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West Indian Words from Igbo Language

By Idenze Ezeme

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FEATURE
IMAGE

Tracing Linguistic Roots: Many common words in Caribbean English have direct connections to the Igbo language, reflecting the rich cultural and historical links between West Africa and the Caribbean.

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WEST INDIAN WORDS FROM IGBO LANGUAGE

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Some common words used in Caribbean English come directly from the Igbo language or have been influenced by it.

01

Unu/Wunna

Means 'you [plural]', the same as in Igbo, únù. In some places, wunna is used. In Nigerian Pidgin English, it is una.

02

Soso

Means 'only' or 'single'. In Igbo, it is written as sọsọ (pronounced saw-saw) and has the same meaning. [Not the same as English "so-so", which means average or not very good.]

03

De

Means 'is', 'presently', or 'positioned in'. In Igbo, it is written as dị (pronounced dih). It is also used in Nigerian Pidgin as de.

04

Se

Means ‘say’ or ‘said’. It comes from English but is also connected to the Igbo word sị.

05

Atoo

Means ‘chewing stick’. In Igbo, it is written as atụ (pronounced atuh).

06

Béké

Means ‘White person’. In Igbo, it is written as bèké and refers to a white person, a Westerner, or a European. It is also used in the French Antilles, including Dominica (Roseau).

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07

Big Eye

Means ‘greedy’ or ‘envious’. It comes from the Igbo phrase ányá úkwú (which means “big eye”) and has the same meaning.



08

Poto poto

Means 'mud' or 'muddy'. In Igbo, it is *mkpọtọ mkpọtọ*, with the same meaning.

Okro

A plant also called 'lady fingers'. In Igbo, it is *ọkrọ* (pronounced aw-kraw) or *ọkwuru*.

09

Obeah

Means 'shamanism' or 'witchcraft'. In Igbo, it is *ọbia* (pronounced aw-bia), which means 'oracle' or 'doctoring'. In Igbo culture, the practitioners are called *dibia* (di ọbia).

10

Awoh

An exclamation. In Igbo, it is *ewo*, often used in the same way.

Example: *Ihe ị dere ebe a hikwara nne, ewo!* (This list is quite long, ewo!)

11

Ah

A word that means 'is' or 'will'. In Igbo, it is á (with alternating tone). The word gá in Igbo means 'go'.

- To go: Caribbean English (CE) → ah go | Igbo → a ga
- Is he going?: CE → him ah go? | Igbo → ọ na à ga?

12

Nah

Means 'will not'. In Igbo, nà means 'is' and à at the end makes it negative. Together, na (with a long 'a') means 'will not'.

- I'm not going: CE → Me nah go | Igbo → A na'm a ga

13

Go

Means 'going to' or 'will'. In Igbo, it is ga.

- He will come: CE → him ah go come | Igbo → ọ ga a bia (which is the same if you swap 'ah' and 'go').
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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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