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Wanaragua: An Embodied Performance of Resistance, Recognition and Resilience Among The Garinagu of Belize

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Christmas season in Dangriga, the culture capital of Belize, brings back some of my fondest childhood memories. My mom would wake me up at the crack of dawn so our family could make our way to Dangriga. I remember staring out the window at the lush forests and hilly green mountains as my older sister drove through the Hummingbird highway. Driving into Dangriga was exhilarating! Yellow, black, and white flags (the Garifuna colors) decorate the Gulisi Garifuna Museum[1] and neighborhood homes. I can smell and feel the cool sea breeze as it brushes against my face. This felt like home! Even though I was born and raised in northern Belize, being in the south was familial. Dangriga is home to the largest Garifuna population in Belize. It is where my mother was born; it's where my siblings were born and raised; it's where I got to learn about my ancestors and their struggles and ambitions; it's where I learned about hudut and darasa,[2] about hugu hugu and parranda,[3] about the importance of being a proud Garifina woman and learning to speak our language. Dangriga is where my roots are embedded. Christmas time solidified this, and the Wanaragua was the highlight of the season.

The word Wanaragua is Garifuna for "mask," and while there are many masked performances among the Garinagu, the Wanaragua is the most culturally significant. On December 25, families in Dangriga can be seen sitting on their veranda or gathering along the streets, waiting to decipher the direction from where the sound of the beating Garifuna drums is coming. Excitement grows as spectators, locals, and tourists alike, hear the reverberating sound of the drums in the distance and viewers begin to quiver to the tempo of the rhythmic sounds, waiting to see the Wanaragua. My maternal grandmother loved Wanaragua! She would invite the dancers—and give them a small monetary contribution—to perform in front of our home in Dangriga. My siblings and I enjoyed front-row seats to the performance.

[1] The Gulisi Garifuna Museum is the only Garifuna museum in Belize.
[2] Hudut and darasa are two of many traditional Garifuna dishes.
[3] Hugu hugu and paranda are two of a number of traditional Garifuna dances.

Christmas would not be a celebration in Dangriga without the Wanaragua. But the Wanaragua is more than just a vibrant dance; it represents the most culturally significant part of the Christmas celebration. It is an embodied performance of resistance and resilience for the Garinagu[4] of Belize. The Garinagu are an indigenous Afro-Carib people who are descendants of Arawaks, Carib Native Amerindians from the island of St. Vincent, and West African Diasporas. In Belize, the Garinagu are among the indigenous autochthonous people of southern soil. They boast their own language, foods, cultural attire, music, and of course, dance, which is organically bound to the red soil of southern land on which it is performed. This relationship between dance and the space and place in which it occurs merits highlighting. Malea Powell defines space as "a place that has been practiced into being through the acts of storied making, where the past is brought into conscious conversation with the present and where—through those practices of making—a future can be imagined" (388). These "practices of making" for the Garinagu stem from a long history, which Belizean drummer and former wanaragua dancer Joshua Arana describes as *Ichahówarügüti*, everything we (Garinagu) have was gifted to us by our ancestors (personal interview, May 14, 2021).

The Wanaragua emerged in the eighteenth century during the time of the slave trade and is still performed today in Belize and other Caribbean and Central American countries. Today, the Wanaragua reifies the Garinagu's presence in Belize and depicts the cultural group's resilience and resistance. The spaces that the Wanaragua dancers inhabit as they display this cultural performance affirm that spaces indeed are, as Powell stated, "made recursively through specific, material practices rooted in specific land bases, through the cultural practices linked to that place, and through the accompanying theoretical practices that arise from that place" (388). Traditionally, the Wanaragua is performed in front of homes and people's yards, and the dancers move from home to home, dancing for families and neighborhood spectators.

Although this essay will focus on the significance of the dance in Belize, it is noteworthy that similar versions of the Wanaragua have also been identified, and are still being performed, in other Central American and Caribbean countries. For example, the dance is also performanced in Honduras. Like in Belize, the Garinagu of Honduras refer to this cultural performance as "Wanaragua." The dance has also been identified in Caribbean countries such as Bahamas, where it is called "Junkanoo," Bermuda "Gombey," Jamaica "John Canoe," in parts of Africa such as Sierra Leone "Kome," and in the United States, specifically the Southern part of

[4] Garinagu is the plural of Garifuna.

North Carolina and Virginia and in New York and Los Angeles, where many Belizean Garinagu reside and where the dance is also known as “Wanaragua.”

Wanaragua dancers performing at a home in Dangriga, Belize. Photo courtesy Felicita Arzu Carmichael.

Disciplinary Exigence

This essay is situated within the context of rhetorics of performance. Bernadette Marie Calafell reminds us that performance “works against dominant conceptions of knowledge by locating itself in and theorizing through the body” (116). It provides a critical lens to view cultural productions through, such as the Wanaragua, and bring them into a sharp analytical focus. Diana Taylor likewise affirms that “Performances reactivate historical scenarios that provide contemporary solutions” (72). For a performance such as the Wanaragua, this means that there is a rich opportunity to further understand the historical and contemporary rhetorical traditions, which were created by the enslaved and maintained by their descendants. A critical eye toward performances like the Wanaragua is important because it provides the opportunity for scholars in the field of rhetoric and cultural studies to recognize and learn more about the Afro-Caribbean perspectives and ways of making meaning that are “outside the Western code” (Powell 402). The Wanaragua is rooted in the histories of African diasporas, so its study can contribute to the growing body of literature and stories on African traditions in

Central America[5] and address the limitations of our knowledge of the Black experience in these regions. Powell also reminds us that "stories are carried in the body, in the body where they live and grow" (396). Thus, a central part of my analysis is to bring into focus the embodiment of the Wanaragua as a performance of resistance, recognition, and resilience. These qualities of the Wanaragua exhibit what cultural anthropologist Victor Turner believes—that there is a need to "ground performance, to seek its foundations in those depths of human acting that are about survival" (qtd. in Fabian 17). Dance and its accompanying music are part of the foundational ways of surviving.

As a result, resistance, recognition, and resilience provide a lens to view cultural productions through, such as the Wanaragua. Aside from the performance itself, the language used to talk about this performance is key. Throughout this essay, I primarily use the concept *Wanaragua* when referring to the performance in Belize. As Megan Schoen reminds us, "Several scholars of non-Western rhetorics discuss the necessity of using terms and conceptual systems that are endemic to the cultures being studied rather than simply importing existing Western concepts and applying them" (3). In this case, the Garifuna term Wanaragua is endemic to the Garifuna culture in Belize instead of its English translation of "John Canoe" or "Jankunu," the latter I use when referring to the dance more broadly in other countries.

Indeed, several scholars across disciplines have studied the Wanaragua (Bilby; Bethel; Bernett; Cayetano; Rommen). However, Schoen reminds us that "many African traditions remain largely unstudied in the fields of rhetorical studies and cultural rhetorics" (2); thus, the rhetorical cultural traditions of Afro-Central American people in particular also remain underdeveloped. A closer look at the Wanaragua in Belize can invite rhetoric and cultural studies scholars to fill the existing gaps of developing studies of Afrocentric comparative rhetorics in countries like Belize, thus "enriching the field of rhetorical studies by continuing efforts to broaden the conceptions of rhetoric beyond the Greco-Roman foundations on which so much of our current understanding rests" (Schoen 3). Drawing on performance studies to understand the Wanaragua invites us to challenge what counts as knowledge in rhetoric and cultural studies. Moreover, Dwight Conquergood affirms that this work of studying performance is important because (1) performance-sensitive ways of knowing hold forth the promise of

[5] See for example Palacio, Joseph. "How did The Garifuna become an indigenous people?-reconstructing the cultural persona of an African-native American people in Central America." Revista pueblos y fronteras digital 2.4 (2007): 401-428 and Greene Jr, Oliver N. "Ethnicity, modernity, and retention in the Garifuna punta." Black Music Research Journal (2002): 189-216

contributing to an epistemological pluralism that will unsettle valorized paradigms and thereby extend understanding of multiple dimensions and a wider range of meaningful action; (2) performance is a more conceptually astute and inclusionary way of thinking about many subaltern cultural practices and intellectual-philosophical activities (26). A study of the Wanaragua today is important because as Bilby asserts, "the vast majority of contemporaneous written documentation, particularly in the Anglophone Caribbean, was produced by authors who were not only hostile to the cultural worlds that interest us, but largely ignorant of them" (184).

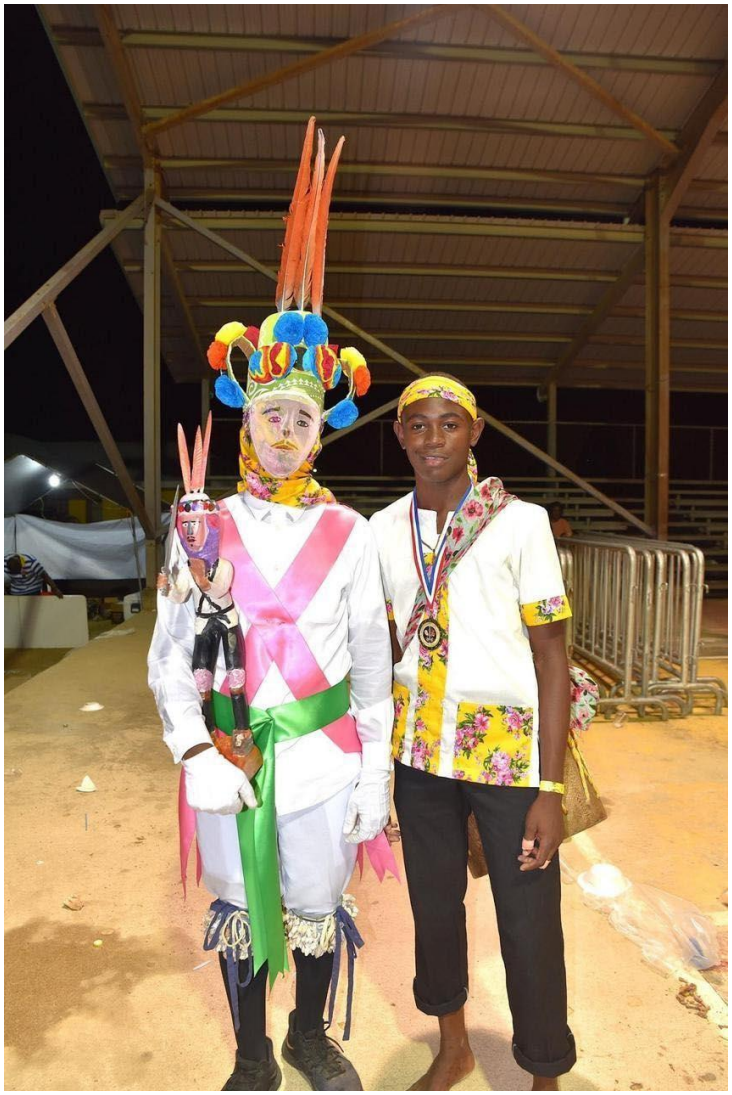
I argue that the Garinagu's resistance, recognition, and resilience is evident in the Wanaragua. As Johannes Fabian asserted, history has taught us that "the 'shuffle and dance' to which the oppressed had to resort in everything from how they speak their languages to the ways they move, and the manner in which they relate to those in power, have been so many ways of surviving" (20). Although there are undoubtedly many factors that support the development and survival of the Garinagu of Belize, the Wanaragua creates a sense of cultural identity, which solidifies the cultural groups' Black experience and African heritage and contributes to their inhabiting spaces in Belize and throughout Central America and the Caribbean.

A Brief Background on the Wanaragua

The Wanaragua is said to have originated among the enslaved during the time of the slave trade in the eighteenth century. It is known as a traditional, native, cultural dance, which is typically performed during the Christmas season because historically, it is during this time that the enslaved were granted a brief rest. Richard Burton calls the Wanaragua "the most ancient and most enduring non-European cultural form in the Caribbean" (65), making the Wanaragua an insightfully calculated performance. More specifically, Irene Smalls believes that the Wanaragua originated along the West Coast of Africa and was spread to the West Indies and the southern coast of America. She further notes that it is a celebration in honor of an ancient African chief. Today, the Wanaragua is a highly visible cultural manifestation and a performance of resistance, recognition, and resilience. It is performed during the Christmas season, as it was historically, and the dancers, who are mostly male, dress up in colorful adornments and dance to the up-tempo

rhythm of beating Garifuna drums. Ifasina Efunyemi notes the appearance of the Wanaragua dancers as follows:

> They wear long sleeved white shirts, white gloves, knee length black pants and the occasional skirt, stockinged feet with black or white shoes. Green, pink, or black ribbons criss-cross their chests and wrap their waist. At the knees, hundreds of tiny shells strung into knee pads make that 'shingling' sound that accompany the dancer's every move. The heads are wrapped in colorful cloths and the face is covered with painted masks depicting the features of a Caucasian male. Crowning this ensemble is the *wababas*, an elaborate crown of colorful paper, flowers, mirrors, and tall colorful feathers from the Scarlet Macaw being the most prized (Efunyemi).



Wanaragua dancer and drummer at the "Habinaha Wanaragua" 2019 competition in Dangriga, Belize. Photo courtesy Clive Flores.

According to Canon Jerris Valentine, in Belize, the Wanaragua was performed only by men because it was a means for them to showcase their masculinity. However, today, a few women and children alike also perform the Wanaragua, which Arana describes as symbolic of the changes that are innate to any culture (personal interview, May 14, 2021).

Rhetorics of Resistance

The Wanaragua is an embodied performance of resistance. In *Weapons of the Weak*, James C. Scott argues that cultural resistance is the most successful manner in which the enslaved resisted because it achieved more than the few uprisings that are highly represented in existing scholarship (34). Through cultural resistance, the enslaved not only developed a manner of survival but also a manner of telling their stories and keeping their history alive. These stories have since evolved into unique and transformative embodied performances such as the ones that are told in countries like Belize. Jane C. Desmond believes that "tracing the history of dance styles and their spread from one group or area to another, along with the changes that occur in this transmission, can help uncover shifting ideologies attached to bodily discourse" (338). Having developed in the African diaspora and spread across Caribbean and Central American countries, the Wanaragua is indeed bodily discourse that communicates the cultural identity and struggles of an oppressed group of people.

As a matter of fact, Desmond echoes this idea clearly noting that oftentimes, types of dances that are created by marginalized populations demonstrate "a trajectory of 'upward mobility'" (34). Performance studies also invites us to further understand this 'upward mobility' as it relates to power relations. For example, the historical performance of the Wanaragua included tools and emblems that could be perceived as having significance of resistance. In the eighteenth century, when the dance emerged, a dancer carried emblems such as swords or axes, and these items, Burton describes, would enable the dancer to gain added "power and poignancy," because they "transform the tools of oppression into instruments of liberation" (234). Additionally, swords can be symbolic of strength, and axes are used to chop wood, one of the most essential materials known to humankind; thus, this tool can be symbolic of struggle and hard work. Both the sword and the axe allow the dancers to perform the Wanaragua as a discourse of the body. Also, one of the most significant items used in the performance of the Wanaragua in the eighteenth century was a "house," which is placed on the dancer's head. The

dancers would construct a model of the Great House and place it on their heads. They would then sing and dance, which would symbolically reverse who controls the Great House, as this power and control would be passed into the model house, which the enslaved had made and now control. In this regard, Burton discloses:

> [T]he experience of possession is first and foremost an experience of *power* in that 'the possessed is *virtually* in absolute control of those around him' (Michael and Mission 239); while the dancer is performing, he is commanding respect by the sheer splendor of his or her presence, lost in, but also controlling, the ecstasy of the dance.

Appearance of Wanaragua dancers. Photo courtesy Ethel Arzu.

More contemporarily and in Belize, Wanaragua dancers wear seashells on their knees as seen on Figure 3 below. For the dancers, the shells have significant meaning. Seashells are known to exhibit a certain amount of healing power whenever they become in contact with someone. People are attracted to different types of seashells, and these shells can be essential tools of resistance and empowerment. Moreover, because the dancers reside in southern Belize, which is

coastal, they have easy access to the seashells and other materials that comprise the attire. Medina-Lopez's description of rasquache is helpful for thinking about many of the tools and materials that make the Wanaragua dancer's clothing. For Medina-Lopez, "rasquache emerges from a sociocultural imperative to recycle, upcycle, make do, and make new meaning through whatever available bits and pieces. It is this combination of ingenuity, meaning making, boldness, and flair that dovetails nicely…into cultural rhetorics" (3).

The resistance elucidated through Wanaragua is also as a result of the "complex network of social, economic, political, aesthetic, and philosophical histories" which have been "consolidated onto the bodies of performers" (Okpewho et al. 267). The Wanaragua dancer is not just a body in movement, it is embodied rhetoric, a site of resistance and meaning making. These bodies must be recognized for how they function as complex relational histories and ways of surviving and resilience.

Rhetorics of Recognition and Resilience

In 2001, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated the Garifuna culture, inclusive of its language, music, and dance, a "masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity," a designation that highlights the value of the culture and the importance of preserving it. This designation also amplifies Garinagu's work to shift our story from one of oppression, colonization, and delegitimization to one of liberation, transformation, and recognition. Moreover, in 2019, UNESCO declared that the 24th of January will be the World Day for African and Afro Descendant Culture, a day which affirms that African and African Diaspora cultures, such as the Garifuna culture, continue to make significant contributions to humanity. Because the Garinagu have sustained our culture, Michael Stone describes the cultural group as a "striking cultural anomaly in Caribbean Central America" (222).

These recognitions were not by chance; they were because of the will and resilience of community leaders and members, who continue to strive daily for our culture to survive; the Wanaragua is symbolic of this resilience. Performance studies invites us to understand this resilience because it allows for "more complex approaches to embodiment, resistance, and cultural nuances—particularly when examining work by historically marginalized groups" (Callafel 115). Part of understanding this resilience also means identifying the ways in which the Wanaragua, and the Garinagu dancers involved in its performance, have been recognized. Nancy Fraser believes that "the politics of recognition…targets injustices it understands as

cultural, which it presumes to be rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication" (7). This politics of recognition proposes to address injustice by "cultural or symbolic change" (Fraser 7). But more than addressing injustices, according to Charles Taylor, recognition is a "vital human need" (26). In other words, the ways in which we perceive our own identity is informed by the (mis)recognition by others; thus, "a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves" (Taylor 25). Today, the Wanaragua functions as a cultural performance where the Garinagu shift the image that has been depicted of them and shape it into one where they are recognized as proud descendants of Arawaks, Carib Native Amerindians, and West African Diasporas. Recognition makes resistance possible.

In her book *Dance, Knowledge, and Power*, Dunagan argues that dance is a form of meaning-making, in which the meaning is revealed as much as it is concealed. The Wanaragua performance is an embodied performance, one with specific symbolic movements that supports this idea of resistance. In fact, Langer states that in order to understand dance, one must be able to *recognize* the aspect of life which is captured in the performance (qtd. in Dunagan). Colleen Dunagan further explains the acts of reveal and conceal, which are particularly important to how resistance is performed through the Wanaragua. She discusses the relevance of bodily movements and contends the following:

> human movement carries significance in that it is part of how I enact who I am in the world. In addition, while some movement engages in the activity of denotation through established cultural mores and values, much of dance utilizes movement that more often communicates through *connotation and metaphor*. This metaphoric level of movement generates meaning on a conceptual level, rather than on a literal level (Dunagan 30).

Moreover, as we have learned from Lawrence J. Prelli,"whatever is revealed through display simultaneously conceals alternative possibilities" (2-10). In other words, whatever is visually revealed through a performance such as the Wanaragua can also conceal 'truths' (Prelli 2-10). One aspect of the Wanaragua that is particularly key for paying attention to what is revealed and what is concealed is the dancer's mask.

As Conquergood affirmed, "extreme surveillance and silencing of [enslaved] demand that we give attention to messages that are not spelled out, to in direct nonverbal, and extralinguistic modes of communication where utopian desires and

subversive meanings could be nurtured and hidden from the sight of overseers" (26). Perhaps because of that "extreme surveillance and silencing" that the enslaved ensured that one of the most noticeable and symbolic aspects of the Wanaragua is the concealment of the dancer's identity. Gwen Nunez Gonzalez shared that traditionally onlookers do not know the identity of the dancers. Their hands are covered by white gloves, their entire body is covered in a long sleeve white shirt and black pants, even their head is covered in a headwrap with mirrors and beautiful feathers, and of course, the dancer wears a mask (personal interview, March 30, 2021). Moreover, many believe that the Wanaragua is a ritual created with the intention of mocking the white slave masters and a form of resistance to British colonization. As shown in figure 4, the mask worn by the dancer is pink, resembling a Caucasian male. These pink masks have pointed noses, pink lips, thick eye-brows and a squared chin, so viewers often believe that the dancers are imitating the colonizer. All of these descriptors contribute to why the Wanaragua obtains the name "mask."

Wanaragua mask resembles a caucasian male. Photo courtesy Felicita Arzu Carmichael.

What's more, post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha argues that "imitation in the colonial context is never simple mimicry but an appropriation that signals resistance" (qtd. in Okpewho et al. 262). Moreover, Bhabha informs that "mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (126). The Wanaragua dancers' performance of resilience is revealed through their mimicry, where they use masks to resist the colonizer's "stigmatizing gaze" (Fraser 24) and to create a source of empowerment. Resisting this gaze is a fundamental aspect of the performance, and the survival of the culture more broadly, because this gaze has perpetuated harm and violence against the histories and cultural practices of marginalized people. Thus, mimesis is an "active mode of coping, not just passive imitation (Fabian 56). For Fabian, the performances we see today "have become for the people involved more than ever ways to preserve some self-respect in the face of constant humiliation" (Fabian 19). White society has always created a demeaning image of marginalized populations, and the only way for historically marginalized groups to resist this image and fight against oppression, is to "purge themselves of this imposed and destructive identity" (Taylor 26). The Wanaragua is one such way as it is a highly visible cultural manifestation, which allows an oppressed group to "purge themselves" of this demeaning image that has been imposed upon them and demonstrate their resilience.

Resilience is evident not only through the masks worn by the dancers but also through the dancers' body movements. For example, the performance entails rapid and forceful stomping of the feet, arms stretched out and pushed forward, with resilience also being created through the tools the dancers carry. These choices reveal how Black bodies "cry out for the political and existential urgency for the immediate undoing of the oppressive operations of whiteness" (Yancy 229). Today, the Wanaragua dancers transmit knowledge about their identities through the movements. In fact, Arana describes the Wanaragua as a "combat dance," and its accompanying drumming helps to solidify this resilience. Arana explains the relationship between the drums and the Wanaragua dancer. The Garinagu have two drums that are integral to cultural events—the primero (lead drum), which is the smaller drum and the segunda (bass drum), which is the larger drum.

The relationship between the primero and the Wanragua dancer is a specific one because "the drummer has to interpret, in sound, the movements of the dancer" (Arana, personal interview, May 14, 2021). This rhythmic interpretation that occurs throughout the Wanaragua performance is a uniting factor among the dancer, the drummer, and the spectators, most of whom are Garinagu. Neither the drummer nor the spectators can anticipate the bodily movements of the dancer; this

excitement commands attention and serves as an example of Gonzalez's description of the Wanaragua as a "community gatherer" (personal interview, March 30, 2021).

Wanaragua dancer, gayusas (singers) and daünbürias (drummers). Photo courtesy Ethel Arzu.

Habinaha Wararagua[6]

bell hooks reminds us that "We are born and have our being in a place of memory…we know ourselves through the art and act of remembering" (5). My memories of the Wanaragua are a significant part of my sense of belonging to this rich and dynamic culture. My introduction to this dance has been rooted in my mother's birthplace, the place where my ancestors sailed to when they were exiled from the island of St. Vincent in the eighteenth century, the place where I spent many summers and Christmas holidays as a child. Today, at a time where community gatherings in Belize have been significantly restricted due to the

[6] Habinaha Wanaragua is the name of the annual Wanaragua competition in Dangriga Belize, and it is Garifuna for they are going to dance Jankunu.

COVID-19 pandemic, the Garinagu, who are communal people, have continued to amplify our presence and network across boundaries to connect with Garinagu worldwide. The Wanaragua is still performed in Belize, and from all accounts, this performance of resistance, recognition, and resilience will continue to advance the Garinagu culture. It emerged during the eighteenth century, persisted through the colonial period, and remains one of the most vibrant and meaningful cultural performances among the Garinagu of Belize.

Although the Wanaragua is still very popular in Belize, there are elders in the Garifuna community who have started a movement to "restore the decency" of the dance back to its roots. Every year during the Christmas season, the "Habinaha Wanaragua" competition is held, where groups of dancers, drummers, and gayusas compete for a coveted title and prizes. Nunez, Valentine and Cayetano, who are the pioneers of the competition, explain that the purpose of the competition was to have documentation of the dance along with a space where dancers and drummers can learn and improve the quality of the performance for generations to come.

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