

# **AFRICAN ELEMENTS IN THE ENGLISH AND CREOLE OF BELIZE**

**Jos Linguistic Circle**

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# Background to Belize

- Belize is the former British Honduras, the only Anglophone country in Central America
- It is a relatively small country with a population of some 300,000
- It is the only 'African-run' country in the region, outside the Caribbean islands
- It is an old colony compared with most African states
- The first Europeans (Spanish) landed in 1511



# Background to Belize II

- The first English settlement was in 1638, when sailors were shipwrecked there.
  - Although the region had once been dense with Maya cities, by this time, most had gone back to the forest, and the remaining Maya lived in small, scattered settlements
  - Belize at first looks an attractive place to settle, but it is visited by devastating hurricanes and floods at regular intervals, which may account for the sparse population.
  - These random settlements attracted attention to the valuable timber, including logwood (a dye tree) and mahogany
  - So in 1724, slaves were transported from Jamaica to cut the trees in the Belize River Valley.
- Spanish attempts to retake Belize were defeated following the Battle of St. George's Caye in 1798

# Background to Belize III

- The end of the slave trade in 1807 encouraged a series of slave revolts, until the ending of slave status in 1838
- At this time the first Creole villages were established in the Belize River Valley
- From 1848, the 'War of the Races' in Mexico led to Hispanic/Yucatec Maya mestizos to flee into Belize, settling in the North
- Britain formally took possession of 'British Honduras' in 1862.
- British Honduras was renamed Belize in 1971, but does not become independent until 1982, in part because of threatening territorial claims by Guatemala.
- Despite a British cultural background, American economic influence is very heavy

# Where do Belize's 'Afro-descendants' come from?

- There are three African populations in Belize, all from different origins
- The Creoles [Krio] are the descendants of the slaves, brought mostly from Jamaica, but also other Caribbean islands, for logging and later plantation work
- The Maroons of Gales' Point and Freetown Sibun are descendants of escaped slaves, but their exact origin is a mystery so far
- The Garifuna live in a series of villages along the southeastern coast from Dangriga southwards
- The Garifuna are the descendants of African slaves who were shipwrecked on the island of St. Vincent in the 1780s
- They escaped to what is now Nicaragua and mixed with the local Amerindian population, losing their language  
They now speak an Arawakan language, but influenced by African speech and culture

# Apart from this

- There are the remaining Maya, Mopan and Kek'chi, in the south and Yucatec in the North
- Extensive mestizo populations, both from the early migration from Mexico, but gradually moving in from Guatemala, Honduras and other Central American countries.
- Miskito Indians, from the 'Mosquito Coast' in Honduras and Nicaragua, who have also interacted with African groups, and who came as sailors and traders to Belize in the nineteenth century
- And Mennonites, who came from Canada in the 1950s onwards, apparently because Canada wasn't repressive enough? Mennonite communities can be either 'strict'; no modern technology, or up-to-date. They have become economically dominant

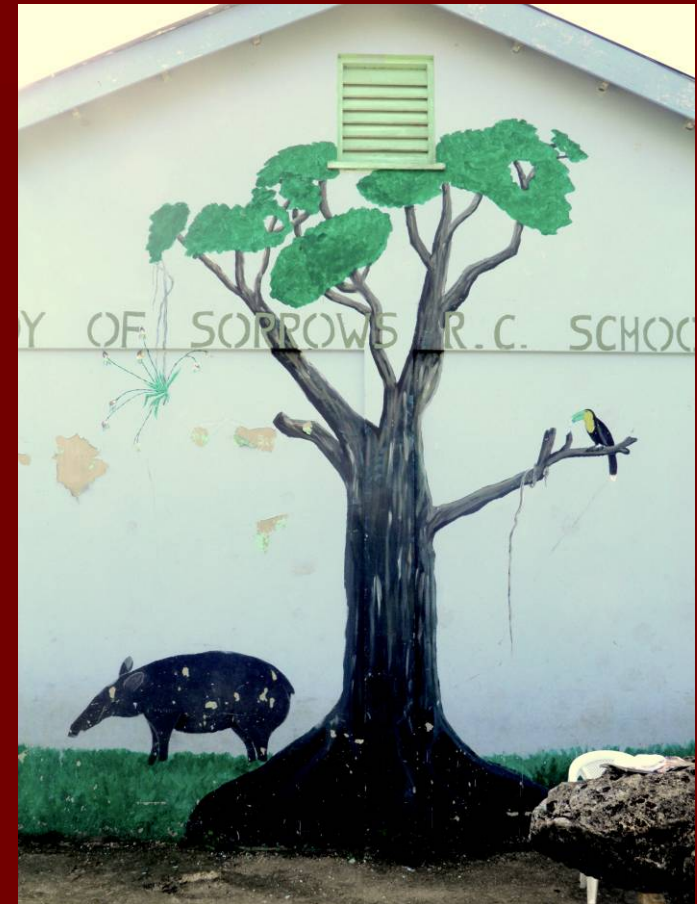


# Images of Belize: Maya Pyramids





# Belize River Valley





# Belize Cayes



# Belize Cayes





# Belize Cayes





# Belize roadsigns





# Animals of Belize





# Birds of Belize





# Butterflies of Belize



# So what does all this mean?

- The official language of Belize is English, and in government this means old-style British administrative English
- But contact with Spanish and increasing numbers of Spanish speakers mean both borrowings and more bilingualism
- And American contact means that spellings and lexical items are borrowed from US English
- However, like much Caribbean English, Belize English is full of words of unclear origin, particularly to describe local flora and fauna and cultural practices such as dance and music

Many of these probably derive from African languages; but which?

# So what does all this mean?

- Slaves came from a variety of places and this means there are hundreds of African languages to scan for possible cognates.
- This is why it took so long to identify Ijo as the source language for Berbice Dutch (in Surinam). It was a language no-one was expecting.
- An immense amount of work was undertaken for the 'Dictionary of Jamaican English' and other similar works, but sometimes the lexicographers wanted to find African etymologies and stretched the sense or phonology



# And Krio?

- Apart from Belize English, Creole (Krio) is commonly spoken in the Belize River Valley and increasingly in urban areas.
- Krio is significantly more 'African', i.e. it resembles West African Pidgin extremely closely at times, which is remarkable given that the period of separation is earlier than any documentation, i.e. the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18 centuries.
- My guess is it strongly resembles rural Jamaican 'patwa'; urban Caribbean speech has diverged quite extensively from this.
- Krio is even more studded with lexemes of unclear origin.

# And Krio?

- Krio is not really a written language, but there is an aspirational movement to create a written form.
- To this end a dictionary and grammar have been published.
- My view is that these are normative, and the norm is respelt standard English
- The constructions in these works do not seem to correspond to much of the Krio I hear
- Similar attempts have been made to turn Nigerian Pidgin into a standard written language
- But my research is really about Belize English

# Creole and Belizean English as registers of the same language

- It is not uncommon to hear it argued, as elsewhere in the world that Creole is a 'different language'.
- There have been some attempts to formalise the spelling, mostly among Belize City elites, who largely speak English.
- Regarded purely in dialectal terms this is simply not true, as the Creole and Belizean English share almost all their lexicon and grammar.
- A much better way to understand the relationship is to treat them as registers of one another.
- When speakers are uncertain of the language preferences of someone they do not know, they repeat a sentence twice, in Creole and Belizean English.



# Kriol publications

## The Song of Kriol:

A Grammar of  
the Kriol Language of Belize

Ken Decker



*Inaugural Issue  
Fos Taim Owt  
28 Janiwari 2006*

## Kriol - English Dikshineri English - Kriol Dictionary

Compiled and edited by

Yvette Herrera  
Myrna Manzanares  
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Ken Decker

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*Belize Kriol Project*

# Some clear Africanisms

**anansi** spider, but also a lead character in folk-tales. Characterised as a trickster, and also a way to refer to someone who is sly or tricky. < Akan. cf. *hanansi*

**bami, bammy** cassava bread < Ga *bàmi* cassava variety.

**Cho!** exclamation of disgust, annoyance < Ewe *tsó*  
'exclamation of surprise'

**ducunu, dukunu** food made from steamed maize mash wrapped in a leaf < Twi *ɔ-dòkóno* 'boiled maize bread'

**dungdung** [dunɔun] double-headed drum  
played in Gales Point < Yoruba *dundun*

**gombe** goat-skin drum played with the hands typical of the Maroons of Gale's Point < Bantu language

**pickny, picknie** child < West African Pidgin *pickin*  
ultimately Portuguese *pequeño*.

# Some possible Africanisms

**cerasee**        balsam apple, *Momordica charantia* or *M. balsamina*. A vine bearing a small lumpy skinned yellow or orange fruit.    = sorosi, surasee. Corresponds to Trinidadian *cerasse*.



**Gumbolimbo**        *Bursera simaruba*. Gumbolimbo is often found growing near the poisonwood tree, and its bark is a cure for the effects of poisonwood sap.

**Jankunu**        costume dance, in Belize the costume and dance originate from a comical ridicule of slave masters

                      Said to go back to John Koni, an eighteenth century slave leader. or Hausa? Corresponds to 'John Canoe' in Jamaica and 'Junkanoo' in the Bahamas.



# The Empire strikes back

**Charley Price** very large rat, thought to have been brought to Jamaica by Sir Charles Price, an 18th century planter and Speaker of the House of Assembly in Jamaica. Not the house rat, probably the Norwegian rat.

**royal rat** paca, small rodent, *Cuniculus paca*, much favoured for food Also gibnut, but so named because it was given (?unknowingly) to Queen Elizabeth II on the occasion of her visit to Belize in 1982



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