

**Address to the 2019 Annual General Meeting of the
Folk Research Centre
Plas Wichès Foklò**

The FRC in a Dynamic Evolving Environment

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Salutation

Monsignor the Honourable Patrick Anthony
Members of the Interim Board of the FRC
Members of the FRC
Distinguished Invited Guests
Members of the Media
Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Morning

Introduction

This address is unique for me in that it is the first time I have been asked to deliver a feature address to a body or an organization of which I am a part (two words, as opposed to one word). I am used to speaking to groups with which I am somewhat disconnected, which allows me to speak with greater freedom and objectivity. Perhaps what made the preparation of this address easier is that my association with the FRC is of very recent vintage, starting after the Mount Pleasant fire. Therefore, I hope to approach this address as somewhat of an insider, but one who has less attachment to the organization than many of you in this room today. Hopefully, this will allow me to speak with a level of empathetic objectivity that you will find to be of some value.

You will note that during the course of this address, I will refer to the organization only by its acronym and not its full title, until I get toward the end of the address. I will explain why I did this later.

In the aftermath of the fire, you the members of the FRC chose the theme 'FRC Vivan' to capture the philosophy that while the building that housed the collections of the organization and served as its headquarters had been destroyed, the spirit of the organization was alive. You wanted to convey to the public that although what had been destroyed was priceless and, in many instances irreplaceable, what remained was what had birthed and kept the organization alive for 45 years – its heart: you the members, together with its soul: the enduring passion to 'research, study, record and promulgate Saint Lucia's rich culture'. So, while the shell had been destroyed, the things that gave the FRC purpose, passion and life were intact. After the fire, FRC Vivan became a rallying cry for the organization.

But what exactly does FRC Vivan mean in our current environment? Is it sufficient for the FRC to be vivan or does it need to be something else, something more? Will being vivan ensure that the FRC and the spirit that drives its membership will endure? Is being vivan enough to ensure the continued growth and development of the organization as the environment around it changes?

Therefore, what I hope to do in this relatively short address is to take a quick look at the FRC and discuss ways in which it might become more vivan – more vibrant, more engaged, more relevant and more appealing to a wide cross section of the population.

The Biggest Strength of the Organization

Being an insider, I am aware that the FRC is in the process of developing a strategic plan to guide its operations in the years ahead. Most strategic plans, and I am absolutely certain that the one being done by Victor Poyotte is no different, usually pivot around a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats or SWOT analysis of the organization.

An obvious strength of the FRC is that it is blessed by the presence of very loyal, committed and knowledgeable members, who have distinguished themselves as competent and devoted custodians of our cultural heritage. These custodians, represented by many of you in this room here today, have helped to keep our culture alive in an environment that has not always been supportive or encouraging.

Most governments appear to believe that support for heritage, both natural and cultural, begins and ends with the award of a subvention or monetary support. They do not understand that it is much more important to provide an enabling environment that encourages respect and support for arts, heritage and culture and which facilitates the growth and development of these essential elements of our society; elements that are just as important as the hard infrastructure projects that look so good on the nightly television news when we cut the ribbon to declare them open, but not so good a few years later when their occupants are complaining because of neglect and failure to maintain them adequately. In fact, I have often said that if governments understood that providing a supportive environment for the growth and development of heritage, culture and arts was more important and they actually did that, they would find that the amount they have to provide by way of subvention to the NGOs and CBOs that take up the mantle of responsibility as caretakers of our natural and cultural heritage would get smaller every year.

You the members of the FRC, the soldiers at ground zero of this battle to preserve our cultural heritage, have fought hard to establish a place for many aspects of our heritage as essential elements of our modern-day society. The success of Jounen Kweyol and latterly, Creole Heritage Month, provides a sterling example of that effort. Our country owes you a huge debt of gratitude, even though many of us may not realize at present how large that debt is. However, your membership is not growing, while the challenges confronting you are increasing both in number and complexity. This represents an existential threat to the organization. The challenge for the FRC is to ensure that its actions are not contributing, unintentionally, to the stagnation or diminished attractiveness and appeal of the organization. Remember, your goal is not just to ensure that FRC vivan, but that FRC an bonn santé ek ka pofité ek dévlopé.

The Danger of Being Over Protective

There is one possible weakness of having strong custodians of our cultural heritage, particularly where those guardians have had to operate in an environment that is less than supportive and see themselves as constantly having to operate in survival mode. This constant state of struggle and siege can cause them to want to hold on tightly to their precious charge and seek to protect it from all things and people that they fear may adulterate, corrupt, mutate or destroy it. It may also cause them to develop an instinctive suspicion of those who may be seeking access to elements of the culture to play with it, learn from it in their own ways, experiment with it, reshape it so that they may better associate with it, and use it in ways that may not be traditional or with which the original custodians may not be entirely comfortable. The result can be an attempt to deny access and to keep the culture protected in a safe, secure space, only allowing it out for closely supervised dates with very clearly prescribed parameters about where it can go, when it can go, with whom it can go, how it can dress, and what it can do while it is out. I do not have to tell you that this approach is not healthy and that inevitably, it is the over-protective parent or custodian who is disappointed because their ward will eventually leave.

Our culture is strong. It is resilient. It has stood the test of time and it has gradually evolved over time. It is what it is today because of its several encounters with external forces over time. Therefore, we must not be afraid to expose it to things that may impact it in new ways and cause it to reshape itself to meet changing circumstances. We must allow our culture to evolve and adapt. We must give it space to grow. We must not be afraid to let others, particularly younger generations of creative Saint Lucians, take it, play with it, experiment with it, associate it with forms and media with which they are more familiar, and shape it into something closer to their image and liking. Compere Lapin can be a character in a traditional Caribbean folk tale or it can be an award-winning restaurant run by a celebrated daughter of the soil in the Warehouse Arts District in New Orleans, Louisiana. The two complement each other and add value to each other.

An essential job of the FRC is to map the DNA of our culture and keep track of how it has evolved and continues to evolve over time. The FRC, in classic genetic terms, must do the genome sequencing of our cultural heritage that will allow us to identify the constituent genes, their origins, how they are related, and for what are they responsible. However, it should not try to stand in the way of the continued evolution of the culture. In any event, even if the FRC were to try to do this, it would not succeed. Our culture will continue to evolve, with or without the FRC.

Therefore, we must guard against the very serious possibility of the FRC being inflexible and unwelcoming of new or different ideas and in the process, robbing itself of the ability to regenerate, reinvigorate, and adapt to a changing external environment, changing demographics, changing attitudes and practices. If this were to happen, the FRC would be denying itself the opportunity to grow, to evolve, to participate in and influence the continued development of our culture. In effect, it would be contributing to its own obsolescence and extinction. Our country and our culture would be the poorer if this were to occur.

The Importance of Partnerships

The current environment in which we live is a very competitive one. Financial resources are scarce, at least for most of us. An extremely influential Caribbean poet, who has been in the news quite a bit recently, put it very succinctly when he said, “it’s a competitive world for low budget people; spending a dime while earning a nickel”. That poet is Mr. Mark Anthony Myrie, otherwise known as Buju Banton. Unfortunately, the FRC has had to operate within that financial space, which was described by Buju in his song Untold Stories. The FRC does not have a well-resourced benefactor, neither in government nor in the private sector. Therefore, it must establish partnerships to change the equation that Buju sang about. The FRC needs to be earning a dime while spending a nickel. How does it do this? This, interestingly, presents an opportunity for the organization.

The FRC must look within Saint Lucia and establish strategic functional partnerships with like-minded organizations. One candidate is the Archeological and Historical Society. Another is the Saint Lucia National Trust. The National Trust is an organization that was set up to, among other things ‘locate and promote the preservation of buildings and objects of archaeological architectural, historic, artistic or traditional interest and the establishment of museums’ and ‘make the public aware of the value and beauty of the State’s heritage’. It is clear that the Trust and the FRC have similar, sometimes parallel, occasionally overlapping, mandates. Unfortunately, both organizations are also operating within the same constrained financial space. There should be opportunities, therefore, for collaboration and synergy between the operations of the two organizations. Are there functions or arrangements where cost-sharing is possible, particularly in administrative costs? Are there opportunities for collaboration in fund-raising? Can the two organizations pool their regional and international networks to the benefit of both bodies? There are many large philanthropic companies out there that are much more inclined to consider a multi-million-dollar endowment to an ambitious national heritage development project, jointly proposed by the FRC and the Trust, than a relatively small hundred-thousand dollar project from one of the organizations.

Secondly, the FRC needs to look aggressively outside of Saint Lucia and the Caribbean for funding opportunities. The local economy remains anemic and, in an environment, where arts, heritage and culture are not given much national prominence, it is difficult for the FRC to raise the level of funding it will require to expand the scope of its operations. Fortunately, heritage, arts and culture are viewed with greater favour internationally and the FRC must take advantage of this.

The FRC missed an excellent opportunity in the immediate aftermath of the Mount Pleasant Fire to mobilize human and financial resources to assist with the rebuilding effort. As an insider, I know this was not due to a lack of will. Most of the internal discussions in the weeks and months following the fire revolved around using the crisis as an opportunity to mobilize, regroup and emerge stronger. Unfortunately, this did not materialize. The spirit was willing, but the flesh did not appear to be up to the task. It was an overwhelming task, particularly for members and staff who were perhaps still traumatized by the devastation of the fire. However,

we could and should have done more and this must serve as a poignant lesson for the organization as it moves forward, particularly with respect to the implementation of the strategic plan. The FRC cannot do it alone. It needs to enlist support. There are individuals and organizations that are willing to partner with the FRC. It needs to meet with them, agree on shared interests, and develop an action plan with clearly defined, ambitious but realistic timelines for jointly pursuing shared goals. Additionally, the organization must become nimbler, more responsive and more alert to emerging opportunities.

Indigenous and Local Knowledge

Another major opportunity for the FRC lies in the prominence currently being given to indigenous and local knowledge as an important development plank for Small Island Developing States.

The Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States, which took place in Samoa in 2014, in the outcome document entitled *The SAMOA Pathway*, states “We recognize that small island developing States possess a wealth of culture, which is a driver and an enabler for sustainable development. In particular, indigenous and traditional knowledge and cultural expression, which underscores the deep connections among people, culture, knowledge and the natural environment, can meaningfully advance sustainable development and social cohesion”. The Report goes on to say that “In this regard, we strongly support the efforts of small island developing States: To develop and strengthen national and regional cultural activities and infrastructures, including through the network of World Heritage Sites, which reinforce local capacities, promote awareness in small island developing States, enhance tangible and intangible cultural heritage, including local and indigenous knowledge, and involve local people for the benefit of present and future generations.”

A document published in June 2014 by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), entitled ‘Emerging Issues for Small Island Developing States’ stated the following:

“SIDS possess a wealth of hitherto underutilized Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK) that could be synergized with modern science to develop sustainability strategies that are more appropriate to local realities. Externally derived strategies may not be appropriate to small islands, and there is need to reorient development aspirations away from conventional development. Innovative approaches and tools that are adapted to local conditions, cultures, and needs are required. This can be facilitated by harnessing and integrating ILK with modern science. Hence, there is a need to identify opportunities and mechanisms for promoting, integrating, and preserving ILK and incorporating it into the educational syllabus at all levels.”

The document, which was the result of a foresight process, goes on to suggest:

“As SIDS face the increasingly complex problems of the globalized modern world, they are finding that traditional and indigenous knowledge systems have a great deal to offer to the implementation of sustainable development. Communities in SIDS are recognizing the irreplaceable value of traditional knowledge and are promoting a “third way,” combining traditional knowledge with modern science to address the challenges of the 21st century.”

Even in the pressing environmental problems that we face, the UNEP/UNDESA report recognized the role that ILK can play:

“There is a growing body of evidence that ILK can complement modern science in the search for sustainable and alternative solutions to many of today’s challenges. It has been found, for example, that community narratives related to issues such as climate change, disaster mitigation, and ecosystem sustainability are useful for storing, communicating, and activating complex environmental information and for integrating scientific, normative, and cultural dimensions. SIDS are a custodian of a wealth of ILK that could complement scientific understanding and assist with policy formulation that is more appropriate to local realities. Many SIDS possess cultural knowledge and a philosophy that for millennia have been based on a sustainable existence, as seen for example, in traditional practices related to the efficient use of energy and water resources. But the loss of ILK is now a very critical issue. This can be attributed to the ageing and death of the older generation of knowledge holders as well as globalization and market economics that are quickly eroding this valuable asset. The latter are often disregarded, as seen for example in the Caribbean. Despite the growing acknowledgement of the importance of synergizing ILK and modern science for effective sustainable applications in SIDS, the process of integration can be daunting. In search of quick fixes, more often top down approaches based on modern science are favoured by decision makers rather than those based on cultural values and local knowledge.”

I quoted extensively from this report to indicate to you that even in the global arenas of climate change, energy efficiency and water scarcity, three of the big environmental issues facing our planet, and as a result, subjects that have attracted major international attention and pledges of massive resource allocation, there is a very important role for an organization like the FRC in harnessing indigenous and traditional knowledge, which has for years allowed our people to live in greater harmony with their natural environment. Consequently, this presents significant opportunities for resource mobilization by the organization. This is another reason the FRC must be broader and more embracing in its approaches and more strategic in the partnerships that it makes.

Using Technology Effectively

Another exciting opportunity for the continued growth, development and evolution of the FRC lies in the use of technology. Technology allows the organization to make our cultural heritage come alive for new generations of Saint Lucians, at home and overseas. It allows you to capture elements of our culture, record them, create links to them, index them and make them accessible, at a fee, to researchers and other interested parties. It allows you to expand the

reach of the organization and its work. Using technology, particularly within the context of social media platforms and an online presence, compels the organization to better manage information, be more responsive to its clients and stakeholders, and remain current.

It would be remiss and insincere of me if I were to give the impression that technology is all good for heritage and culture. This is not the case. While it provides the opportunity to record, popularize and disseminate elements of our heritage to a wider audience, both within and without, it also provides a medium for the exposure of our culture to erosive, external elements, what are called in biology – alien invasive species. To counter this, we have to work quickly and assiduously to provide our young digital natives access to a plethora of interesting cultural heritage content. There are many examples in countries where digital technology and online platforms are being used successfully to promote indigenous languages, popularize and expose children to games and stories with strong cultural content, and allow users to personalize their interaction with the content, which in turn fosters a more profound and enduring connection with their cultural heritage. Technology allows us to recreate historical events and important cultural practices and present them in a form that is almost tangible. Virtual reality technology is rapidly evolving and becoming cheaper and more easily created and disseminated. Its potential for exposing new generations to an exciting recreation of our cultural heritage is almost limitless.

We need to promote hack-a-thons where we provide access to a wide range of information on our cultural heritage and encourage our young mobile app developers to create multiple apps for android and iOS devices that are based on elements of our culture. By developing software and mobile applications that incorporate indigenous knowledge and elements of our rich heritage, we will be ensuring that this knowledge is passed on faithfully to the next generations.

A simple map-a-thon would allow us to crowd source the digital mapping of all cultural assets on the island, on a geographic information systems platform, so that anyone, anywhere in the world, can obtain information via an interactive web-based map of Saint Lucia's natural and cultural heritage. This is one of the initiatives that can be pursued jointly with the Saint Lucia National Trust and for which I am certain funding could be very easily mobilized.

Technology will also allow us to ensure that the unfortunate consequences of the Mount Pleasant fire are never again repeated. When I was writing my PhD dissertation in the spring and summer of 1990, I had to ensure that I distributed copies of my thesis, at every major milestone, to a few friends across the university, in the event that the unthinkable happened and I lost the copy on which I was working. Digital technology and now cloud computing have made these fears a thing of the distant past. The FRC needs to transition very quickly into the digital age. Your collections, as they are rebuilt, must be immediately digitized. Where possible, you should even look to using 3D printing to create copies of priceless artifacts that can be displayed to the public, while the originals are kept in a safe place, away from the possibility of fire or water damage.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, I stated at the beginning of my address that I would refer to the FRC only by its acronym and not by its full name, the Folk Research Centre. The reason I did this is I do not believe the name of the organization is a true reflection of what it is or what it aspires to be. In fact, the Kwéyòl name, Plas Wichès Foklò is for me a more appropriate description of the organization – a place that houses the richness of our folklore. Therefore, I want to be bold and impertinent to suggest that this may be as good a time as any for the organization to consider aligning its English name with its Kwéyòl name and calling itself The Folk Resource Centre. This would allow the FRC to keep the research dimension of its work, but also leave space for the other dimensions of your agenda, which as expressed on your web site include ‘to explore and clarify the role of culture in the development of our people’, and ‘to contribute to the cultural development of our people’. I have not seen the draft new Strategic Plan, but I would be surprised if these objectives have not been redefined in a manner that makes the name Folk Research Centre even less accurate. By transitioning to Folk Resource Centre you would keep the acronym by which you are more popularly known, and you would also signal that you are the ultimate resource for information, research, and work on our folk traditions, our cultural heritage.

Finally, I want to leave you with a word of caution concerning your strategic plan. However, before I do, I want to apologize to my friend Victor Poyotte for my bastardization of the rigorous process of developing a strategic plan. I conveniently plucked strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats from my own ether to make my case here this morning. So, the disclaimer I must make is that any resemblance of anything I said to the real, informed and more intellectually sound Strategic Plan that is being developed by Victor Poyotte is purely accidental and any harm caused to his process by my examples is entirely unintentional and regretted.

So, what is my note of caution? A Strategic Plan is only as good as the people who will be implementing the plan and their commitment to seeing it through. I have seen and been a participant in the development of many a sound, well developed, participatory, comprehensive Strategic Plan. The literature purists in this room will hopefully forgive me for what I am about to do to this line from Hamlet, but I have seen too many Strategic Plans being more honoured in the breach than in the observance. We are notoriously good at this in the English-speaking Caribbean. We do an excellent job of analyzing a problem. We are equally adept at describing the causes of the problem. But we routinely fall short in solving the problem. It is as if the catharsis of articulating the problem to a public audience is all we needed. We sate our desire for action with a good healthy public venting. Please, let us not have this fate befall the FRC’s Strategic Plan. We have a window for action where this country is concerned, and this window is narrowing with every day that passes. I am very concerned about the economic, social, cultural and environmental vital signs of our country. We are not on a sustainable development trajectory. We have not been for some time. There is an unhealthy and dangerous imbalance in our developmental pursuits.

Therefore, it is your responsibility, our responsibility, as members of the FRC, to intensify our efforts to ensure that the cultural elements of our development are respected and given the attention they deserve. The group of people in this room cannot do it alone. PABA, I apologize for this misuse of scripture, but the task of the FRC members in this room is to become fishers of men and women to help in this very important cause of safeguarding our patrimony, as it is originally defined. We have to convince our population of the importance of celebrating and promoting the richness and uniqueness of our cultural heritage and maintaining our identity as a people who care for and look out for each other. We are a people of koudmen, not koutla.