



*Living the Garifuna
Heritage & Culture*

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Editor

Kindly publish the following Statement.

Secretariat

The Garifuna Heritage Foundation

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STATEMENT FROM THE GARIFUNA HERITAGE FOUNDATION

Whilst the Garifuna Heritage Foundation considers it significant that issues affecting the Garifuna Heritage and Culture are being debated in St. Vincent and the Grenadines outside the month of March, National Heroes and Heritage month, we note, with concern, the negativity emanating from some elements of the current discussions on the issue of Honorary Citizenship for Garifuna in the Diaspora and wish to make the following statement.

The Garifuna Heritage Foundation is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation formed in 2001 to promote the Garifuna Heritage and Culture in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the country where this culture originated. We are not a membership organisation but seek to carry out activities and programmes with the support of and in collaboration with community organizations in SVG, local NGOs, regional and international organizations as well as individuals who are in pursuit of similar objectives. In pursuance of this mandate our organization has throughout the years, with our limited human and financial resources, implemented a programme focussing on public education and public awareness directed to various target audiences particularly the youth. At the local level we have sought, through our National Garifuna Gatherings, to build a network of communities in St. Vincent and the Grenadines where Garifuna people traditionally have significant populations such as Sandy Bay, Owia, Point, Fancy, Rose Hall, Rose Bank and Greggs.

Our Public Education and Training programme has been implemented through various activities such as summer camps for youth, Garifuna cultural dance training programmes, Garifuna language training programmes, workshops in Garifuna History for teachers at the secondary school level, and more recently the organising of National and International Garifuna Conferences involving scholars and activists from the Caribbean, Central and South America, the USA, Canada and Europe.

This programme is intended to provide Vincentians of all walks of life with concrete information from cultural activists as well as researchers in various disciplines impacting on the Garifuna heritage and culture here in SVG. The Conferences are also intended as a forum for Vincentians to interact with visiting Garifuna brothers and sisters from various countries where Garifuna currently reside. This year, 2015, the International Garifuna Conference formed one component of an International Garifuna Summit which included seven (7) other public education events. These events were namely, the establishment of a model Garifuna Village on the grounds of the Carnegie Building (Old Public Library) and Heritage Square; the collaboration with Leiden University to establish a Traditional model village in the National Public Library; organising of Garifuna Music and Medicinal plants workshops; screening of films on the Garifuna Heritage and culture to students of primary and secondary schools and the staging of the First National Garifuna Folk Festival for primary and secondary schools.

These activities could not have been carried out without the support of the private and public sector and we acknowledge the support of the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines in this

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regard through financial and in kind contributions. We consider our work over the years to have contributed to the increased appreciation and support of the Vincentian Public for the Garifuna Heritage and culture. We view this as an indication of our people's growing sense of commitment to providing a greater space within the Vincentian consciousness for the Garifuna Heritage and Culture, a culture which is highly regarded outside of these shores to the extent that it was declared by UNESCO in 2001 as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Mankind.

The Garifuna Heritage Foundation has been building the relationship between the Garifuna in the Diaspora and persons who were born in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and their descendants . In this regard our organization participated in crafting and endorsing the Yurumei Declaration emerging from the Delegates of the 2012 International Garifuna Conference. This Declaration was again endorsed by the Conference Delegates from Garifuna Organizations representing Garifuna from Honduras, Guatemala, USA, Belize and Nicaragua at the March 2015 International Garifuna Conference. It re-affirmed St. Vincent and the Grenadines or Yurumei as the Ancestral Homeland of all Garifuna people. It called for the continued support by the Garifuna people in the Diaspora of the general process of retrieval of the Garifuna Heritage, language and Culture here in St. Vincent and the Grenadines to be specifically implemented through an International Garifuna Research Centre . It supported the Call for Reparations for the Garifuna people as a result of the genocidal suffering including the expulsion of 1797 and it called for the recognition, protection and preservation of the Island of Balliceaux as a sacred Heritage site for the use of future generations.

The issue of Honorary Citizenship or full Citizenship of Garifuna from the Diaspora in St. Vincent and the Grenadines is not one that was ventilated by the delegates during discussions at any of our International Conferences. That being said, it does not exclude its consideration at any point in time although it is an issue that is delicate and complex.

The Garifuna people in the diaspora reside in several distinct political nation states in Central America . A significant number have migrated and established vibrant communities in the USA. The Garifuna in the Diaspora have yet to determine among themselves a consensual mechanism for identifying a common leadership and overarching authoritative voice. At the 2015 International Garifuna Summit , the issue of the Garifuna Nation was addressed to a limited extent to seek to clarify elements of the concept. There was no intention to develop a leadership structure. This attempt to develop a global Garifuna Leadership structure has been made at various times, the most recent being 2014 when a Garifuna Nation Summit was held in New York , USA.

There is still much work to be done in this regard before a concrete result can emerge in future to determine whether there will be any unified organization speaking for all Garifuna people. This consensual voice may be required if the dialogue on Honorary Citizenship is to take place on a constructive basis between representatives of the Government and people of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and the Garifuna in the Diaspora as a whole.

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At the local level the work of building the appreciation , understanding and information on the Garifuna Heritage and Culture, its historical significance and the elements of the culture which can be embraced by Vincentians in the ongoing process of building a Vincentian identity is slowly taking shape. There is a relative lack of systematic information locally on the Garifuna language, music , dance, spirituality and other aspects of the culture poses a very serious challenge. There is also the need for the Educational Curriculum to specifically include teaching of Garifuna history. The absence to date of a definitive Vincentian History textbook for students as well as the general public have often been cited as weaknesses which need to be addressed.

Our organization is still in the process of seeking support for the re-establishment of our International Garifuna Research and Documentation Centre (IGRC) which commenced operations in 2012 but which had to be discontinued due to financial constraints. This Centre was intended to spearhead more educational programmes on the Garifuna Heritage and Culture at the local level. We applaud the efforts of other organizations such as community based organizations in Fancy, Greggs and Rosehall as well as the YUGACURE organization from USA in carrying out programmes in SVG to support the Garifuna Heritage and Cultural retrieval process.

The recognition of Paramount Chief Joseph Chatoyer as the First National Hero and the Call for Reparations by the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines were critical steps and have enabled the building of a greater level of awareness of the Garifuna Heritage and Culture than hitherto. Notwithstanding, the leap of consciousness from this level to one that will be required for the extension of what is normally perceived as a birthright – i.e citizenship- should not be underestimated. It would be very unfortunate if the fallout from the current debate on Honorary Citizenship would lead to a reversal of the hard work done by many persons and organisations over the years to build the appreciation for and knowledge of the Garifuna Heritage and culture. If this is replaced by resentment on the part of some Vincentians of their Garifuna Brothers and sisters in the diaspora, or an unwillingness by others to become involved in the process of promoting the Garifuna Heritage and Culture in SVG , then that would be detrimental to the ongoing relationship between our peoples .

The issue of Honorary Citizenship or full citizenship for persons from the Garifuna Diaspora not presently entitled, is one which first and foremost concerns Vincentians as current holders of this sacred birthright. It will be guided principally by the Laws of St. Vincent and the Grenadines and changes to Citizenship can be made changes to the existing laws and by the Vincentian Lawmakers under whose responsibility it falls to determine. Persons from the Garifuna Diaspora who are not Vincentians can express opinions and ideas, however these opinions and ideas at this point in time will more than likely not be emerging from one common, consensual position of all people in the Garifuna Diaspora. It is more important that a strategy be outlined for the Vincentian public to be fully engaged in the development and approval of any proposal which affects the conveying of such citizenship. Any approach which seeks to force the issue will, in our view, be counterproductive.

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Above all , we urge that discussions on the issue be given the seriousness they deserves in all its complexity. In the context of an upcoming General Elections, discussions of such a nature could be impacted by the divisiveness of party politics. We also urge that a long term approach be adopted, within which proposals for strengthening the educational and awareness programmes on the Garifuna Heritage and culture at the local level be included for development and implementation and that the approach of dialogue and consensus building be strategically employed.

St. Vincent and the Grenadines is a signatory to the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and therefore the rights and obligations established within this International Instrument should form an important part of the context of our national approach to indigenous issues in SVG. This Declaration does not directly address the issue of Honorary citizenship for indigenous persons not born in the State, however it mandates signatories to develop and implement extensive measures affecting a broad range of issues impacting positively on indigenous people. Although some progress has been made, these rights and obligations are still to be fully implemented within SVG and if implemented would positively impact upon Garifuna people in the diaspora.

The Garifuna Heritage Foundation is in the process of becoming part of a recently formed Alliance of Central American organizations. This Alliance , the Alliance of Afrodescendants, Garifuna and Creoles of Central America (AAGACREC) has as one of its main objectives the promotion of the Garifuna Heritage and Culture in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. This would result in the strengthening of the relationship between the Central American organizations representing Garifuna people and Vincentians.

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