

Creole Drumming in Belize, and the Drums Not Guns Progressive Youth Movement

By Dr. Michael B. Vercelli

Emmeth Young is a master Creole drummer, co-director of the Maroon Creole Drum School, and founder of the Drums Not Guns Progressive Youth Movement in Punta Gorda, Belize. Founded by Young and Jill Burgess, the Maroon Creole Drum School teaches traditional music, art, dance, language, cooking, and ethnobotany.

Recognizing that many of his traditions were lost through colonialism, Emmeth sees his school as part of a larger “African revival” in which he is reestablishing the role of traditional music in Creole society, particularly through his youth advocacy movement, Drums Not Guns. Emmeth combines his background in traditional Belizean Creole music with his knowledge of West African drumming to create a dynamic musical outlet for local youth. This article briefly explores the background of Belize’s Creole people and how Emmeth reconnects his West African roots to his culture while simultaneously educating his community and providing youth opportunities through performance.

BACKGROUND

Emmeth traces his ancestry to Nigeria by way of the British slave trade. In the early 1700s, the British were primarily bringing slaves from Africa, through islands in the Caribbean, to Central America as needed with the growth of the mahogany trade. African slaves of various origins were brought to the British colony via Jamaica. Although there are no shipping records to give exact numbers and places of origin, the development of Eboe Town in the early 1800s suggests a dominance of the Igbo ethnicity and indicates the slaves were “particularly numerous.” Within the settlements, there were few European women, and the British Baymen took female slaves as mistresses. The National Kriol Council of Belize website states that “many of these women were later freed; therefore, whatever children they bore became free people of color. This mixture of European and African slaves created the Creole population.”

Belize historian Nigel Bolland cites numerous slave rebellions from the mid- to late-1700s. Escaped slaves would head beyond the colonial settlements and into the interior of Belize, forming various Maroon communities including Emmeth’s village of Gales Point Manatee. These settlements were very difficult to locate through the swamps and forests, especially for colonial forces trying to track the escapees.

In these new settlements, the newly freed slaves built drums and reconstructed



Emmeth Young

their music. Being a mix of West African ancestries, the music created was not particular to a specific ethnic group, but rather it consisted of new musical interpretations reflecting the diversity of their cultural backgrounds. This collective cultural identity founded what is seen today as the Belizean Creole culture—Kriol language, music, arts, the Obeah religion, and history—in present day Belize.

Today, only three rhythms are recognized as specifically Belizean Creole: Sambai, Kunjai, and Brukdawn. Sambai has multiple meanings, referring to the rhythm itself, the specific drum used, and the event where the rhythm is performed. The Sambai event takes place during a full moon as a fertility ritual in which the participants gather around a large fire and take turns dancing individually. As each dancer finishes, he or she selects the next dancer to participate. If the dancer selects the same person multiple times, it indicates an attraction to the person selected.

Near the end of a Sambai event, the second rhythm, Kunjai, is played. Dancers who have shown mutual attraction will now partner and dance together as they leave the event. The third rhythm, Brukdawn, is heard in a variety of configurations within popular contexts throughout Belize. Popularized by Leela Vernon and Wilfred Peters, the recreational music of Brukdawn is performed on a variety of drums, usually accompanying guitar, bass, accordion, and singing. While the dancing for Brukdawn may be choreographed, such as in the National Dance Company of Belize, it is often danced freely in clubs, bars, and outdoor venues.

DRUMS NOT GUNS

Emmeth grew up within the Maroon Creole community in the town of Gales Point Manatee and started playing drums at an early age. Typically, drumming would be passed along within the family, but since Emmeth’s father did not choose to play drums, Emmeth’s teacher was a close friend of his family who learned directly from Emmeth’s grandfather. By the time Emmeth was 16 years old, he had moved to Belize City in search of work to help support his family.

After four years in Belize City, Emmeth moved back to his village to discover they were no longer playing drums the way they did in his youth. In fact, there was only one drum left in the village. Emmeth decided that he could help revive the Creole drumming culture in Gales Point if they had more instruments. Because he had been building his own drums since he was 13, he built enough instruments to start an ensemble with other musicians in the village and host Sambi events.

The sudden revival of the Sambai caught the attention of Belize popular musician Leela Vernon, the Queen of Brukdawn music. Vernon recruited the young drummers from Gales Point for her dance company, and soon after, Emmeth was touring with her internationally. Upon Emmeth’s return to Gales Point, Emmeth started the Gales Point Progressive Youth Movement—a traditional drumming school, located on his uncle’s farm.

Despite Emmeth’s active engagement with the local youth, many children in Gales Point were being recruited by gang leaders from Belize City. The gang

leaders would target at-risk youth in the villages by giving them alcohol and demonstrating their wealth garnered through illicit activities. Gangs specifically targeted underage youth so that if the recruits were arrested, they would be tried as juveniles.

Unfortunately, many of the children recruited from Gales Point were killed in the gang violence of Belize City, and their bodies were sent back to the village to be buried. Gang members would also return to Gales Point for the funerals and shoot guns over the grave to “honor” their fallen members. After a particularly violent two-month period, where several children from one gang were killed, Emmeth decided to peacefully intervene. He took his drum down to the cemetery and played for the victim, as if it were a traditional funeral wake, to discourage the gang members from shooting guns in the village. From this peaceful intervention, Emmeth began his Drums Not Guns movement.

The Drums Not Guns movement gave the community youth a cultural alternative to the gangs by providing a safe environment along with the potential to earn money through performance. At first, Emmeth started with drumming, but eventually kids came to his school to learn how to build instruments, make local crafts, paint, and learn to sail on the lagoon. Emmeth and Jill would host regular cultural events and set up visits to the local artisans in Gales Point Manatee to attract tourists. As Emmeth’s program started to influence the local youth, gang members also took notice. The local gangs realized that Emmeth was infringing on their recruits and became violent toward him. After an attack on Emmeth and guests, Emmeth decided that it was no longer safe for him or his family. He then relocated the Drums Not Guns program and opened his current Maroon Creole Drum School in Punta Gorda, Belize.

Punta Gorda, being the largest city in the southern Toledo District of Belize, has many of the same social and economic issues that Gales Point Manatee faces, but because of its remote location, the gang culture from Belize City has not had the same impact. In Punta Gorda, many children looking to assist their families will collect glass “pint” bottles to recycle, earning 25 Belize cents (\$.125 USD) for each bottle. Emmeth specifically recruits the children looking to work, and he makes it his policy that every performer is paid each time the Drums Not Guns group performs, sometime earning up to \$20 USD for a performance.

The Drums Not Guns program rehearses every Saturday in the city square where kids and adults can participate. As part of his recruitment strategy, Emmeth ensures that each Saturday rehearsal includes a small meal. Anyone can participate. Emmeth’s only requirement is that they bring good behavior and self-discipline. At first, the adult members of the community were not impressed, claiming that Emmeth was only there to “make noise,” but with the success of his school and the Drums Not Guns group, his students play regularly around Punta Gorda. Parents actively send their children to him for both his leadership and the financial incentive. Emmeth explains that when the children “feel welcome, they help each other,” within the Drums Not Guns setting, creating a supportive environment necessary to the musical and cultural sustainability of his community.



Drums Not Guns performing in Punta Gorda, Belize

MODERN MUSICAL DEVELOPMENTS

The sambai drums are closely related to Garifuna drums and are traditionally made of local materials such as hardwood, rope, and vine, and headed with goat-skin. Emmeth began to experiment with the design to create a modern version modeled after the West African djembe. By substituting wire rings for the vine, Emmeth modified the carving at the bottom of the drum, modeled after contemporary djembe shells from Guinea, to create a ledge to keep the bottom ring level. The newly designed drum can support higher tension on the head, resulting in a much louder sambai drum. Emmeth’s drums are equally responsive to the sambai or djembe technique in creating distinct bass, tone, and slap sounds.

Wanting to reaffirm the African roots of the Creole culture and his love for West African music, Emmeth has added djembes and dunduns to diversify his performance program. Having studied with master *djembe* *folas* Mamady Keita and M’bamba Bangoura, Emmeth teaches many Mande rhythms in the Drums Not Guns curriculum including “Kuku,” “Sunun,” “Kassa,” “Sofa,” “Soli,” “Kakilambe,” “Yankadi-Makru,” “Djansa,” “Didadi,” and “Djole.” He believes that including these instruments and rhythms from West Africa reaffirms the connection between the Creole culture and Africa and adds excitement to the Drums Not Guns performances.

The following transcriptions and videos demonstrate Emmeth’s traditional Creole performance practice and his contemporary adaptations. Emmeth is accompanied by Drums Not Guns “alumni” Denroy Castillo and Eugene Escarpeta.



Traditional sambai drum construction



Emmeth Young’s modern sambai drum construction

Sambai/Djembe Notation Key

Diagram showing notation for Bass, Tone, and Slap on a staff.

Sambai/Dundun Notation Key

Diagram showing notation for Dundunba, Sangban, Kenkeni, and Rim on a staff.

Sambai Transcription

Musical notation for Sambai 1/djembe 1 and Sambai 2/dundun, showing rhythmic patterns.

▶ Tap to play Video



Video 2. Sambai Drums Not Guns Approach

Brukdown (Traditional Version)

Musical notation for Brukdown (Traditional Version) on a staff.

▶ Tap to play Video



Video 3. Brukdown Traditional Approach

▶ Tap to play Video



Video 1. Sambai Traditional Approach

Brukdown (Drums Not Guns Version)

Musical notation for 'Brukdown (Drums Not Guns Version)'. The notation is presented on two staves: 'djembe' and 'dumduns'. Both staves are in 4/4 time. The djembe part consists of a sequence of quarter notes and eighth notes. The dumduns part follows a similar rhythmic pattern but includes two 'x' marks, likely representing a different sound or technique.

▶ Tap to play Video



Video 4. Brukdown Drums Not Guns Approach

CONCLUSION

Emmeth recognizes that he cannot re-invent the rhythms of his culture that were lost, but by introducing contemporary West African music, he builds interest in the roots and history of his culture. His genuine sense of ingenuity within the Drums Not Guns repertoire seeks relevance within the contemporary youth culture and does not simply put forth a historical or “museum” approach to its performance practice. As author Rodney Harrison discusses in his book *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, “Heritage is primarily *not* about the *past*, but instead about our relationship with the *present* and the *future*.”

Through the Drums Not Guns repertoire, Emmeth creates new means to keep his traditional music relevant within his community, reconnects his tradition to its ancestral roots, and develops new performance opportunities within Punta Gorda’s growing tourism industry. As a youth development project, Emmeth has also supplied the next generation of Creole musicians with the resources to sustain their cultural legacy. Emmeth’s approach and success is indelibly linked with the quotation found on the flag of the National Kriol Council of Belize: “*Wan wan okra full baaskit*,” meaning that if we continue with patience and perseverance, we will prosper.

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