

“Back to our Roots -- Strategies for Survival and Sustainability of Indigenous Peoples in SVG”

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WELCOME

Let me first thank the organisers of this conference for the invitation to be part of this conversation on our Indigenous people.

INTRODUCTION

I want to speak to the theme of today's conference, really my interpretation of it. I will raise some issues that I believe have been left hanging and hope that some of these would be taken up later through the panels and discussions that will follow.

Of course, when we speak of the Indigenous people, for our purposes, we are speaking of the Caribs, namely the Kalinago and Garifuna people. Today we seem to be extending the conversation, perhaps even suggesting a new kind of

conversation. The story of the Caribs as told to us and which we have been talking about over the years virtually ends in 1797 with the exile of a majority of the Carib people and then shifts to Central America. It is as if the rest is simply a reaction to what went before. It is as if the Carib people were not part of the struggle against colonialism and did not encounter serious challenges integrating into the post-emancipation society.

If we are going to be honest about this story we have to admit that there has been grave discrimination against these people. They lived on the margins of society. Their young women were exploited sexually and as domestic workers. Some of this took place as late as 1979 when the Caribs were put in shelters and accommodated in different towns and villages following the volcanic eruption of that year. I speak about this because I know it existed.

There are indeed many people outside SVG who are unaware that there are descendants of the Caribs still living here, their homeland. The Caribs have thus become to them an historical curiosity, so they want pictures and artefacts. That is the extent of their interest. The fact that descendants of the Caribs remain here and in Central America, attests to the reality of their survival, especially when we know

that most traces of the indigenous past have disappeared in most of the other Caribbean countries.

I am going to draw to your attention some issues which I think are problematic and which we need to be conscious of, to clarify and refine and to confront, even if not to bring closure to them. This Conference is being sponsored by the Garifuna Heritage Foundation and while we are talking about roots to what are we really referring? We need, for one, to attempt to clarify the Garifuna/Kalinago connection and relationship and to put this in context. Who are these people, the Garifuna and the Kalinagos? This has been confusing to many people including the descendants themselves and we need to examine this carefully, not by creating confusion but by seeking to clarifying things. We look at colour or rather shades of colour and we conclude that people in Sandy Bay are descendants of the Kalinagos and those in Greiggs and Fancy of the Garifuna.

As we reflect on this, let us be guided by Anthropologist Nancie Gonzalez. In a 1997 article ('The Garifuna of Central America' in Samuel Wilson's *Indigenous People of the Caribbean*) she states, "My studies indicate that by the middle of the eighteenth century the 'Black Caribs' of St.Vincent were culturally and biologically indistinguishable from the so-called Yellow Caribs. Yet European

observers, burdened by a racist imagination and ignorant of Mendelian genetics, insisted on distinguishing between darker, more combative Caribs and lighter, more tractable ones- and in imposing policies that preserved the distinction. In carrying out the deportation policy, of course, they were also reflecting the fear of the possible influence that the continued presence of free blacks might have on their own slaves. In fact, many of these had already escaped over the years to join the Caribs” (p. 203)

I am not a biologist and am ignorant of mendelian genetics, but what she seems to be suggesting is that shades of colour alone cannot be used as a yardstick to determine ancestry. In fact, the Europeans themselves were confused, particularly with the Black Caribs and African slaves which they sometimes mixed up. She reported on the British policy, after the 1795 war, of sending the French captives back to Europe and deporting the darker-skinned ones. In doing so, she said that they frequently separated members of the same family who had different skin colours. Then she goes on, “So convinced were they of the ‘innocence’ of the Yellow Caribs that even years later they expressed surprise when they found some of these in former ‘Black’ Carib settlements and also when the lighter-skinned natives resisted British takeovers.” (p. 2013)

In the historical literature we have become trapped and put off course by the deliberate attempts of the British at divide and rule and so the Black and Yellow Caribs were supposedly permanently at war. But a careful look at the literature including French documents, gives a different picture. Some examples; In 1722 when Captain Braithwaite arrived in St.Vincent to enforce the Duke of Montagu's so-called claim to St.Vincent, he was met by Black and Yellow Caribs, the chiefs of whom snubbed at the mission that brought him to their country. While being on board the Duke's sloop, after having told them about his mission, Captain Brathwaite reports that "They told me it was well that I had not mentioned it ashore, for their power could not have protected me; that it was impossible, the Dutch had before attempted it, but were glad to retire." They declared too that they trusted no Europeans, they owed much to the protection of the French, 'but would as soon oppose to their settling amongst 'em or any act of force from 'em, as us; as they had lately given an example, by killing several'. (Hulme, p. 179)

In 1700 a French military Officer was given the mission to solicit the support of the Yellow Caribs against the Blacks. He considered the mission an impossible one since the Yellow Caribs claimed to prefer to see 2,000 negroes settled there than fifty Frenchmen. When the French man Moreau De Jonnes was sent on a mission to St.Vincent he was taken to a communal house that contained an assembly hall

about 80 feet long where he found a gathering of chiefs and warriors of the Black and Yellow Caribs. Moreau who had developed a strong friendship with Pakiri, the Chief of the Yellow Caribs, stated that the Chief declared that he had two cares in the world, the love of his daughter and the defence of his country. His daughter was described as one of their most famous warriors. He applauded the training the Caribs gave to their girls with the aim of defending their homes rather than the ‘groaning and calling on Providence that they do in Europe.’ The two daughters of one of the chief of the Black Caribs stood out in that respect. During training Morning Star and Flower of the Forest never missed the target once, he said. (p. 39)

Let us recognise, too, that from 1492 it was the Kalinagos who first resisted the colonisation attempts of the British and French. The fact that St. Vincent defied any efforts at colonisation until 1763 owes much to the original Caribs, the Kalinagos. Hilary Beckles in an article entitled “Kalinago (Carib) Resistance to European Colonisation of the Caribbean” CQ, vol 38, nos 2&3, 1992) makes this point, “By refusing to capitulate under the collective military might of the Europeans, Kalinagos certainly kept the Windward Islands in a marginal relation to the slave plantation complex of the North Atlantic system for two hundred years, and in so

doing, made a principal contribution to the Caribbean's anti-colonial and anti-slavery tradition" (p. 13)

So we have to be careful not to read the Kalinagos out of the story of resistance to colonisation. Therefore when we talk about shaping a culture of resistance, the Kalinagos will have to take pride of place with that. On the matter too of a culture of resistance I wonder if we really have a culture of resistance. This is quite ironic for it is one of the lessons we should have taken from our National Hero who showed that despite the military superiority of the Europeans they joined the Kalinagos in confronting that might. This is what their survival was about. This resistant was constant.

The Conference theme makes the connection between roots and survival and sustainability. Let us explore this some more. Roots are embedded in Culture but what are we getting at here? Again I want to use Nancie Gonzalez's article fittingly entitled "The Garifuna: Adaptability and Survival." She writes "The original Carib population and its culture patterns were largely exterminated by disease, warfare and slavery during the earliest years of European contact. Later the surviving Carib communities, especially those in St.Vincent and Dominica, began to bring or accept black persons, mostly male into their midst, and this rapidly brought both

biological and cultural changes. Members of the resulting new 'race' would have found it advantageous to adopt the Carib cultural patterns, in part because these patterns were suited to the local situation. This included the technology and skills needed for canoe making, 'island hopping', to raid or trade, fishing, hunting, basketry and horticulture." (p. 204 in Wilson's)

The question of survival and sustainability must relate to adaptability. The contact between Europeans and Caribs would have brought changes to both groups. We see this also with the Central American connection. It has to be borne in mind that Culture is not something static, and that it is shaped by the environment. To use a more modern example - As young people when we reflect on this we would note that, Ring games and Coop took root in an environment where electricity was not widespread. As the environment changes aspects of our culture also change. Our nanci stories, ghost stories and folk traditions have all but disappeared with environmental changes.

When the Garifuna people arrived in Central America following their expulsion, they met, in Roatan and some other areas blacks who had come from Haiti and Guadeloupe. They developed a relationship and the people they met began to make adaptations to the Carib Culture and the Caribs themselves, to the physical and

social environment that they met. It is suggested that the blacks they met, also introduced West Indian cultural traits and one thing in particular that was singled out was the punta dance which it is suggested, is now regarded as being 'symbolic' of the Garifuna tradition. (Gonzalez, p. 203-4)

This is a good point at which to mention the matter of 'language'. The language which the exiled Garifuna peoples carried to Central America would have been affected by European contact. The Caribs, we are told, were fairly proficient in the use of the French language, and would have contributed to the development of what became a Creole language. Because of the long contact with both the French and British this was to be expected. We have not done a good job at identifying words and terms from the Carib language that were taken into the Creole language. On the other hand, the Caribs caught tri-tri the same way we do today but the word tri-tri seemed to have come from the French. The names of foods and the preparation of foods that would have been familiar to our grandparents and great grandparents would have come from the Caribs. At the same time the linguistic connections and adaptations from their presence among the Spaniards and other groups in Central America means that the language the Garifuna speak today is not the one that they left here with. Apart from their connections with the peoples of that area they would have had to react to different stimuli in the environment.

Vincentian Linguist Paula Prescod makes the point that the exiled Garifuna population would have found itself in an area where the geopolitics was new and obviously had to struggle to retain what parts of their language have been retained, while adjusting to the broader community in which they had to coexist.

The other dimension of the language issue with which I have some concerns has to do with efforts to reintroduce the Garifuna language to SVG. Language is a living thing and people would only respond to it positively in a situation where they are able to communicate with others and where it allows them some mobility. This is the fate suffered by Latin where even its use in Catholic religious rituals is very *much restricted if not completely gone. But even in the countries of Central America there is a problem with the retention of the language although they have been doing a good job at trying to preserve it. In this regard Paula Prescod makes another point that is very relevant and which relates to language and colonial society; “Numerically the Carib population was quite an insignificant one. The language shift became even more important as the native was made to feel that social mobility and ascendancy were equated with the ability to conform. There might have been little effort to resist assimilation since the stereotypes about the Caribs continued and increasingly the view that their future depends on their ability to operate a language shift.”

The issue of the survival and sustainability of the Indigenous people (the Caribs) has to be located first within the context of the colonial environment and in looking at strategies we have to fast forward to the present globalised environment and all the challenges that it brings, challenges that affect all of us as we attempt to preserve and build our Vincentian and Caribbean civilisation.

The environment in which the Caribs, like the Africans, had to struggle for their survival and the ability to sustain themselves was one where power mattered and power rested with the colonial masters. Their military technology was superior but of even greater importance, in that we are continuing to fight against it, is the use of Culture as a weapon. This point made by the Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiong'O remains with me as I reflect on this matter of survival and sustainability. Wa Thiong'O portrays Culture as a more formidable weapon in a colonial situation than military technology. He argues that military might is only important once the guns are held over the heads of the people. If, however, you convince them about their inferiority and dismantle their culture you control them indefinitely. So Culture presents itself as a bomb to the colonial master; one that is long lasting and if not fought against could be self sustaining.

This is how WaThiong'O puts, it and this statement is one which all of us in the post-colonial societies should take on board as we try to reshape our societies: "...the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from their wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own. It makes them want to identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all those forces which would stop their own springs of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle..." (p. 3- *Decolonising the Mind- The Politics of Language in African Literature*)

This manifests itself in making the people the objects rather than subjects of their history; in eroding confidence in themselves, thus causing them to hate themselves. Part of this cultural bomb was the unleashing of the stigma used against the Caribs to the effect that their people were cannibals. The Caribs have lived with this stigma for a long time, one that was a blow to their pride and identity and would have caused them to lose confidence in themselves as a people. Education and

religion were parts of this cultural bomb. The books used in school spoke of a barbaric and primitive history even claiming that they had tastes for certain types of Europeans. Some of these books were until quite recently still used in schools. It is a fact that many Carib people especially those who began to reside in other parts of SVG were denying themselves and their Carib heritage. A lot of this changed after 1992 when Indigenous scholars in the Americas began to battle the myths and to tell their own story. Then added to this, in our case, was the declaration of Chatoyer as our first National hero. This is however a double-edged sword. On one hand, many people who are not of Carib ancestry began to try to find links. Then, although we do not speak about this a lot, there are significant numbers of Vincentians that resent a man in loincloth being their national hero. Some attempts have even been made to cast Chatoyer in European garb; a result obviously of misinformation and ignorance.

This point about the Cultural bomb is so important that I want to make brief references to what others have said about it. Frantz Fanon supports this by stating that the Imperial mother proposed to convince the indigenous peoples that colonialism came to lighten their darkness. (p. 169)

Dr. Carter Goodwin Wodson, the African American historian and founder of the Journal of Negro History, puts it in a very interesting way: “When you control a

man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his proper place and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary." It will be interesting to look at our education today against this point being made by Woodson. George Lamming refers to this cultural experience as 'the effective appropriation of the others' minds...' (From *Small Axe*, September 12, 2002, p. 177) And of course, there is Bob Marley's call for us to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery, since he perceived that this is where the problem was, the effect really of the Cultural bomb.

I mention all of this to show that the Caribs were up not only against the military might of the Imperial Mother, but had to confront the Cultural bomb. The surrender and exile of the Caribs in 1797 did not, of course, end the story. But we have paid little attention to the struggles of these people and to the challenges which they had to face with integrating themselves into post emancipation Vincentian society. In 1801 the Assembly had agreed to supply some of the Caribs whom they were able to locate and forced to surrender, with a vessel to carry them to the Spanish Main. They were to be supplied with provision and with salt beef, pork, flour, nails, cutlasses, carpenters' tools and fishing tackles with some muskets and ammunition.

Note that this is 1801 after the exile of 1797 and there is a great deal of arrogance here as can be seen in a letter sent to the Duke of Portland, "I shall also prepare a letter to the Spanish Commandant of the place whither they will be sent, explaining that they having been seduced from their allegiance to the King by the intrigues and artifices of the allies of Spain, the French and having in consequence rendered it impossible for them to continue longer in this colony either consistently with their own security or the security of the Country, they are entitled upon every consideration to the protection of that Government with which they may be considered as in Alliance.." This is totally absurd. The Caribs did not have to wait on the French to seduce them from an allegiance to the King which in the first place, they never accepted. In fact, as was said in 1722, they did not trust the French or any other European.

Following the eruption of the Soufriere volcano in 1902-3 the colonial government's solution to the resettlement of the people, mainly Caribs, who lived in the foothills of the Volcano, was to try to make arrangements to send them to Jamaica. Fortunately some people, led by the Methodist Reverend J. H Darrel fought against it, standing with the Caribs who opposed it.

Those Caribs who remained continued to meet significant obstacles in their bid to provide a life for themselves and to integrate into Vincentian society. The

prejudices remained. They lived on the margins of society as I indicated before and were belittled and made fun of even by the black population that had itself suffered its own kind of discrimination and mental enslavement. Our post-emancipation people, especially those who were educated saw them as lesser beings and swallowed the propaganda that was part of the Cultural bomb. Ironically, the Africans, too, were supposed to have come from societies that were barbaric. When the decision was taken in 1912 to ban the Shaker religion, one of the things used against its followers was that they were supposed to be remnants of African barbarism.

Not enough attention has been paid to the struggles of those who remained here in their efforts at eking out a livelihood for themselves. The negative effects of the Cultural bomb remains, but we now find ourselves in a globalised environment where it is not only our bananas and other agricultural products that are under threat, but our very persons are because of the blitz (bombardment) we are faced with from television and from other forms of communication in a situation where the powerful prevails because they control the technology. It used to be said that a globalised world stands to benefit us but there is no level playing field and we are up against those with power who control not only the International Financial Institutions but the instruments that shape our lives.

The Caribs have survived and they have had to make adjustments to a society in which they were a minority. The people with whom they had to interact were ones schooled in a system that continued to preach the myths about the backwardness of Carib people. Even as they still continue to make that adjustment we are all as Vincentian and Caribbean people faced with having to make our own adjustment in order to survive in a globalised world and in that sense the issue of sustainability is a real one. Culture might have been a weapon used against all of us in the past but it is also the base on which our very survival depends, people of Carib and African descent. The Caribs have endured and we have all reacted to the negatives that came out of our history, since it is one history involving people who had been making connections in the past. While we must continue to tell the story, to make all our people aware of where they came from, we have to pull out the positives. The fact of survival by itself is important and we have to learn from our forbears who not only fought colonialism but developed villages, su- su hands, friendly societies and played a significant part in the development of the country. The Caribs assisted in taking sugar from the estates to the ships waiting outside on the rough windward coast. With the slaves they would have helped to construct the Black Point Tunnel and the Byrea Tunnel. As a booklet published at the time of the Jamaica Exhibition in 1891 states, “The people are perfectly fearless on the water

and are the principal boatmen employed in shipping on the dangerous Windward Coast. The handcraft of the Caribs was displayed at different Imperial exhibitions in which St. Vincent participated. In Jamaica in 1891 they attracted considerable attention as people flocked to their Tent to get a demonstration of how they constructed their baskets. It was reported that the Governor Sir Henry Blake and Lady Blake visited the Tent often and expressed great interest in the work of the Caribs. Their basket making was pure artistry and it was said that they were constructed in such a way that they were water-tight and could last for many years. Their boat building techniques were used by the blacks in the period after emancipation.

They were small farmers. They made a significant contribution to the development of this country. Today as we talk about sustainability it isn't they Caribs and us. It is all of us, who struggled through the darkest days of Colonialism to secure a living for ourselves. It is all the people who constitute the Vincentian civilisation that is a part of the broader Caribbean civilisation that have to stand together and ensure our survival, not the physical but as Vincentian and Caribbean people in all their dimensions. We have to resurrect the creative spirit and energies not only of the Carib people but of the African slaves and freed people. We have up to now not learnt the positives from what our national hero and his people had to offer.

In our coming together we should not lose what was distinct about us. This is the base that will strengthen us and give us confidence to undertake the journey we are on. In our quest for reparations, for example, we should come to some consensus on what we need from it. Not to do this is to admit that we are not serious. There are many things we can do to inform the Carib and the African peoples about their past and give them an understanding of their roots. I suggest making Balliceaux a sacred Carib ground, paying tribute to the many that died there. We should aim at having a Carib museum in the Carib country. The schools should have libraries with literature depicting and helping the young people to understand the roots from which they grew. They should be able then to inform Visitors about their rich history. We have certainly not done a good job at preserving elements of our past and generally our cultural heritage that could assist the present generation and future generations in understanding our past. Our failure to do this could result in our being lost in a globalised world where even today some of us are perhaps more familiar with areas of American life than with our own.

As I come to the end I want to share with you this quote from Frantz Fanon, taken from his *Black Skin, White Masks* – “Every colonized people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death

and burial of its local cultural originality- finds itself face to face with the language of the civilising nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle" (p. 18)

Whiteness in this sense refers to the culture of those who hold the power.

The research still has to go on. What we have been having so far is still really a reaction to the Euro-centric images and story as part of our history, and to European control and domination of our land and people. We still do not have a rounded picture of the lives of the Indigenous people outside of the context of war. More emphasis has to be placed on understanding the struggle of those who remained after 1797.

The slate has to be cleaned. We cannot continue to be guided by anger but must move on as one people with the confidence built on the positives we have taken from our understanding of the past. It is on this we have to build a base as we confront a globalised world with all the challenges that brings.