I remember clearly, and I used to love watching them do that, right? Because when all the women get together, there was music. So they would make sounds, like the board, where they would make a great cassava, and then they would dance. One of them would probably say something funny, and all of them would just burst out laughing and probably be something naughty. And then kids are not allowed to be around. But then again, you know, there's something going on and you just want to kind of be sneaking around to listen to them. So, um, those were like very candid moments, I have to say, but it was very significant, right?

Because they're, they're getting together to then produce food, right? And then after everything is done, and they bake the bread, so then they will share. So if you were able to help and bring the cassava, so a portion of that is given to you, and then another portion will be given to the people who came in to help, to peel, and whatever the process was for that time.

So, I used to love going into the, they call it el monte. So if you had a plot of land where you grow food, it's el monte, right? We call that arab, arab. So, that section right there, that will be monte, or arab.

[00:10:30] **JahAsia Jacobs:** The Spellman Gardens?

[00:10:31] **Elga Garcia:** Yes, yes, the Spellman Gardens will be called el monte or arab, in Garifuna. And so, they will have to wake up early in the morning, sometimes 3 in the morning, get ready and go.

And I would get excited to go. But then again, my grandmother, she, because we were her grandkids and she was taking care of us, she didn't think it was safe for us to go with her. So it was different when she was raising her daughter, which my mom, she would take her daughter with her and she would teach her how to plant, right?

But because things are changing, you know, economically, the family is now well off because then my mom is here in the States and she's able to send money. So the need for me to actually go and learn how to then plant and grow. It's no longer there, or at least it's just dissipating, because then it's changing, right?

So that's one aspect of it to where I feel like I missed out a lot because then I wasn't shown as much because for her it wasn't required. It's like, you're not going to live this life of like, you know, working the land for you to grow food. You see what I'm saying?

[00:11:50] **JahAsia Jacobs:** Absolutely. Absolutely. For the record, what, what's your mom's name and then what is your grandmother's name?

[00:11:56] **Elga Garcia:** My mother's name, she passed away in 2018, uh, where I was, I guess. Erica, Erica Cacho. And my grandmother's name is Marta Olivia Cacho. My grandmother's still alive, she lives in New York with my aunt. She's turning 88 towards the end of July. So, uh, we're planning to do something to celebrate her. And so, yes, so it's Marco Olivia Cacho, my grandmother, and Erika Cacho, rest in peace, my mom.

[00:12:27] **JahAsia Jacobs:** Can you describe a little bit more, uh, the village that you grew up on initially? The space, what was growing? I guess what was your grandmother growing?

[00:12:40] **Elga Garcia:** Yeah, so, my grandmother inherited her parents house. So, based on what I was told, it was a house, it was like a Victorian style home. And it was kind of like a prominent home, because a lot of people did not have the style of homes like that in the village. But it was because of the status of her father in the village. So my great grandfather, Felicito Cacho, he was a merchant person, like he used to grow plots of watermelon and coconuts.

And so he will harvest that and then travel from our village to the city and then to Belize. He will go as far as into Belize to be able to sell his products, right? And so they were well off, considering in that time. It was a well to do family in the village, and so my grandmother then had my mom, and then she divorced my grandfather, and yadda yadda.

So, um, but yeah, so the house was wooden, and then when my uncle, Felicito Cacho, was my grandfather's, great grandfather's name, he came to the States, and so he built another house for my grandmother. So that's the house that I remember, which is like blocks, and now, you know, is more like modern home. Um, but we still had the kitchen, which was the typical house in a Garifuna village. It was made out of wood with like, um, I don't know what they call those

leaves. Casa de manaca. Okay? That was the kitchen. So we had the main house and then next to it we had our kitchen. And it was more like a typical Garifuna house. Okay?

We had orange trees. I remember we had papaya trees around the house. We had um, maybe three coconut trees. We had sour orange trees. What else? Lemon lime trees. Um, what else we had? And then she had like flowers around her house because she loved to have flowers around the house.

[00:14:49] **JahAsia Jacobs:** So a lot of citrus?

[00:14:50] **Elga Garcia:** A lot of citrus, coconut, definitely coconut trees. Every, I want to say, from what I remember, and I can see that going back to the village, pretty much every household, it was required that it had a coconut tree because our food, the base of it has to do with a lot of coconut milk. And so if she was to go out to El Monte or to out to her plot to where she grows cassava, she used to grow, malanga.

I guess that's what you call it, taro or wafu. Uh, sweet potato, mabi, she grew that. She also grew sugar cane. And what else she grew? Mango, she had mango trees there too. Soursop tree. What else? And banana trees, and plantains, absolutely. We had to have plantains and bananas.

[00:15:42] **JahAsia Jacobs:** And what were some of the meals that you enjoyed?

[00:15:44] **Elga Garcia:** Some of the meals that I enjoyed, I still enjoy to this day and happy to be able to prepare myself is machuca or pudutu, which is a coconut milk based soup with seafood. It could be with seafood or with, you know, deer meat or meat or not chicken. Um, And then, of course, the hudutu or machuka is made out of mashed plantains, green and sweet plantains together.

I also love rice and beans. So it's the red beans, uh, coconut milk, and then you add some rice and you season it. And I, we typically have that with, uh, fried fish. Yes. Um, another dish that I like is called, um, ugundiga, it's like dumpling. It's made outta green banana. It's green banana dumpling.

[00:16:40] **JahAsia Jacobs:** Um, green banana. Okay. So is, it's not, it's like savory.

[00:16:44] **Elga Garcia:** It's, it's savory. It's not the sweet banana. It's the green banana and, and it's warm. So you grate it and then you scoop, you know, you season it and then you scoop it into some coconut milk.

[00:16:56] **JahAsia Jacobs:** What do you season it with usually?

[00:16:58] **Elga Garcia:** Um, a little bit of salt. We grate a little bit of garlic, onion, and maybe some green pepper, add into it. And then some cumin, black pepper. And then, you mix that together. Once it's grated, then you scoop. You know, a scoop of, a quarter cup of whatever thing, dough, you make out of it, and then you just let it boil, and then once it floats into the

soup, then it's ready to be served. So, you can have it with stew meat, or stew chicken, or fried fish. It's called green banana dumpling. Garifuna is called ala bundiga.

When it comes to breads, I love coconut bread, I love cinnamon roll bread. Um, this one, we call it keke in the Caribbean. Some people call it Johnny cakes. It's like a sourdough. It's hard dough. I want to say is similar to what we have here in the U S African Americans biscuits.

It's like a typical biscuit. Okay. It's called keke. Um, and I love eating that with some white cheese, fresh cheese or some refried beans. Um, and a cup of coffee..

On the sweet side, there's a candy that's made. It's like a caramel. I wouldn't say it's caramel. And we call that Tableta de Leche.

Um, there's a version of it, they made it with coconut, but I, personally, I don't like it. It's the texture. It's just never was my thing, so. But, you know, you grate the coconut and then you have some brown sugar, some ginger, and cinnamon, and then once it hardens, you know, you can just cut it into squares and then you sell it or give it out to people when they come visit. Yeah. It's called Tableta de Coco and Tableta de Leche. Yeah.

[00:18:54] **JahAsia Jacobs:** So you said that you didn't have much experience in gardening, but you retained a lot of these food preparation techniques. And I'm wondering who taught you then, if you were out gardening, how did you learn how to cook?

[00:19:09] **Elga Garcia:** Just watching and observing. Just observe the elderly and sometimes, you have kids playing around and you think they're not paying attention, but really they are and so I feel it was the same for them where they were just busy trying to prepare the next meal and bringing in the ingredients together or like asking me to go to the next door neighbor if they don't have whatever ingredients they need.

They're like, Oh, get me some machote, or go get me some onion or ask if she has a little bit of sugar. I need some cumin or whatever. So I would just go and fetch that, bring it back and then just watch my grandmother prepare the meal. And so, as much as I did not go out into the Monte or into the garden to really grow, I, I do remember watching, like having a lot of, you know, observing how people did what they did and how they prepared the meals.

And if it wasn't that I didn't go, but once he came to the village, bringing all these food, then it was required of us to go and help bring the food from like, I don't know if there was like a canal and that's where they had to park their canoes and stuff. We have to go in there. You know, bring our pans and then bring the food home.

So it's a lot of that. Uh, so it's a lot, it's a lot of community work. That's what I remember. Like, and it's so beautiful to go back in memory and see all of that. Cause it's like, I'm just, it's a movie and I'm rewinding everything. You see, and it was so organic and so beautiful and so communal, like.

[00:20:42] **JahAsia Jacobs:** Who's, who's around you when you think back to those days where a lot of you would go.

[00:20:48] **Elga Garcia:** My sisters, my older sister, she was adopted, but she's my older sister, um, Judith, Al Bahoudi, we called her Judith, and then my little sister, Jenny, but she was a lot younger when we were out and about doing these things, but, I do remember her and our neighbors as well, my friends, and I'm still friends with most of them to this day, so.

Um, that's what I remember. So our village, it was situated on one side, we had the river, El Rio One, and then on the other side, we had the beach, like the coastline, and that's like the Caribbean Sea. So, in order for you to get to us, you have to go and, yeah, like, the road, and then you get to one side of the village, you have to get in the canoe, and then cross over to the other side.

[00:21:39] **JahAsia Jacobs:** What kinds of fish were popular?

[00:21:42] **Elga Garcia:** No, I could tell you a couple. I don't know the names of the fish in English, but one of them is called, Brutoba. In Spanish, I think they call them trovalo. And then, um, the other one is haba. In Spanish, I think it's called sabaleta. And then, red snapper. That's one of my favorite fish.

Um, there's another one is called, um, gawuchu, I don't know the name in Spanish . I can give you the name in Garifuna I think it's gawacha in Spanish, but those are like my main, my favorite fish. And then I think King Fish. Yes, that's one in English. Kingfish. And then I, uh, I love crabs, blue crabs. I love conch meat, escaracol, shrimps, you know, prongs.

Yeah, we used to have a lot of those, so, um.

[00:22:36] **JahAsia Jacobs:** Is that the kind of food, what kinds of seafood would go in the, in the mechuco?

[00:22:41] **Elga Garcia:** In the mechuco, it would be, it could, it could go with fish. It, you could have conch meat, which is escaracol, or you could have it with shrimps, or you could have all three combined. So you can have it individually and then you can have it all three.

So it all depends how you like your seafood. A lot of people add other things to it. I prefer to have either just shrimp, fish, conch, maybe crabs, lobster. Those a good as well. Individually altogether into soups. It's like a mixture and it's so delicious. This tastes like the best. I don't care what other people say around the world. Once you try that, that's like the best food you can have.

[00:23:24] **JahAsia Jacobs:** That sounds really good. I want to ask you a little bit more about the generational, intergenerational ties that you have going on, so I'm thinking about your son. What's his relationship to, to Gerifuna food like? Um, has he inherited any of the ability to prepare foods? Is he interested?

[00:23:45] **Elga Garcia:** I'm glad you mentioned it. Because, like I said, in, in our family, like, we, we live the culture. Like, we still have most of what our great grandmother and grandmother taught us. My mom and who had the opportunity to teach me. Right? And now, in my household, I, I cook that. And so my son has had to like be able to learn how to cook that.

And thank God, he loves it. He loves everything, most of everything. He doesn't like alabundi, I think. But it's interesting that you bring that up because if he was here right now, he's in the Navy. He's 24 years old. And so he's doing his thing on his own. But if he was here and you were to ask him, I'm pretty sure he would say he loves anything that's Garifuna culture because he's been exposed to it so much, right?

Uh, he doesn't speak the dialect. He understands a few phrases here and there. But I want to say, preparing the food, not so much, but it's something that could interest him, and he still has the time, I want to say, to learn how to, how to prepare it. I'm hoping and praying that he does it, but he, he loves it. He, he loves to eat Garifuna food. Yeah, so I'm proud to say and safe to say that, I guess, the, the, the culture will continue through him.

[00:25:19] **JahAsia Jacobs:** Can you tell me more about the ceremonies, like some important Gerifuna ceremonies, rituals, and maybe what foods or what plants become important?

[00:25:30] **Elga Garcia:** Thank you for asking. And I think I can say a little bit or a lot because the past two years in 2021 and 2022, I was fortunate enough to be able to participate in, in one of our major rituals is called Dugu. Okay. And Dugu is D U G U, Dugu is pretty much a family reunion, the gathering of like four last names, if you will.

So you have the two last names of a matriarch and then the two last names of the patriarch, and then families coming together. Okay, we usually have a medium who's able to organize and direct the ceremonies around. This type of ritual, and then all families have to contribute to it economically. Some people would bring money, other people would bring food, you know, whatever is required, you know, it has to be organized. And so it's something that is requested, right, by the spirit of the ancestors. So there's a communion between the ancestors. And, and those that are still alive, so that's pretty much that.

And so what they ask, they ask for people to, to, to know about each other. They ask for families to work together, to get along, and to be able to take care of each other and the ones to come, right?

And so they ask for, it's like a huge, it's a feast, pretty much. The first day, everybody gets together, everybody gets settled in, and it's like we dance and we eat, and it goes day and night. Depending on what the spirits are calling out for, people just need to get up and do what they need to do, start dancing, singing, playing drums, playing the maracas, and stuff like that.

But it's, it's pretty much a family reunion, and it goes out maybe for two days, two nights, two days. So everybody's together in the same house. It's just doing what they need to do.

There was one particular time during the day, I want to say on the second day, to where we have tables put out and everybody brings in the dish that their family member enjoyed or used to like or whatever that family member requested. That's the spirit of the deceased, right? So they ask for particular dishes to be prepared and then that family member is supposed to bring it in and present it and just put it out on the table. So it's the gathering of all kinds of Garifuna foods.

And, and then prepared differently. And so, I have a dream, that one day, I'm able to actually record something like that and be able to document the different dishes that we have. Because I think a lot of it, we're losing it. A lot of people, it's just not interested in preparing foods the way our ancestors used to prepare it. And it was less of the chemicals that we use in these days. So that's another topic, too. Because the way they used to eat it was very organic. And it was delicious food.

[00:28:48] **JahAsia Jacobs:** Can you say more about that? Um, for what other techniques or practices?

[00:28:53] **Elga Garcia:** So, for example, the seasonings were very much natural. So they had oregano. They had basil. They had, you know, the all spice, they had cinnamon, they had all of these spices that was so natural and abundant at that time. Right? Um, they didn't use chicken bouillon back then. It's like they made their own chicken bouillon. You know, and that's, they used to call it, they call it dumari.

I want to learn how to make dumari. But, based on what I learned when I went last year to participate in this ritual. One of my mom's or my grandfather's great aunt. She was an expert in making dumari. And dumari is like the juice of the cassava that's extracted. So the cassava is grated and then the juice is extracted so that we can have the flour, if you will.

So out of the juice, I think they used to cook it. I don't know the process of making it, but the references of what I've heard, they would cook it until it becomes very, or it became syrupy and yellowish. And, and it was like a way of adding salt or seasoning to your food. I

So, um, basil is, I think it's called basing, that's what they call it in Garifuna. Allspice, they call it nilahashuru. Um, allspice, like the tree, the leaf of it, they will, you know, make tea out of that. So it's allspice tea. What else? So, so The ritual itself is called dugu so, then they prepare, they present the food, and then after the communion then whoever is around, they can go in and take some of that food and start eating it so we share it with other people, not just the family, but with other people in the community.

Whoever wants to come in, they can join and, you know, um, you know, eat with us as well. So it's a major feast. It's beautiful. It's beautiful. And it saddens me, in a way, because I can see that we're not practicing it as we should. And eventually, I think we're gonna lose it. Sadly, we may lose it. Yeah.

[00:31:16] **JahAsia Jacobs:** Can you share a memory that you have from one of these, one of your experiences?

[00:31:23] **Elga Garcia:** So I was called out in the meeting to kind of like be the leader and that I hate to say leader but more like the person to bring everyone together. And, and it was overwhelming working with people of, of different opinions and, trying to get everybody on the same page, you know, uh, working with people older than me, younger than me, , uh, but eventually it was done.

And so I was happy that at least my ancestors, I wanna say my great grandparents who requested to have this ritual be done, I feel they were satisfied with what transpired and, and what was achieved. Uh, we were able to bring as a lot of people back into the village to have this family reunion.

I was able to work with the medium, that they selected, the Spirit of the Ancestors. It can get very, um, hard to explain because a lot of people, if you don't experience it, what it is to, to, to commune and to communicate with the spirit of your deceased loved ones, right?

[00:32:36] **JahAsia Jacobs:** What does that feel like for you?

[00:32:38] **Elga Garcia:** It's, it's safe. It feels safe and I feel protected and taken care of and loved, despite the fact that I may not have known my great grandparents, physically, I feel the presence because then, because of them is my grandmother, because of my grandmother is my mom, and because of my mom, here I am, and so I feel like I'm their legacy, and I'm carrying this legacy, and I feel like they're proud that I'm still here speaking the language, like I'm like that last generation, that last hope, right? That, that's still here and, and, and talking to you and relating these stories, you know, um, so I feel fortunate that I can still be able to carry on that legacy.

Uh, the Garifuna people are very resilient people, right, and as you can understand, the African diaspora, the experiences that we have had because of the enslavement and whatever transatlantic trade and how they got to, to the Americas, right? And everything that they had to endure. And these were people that, I guess by the grace of God, the ship wrecked and they had to swim, right, to some island. In the Caribbean, it's called St. Vincent. And, and in St. Vincent, they met with people like the Arawaks and the *Tainos* who welcomed them and helped them to survive and, and thrive at the same time, right?

So I'm like the product of, of those cultures mingling together, resilient and free and strong and, and, and fighters too. And then once they got to the coast of Honduras for them to be able to just spread out and live independent lives, right? And they brought all of the skills that they brought with them from Africa and the skills that they had to learn with these new people in the Caribbean.

Because cassava bread, I don't think that's like an African food, that's a very much South American, Caribbean food because of the people, the indigenous people who already lived in, in these islands. And we still make that. And, and it's funny because then a couple of years ago I saw a video from Guyana of the people making cassava. It's like exactly the same process. I was like, oh my goodness. And then just the other day, I saw people in Haiti making cassava

bread. I was like, this is wonderful. So it was the connection for me when I saw all of these things. Like, yeah, I am Caribbean. I am these people.

So I feel when, you know, when I talk about my, my ancestors, it's, it's a real thing. It's, it's um, it's, it's what has survived after all of these years since they were able to like leave the coast of Africa. Because when you go to Benin, whatever Voodoo thing, the rituals they do is similar. We do libations, we do food offerings, we have a media. That's what these people have in West Africa. So yes, it's very much that. And I'm not going to deny that. I'm not going to deny that I haven't lived that. I have. Two years ago, I was there.

[00:36:19] **JahAsia Jacobs:** Thank you for sharing that. I'm curious to hear more too about the dress and adornment, that component of the rituals of the food celebration.

Um, for the record, you're wearing a beautiful gingham style dress today.

[00:36:37] **Elga Garcia:** In honor of the Garifuna culture, because we do use a lot of gingham fabric to make our batas. Batas is like a gown that is a casual gown that you wear in any typical day. Um, so I figured, you know what, let me just put on my bata.

The, the dressing, the, the dresses or the attire that's required for the, the, it's, it comes, these instructions are given to us through the medium, okay? So there's a specific color that the family may request. So it depends on the, um, the requests coming from the spirits or the, the leaders, the spiritual leaders that are requesting this specific Dugu, okay?

This one specific attire that has to be, kind of like prepared. So the medium has a ways of bringing together some type of bush medicine and some other things for him to then prepare the undergarment that goes under the uniform. So basically, we have a uniform.

And again, making that connection to family reunions in the U. S., when we see families getting together, and everybody has one t shirt, right? So that's one connection right there.

So for us, it's usually maybe like blue color, so some blue and, and, and red. So maybe your headscarf is red. For men, the shirt buttoned down blue and then maybe like some khaki shorts and then for women is batas, you know with the same blue cloth and then maybe some red detailing, you know design for their clothes and then the undergarment that's prepared by the medium, and that's called Galatu, or Galatia, Galahot.

It's some kind of red dye and some other stuff. Only he knows how to prepare. I couldn't tell you much, but that's what I've been able to observe. So that's how they do it. And so during certain parts of the ritual, we need to be able to wear that undergarment as a way of protecting us against evil or negative spirits, if you will.

[00:39:03] **JahAsia Jacobs:** And, um you don't know the, the herb, the medicinal herbs that were going into the garment, but, would you be able to describe if there were special plants or any particular herbs that one would use for illness, um, or to, like, recover from illness or to heal or for health?

[00:39:26] **Elga Garcia:** That aspect of it I couldn't tell you. My mom was very good, and I feel like my mom was going through a journey of actually receiving, like, I don't know, some type of messages from her guide to prepare medicine, because in our culture, there's people who have been, like, predestined or selected as, like, on a spiritual level. Okay, a lot of people may not understand this, but I'm trying to explain it as, as, as basic as possible that I can, I can.

So, there are people who are selected from when they were born. And that person is going to be a medium. This person is going to be maybe like a, a, a, a medicine doctor. Someone who knows how to gather the herbs that's going to help the sickly in the community.

Right? And there's people who, who, who know other, have other skills and gifts. So these are gifts that were like passed down from generation to another generation, right? So I think my mom was, was destined to do that. But unfortunately, again, she passed away. I couldn't tell you which specific herbs and plants would be good for medicine.

And I couldn't, I couldn't distinguish because you have to see, because once you see the plant, like, you know what it is for. So no, I don't, I couldn't tell you. I know maybe, you know. I recently visited my family in Houston and one of my cousins has this plant that we used to kind of like, take the leaves, kind of like rub it together in water and bathe the babies.

So that's called Walelama. I don't know the name of it in Spanish. But it's close to like a lavender scent. And so, and, and, and just breaking one leaf and smelling it really kind of like brought me back. You know how certain scents can just bring you back to a specific era or space, you know? And so Walelama is a plant that, uh, when there's a new baby, the family will then prepare the baby's bath with, with the leaves of that plant. And it's supposed to be to protect the baby from like evil spirits and, and so on and so forth.

[00:41:58] **JahAsia Jacobs:** What do the leaves look like?

[00:42:01] **Elga Garcia:** It's the texture is kind of like very velvety and it's got pointy edges. I thought I carried one with me in my wallet. Uh, but it's very, it's like medium size and it's flat, it's not long, it's very small leaves. I could probably ask my cousin to send me a picture of the plant because she has plenty of it in Houston. And then it has like purple flowers, tiny purple, so it's similar to like lavender. If you've seen lavender, then it's similar to that, I want to say. And it has a very lemony, sweet scent. Yeah, so if you've seen oregano, like the, the broad leaf of the oregano, it looks like that, but on a smaller scale. That's like the best description that I can give you for that.

Other plants that is used for medicine. I don't know the name. There's plenty though.

We do have, a, a variety of plants that people use for different types of ailments. But I couldn't describe it to you right now. I know that I told you earlier how we use the leaves of the orange or the lemon, like lemon leaves, lemon tree leaves, orange tree leaves, allspice tree leaves. We use those to prepare teas.

And we drink tea when it's like rainy weather in the village. Because it's cold, it's hot, so you want something like to warm you up. And also lemongrass, which I told you is one of my favorite teas, lemongrass tea. Cinnamon tea. That's usually that people use it, you know, for ailments. It's soothing. It's like, you know, soothing. If you feel stressed out or you feel like cold or you feel like you're about, you know, get sick, then, you know, your grandparents will say, okay, I'll make you some tea or this kind of tea.

[00:43:59] **JahAsia Jacobs:** I want to give you a moment maybe to share anything that's on your mind, um, as you've been thinking back to your childhood and then moving across so many places that you've called home. If there's anything that you would like to share as a part of your story.

[00:44:17] **Elga Garcia:** I just, I feel fortunate to be able to represent my culture anywhere I go. And, and in retrospect, when I look back when I was in college, when I was in school, like elementary, junior high school, high school, in college, and then going into corporate America, and then, you know, having these roles and, you know, and in these positions, I've had to explain to people like who I am. Right? But in the sense that is enlightening and educational because a lot of people don't have the knowledge that this particular group of people in Central America have been able to retain so much of their West African culture. It's predominantly West African culture. And then when I see videos of people in Africa, when I'm exposed to the music and the food in Africa, it's similar to what we have.

And so it brings a sense of, of pride, and a sense of, of, of self. That I can, I can still trace back me based on what I eat, what, what music I dance to, what rituals I practice, and what I speak. And in Garifuna culture, you know, it's very much oral. Information is passed down from one generation to another, you know?

And a lot of the, um, the songs that we use in these rituals is, is where they have been able to preserve the history of the Garifuna. We didn't have, we don't have books. We don't write the language, but we're able to tell it in our spiritual songs, right? At one point, one Garifuna guy who, who, who has a great understanding, his name is Bodona.

He's an artist in the community and he posted a video in social media and he was able to explain one of the songs and it was like an aha moment for me, the way he explained it, how he says this spiritual deity or the spiritual thing, entity, was able to recollect how he left from the north of Africa across the Sahara and then arriving into the Caribbean, right?

So that's history right there. And a lot of it, uh, for me, if you sing it, it's, it's, I can't understand the meaning of it. Like people will have to explain it to me because it has been able to change, right? And it's not the Garifuna that I speak on a daily, and it's like secular, and you know. People will have to really understand the meaning of the songs and then explain it to you.

I could sing it, but I couldn't tell you the true meaning of it. So the history of the Garifuna people is pretty much preserved in stories and songs. And then in this case, um, spiritual songs. And I think he said it's called, those are called Uyenu.

So you know how we have gospel and spiritual songs gospel. Well like, when you go into an African American church, there's one specific song that's really like a spiritual song. That will be considered Uyenu. And that, that's what it is for us, so.

So, I then have, or feel, a sense of, of representing my culture, right, where I've been able to live in this country and to have the responsibility. So, I feel a sense of responsibility to retain as much as I can and then to share it with people that come across my path.

[00:48:17] **JahAsia Jacobs:** I'm wondering too about your drawing connections between the Caribbean, between specifically between, um, like you were saying earlier, Haiti, but linking Honduras to Haiti, to St. Vincent, to West Africa, and I'm wondering, maybe how the Garifuna culture, what is it like in the United States? And how do you locate Garifuna culture in the States to those other places?

[00:48:48] **Elga Garcia:** The great thing about technology these days, specifically I want to say social media, we are now exposing our stories, right? And then collectively we're seeing how similar we are.

And, and there's so much out there that hasn't been exposed or talked about as it should. Right? In our history books, right? And so now when we have friends from other countries, from the Caribbean, from West Africa, and here in America, because I live here and I have African American friends that if they see me, first glance, they're saying, well, you look black, you're African American.

And I'm like, no, I'm not because I wasn't born here. But I do feel like I have an experience of being Afro descendant. You see what I'm saying? I may not be African American, but I'm a descendant of African people that kind of like have the same shared experiences as your people. It's just that some of them came to the U. S., the rest were in the Caribbean, and mine happened to just be like left out somewhere in the sea and arrived in Central America. You see? But, I do feel like we, we are connected. You know? And we are so similar in so many ways. Right?

And so the way I see Garifuna people who have had to come to this country to find better opportunities for themselves and their families, we are everywhere. We are everywhere, but at the same time because we have to assimilate to the culture, right? And so slowly but surely, I want to say we are kind of like not maintaining our own because now we have to assimilate and now we have first, second, third generation Garifuna people here that probably don't even speak the dialect and they're not even teaching it to their children.

I haven't, I haven't, I'm one of them because I don't teach my son the dialect. He has been exposed to it when he's at home and he would have heard myself, my mom, my sister speak it. But, he doesn't speak the dialect, right? And so, it's similar to other kids his generation where they don't. They don't even speak Spanish.

You know, for him, I was lucky enough to have been able to send him to Honduras for two years. It was more like a cultural sub submersion. Cause I needed him to, for him to speak

Spanish, write it, read it, understand it, and communicate. Right? And so I, I made it a point. I was very intentional for him to actually spend two years of school in Honduras for the same reason that I wanted him to at least have a glimpse of what it is to live in a country like Honduras.

And I think it helped him to appreciate the culture. And I can tell you, he represents African American culture, Honduran culture, and Garifuna culture. And so, Garifuna people in the Americas were pretty much based in every major city. I'm going to say New York, let me go by state, the state of New York, Florida, Georgia, there's quite a number of us here now, New Jersey, Texas, and California.

[00:52:26] **JahAsia Jacobs:** And from your experience, what about Garifuna culture, what does it look like in the United States in particular?

[00:52:33] **Elga Garcia:** In the United States, because we are a very tight knit family, again going back to kind of like having these family reunions, we're very much tight in that sense. And then it's like naturally we just come together and it's like we need that sense of seeing each other and celebrating and, and communing with each other.

So not too long ago, there was a group of people who came from Houston and New York and gathered here in Atlanta. And this is like the second year that they do that. And I tell you, the more Garifunas we have here in Atlanta, the more we're going to see these people coming in here and exchanging. Because then the people in Atlanta are going to be able to go to New Orleans or Houston or New York whenever they have these types of gatherings.

So culturally, I think. It's within us, like in our blood, to be able to just be connected to one another in that sense. And we connect mainly through food and music. Like we have to have the drums. The drums is like a major thing for us, right? So in that sense, I feel like the more we come to the U. S. and live and raise our families here, then we are adapting, but at the same time trying to maintain that essence of our culture.

So, I'm hopeful. I'm hopeful because then, um, there are many people in the community who see the need to be able to have a center or a cultural base where we can still maintain that and teach it. Not only to our children, but to other people who may want to be able to, um, learn. You know, the culture. You know, specifically African American, so the fact that Spelman is here, maybe one day, I don't know, it's a dream.

We can have, like, courses, or at least we can have a space, you know, designated to, like, Garifuna culture, where people can come in and gather and, and then have these cultural events, right, to be able to preserve the little bit that we still have.

My mom and I had, we had a project before she passed away and it was to actually create a cookbook. And I want to share this in general because I still want to be able to work on it. And it was basically putting together a cookbook that covered like how we prepare breads, how we prepare main meals, how we prepare porridges. We had different kinds of sweets and desserts. We had different kinds of drinks that people are not learning how to make it and they have lost

the skill of how to prepare it. So it was very much going to be like a collection or the archives, if you will, of how to make certain things that people used to do that we are no longer doing. And it would have been broad.

And I was like, Mom, but you know what? Thinking about it and going through this list, we have a whole menu, a whole cuisine. Like, oh my gosh, it's so diverse and so rich. So rich that if we're not able to document it, I think we will lose it. And I feel like some Garifuna people have been able to create cookbooks, but I'm not sure exactly how broad it's been to be able to cover the full spectrum of, like, Garifuna.

And so I'm fascinated about that and I'm just like, wow, it's like I have ideas and it's like, okay, maybe I need to start here, I need to start there, but maybe I want to be able to interview older people who still know how to do it and then document it that way. And then be able to present it in a way that people can still prepare it as organic as possible and as close as it is done because a lot of it is techniques like a lot of peop, peeling, people don't like peeling stuff, you know? It can be cumbersome, it can take a lot of work to do it, but I think about things like that. Be able to still present it to where people can easily get ingredients, prepare it, and then just enjoy the meal.

[00:57:02] **JahAsia Jacobs:** What are some of the drinks that you're thinking about?

[00:57:04] **Elga Garcia:** Okay, so one of the drinks is called Hiu. Hiu is is, is made out of like the cassava bread crumbs. So when you make cassava bread, you have to kind of like, you know, it's, it's round like a big tortilla, right? It's, and then you have to cut the edges because you want it to look nice and cute and round. So the edges are then saved. Or it's like the crumbs from when they extract the juice and some of it is left out. So people will gather that and toast it. So once you toast it, then you put some water and then you add, I think it's like, um, pilon. It's, it's brown sugar or molasses. And then you let it ferment. So it has to ferment for a couple of days. And then I think they add ginger and some other things. But it's called Hiyu. And you can drink it like room temperature. Back then, we didn't have electricity. We didn't have ice boxes. There was no ice.

But, you know, they had like, ways to, uh, prepare drinks. So that it would be cold enough to be drank at room temperature. So Hiyu is one of those drinks. And people don't, don't drink that. I happen to love it, because when I was a little girl, like, my grandmother used to give it to me, and my mom used to give it to me.

So, um, I know, I know that. There's a juice that they make out of, like, sugar cane, like, distracting the juice out of sugar cane. It's called chicha. You know, delicious as well. It's fermented, and then after a couple of days, then you can, you know, you can drink it. Um, what else they make. Those two are the main ones that I remember, you know.

And then other drinks, it would be like, that other stuff is, is basically more like using fruits like sour, soft juice or like, sour orange juice. A lot of people don't like it, but it's a very healthy drink

to be had. What else? There's a golden cherry. They call it nansi. I found some yesterday at the supermarket close to my job. And I had to just buy them.

I was like, oh, I never thought that I could find them here. But apparently now they bring them. They import those. I want to say it's golden cherries. But in Spanish it's nanses. And then when it comes to like, they were to cut porridge, porridge drinks like the oatmeal or like the cornmeal porridge or this one that we make with flour and milk and then it has like small little dumplings. That's one of my favorite porridge to, and I still make it.

Um, what are the drinks they have? This one that they called Pinol in Spanish. But it's like a corn, a type of corn meal as well. It's just, it's just so much. so much. It's the breads, the soups, the desserts, the drinks, and the teas.

I think we had like five categories that we were gonna collect on. Mm hmm. Yeah.

And, and what's happening right now, and this is just my observation, when I go back home and I stay with my aunt in the village, a lot of like my generation in Honduras, they don't go out into the field and grow plants because they have family members here in the states that are able to provide for them economically. It looks like they don't have the need to be able to go out and work and then, you know, plant their own food. Right. And so again, a lot of the, a lot of it is being lost in that sense with agriculture.

The village will probably, will not exist. I'm not sure how they're going to survive. I'm hoping that the need is going to be so great that a whole lot of them have to go back to the old ways of doing things. Right. And so. It's like, wow, like, who's going to be able to make this, and how are we going to be able to make that, and how are the young ones going to be able to learn how to make all of these things, because we're no longer going back to the basics of actually growing the food, preparing it, and, you know, sharing it with our families.

So it's a major, major concern, you know? But I think, um, there's an effort, uh, in schools to be able to teach the younger ones to speak the dialect and then also to understand their culture and then, again, going back to the basics, specifically fishing and then growing food. We no longer have people, we used to have families that, like, take care of building canoes or there will be families, like, different, um, skills we're very specific to family members, like, you will know, like, the family of XYZ, they're the ones in charge of making this in the family, or like weaving baskets. It will be, like, specific to a certain family that that's their thing, that's what they do from one generation to another. And we don't have that.

I feel like we don't. We're down. And then because we are moving to different countries or moving to cities in, in Honduras, you know, um, people have to like go to schools and universities to, to have higher education, which I think is great. But then, you know, we're missing out somehow in other things that we should still be doing and teaching.

[01:02:45] **JahAsia Jacobs:** Is there anything else that you'd like to share?

[01:02:50] **Elga Garcia:** Oh gosh, I think we've covered pretty much everything because we covered from like the rituals, the foods, you know, um, experiences of, you know, leaving behind a family back home, the village life to be able to live in in cities in Honduras and then to come to major cities in America to where you have to adapt.

So I think we've covered everything. But, I was so honored to have joined Soraya and the team here at Spelman a couple of weeks ago to plant some of the foods that my ancestors kind of like had to plant themselves in order for them to survive, you know, in Honduras. And to be able to talk to other people about that and how delicious it is to prepare the food and, and, you know, it's what sustained, what sustained me when I was a little girl, you know?

[01:03:52] **JahAsia Jacobs:** Could you share more about that experience

[01:03:54] **Elga Garcia:** It was beautiful. So it's like it brought me back to when I went with my grandmother for the first time. To her plot to where she had her own garden, and she was, you know, maintaining it and growing things. And I remember just sitting down under the big old tree, and she was just removing the weed or extracting the cassava from the ground and cutting down some plantains because we had to take some of that home so she could prepare the meal and then cutting down some sugarcane. So I will have a snack on the way back home. You see? So that, that was that.

So it really brought me back to that one day, the first day that I was in. I think it was the first and last because I never went back with her. But it was so beautiful. And I wish she had taken me a lot more, like many, many other times, you know, to help her.

But then, you know, by the time I was 11, then I had to join my mom here in New York. And so yeah, a lot of that.

[01:04:58] **JahAsia Jacobs:** Can you tell folks what you, what you're growing? What of the Garifuna culture is growing in the Spelman Garden?

[01:05:05] **Elga Garcia:** So that day we were able to plant some yucca, cassava, sweet potato. We had malanga. And, uh, I think that's taro, and we also planted some corn, some corn. And so, I was just so honored to join other Garifuna, Ms. Dorina was one to have invited me and I was like, absolutely, I'm going to be there. And I think there's another project where I think we're going to prepare some machuca.

Hopefully you're going to be able to make it. I offered to prepare it. So I'll probably be like, you know, getting the ingredients and teaching, you know, the students how to make it, how to prepare it and it's a delicious dish. So I am so looking forward to that.

It's a, it's, it's a beautiful culture. I think that, uh, the more we talk about it and the more we share it, people can learn and then we can have these connections. Like, for example, I think Soraya mentioned something about this project to go out to Gullah Islands or to talk to some Gullah people.

Of all races, the moment I, I heard the stories of the Gullah people. I felt the connection with them, even the way the twang and, and, and the way that the mannerisms I want to say is so similar to how we talk and how we move, like the bad language when we communicate. So Gullah people, I am, I cannot wait to visit. And now that I'm in Georgia, it's like my It's on my bucket list, like I have to go and visit, and it was amazing to learn that they too have their dialect, that they too have been able to preserve a lot of these Western, West African cultures, you know, so I feel like there's so, there's a lot, we have similarities into, um, the way we, we, we came together as a community, protected ourselves, and preserved, you see what I'm saying?

Also on the spiritual side too, I think a lot of what they practice is similar to what we practice back home, in reference to the good and all of that stuff. So, um, I'm excited to be able to participate as much as I can, to share my experiences, to share a little bit of what I know. And then eventually to just, you know, contribute, you know, contribute to whatever information is required to, to be shared with other people.

Yeah. I'm a proud Garifuna woman hahah. Love it. I love that.

Oh, it's just, it's, it's a lot, it's, it's, it's so much. And so, yeah, I, um, I'm happy to have been able to meet up with you to share my story.

Um, and I want to say something in Garifuna. I know a lot of people will not understand it, but I feel the sense and the need to do it. Um, Gundatina, Luguniebia, Ugunyabuma. In January, uh, I will be going to the U. S. Okay? Um, uh, I want to say that I am very happy to be able to meet you. I am very happy to be able to meet you.

Um, "I am very happy to be here with you talking about my life as a Garifuna woman. It is a great honor that other people are interested in asking me about the lives of the Garifuna in Honduras. I spoke to you a little bit about what I know, and I did it with a clean heart, for my ancestors, for my family. For my grandmother and my mother because it was they who taught me about the life of a Garifuna woman. I am grateful to you JahAsia for inviting me to speak about the lives of the Garinagu [Garifuna people] or the life of a Garifuna woman."

So, I would like to say hello to you all. I hope that you are all well. And I want to say that I am very happy. I am excited to be here. I am very happy to be here in the United States. Bye. Sophia.