



PUNCH LADLE OF
CHATOYER, THE CARIB CHIEF

PRESENTED TO
THE WEST INDIA COMMITTEE
BY

Chatoyer & the Garinagu: A story of survival

by David A.J. Wells

Introduction

The Caribbean is the birthplace of some of the most intriguing examples of human integration in the world. The story of the Garinagu is perhaps the most extraordinary. Although now largely separated from their homeland, St. Vincent, Garinagu people are still extant in a number of countries and are recognised by their distinctive language, music, food and dance. They are also known to history as the Black Caribs or the Garifuna. (Garifuna is the name of their language and also the singular for a member of the Garinagu). Their story forms a part of the history of the modern nation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, who recognise the most famous member of the tribe, and at one time their Paramount Chief, as the country's first, and currently only, national hero - Joseph Chatoyer.

The story of the Garinagu is not a happy one; it is a story of war, with the Garinagu coming into conflict with the island's indigenous Caribs, with whom they originally integrated, to clashes with French forces from Martinique and, eventually, three short wars with the British. In these three conflicts the Garinagu were aided by their former adversaries, the French, with whom they had established a good relationship. These were wars that the Garinagu largely fought to secure their lands, a mission that ultimately proved to be a failure.

This story also features not one but two exiles: firstly of the Garinagu's African ancestors from their homelands and secondly, the exile of the tribe over two centuries later from St. Vincent, in which this creole tribe evolved, to other shores. As in all such exiles, there was much suffering and death on the way. These exiles had a new creolised culture, with influences from Africa, the Americas and Europe. The resilience of this culture allowed it to thrive on St. Vincent for approximately 150 years before the second exile. This forced migration, though again filled with pain and suffering, saw the Garinagu thrive in central America, rebuilding their numbers and culture, and contributing significantly to many of the modern nations in that region of the world, most notably Honduras and Belize.

The figure of Joseph Chatoyer is arguably a controversial one. Although little is really known of his life, it is evident that he was a leader, indeed arguably the chief leader, amongst his people for over 20 years. In many respects, he was a dichotomy: to some he fought for his people and their lands, to others he broke treaties signed in good faith and betrayed those who considered themselves his friends. He is viewed as a great liberator against colonial repression, and yet, like his brother, also appears to have owned slaves that worked his cotton plantation.

In the West India Committee collection is a unique artefact that was donated to the charity over a hundred years ago, and is the only item attributed to Chatoyer. It reflects the blend of styles and cultures that gave birth to the Garinagu, whilst being adapted to Western taste. It is believed to have been presented by Chatoyer himself to the British Army in 1773 at the signing of a peace treaty. This punch ladle, made out of thin baby coconut shell, is the only surviving example of pre-exile Garinagu art, making it of global importance and relevance, not only to the nation of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, but to those countries around the world where the Garinagu now live. We hope that this work provides a better knowledge and understanding of this unique culture and its history.