

WELCOME HOME, BALLICEAUX!

By

Unity Labour Party

On March 4, 2025, the quiet publication of a second declaration in the *Government Gazette* heralded a revolutionary act of nationalism, historical reclamation and justice: The Government of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines had acquired the island of Balliceaux, and returned that sacred site of tragedy and triumph to the Vincentian people.

This is no small feat. From the date of the exile and imprisonment of Garifuna warriors and their families on Balliceaux almost 230 years ago, the island has been a possession of foreigners. In the four and a half decades since Saint Vincent and the Grenadines reclaimed our independence from the British, Balliceaux has been a stubbornly visceral reminder of the powerful lingering legacies of colonial exploitation and injustice. Our persistent calls for reparatory justice for the genocide committed against our indigenous people are anchored in the colonial killing of almost 2,500 Garifuna people on Balliceaux.

When the British arrived in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, they immediately recognized the Kalinago and the Garifuna (whom they called the “Yellow Charibes” or the “Black Charibes,” respectively) as a threat to the money-making potential of our country, and set about to eliminate them.

The effort to eliminate the Garifuna was earnestly led by Sir William Young. Young was a British colonial administrator, owner of enslaved Africans, and the president of a commission whose job was to sell lands in Grenada, Tobago, Dominica, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Long before wars with the Garifuna and the ultimate genocide, Young zeroed in on the fact that the existence of the Garifuna on Saint Vincent were an impediment to his ultimate purpose: to sell their land. Writing to London in 1765 – three decades before exile to Balliceaux – Young complained “*That the Charaibs are altogether uncivilized, and the Blacks particularly of an idle untractable disposition,*” that their scattered villages “*interfere much with the laying out of plantations for sale*” and that the course of action that would be “*the safest and most for advantage of the colony*” would be to “*offering at the same time other lands in Bequia, where they cannot be hurtful, in lieu of those they quit; but not permitting them to take up any land again in any other part of St. Vincent’s.*”

Even though Young’s initial effort to move the Garifuna to Bequia was overruled because the island lacked rivers and fresh water, he never abandoned his idea of forced relocation of the true owners of Vincentian patrimony. Indeed, it is ironic that, in 1765, Bequia was deemed too inhospitable to the Garifuna, but that by 1796, the colonial powers were willing to imprison humans on the far more desolate island of Balliceaux.

Six years after his original relocation plan failed, Young proposed a plan to “*reduce [the Garifuna] to obedience*” by sending a “*sufficient military force*” to build roads through

Garifuna land, relegating them to “*lands for their subsistence,*” and “*to sell the remainder.*”

Our history records that that, for years, the Garifuna consistently and creatively resisted this British attempt to “*reduce them to obedience,*” and that the resistance led to the outbreak of the so-called Second Carib War. William Young realized that the unconquerable spirit of the Garifuna would resist any attempt at colonial subjugation. Recognizing that the Garifuna would not peacefully succumb to British intimidation, or accommodate themselves to white supremacy, Young presented London with a stark choice:

“[We] declare the sole alternative to be that the British planters, or the Black Charaibs, must be removed from off the island of St. Vincent’s.”

This is where Balliceaux enters the national consciousness. The colonial government in Saint Vincent and the planters who coveted Garifuna land decided to exile the indigenous inhabitants of this island. British historian Charles Shephard records that “*inhabitants held a general meeting with the Governor to discuss the measures proper to be adopted towards the Caribs, when it was proposed that the small island of Balliceaux... should be appropriated for their temporary reception.*”

The British tried to move the Garifuna to Balliceaux, with promises that “*they would be supplied with a sufficient quantity of provisions and water for their support, and in their ultimate removal they would be furnished with every convenience necessary and essential to their future existence.*” Again, our ancestors resisted.

The son of our slain national hero Joseph Chatoyer was among those who rebelled against this plan of forced relocation. When soldiers arrived at his village to “persuade the Caribs to submit,” young Chatoyer led the villagers into the forests around Grand Sable. The Garifuna again took up arms, and when a platoon of 30 British soldiers went to subjugate them, they met 200 armed Garifuna warriors, who declared “*that they **never** would submit to the English, and that they did not revolt so much from the prospect of death as from the idea of submission.*”

These warriors, and hundreds more like them, were all heroes in the anticolonial and liberation struggles that forged the indomitable Vincentian spirit of resilience and resistance. That spirit survived genocide, and has survived through the centuries, as a bequeathment of the Garifuna to their modern-day descendants here in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

The British took up a policy of surrounding Garifuna villages with military personnel and starving the inhabitants into submission. They would then capture these hungry and weakened people and forcibly relocate them to Balliceaux. A British doctor named Dickenson noted that the majority of the Garifuna were in an “*emaciated state*” when they arrived – weakened and susceptible to disease. Dr. Dickenson also observed that Balliceaux was inhospitable to life, and that the British promises of adequate food were false. Dr. Dickenson bluntly stated that the island was

“by no means favorable to the comfort and convenience of its new inhabitants, who regard the luxury of immersion in fresh water, an indispensable necessary of

Health. Neither does Baliseau afford those fruits and vegetables which constitute a principal part of the diet of these people.”

What happened next was a crime against humanity. Dr. Dickenson tallies 2,412 deaths among the so-called Charibes over five months of imprisonment on Balliceaux:

12 in August
100 in September
600 in October
750 in November; and
950 in December

The blood of those approximately 2,412 Garifuna victims still stains the soil of Balliceaux today, and their bones litter the landscape of what is, essentially, a mass grave. Their remains were never properly buried or respectfully treated in accordance with indigenous traditions.

The famed Martiniquan writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant connects dispossession of land, and the imposition of the European plantation system in the Caribbean, with “*the erasing of the collective memory*” and attempts to create a “nonhistory” for peoples victimized by colonial oppression.

Glissant observes repeated attempts to “*twist[] the meaning of ... heroic acts and remov[e] [them] from popular memory.*” He asserts that “*any community without a collective consciousness and detached from an awareness of itself*” will not be bound together by collective memory, but rather a “*history [that is] often reduced for us to a chronology of natural events.*” And he urges Caribbean people to ‘re-territorialise’ (re-naturalise) the Caribbean island, which for him is also a historical monument, and a place of memory.

This is the challenge that the ULP has boldly confronted: The heroism and genocide of the Garifuna were being reduced to a sterile chronology of dates, and the mass grave of Garifuna victims was repeatedly peddled as a potential playground for rich foreign investors. Our ability to collectively feel our history, on a visceral level, and a shared and unified experience, was being hindered today, as it was yesterday, by the colonial instinct to value real estate above Vincentian lives, heritage, history and patrimony.

We had to act. On January 2nd 2024, Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves set in train the series of events that led to our acquisition of Balliceaux. The Prime Minister wrote the Chief Surveyor, stating, among other things that:

It is the intention of the Government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines to acquire Balliceaux as a cultural/historic/memorial site from the fee-simple owners as per the law and constitution of St. Vincent and the Grenadines...

The acquisition is grounded on the necessity and desirability of keeping this historic Balliceaux as part of our national patrimony.

That process culminated in the historic acquisition of Balliceaux that the Prime Minister announced in Parliament on March 6th 2025. This acquisition is the latest manifestation of the Unity Labour Party’s unshakeable commitment to honouring our history and local

heroes, fostering a sense of national pride, reclaiming our identity and meaning from centuries of colonial attempts to erase our sense of self. In last week's column, we listed 16 separate initiatives that the ULP government has taken to defend and promote of our patrimony since being elected in 2001. This year, we will consider elevating additional Vincentians to the pantheon of National Heroes, further develop the Chatoyer National Park, and advance the quest to have local historians author a comprehensive history of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Comrade Ralph has also promised to initiate the process of renaming many of our landmarks and villages that were originally named after dishonourable foreign figures from our colonial past.

Under Comrade Ralph's leadership, the ULP has continually viewed our history and culture as ennobling tools to uplift the Vincentian people and further develop our sense of self. The acquisition of Balliceaux as a monument and a place of memory is the latest tangible manifestation of our bold commitment to understand history, to come home to ourselves, and to lift SVG higher.

Welcome home Balliceaux!

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