The Garifuna Culture in the 21st Century

By Jose Francisco Avila

As we conclude the first decade of the Twenty first Century, I could not help but think about the nay sayers who continue to predict the extinction of the Garifuna Culture and language. However, I continue to maintain that if the culture and language survived for 193 years through oral transmission; now that we have a traditional Garifuna Dictionary, as well as an electronic version on the Internet. We also have GAHFU offering Garifuna Classes in Los Angeles and webcasting them over the Internet through Labuga.com, in addition, Casa Yurumein is offering Garifuna classes in New York City. When it comes to Garifuna Music yes we recognize the achievements of the late Andy Palacio, Aurelio Martinez, Pen Cayetano, etc. However, let us not forget that the biggest Punta Rock explosion of the late 80s and 90s was a Punta Rock group by the name of Garifuna Kids, made up of first generation Garifuna-Americans and what makes all of this more amazing, is that it is all happening in the “Melting Pot of the World” The United States of America! That is why I would bet my last Dollar with the naysayers that the Garifuna Culture is indeed here to stay and stronger than ever.

My assertion is based on facts and not mere speculation; it is also based on looking to the past while projecting the future, rather than on my own personal assumptions. While reviewing my archives recently, I came across my opening speech during the Second Garifuna Summit Meeting in Los Angeles, California in July 1992. “Among the many Garifuna dignitaries that were present, included Dr Joseph Palacio, Mr Pablo Lambe (R.I.P.), Mrs Myrtle Palacio, Roy and Phillis Cayetano, all from Belize; Mr Salvador Suazo, Mr Crisanto Melendez, Suni and Julio Morales from Honduras; Mr Gerrardo Ellington from Guatemala; and Cornelius Sam from St Vincent and the Grenadines. In addition to these prominent visitors, over 300 Garinagu from around the US attended the event.”

The theme of the meeting was “Afareinraguni, Awararuguni, Agibudaguni Liadun Abar” or “Separation, Dispersion, Reunification”. “One hundred and ninety-five years ago, the Garifuna people were torn from our native land of Yurumein and scattered across the seas. Today the Garifuna people are still divided and some of us have long neglected our historical and cultural links with Yurumein and other Garinagu. But there’s probably no better time than now for us to assume the inherently international role that this scattering across the earth has given us.

It is now our collective responsibility to put the pieces of ourselves back together. We must help resurrect the Garifuna culture in the image of its past glory by reclaiming our history for the sake of our future. It is our responsibility to work to reassemble Chatoyer's people.

It is time for us to become the subjects of our own history rather than objects of someone else’s, as we inevitably have been when others have told our story as a footnote to theirs in their own way and for their own sometimes unhealthy purposes. It is time for us to center ourselves in our own self-definition rather than allow ourselves to be defined by others whose self-interest is different from and often diametrically opposed to our own. Most importantly, we must define ourselves within a global context rather than in the narrow confines of our scattered nationalities.

Doing so requires neither imagination nor myth making, as our detractors contend. It requires only an accurate awareness of our natural ties, in spite of efforts to destroy them, with Yurumein and with other people of Garifuna descent. We need to be aware of our history as people whose ancestors contributed to the creation of world civilization and which, as other people, have suffered the vicissitudes of conquering and being conquered.

Although we still suffer from problems that are logical results of a history of oppression, we have indeed proved our ability not only to participate but also to become outstanding leaders in many areas of society as demonstrated by the likes of Dr. Cadrin Gill, Pat Frazier, and Cornelius Sam, from St Vincent; Joseph Palacio, Norman Chavez, and Roy Cayetano, from Belize; Guillermina Guity, Jorge Bernardez, and Salvador Suazo; from Honduras; Carlos Gamboa, Josefina Gregorio, and Gerardo Ellington, from Guatemala and Francisco Sambola, from Nicaragua.

But it would be foolish for us to enter the twenty first century with a twentieth century world view, concerned only with being citizens of our respective countries. For the twenty first century, we must be prepared to define ourselves in the most global manner possible as Garinagu. And as citizens of the planet, we must assume the logical role to which our own history not someone else's, clearly assigns us.

To paraphrase President Kennedy, we must stop asking "what has my culture done for me?", and begin asking "What can I do for my culture?" In my opinion, there's a lot that we can do to ascertain our culture's proper place in history.”

The First Garifuna Summit Meeting was held in New York City in July 2001 with the theme “Uwala Busiganu, Garinagu Wagia” “Garinagu’s Path to the 21st Century” and together with the second, laid the foundation for the Garinagu’s path to the twenty First Century and started a movement that continues today and as we conclude its first decade, I’d like to summarize some of the major Garifuna achievements:

**The UNESCO Proclamation**

On May 18th 2001, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, proclaimed the Garifuna Language, Music and Dance a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The National Garifuna Council (NGC) is the lead organization that is responsible for safeguarding preserving and revitalizing of the Garifuna language, music and dance.

**National Heroes Day**

On March 14, 2002 the Great Carib (Garifuna) Chief, Josep Chatoyer, was declared the first National Hero of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and the day made a national holiday.

**Andy Palacio Designated UNESCO Artist for Peace**

On October, 2007, The Director-General of UNESCO, Koichiro Matsuura, designated the celebrated Garifuna musician and singer Andy Palacio a UNESCO Artist for Peace.

UNESCO Artists for Peace are internationally-renowned personalities who use their influence, charisma and prestige to help promote UNESCO’s message and programmes.

**Garifuna Heritage Promotion in the USA**

The UNESCO proclamation candidature form submitted by the National Garifuna Council, includes a draft action plan for the safeguarding and revitalization of the Garifuna Language with the purpose of nurturing and promoting the Garifuna culture, identity, Music and Dance. Among the expected results, was “Garinagu cultural elements are being utilized to promote the culture and the people.” As a result, Garifuna organizations around the United States became involved in promoting the Garifuna Culture and the people by developing Garifuna festivities and festivals that showcase the language, music and dance. Among these: Garifuna Day in Los Angeles, California, sponsored by Garinagu empowerment Movement, Garifuna Settlement Day in Atlanta, sponsored by the Atlanta Garifuna Association, Garifuna Settlement Day in Inkster, Michigan, Garifuna Heritage Month in New York (March 11 - April 12), sponsored by the Garifuna Coalition USA, Inc. More recently, Houston’s Mayor, issued proclamations for Garifuna Settlement Week, William Henry Brown Day and Andy Palacio Day. These proclamations were sponsored by the National Garifuna-American Day Parade Committee.

**The Garifuna Reunion in St Vincent and the Grenadines**

While the Garifuna Diaspora has maintained links and connections with the Central American countries where we ended as a result of the exile, such has not been the case with St. Vincent and the Grenadines “Yurumein” the Ancestral Homeland of the Garifuna people.

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2 Candidature Standard Form Proclamation of masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity www.ngcbelize.org
3 www.Facebook.com
Therefore, in an effort to reestablish the link with their Ancestral homeland, the Garifunas Coalition USA, Inc. organized and sponsored the Garifuna Reunion in St. Vincent and the Grenadines for July 2009 as an integral component of Vincy Homecoming 200. The Garifuna Reunion provided an opportunity for Garifunas to become the subjects of our own history.

The return home was highlighted by the first ever Bilingual English Garifuna Mass at the Cathedral of the Assumption; where after listening to Ms Marcia Gomez sing a hymn in Garifuna, father Mark Da Silva began the Gospel by expressing “I am not a Black Man, and I am not a Garifuna but when I heard that song I felt the spirit.” That statement becomes even more significant when I shared experiences with members of the delegation and we all arrived at the same conclusion, the spirit of our ancestors were with us and were happy that we had returned. This became very evident during the laying of a wreath at the Joseph Chatoyer monument in Dorsetshire Hill. In our opinion, the strong wind and rain that approached as we concluded the ceremony represented the powerful spirit of the Paramount Garifuna Chief welcoming his people back.

The spiritual connection continued as we reconnect with our people through a tour of the Leeward Side of the Island with a cultural interchange in Rose Bank, where we visited the home where James Augustus Roberts the last Black Carib Chief of Rose Bank lived from February 7th, 1889 to May 1956, where We had the opportunity to meet his grandson Ivan. This visit was very emotional and the spiritual connection was highlighted by a poem read by a young lady which concluded with “Am begging you Bring back we culture, we fun, we games, and name, Cause the only thing we got now is “Ivan” the grandson of Jim Roberts the late chief. So don’t let us die without knowing who we are. Please send us a Mother to revive our Garifuna Culture.”

Our commitment to the revival of the Garifuna Culture was sealed by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding by The Garifuna Heritage Foundation of St Vincent and the Grenadines, The Garifuna Coalition USA, Inc., St. Vincent and the Grenadines Organization of Pennsylvania, Inc. and the Garifuna American Heritage Foundation United, Inc. of Los Angeles California, to promote the Garifuna Heritage and Culture in all parts of the Garifuna Diaspora as well as collaborate in practical ways to support the Renaissance of the Garifuna Heritage and Culture in St. Vincent and the Grenadines "Yurumein" the Ancestral Homeland of the Garifuna people. The Memorandum is being reviewed by the Regional Integration and Diaspora Unit Office of the Prime Minister of St Vincent and the Grenadines for inclusion in the National Diaspora Policy, the result of Vincy Homecoming 2009.

Furthermore, seven traditional Garifuna communities came together recently to share knowledge, discuss ideas and formulate strategies for the promotion of the Garifuna culture and heritage, under the theme, ‘Exploring our Garifuna Heritage from past glory to future success.”

As we conclude the first decade of the Twenty first Century and on the eve of the 215th Anniversary of the death of the Right Excellent Garifuna Joseph Chatoyer Paramount Chief of the Black Caribs (Garifunas) and as Cheryl Norales, Ruben Reyes and Milton Guity continue the work started by Roy Cayetano and Dr Jorge Bernardex to preserve the Garifuna language, as Martin Bermudez, Jorge Garifuna, Murphy Valentine and Cesar Arzu continue to take the technological revolution stared by yours truly and my brother Tomas Alberto to new heights, it is evident that we have resurrected the Garifuna Culture in the image of its past glory by reclaiming our history for the sake of our future. A future that in 2011 will bring the Thirtieth Anniversary of the National Garifuna Council of Belize (NGC), the twentieth Anniversary of the First Garifuna Summit Meeting, the Tenth Anniversary of UNESCO’s Proclamation of the Garifuna Language, Music and Dance a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, and we’ll celebrate all these milestones with a return to Yurunein, in support of the Renaissance of the Garifuna Heritage and Culture in St. Vincent and the Grenadines "Yurumein" the Ancestral Homeland of the Garifuna People.

Jose Francisco Avila is the Executive Director of the Garifuna Coalition USA, Inc.

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4 Garifuna organizing, November 11, 2009, The Vincentian
5 [www.everyculture.com](http://www.everyculture.com), Garifuna Americans Science and Technology
JAMES AUGUSTUS ROBERTS
BLACK CARIB CHIEF
OF ROSE BANG
LIVED HERE
7TH FEB 1889 – 27TH MAY 1956

REMEMBRANCE OF UNDERSTANDING

The Garifuna Heritage Foundation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the
Garifuna Coalition USA Inc., the St. Vincent and the Grenadines
Organization of Pennsylvania (SVGOP) and the Garifuna American
Heritage Foundation United Inc., hereby agree that referred to the historic
Garifuna Reunion held between July 18-23, 2009 in St. Vincent and the
Grenadines as now, described as follows:

That the organizations present here will in the future cooperate to promote
the Garifuna Heritage and Culture in parts of the Garifuna Diaspora; and
that they will work together with all other Garifuna brothers and others,
that we will celebrate in practical ways to support the Maintenance of
the Garifuna Heritage and Culture in St. Vincent and the Grenadines
"Yamuna" the Ancestral Homeland of the Garifuna people.

Agreed to at Kingstown, St. Vincent and the Grenadines the 24th day of
March 2009.

Garifuna Coalition USA Inc.

Garifuna American Heritage Foundation United Inc.

Garifuna Heritage Foundation

GARIFUNA
COALITION
USA, INC.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines
July 18 – 23, 2009
Souvenir Book