



King Shotaway at Bronx Rising *By Howard Giske*

On Saturday, May 18th, the Garifuna community and others came to a reading of the play, the Drama of King Shotaway. Sidney Mejia read the play in English and the Garifuna language, and when he sang, people played drums and danced on stage. This was at Bronx Rising, a program of the Bronx Musical Heritage Center (BMHC) Lab, at 1303 Louis Nine Blvd, Bronx. Time has dispersed the Garifuna people throughout the Caribbean, Belize, and other locations in Central America, and many of them make their home in the Bronx.

The Drama of King Shotaway was written as a play by William Henry Brown (1814-1884) and is recognized as the first publicly performed play by an Afro-American author, in New York City. Using this source material, Mejia wrote *The Life and Times of Chatoyer*, also known as, *The Drama of King Shotaway*. The original play and Mejia's book have their source in the oral traditions of the Garifuna people.

On stage, Mejia first described the setting of the drama. In 1795, the Paramount Chief Joseph Chatoyer (King Shotaway) led the defense of St. Vincent Island and the Grenadines from an attack by the British Empire. At the beginning, there are friendly negotiations with the Garifunas by the Colonial Governor of Aruba, and the British and the French forces in the area, also involving the black Carib and yellow Carib people. The chiefs of the island of St. Vincent are selected by the sub-chiefs and other Garifunas. A young chief marries and becomes the heir to his father's chiefdom. The native people and visiting ambassadors recognize King Shotaway. The King plans to support his people's rights to self-government, liberty and justice. Negotiations and politics begin, but there is a dispute, and war settles things as politics by other means.

After a period of tension, the British invade and take over the island. This was one of the last

free black islands in the Caribbean. After he narrated sections of the story in English, Mejia told the story in the Garifuna language. The excitement of the drama came from a sing-song deliver by Mejia of the story, while 4 drummers play in the background. Different members of the audience got up to dance. The City Lore organization had their Poe Mobile parked outside and inside projected the translation of the Garifuna words, so it was easy to understand the drama.

Sidney Mejia is a singer and songwriter based in Los Angeles, California. The Garifuna immigrant community is organized in the Bronx, with the Garifuna Advocacy Center having an office at 391 East 149th St. They work with the Phipps Community Development Corporation to make available English as a Second Language programs and GED classes.

Bronx Music Center has an exciting schedule of performances from May through December 2013. Each month there are three performances, one each of music, film, and the spoken word. The BMHC space is currently curated by the Rebel Diaz Collective. For more information see <http://bronx-music.org>. For more information on the Garifuna community see <http://beinggarifuna.com>



Pictures: 1. Sidney Mejia with his book. 2. The Poe Mobile.



BP Diaz Dances with Attendees at Bronx Week



Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz Jr. dances with some of the attendees at the Bronx Week 2013 Youth & Senior Day Talent Show. The event took place on Thursday, May 16, in the Dreiser Loop Community Center in Co-op City.