

**The Temne Reunion
A Long-Separated Family
Comes Back Together After 250 Years**

A small group of people on the island of Carriacou in the Caribbean nation of Grenada still identify with the Temne tribe of Sierra Leone. They still call themselves “Temnes,” and they celebrate their heritage with a Temne song, dance, and drum routine handed down for centuries. Several times a year they proudly display these vestiges of their African past as part of a dramatic traditional performance called the “Big Drum Dance.”

Sierra Leone Temnes and Carriacou Temnes will come together at an historic Reunion in Carriacou between September 27th and 30th. The Grenadian Government and the Carriacou community will welcome their African guests, and share the history and culture that bind this family together despite the vast space and time that have separated them. To our knowledge, this Temne Reunion is unique. As far as we know, no family reconnection quite this specific has ever happened in the Caribbean before.

Sierra Leonean dignitaries may also attend the Reunion, including ambassadors, cabinet ministers, paramount chiefs, and possibly even Sierra Leone’s President Earnest Bai Koroma. President Koroma speaks Temne and hails from the part of Sierra Leone where the Temne people predominate.

This “Reunion” is only possible because a tiny community on a small island in the West Indies has preserved the memory of its African roots *and* elements of its African culture for more than 250 years.

The Connection

Folklorists have known about the Carriacou Temnes since the 1950s, but no one paid attention to their importance for modern Sierra Leoneans until 2011 when three scholars went to Carriacou to witness the vestiges of Temne heritage on that island first-hand, and to find out if the modern Carriacou Temnes were interested in meeting with their long-lost family in Africa. The researchers were Angus Martin, a Grenadian-American historian who served in the Peace Corps in Sierra Leone; Joseph Opala, the historian who identified the Sierra Leone’s connection to the Gullah people in South Carolina and Georgia; and Cynthia Schmidt, the American ethnomusicologist who worked with Opala to identify an ancient Mende song from Sierra Leone still sung by a Gullah family in coastal Georgia.

Soon after landing on Carriacou, the researchers were surprised when local people took them to a small, one-room museum intended to highlight their island’s cultural heritage. They found an exhibit on Bai Bureh, the famous Temne king who led the war against the British annexation of the Sierra Leone interior in 1898, and who is still a national hero in Sierra Leone today. In the age of the internet, some Carriacouans had apparently Googled “Temne” and discovered Bai Bureh. And given their pride in their Temne heritage, they took the famous king as their own hero too, even though they are separated from Sierra Leone by hundreds of years and thousands of miles.

Historical Background

When slavery ended on Carriacou in 1834, the British slave owners quickly left the island as their cotton and sugar plantations were no longer profitable. The former slaves were then left on an isolated island only 7 miles long, and for generations their descendants carried on their traditional way of life with little interference from the outside world. Their neighbors on the much bigger island of Grenada, just 27 miles away, regarded them as backward, though, because of their many African traditions. But the Carriacouans cherished their little haven hidden away from the wider world; and by drawing on their island’s resources, they made their living from

fishing, boat building, and trading, and took pride in their self-sufficiency. Even today, they have a strong sense of identity.

The Carriacouans are not the only West Indians who have preserved a good deal of their African heritage, of course. West Indians are known for their rich African-inspired rituals, songs, dances, crafts and storytelling. But the Carriacouans' unusual degree of isolation after slavery ended puts them in a class of their own. Carriacouans still divide their island into "Nine Nations," each claiming descent from a particular African tribe, and each with its own settlement area. During their Big Drum Dance, each "nation" proudly displays the singing, dancing and drumming of its own tribe. The Big Drum Dance is, thus, an ensemble of all the performances preserved by the island's "Nine Nations."

Although scholars knew about Carriacou's Nine Nations, why the Temnes should be included among them has always been a mystery. Most of the Nine Nations – including the Manding, Cromanti (Fante and Ashante), Igbo, and Kongo – represent very large African tribes that numbered in the millions at the time of the Atlantic Slave Trade, and still today. But the Temnes are a small ethnic group by African standards, and when slave traders took away hundreds of thousands belonging to these much larger tribes, only a few thousand Temnes would have suffered that fate. Only a few Temnes should have wound up on Carriacou, and yet that tiny island is the only place in the Americas where the Temnes of Sierra Leone are still well remembered today. Until now, no one had solved that mystery; but working together, Martin and Opala have uncovered the likely origin of the Carriacou Temnes.

Bunce Island and Carriacou

The story begins with Bunce Island, a British slave castle in Sierra Leone operated by the London-based firm of Grant, Oswald & Company. John Mill, one of the firm's associates, bought a large plantation on Carriacou after British naval forces seized the island from the French in 1762. Mill then convinced several other British investors, all affiliated in various ways with Grant, Oswald & Company, to buy plantations there as well. Mill likely arranged advantageous terms for these investors in return for their buying African captives from Bunce Island, which is located in the Temne region of Sierra Leone. Mill and his investor friends were taking advantage of the fact that with the French planters were leaving, and they could buy up much of the island. Martin found that by the 1770s, these investors owned more than half of Carriacou. He also found Grenadian newspaper advertisements of that period announcing the sale of slaves coming directly from Bunce Island, the use of that name strongly suggesting that that specific origin of the captives was important to the buyers.

The researchers, thus, solved the mystery of why people living on a tiny island in the Caribbean still remember a small tribe in West Africa. We can see now that for several decades these two islands -- Bunce Island and Carriacou -- were strongly connected through the slave trade. Grant, Oswald and Company's associates owned plantations on other islands, but because Carriacou is so small, and because the firm's associates controlled so much of it, the Temne slaves they sent to their plantations on Carriacou had a much greater impact there than on the other, much larger islands with much bigger slave populations. Thus, Bunce Island and Carriacou were bound together by the slave castle's location in the Temne area of Sierra Leone and by the *relatively* large number of captives it sent to Carriacou.

But some of the Temne captives sent to Carriacou may actually have been free. When Richard Oswald, a senior partner in the London firm that owned Bunce Island, purchased new lands in Florida in the 1760s, he sent some of the castle's free African workers – mostly Temnes – to help establish his new plantations. Bunce Island's African workers were highly trained craftsmen, and Oswald needed their skills for the initial building. If John Mill – also a part-owner of Bunce Island – used the same strategy on Carriacou, then some of the Temnes he sent from Sierra Leone would have had highly developed skills and some degree of personal freedom. That would have generated a strong impression of the Temne people, both free and enslaved, among the other

plantation slaves already living on Carriacou.

Carriacou Temne Culture

When Martin, Opala, and Schmidt visited Carriacou in 2011, Winston Fleary, the noted Big Drum Dance organizer, took them into the interior of the island where the Temne descendants live today. The researchers were astounded when they realized that Carriacouans still pronounce the name Temne as *Themne* or *Themene*, the ancient names for that tribe that are still remembered in Sierra Leone but no longer used. One can see just from this old-fashioned pronunciation that the Carriacou Temnes have been separated from Sierra Leone for centuries. The researchers were also surprised when they heard a local woman greet her neighbor with the phrase “How de body?” (How is the body?), the standard greeting in Sierra Leone’s Krio language. They were surprised again when an elderly man, hearing that they were there to learn about local history, rushed forward and asked if they wanted to see “the swamp where my great-grandfather planted rice.” The visitors had not mentioned that the Temnes are rice farmers, but the old man clearly associated rice farming with his own heritage as well.

Cynthia Schmidt, the ethnomusicologist on the research team, observed the Temne song, dance, and drumming routine. She noted that the men drum, while the women sing and dance. The lyrics of the song are in Carriacou’s English-based patois, or creole language, and not in Temne; but they contain the repeating phrase: *Themene uman, Themene dansa – oh* (“Temne woman, Temne dancer – oh”). Schmidt noted that this type of ensemble is characteristic of West African music and dance, but she could not make a specific link to Temne music at that time. Later, though, Isatu Smith, now Chairwoman of Sierra Leone’s Monuments and Relics Commission showed a video of the Carriacou Temne performance to elders in several Temne towns in Sierra Leone, and everyone remarked that it was similar to a performance of the women’s Bondo Society in both the rhythm and the dance.

The Temne Reunion

Amadu Massally, a well-known Sierra Leone cultural activist, recently visited Grenada and held talks with that country’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and then went to Sierra Leone soon afterwards to meet with the Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Affairs. Massally found that both governments are enthusiastic about organizing a Temne Reunion in Carriacou.

The Reunion will give Temnes from both countries a chance to meet and share their cultural traditions. The Carriacou Temnes will perform their Big Drum Dance, of course, and take their African guests to the traditional Temne settlement area on their island. They will also give their guests drums and other artifacts for display in Sierra Leone’s National Museum. The Sierra Leone Temnes, for their part, will bring a portrait of Bai Bureh and Temne drums and cultural artifacts for the Carriacou museum. *Both sides of the Temne family also have a traditional ceremony – called sara in Sierra Leone and saraka in Carriacou – in which respect and gratitude are shown to the ancestors. A highlight of the Reunion will take place when Temnes from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean express their gratitude to their common ancestors for helping bring their family back together more than 200 years after slavery divided it.*

The Temne Homecoming

But the Temne Reunion is just the beginning. The Sierra Leone Government will issue an invitation for representatives of the Carriacou Temne community to come on a “Temne Homecoming” to Sierra Leone in 2017. Back in their ancestral homeland, the Carriacou Temnes will call on high-ranking government officials, meet Temne paramount chiefs, tour traditional villages, visit rice farms, sample Temne foods and, most importantly, observe the Bondo Society dance that so resembles their own Big Drum Dance performance. They will also be greeted by ordinary Temne people wherever they go.

Since the Temne Reunion and Temne Homecoming will be such powerful events – inspiring to people not just in Grenada and Sierra Leone, but all over the world – it is important that that these events be preserved in a video documentary. Therefore, we are urging the Grenada Broadcasting Network (GBN) to document the Reunion, and the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) to document the Homecoming. We propose that these two networks collaborate on a documentary of both events drawn from their respective filming. In the end, a one-hour documentary called perhaps “A People Reunited” can be broadcast in both countries, and hopefully in other parts of the world as well.

Looking to the Future

But the strongest impact of the Reunion and Homecoming, and the documentary based on them, will likely be to inspire the other eight African “Nations” on Carriacou to reach out to their own lost families in other African countries – such as the Mandinka in Senegal, the Ashanti in Ghana, the Igbo in Nigeria, and the Congo in the Democratic Republic of the Congo – and plan other Reunions and Homecomings in the future. One can imagine a diaspora festival on Carriacou every year, during which a different African tribe comes to find its lost family in the Caribbean. That could make Carriacou a great center of African diaspora tourism that people from all over the world will want to visit.

Temne Culture on Film

Wedding in a Temne Village - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AKi5XXYjbEM>

Dancing - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xK5uEJnqbM4>

Temne Women Dancing - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDkyccVOsJc>

Singing Temne Songs - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PoX2EEQzdlw>