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# Chatoyer, Joseph

(1795–), paramount chief of the Caribs,

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who was killed in battle on 15 March 1795, has the honor of being the first national hero of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, a status conferred on him posthumously on 14 March 2002. This recognition reflects the shift from villain to hero that came with a reassessment of colonial symbols following the country's attainment of independence in 1979.

The Caribs left no written records, so tales of their lives and struggles with the European colonizers came from their enemies. In developing a profile of Chatoyer one must depend on the records and writings of those who saw him as spearheading the efforts to thwart their colonization ambitions. The two main sources of information on Chatoyer have been Sir William Young's *An Account of the Black Charaibs in the Island of St. Vincent's* (1795) and Charles Shephard's *An Historical Account of the Island of St. Vincent* (1831). Sir William Young, whose papers formed the basis of the account of the black Caribs that was written by his son, also called Sir William, was a plantation owner in St. Vincent and also a colonial official in charge of the disposal of Carib lands following the British conquest of St. Vincent in 1763. Charles Shephard, on the other hand, acknowledges upfront that he was writing on behalf of gentlemen involved in the war who wanted the records of their involvement preserved.

There is no doubt from the accounts of these two persons and from other colonial officials that they regarded Chatoyer as a pivotal figure who obstructed their goal of acquiring land for the cultivation of sugarcane. Shephard (1977) described Chatoyer as "ruthless and sanguinary" (p. 67) with "cruelty rather than courage" depicting him (p. 74). Sir William Young, recognizing the central role he was playing as military strategist and coordinator of resistance by the Caribs, attached a great deal of importance to him. In fact, the only depiction we have of Chatoyer is from a painting by Antonio Brunias, an Italian painter who seemed to have been invited to St. Vincent by Sir William Young. The younger Sir William, the author, who inherited his father's estates, took note of "the most flattering attentions and hospitality" (Young, 1971, p. 107) that his father gave to Chatoyer, the Carib chief, who on occasion found accommodation at his villa and on his estates, even dining there on occasion.

Chatoyer first appeared in the historical records in 1768, when as chief of the Grand Sable estate he led Carib resistance to efforts by the British to undertake a survey of their land as a prerequisite to occupying those lands. Chatoyer stands out as a military strategist and diplomat who appeared to have had an understanding of the geopolitics of those times. He played on the French-British antagonisms of the latter part of the eighteenth century and sought French assistance in the struggle against the British, whom he considered the greater threat to the occupation of their land. The French recognized the skills of Chatoyer and were prepared to allow their soldiers to fight under his leadership in their own battles with the British. In the struggles in 1778–1779 between the British and the French as part

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of the American War of Independence, Chatoyer played a leading role coordinating the joint efforts of the French and Caribs and was involved in efforts to renegotiate the 1773 British-Carib treaty following the war.

Chatoyer died in the struggle against the British in 1795. His death has been depicted as the result of a duel with a British major, Alexander Leith, whose remains lie in the Anglican Cathedral in Kingstown. This account lacks credibility and was likely to have been part of a psychological battle against the Caribs, since the Caribs fought mainly with guerrilla tactics and avoided close encounters. What appeared most likely as pointed to by other accounts, including a report from the governor, was that he fell victim to an ambush on the early morning of 15 March at Dorsetshire Hill, where an obelisk now marks the spot and the occasion.

The struggle between the British and the Caribs was a prolonged one that started after the British acquisition of the island. Chatoyer was a leading figure in that struggle until his death in the second Carib War in 1795. The earliest recognition given to him was in 1822, when he was the subject of a play, *The Drama of King Shotaway*, written by William Brown, who is regarded as the father of black theater in New York. Unfortunately, only the playbill survives. It describes the play as being "Founded on facts taken from the Insurrection of the Caravs in the Island of St. Vincent." Brown, who, it appears, wanted to record the heroic leadership of Chatoyer, is believed to have been a black Carib who had participated in the war and escaped on a vessel leaving St. Vincent.

Chatoyer was a black Carib (Garifuna), a people born from a mixture of the indigenous yellow Caribs and African slaves. It is his leadership in the struggle to recover the independence of a country handed to the British without their consent that led to his elevation as national hero, a distinction also celebrated by the Garifuna people in Central America who were descendants of black Caribs who were exiled to Ruatan, an island off Honduras, in 1797. This was part of a quest by Vincentians to recover their history that had previously been told from the point of view of the European colonizers.

[ See also Brown, William Alexander .]

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**See also**

Brown, William Alexander <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-50944>>