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The Igbo People in Haiti: *Their Influence and Struggles*

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Haitian vèvè sign for 'Ibo' via The Haitian Vodou Handbook.

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The Igbo people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. During the transatlantic slave trade, many Igbo people were taken from their homeland and sold into slavery in the Americas, including Saint-Domingue (now Haiti). Their arrival in Haiti left a deep mark on the island's culture, religion, and history. This article explores the role of the Igbo people in Haiti, their struggles during slavery, and their lasting influence.

01

Why Igbo People Were Taken to Haiti

The transatlantic slave trade lasted for over 300 years, from the 16th to the 19th century. During this time, European traders captured and transported millions of Africans to the Americas to work as slaves on plantations. Many Igbo people were among those taken, especially to the Caribbean islands like Jamaica and Haiti.



Igbo Women in the early 20th century. Photo taken by an unknown photographer, possibly G. T. Basden

In Saint-Domingue, many plantation owners preferred Igbo slaves because they were hardworking and loyal to one another. Newly arrived Igbo people could rely on those who had been there before them for support. However, some plantation owners avoided buying Igbo slaves because they were known to resist slavery and had a strong tendency to commit suicide rather than live in bondage.

02

Igbo Resistance and Suicide in Saint-Domingue

The Igbo had strong spiritual beliefs. They believed that if they died, their spirits would return home to their ancestors in Africa. Because of this, many Igbo slaves chose death over a life of suffering. The most common method of suicide among the Igbo was drowning, which was

believed to be a way to “return” to Africa. This act of resistance became so common that Haitian people later created the phrase “Ibos pend cor a yo,” meaning “The Igbo hang themselves.”



Historical Marker, unveiled on May 24, 2022 Photo by Jud McCranie

Plantation owners and overseers became frustrated with Igbo suicides. To stop them, they started mutilating the bodies of those who killed themselves. This was because the Igbo believed that a person who died in a dishonourable way, like with a mutilated body, would be ashamed to return to their ancestors. In Igbo culture, suicide was already seen as a bad death, and the body of a suicide victim was often thrown into the bush without a proper burial. The plantation owners hoped that by doing this, they could prevent other Igbo slaves from choosing suicide. However, these cruel tactics were not enough to stop the Igbo from resisting their enslavement.

Igbo Influence in Haitian Vodou

Even though many Igbo people died during slavery, their culture did not disappear. Today, the Igbo are still honoured in Haitian Vodou, a religion that combines African spiritual traditions with Catholic influences. In Haitian Vodou, the Igbo spirits are part of the Petwo (or Petro) rite, which includes powerful and fiery spirits. The Igbo spirits are known to be strong, proud, and difficult to control.

One of the most important Igbo spirits in Vodou is Gran Ibo, who is seen as the grandmother of the Igbo spirits. Another well-known spirit is Ibo Lele, who is considered one of the strongest and most respected Ibo spirits in Vodou. However, the importance of Igbo spirits varies among different Vodou houses. Some houses give them a lot of respect, while others do not focus on them at all.

Even in Vodou houses that do not directly worship Igbo spirits, Igbo influence can still be seen in the rituals and ceremonies. This shows how deeply the Igbo people shaped Haitian religious traditions.

The Igbo people played an important role in Haiti's history. They were known for their strong spirit, resistance to slavery, and deep cultural beliefs. Even though many Igbo people suffered greatly in Saint-Domingue, their influence did not disappear. Today, their legacy continues in Haitian culture and religion. Their story is a reminder of the strength and resilience of the African people who were taken from their homeland and forced into slavery.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Nze is an Igbo history and culture enthusiast with an in-depth passion for exploring the rich cultural heritage, traditions, and historical narratives of the Igbo people. His works is mostly focused on pre-colonial Igbo societies, traditional belief systems, leadership systems, and the impact of European colonialism.



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