

How Blama Preschool Project Has Evolved ~A Musical Journey~

These recorded musical expressions are representative of the path I traveled from 1973 until the present, January, 2016, to bring Blama Preschool Project into being.



<—Blama, Sierra Leone, 1974
Hanging out with fellow teachers>



1. “Nyayal Brima” - 1975 - Brima, Professional Kalimba artist, palm wine gatherer, roadside salesman

During my 2-year Peace Corps service in Blama, Sierra Leone, 1973-1975, Brima played his kalimba (thumb piano), within earshot of my home. His music drew me to his roadside palm wine stand on the laterite dirt road that ran parallel to my house. We developed a friendship based on our mutual interest in kalimba music and my appreciation of his musical mastery. As I prepared to return home to Lubbock, Texas in 1975, he agreed to allow me to record him as he played. He wondered what I would use the recording for. I said I would share his music with my family and friends in the United States. You can listen for him, laughing and making comments during his song, ending with his vocal signature, “Nyayal Brima!” (I am Brima.)



Brima and his kalimba

Ester Williams, the headmistress of R.C. Blama Primary Girls' School, was a feisty old soul who lived right next door to my Peace Corps house. I admired her way with children and her inclusion of music experiences in their daily lessons. Upon saying farewell to her in 1975, she said, "Don't forget your Mende name, Jeneba. It means 'she who will go away and then return.' "

H.R. Blama Primary Girls' School Headmistress, Ester, is the woman on the left, standing behind students in music class. The student playing the shakere is wearing Ester's head-tie.



2. "I'm A Traveler" - 1990 - by Faith Sorenson Lester guitar - Ned Dembler

From 1991 to 2001, a civil war ravaged Sierra Leone, leaving death and devastation everywhere. It broke my heart to hear the reports, not knowing whether my friends were alive or dead or what horrors they may be suffering.

In 2002, dreaming of traveling back to Blama to see my friends and to ascertain if I could be of any help, I wrote "The Traveler". I didn't know how I could be of service but I felt that I had to return to Blama and that I'd figure it out when I got there. Thus the lyrics, "where I go is how I find my way."

3. "Today You Are Called Jeneba" - 2008 - Ester Williams and Miss Regina

When I finally did return in 2008, Ester was quite old and ready to retire. She had a thrilling wartime experience to tell in dramatic detail. She was about to be killed with a machete by the rebels but she talked her way out of it. She quoted herself telling them, "Is this why your mothers raised you, to kill old mamas like your own grandmothers?" They were ashamed and let her run to the bush to hide with the others. "Otherwise you wouldn't see me here today," she said with a huge grin.

33 years after the last time I had seen her, there was Ester, living in the same house. She reminded me of my Mende name, Jeneba and she sang a Mende song in her now feeble voice, about Jeneba, finally returning. She asked Miss Regina, a young teacher whom I had known as a first grade child, to sing along with her.



Greeting Headmistress Ester,
33 years after leaving Blama

Miss Regina



4. "Blama Welcome" - 2008 - R.C. School, Blama; girls in Form III



Visiting the school in Blama, I was greeted by a group of school girls, singing a welcome song with very enthusiastic voices. They were quite entertaining, singing and clapping, "Peace Corps, you are welcome, welcome here today."

5. "Gbama Celebration" 2008 - Family of A.C. Demby (May his soul rest in perfect peace.),

Children preparing to dance



Double drum and slit drum.



Son and daughter of AC Demby



It is a Mende tribal custom to commemorate the day of death of a loved one, for many years after their passing. On July 20, 2008, my dear friend, headmaster and mentor, Mr. A.C. Demby, had been deceased for 4 years. In his home village, Gbama, they had a celebration, organized by his son, Ambrose Demby Jr., complete with rice chop, fatted chicken, music and dancing. Musicians and dancers entertained us as we ate. I was seated next to Mr. Demby's brother. He instructed me to give my leftover rice chop to the 6-year-old girl who performed as a solo dancer. He, in turn, gave his leftovers to the solo boy dancer. When the adults started dancing, the lead musician brought a shekere for me to play and invited me to dance with them. I was honored to participate in this celebration of my dear friend's life.

Before leaving Blama in July, 2008, Fr. Combey and Sr. Petrine and other RC Blama School staff shared the preschool plans with great enthusiasm.

Fr. Combey stood on the proposed building site.





Returning home to Ohio and to my job as a music teacher at Mason Intermediate School in Mason, OH, I had a mission, based on a request by Fr. Fatorma Combey and Sister Petrine. They had asked me to help raise funds to build a preschool for the children of Blama. Several of my 4th grade students, as well as some 5th and 6th graders, were eager to help. The result was the Salone PEP Club, or the Sierra Leone Peace Education Project Club. Between 2009 and 2013, the club was able to raise \$9,000.00 towards the building of the Blama Preschool.

“My West African Home” by Peter Penfold, performed by Milton Margai School for the Blind.

One of the Salone PEP Club’s fundraising projects was to record a CD, called *Foh Salone*. Peter Penfold granted us permission to include his song, performed by Milton Margai School For The Blind in Freetown, Sierra Leone. It expresses the hope for the future of Sierra Leone after the devastation of the civil war.

The members of Salone PEP Club used this song to learn the names of some Sierra Leonean major cities as well as the history and horror of the civil war. Desire to help in the reconstruction after the war was one of the major reasons for the members’ dedication to get the preschool built.

7. “Numumbe” - Sierra Leonean Folk Song - performed by Salone PEP



The Salone PEP Club learned the Mende and English words to the old folk song, “Everybody Loves Saturday Night”. They accompanied the song with xylophones and drums. We included this recording in the CD, Foh Salone.



With a Salone PEP Club check for \$1,500.00 in hand, I again returned to Sierra Leone in July, 2011. From Blama, Fr. Combey drove me to the big city of Kenema to deliver the check directly to Bishop Koroma of Kenema Parish. Now construction on the preschool could begin!



While in Kenema, I also had a joyful reunion with Ester Williams, who had sung “Jeneba” to me in 2008 (#3 on this album). She had moved to Kenema after her retirement. It was a wonderful day of purpose and friendship.

8. Mende Christian Church Service -- Bo, Sierra Leone 2011

This second return to Sierra Leone also brought me to Bo, another large city near Blama. The music coming from this Christian Church was hard to miss. Drums, shekere and kalimba music, accompanied their hymns and poured from the doors and windows. Singing, clapping, praising, preaching, call and response, along with the instrumentation provided a slice of Sierra Leonean life I'd never experienced before. It was lively and deeply reverent.

9. Women's Gratitude Celebration - Blama July 2011

Back in Blama, the members of Catholic Women's Association of Blama were planning a surprise celebration of gratitude for the Salone PEP Club's donation. The women, all dressed alike, danced down the road, playing shekere and drums. A traditional masked dancer, representing the Bundu Society, showed up to dance and tell stories through her dance. They spoke words of gratitude and presented me with my own shekere, a woven banner and a raffia bag. Of course, it was Salone PEP Club they were thanking but I had the honor being there and dancing with the women, the Bundu and the traditional music!

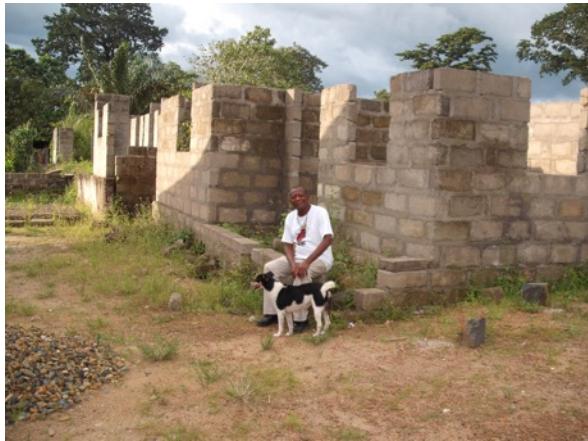


Catholic Women's Association of Blama, celebrated and gave gifts of gratitude.

After my 2011 visit, until 2013, Salone PEP Club continued to work on a variety of fundraising pursuits. One of the most successful was their “Sponsor A Brick” campaign, in which they sold “bricks” at \$5 each. We had a display outside our music classroom, on which they pasted each brick with the donor’s name printed on it. It was so successful, they used this activity two years in a row. We can truly say that this school has been built one brick at a time!



We were fortunate to have Baoku Moses, a performing musician from Nigeria, to guide their learning about Afro Pop music. With Baoku, Salone PEP Club performed for the school and for parents as well as public events, where they collected donations.



Donations generated by Salone PEP Club provided the funds necessary to build the exterior walls of the preschool structure.

After I retired from Mason City Schools, Salone PEP Club came to an end and fundraising slowed down considerably. Thanks to some generous private donations, we were able to generate enough funds to erect the roof, just in time for the rainy season.

RETURNING AGAIN?

I had planned to return to Blama in 2015 but the borders were closed due to the Ebola epidemic. Sierra Leone was in a turmoil once again, with hundreds of people dying daily and as people lived in constant fear of contracting the deadly virus. Even though there are no more cases being reported in Sierra Leone at this time, the toll on the entire population is great. Prices are higher than ever, jobs are hard to find, some people didn't farm during the epidemic so there is little fresh food. Many people are still afraid of those who survived Ebola. It is even more important than ever to provide early education for Sierra Leone's youth.

Today, fundraising continues. As a result of the 2015 Holiday Campaign, we are sending \$2,700.00 to Blama on January 6, 2016! Fr. Combey reports that this will provide the purchase and installation of doors and windows and maybe more. We extend a big THANK YOU to our holiday donors! As we receive more donations in 2016, the inner walls, electricity and plumbing will be installed. The final step will be the outer finishing.

I am now planning my next visit to Blama in November of 2016. I hope to travel with Arlene Golembiewski, the founder of Sherbro Foundation. She has graciously offered to allow Blama Preschool Project donations to be sent through her foundation, making them tax deductible. We hope to see the finished preschool occupied by students when we arrive!,

10. “Rhino Walk”- Karl Payne, Joanie and Jeffry Weidner, Ned Dembler, “Dauber”, Joost Meijer, Faith Sorenson Lester

Several musician friends and I got together and jammed on this fantasy walk through the jungles of Africa. The beauty of Sierra Leone and the sweetness of the children is on my mind as I wander. And even still, “where I go is how I find my way.”