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The Legacy of Ndi Mgburichi Jumieka: *Igbo Social Hierarchy and Resistance in Jamaica*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

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The legacy of Igbo culture in Jamaica is an integral part of the island's history, especially during the slavery era. The famous Igbo saying, "Igbo enweghi eze"—meaning "The Igbo have no king"—aptly captures the egalitarian nature of the Igbo people, both in their homeland and in the diaspora. Despite lacking centralized kingship, the Igbo developed complex social hierarchies, including titleholders who wielded significant influence. This article delves into the documented social structures among Igbo speakers in Jamaica, the role of Mgburichi titleholders, and the marks of resistance and cultural survival observed among enslaved Igbos on the island.

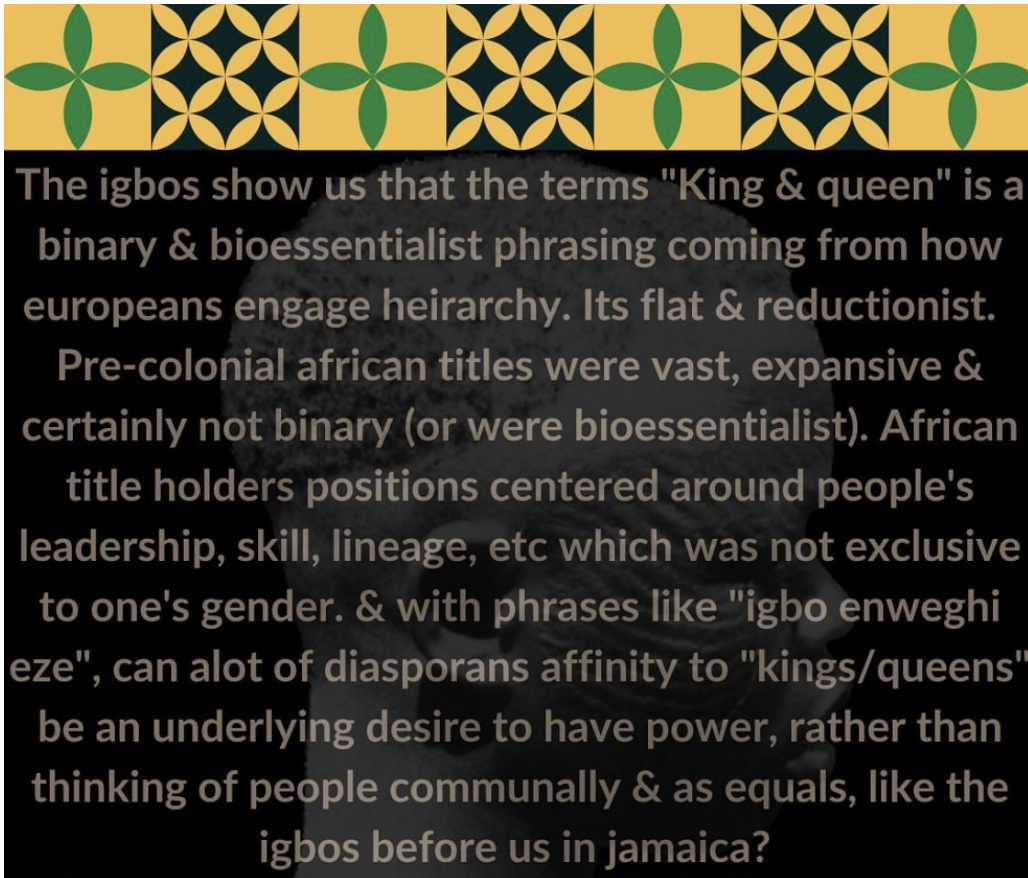


Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

01

Igbo Egalitarianism and Communal Decision-Making

Precolonial Igboland was characterized by decentralized leadership. While kingship systems were absent, communal decision-making was deeply entrenched. Villages operated collectively to resolve disputes and safeguard communal welfare. This communal ethos extended to the diaspora, as seen in documented cases in Jamaica where Igbo enslaved people collectively organized to address mistreatment by plantation authorities. One notable example recounts a group of Igbo individuals lodging complaints against a bookkeeper and collectively appointing a hearing date. This aligns with the Igbo cultural emphasis on consensus-driven leadership, highlighting their ability to adapt and preserve their traditions in foreign lands.

social heirarchy among igbo speakers is well documented on the island of jamaica. The famous saying "igbo enweghi eze" meaning the "igbos have no king" can certainly be observed with how igbos organized both in their natal lands & the diaspora. pre-colonial igboland as whole* was not bound by a single ruler. This made them particularly difficult for the british to colonize. Although the igbos didnt have a king, this did not mean they didnt have title holders & people who held social influence. Lets explore social heirarchy among "ndi igbo jumieka" (igbo people of jumieka) in the slavery era

Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

02

Ndi Mgburichi and the Role of Titles

Among the Igbo, titles conferred social influence and responsibilities. The Mgburichi title, associated with the ancient kingdom of Nri, was one of the highest honours in Igbo society. Those bearing the Ichi facial marks associated with the Mgburichi were highly respected for their roles in peacemaking and representing the Eze Nri.

‘Son of the late Eze Nri at Oreri, wearing Benin-style bronze pectoral mask.’ Photo: Thurstan Shaw, 1960. “[Ichi] scarification is not a tribal mark, but a sign of status, rank, or nobility. It was taboo for persons thus marked to perform any menial task, such as to carry [...]” The Ichi marks came in two forms:

1. Mgbuzu Ichi: Full-face markings primarily linked to royal lineages.
2. Ntuche or Ichi Nwadiokpala: Limited markings on the forehead and temple.

A unique song accompanied the Ichi-marking ceremony, reinforcing its cultural significance. Notably, the Mgburichi title was not restricted by gender, as accounts like that of slaver Hugh Crow describe female Mgburichi. This underscores the non-binary and expansive nature of Igbo social structures, contrasting with the rigid, bioessentialist hierarchies often imposed by European colonial frameworks.

There were 2 types of Mgburichi. The full-faced marks represented by royal lineages called Mgbuzu Ichi & Ntuche (Ichi Nwadiokpala) which were a few marks on forehead & temple. A special song was sang during the Ichi making ceremony. & While current accounts & retellings tend to center mgburichi cis men, we know for a fact that mgburichi was a title, meaning ones gender/sex-(biology) did not determine who would become a mgburichi. Even Slaver hugh crow describes seeing "female Mgburichi"



Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

Mgburichi in Jamaica: Resistance and Survival

The presence of Mgburichi in Jamaica is well documented in runaway slave adverts and colonial records. The Ichi marks were often Anglicized as “Bruchee” or “Breechee” in these documents. These individuals were frequently noted for their leadership and organizing abilities, traits associated with their status as titleholders.

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centre of the home slave mart for the coast, and the south of I'gbo. I inquired particularly after a supposed district or tribe, mentioned by Clarke and some other writers, as I'tshi or Brétshi, but found that this was a misapplication of the term. There is no place of this name, but I'tshi, which means “cut-face,” refers to certain individuals who are marked by numerous cuttings on the forehead, which greatly disfigure the countenance. I fell in with one of these I'tshi, who confirmed all this, and told me that this practice prevails chiefly in Isuáma, and that it is confined to the families of the wealthy. As far as I could gather, it is only the males who are thus hideously tattooed, though in I'gbo it is reckoned becoming, and entitles the possessors to respect. The word Brétshi is wrong, Mbrítshi being the correct term, but I'tshi is more frequently employed.

To the northward and eastward of Ndóki is a large district named Abányim, where the I'gbos and people from Old Kalabár meet for trade. Not far from this stands the noted city of A'ro or A'no, where is the celebrated shrine of *Tshúku*, or the deity to which pilgrimages are made, not only from all parts of I'gbo proper, but from Old Kalabár, from the tribes along the coast, and from Orú, and Nímbe or Brass. The city is described as being nearly three times the size of Abó, and as extremely populous. The inhabitants are skilful artisans, and manufacture swords, spears, and metallic ornaments, specimens of all of which I have seen, and can therefore testify to their being very

Baikie, W. B. (1856). Narrative of an exploring voyage up the rivers Kwora and Binue (commonly known as the Niger and Tsadda) in 1854. John Murray.

For example, in April 1793, in Trelawny Parish, four Igbo individuals, including a “Bruchee,” escaped and were suspected of planning further escapes via canoe. Similar accounts from St. James Parish in 1792 mention “Scipio, an Eboe Bruchee,” emphasizing the significant

role of Mgburichi in resistance efforts. These records highlight how the Igbo, and particularly Mgburichi, maintained their leadership traditions, even in the harsh conditions of slavery.

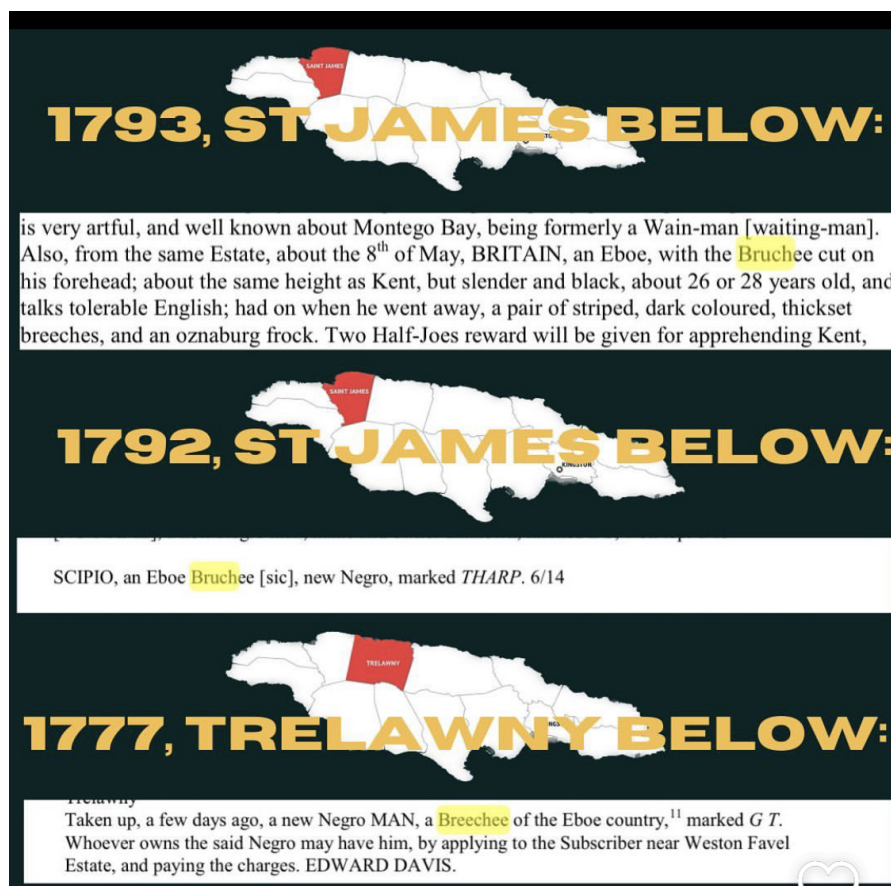


Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

04

Cultural Survival Through Ichi Marks

The Ichi marks, specifically linked to Umudioka in Anambra State, serve as a testament to the resilience of Igbo culture. These marks, signifying the Mgburichi title, became symbols of identity and resistance in the diaspora. The widespread documentation of “Bruchee” individuals in runaway slave ads across Jamaica, from Kingston to Westmoreland shows the extent of Igbo influence on the island.

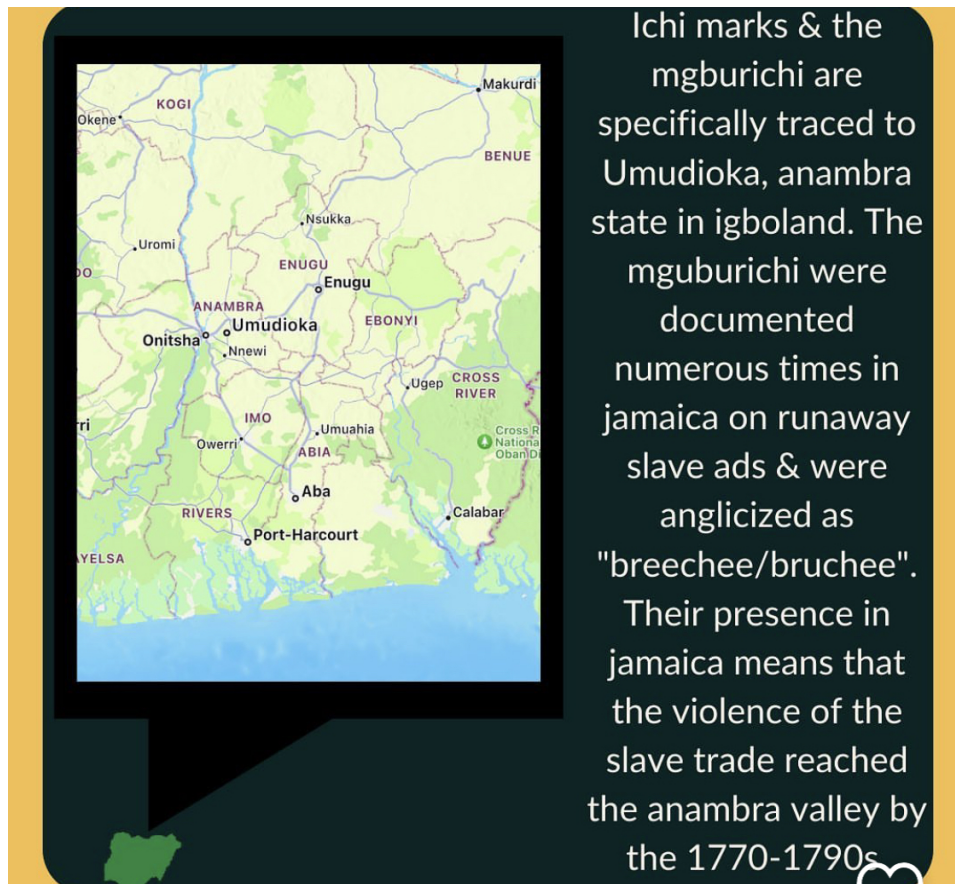


Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

- 1793, Trelawny Parish: An “Eboe Bruchee” was noted for attempting escape.
- 1791, St. Ann Parish: Somerset, a “Breechee,” was recorded.
- 1777, Hanover Parish: A “new Negro man” identified as a Breechee was documented.

These accounts reflect the persistence of Igbo traditions and their impact on the broader Afro-Jamaican community.

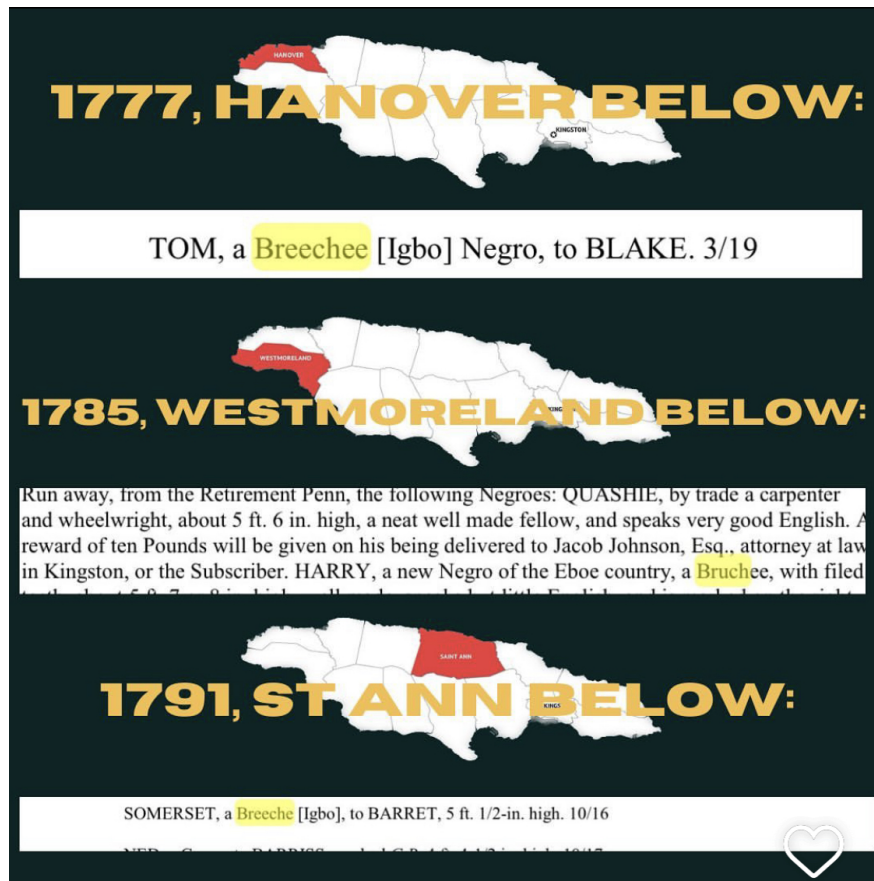


Photo by @rootinnajumieka on Instagram

05

The Legacy Of Igbo Ideals In The Diaspora

The saying “Igbo enweghi eze” offers profound insight into the values of equality and communal leadership. The Igbo rejection of centralized kingship and reliance on communal governance challenges modern diasporic ideas of kingship and queenship as markers of power. Instead, the Igbo example encourages a collective approach to leadership and mutual support, a legacy that resonates in the stories of resistance and cultural preservation among enslaved Igbo in Jamaica.

The Mgburichi, with their Ichi marks, symbolize the endurance of these ideals, serving as cultural leaders and organizers in the harsh

realities of slavery. Their documented presence in Jamaica emphasizes the deep connections between the Igbo homeland and the island's Afro-descendant population.

06

Conclusion

The history of Ndi Mgburichi Jumieka highlights the resilience and adaptability of Igbo culture in the face of adversity. From their communal governance structures to their symbolic Ichi marks, the Igbo left an indelible mark on Jamaican society. By examining the lives of Mgburichi in the diaspora, we gain a deeper understanding of how African traditions shaped the resistance and cultural identity of enslaved communities in the Americas.

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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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