

Joseph Chatoyer –Paramount Garifuna Chief

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In 1795, with the country under the governance of James Seton, the Caribs began the two years of attack known as the Second Carib War. With the aid of French rebels from Martinique, the Caribs plotted the removal of the British. Chatoyer and DuValle (the two main Carib chiefs) planned that Chatoyer would lead the rebellion on the Leeward side and DuValle would lead on the Windward side. News came to Kingstown on March 8th that war had broken out.

Chatoyer directed his fury at the settlers themselves rather than destroying their property. His belief was that the land would be extremely useful to the Caribs after the removal of the British. He worked his way along the Leeward, joined in battle by the French at Chateaublair, to unite with DuValle at Dorsetshire Hill. The amalgamated forces then set their sights on Kingstown.

A battalion of British soldiers from recently arrived warships marched towards Dorsetshire Hill on March 14th. On this night, Chatoyer was killed by Major Alexander Leith. Considered a hero to the nation, a monument in Chatoyer's honour is placed at Dorsetshire Hill. Battles raged throughout St. Vincent over the next year with both sides bearing heavy losses. The final battle took place at Vigie on June 10th, 1796. After a night of arduous fighting the Caribs approached the British with a truce flag.

Submission terms were negotiated and during the next four months over 5,000 Caribs surrendered. The Caribs were exiled to the neighbouring island of Balliceaux and in February 1797, the defeated Caribs were loaded onto a convoy of eight vessels and transported to the coast of Honduras. The few remaining Caribs scattered to the north of the island near Sandy Bay where their descendants can still be found.

The most recent development in this quest for reclaiming identity and reconstructing their history took place on March 14, 2002 when the Great Carib (Garifuna) Chief, Chatoyer, was declared first National Hero of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and the day made a national holiday. Chatoyer, who is also revered by the Garifuna people in Central America, was Paramount Chief at a very critical period in the struggle to retain the independence of St. Vincent and to preserve the lands on which his people lived. He died in 1795 during the battle that led to the final defeat of the Caribs. The recognition of the importance of the Carib Chief to the life and struggles of his people has long been recognized. The British have established a monument in a prominent place in the Anglican Cathedral to their Major Leith who, it was alleged, had killed Chatoyer in a duel. The account of his death given by the British has been disputed, and is believed to have been part of efforts at psychological warfare.

Chatoyer was also immortalized in a play, the "Drama of King Shotaway", that was performed in New York in 1823, twenty-eight years after his death. The play was written by Mr. Browne, whose first name is unknown. It is believed that he was a Garifuna member who had experienced the battle of 1795 in which Chatoyer was

killed. Mr. Browne is regarded as the Father of Black Theatre in the United States of America and this play is said to be the first about a black person.

The recognition given on March 14 to this leading figure in the history of the Garifuna/Black Carib people will undoubtedly focus attention on his and his people's contribution to the history of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. They had held the might of Europe at bay for centuries, St. Vincent being among the last of the Caribbean countries to be colonized. It will also contribute to restoring the confidence and reconstructing the identity of a people who had been victims of a colonial past and who have had over the years to face the accusation of being cannibals that had been widely propagated in colonial history.

The Black Carib/Garifuna population in St. Vincent that remained following the exile, had for long lived on the margin of society, many of them in communities that had been devastated by volcanic eruptions in 1812 and 1902 and had, to all intents and purposes, been cut off from mainstream Vincentian life. A lot has changed over the years, a result of political developments and the growing consciousness of the people. The reconnection of the people, among other things, will help in the reclaiming of their history, identity and pride; and in reconstructing and restoring their central place in the early history and development of St. Vincent, or Yuremi as it is known in Garifuna language

The history, artifacts and other symbols of the Black Caribs (Garifuna people) are essential parts of the history and culture of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Many of the forts and places where the different encounters took place, remain and tell their own story, among them the cannons at Fort Charlotte that point inland. Beside the information they provide to the Vincentian people, they also add to the rich heritage and cultural-tourism infrastructure. Sections of the Central American Garifuna community are developing a case for reparations and are seeking 'symbolic' citizenship of this country. The story of the Garifuna people is a unique one that needs to be told, since among other things, it is pivotal to understanding their position in Central America and also the history of St. Vincent and the Grenadines; and indeed the rest of the Caribbean region in which St. Vincent was one of the last outposts of Carib resistance.

References