

# Interview with the Nicaraguan director María José Álvarez about *Lubaraun*

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In the opening moments of “Lubaraun,” (“Encountering”), a Garifuna elder walks along the Caribbean shore in Honduras. The calm waters of the Caribbean that gently roll toward him, the sound of drumming in the background and the two “rugumas”<sup>1</sup> that he carries, establish the principle motifs of this documentary about tradition, memory, and the return to origins. First arriving to the shores of the Central American Caribbean in the late 1800’s, the Garifuna, originally from St. Vincent, were forced to rebuild their lives in a new territory in a new age. As they continued to settle along the coastline of Central America, they established long-term communities, eventually arriving in Nicaragua at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in places like Corn Island, Bluefields, and the Laguna of Pearls.

“Lubaraun,” is the first film to focus solely upon the Nicaraguan Garifuna and, thus, completes a series of documentaries and a feature-length film on the Garifuna experience throughout the modern world. Written and directed by María José Álvarez and Martha Clarissa Hernández, “Lubaraun” is the companion film to their earlier documentary, “The Black Creoles: Memories and Identities” (2011).

As María José Álvarez explains in the interview below, this second documentary follows the journey of a Nicaraguan Garifuna elder, “Dady,” (Absalón Velásquez) and his desire to return to his birthplace in Tocomacho, Honduras. Along the way, Álvarez and Hernández and their film crew, capture the beauty and humanity of one of Nicaragua’s and the Caribbean’s most unique cultures.

**SJB:** María José, thanks again for agreeing to talk with me today. In a November 2015 interview with Céline Agnes for AVA Luxembourg, you began to talk about why you and your colleague, Martha Clarissa Hernández, made two films about the Afro-Nicaraguan communities instead of one. Unfortunately, time ran out and you were not able to complete your thought. So, I would like to begin with that question: why two films?

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<sup>1</sup> Hand woven baskets used to extract water from grated cassava to produce flour. They also are called “culebras” in Spanish because of their long tubular shape.

**MJA:** Yes, well, in 1983, I went to live on the Southern Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. I am a photographer by training, a documentary photographer, so I photographed a lot of Bluefields, the Laguna de Perlas and the Cruz del Rio Grande in the Suma communities. It was there that I realized something; I realized that the history of Nicaragua that we had learned on the Pacific side was completely wrong; incomplete. When I went to the Caribbean, I realized there was another story entirely. I always had this feeling that the people with whom I interacted and talked had a different history, one that was not written in books. Thus, I had always wanted to tell a bit of their history; the history of Nicaraguans who are descendants of Africans.

But, when I completed my research some ten years later, after I no longer lived on the coast, when I was living in Managua, I realized that there were, in fact, two histories. The Black Creoles are people originally from Jamaica, Belize and Rio Dulce who had mixed with the Miskito Indians who lived here in Nicaragua. These Black Creoles were also descendants of slaves, the owners had left, and they remained. The Garifuna are another story, in another time, and their formation centered on the fact that they were never slaves; they were the Africans intent on escaping slavery. So, they joined with South American Indians, the Arawak, and then these groups joined the “Caribes” on the Island of St. Vincent. In turn, these people joined with the French against the English. And so, being very strong and brave, the Garifuna resisted the British even when St. Vincent was given over to the British and so the British expelled the Garifuna to the Atlantic coast of Central America.<sup>2</sup>

Eventually, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they arrived in Nicaragua. In general most people believe that the Garifuna were Black Creoles, but they are different. This myth, this misrepresentation of the Garifuna, was stronger when I first arrived in the 1980’s. People would tell me that the Garifuna were descendants of slaves that had come from St. Vincent. But, when I returned, to finish my research in the 2010’s the people were embracing their culture, visiting back and forth between Belize, Orinoco, and here. They were speaking and singing in Garifuna, thus, it was clear this was another expression, distinct from that of the Creoles. Obviously, we could not make only one film about the history of Afro-Nicaraguans.

It was really difficult to decide to do two films: one that is called “The Black Creoles: Memory and Identity,” centers on the Afro-descendants of the Atlantic Nicaraguan coast, which is a long history; long enough that we needed a second film to tell the history of the Garifuna. So, we knew we needed two histories, which we originally proposed at the first screening of “The Black Creoles” in Costa Rica. Traditionally, the Creoles of Costa Rica have a relationship with the Creoles of

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<sup>2</sup> The most definitive work on the history of the Garifuna has been written by Christopher Taylor. *The Black Carib Wars: Freedom, Survival and the Making of the Garifuna*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2012. Likewise, there is also a 50 minute documentary by Andrea Leland, “Yurumein: Homeland” that recreates the traumatic journey from St. Vincent to Central America. <http://www.andrealeland.com/film/yurumein.html>

Nicaragua. For these groups, the Central American Caribbean is, in fact, just one community. This is also true regarding the Garifuna communities of Nicaragua and Honduras; people of the same family, who live up and down the coast. They are transnational, living and traveling within and between their communities.

By separating the two themes, we were able to better highlight the multi-ethnic character of Nicaragua. This is a Garifuna nation, a Nicaraguan nation, and a Black, Creole nation, a Miskito nation, a Rama nation, thus, we believed it was better to tell the Garifuna history separately. The Garifuna from different areas come together here, but each branch of the Garifuna has family in Honduras, Belize, even Guatemala and two families came here and became a large group. Thus, we had to conduct research in Honduras, look for more financing for the project, figure out how much more time we would need. It was really a difficult decision, but it was worth the effort.

**SJB:** There are scenes in “Luburaun” that are unique, such as the cassava bread making ritual, correct?

**MJA:** Yes, this is an indigenous practice of the Garifuna and several other Amerindian peoples. This way of making cassava is unique to the Garifuna. It is a very magical process, very important to the culture. Only the Garifuna in Nicaragua eat cassava bread.

**SJB:** Is the soup that Anacely makes for Dady (the elder of the film) in Tocomacho, Honduras, another Garifuna tradition?

**MJA:** Yes, this is machuca, it’s a soup of corn dough and crab and other things including mashed plantain. And that village, that place is a very isolated place, even for someone from Honduras, it is at the end of the world.

Dady, yes, well, this is something very special about this film. At the beginning, I always thought we were going to make only one film. But, when we interviewed Dady, he told us that he wanted to go to Honduras. And what did we think? And that is when we realized we needed to go to Honduras. This was not in our original screenplay. This decision came after spending several weeks talking with him, listening to him play the drums with such heart. I had photographed him long ago when he was much younger and he played the corazón drum. He was the principal drummer in the Walla Gallo (Dogú).<sup>3</sup> Of course, the story of the Walla Gallo would be yet another film I need to make.

Dady, is the only surviving Garifuna that speaks the language and is trying to maintain it by teaching it and speaking with the young people who are learning it. Thus, it is very important. The person who speaks the language of your community, the language, your identity, that you want to preserve, makes this person very important. And he is so down to earth, so tranquil with everyone. He only wanted to go to

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<sup>3</sup> The “Walla Gallo,” described as the “Ancestor Party, in English is a postmortem ritual that is central to Garifuna tradition. For an excellent first-person account of the practice see Marilyn McKillop Wells. *Among the Garifuna: Family Tales and Ethnography from the Caribbean Coast*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama Press, 2015.

Honduras, to Tocomacho, to have some machuca and look for his relatives. And really, he was unaware that we were making a documentary about him. And of course, we went bit by bit because we knew little about Honduras. We looked for any mention of the Walla Gallo, or the person who sings the Walla Gallo in Garifuna, these are very important people.

**SJB:** With Dady at the center of the documentary, the idea of a return to one's origins becomes very clear. His journey then, is an allegory of the community in search of their identity.

**MJA:** Yes, well, that is what Lubaraun means in Garifuna, in Spanish it means "al encuentro de" (Encountering). And this is why we titled it "Lubaraun" because we believed that it expressed the philosophy of the film. We had to look for this word in a dictionary because in Nicaragua the Garifuna speak Creole English, so it was not easy to get to know them because the Garifuna do not speak any Spanish in Nicaragua. Some could speak some Garifuna, but none of us could speak any Garifuna so we were a bit stuck. I believe we found translators who spoke Spanish among the vendors who sold local arts and crafts.

Afterwards, when we were in post-production, we brought a Garifuna professor to translate. It was a pretty elemental translation, a first translation. But later, when we put this together, we worried about confusing these subtitles. This was a learning process for me because I did not understand the language unless someone repeated it various times and we did not have a program for subtitles, it took five months. It would take us four attempts each time because we had to try to be as close as possible to the original text and image. So, the subtitles were a real experience because it was a new language for me and we did it with Garifuna and everyone says that what we did turned out well.

**SJB:** The film, meanwhile, depends on its own visual language, built around nature and the people, yes?

**MJA:** Yes, it is a beautiful place. Regarding the imagery, we were looking for a language, an aesthetic to tell the story. This is their reality. So, as the director of photography I wrote thinking about how to best tell this story. I interviewed them before beginning the film to best understand how we were going to proceed; what questions were we going to ask, how could we do our work quietly in the community, it was a process of various visits. I only went to Honduras once, but in Nicaragua, there were various trips. And everyone in the community wanted to participate.

**SJB:** There was the one young woman in Tochomacho that seemed uncomfortable.

**MJA:** Yes, she did not want to be filmed. We did not have such problems in Nicaragua, but in Honduras they were much more careful. Except for Anacely, she was fine. It was the first time we met her and they (Anacely and Dady) kept talking and talking and talking in Garifuna. The scene with Anacely and Dady is very long, but we

did not want to interrupt the story. But in the end, what Dady really wanted was his machuca and she prepared it.

In October, I was in Belgium, invited by the Secretariat of the ACP (Africa, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States), I was so happy to see that at the film's screening, the Africans in the audience identified with this meeting. The respect toward Dady, Anacely's willingness to attend to him, to speak so softly and clearly to him, they really identified with that because in Africa, that is how you demonstrate respect in front of others, they take care of them; of an elder like Dady. It was incredible for me to show the film in that location because the majority of the audience was African and Caribbean.

Then, I remembered that when we were in Jamaica, they knew nothing about us. Meanwhile, here, they dream about going to Jamaica because it is the home of the Creoles. But, really, in Jamaica, they do not have an interest in the Central American Caribbean. There was a woman who was absolutely surprised and she was a diplomat. But with the Africans in Belgium, they were genuinely interested in what we were doing. I was very touched by their reception of the film.

I also went to St. Vincent and the Grenadines in celebration of the Garifuna and it was incredible to show the film there in front of young and old alike because they have lost so much of their culture. The entire part about food, about the drumming, they were captivated watching it. They no longer speak Garifuna, they speak English. They lost the language when their ancestors were expelled from the island. I also showed it in Providencia and San Andres (Colombia) and there was also a sense of identification for the audience, especially in Providencia.

**SJB:** What about Nicaraguans who do not have an Afro-Descendant past? How did they react to the film?

**MJA:** I believe, and I don't want to sound odd, here, but I believe these two works are like a home now for those who want to know about their history. No one has recognized them the way we have. And we were not interested in royalties as much as making a gift of these films to the people, to share this information with as many as possible. And it was interesting, I went to visit the School of Journalism here in Managua and they did not know a thing about the Garifuna. And this is their people. When we premiered the film in Managua people were very excited because it wasn't a documentary about the war, it wasn't a documentary that was criticizing the world, so the people were really happy to learn that there were Garifuna living in Nicaragua. Dady enchanted them, I believe that in many places, there was a lot of compassion for Dady. He was so calm and patient but he really wanted to go to Honduras. The journey to Tocomacho was really hard but once he arrived, it was beautiful.

For me, a lot of this film was about observation. Watching how people cooked for their families. It is in Nicaragua where they gather under the tree, where they are working with the cassava, grating it, putting it in the ruguma (a woven sieve). They call the ruguma "the snake," and this scene under the tree takes place in Orinoco, in

Nicaragua. The woman in the kitchen, grating the cassava, meanwhile, is in Honduras. But the two scenes show how they work together as a family to make the cassava, to hang it from the tree. There is a tendency now, although I have not seen it, to mechanize the process. But I believe, at least in these small communities, the making of cassava will be preserved because it is something they do communally.

**SJB:** It is such a beautiful process in the film.

**MJA:** Yes, and in May, I will be in Los Angeles to show the film at the International Garifuna Festival.

**SJB:** Wonderful. María José, thanks so much for spending time with me today to talk about this beautiful film. I look forward to talking with you again in the future.

**MJA:** My pleasure.