

Chatoyer's Ladle



This item from the West India Committee's UNESCO inscribed Collection is a unique piece of craftsmanship, made primarily out of the shell of a young coconut with patterning that is apparently unprecedented in Caribbean art. It was presented to the Committee in the early 20th Century by a Mr. MacGregor Frame, a member of the Committee. It is said to date from 1773 and to once have belonged to Joseph Chatoyer himself, bearing the inscription *Chatoyer 1773* on its silver rim. The exact provenance of the item is unknown; but there are several points which nevertheless support its link with the Paramount Chief of the Garinagu.

The patterns on the bowl, whilst unique in the Caribbean, do bear a resemblance to motifs in African art, specifically that of Benin art, seen on the famous Benin-bronzes. This would lend credence to the belief that the Garinagu's ancestors were from the Bight of Benin. The handle is likely a later addition, and the item may have been a cup before being adapted to become



a ladle. Chatoyer may have drunk punch and served it to European guests, the drink being popular in the Caribbean since the 1660s. There was a fashion in the late 18th and early 19th centuries for engraved punch ladles like this one. What sets this item apart from other such ladles made from coconuts, is that they were normally carved in Europe, and, as such, feature European motifs and patterns. The clearly non-European artwork again gives credence to a Garifunan origin. Some believed at the time that a coconut, a then exotic curiosity, had special properties that would protect those who drank from it from poisons.

It is quite possible that the item was gifted to the British, maybe even Colonel Dalrymple himself, on the signing of the Treaty between the British and the Garinagu at the end of the first Carib War, hence the date on the rim. The exchanging of gifts during a negotiation, or at the signing of a treaty, has occurred throughout human history. Although there are still questions to be asked about the ladle, which may never now be answered, it is nevertheless the only artefact in existence associated with Joseph Chatoyer.

