The Garifuna Reunion in St Vincent (Yurumein)

The Power of the Past and the Promise of the Future

By: Jose Francisco Avila

In his 1970 book “Future Shock” Alvin Toffler wrote, “Change is the process by which the future invades our lives, and it is important that we look at it closely, not only from the grand perspective of History, but also from the vantage point of the living, breathing individuals who experience it”¹. Change is inevitable and there’s is no question that it is happening in the relationship between St. Vincent and the Grenadines and the Garifunas as demonstrated by the Garifuna Reunion to be celebrated on July 18th – 23rd, as part of Vincy Homecoming 2009.

It has been said that “The future does not just happen, we must make it happen” and that’s what the Garifuna Coalition chose to do when it linked the power of the Garifunas’ historic past while looking forward to a future brimming with promise and hope when it proposed the Garifuna Reunion as part of Vincy Homecoming 2009 to the Government of St Vincent and the Grenadines through the Regional Integration and Diaspora Unit (RIDU) Office of the Prime Minister.

While the US Garifuna Diaspora has maintained links and connections with the Central American countries, where they were exiled to that has not been the case with their homeland of St. Vincent and the Grenadines (Yurumein). With the exception of Garifunas from Belize, no other Central American Garifuna Community has maintained regular contact with St. Vincent. There will be some who will remember the Honorable James Mitchell, Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines’ visit to Honduras in 1997 during the Garifuna Bicentennial, in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the Garifunas exile. However, twelve years later there has been no renewed linkage. An analysis of the situation led to the conclusion that it was due to the language barrier since the largest Garifuna Diaspora is located in Spanish speaking countries. Therefore, the Garifuna Coalition USA, Inc. chose to organize the Garifuna Reunion as an integral part of the Vincy Homecoming 2009 celebrations in an effort to forge better relations. It also chose to develop bilingual (English/Spanish) promotional material to reach out to all Garifunas.

The Garifuna Reunion creates an opportunity for the Garifuna Diaspora to get to know and reconnect with Saint Vincent and the Grenadines and to meet and exchange information with Saint Vincent leaders in the government, business, political, non-profit, and cultural sectors during their visit to the country. The reunion also enables Saint Vincent leaders to gain a greater understanding about the multicultural and multilingual Garifunas while developing a framework and action plan for further enhancement of relations between St. Vincent and the Grenadines and the Garifuna Diaspora.

The media has brought greater awareness about the Garifunas and their special place in history. The awakening of ethnic cultural pride among the Garifunas combined with the increased awareness about their special place in history provides Saint Vincent and the Grenadines an opportunity to develop a new cultural tourism strategy to compliment its thriving tourism industry, while facilitating greater collaboration and partnership between the business community in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and entrepreneurs in the Garifuna Diaspora.

According to Dr. Adrian Frazier, 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

¹ Alvin Tofler, Future Shock, Random House, 1970
point inland. Beside the information they provide to the Vincentian people, they also add to the rich heritage and cultural-tourism infrastructure.²

However, the Garifunas special place in St Vincent’s history has also generated a great deal of debate about the sale of the Island of Baliceux, as demonstrated in the following excerpt from an article in the Caribbean Net News “We are of the opinion that the nature of the proposed development will obliterate the significance of the history of Balliceaux and Battawya to the people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, now and in the future. This is particularly in reference to the Garifuna people who suffered tremendously at the hands of the early settlers. This proposed development will be grossly disrespectful to the memory of the indigenous peoples, especially those who lost their lives on Balliceaux, and those who were exiled to Central America in 1797.”³

For full disclosure purposes, I must mention that various people have written me about this issue and I will share part of my response to one of the messages: “I understand that we need to do something, however, I feel that it needs to be in an organized manner and we need to first engage in dialogue with the Government of St Vincent and the Grenadines at all levels. That is why I chose the diplomatic approach of reestablishing the links with the country. Once we have engaged the Government officials, we can negotiate a mutually beneficial agreement.”

While it is true that when there is a conflict between heritage preservation and economic development, the preservation and protection of the nation’s heritage is not given equal weight in the discussion, there is evidence that the government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines is taking steps under Minister of Culture René Baptiste to preserve the Garifuna heritage. This is demonstrated by the Pilgrimage to Balliceaux - A Journey of Spiritual Remembrance, which was started 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 became a national holiday.

Furthermore, it is demonstrated by the SVG Government’s acceptance letter to our proposal for the Garifuna Reunion, which stated “We are looking forward to welcoming all of your members for Vincy Homecoming 2009-The Garifuna Reunion. We are ready to work with you to develop an exciting and fulfilling program to ensure that you have a full appreciation of your homeland, St. Vincent and the Grenadines (Yurumein). The Minister of Culture, the Honourable Rene Baptiste has included Vincy Homecoming 2009-The Garifuna Reunion in her strategic plan for 2009 and is anxious to begin working on the logistical and administrative details to ensure that your welcome home is flawless.”

In addition, as part of the planned Tourism development sites, which will be an integral part of the construction of the Argyle International Airport, is the development of the Rabacca National Park, a concept that is jointly promoted by the Ministries of Tourism, Agriculture and the National Park, Rivers and Beaches Authority in the area between the Rabacca River and Miss Jane River, immediately to the South of the Rabacca River. While a theme for that park was not yet determined by the time of writing the final report, it is likely to be a mixture of recreation and a Carib theme village with a memorial statue of Chief Chatoyer, shops, play area, parking, rest stop, cabins along with the camping and picnic facilities.⁴

There’s no question that positive change is happening in the relationship between St. Vincent and the Grenadines and the Garifunas. It is hoped that by linking the power of the Garifunas’ rich history to the promise of the future of Vincy Homecoming 2009, the Garifuna Reunion will create an opportunity for the Garifuna Diaspora to get to know and reconnect with Saint Vincent and the Grenadines while developing a framework and action plan for further enhancement of relations between St. Vincent and the Grenadines and the Garifuna Diaspora. It will also allow for a look at the future from the vantage point of the Garifunas as the conflict between heritage preservation and economic development is reconciled around their special place in St Vincent and the Grenadines’ history!

² Dr. Adrian Fraser, The Reconnection Of The Garifuna Peoples, The St Vincent and the Grenadines Department of Tourism , 2001
³ An open letter from the Linley family in St Vincent, Caribbean Net News, June 4, 2008
⁴ Argyle International Airport Project Environmental Impact Assessment
Garifuna Coalition USA, Inc Board members Marcia Gomez, vice president, Rejil Solis, president, Delly Suazo, Secretary and Jose Francisco Avila, Executive Director St Vincent and the Grenadines General Consul in New York Cosmus Cozier

Garifuna Coalition USA, Inc Board members Rejil Solis, president and Jose Francisco Avila, Executive Director with St Vincent and the Grenadines Ambassador to the USA La Celia Prince in Washington, DC

Garifuna Coalition USA, Inc Board members Marcia Gomez, vice president, Rejil Solis, president and Jose Francisco Avila, Executive Director with Dr. Ralph Gonsalves, St Vincent and the Grenadines Prime Minister at the Vincy Homecoming 2009 launch

Garifuna Coalition USA, Inc Board members Marcia Gomez, vice president, Rejil Solis, president with St Vincent and the Grenadines Minister of Culture Rene Baptiste and Ambassador to the USA La Celia Prince at the Independence Gala in Philadelphia

Garifuna Coalition USA, Inc Board members Rejil Solis, president Marcia Gomez, vice president, and Jose Francisco Avila, Executive Director St Vincent and the Grenadines Minister of Culture Rene Baptiste at the Vincy Homecoming 2009 launch

Garifuna Coalition USA, Inc Board members Rejil Solis, president, Marcia Gomez, vice president with Ambassador Ellsworth I. A. John Director Regional Integration and Diaspora Unit Office of the Prime Minister at the Vincy Homecoming 2009 launch.