

THE RHYTHM OF BELIZE

History of Song and Dance of Our People



The history of Belize is the history of the Maya, the European, (both Spanish and English), Kekchi, African, East Indian, Chinese, Garifuna, people of the Middle East, Central Americans and many others. We are a nation of immigrants: people who came and keep coming. Three Maya languages (Mopan, Kekchi, and Yucatec) are spoken, making it unique among Caribbean countries. The language understood by most people is an English/African derived Creole yet many people speak Spanish and Garifuna. Most Belizeans are of mixed ancestry with roots in African, Asia, the Americans and the Caribbean.



According to archaeologists working in Belize, the Maya or Pre-Maya have been in Belize as far back as 2,500 B.C. or earlier. These Maya whose advanced civilization reached its peak between the 7th and 9th centuries were expert farmers employing advanced methods of agriculture such as terracing, tree cropping and using raised fields with drainage canals. They studied advanced astronomy, devised a precise calendar, used math based on the zero concept, built magnificent temples, palaces and ball courts which can be seen at Lamanai, Nim li Punit, Altun Ha, Xunantunich and Caracol.

From the early 16th century to the early 18th century there was a period of Spanish colonial influence in Belize with periodic domination of Maya Belizeans. An expedition led by Davila to present day Corozal was quelled by Nachankan. Maya chieftain with the help of Gonzalo Guerrero, a Spaniard, who had married the chief's daughter and decided to fight with the Maya. Today Guerrero is known as the father of the Mestizo race.

British occupancy of Belize dates to mid-seventeenth century, when Bartholomew Sharpe, a buccaneer turned logwood cutter, came in contact with a Spanish priest Padre Jose Delgado in the Mullins River area of Belize. Padre Delgado was making his way from Guatemala to Mexico. From Spanish archives and records we can prove an early British presence in Belize. At this time piracy had been outlawed and logwood was fetching a pretty price on the European market in England's textile industry. In the latter eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, British settlers increasingly moved into the interior in search of mahogany. In this process the Maya strongly resisted British attempts to take over their territory.

In 1788, the Maya attacked woodcutters at New River. British troops were asked to be "sent up river to punish the Indians who are committing depredations upon the Mahogany works." Despite strong resistance the Maya were forced back by the British deeper into the rainforest around San Ignacio, Cayo. This, however, did not keep the Maya down. They continued to fight right up to 1867 when Governor Austin ruled, "No Indians will be at liberty to reside upon or occupy or culti-

vate any land without previous payment or engagement to pay rent whether to the crown or to the owner of the land". It was in 1872 that Marcus Canul attacked the British Barracks at Orange Walk. He demanded rent and land but he could not capture the barracks and was killed.

The switch from logwood to mahogany (a hardwood found in the interior scattered in the Belize rainforest) required more labour than the Baymen could supply. By 1724 British settlers had acquired African slave labour from West Africa, via Bermuda and Jamaica. By 1745 slaves made up 71% of the population. The British colonial administration passed laws to assert their ownership of the land and timber extraction continued. Unlike plantation slavery in the Caribbean, Belize allowed slaves closer proximity to their masters but did not allow them to farm except for occasional "provision grounds". Slaves carried machetes and shotguns for jungle survival.

The second half of the eighteenth century witnessed four slave revolts as well as a number of unsuccessful attempts by the Spanish to dislodge the Baymen at the 1798 Battle of St. George's Caye. When abolition came in 1834 and apprenticeship in 1838, timber interests still controlled the fate of the economy of the country through labor arrangements and land ownership. Reaction to this inequity was periodically expressed in riots and disturbances. In 1894 when mahogany workers returned to Belize City to discover a currency devaluation, workers led by John Alexander Tom rioted. In another instance, Black Belizean soldiers who had suffered discrimination during World War I in Europe returned home to protest unequal, racist treatment. Following the Great Depression, a devastating hurricane in 1931, unemployment, poor housing and severe economic and social problems came protests. One man, Antonio Soberanis, led workers in Belize City and Dangriga to stand up for their rights. By December 1949, the devaluation of the Belize dollar again resulted in the immediate worsening of the situation of the working class. A group of dynamic, concerned young men: George Price, John Smith, Philip Goldson and Leigh Richardson formed the People's Committee which became the People's United Party a year later. Its objective was "to gain for the people of this country political and economic independence".

During the 1950's and 60's Belize struggled to gain adult suffrage and self-government. Finally during the 1970's and 80's, there was the struggle to gain both political and economical independence. On September 21, 1981, Belize gained its political independence.

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CREOLE

The Belizean Creole, are descendants of slaves brought by the first British settlers. This African mainstream was mixed with the blood of the slave master, usually English or Scots, since most of the early Baymen took their women from among the slave population. Religious leaders judged and cured their brothers and sisters and taught the people customs and traditions using oral traditions, myths and folk tales. African ancestors believed in many gods, whose job as caretakers of the rainforest and rivers predated today's environmentalists. An obeahman was known and respected as a healer, using herbs to cure and words of wisdom to advise the tribe.

Music and dance were closely connected with African religious traditions, as well as recreational activity. People sang, played and danced in worship and worked in joy, sorrow or fear. Creole folk songs employ a call and response style reminiscent of African songs. Since timber – mostly mahogany – continued to dominate the Belizean economy, it was in the mahogany camps where much Creole Belizean music had its start, as did the Creole culture.

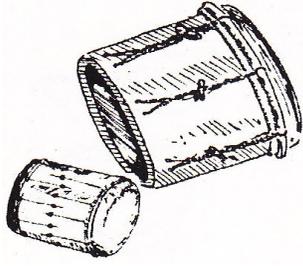
Christmas time was the time when mahogany workers came home for a break, celebrating with friends and families. They renewed contracts and used their advanced wages to celebrate and buy basics for their families, becoming more indebted to their bosses.

Belize Town came alive with beating drums – the bram! According to Belizean folklorist, Gladys Stuart "groups of friends would gather at a home with the furniture pushed against the walls, leaving an open space in which to bram. Hips and bellies gyrated, shoulders swung and arms flung about with abandon, resulting in flowing contortions of the body while the legs kept up a rhythmic bram! Bram! (If you were able to perform all of the above then you could brukdown). Music was supplied by a combination of two or three of the following: drums accordions, banjos, guitars, pint bottles, tapped against each other, combs covered with soft paper, and brooms stuck on the floor. Enthusiasm replaced harmony and the tempo increased as the liquor (rum, rum popo, spruce, cashew, black – berry, orange, craboo or ginger wines) flowed."

Several Boom and Chime groups are still going strong. Instruments in a Boom and Chime band include a gumbay (two-sided) bass drum, jawbone of an ass, guitar and accordion. The Boom and Chime name is derived from the two sounds made by the hitting of the drum on different sides: "boom" (bass) and "chime" (tenor). "Boom and Chime" songs are composed about recent happenings, gossip, petty thefts, elopements, mule's birthdays or "shall I babies".

Dynamic parts of Creole Culture are Creole proverbs, which became ways of conveying folk wisdom and ridiculing the elites or their followers. Another aspect of the Creole culture is the Anansi story, featuring spider hero Anansi of the Ashanti tribe in Africa. Anansi is a spider/man who always appears to get the upper hand in most situations.

GARIFUNA



The Garifuna are descendants of the Island Caribs and Arawaks of St. Vincent in the eastern Caribbean who intermarried with escaped African slaves around 1765.

Fighting for their freedom, first against Spain and then against France and Britain, the Caribs of St. Vincent struggled fiercely to keep themselves from being enslaved. After several attempts the British conquered them in 1797, then exiled them to the shores of Central America. About 2,000 Caribs were loaded onto ships and forcibly transferred to the Bay Islands. They moved quickly from there to the mainland, establishing many villages along what is now the north coast of Honduras.

The first Garinagu moved into Belize about 1802 and established villages along Belize's southern coast. The British "Baymen", already settled here, were fearful of this independent and free group of blacks and did their best to build up a distrust of them as "devil worshippers", "baby eaters" and "witch doctors" among their own slaves and the Creole population.

When the Garifuna of Honduras were involved on the losing side of a revolution in 1832, large numbers led by Alejo Beni fled to Belize for safety. That event is commemorated as Garifuna Settlement Day – a national and bank holiday on November 19th, initiated by T.V. Ramos.

The English word music is reserved for European instruments like violin, flute, trap drums or guitar, which may be used for Christmas quadrille dancing, and to accompany mime dances. The Garifuna music however, deters from this conventional European style. It has no distinct term attached, as can be seen in the OREMU songs which dominates Garifuna music. A pair of single – head wooden drums with snares, a Primero, and a large Segundo accompanies most of its singing. The name of the song styles is the same as the name of the dance beats they accompany. Dance beats vary widely and include some which are rapid and polyrhythmic (wanaragua, and punta) and others with moderate tempos in both double meter and other with moderate tempos in both double meter (gunjai, chamba, paranda) and triple meter (hugu – hugu).

Another important class of songs is known as Wuyan. These are not dance beats and are not accompanied by instruments. These soulful melodies are semi-sacred gesture songs, some for men and others for women. Few Garinagu are able to perform these songs today. Although any type of dance may appear at ceremonies the music of the Dugu, the major traditional religious rite, has a distinct role as a sacred dance. These songs are typically dreamed or otherwise given to the owner by ancestral spirits. Three drums playing a simple triple meter to which participants dance hugulendi, a shuffle step of great antiquity; it is used to accompany Dugu songs.

MESTIZO

A group of immigrants who fled the ravages of war as a result of the Guerra de las Castas were the Mestizos of Belize. Mestizo refer to the mixture of Spanish and Maya. The first group began to move into northern Belize around the 1850's. The northern refugees who settled in Corozal, Orange Walk, Ambergris Caye and Caye Caulker were at first only Mestizos but later were joined by many Maya immigrants. The new arrivals were mostly Catholic and spoke Spanish. Today with the addition of Central American refugees the ethnic group has significantly grown. These were the people who developed agriculture especially sugar cane production on a large scale.

Apart from language and cultural religious traditions such as the novena, posada, fiestas and los finados, the Mestizo culture was unique in its regard for close family ties with strict rules of courtship and marriage. Mestizo food is actually a mix of Maya and Spanish cuisine with corn playing a major role: tortillas, tamales, bollos, tamalitos etc. along with other tasty foods such as relleno negro, chirmole, or escabeche which have been adopted by all Belizeans.

Many Mestizo and Maya towns and villages celebrate All Saint's Day (Nov. 1st) and All Souls Day (Nov. 2nd). The celebration includes preparation of a special meal: of the dead person's favorite. No meal, however was complete without the traditional bollos with "Xpelon" (black beans), bollos with anise seed and the drink "xpa'sha" prepared with corn, milk and spices.

Another aspect of Mestizo culture is the fiesta Carnaval practiced in the Orange Walk district. Carnaval season would be ushered in by a dances called "los mascarados". This dance involves a group of men in different disguises who would march through the streets dragging chains. Some would be dressed like old men and women while others masquerade as witches, ghosts, demons, and other disguised themselves as priests in black cassocks with one man impersonating the devil. Other groups of 6ft women would sometimes dress in Sunday satin all shiny, while men sometimes stuck in simple white trousers with a white long, sleeve shirts, red neckerchiefs and sombreros.

During other carnival days comparsas (chorus/skits) would be performed at individual homes where refreshments would be served and sometimes a fee would be collected for entertainment. Dances performed included: la Estudiantina; Juan Carnaval was an effigy (made by stuffing a pair of trousers and a shirt with dry banana leaves, his head an empty calabash with facial features painted on wearing a sombrero). Juan Carnaval would be burnt around 6:00 p.m. on the eve of Ash Wednesday, La Rumba, la Samba, los Negritos, el Torito, Basilio Capa Mojada, los Chicleros, las Pelonas and las Tres Hermanitas were also danced during Carnaval. Not to be excluded, groups of boys and girls played on the streets trying to catch anyone to paint their victim with an assortment of Talcum powder, egg and shoe polish.

MAYA

Various Maya groups have continuously lived in parts of Belize from ancient times. The Mopan Maya lived mostly in the Toledo and Western Cayo districts where they settled after fleeing rigid conditions including forced labor, military conscription and heavy taxes in Guatemala. Mopan and Yucatec Maya have both retained many traditions. Both for example, maintain a strong respect for Maya gods particularly at planting and harvest time.

The Kekchi Maya live in villages around San Antonio in rural Toledo. Most Kekchi arrived in Toledo district around 1884 as refugees from the Vera Paz area of Guatemala. The Kekchi are largely self-sufficient and carry on traditional subsistence farming based on the cultivation of corn, beans and rice and pig rearing. The Kekchi speak their own dialect and govern themselves through the alcalde system. Ancient rituals such as twelve nights of Yolec – a ritual of self-purification in atonement for sins: Mayehac – a ritual in which various spirits of rain, lightning, thunder and land are involved for blessings, and the Atuk ritual which helps prepare a child for its future life are still practiced. Many ancient beliefs are conducted side by side with Christian marriage procedures low Tz'amanc– the asking, a traditional wedding rite; and Sumlac where elders give advice to the couples and relatives are feasted.

Yucatec Maya refugees who immigrated from Yucatan at the time of the Caste War live in northern and western Belize. Yucatec Maya have been hispanicized being mostly Catholic and Spanish-speaking. The Yucatec Maya practiced intensive agriculture with sugar cane.

The Mopan and Kekchi have no written musical theory but certain musicians will be known throughout a region for their expertise as teachers. The flute melodies and rhythmic patterns of the drum are universal and unchanging for a particular dance no matter where they are performed. A harp guitar, and violin combo and the marimba each have its own style according to its village. Other maya instruments include flutes and a chirimia or double-reed flute. Bonampak in Chiapas, Mexico shows a marimba being carried in a religious procession. Today the people of San Antonio still carry the marimba in religious ceremonies. Maya dances generally take place during the fiesta. The alcalde picks the dancers and this is considered a great honor. Dances include: Cortez Dance, an epic drama which portrays the coming of Christianity to the Mayas; the Xol Moro tells of the war between the Moors and the Christians. Other Maya dances include the Deer Dance, as story about a hunter, and the Monkey Dance where monkeys were depicted as being powerful in assisting or retarding the growth of corn and the fall of rain. Today many ancient dances include pictures or statues of saints.

