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CAN WE TALK
Rodney Lives: Resistance, Resilience, Renewal and Unity
By Dr. Aubrey Bonnett

For the past thirteen days ending June 14 during the last seven of which I was present — the WPA in Guyana observed the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the assassination of the late Walter Rodney, distinguished scholar, historian extraordinaire, and political activist. The “Groundings”, as they were called, extended throughout all parts of the country — the capital city Georgetown; the counties of Berbice and Essequibo; regions in the interior, (Kabakaburi); Linden, the bauxite community; and the west and east coasts of Demerara, for example.

Many foreign visitors — some from as far away as Kenya, England, Germany, the USA and Canada — were present, as were many from the Caribbean nations, including Prime Minister Ralph Gonzales who gave the keynote address at the formal opening ceremony at Queen’s College’s auditorium on Friday last — the high school which spawned Rodney. Members of the diplomatic corps, the President of Guyana, Bharatt Jagdeo, Prime Minister Sam Hinds as well as cabinet members also attended some events, as did many locals. However, at some events there were more overseas participants and attendees than locals, and there was scant attendance —especially from Indo-Guyanese.

There were many sad moments; some reflective and poignant; others nostalgic and riveting; yet, all in all, the events pointed to the legacy of Rodney emanating from his short life and the lessons to be learnt from his brutal and untimely death. I would categorize my impressions as such:

Rodney, the Human Face:

I believe his wife Pat stated it best at the formal opening ceremony at Queens College when, standing proudly as the warrior who had successfully and in the face of adversity raised three well adjusted young people — an attorney and human rights specialist, Asha; an entrepreneur, Shaka; and a physician, Kanini — she indicated that Rodney had
not only a public persona but also a private one. She reminded the audience that although they would continue to see Rodney as a martyr he was also human—with all its frailties and imperfections thus embedded. He was a nurturing parent to their children and a dutiful and caring husband, he loved his extended family, was not arrogant or dogmatic, hated lofty titles, and was always willing to reassess and learn from his mistakes. She further urged that the audience and the Guyanese people should avoid the dangers of hero worship and Rodneyism, and not use ideology to demonize others but rather focus on national healing. She ended on the theme that her husband though not perfect remained supreme in her eyes as the best of Caribbean men.

Indeed in her speech she reminded me of Martin Luther King, another martyr and fighter for social justice who was also assassinated and similar sentiments expressed continuously by his courageous wife, Coretta Scott King.

Rodney, the Nationalist and Internationalist:

Ali Mazrui, the noted Africanist and University scholar and administrator, adumbrated this aspect of Rodney’s life best. Professor Mazrui who had sparred intellectually with Rodney at Dar es Salaam and come up short, argued in his short presentation that at home [Guyana] Rodney espoused radical socialism in an effort to fight the scourge of mass poverty and societal elitism; while, abroad, he advocated and practiced active Pan Africanism — much in the tradition of C.L.R James and George Padmore, I may add. Mazrui continued by stating that Rodney’s stature was rooted in how he died and that, indeed, his style of death has contributed to his greatness and the mythology surrounding him. He compared Rodney with President Kennedy and Martin Luther King — political figure and leaders who were also propelled to greatness by their death and whose legacies are intertwined and interconnected with such.

Rodney, the Political Figure:

Many speakers sought to refute the charge of political adventurism, attributed to Rodney by some critics, in his political travail in Guyana and his conflict with the late President Burnham. Local WPA acti-vist and Rodney compatriot Andaiye argued that there was no trace of adventurism in Rodney’s actions, but that he was a committed political activist and great schol-ar, that the two statuses were not mutually exclusive, and that Rodney had morphed his ideology to accommodate both thrusts. As she put it, the other alternative was cowardice, retreat and inaction and, for Rodney, that was worse than death. Rupert Roopnarine, Rodney’s close companion and WPA leader and executive, also took pains at another venue to refute the charge of political adventurism, and urged that Rodney’s ultimate and still unfinished goal was to create a united front against imperialism, and thus called Rodney’s assassination a brutish, militaristic act done by those working to consolidate imperialism and its hegemony. He did concede, however, that Rodney saw himself more as a political organizer, activist and rhetorician, whilst the task of building the organizational and party structure to eventually run the State was left to him. Unfortunately neither envisioned the ravages of pluralistic, ethnic, and other divisive forces manipulated by what he called governing capitalist elite, which has so far negated working class and national Guyanese unity.

Walter the Artist and Sage of Children:

Rodney was always a lover of children and, at the National Library where we saw an Arts exhibition dedicated to him, we were reminded of the two books he wrote for the young in Guyana. His efforts in this regard were designed to use history, historical referents and story telling to acquaint and socialize young people to the cultural vistas of the six peoples which make up Guyana. Kofi and Lashmi were two examples utilized to describe life and struggle in poor Indian villages as well as that of West Africa.
Noted Caribbean author George Lamming opined on that occasion that arts is the oldest language, and that the foundation of all art is that form of language that speaks to an area of feeling that is more dangerous than the cerebral plane. He told the audience that Rodney had asked him to write the foreword for the acclaimed, History of the Guyanese Working Class, and when he inquired of Rodney why he was chosen and not someone more formally trained as an historian — Rodney responded that he felt that he, Lamming — like C.L.R James — was able to interconnect history and fiction in a formidable manner.

Lamming decried the killings, murder and mayhem in Buxton even as he deplored and lamented the assassination of Rodney. Also he stated, unequivocally, that Rodney’s greatest legacy in that regard was an enunciation of a “legacy of courtesy” to which he [Rodney] was committed and which he never suspended even against tremendous and later fatal odds. It was this commitment to that legacy, he believed, that Rodney saw as the only antidote against the virus of intolerance and naked oppression — a theme earlier articulated by Pat Rodney and Professor Horace Campbell, for example. Campbell, an old and close friend of Rodney, and one of the main organizers of the commemorative events, had repeatedly urged that Rodney was not a ‘rum –sipping, soul selling intellectual’, but, in the tradition of true Rastafarianism, committed to the genuine emancipation from mental slavery; and peace, love and unity — especially for the working classes. This had caused him to initiate early Groundings with the “Rastas” in Jamaica, Groundings in which we were now engaged.

Rodney as Granite, the Immovable Force:

It was a hot sticky afternoon on Monday, with young primary school children from Smith Church’s congregational school in attendance, and opposite the church of the abolitionist John Smith, that the defining moments of the events occurred and were symbolized, in my opinion.

With the beating of the drums by Ghanaian born and British percussionist Jo Jo Yates as backdrop, Pat Rodney unveiled the monument and marker on Hadfield Street — soon to become the “Avenue of Liberation”. The stone was drawn from granite to signify enduring strength, ultimate durability and continuity; and the simple marker from jasper made from volcanic rock signifying the eruption of the elements; and agate signifying water; and an ultimate splendorous adornment with black polished pearls. There, Pat Rodney, daughter and human rights attorney Asha, joined Rupert Roopnarine (the other element of the dual charismatic force), Horace Campbell, Andaiye, Alissa Trotz and many young children to plant four young royal palm trees as a further symbol and tribute to the longevity of Rodney.

Plans are underway, with the national government and its parks administration, to expand this monument and marker to be a pivotal part of a national park dedicated to the legacy of Rodney. Incrementally, but steadily, contributors have already begun to pour in.

As I departed for America early on Tuesday morning I was glad that I had visited the homeland once more — albeit under these sad circumstances. I was able to reconnect with friends — old college and high school ones, and just plain chums — long lost. Together, with my spouse, we were able to distribute food hampers and clothing to some of the truly deserving and poor, many of whom — some contend intentionally — were bypassed by the national government and other NGOs in their flood relief efforts, and this was rewardingly Grounding.

But larger questions still linger:
Was Rodney a political adventurist and agitator, as some have urged, bent on using terror to destabilize the state, its apparatus, its leaders and agents? One consumed unfortunately by his own angst?

Did Rodney badly underestimate the powers of the forces of imperialism and neo colonialism and their tenacious power of resilience and “fight back”?

Was he, Rodney, true to all of his familial /paternal responsibilities and the ultimate pro feminist advocate for his time, even unto his untimely death, or was he like Martin Luther King, John F Kennedy, and Linden Forbes Sampson Burnham and such others, prone to human frailties, foibles and missteps? And, if so, does this matter in the larger historical quest for legacy?

Did Forbes Burnham order and engineer Rodney’s assassination or were they both the victims of the actions and machinations of larger global “cold war” forces?

Have the PNC and the PPP learnt, eventually, from the legacy of that sad, unique and tragic moment in Guyanese history — one never fully probed by either party, or are they trying to use this occasion to maximize their political — qua sectoral — advantage at an imminent electoral juncture?

But even as these questions wait for a definitive and uncontested historical answer, there is no doubt that, on June 13, 1980, Guyana lost a national hero whose resistance, resilience, national pleas for renewal and unity still remain goals worth striving for, and still resonate with the Guyanese nation, however failingly. And, as Prime Minister Ralph Gonzales and many of us continue to hope, that in the never ending annals of Caribbean history, Walter Rodney will loom greater in significance than Walter Raleigh.

Rodney Lives!
This holiday season, we present our fabulous Christmas collection. A delightful collection of Gift Baskets.
NOTICE
Please be advised that the next publication of the Caribbean Impact will be on Friday, December 23, 2005. Our scheduled issue for December 16, will be held over for Christmas and the New Year’s Issue will be circulated on January 4, 2006.

December 1, 2005  November 16, 2005  November 01, 2005
October 16, 2005  October 01, 2005  September 16, 2005
September 01, 2005  August 15, 2005  August 1, 2005
July 15, 2005  July 01, 2005  June 15, 2005