

A Learning Trip of Yoruba Culture

“*Buiti binafi*,” and “*Buiti raban beyu*,” (good morning and good afternoon respectively) said the tourist guide as we boarded the mini-van in Roatan, Honduras. With this, we were ready to discover the distinctive culture of the native Garifunas from Roatan. Although Spanish is still their national language with fluency in English, many of them speak the local dialect that traces their ancestry origins to the Carib and Arawan Indians and West African slaves (Yoruba culture). Roatan is the largest of four islands in the Caribbean Sea off the coast of Honduras. The Garifunas are natives of Roatan, Belize and Guatemala along the Caribbean Sea. It is interesting to see diversity in their cultures that stems from Carib and Arawan Indians (natives of the Caribbean Sea coastal towns), West African, Spanish and British. We have also visited Guatemala and Belize before where we observed the Yoruba culture in their people.

Driving around the mountainous island is the same in every tropics; I could really be back in the Philippines at that moment. The greenery from the forests could be painted in a canvas accented by the blue sky above and deep blue sea below in the background. So breathtaking and relaxing!

Our next stop was an elevated building complex resembling a structure from their past. Wood for stairs and foundation; mud for flooring; walls made with a mixture of mud and wooden sticks; and dried palm fronds for roofing were the norm. There was an open kitchen with stone stove where a female cook just laid out a local delicacy made with cassava flour for us to taste.

We were welcomed by performers and drummers who danced for us. Their multi-colored dresses and layered over other clothes were complemented with masks and hats. (I have seen these attires before in photos from art books showing Africans in their Yoruba culture.) The barefooted dancers stomped their feet on the mud floor as they jumped, twirled and clapped to the beat of the drums. I was mesmerized and before I knew it, I was dancing with them without inhibitions! I was transported to another era in history. I dreamt for this moment to dance like an African dancer.

The Yoruba culture had fascinated me the first time I laid my eyes on a fully-beaded cape, headpiece and specter that I bought in an antique store in New Orleans on behalf of Mobile International Festival (with matching funds from Mobile Arts Council). This Yoruba artifact set is displayed at the Mobile Museum of Arts. I read books and literature and talked to people who have researched the culture. In fact one of them was a curator for a museum in California. She sent me their catalogue of Yoruba art collection displayed in a dedicated room. This has been put into good use every year as part of the educational outreach of Mobile International Festival.

To continue our tour, we visited a typical home, again from the past. It was a one-room dwelling made of sticks and mud as walls; thicker wood used as posts for foundation;

and dried palm fronds for roofing. And for those willing to try, we were offered samplings of a native dish called *machuca*. Of course, I tried it and found the dish to be delicious. Ingredients were mashed plantain, fish cooked in coconut milk and seasoned in lime juice. I had to have a second sampling.

As the bus rounded the island, I saw the contrasting newly-developed shopping center at a distance. I can't help but think that we just left a world where people's lives are still very simple and whose past is very much part of their lives. And as we stepped out of the bus, they bid us their "*Ayu*" (good-bye) with big smiles. Then we were suddenly engulfed in a contained environment where tourists are meant to be comfortable while they shopped to their delight.

History is interesting. It will always be there. Some people might prefer to forget it. But history is what makes life very interesting. Our past dictates our culture.