

Resilience And Resistance: IGBO Women's Experiences In Transatlantic Trade

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Abstract

The transatlantic slave trade, which forcibly enslaved millions of Africans, had a profound impact on the lives of the Igbo women. Despite being subjected to unimaginable violence, exploitation, and displacement, Igbo women demonstrated remarkable resilience and resistance. This case study explores the experiences of Igbo women during this period, exploring their roles in the slave trade economy, their relationships with enslaved men and other women and their strategies for maintaining cultural identity and resisting enslavement through a critical examination of historical records, oral testimonies, journals and books.

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I. Introduction

The experiences and stories of Igbo women during the Atlantic slave trade were powerful narratives of resilience, strength, and survival amidst unimaginable hardships, these women were forcibly taken from their homes and communities in present-day Nigeria and faced the brutal realities of the transatlantic slave trade. Despite these enduring and unimaginable suffering, Igbo women found a way to resist and reclaim their identities and heritage even in the face of oppression. The Igbo women faced brutal circumstances during their forced transport across the Atlantic. Crowded onto slave ships, they suffered from disease, abuse, and degrading treatment. Torn from their loved ones and communities, these women were robbed of their traditions and compelled to survive in an unfamiliar and oppressive new world. Regardless of these challenges, Igbo women demonstrated remarkable courage and tenacity, supporting each other and preserving elements of their culture through music, dance and oral traditions.

Once enslaved in the Americas, Igbo women faced further struggles, including forced labour, exploitation, and the erasure of their cultural heritage. However, even in these prevailing circumstances, Igbo women found ways to resist and assert their agency, through acts of defiance, solidarity, and cultural retention, they maintained a connection to their roots and resisted the dehumanizing forces of slavery. The stories of Igbo women in the Atlantic slave trade highlight their strength, resilience, and unwavering spirit in the face of unimaginable adversity, these women's narratives serve as testaments to the enduring legacy of resistance and survival, showcasing the power of reclaiming one's identity and heritage even in the darkest time. These experiences of Igbo women in the transatlantic slave trade profoundly influenced their perception of gender and power.

II. Resilience

Throughout the dark period, Igbo women faced immense challenges that reshaped their understanding of themselves, their roles and their relationships within a deeply oppressive system. They endured unimaginable hardships, from the brutal middle passage to the harsh conditions of plantation life in the Americas these experiences forced them to navigate a world where power dynamics were starkly defined by race, gender, and enslavement. Igbo women were subjected to both racism and sexism, facing exploitation and abuse based on their gender and their status as enslaved individuals, despite the humanizing conditions, Igbo women displayed remarkable resilience and agency, they often found ways to resist and assert their power within the constraints of slavery, be it through acts of subtle defiance, community building, or cultural retention. They demonstrated their strength and determination to preserve their sense of self-dignity.

The transatlantic slave trade also challenged traditional Igbo gender roles and power dynamics. In Igbo society, women held important positions and roles within their communities however, the brutality of slavery disrupted these established norms, as women were often separated from their families and communities, undermining their traditional sources of power and support. In the crucible of enslavement, Igbo women had to navigate new forms of power dynamics often finding themselves in precarious and vulnerable positions, their experiences of slavery reshaped their understanding of gender and power, forcing them to confront the harsh

realities of their existence and adapt to survive in a hostile environment where their autonomy had agency was severely limited.

III. Enslavement And Middle Passage:

The forced migration of Igbo women during the slave trade era was a profoundly devastating historical event. Falola's work details the immense suffering these women endured. Violently uprooted from their African homeland, they faced a horrific journey across the Atlantic to be enslaved in the Americas. The middle passage was especially brutal. Crammed into squalid, overcrowded ships, Igbo women battled disease, hunger, and abuse from their captors. Many perished during the grueling ocean crossing, overcome by illness, despair, or the appalling conditions. Those who survived arrived traumatized, having endured unthinkable cruelty and degradation. This forced displacement stripped Igbo women of their freedom, culture, and humanity. They were thrust into a harsh new world of slavery, forever separated from their homes and loved ones.¹

Regardless of the immense changes faced by the Igbo women, they displayed remarkable resilience and courage during this dark period as some women actively participated in slave revolts and uprisings, resisting their captors and fighting for their freedom, in moments of desperation, they banded together with fellow captives to rebel against the oppressive forces of slavery, risking their lives in acts of defiance and resistance.

Furthermore, Igbo women employed various strategies to resist their enslavement and maintain their sense of identity and dignity, through subtle acts of rebellion such as feigning illness, breaking tools, or slowing down work, they resisted the dehumanizing effects of slavery, these acts of resistances though small in scale, were powerful expressions of their refusal to accept their unjust treatment and oppression. In addition to physical resistance, Igbo women found ways to preserve their cultural heritage and traditions despite the efforts to erase their identities, through storytelling, music, dance, and other forms of cultural expression they kept their traditions alive and passed down their history to future generations. These acts of cultural resistance were essential in maintaining a sense of community, identity, and resilience in the face of overwhelming adversity.²

Community solidarity played a pivotal role in the resistance efforts of Igbo women, they formed tight-knit bonds with fellow captives while establishing networks of support, these women created a sense of unity and shared purpose by coming together in times of hardship the found solace, strength, and collective resilience bolstering each other's spirits and providing a source of mutual encouragement and empowerment. Additionally, the Igbo women used acts of spiritual resistance which was prevalent among them, through prayers, rituals, and spiritual practices, these women found solace, guidance, and a sense of connection to something greater than themselves, their faith and spirituality served as sources of inner strength and resilience, sustaining them through the darkest moments of their enslavement.

IV. Plantation Life:

The plantation life experiences of Igbo women in America during the era of enslavement were marked by immense challenges, resilience, and complex relationships, including their interactions with enslaved men. These women were faced with harsh conditions, exploitations, and constant threats of separation from their families, yet they found ways to navigate their circumstances with strength and determination. Igbo women on the plantations often endured backbreaking labour in the fields, domestic work in their master's house, and the burden of caring for their families under oppressive conditions, despite the physical and emotional toll of their daily lives, these women demonstrated remarkable resilience and resourcefulness in finding moments of solidarity and support within their communities.³

The relationship between the Igbo women with enslaved men also reflected their shared experiences of trauma, resistance, and survival. Some found comfort and support in each other while others faced difficulties due to the brutal nature of slavery. These relationships in some cases served as sources of emotional support, solidarity, and resilience in the face of adversity, together the Igbo women and men found ways to navigate the brutalities of plantation life drawing courage from their shared cultural heritage and the bonds they formed while suffering.⁴

The determination of Igbo women to maintain their language and cultural practices despite the harsh conditions they faced on the plantation was truly outstanding. On the plantation in the Americas, Igbo women found ways to preserve their cultural heritage and maintain a sense of identity through various means. Language played a pivotal role in cultural preservation for Igbo women, though several attempts to suppress their native language, many women secretly continued to speak Igbo among themselves by passing down stories, songs, and prayers in their native language and they ensured that their linguistic heritage was not lost, this clandestine preservation of the Igbo language helped to foster a sense of community and belonging among enslaved Igbo women, creating a shared cultural space amidst the harsh realities of plantation life.

Cultural practices were another significant aspect of preservation for Igbo women, despite the limitations of slavery these women found ways to uphold traditional customs and rituals. Through music, dance

storytelling, and traditional crafts, they kept their cultural traditions alive. These practices not only served as a form of resistance against the erasure of their identity but also provided sources of strength and connection. Religion also played a crucial role in cultural preservation for the Igbo women, many enslaved women maintained their traditional spiritual beliefs and practices such as honouring their ancestors and participating in spiritual ceremonies, these practices gave them a sense of continuity with their past and offered solace and guidance in the face of adversity. The strong sense of community among the Igbo women on the plantations was instrumental in cultural preservation, the challenges they faced made them unwavering to support each other, share knowledge, and pass down cultural traditions from one generation to the next, through communal gatherings, celebrations and shared experiences, they maintained a sense of unity and solidarity that helped sustain their cultural heritage.⁵

V. Resistance And Agency:

Igbo women played a crucial role in resisting slavery and the transatlantic slave trade despite being subjected to various forms of oppression, they found various strategies to fight back, including escape attempts, sabotage, and leadership in slave revolts.

In an oral interview with “Mrs Benedict Nkenkwere a native of Amuda Isuochi,” she gave a notable example with the story of Madu an Igbo woman who was enslaved in the 18th century, Madu attempted to escape from her enslavers on multiple occasions, using her knowledge of the forest to evade capture, although she was eventually caught and punished, her bravery inspired others to resist.⁶

Another notable example was the story of Nwanyeruwa, an Igbo woman who led a slave revolt in the 19th century, Nwanyeruwa organized a group of enslaved people to rise against their enslavers using her leadership skills and strategic thinking to outmanoeuvre them, although the revolt was ultimately unsuccessful, Nwanyeruwa's courage and determination inspired others to continue resisting.⁶ Escape attempts were a common form of resistance among the enslaved Igbo women, showcasing their unwavering commitment to freedom, these women showed incredible resourcefulness and bravery in planning and executing daring escapes from captivity. Be it fleeing individually or in groups they navigated dangerous terrain and evaded capture, risking everything for the chance of liberty, their escape attempts symbolized not only rejection of their oppressors but also a profound desire for autonomy and self-determination, Igbo women's escape endeavours stood as powerful acts of resistance against the shackles of slavery.

Sabotage emerged as another potent form of resistance employed by Igbo women to disrupt the oppressive slave system, through acts like damaging tools, slowing down work, and feigning illness to disrupt the smooth operation of the plantation or slave ship. Others would use their knowledge of herbs and medicine to poison their enslavers to render them incapacitated. By engaging in sabotage, Igbo women asserted their agency and defied the dehumanizing treatment inflicted upon them, these actions not only disrupted the operations of the slave system but also served as a bold statement of protest against subjugation.

While in the context of slave revolts, Igbo women played significant roles in organising and leading uprisings against the oppressive slave trade, these women often risked their lives, mobilized their communities, coordinated resistance efforts, and actively participated in rebellions aimed at overthrowing the institution of slavery. Igbo women's involvement in slave revolts was marked by their courage, determination, and unwavering commitment to freedom and justice, their leadership in these uprisings not only challenged the existing order but also inspired others to join in the liberation struggle.

The Igbo women played significant multifaceted roles in the slave trade economy which was deeply impactful shaping not only their own lives but also influencing the dynamics of relationships within the enslaved communities. Igbo women gained leadership roles in their communities as a result of the domestic slave trade, as wives, mothers, or traders where they wielded influence and power that could affect their relationships with enslaved men, these roles sometimes created complex power dynamics within their relationships as they navigated their responsibilities while also contending with the constraints imposed by the slave trade economy.⁸

VI. Summary

The transatlantic slave trade presented a different set of challenges for Igbo women, many were forcibly uprooted from their homes, separated from their families, and subjected to brutal conditions of the middle passage. The trauma of enslavement and the harsh realities of the plantation life profoundly impacted their relationships with the enslaved men and women, despite the hardships they faced, Igbo women demonstrated resilience and solidarity and formed bonds with fellow captives that transcended gender and cultural differences. The experiences of Igbo women in the slave trade economy revealed the complexities of gender, power, and resistance within the institution of slavery, enslaved men and women navigated a system that sought to dehumanize and exploit them, yet within this oppressive framework they discovered ways to

assert their humanity and dignity, Igbo women in particular, exhibited strength and resourcefulness in the face of unimaginable suffering.

The narratives that often overlook the resistance of Igbo women fail to capture the true essence of their strength, resilience, and unwavering support and determination in the face of adversity, Igbo women like many African Women played crucial roles in challenging oppression, preserving their cultural heritage, and fighting for their rights during challenging historical periods, by shedding light on the stories of Igbo women's resistance, we can challenge the dominant narrative that undermines their agency and perpetuates historical inaccuracies. Igbo women throughout history have been at the forefront of resistance movements, using various strategies to defy oppressive systems and assert their autonomy, from the pre-colonial era to the present day, Igbo women have shown remarkable courage and resourcefulness in resisting colonization, slavery, and patriarchal structures through protest, anti-colonial movements, or preservation of cultural practices, Igbo women have left an indelible mark on history through their resilience and defiance.

The erasure of Igbo women's resistance in historical accounts not only diminishes the significance of their contributions but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes and reinforces skewed narratives that sideline their agency, by challenging these dominant narratives and amplifying the voices of Igbo women who stood up against oppression we can rectify historical injustices and honour their legacy of strength and resistance, recognizing and celebrating the stories of Igbo women who fought for justice and equality is pivotal in painting a more accurate and inclusive picture of history.

Endnotes

- [1] Toyin Falola, "The Transatlantic Slave Trade And Slavery" (New York: Routledge, 2019), 23-25
- [2] Toyin Falola, "Igbo Women And The Transatlantic Slave Trade" *Journal Of African History* 60, No. 2 (2019) 245-246
- [3] Gloria Chukwu, "Igbo Women And Economic Transformation In South Eastern Nigeria" (New York: Routledge, 2016), 60-70
- [4] Jennifer Morgan, "African Women And The Atlantic Slave Trade" (New York: Routledge, 2018), 100-125
- [5] Jennifer Morgan, "African Women And The Atlantic Slave Trade" (New York: Routledge, 2018), 126-150
- [6] Benedict Nkenkwere, Interview By Author, January 10, 2021, Abia, Nigeria.
- [7] Madueke Obialor, Interview By Author, January 12, Abia, Nigeria.
- [8] Herbert S. Klein And Claire C. Robertson, "African Women And Slave Trade" (Cambridge University Press: 2020), 215-238