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ETHNOHISTORY

Haiti's Independence Day: *Celebrating the Igbo Legacy in Haitian Culture*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

**Henri Christophe, the Igbo descent
who liberated Haiti nation from
slavery and French colony**

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Haiti's Independence Day on January 1st is not only a commemoration of the first successful slave revolt in the Americas but also an opportunity to reflect on the African roots of its people, particularly the significant influence of Igboland in modern-day Nigeria. The Igbo, brought to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade, left a profound mark on Haiti's cultural, spiritual, and social fabric. This connection to Igboland is a testament to the enduring legacy of African heritage in the Caribbean and the broader diaspora.

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The Igbo in Haiti: A Historical Connection

During the transatlantic slave trade, enslaved Africans were forcibly taken from various regions, including the Bight of Biafra, which encompassed parts of Igboland. Haiti, then known as Saint-Domingue under French colonial rule, received a significant number of enslaved Africans from this region. The Igbo were known for their strong cultural traditions, resilience, and philosophies, many of which found fertile ground in Haitian society.

TABLE 5
FREQUENCY OF 'IGBO' AMONG BIAFRAN AFRICANS IN THE DIASPORA,
c. 1720–1820

Place/Time	N=	% Igbo
Louisiana 1720–1810	757	69.5
St Domingue 1721–97	1,212	93.2
Jamaica 1718–1814	337	61.4
South Carolina 1732–75	89	79.8
St Lucia 1815	1,250	71.5
St Kitts 1817	608	72.4
Berbice 1819	182	61.0
Sierra Leone 1821–22	1,008	68.6
Total	5,443	74.8

Sources: Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, 'The Louisiana Slave Database and the Louisiana Free Database: 1719–1820', in Hall (ed.), *Databases for the Study of Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1699–1860* [CD-ROM] (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2000); David Geggus, 'Sex Ratio, Age and Ethnicity in the Atlantic Slave Trade: Data from French Shipping and Plantation Records', *Journal of African History*, 30 (1989), p.32; fugitive slave advertisements in Jamaican newspapers (*Weekly Jamaica Courant*, 1718–30, 1754; *Cornwall Chronicle*, 1776–7; *Jamaica Mercury* 1779); Douglas B. Chambers (ed.), 'Abstracts of Jamaican Fugitive Slave Advertisements, c.1791–1814: A Compilation From Original Sources' (typescript, Special Collections, Campus Library, University of the West Indies-Mona, Kingston, Jamaica, 1999); Daniel C. Littlefield, *Rice and Slaves: Ethnicity and the Slave Trade in Colonial South Carolina* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), after pp.118–20, 146–9; B.W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean 1807–1834* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), after pp.443–6, 454–5; David Northrup, *Trade Without Rulers*, p.231.

Africans in the diaspora, it seems highly probable that Igbo did in fact predominate.

To understand the 'cultural baggage' that Africans from the Bight of Biafra brought with them into the diaspora, it is not enough simply to catalogue the changing ethnonymic terminology of the slave-trade. One must instead comprehend and interpret structural changes in the patterns of the trade over time, by taking a regional and diachronic (and comparative) approach, in order to identify likely source populations.

An initial survey reveals that a closer attention to the comparative chronology of the Biafra slave-trade suggests overlapping patterns which connect changes on the coast with those in the hinterland, and vice versa. Significant new institutions, such as the *Ekpe* society in the lower Cross River region, and perhaps the 'canoe-house' as it operated at Bonny, as well as new political dynasties (Amakiri at Elem Kalabari, Perekule/Pepple at Bonny, the rise of 'Duke Town' at Old Calabar) and the expansion of Aro colonies in the Igbo heartland, are all associated with the first half of the

Chambers Northrup Rejoinder

The Igbo concept of egalitarianism is often linked to Haiti's early revolutionary spirit. Igbo people traditionally emphasized collective leadership and community-based decision-making, which resonated with the enslaved Africans' struggle for freedom and equality. This is reflected in the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), where enslaved Africans overthrew French colonial rule to establish the world's first Black republic.



Igbo Loa princess at the celebration in Haiti Adeyinka Olaiya, Haiti/

02

Cultural Influence: Igbo Traditions in Haiti

One of the most enduring legacies of Igboland in Haiti is seen in its spiritual practices. Haitian Vodou, a syncretic religion that blends West African, Catholic, and indigenous beliefs, has clear traces of Igbo spirituality. Rituals, symbols, and even the use of proverbs in Vodou ceremonies often bear striking similarities to traditional Igbo practices. For instance, the Igbo belief in ancestral spirits and the sacredness of nature aligns with Haitian Vodou's reverence for lwa (spirits) and natural elements.

Language also reveals Igbo influence. Haitian Creole incorporates words and phrases derived from African languages, including Igbo.

Terms like “mba,” meaning “no” in both Igbo and Creole, highlight this linguistic connection.

The cultural imprint extends to cuisine. Haitian dishes such as “bouyon” and “akasan” reflect African culinary techniques and ingredients, reminiscent of those found in Igboland. Additionally, Igbo dance forms and communal music styles contributed to Haitian folk music traditions, further enriching the cultural tapestry of the Caribbean nation.



Haitian nationals meet with traditional rulers and government officials in Enugu. Photo: Raphael Ede.

Modern-Day Recognition of Igbo Roots

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of Haiti's Igbo roots. Scholars and cultural advocates continue to explore the historical and cultural links between Haiti and Igboland, shedding light on the significant role of Igbo people in shaping Haitian identity. Events such as Igbo Day celebrations in Haiti and cultural exchanges between the Igbo in Nigeria and Haitians have strengthened these ties.

The Igbo philosophy of "Igbo enwe eze" (the Igbo have no king) resonates deeply in Haitian society, reflecting its egalitarian and democratic ideals. This philosophy underscores the importance of community and collective leadership, values that were critical to the Haitian Revolution and remain central to Haiti's national identity.

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Conclusion

As Haiti celebrates its independence, it also honors the enduring influence of its African ancestors, particularly the Igbo people. The connection between Haiti and Igboland is a powerful reminder of the resilience, creativity, and cultural richness of the African diaspora. Haiti's independence is not just a historical event but a testament to the strength of African heritage and its continued relevance in shaping identities and fostering unity across the globe.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odi

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 explores 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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