

March 17th 2023

THE SPIRIT OF JOSEPH CHATOYER; INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY WITH SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

Introduction

On Tuesday March 14, 2023, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines celebrated National Heroes' Day, with the formal wreath laying ceremony at the Obelisk in Dorsetshire Hill. There were other localized activities in communities such as Greggs and Fancy celebrating our ancestral heritage through expressions of song, dance, and the spoken work. The level of acceptance and growing expansion of this day of national significance must be commended since the formal recognition only began at the start of this 21st century. The naming of the day began a much overdue process of the recognition of the Garifuna and Kalinago people who were the original inhabitants of these islands that make up SVG. Their true story previously hidden or told from the point-of-view of the colonizers who committed unspeakable atrocities against them, is finally being told and our people can finally appreciate our history. The British were not satisfied with making them disappear physically, they seemed intent on ensuring that the history of the Garifuna and Kalinago was also erased or where elements survived, it was negatively distorted. It was therefore very necessary that this government lead by Comrade Ralph provide avenues and activities that promoted the history of our people and lead conversations aimed at providing information about the Garifuna and Kalinago. Our government has also worked actively to promote the descendants of the Garifuna, by providing better opportunities for their advancement. Today, the once marginalized descendants of our indigenous ancestors are now fully integrated into our Vincentian life and are accorded the same respect befitting members of our noble Vincentian civilization. It is only because of the acceptance and appreciation of the significance of the remarkable story of our Garifuna and Kalinago ancestors that we can now accord to the descendants their rightful place in our Vincentian society.

He Fought for and with His People

The history of the Garifuna is one characterized by staunch resistance and constant struggle to remain free from whatever the British wanted to impose on this brave people. The Garifuna lead by Paramount Chief Joseph Chatoyer, were determined to protect their homeland and were willing to do what was necessary to keep it their own. Paramount Chief lead his people and show the level of selflessness, courage and bravery that inspired his people to fight on and fight they did even to their death. The history tells us that many of them in refusing to live a day under British captivity, jumped to their deaths as that was seen as more honorable. The history also tells us that the Paramount Chief fought to the end, sacrificing his life in the defense of his homeland and protection of his people. This example of selflessness remains as a guide of the way we should approach issues of national significance, there must be

social solidarity. At any point the great leader of our Garifuna ancestors could have insisted on his individual right but instead he saw the bigger picture and understood the individual responsibility that came with him not just being leader, but part of a community of persons. The Bible does have an example of great love when it records “greater love has no man than this, than a man who is willing to lay down his life for his friends”. Centuries later the Paramount Chief of the Garifuna people laid down his life for his people and that is the richness of heritage and history that we have, one of sacrifice, working on solidarity with each other. Whenever we celebrate National Heroes Day and we celebrate the spirit of our ancestors, we celebrate, love, selflessness and solidarity working together for a common goal.

Solidarity with Garifuna Descendants Abroad

One of the features of our celebration of National Heroes Day and remembering our first National Hero Paramount Chief Joseph Chatoyer, is the inclusion of descendants of the exiled Garifuna people. Those ancestors who were shipped out, found their way to Belize, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, and made the strange lands their homes, striving and establishing vibrant communities. On a recent visit to Nicaragua, Comrade Ralph lead a delegation and visited two Garifuna communities in Orinoco and Bluefields establishing a connection with them as part of our diaspora. Our government continues to form bonds with communities wherever they are and more and more representatives of these communities travel to SVG to participate in the National Heroes Day celebrations. This year was no different as representatives from all 4 countries as well as some living in the USA formed a large delegation that participated in the various activities across the country. The International Garifuna Council bestowed on Comrade Ralph the title of “Messenger of Chatoyer”, an honor that our Comrade says is one that he holds in highest esteem and pledges before God and man to carry out faithfully. The government must be commended for doing its best to facilitate this improved solidarity among our Garifuna people at home or abroad and will continue to explore ways to further strengthen this bond. Plans are in place by members of the delegation to host a one-month language and performance workshop from August 1, 2023, to August 31, 2023, and this is open to the public. Programs like these can only help to enrich the full Garifuna experience as more Vincentians are exposed to elements of the culture of our ancestors that will bring to life future celebrations and commemoration of the life and work of Joseph Chatoyer.

Our ULP government that is doing fantastic work in fostering an awakening of our people to our history as seen through the Garifuna ancestors, will continue to celebrate our past, work in the present, in solidarity with one another to create the future we want for the next generation of Vincentians. We are encouraged to accept personal responsibility and embrace social solidarity working in communion with each other.