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Restoring dignity to the Caribs of Yurumein

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Yurumein– Homeland. The Caribs of St Vincent

50 minutes, colour DVD documentary directed and produced by Andrea E. Leland, 2014.

Yurumein– Homeland. The Caribs of St Vincent (hereafter *Yurumein – Homeland*) is a documentary film that interrogates Caribness among Vincentians of indigenous lineage. In 1998, producer Andrea E. Leland had already teamed up with Kathy L. Berger to present *The Garifuna Journey*, a first-voice documentary film which can safely be considered the prequel to this film. Both *The Garifuna Journey* and *Yurumein – Homeland* are timely pieces of work, but *Yurumein – Homeland* stands out particularly because it is the first documentary to feature the Caribs in St Vincent. Other foregoing videos (Peter "Jack" Arzu's *The cave of the Hiyuruwa: The time is now* [2011], Ben Petersen's *A story about the Garifuna* [2012]) concentrated solely on the Garinagu (plural for Garifuna in the Garifuna language) in Central America or in the North American diaspora. The Central American Garinagu are considered the torchbearers of the heritage language and culture of a people who resisted British dominion to the point of suffering expulsion from Yurumein, the territory their ascendants had occupied well before the arrival of European explorers.

Leland could not have chosen a better title for her documentary. St Vincent was originally called *Iouloúmain* (Yurumein) in the language of the Caribs (Breton 1667: 413). In the documentary, we see scenes that any Vincentian, urban and rural, Carib and non-Carib, can identify with or recognize as authentically Vincentian. People in the capital, Kingstown, are going about their usual business. Footage from the rural districts like Clare Valley or Sandy Bay depicts scenes of outdoor washing, fishing, boat-building, cricket, returning from labouring on the land, transporting bananas to the boxing plant, church-going, going to Spiritual Baptist "prayers", etc.

The documentary restores dignity to the Caribs who remained in St Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG). Whereas *The Garifuna Journey* presented the narratives of the Garifuna, the descendants of the Vincentian Caribs who were exiled by the English to Central America, *Yurumein – Homeland* explores the Vincentian side of the story giving a voice to descendants of Caribs in St Vincent. Through their testimonies, some of the questions we obtain answers to in part are: what were the experiences of the natives of St Vincent whose ancestors had defiantly refused to allow themselves to be enslaved and had stalwartly defended the land against English attempts to acquire it for large-

scale sugar production? Are the Vincentian Caribs aware of their history? What have they retained from the narratives that have circulated about them? In *The Garifuna Journey* we learn that the Garifuna had never been enslaved: have the Vincentian Caribs come to terms with this, and can they fathom the significance of this to their Central American brethren? In actual fact, what we hear resounding from the testimonies in *Yurumein – Homeland* are the narratives of the aggressor and the image the latter sought to bestow on them: warlike, cannibals, stupid, rebellious, savages...

Yurumein – Homeland is a story of a people seeking their roots and identity. In the documentary, we accompany Dr Cadrin Gill, a Carib descendant who practises medicine in Los Angeles, on his return to Sandy Bay in the Carib Country of St Vincent after a long absence. His is as much a journey of reconnection with his past as it is of seeking knowledge about his heritage. Other Vincentian collaborators share their experiences while going about their usual, daily or weekly business. For instance, Odette Sutherland continues her outdoor laundry chore as she reflects on what she, as a Carib, learnt about her own people at school and in books. Nixon Lewis, a tailor by profession and self-made historian, tailors his fabric as he provides historical facts about the expropriation of Carib lands by the English as early as 1773 and as he adds a poignant testimony of growing up in SVG as a Carib.

Some of the interviewees have internalized a discourse of self-degradation. But filmmaker Leland has also managed to obtain testimonies from Caribs who claim the right to self-ascription. For instance, Ms Sutherland sees the Caribs as independent and hardworking throughout their history despite not being recognized as a people worthy of the respect of fellow Vincentians. Notwithstanding, in parallel with this discourse of self-esteem, we are forced to see how deeply the daggers of humiliation have sunk and how deeply the misconceptions have permeated into the discourse of the Caribs themselves: Dr Gill reminisces that during his youth it was not fashionable to self-identify as a Carib. Ms Sutherland claims that it was an ordeal for a Carib to go “in town”, and Augustine “Sardo” Sutherland’s concluding words sound like an attempt to convince himself that his people have a proud past and that the role they play in modern societies is legitimate and worthy of respect: “I feel proud. People love the dance. The Caribs weren’t cannibals. They are professional people. I hope people see it different now.”

Needless to say, Vincentian Caribs still experience discrimination and intolerance. Mr Sutherland relates how his act of wearing Carib traditional attire is considered strange by members of the Vincentian community. Mr Lewis’ teenaged son tells us that he is still singled out and scorned as a Carib. In SVG, members of the Carib community are yet miles away from being viewed in a positive light. Even today, debates hardly transcend questions of race, ethnicity and heritage. We cannot help but echo Dr Gill’s criticism that little has been done to commemorate Carib resistance in SVG in contrast with the efforts made to celebrate the memory of the Englishmen who worked in SVG for the interest of the Crown.

One would have thought that the entry of Montgomery Daniel in the Vincentian House of Parliament in March 2001 would have served, among other things, to destigmatize Caribs. On several occasions, the parliamentarian has had to defend his Carib origins in contexts of socio-political conflict. On one such occasion, he was taunted for being irresolute in the agricultural ministry, his portfolio at the time. One protestor fired him comments about his Carib origins to which he responded with vehemence that he is indeed of Carib descent, that he knows his origins and that he did not come to SVG either by boat in chains or for the indentured labour system (IWNSVG 2011). These comments pierce through the core fabric of Vincentian society with its history of Carib resistance to the Europeans, plantation slavery and, after the abolition of slavery, the indentured labour system in which contract workers from Madeira and India participated.

It struck me, while watching the documentary, that the Vincentian Caribs appear to be very much attached to the outward signs of Caribness. The film opens with individuals proclaiming their Caribness. Jimmy “Bronzelove” François relates that he discovered that he was of Carib ancestry in his adulthood, and he reviews his physical features for confirmation: “a large forehead, a square nose,” he says. Leon “Banjo man” Nero accompanies his declaration of being Carib with the gesture of taking off his hat to display his hair type and texture. The interviewer comments “I can see that”. One school-boy wittily expounds his Carib origins: “My great-great-great-grandfather was a Carib, [...] look at my Carib hair, you can see the Carib, the Garifuna type”, unambiguously reminding us of the African component in Vincentian Caribs. Rochefort (1665: 252) had written: “The hair of the *Caribbians* is not curl’d or frizzled, as that of the *Moors*, but streight [sic] and long, as those of the *Maldiveses* [sic]”.

And as I reflect on this issue, I ask myself whether or not this attachment to what makes an individual Carib, physically, is the result of century-old attempts to rid Caribs of their heritage and culture. The testimonies bear witness to the lasting impact the colonialist discourse has had with respect to the racialist descriptions of the Caribs and their descendants, and, the attempts to distinguish them from the Africans, who according to Young (1795: xli) had “[usurped] the Indian name of Caribs”. In light of these considerations, it would appear that the Vincentian Caribs have inherited only the phenotype of Caribness. With the return of Central American Garinagu to SVG on pilgrimage journeys, the way has been paved for retrieving the heritage which they have kept alive, despite the hostile ecology in Central America where their ancestors were exiled to in 1797. More than 200 years later, they have initiated sacred journeys back to their ancestral land, Yurumein, and to Balliceaux, where the Caribs were first held captives by the British as they contemplated a destination to which they could be exiled. The first such journey made by a Belizean contingent seeking to reconnect with the spirit of their ancestors and with Vincentian brethren must have been a cruel awakening to the harsh reality that there is very little Garifunanness left in SVG, be it language, dance, ritual, music or other cultural

traits. Lucia Ellis' anguish, beautifully captured in *Yurumein – Homeland* and shown in the still below as she arrives on the shores of Balliceaux, needs no words.



<http://www.cid.mimoona.com/Projects/477>

The painful words of Ashanty Crisanto Peralta, member of the National Garifuna Folkloric Ballet of Honduras featured in the documentary, on the event of their pilgrimage journey to St Vincent and Balliceaux in 2005 sums it up: “This is the birthplace of Carib culture. What happened? [...] We, Garifuna, who were exiled to the Americas with all the cultural richness, carried everything away.” With these words come the realization that the Central America Garinagu are better able to re-enact Garifunanness in their ancestral land, Yurumein. Ashanty Crisanto Peralta concludes: “We have to come back to St Vincent to teach what our ancestors taught us” and Armando Crisanto Melendez exhorts the crowd who gathered in Kingstown to view the performance of the Garifuna ballet troupe he founded: “Don’t forget your culture. If you lose your culture, you lose your identity.” Despite the ostensible loss in transmission of Carib culture to Carib in SVG, in actual fact, some syncretism must have taken place during the pre-colonial period. Indeed, very few Vincentians think of such culinary delights as the *bam-bam* (or cassava bread), the *titiri* (or *tritri*) cake, the *madongo* bake (a baked or fried speciality made from arrowroot flour) or the *doukuna* (made essentially from grated sweet potatoes and spices wrapped in banana leaf and boiled) as being typically Carib, considering these as part of Vincentian heritage instead.

The film reveals the nostalgia, the emotions and the spiritual connection the Central American Garinagu feel with their ancestors as they perform rites

on Balliceaux. It is in this sense that I find it very significant that Anthony Theobalds, the representative from the Ministry of Culture, reminded those Vincentians who joined the Central American Garinagu to Balliceaux that the trip was not a picnic, but that its aim was to remember, mourn and commemorate. Dr Gill refers to Balliceaux as “sacred ground for [the Caribs]”. Towards the end of the documentary, Leland shares with viewers that Balliceaux is up for sale on the Internet. How should viewers process this statement considering the spiritual significance Balliceaux holds for the Caribs and their longing to continue their quest for repair?

On a linguistic level, *Yurumein – Homeland* is of interest to scholars. When speaking of the Carib /kæ'rɪb/, the majority of the interviewees use the palatalized variant of the velar stop /k/ producing /kjæ'rɪb/. The apostrophe indicates where the word is actually stressed. Therefore, depending on the interplay between stress and tone in speakers' productions, one may hear either /kjæ'rɪb/ or /,kjæ'rɪb/: the latter tends to have secondary stress on the first syllable (marked by the symbol ,) and primary stress on the final syllable. A palatalized consonant like /k/ followed by a non-back vowel like /æ/, is pronounced as though there is a 'y' following, transcribed /kj/ in phonology. Here, we recognize a phonological feature which is pervasive in the English-speaking Caribbean but also in other English dialect countries such as Ireland. According to Harris et al. (1986), the feature was observed among speakers in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its transfer to the colonies is therefore not altogether surprising.

Of phonological interest also is the varying intonational patterns one can observe in the pronunciation of “Garifuna”. Whereas Central Americans tend to put stress on the second syllable (Ga'rifuna), Vincentians put a secondary stress on the first syllable, and primary stress on the penultimate syllable (Gari'funa). The former variant is reminiscent of the form Ka'rif (with syllable-final stress) still in use today by the older generation of Vincentian Caribs in the Carib Country to refer to themselves. The link between “Karif” and “Garifuna” still needs to be investigated. Conzemius (1928: 184) makes mention of the term “Garif” which he suggests is simply the shortened form of Garifuna. Elsewhere, Adams (2015: 3) posits Mandinga and Islamic origins for the names Garinagu and Garifuna. Whatever the case may be, and as Dr Edgar Adams rightly informs us in Leland's present work, the term Garifuna has only recently entered the vocabulary of Vincentians. However, it is worth noting that the pronunciation observed in St Vincent may be due to a wider, more generalized tendency among Vincentians to prefer primary stress on the third syllable; cf. telephone in British Englishes vs tele'phone in Vincentian English.

The choice made by Leland to give a voice to the laypeople like Ms Sutherland, Mr Nero, Mr Sutherland and Mr Lewis, the hobbyist historian, but also to a reputable historian, Dr Adams, must be commended as it adds a measurable balance of perspectives. In stark contrast to Dr Gill's “I do not believe [Columbus] ever set foot here” we hear the seasoned historian's “we

believe...”. Likewise, with reference to the 1797 Carib exile, trenchant words like “ethnic cleansing”, “holocaust”, “genocide” used by the nation’s Prime Minister at the 2005 National Heroes Day celebration in honour of Chatoyer, the Paramount Carib Chief who was slain by the English army on March 14th, 1795, contrast with Dr Adams’ choice of the word “expulsion”. The diversity of viewpoints can be positioned against the African proverb Leland cites towards the end of the documentary: “Until lions have their historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter”, which I find is aptly chosen.

For researchers with interests in Cultural Studies, Sociolinguistics and Anthropology in the Caribbean, *Yurumein – Homeland* is a significant, pioneering and useful project. But educators in SVG should ensure that children throughout the nation view this documentary with some complementary input from teachers of history. Educators can draw on works by Adams (2002; 2007), Fraser (2002), Gullick (1985), and Hulme and Whitehead (1992). *Yurumein – Homeland* is also a must-see for the wider Vincentian public for its historical relevance and for the way Andrea E. Leland has been able to produce a story full of testimonies, scenes and shots that are evocative of post-colonial SVG.

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