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Bussa's Rebellion of 1816: *The Largest Uprising Against Slavery in Barbados*

By Chuka Odike

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BUSSA'S REBELLION OF 1816

Bussa's Rebellion of 1816: The Largest Uprising Against Slavery in Barbados

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The Bussa Rebellion, which began on April 14, 1816, stands as the largest slave revolt in Barbadian history and a significant event in the broader resistance to slavery in the Caribbean. Named after Bussa, an enslaved man of Igbo origin, the rebellion was a coordinated and determined effort by African-descended enslaved people to resist the inhumane system of slavery that had subjugated them for generations.

01

The Igbo Presence in Barbados

The Igbo were among the numerous African ethnic groups forcibly transported to the Caribbean during the transatlantic slave trade. Known for their cultural cohesion and resistance to enslavement, the Igbos carried with them strong communal values and a disdain for tyranny, traits that influenced their response to enslavement. In Barbados, Igbo captives formed a significant portion of the enslaved population and brought their cultural traditions, such as spiritual practices and oratory skills, which later became tools of resistance.

REJOINDER TO NORTHROP'S 'MYTH IGBO'

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TABLE I
ESTIMATES OF SLAVES, AND IGBO, EXPORTED BY PERIOD, 1470-1867

Years	Number from Biafra	% Igbo	Number of Igbo
1470-1600	20,000	25	5,000
1601-1650s	25,000	33	8,250
1662-1700	89,296	65	58,042
1701-1750	273,580	80	218,864
1751-1810	939,240	80	751,392
1811-1860	354,600	65	230,490
	1,701,716	75	1,272,038

Source: After Chambers, 'Igbo Exiles', p.76.

Note: The following statements are comparisons with my previous estimates of the frequencies of Igbo. A downward revision for 1470-1600, to reflect the predominance in Sandoval of non-Igbo; probably the majority were Ijo and other delta peoples (Andoni, Okrika, Ogoni, Engenni etc.); see E.J. Alagou, *A History of the Niger Delta: An Historical Interpretation of Ijo Oral Tradition* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Ibadan University Press, 1972), pp.140-1. Also a downward revision for 1600-1650s; but still reflects that Overri Dapa of Kalabari knew the 'secrets' of trading with the Europeans (which undoubtedly included those connections with the 'upland Blacks' that brought slaves down), and which he had imparted to Asimini of Ibani. Figure for 1660s-1699 reflects the 'Kamalu' Endeme dynasty of Elem Kalabari; as well as the 'Kamalu' dynasty at Bonny; importance of the 'Hackbous Country' reflected in Barbot's 1699 map; see P.E.H. Hair, Adam Jones and Robin Law (eds), *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa 1678-1712*, II (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1992), and also David Northrup, *Trade Without Rulers: Pre-Colonial Economic Development in South-Eastern Nigeria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp.43, 52, 53. But because this was also a time of conflicts between the coastal groups, especially Elem Kalabari, Ibani, Andoni, and Okrika, probably more like 2/3 rather than 3/4; thus a slight downward revision. Figures for 1700-1749 are unchanged, reflecting initial Aro expansion, and rapid expansion of exports from Bonny. The rise of the Anakiri dynasty at Elem Kalabari would have reduced significantly the enslavement of Ijo, and certainly encouraged the incorporation of Igbo; as was the case for the new Perikule (Pepple) dynasty at Bonny. The projected proportion is unchanged for 1750-1809, reflecting Nri-Awka/Aro/Bonny axis, and Bonny's domination of exports, which was reflected in turmoil in Nri ambit, and the nearly complete shift from Ijo to Igbo in the littoral politics, as per observations in Crow and Adams about the putative Igbo origins of Kalabari and Ibani. A significant downward revision for 1811-67, derived from the strong cultural presence of non-Igbo *Carabali* in Cuba, embodied in the Abakuá society and in references within *Regla de Ocha* ('Santería') *patiki* ('myths'); and see also some very limited data in Northrup, *Trade Without Rulers*, p.231. The total revised estimate of Igbo exported is 74,842 less (or 5.6 percent) than the one in Chambers, 'Igbo Exiles'; and representing a proportion of 74.8 percent (rather than 78.7 percent).

Douglas B. Chambers – A Rejoinder to Northrup.

02

Historical Background

The revolt was set against the backdrop of increasing tensions between enslaved Africans and their colonial enslavers. In November 1815, the Barbadian House of Assembly debated and ultimately rejected the Imperial Registry Bill, which proposed the registration of enslaved people in the colonies. Enslaved individuals interpreted this rejection as a signal of potential worsening conditions, spurring clandestine meetings and strategic planning by early 1816.

03

Planning the Rebellion

The rebellion's organization reflected the strategic and communal efforts of enslaved Africans to challenge their oppressors. Various sugar plantations across the island became centers of planning. The Simmons Plantation, one of the largest in Barbados, had three notable leaders: John Grigg, Nanny Grigg, and Jackie. Meanwhile, the Bailey Plantation uprising was spearheaded by King Wiltshire, Dick Bailey, Johnny, and Bussa.

A propaganda campaign complemented the planning phase, led by three free black men: Cain Davis, Roach, and Richard Sarjeant. Davis and Sarjeant traveled across coastal and central plantations, coordinating plans and spreading rumors to galvanize support. The final coordination occurred at the River Plantation on Good Friday night, April 12, 1816.

04

The Uprising

The rebellion officially began on the night of Easter Sunday, April 14, 1816. Cane fields in St. Philip parish were set ablaze, serving as the signal to other rebels across central and southern parishes. The rebellion spread rapidly, affecting over seventy estates in its initial stages. White plantation owners and overseers fled in panic to Bridgetown, the colonial capital, seeking refuge from the widespread chaos. Despite the extensive impact, only two white individuals were killed during the uprising.

05

Suppression and Aftermath

The rebellion was swiftly suppressed. Martial law was declared on April 15, 1816, and local militias, supported by British imperial troops, including enslaved soldiers moved to quell the insurrection. By September 1816, five months after the rebellion had ended, harsh retributions had been exacted on the rebels. Reports indicate that 144 people were executed, seventy were sentenced to death, and 170 were deported to other British Caribbean colonies. Many others endured brutal floggings during the eighty days of martial law.

06

Igbo Contributions to the Rebellion

The Igbo people's philosophy of freedom and resistance played a critical role in inspiring collective action during Bussa's Rebellion. Oral traditions and historical records suggest that Igbo customs, such as secret meetings, coded communication, and the strategic use of spiritual beliefs, were instrumental in the planning and execution of the uprising. Igbo-led rituals and symbols, such as the use of charms and invocations of ancestral spirits, helped unify participants and imbued them with the courage to resist.

07

Significance and Legacy

Although the rebellion was short-lived, its impact resonated deeply. It

highlighted the enslaved population's agency and capacity for organized resistance. Bussa's Rebellion is commemorated in Barbados as a symbol of the unyielding fight for freedom. In 1985, Bussa was declared a national hero, and a statue in his honour was erected at the roundabout near Haggatt Hall, serving as a powerful reminder of his resistance and the enduring quest for justice.



Bussa Rebellion 1816 – Blackpast

08

Conclusion

Bussa's Rebellion was a pivotal moment in Caribbean history, symbolizing the collective determination of enslaved Africans to challenge systemic oppression. It stands as a testament to the resilience and strength of those who dared to envision a world free from the bonds of slavery.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explore ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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