

The Amistad Saga: A Transatlantic Dialogue FREE

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Summary

The story of the slave ship *La Amistad* is one of the most celebrated and narrated 19th-century stories of the transatlantic slave trade. To fully appreciate the significance and impact of the events and circumstances of this fateful episode, it is important to examine its legacy from multiple points of the Atlantic world—vestiges of the triangular trade bequeathed by the Columbian Exchange. For a long time, the Amistad saga has been viewed from a very US-centric perspective because the dispute over the lives of the Africans rose to the US Supreme Court in 1840–1841. New archival and oral research in West Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean is rebalancing the narrative and revising the historical drama. Today, the Amistad story is widely recognized as a quintessentially Atlantic story, a story of mobility that moves back and forth across the Atlantic in multiple directions over many decades. The deployment of the phrase “Amistad saga” provides a vehicle with which to critique the socio-legal battles about transatlantic slave trading in Caribbean, North American, and West African history. The Amistad story is often described as pre-incidental to the US Civil War. The victory of African defendants is often framed as a self-congratulatory vindication of the successful resistance of enslaved Africans. The celebrated figure of “Joseph Cinqué” or Sengbe Pieh, the self-appointed leader of the Africans, and a replica of the ship itself are part of an *Amistad* memory industry that attempts to narrate the slave trade and its abolition. A new framework for teaching and understanding the history of the Amistad saga and its memory and forgetting through an Atlantic lens must combine historical and contemporary perspectives from the United States, Europe, Cuba, and Sierra Leone.

Keywords: Africa, United States, Cuba, United Kingdom, transatlantic slave trade, slavery, race, Sierra Leone, Atlantic, Mende

Subjects: Afro-Latin History, Cultural History, Slavery and Abolition

The Origins of the Amistad Saga

The phrase “Amistad saga” operates as a popular catchall for one of the more curious 19th-century socio-legal battles about transatlantic slave trading in Caribbean, North American, and West African history. *La Amistad* was the name of a slave ship (see figure 1), a two-masted

schooner, owned by a Spaniard living in Cuba, that regularly transported illegally enslaved Africans in the 1830s, more than a decade after new slave imports were prohibited in the Spanish colony.



Figure 1. The schooner *Amistad* under sail, 2017; replica of original.

Source. With permission ©Discovering Amistad.

Several days out of Havana, the enslaved Africans violently overthrew the Cuban crew and then unwittingly sailed the ship into US waters. US government agents seized the vessel, along with the Africans and surviving crew, in late 1839 off the coast of Long Island, New York, and it subsequently became part of a three-year legal dispute.

United States v. Schooner Amistad (40 U.S. (15 Pet.) 518 (1841)) is the legal citation to the 1841 US Supreme Court decision, wherein the ship's owners and their advocates, including the sitting US president Martin Van Buren, lost their case against the Africans' abolitionist champions, led by former president John Quincy Adams. The struggle between abolitionists and proslavery forces was so pronounced in the United States by 1840 that the dispute became a *cause célèbre* for many antislavery campaigners, foreshadowing legal conflicts that would ultimately result in the outbreak of war in 1861. Numerous amateur and professional historians and journalists have recounted the successful resistance of the enslaved African survivors and their return to Freetown. A variety of memorials exist in different parts of the world, attesting to the lasting legacy of the fraught legal dispute over the status and identity

of the Africans. With the release of *Amistad*, a 1997 feature film by preeminent US director Steven Spielberg and screenwriter David Franzoni, based on the 1987 book by historian Howard Jones, the story of the famous ship once again returned to public attention.

Bringing these and other threads into conversation, this article offers a framework for teaching and understanding the history of the Amistad saga and its memory and forgetting through an Atlantic lens, combining historical and contemporary perspectives from the United States, Cuba, and Sierra Leone. As the Amistad story may be familiar terrain to some and less clear to others, this article first offers a short synopsis in order to set the stage for understanding how the Amistad saga became the crucible of historical, historiographical, and memory studies debate it is today. It then explores the history and legacy of the Amistad story in three interrelated parts of the globe, drawn tightly together because of the world's single largest forced migration, the transatlantic slave trade.

In the United States, the Amistad story is cited by some historians as an early volley of the US Civil War. For others, the African victory over European slave-trading oppressors is grounds for self-congratulatory vindication of the moral righteous of the abolitionist cause. And today, imagery of Sengbe Pieh (see figure 2) and a replica of the ship itself are part of an *Amistad* memory industry that attempts to narrate the slave trade and its abolition.



Figure 2. *Joseph Cinqué* by Nathaniel Jocelyn, c.1840.

Source. Original held by the New Haven Colony Historical Society, New Haven, CT. Public domain.

In Sierra Leone, Sengbe Pieh also looms large in nationalist histories of resistance to colonialism and slavery. Among Sierra Leoneans, Sengbe Pieh is one of the most recognizable historical individuals. In Cuba, the historical study and contemporary memorialization of the transatlantic slave trade and Cuba's involvement in the transport and enslavement of more than 1 million Africans from across the continent differ sharply. The Amistad story may be marginal to other Cuban slavery dynamics, yet renewed attention has shifted public and pedagogical perspectives.

A Synopsis of the Amistad Story

Sometime in mid- to late 1838, Spanish Cuban slave traders moored off the West African coast, between the British protectorate of Sierra Leone and the independent Republic of Liberia, secretly filled one or more slave ships with human cargo, drawing primarily from the slave factories owned and run by Pedro Blanco, a notorious slave trader operating in the region known as Galinhas, on either side of the Sulima or Moya River (see figure 3).

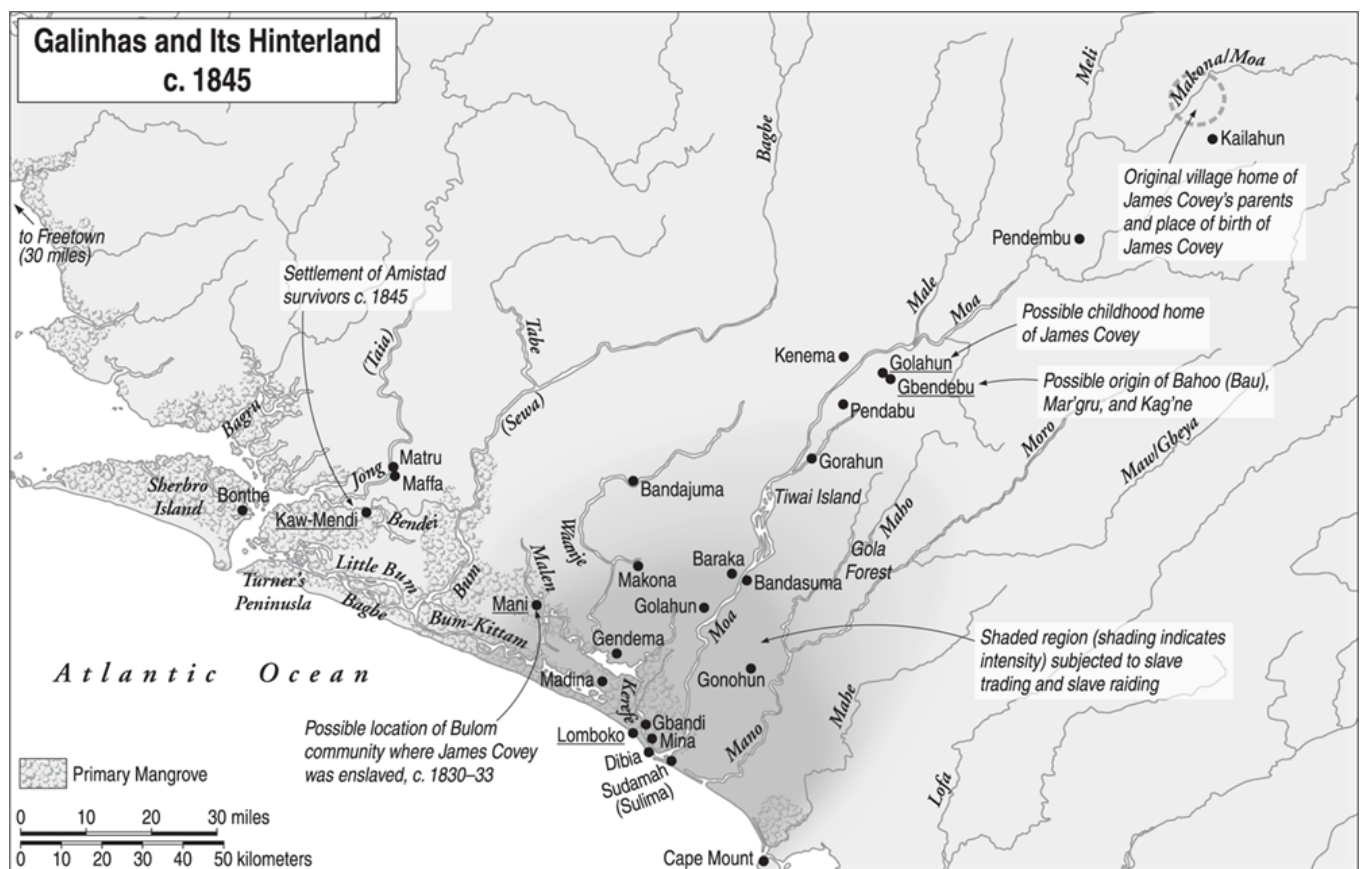


Figure 3. Galinhas and its hinterland, c.1845.

Source. Phil Schwartzberg, Meridien Mapping.

Over the course of the next several months, these ships sailed across the Atlantic, evading the blockade of the illegal trade by the British navy, arriving in Havana, the largest slave port on the island of Cuba. Illegally, they disembarked their cargo of enslaved Africans, whereupon these captives were taken to barracoons: holding cells close to the main harbor. Over the course of the next months, the African survivors of these voyages were renamed and branded as if they were born in Cuba, and sold by auction to planters and other merchants. The masters of a ship known as *La Amistad*—namely, the ship's captain Ramón Ferrer, and two others, José Ruiz and Pedro Montez, all Spanish nationals—acquired fifty-three African adults and children, and boarded them on their vessel with the intention of taking them to their sugar plantations in the vicinity of Santa María del Puerto del Príncipe, today known as Camagüey. They sailed from Havana on June 27, 1839, for what would normally be a swift four-day journey.

On July 2, Cinqué freed himself from his slave shackles and liberated others. In the struggle that ensued, the Africans first killed the ship's cook, a man known as Celestino, likely also from Africa, who had told them that they were to be killed and eaten. They killed Ferrer, and two Africans also died in the struggle. While two sailors escaped in a lifeboat, the Africans spared the lives of Ruiz and Montez, on the condition that they would return the ship to Africa. Among the surviving crew was Antonio, also likely from Sierra Leone, who served as an interpreter. The vessel and its new owners then attempted to navigate their return to Galinhas, but they were deceived by the Spaniards.

In August 1839, a US government vessel detected a schooner, crewed by Africans, off Long Island. Some of the Africans had laid anchor and landed at Montauk. The boat was escorted to New London, Connecticut, whereupon the Africans (including three girls known by the names Mar'gru, Kag'ne, and Te'me, and two boys, Ka'le and Antonio) were transferred to New Haven and imprisoned. The arrival of the Africans in New Haven attracted the attention of the recently established Connecticut Anti-Slavery Society. Various parties filed a series of suits, including libel of salvage under admiralty law, either to claim ownership of or to release the Africans. A grand jury convened to consider whether to indict the Africans for murder of the captain, Ramón Ferrer, and piracy. Competing suits were filed, and among the first issues debated was whether the Africans were legally cargo or people recently illegally smuggled from West Africa. Whether they were cargo or people rested in turn on whether they were slaves, which hinged on whether they were enslaved legally. Depending on which court had ultimate jurisdiction and how it ruled, various laws and treaties would direct specific outcomes.

In preparation for the hearing, an ad hoc defense coalition known as the Amistad Committee formed, comprising prominent New York and New Haven abolitionists Lewis Tappan, Amos Townsend, Timothy Bishop, and others. It raised funds for the welfare of the Africans, hired lawyers, including Roger Sherman Baldwin, and engaged university faculty and students, such as Yale University professor Josiah Willard Gibbs. Most importantly, the abolitionists located James Kaweli Covey, a teenage African crew member in the Royal Navy, and liberated formerly enslaved child. With the translation skills of Covey, the Africans were able to tell their story in their own words in court. In January 1840, Judge Andrew Judson of the

Connecticut US district court ruled that the Africans aboard *La Amistad* were free because they were not born in Cuba but had been illegally smuggled into Cuba in violation of international laws and treaties.

The identity, status, and origin of the Africans formed the kernel of the competing legal claims. If the Africans were legally slaves, as the purported owners claimed, it could only have been because of two possible reasons. Either they were born in Cuba, and were thus slaves of legal slave parents, or they were imported legally into Cuba prior to the closure of the legal importation in 1820. If the Africans were illegally enslaved and recently brought to Cuba (*bozales*), as their defendants insisted, it could be the result of several scenarios. They could have been free Cubans, illegally kidnapped and enslaved in Cuba. They may have been enslaved on another Caribbean island, such as the French territories of Guadeloupe and Martinique, or the Spanish territory of Puerto Rico, and then illegally smuggled into Cuba in violation of an intra-colony prohibition from 1835. The Africans may even have comprised part of an illicit smuggling network into the US South. The *licencias*—the documentation produced by the Cubans as “proof” of legal enslavement—referred to the Africans as *ladinos*, or Cuban-born legal slaves. As most of the adults were clearly in their early twenties and accompanied by at least five children, legal importation prior to 1820 was deemed highly unlikely. The defense team thus sought professional expertise to substantiate their emerging hypothesis, namely that the “slaves” were of African origins and enmeshed in an expansive network of illicit Caribbean slave smuggling.¹

To considerable astonishment, the Van Buren administration appealed to the Supreme Court, effectively on behalf of the purported slave owners, Ruiz and Montes (who had absconded to Cuba), and the Spanish Crown. The defense team deployed former President Adams to argue for the Africans’ liberty. In March 1841, as Justice Joseph Story delivered the court’s verdict affirming their freedom, Antonio escaped to Canada. In April, four of the children relocated to Farmington, Connecticut, where they attended school and church, in preparation for their return to Africa as part of a new missionary endeavor. The adult males soon joined them, and over the next few months they toured the eastern seaboard, raising funds for their return. In November, thirty-five survivors, along with Covey and several American missionaries, sailed for Freetown, Sierra Leone, arriving in January 1842. A number quickly dispersed, in search of their homes and families. At least two successfully found family members. Several became instrumental in the foundation of the Mende Mission, an American Missionary Association (AMA) endeavor. Others appear to have become embroiled in slave trading. The last survivor of the *Amistad* ship, Ka’le (see figure 4), was photographed by a Canadian-British missionary in April 1917.

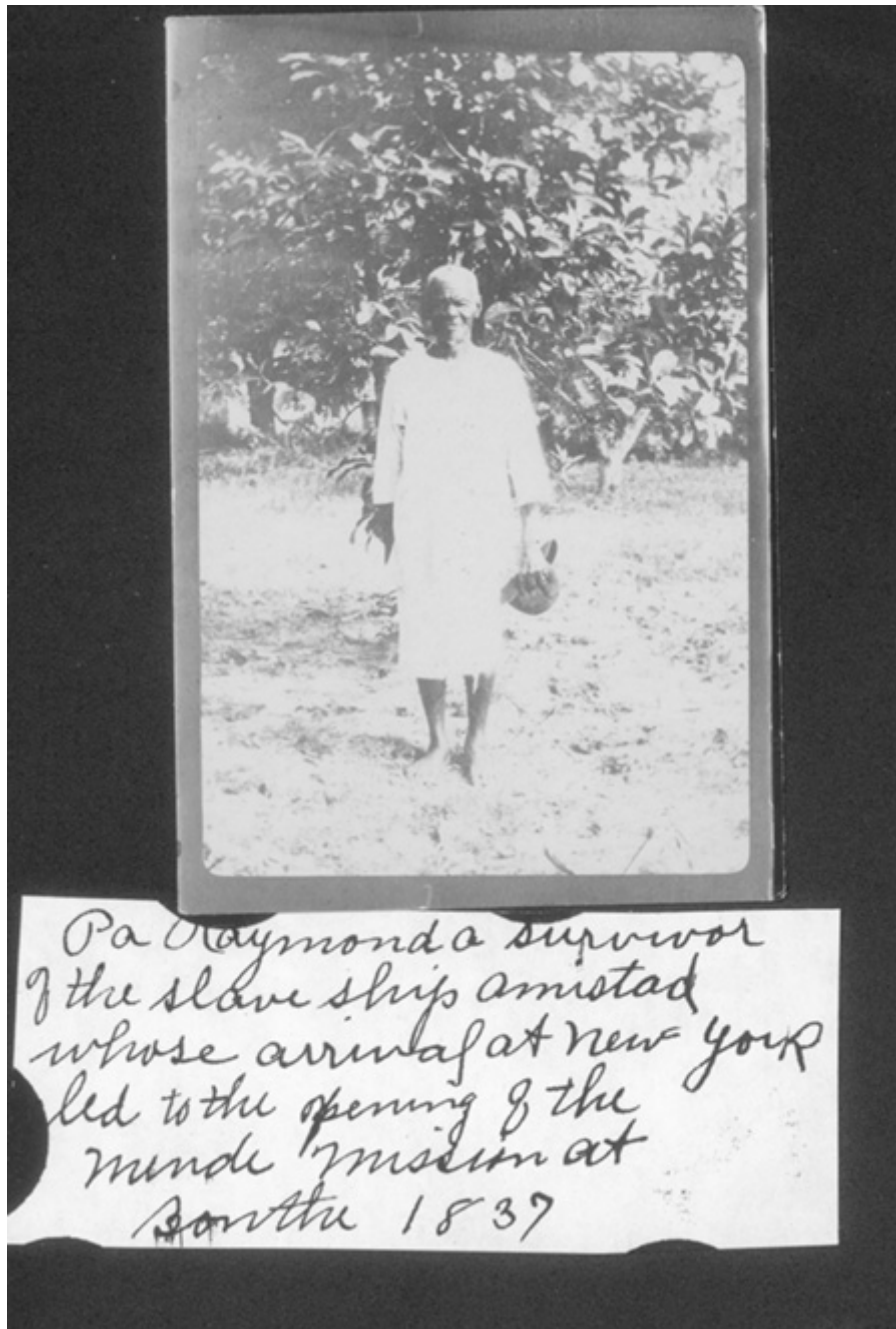


Figure 4. Pa-Raymond, c.1917, aka Ka'le.

Source. United Methodist Church Archives—GCAH, Madison, NJ.

Why an Atlantic Approach to the Amistad Dispute?

To fully appreciate the significance and impact of the Amistad saga, it is important to examine its legacy from multiple points of the Atlantic world—vestiges of the triangular trade bequeathed of the Columbian Exchange. Largely because of the US Supreme Court's involvement, the Amistad saga has long been viewed from a very US-centric perspective. New archival and oral research in West Africa, Europe, and Cuba, however, has begun to rebalance

the narrative, giving rise to a substantial revision of the historical drama. Today, the Amistad story is widely recognized as a quintessentially Atlantic story: a story of mobility that moves back and forth across the Atlantic in multiple directions over many decades.² Indeed, the dispute about the origins of the *Amistad* Africans is in many respects foundational to what today is called Atlantic studies insofar as it is the first court case where an Atlantic contextual argument was advanced—one that drew on knowledge about the entire Atlantic dimensions of the slave trade from multiple perspectives.

Courts had an unusually public profile in slavery disputes, which provided a capacity to push public conversations in new directions, forcing divergent classes and social groups to critically re-examine their assumptions about morality, science, and justice.³ In the opinion of Roger Baldwin, the central issue requiring “expertise,” and one which would resolve all the overlapping suits and countersuits, concerned the question of whether or not the seemingly African men aboard *La Amistad* were *born* in Africa, and thus free, or slaves from Cuba, either born in Cuba, or transported legally prior to prohibition in 1820. The defense team sought to prove the origin of the Africans by attempting to pinpoint their languages, collecting their narratives in their own words, and setting this against what was known about Cuban slave economies and the illegal West African slave trade. By structuring the defense in such a manner, and making affirmative claims, attorneys for the *Amistad* Africans triangulated their identities, and in so doing advanced an Atlantic contextual argument. In this way, the Amistad Committee’s strategy speaks to the emerging emphasis on empiricism in both antislavery and proslavery ideology and activism.⁴

Expertise subpoenaed by the Amistad Committee, the ad hoc defense committee based in New York and New Haven, in the form of reports and testimonies by experts, formed the intellectual architecture about which the legal defense hung. Individuals with professional university training testified to the alleged identity of the Africans, the nature of the illegal slave trade in West Africa, and the nature of the Caribbean slavery, and contributed to speculation about the likely fate awaiting the Africans if they were forced to return to Cuba. Anchored by this rich body of evidence, the defense team developed a persuasive argument about origins of the captive Africans and the jeopardy they faced. Coupled to this was the experience and knowledge of Covey, a former liberated enslaved child, whose personal story mirrored many of the aspects of the *Amistad* Africans.

Richard Robert Madden, an Irish university-trained physician, testified about the nature of slavery in Cuba and the massive influx of illegally enslaved Africans, based on his personal observations and work for the Mixed Commissions that adjudicated the seizure of illegal slave ships. Madden’s deposition substantiated how the Cuban economy remained entirely dependent on the importation of slaves, *illegally*, from Africa. Yale Divinity professor, Josiah Willard Gibbs Sr., testified to the *Amistad* Africans’ West African language and cultural and geographical knowledge. After creating a list of Mende words, with Covey’s translation assistance, he and his students interviewed the imprisoned Africans and constructed basic life histories of many of them. Gibbs’s testimony was designed to emphasize the African-ness of the captives by highlighting information that they could only possess if they were Africa-born. And the Atlantic traveler and author D. Francis Bacon offer personal observations about the

illicit West African slave trade. Bacon's testimony interwove the economies of Cuba, the United States, and West Africa, and his description of conflict and warfare further corroborated the survivors' narratives.

Before the Supreme Court in January 1841, the expertise and evidence assembled to support the claim that the imprisoned individuals were Africa-born was incontrovertible. Justice Story observed,

It is plain beyond controversy, if we examine the evidence, that these negroes never were the lawful slaves . . . They are natives of Africa, and were kidnapped there, and were unlawfully transported to Cuba, in violation of the laws and treaties . . . cogent and irresistible is the evidence.⁵

The foundation of Story's ruling was the Atlantic argument postulated by the defense, consisting of three elements. Linguistic data supported the view that the only tongues the *Amistad* captives spoke were African languages. The economy of Cuba depended on the steady flow of illegally imported slaves, insofar as the Cuban government condoned and participated in illegal imports. And the West African political economy was completely wed to the evasion of the legal Atlantic abolition regime. Even though the eponymous vessel was a coastal schooner, originally scheduled for a three- or four-day voyage along the Cuban coast, the story of *La Amistad* is indeed a truly Atlantic story, as Tony Buba's 2014 documentary *Ghosts of Amistad* demonstrates.

The Afterlives of *La Amistad* in North America

Much has been written about the Amistad saga, and space does not permit this article to here do justice to the voluminous scholarship and artistic work. The majority of scholarly and popular writings, however, reflect what might be characterized as an instance of American exceptionalism. Scholarship, for the most part, has focused on the capture and prosecution of the Africans and their reception in the United States, and has been largely the work of American authors.

The creation of the Amistad Research Center by the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries at Fisk University in 1966 was one part of a larger effort to broaden the story to incorporate the history and documentation of slavery, race relations, African American community development, and the Civil Rights Movement in creative and accessible ways. The Amistad Center became an independent non-profit in 1969, and relocated to Dillard University in New Orleans. In 1986 it found a permanent home at Tulane University. Today the Amistad Research Center contains vast holdings of papers by artists, educators, authors, business leaders, clergy, musicians, as well as records of the working classes of laborers and farmers. At the center of its collection, however, are the records of the AMA. The AMA was a direct outgrowth of the fundraising and mobilization efforts to support the repatriation of the *Amistad* survivors, who were accompanied by Black and White American missionaries. The

AMA, an abolitionist and interdenominational organization founded in 1846, supported Christian proselytization in Sierra Leone and beyond, as well as assisting enslaved peoples in the United States and abolitionism more generally.

Because the self-congratulatory focus has been on American legal process, the involvement of a former US president, and the triumphalism of American abolitionists, among related themes, it is no wonder that a celebration of American exceptionalism informed Steven Spielberg's eponymous film in 1997. Indeed, as Marcus Rediker has observed, the dramatization only served to augment popular memory.⁶ A number of scholars and film critics have disassembled various elements of the Hollywood dramatization of the *Amistad* trial, but space does not permit this article to survey this in depth. Film critics and historians rounded on the spurious historicity of *Amistad*, which at times seems to try to tell the entire history of the more than 400 years of the transatlantic trade through one brief moment.⁷ While testimonies from those who made the horrific voyage described many dying, the dramatization drew on an unrelated notorious crime, that of the *Zong*, some sixty years earlier.⁸ In one particularly poignant scene, the character of "Sengbe Pieh/Joseph Cinqué," played by the Beninese actor Djimon Hounsou, in a trance-like state, stands, faces the judge, and chants "Give us, us free!" While a powerful and persuasive testament to inhumanity to man, it is also a complete and utter fabrication. Not only was the adult imprisoned in New Haven and not present in the Washington, DC, court, but the utterance itself is an infantilizing corruption of the penultimate line of a letter to Adams by Ka'le, one of five African children aboard the *Amistad*.⁹ Whereas Spielberg excused his ahistorical decision with the claim that he was telling "everyone's story," the erasure of the young protagonist was largely unnoticed.¹⁰

Notwithstanding these numerous historical inaccuracies, the movie is noteworthy for how it served to ingrain in American consciousness the erroneous idea that persons seized from their respective African societies arrived in the Americas as "slaves," rather than as free persons taken into captivity for the journey across the Middle Passage and enslaved upon arrival. Thus, scholarship on Sengbe Pieh and his kin came to be recast within the wider Atlantic history of leaders of slave resistance, alongside the likes of Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and Sam Sharpe.¹¹ While the latter two were unsuccessful in their respective uprisings, the *Amistad* revolt has been too often cast in some ways as reminiscent of the Haitian Revolution led by Toussaint Louverture. While originally destined for the sugar fields of Matanzas, Sengbe Pieh and his codefendants were never enslaved in the plantation economies. Thus, it was not particularly surprising that the broader historiography of slave resistance has eclipsed that of the *Amistad* captives from West Africa. If the notion of American exceptionalism has any meaning and legitimacy in this context, it can be attributed to the fact that a group of Africans who took over control of a slave ship en route to a potential life of slavery in the Americas preserved their freedom via a court system itself created by the American Revolution.¹²

Indeed, the Supreme Court case continues to loom large in most narratives of the Amistad saga, and it has become the subject of a number of significant artistic ventures, such as the 1938 three-panel mural by Hale Aspacio Woodruff at the Savery Library, Talladega College (where an image of the ship is embedded in the design of the lobby floor) [see The Amistad

Murals [\[https://museum.talladega.edu/amistad-murals\]](https://museum.talladega.edu/amistad-murals).¹³ Indeed, Spielberg's film is only one of several important cultural manifestations of the Amistad story that continue to echo across the nation in music, art, and cultural performance. The ten-minute-long epic poem *Middle Passage* [\[https://www.poetryfoundation.org/play/75890\]](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/play/75890) by American poet and essayist Robert Hayden, written in the 1940s, explored the slave trade and incorporates various elements of the Amistad saga. Published in the 1962 in *Collected Poems*, and drawing directly on African testimony in the trials, it is an extraordinarily vivid account of the horrors of transatlantic transportation. Indeed, in American renditions and adaptations of the Amistad story, Cinqué looms large. In the Kanye West song "Never Let Me Down," performance poet and spoken word artist, J. Ivy (the stage name of James Ivy Richardson II), connects the *Amistad* leader to an earlier luminary of African diasporic history, Kunta Kinte, the protagonist of Alex Haley's *Roots*, rapping, "I'm tryin' to give us us free like Sinke."

Hayden's poem was a key point of inspiration for composer Anthony Davis's opera, *Amistad*. Today Davis is perhaps most famous for his Pulitzer Prize-winning opera *Central Park Five*, but his fourth opera tackled the Amistad saga, and is composed in grand opera style featuring material drawn from African music and contemporary American styles. *Amistad*, with a libretto by his cousin, the poet Thulani Davis, premiered at the Chicago Lyric on November 29, 1997 (see figure 5).



Figure 5. Dan Ross as Cinqué in Anthony Davis's opera *Amistad*, Chicago Lyric Opera, 1997.

The two acts, running two hours and forty minutes, feature five principals (tenor, bass-baritone, bass, mezzo, and tenor), twenty minor characters, chorus of forty-eight, and orchestra of sixty-five. (Three selections include Margru's Aria, The Goddess of the Waters Aria, and the Testimony of the Captives <https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/27225/Amistad--Anthony-Davis/>.) The opera opens with the *Amistad* languishing off the coast of Long Island, and features a haunting opening scene sung by the Trickster God. Act 1 moves the audience from the boat, to New London and New Haven, and the home of President Adams. Act 2 narrates the survivors' ordeal via details revealed in the trial, concluding with their victory, liberty, and return to Sierra Leone. The opera itself was preceded by a symposium about the events surrounding the *Amistad* and the new opera, which itself resulted in the publication of a marvelous *Amistad Sourcebook*, featuring primary texts, a timeline of events, notes on the cast and crew, and essays by Anthony Appiah, Robin Kelly, Clifton Johnson, Mohammed Barrie, and others.¹⁴ *Amistad* was revised and relaunched in 2008 at the Spoleto Festival.¹⁵ The shorter tighter version was widely acclaimed.¹⁶ Since the relaunch of *Amistad*, Davis also composed the *Amistad Symphony*, a thirty-five-minute work of four movements, premiered by the La Jolla Symphony Orchestra in February 2009.¹⁷

In the United States in 2021, the memorialization of Amistad saga continues to reverberate in fascinating and creative ways. The Amistad Committee, Inc. advocates for the memory of and memorialization of the Amistad saga, which its website describes as "the first human rights case in US history."¹⁸ Founded in 1988, the non-profit corporation began as an effort to commemorate 1989 as the 150th anniversary of historic trial that took place in New Haven. After meeting to discuss various ways to memorialize the important milestone, the committee settled on the installation of a sculpture in a prominent setting. The sculpture was envisioned as "a permanent memorial of the Amistad Revolt, a memorial that would constantly remind us of the long struggle for freedom and equality, in this instance by Africans, whose sole desire was to go home, to their family and country." After conducting a national search for a design, and raising funds, the Amistad Committee engaged Ed Hamilton of Louisville, Kentucky (see figure 6). Today Hamilton's fourteen-foot bronze sculpture of Pieh stands before the City Hall (see figures 7-13), only a short distance from where Pieh was imprisoned a century and a half earlier.



Figure 6. Sculptor Ed Hamilton in his Kentucky studio.

Source. With permission ©Ed Hamilton.



Figure 7. Top view of Hamilton's sculpture.

Source. With permission ©Ed Hamilton.



Figure 8. Quarter view of Hamilton's sculpture.

Source. With permission ©Ed Hamilton.



Figure 9. Cinqué's Africans, with him on board the *Amistad*, from Hamilton's sculpture.

Source. With permission ©Ed Hamilton.



Figure 10. Cinqué in Africa, from Hamilton's sculpture.

Source. With permission ©Ed Hamilton.



Figure 11. Mende helmet mask, from Hamilton's sculpture.

Source. With permission ©Ed Hamilton.



Figure 12. Front view of Hamilton's sculpture.

Source. With permission ©Ed Hamilton.



Figure 13. African side of Hamilton's sculpture.

Source. With permission ©Ed Hamilton.

The sculpture adorning City Hall is but one part of a wider regional and national memorialization. In 1976, Warren Marr and others rented the schooner *Western Union*, renamed it *Amistad*, and sailed it in the Tall Ship Regatta in New York.¹⁹ The Amistad Committee, Inc. subsequently advocated for the building of a replica ship, *Amistad America*, to

provide “a peaceful means by which individuals and communities can learn together and address the issues of racism and intolerance with a positive goal of building bridges of mutual respect and understanding.”²⁰ The project took four years to design and build, and on March 25, 2000, the Mystic Seaport Museum Shipyard launched the 128-foot-long schooner. Over the past two decades it has visited Canada, Azores, the United Kingdom, Portugal, the Canary Islands, Sierra Leone, Cape Verde, Barbados, and Cuba.²¹ The vessel (see figure 1) was refurbished and since 2016 has been managed by Discovering Amistad, a non-profit supported by the State of Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development.²² In a related development, in 2017 Molly Russell designed a National Park Service Amistad Freedom-Seeking Story, a walking and driving tour with fourteen site visits, that journeys through Connecticut, in partnership with the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Offices.²³ The tour draws travelers to New Haven, New London, and Farmington and its Hartford surroundings, including the New London Customhouse, the Old Statehouse where the trial took place, Austin F. Williams’s carriage house where many of the African males resided, the First Church of Christ where many were baptized as Christians, the Horace Cowles House, where Te’me lived and attended school, and other venues.

Cuba and the Historical Memory of Slavery and *La Amistad*

On March 25, 2010, Cuban political authorities, preteen students, and leaders of the Santería religion congregated by Havana’s harbor, during a state-orchestrated ceremony, to cheer for the arrival of the Freedom Schooner *Amistad*. The Cuban state-owned newspaper *Rebel Youth* echoed the words of the renowned ethnographer and progovernment intellectual Miguel Barnet. “This gesture,” Barnet said, “could signify a crack on that cruel blockade that the North American government has imposed upon us for so many years.”²⁴ For Cuban politicians and their controlled media, the central theme of the event fell into the field of international relations. The *Amistad* was the exceptional case of a US-flagged ship calling on the island since Fidel Castro took power in 1959. Those days, tensions were running high in Cuba. A month earlier, Orlando Zapata Tamayo, an Afro-Cuban political prisoner, had died in jail after a lengthy hunger strike, an event followed by the repression of peaceful public protests by the female dissidents known as the Ladies in White. Simultaneously, on the other side of the Florida Strait, Cuban-American artists Gloria Estefan, Olga Guillot, Willy Chirino, and Pitbull headed protests in Miami against what a portion of the Cuban-American community perceived as a soft stance by the Obama administration against the authoritarian Cuban regime. The air-conditioned replica of the *Amistad* became, as the original vessel in 1839, a reason to debate the meaning of civil and political freedoms.

The original purpose of the Amistad Project, however, was not easing political tensions between Cuba and the United States. When the founder of the Amistad Research Center, Warren Marr II, conceived in the 1990s the idea of building a replica of the vessel, the stated goal was “a sailing classroom going from port-to-port educating youth on the story of the Amistad Revolt and its lessons.”²⁵ Following the model of 19th-century Baltimore clippers, the Mystic Seaport Museum’s Restoration Shipyard in Connecticut built the schooner, employing

traditional skills and techniques. The deck was made out of iroko trees donated by Sierra Leone, the region of origin of the 1839 rebels. In June 2000, the vessel sailed for the first time. It would take another ten years, and the more flexible Obama administration, for the ship to weigh anchor in Cuban ports, a high-profile public diplomacy initiative that required the direct involvement of the United Nations (UN), the US State Department, and the Cuban government.

The date of arrival, March 25, was also symbolic for another reason. It marked the “International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” a UN observance designated in 2007. The visit of the vessel was intended to be an incentive for reflecting on and reckoning with the long history of Cuban involvement in the forced transportation of Africans across the Atlantic and their subsequent enslavement in sugar plantations. The eighteen members of the crew toured slaving historical landmarks in Matanzas and Havana and enjoyed Afro-Cuban performances. Among the *Amistad* passengers was Katrina Browne, the director of the 2008 documentary *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*, about the involvement of her DeWolf ancestors in the slave trade. That week, the Cuban television broadcasted her film alongside Spielberg’s *Amistad*.

The anchoring of the vessel was also intended to be a moment for discussing the long-term effects of slavery and existing racial inequalities on the island. This point on the agenda, although overlooked by the Cuban media, was highlighted by activists. Norberto Mesa, the founder of the Cofradía de la Negritud, an Afro-Cuban antiracist association, expressed the persistence of racial discrimination in Cuba. “The issue,” he said to journalists, “is gaining visibility, which gives us hope that progress will continue to be made.”²⁶ Expressing open views about ongoing racism is not an official position accepted by the Cuban government, since, according to Fidel Castro, the revolution had eliminated racial discrimination. It is still considered divisive by government authorities, which is part of a national historical narrative highlighting *mestizaje* (of mixed racial heritage) and “Cubanness” over racial differences. Being Cuban supersedes skin color. “What could divide us,” the activist Mesa added, “is precisely the failure to deal with this problem.”²⁷ In the context of the *Amistad* visit, the Cofradía de la Negritud awarded a prize to Eric Corvalán for his 2008 documentary film *Raza* (Race), on racial discrimination in Cuba. On March 31, the *Amistad* left the island, the international press turned off their cameras, and many of the topics discussed during the visit retreated to their traditional space of silences. That week was the only moment in Cuba’s history that the events that took place on the *Amistad* in 1839 became a matter of public discussion.

In Cuba, historical references to the slave rebellion on the schooner *Amistad* are scarce. Most of what are considered canonic monographs on slavery or the slave trade in Cuba fail to acknowledge the *Amistad* case as relevant. Thus, Jose Luciano Franco’s *Comercio Clandestino de Esclavos*, the only Cuban comprehensive text on the Cuban slave trade, does not mention the case. Not until 2012 did two historians, after extensive archival research, undertake the task of telling the story of the event from the Cuban perspective.²⁸ Some reasons explain this historiographical and public silence.

Although the existence itself of the schooner *Amistad* resulted from the survival of the Cuban slave trade in the 19th century, the legal case debated on the US Supreme Court was, foremost, an American affair. The transnational saga of the *Amistad* encompasses not only the three regions analyzed here but also various slaving national carriers such as Portugal, Spain, and the United States. The political, legal, and public discussions that the case produced in the United States resulted from long-term historical tensions between abolitionists and proslavery forces, a part of the long road leading to the Civil War. In Cuba, however, there were no abolitionist movements or serious debates on the morality or legality of maintaining the institution of slavery. The uncontested political complacency on the island toward systems of enslavement is a fundamental reason explaining why there was a deliberate silence around the successful slave revolt. The case was not publicized, debated, or printed for the same reasons that the Cuban elite censored, in the same year of 1839, the papal bull issued by Gregory XVI condemning slavery; the risks were too high. It was, for the elite, dangerous.

The African rebellion, Cuban planters knew, could have served as a revolutionary example to the hundreds of thousands of slaves working on plantations across the island. In the eyes of the Cuban elite, the rebels were murderers rewarded by the American legal system. Had they been captured by the Cubans, then their fate would have been substantially different. Besides, the public diffusion of the news would have brought attention to the fraudulent commercial endeavors of prominent political and business figures in Havana and their connections with American merchants. Richard Madden, who served as the British Superintendent of Liberated Africans in Havana for three years and a witness during the *Amistad* legal case, described the context of Cuba concerning slavery, the involvement of colonial authorities, and individual names of people sustaining the illegal trade. Slave trafficking, he acknowledged, occurred publicly on the island with the participation of most subjects of the Spanish Crown.

Of course, colonial and metropolitan political authorities, as well as the elite from both sides of the Atlantic, were well aware of the case unfolding in New England. As explained, Spaniards tried, unsuccessfully, to win in the US court their right to own the rebels. On September 11, 1839, Bernardo Tallon wrote from New Orleans to the wealthy creole writer Domingo del Monte, a slaveholder residing in Havana, who, contradictorily, was a soft sympathizer of the abolitionist cause,

I send you a slip which gives some particulars about the Schooner Amistad bound from Havana to P.to Principe when the negroes on board revolted. Observe how these newspaper Editors set about giving a description of the individuals, their African names & further promise a lithographic of the Ringleader. Consider now, if the Havana newspaper had such occurrence to notice, in what a different style they would have done it. This is characteristic.²⁹

The combination of a heavily militarized colonial system and a growing slave plantation complex created sociopolitical conditions that differed from the neighboring United States. By the year of the rebellion, 1839, the transatlantic slave trade had been illegal for all the Spanish possessions for almost two decades, yet near 20,000 enslaved Africans disembarked

in Cuba. The system was far from ending: the transatlantic slave trade to the island would persist for nearly thirty years more. This forced migration input had profound demographic implications. According to a census from 1842, of 1,037,624 inhabitants, 448,291 were considered White, 152,838 free Blacks, and 436,495 were enslaved people. These figures led to a straightforward conclusion: Europeans were outnumbered. Fifty-six percent of the Cuban population was non-White, and Africans kept pouring into the island.

The thriving existence of the institution of slavery, the slave trade, and the demographic composition of the island triggered anxieties among the Cuban elite and the colonial government. There was a genuine fear among the slaving class that a similar slave rebellion, as it unfolded in Saint-Domingue in 1792, could also happen in Cuba. Such fears were crucial in the massive repression against slaves and the free colored population in Cuba in 1844, known as the year of the lash. In this context, any circulation of the successful *Amistad* rebellion was, understandably, seen as dangerous.

How competent were the Cuban colonial authorities in containing the circulation of the news surrounding the rebellion on *Amistad*? That is a question that remains unanswered since there has not been historical research on the subject. Yet, it is known that news of this kind spread through oral channels across the Caribbean among Africans and their descendants. Historian Ada Ferrer has detailed how the years-long events surrounding the Haitian Revolution circulated on the island across all social classes.³⁰ Likewise, Matt Childs has demonstrated that Caribbean rebellions, such as the 1812 Aponte rebellion, had an impact on conspiracies against colonial institutions.³¹ For those living under the oppressive Cuban slaving system, the *Amistad* rebellion could be an example to follow. Most likely, the events were known by, at least, the wealthier and well-connected free Afro-descendant elite. For a city like Havana, a thriving commercial entrepôt with a constant American presence, the legal case unfolding in the United States must not have gone unnoticed. The question if the event became, like the Haitian Revolution, an example for the oppressed to fight for the rights, remains open for researchers.

Not only was the *Amistad* rebellion an American legal affair, a publicized event, and part of the legal discourse, but the event continues to be cherished and remembered for historical and social reasons. While most of the US ruling class pushed forward in the 20th century a national identity based on segregation, racial differences, and openly legal discrimination, Cuba's sense of identity was built, more in political discourse than in everyday life, upon the notion that being Cuban transcends racial differences, that the Cuban identity was culturally and socially a melting pot. This national narrative diluted racial claims within a history that, although it supposedly cherished the African heritage, continued highlighting white-skinned actors. The *Amistad*, never a substantial part of the written Cuban history, did not have space in this mindset.

The case of the *Amistad* is, in the United States, a tale of national reconciliation. It fits both sides of the historical racial divide: the established Euro-American legal system granted recognition to the freedom that the African rebels had achieved by themselves. Such a story could be proudly displayed either by those seeking justice during the civil rights era or the political and social establishment. It could make a film that saw moviegoers leaving the

theater feeling good about themselves. The social components fueling the memory of the *Amistad* did not exist in Cuba. They still do not exist. Without a similar history of abolitionism, Jim Crow segregation, a Civil Rights Movement, or Black Lives Matter, Cuba has lacked the living reasons to dig in the past and re-examine the legacy of slavery on the island. Yet the long-term effects of the system that produced the Amistad saga are, like in other regions in the Americas, a palpable reality. While in the United States and in Sierra Leone, the rebels of the *Amistad* became heroes, in Cuba they are fairly unknown. The case was not publicized on the island in the 1840s, it was not included in history textbooks or academic monographs during the 20th century, and it is not a celebrated memory of resistance.

The *Amistad* Survivors in Sierra Leone

According to Rediker, the victorious *Amistad* Africans were faced with a decision of great import in their newfound freedom: To stay in the United States or to leave? The task of ultimately deciding that momentous decision was placed in the hands of the revered leader of the group, whom the others characterized as their “President,” the “president of the poor.”³² Pieh and his compatriots ultimately decided on returning to their native Sierra Leone. Would the American government help in facilitating the repatriation of the group to their native country? Or would their return be arranged and facilitated by American abolitionists and the Amistad Committee? An appeal was made to US President Martin Van Buren; however, the latter was decidedly opposed to the providing of the requested transportation for the return of Pieh and the *Amistad* group back to West Africa.

The *Amistad* case and the subsequent acquittal of the accused persons had made celebrities out of Pieh and his former codefendants. Thus, in a bid to secure the much-needed resources to fund their return journey home to Sierra Leone, several speaking engagements were organized by the Amistad Committee in which Pieh and the others, who had garnered enough command of the English language, spoke to diverse church audiences in the northeastern states on issues of pertinence to the cause of abolition and, to many, the relevance of biblical scriptures to their common cause.³³ The tour was by all indications a successful one, so, by 1840, enough resources had accrued to make possible the hiring of a seaworthy vessel (the *Gentleman*) for \$1,840, to transport the group back to Sierra Leone.³⁴ The group was accompanied by five American missionaries. The *Gentleman* docked at the Freetown harbor in the colony of Sierra Leone in January 1842, amid what Abraham characterized as “great excitement.”³⁵

While Sengbe Pieh and his compatriots in the Amistad saga were celebrated in the United States, their experience in Sierra Leone upon return is poorly understood. The US Information Service office in Sierra Leone commissioned a pamphlet by Sierra Leonean historian Arthur Abraham, in observance of the bicentenary of Sierra Leone, and of the bicentenary of the Constitution of the United States.³⁶ But until the work of Benjamin Lawrance on the lives of the five children who returned in 1841, and Joseph Yannielli’s research exploring the legacy of the Mende Mission (see figure 14) and the town of Mo Tappan, there has been very little substantive engagement with the legacy of the return.

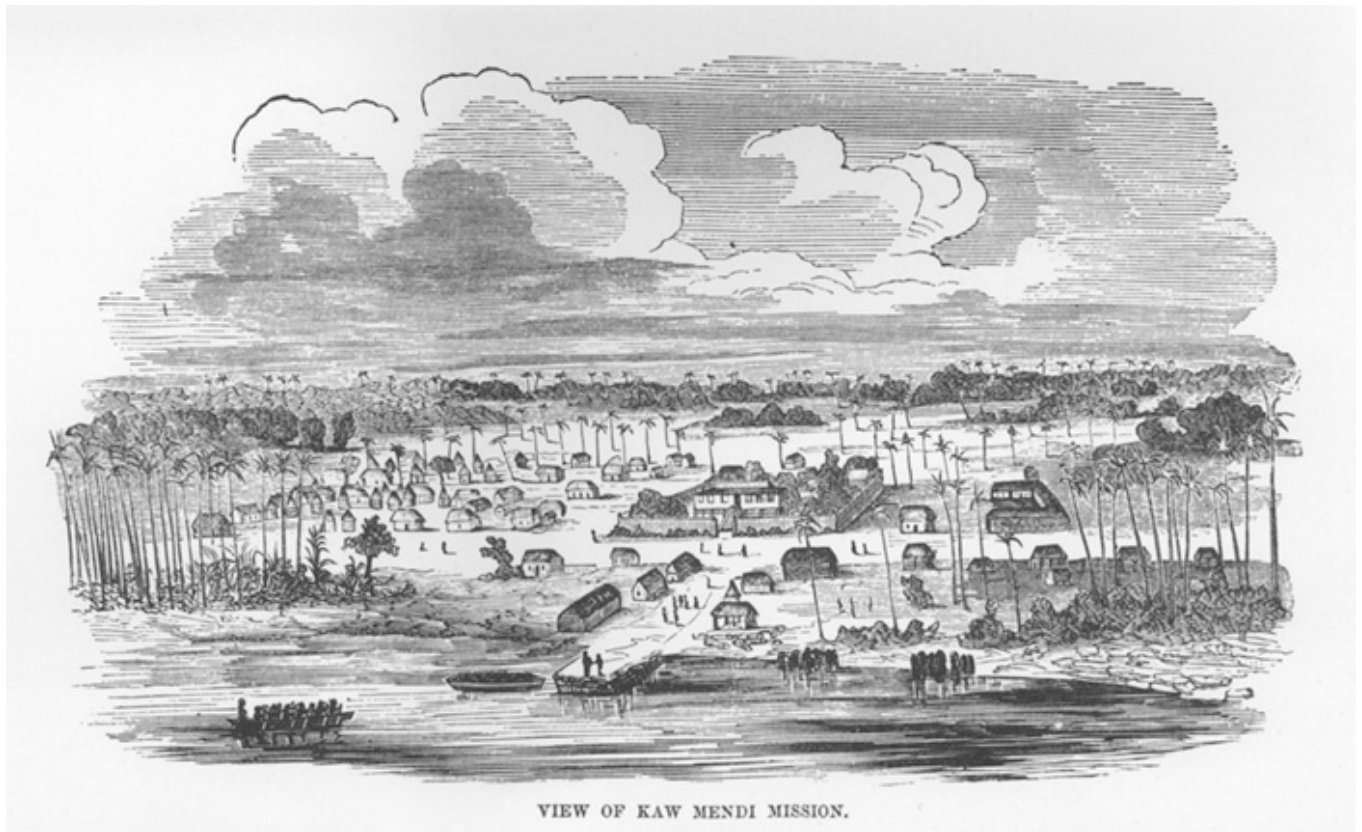


Figure 14. Kaw-Mendi Mission, c.1850.

Source. Engraving from George Thompson, *The Palm Land, or West Africa, Illustrated* (Cincinnati, 1858). Public domain.

Abraham attributed the success of the Mendi Mission by American missionaries, led by Rev. William Raymond, to the influence of Pieh, whom Raymond credited for facilitating a place for the locating of a mission station in Komende in the Sherbro region in 1844.³⁷

The story of Sengbe Pieh and the *Amistad* in Sierra Leone is a fascinating convergence of history and memory. The hero of the *Amistad* mutiny is but one of about fifty national heroes, ranging from those in the category of antislavery resisters to those engaged in the primary resistance to European colonialism, as well as others in the later anticolonial movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. The galaxy of national heroes is remembered and extolled as representative of the virtues of the people of Sierra Leone and others who collectively helped in building the country.³⁸ Pieh was elevated in the national consciousness in the 1980s and 1990s, especially during the military interregnum of the National Revolutionary Ruling Council (NPRC). Thus, *Amistad* arguably was ushered into the historical discourse after about three decades following the attainment of independence from British colonial rule.

Following their court victory in Connecticut, the *Amistad* rebels were introduced to the intertwined agenda of Western education and Christianity. As Rediker tells it, the American abolitionists saw education as “a civilizing process, a means to turn pagan savages into sober, orderly, disciplined, virtuous Christians.”³⁹ By 1840, Pieh and his compatriots were reported by the Americans as evolving into good Christians, “acquiring ideas of order and moral duty,”

“recognizing the Sabbath and giving regular attendance upon their religious exercises, &c.”⁴⁰ Pieh and his fellow Africans did not necessarily share such an “imperial view.” Their translator, James Covey, related the seeming perplexity of Pieh to the ringing of church bells on Sunday morning. Upon being informed that the ringing of the church bell was part of the Christian tradition, Pieh reportedly dismissed the practice as rather foolish, failing to see the need for the ring of bells in praying to God. His perplexity regarding the customary practices of Western Christendom notwithstanding, Pieh and his comrades dedicated themselves to benefiting from the instructions provided them, including the scriptural texts, “with undivided attention.”⁴¹ The process of social acculturation utilized by many of the evangelicals among the abolitionists included a large dose of “devotional services.” According to Rediker, “Ministers as well as laymen preached and commented on a huge array of biblical passages and subjects.”⁴² Gibbs made effective use of the Mende concept of (*N’gewoh*) God, with the assistance of Covey, who translated a prayer into the Mende language.⁴³

With the unqualified determination of Pieh and his compatriots to return back to their homeland following the conclusion of their court case, and after several speaking tours and church meetings, it was resolved in a meeting held at the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church on May 17, 1841, that “in connection with the ardent desire of these people to return to their own country to communicate the truth of the gospel, a favorable opportunity is providentially presented to the friends of missions to unite for the evangelization of Africa.”⁴⁴ While the resolve to spread Christian scriptures in Sierra Leone may have been formalized in the Black Church, the actual mission in Sierra Leone would for all intents and purposes become a largely non-Black venture. Benjamin Griswold of the Theological Seminary was initially suggested as the evangelical agent the Africans would prefer to travel to Africa; however, Griswold was not on board the *Gentleman* that transported Pieh and his compatriots home. At a meeting in Harford, Connecticut, on August 18–19, 1841, “Joseph Cinque (Pieh) and four of his countrymen . . . enrolled their names as members of the (United Missionary Society),” a mostly African American convention, which essentially manifested their agency in shaping their collective life after captivity and emancipation.⁴⁵ However, as Rediker argues, the American abolitionists had their exclusive agenda, one in which leadership was not going to be entrusted to “a Mende warrior.”

Pieh and thirty-four of his surviving compatriots arrived in the colony of Sierra Leone, along with five American missionaries, including an African American couple (Mr. and Mrs. Henry Wilson) and three Whites, Rev. and Mrs. William Raymond and Rev. James Steele. As Arthur Abraham notes, the American missionaries were charged with the task of launching a “Mendi Mission” in Sierra Leone.⁴⁶ The plan of Pieh and the group onboard the *Gentleman* upon their arrival in Sierra Leone was to settle and establish a mission close to Sengbe Pieh’s native town. However, as Abraham tells it, the excitement and hopes of a new mission were quickly dashed by news of the earlier destruction of Pieh’s family home and the liquidation of “most of the family.” Seemingly unperturbed, Pieh soon found an alternative vocation or avocation in trade between the colony of Freetown and the interior region.⁴⁷

In spite of the inauspicious start to the mission, the business of American evangelicalism commenced at Komende (Kaw-Mende) in the Sherbro region of southern Sierra Leone in 1844.⁴⁸ With Komende serving as the mission's base, new stations were subsequently established in the Sierra Leone interior, which, by 1846, were all identified as the AMA. Much to the disappointment of the American missionaries, the returning former captives were hardly ready to discard their cultural awareness and identity, the efforts at social acculturation in Connecticut notwithstanding. The returnees had kept their allegiance to the esoteric institutions, such as the Poro society, into which they had been initiated prior to their captivity. Indeed, one may surmise that the efficiency and precision of the takeover of the *Amistad* was itself a consequence of the discipline obtained from their tutelage in the Poro lodge. The latter may have served as a major challenge to the Mende Mission at its initial stages, with many of the *Amistad* returnees abandoning the mission even before it was formally launched in 1844.

Abraham draws a more positive conclusion on the Mende Mission in Sierra Leone. As he notes in his short pamphlet, "The American Missionary Association ultimately turned over its mission stations to the United Brethren in Christ." The latter went on to have an impressive record of achievement in the area of education in Sierra Leone, including the founding of schools and vocational centers. Among its success stories were the founding of two of the country's storied academic institutions, the Albert Academy in Freetown and the Harford School for Girls at Moyamba, both of which are renowned for having produced a crop of students who went on to pursue further studies abroad, mainly in the United States, subsequently returning home to contribute to national development. A less charitable narrative is provided by Matthew J. Christensen, for whom the African returnees who stayed with the mission experienced "the patronizing and paternalistic oversight" of White American Christian missionaries.⁴⁹

***Amistad* Memorialization and Sierra Leonean National Identity**

The Sierra Leonean historian Ibrahim Abdullah concedes that the events of the *Amistad* were popularized in the country not by historians, but by playwrights and artists.⁵⁰ Thus, most of the scholarly works on Sengbe Pieh are by non-Sierra Leonean scholars. The fact that Sierra Leone historians have not paid much attention to the *Amistad* saga has arguably had the consequence of a dearth of scholarly exploration of Sierra Leone's place in the Black Atlantic discourse. Pieh's consequent elevation in the 1990s, following the staging of popular theatrical productions, particularly *Amistad Kata Kata* (by the Freetown Players International, formerly known Freetong Players), was marked by his portrait on the national currency (Le. 5,000; see figure 15), along with the erection of a statue in the center of the capital city, Freetown.



Figure 15. Sierra Leone 5,000 Leone note.

Source. Public domain.

Local and national artists also paint his likeness on canvases, which are hawked to visiting tourists. There has not been a replication of the staged performance at the time of writing, thus the memory of the *Amistad*, it is suggested, may well have faded but for the visit of the replica of the slave trade vessel from Connecticut to Freetown in 2000.⁵¹ The visit generated a wave of short-lived interest in the history of the *Amistad*, a development which did not occur with the release of the Spielberg movie, probably due to the fact that the country was engulfed in a decade-long civil war in the 1990s, the implications of which still reverberate in contemporary politics.

Described in a local news outlet, *Awoko*, as “Sierra Leone’s powerhouse of performing arts,” another group, the Freetown Players International (FPI), celebrated a milestone of thirty years of existence on May 18, 2015, at the National Museum in Freetown.⁵² The founder and director of the group, Charles “Charlie” Haffner, reportedly likened the FPI’s current endeavor to a “Third War” (following the Foday Sankoh-led Revolutionary United Front (RUF) “Rebel” war, and the Ebola epidemic as the preceding two wars). Haffner identified “the stage (as) the battleground; the costumes are the combat fatigues and our songs and dramas the weapon.” The director of the *Amistad Kata Kata* further described the group as “the fulcrum that has continuously been spinning the wheels of theatre art activities in Sierra Leone.”⁵³ In a lecture delivered at Yale University in 2006, Charlie Haffner maintained that “As late as 1985, almost no one (in his native country) had heard of Sengbe Pieh,” who led the “epic struggle for freedom.”⁵⁴ Haffner explained the role of the FPI in a decade-long campaign to bring the memory of Sengbe Pieh and the *Amistad* back to Sierra Leone. As Haffner further

explained, the group first staged the *Amistad Kata Kata* in 1988, accompanied by what became a popular ballad to tell the story of the mutiny by captives aboard the slave vessel. ^{ffner}

The successful theatrical performance by the group ultimately served to awaken the nation to the significance of the Amistad saga and what it represents for Sierra Leone and the country's place in the history of the Atlantic world. The theatrical rendition of the historical mutiny on a slave ship not only "succeeded in bringing Sengbe Pieh back home," it served to make the *Amistad* rebellion leader a household name in Sierra Leone, with the portrait of Pieh subsequently placed on the national currency (the Le 5000 note) by the then military regime, the National Provisional Revolutionary Council (NPRC). The FPI arguably utilized the theater in bringing history to life, as it were, in a society with a very low rate of literacy.⁵⁵

Producing a play with political overtones in Sierra Leone in the late 20th century and after has not been without its challenges, as Christensen observes. The long-term iron-fisted authoritarian rule by Siaka Stevens evidenced a consistent clamping down on theater performances and the jailing of playwrights and actors whose subjects were perceived as thinly veiled attacks on the state during the late 1960s through the 1980s. Stevens, as noted by Christensen, quickly shut down a stage play depicting the so-called Hut Tax rebellion against the British colonial state in 1898, led by the legendary anticolonial leader, Bai Bureh.⁵⁶ It was therefore with knowledge of a problematic history of governmental clamp-down on the potential subversiveness of the theater that Haffner and the FPI elected to stage the *Amistad Kata Kata* in 1988. Christensen notes that "Although Amistad Kata Kata neither lacks verbal critiques of contemporary Sierra Leonean society nor shies away from celebrating armed insurrection against tyrannical overlords . . .," the play made skillful use of (the then) President Joseph Momoh's new slogan of "Constructive Nationalism" as a cover to depict an event that could have elicited fears of political subversion from the stage.

The civil war of the 1990s was a consequence of the deterioration of national politics, including the institutionalization of a culture of political violence and political corruption arising out of the problematic political structure of a one-party state. To be clear, the political structure was effectively predicated upon the personal rulership of then President, Siaka Stevens, who ran the one-party state with an iron fist between 1969 and 1985, and remained, for all intents and purposes, the real power even after he formally handed over political authority to the then head of the Sierra Leone Military Forces, Major Joseph Momoh. A ragtag bunch of former political foot soldiers of the ruling party, largely uninterested in revolutionary politics, emerged as the so-called RUF to seek the overthrow of the state. To buttress the state's efforts at repulsing the RUF, a group of fighters with ethno-regional motivations known as the Kamajoi, from southeastern Sierra Leone, emerged. The latter group was/is believed to have ties to the ruling party in power in 2021, the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP).

The country's national politics is largely predicated on cultural and ethno-regional nationalism, and this came to be manifested in the mobilization of Pieh for the purposes of the politics of ethnicity.⁵⁷ The problematic place of Pieh in contemporary national politics was laid bare in 2019 when the ruling SLPP government added Pieh's name to a bridge over a small

river in Juba in the west end of Freetown. The problematic nature of Pieh's name being added to the roadway sign over the bridge is due to the fact that, up until then, the bridge had been named for another national hero, I. T. A. Wallace-Johnson, widely revered for his role as an advocate of the working class as well as an uncompromising anticolonialist thorn in the side of the British colonial state.

Critics of the government's decision also point to the fact that the bridge is located in Freetown in the western area of the country, from whence Wallace-Johnson, a Krio, hailed. Critics thus assert that the decision by *fiat* of the president, Maada Bio, in renaming the bridge (see figure 16) is unhistorical and simply geared toward the further marginalization of the Krio, if not part of an outright effort at historical erasure of the latter.



Figure 16. Sengbe Pieh Memorial Bridge, Freetown, Sierra Leone, by Gibril Cole, 2020.

Government critics maintain that, if anything, Pieh's name could have been more appropriately emblazoned on any number of bridges in the southeast from whence the *Amistad* rebellion leader hailed. Another scholar has suggested that “[T]he issue is one of the politicization of everyday life in contemporary Sierra Leone.” The SLPP government, he maintains, “wanted to score a cheap point by memorializing one of Sierra Leone’s national heroes.”⁵⁸

The point is not lost on observers that “the choice (of Pieh) happens to be someone whose alleged ethnicity is Mende—the support base of the current party in power. This is the central issue.”⁵⁹ President Bio, accompanied by his wife, Fatima, subsequently paid a visit in 2019 to the gravesite of some of the *Amistad* captives who died prior to the conclusion of the celebrated trial and were buried in the United States. Ultimately, the politics of naming, of memorialization, has effectively positioned Sengbe Pieh in the Sierra Leone consciousness

(see figure 16). But, as Abdullah asserts, “if Amistad entered Sierra Leone academic history as a footnote to the larger question of Atlanticization, it also entered public history and national memory as a mere postal stamp commemorating the Amistad event without a national discourse.”⁶⁰ The need to engender such discourse, through research and publication on not just the subject of the *Amistad*, but on issues of great import to the West African Atlantic littoral, is not lost on Sierra Leone historians.

The Living Legacy of *La Amistad*

The Amistad saga is an integral part of African diaspora discourse. While the captives aboard the *Amistad* successfully revolted, were acquitted following the celebrated court proceedings, and ultimately returned home, it cannot be overemphasized that the act of rebellion by Pieh and his compatriots is reflective of the resilience and conscious agency of captive Africans throughout the Atlantic world. The act of defiance and struggle for freedom by the Africans in the *Amistad* across the Middle Passage, it could be argued, presaged the continued collective challenge of Africans to the plantation system and the capitalist unequal society to which it gave birth.

The legacy of the rebellion on the schooner *Amistad* and its aftermath differs vastly in three regions directly involved in the case, namely the United States, Cuba, and Sierra Leone, more than a century and a half after the events. Despite its common depiction as a US-centric story, the Amistad saga was rooted in the coalescence of transnational Atlantic events, regions, and actors. Yet its historical and contemporary memorialization and silences differ in each country due to their individual specific economic and sociocultural evolutions. In the United States, because of the high legal profile of the case, the involvement of major political actors, the struggle between pro- and antislavery forces as well as existing racial tensions, the *Amistad* is memorialized and cherished in movies, songs, poems, art, and research institutes. It features as both a triumph of the US justice system as well as a key example of African resistance to enslavement. Almost the opposite is the case in Cuba, where neither the rebellion nor the legal case occurring in North America nor the place of origin of the vessel was publicized; and as of 2021 they are still not memorialized on the island.

The complicity of elites and colonial authorities in the transatlantic slave trade, the absence of an abolitionist movement, and the post-slavery and postcolonial racial history of Cuba are some of the major factors accounting for the historiographical and public silences.

Notwithstanding this polarity, in Sierra Leone, the region of origin and final destination of most of the African captives, the *Amistad* was only memorialized after the late 1980s, and first by playwrights and artists as a triumphalist example of anticolonialism, antislavery, and antiauthoritarianism in the context of domestic tensions. Pieh, the leader of the shipboard revolt, is today, in many ways, doyen of Sierra Leone’s pantheon of heroes; his portrait emblazons the currency, yet his Mende ethnicity is often politicized to foster ethno-regional nationalism. Despite regional differences, however, a transatlantic commonality sustains the *Amistad* as a symbol for discussing or suppressing the polysemic meanings of slavery and freedom in the Atlantic world.

Discussion of the Literature

Until the early 21st century, most scholarship on the *Amistad* was published in the United States and focused on the Supreme Court and the place of the story within narratives about abolitionist activity in the northern states. The most widely circulated text was William Owens's *Black Mutiny*, first published in 1953, and the basis for the eponymous film's screenplay. Various versions of Owens's narrative circulated in popular works, children's books, and other formats, and the book itself was reprinted several times. A number of works approached the saga from a literary perspective, notably by Iyunolu Osagie, as various anniversary dates and interest generated by the film renewed scholarly attention.

A more critical reappraisal began in the 2010s, with the publication of a series of historical works revisiting known archival sources and exploring new materials. Marcus Rediker's *Amistad Rebellion* was the first to shift the focus away from the United States and toward the Atlantic dimensions of the story. One of the interventions Rediker advanced was the importance of secret society membership in creating shipmate bonds among the enslaved Africans, countering ethnic and linguistic divisions. Michael Zeuske's books and article drew on archives in Spain and Cuba, and identified possible other vessels that may have been involved in the transport of many of the *Amistad* captives from Sierra Leone to Cuba before the fateful coastal schooner voyage, notably the *Hugh Boyle*. He also identified new evidence of US involvement in the illegal slave trade between Cuba and the United States, and between Spain, Cuba, and West Africa.

Benjamin N. Lawrance's work focused on the African historical dimensions of the saga, and in particular the significance of the children. In a series of works Lawrance identified a distinctly different childhood experience, and reconstructed the lives of the six children embroiled in the saga, and their lives upon return to Sierra Leone. Culminating with his 2014 book, *Amistad's Orphans*, Lawrance argues that the *Amistad* saga provides a lens to understand the curiously unappreciated importance of children to the illegal 19th-century slave trade, and views this as an important precursor to the massive rise in child enslavement in the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century and into the present.

There was no mention of the *Amistad* case in the Cuban historiography between 1839—when the *Amistad*'s events began to unfold—and the 21st century. The first Cuban historiographical studies on the *Amistad* case were published in 2005 after historian Orlando García found in the Cuban National Archive the original documents produced by the island's colonial government. This finding resulted in *La Sublevación Esclava en la Goleta Amistad*, the first book published in Cuba on the *Amistad* coauthored by historian Michael Zeuske. In 2015, Zeuske individually authored an extended version of the Cuban title, renamed *Amistad: A Hidden Network of Slavers and Merchants*.

The production of knowledge in Sierra Leone about the *Amistad* saga, largely a function of the use of archival source material, was spearheaded by Arthur Abraham. If the relative dearth of historical studies undertaken by Sierra Leonean scholars can be corrected, such undertakings

will have to make substantial use of oral research, particularly in the interior regions of southeastern Sierra Leone. And such efforts will have to be unavoidably interdisciplinary in nature. Historians will have to proactively engage with specialists from a variety of disciplines, including historical-linguistics, anthropology, and such other related disciplines, to ensure a substantive reconstruction of the slave trade in the region and how local factors facilitated the capturing and selling of unsuspecting people and others taken through wars into the Atlantic slave trade. What place did captured and exported people hold in society before they were unceremoniously removed from their domiciles? What was the resultant impact of their removal, most of them permanently, from their families and communities? How did such developments affect the local and regional economies? In pursuit of answers to these and other substantive questions, oral history appears to constitute an important component of the efforts at historical reconstruction of the nefarious slave trade, and the case of the *Amistad* will be no exception. The potential research evidence that will be elicited from engagement with the people in the villages and towns, away from the metropolitan center, will prove to be instrumental in relocating historical attention from the Americas to the place and/or places from whence captives were taken for the “rough crossings” of the Atlantic.

As Rediker reminds us, research engagements with the people in villages directly affected by the carnage of the slave trade can be instrumental in spotlighting the African background to the history of the Americas. It is imperative that a departure from writing the history of a singular hero, “the history of great men,” as it were, be undertaken in future knowledge production. Thus far, works on the *Amistad* in Sierra Leone have largely, if not exclusively, focused on Pieh. While the latter was the undisputed revered leader of the group of captives who took over the slave trade vessel, Pieh could not have successfully subdued the *Amistad* crew by himself. Gilabau (Grabeau), Fabbana, Moru, Kimbo, and others, several of whom did not survive to make it back to their native Sierra Leone, were important subjects of history as well and should not, therefore, be relegated to the footnotes of the history of the *Amistad* saga. And nor should the children, including Mar’gru and Ka’le, be denied their rightful place in the history of this watershed moment in the resistance to the Atlantic trade system.

Primary Sources

The preponderance of archival materials is located in public and private libraries, archival repositories, and national archives in the United States, Cuba, the United Kingdom, Sierra Leone, Spain, and Canada. The key archives are the American Missionary Association Archives in the Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans; Archivo Histórico Provincial de Camagüey, Camagüey, Cuba; Archivo Histórico Provincial-Matanzas, Matanzas, Cuba; Archivo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Cuba; Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; Bodleian Library, Rhodes House, Oxford University; British National Archives, Kew, Surrey; the Archives of the Christian Missionary Society Cadbury Research Library, Special Collections, University of Birmingham, UK; Caird Library, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich; British and Foreign Bible Society Archives, Cambridge University Library; Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford; Connecticut State Library, Hartford; Papers of Lewis

Tappan and Papers of Thomas H. Gallaudet, Library of Congress; the Andrew T. Judson Papers, Mystic Seaport Museum, Mystic, CT; Despatches from US Consuls in Havana, Cuba, 1783–1906 in the National Archives, Washington, DC; Records of the District Courts of the US National Archives and Records Administration, Northeast Region, Waltham, MA; the John Dougall and family fonds National Archives of Canada, Ottawa; New Haven County Archives, New Haven, CT; New-York Historical Society Library; Sierra Leone National Archives; United Kingdom Hydrographic Office; Baldwin Family Papers and Norton Family Papers, Yale University Library and Manuscripts.

Archival sources in the United States, Cuba, Sierra Leone, Spain, Canada, and the United Kingdom include court and tribunal records, pamphlets, published congressional records, period newspapers, official correspondence and diplomatic records, memoirs, personal and private correspondence, firsthand accounts sent or shared between and among key figures, diaries and journals, ship manifests, insurance records, published letters in missionary journals, and naval logbooks. The primary materials contributing to the legal dispute that rose to the US Supreme Court are: Lewis Tappan's memo, "To the Committee on Behalf of the African Prisoners," in the *New York Journal of Commerce*, September 10, 1839; the Libel of Sengbeh Pieh to the Jurisdiction of Cinque and others, the Plea of Sengbeh Pieh (Joseph Cinque), the Plea to the Jurisdiction of Cinque and others; all in *Thomas R. Gedney v. Schooner Amistad*, Case Files 1790–1911, Records of District Courts of the United States, Records Group 211, National Archives at Boston, Waltham, MA; the Warrant for Habeas Corpus, *United States v. Cinque and the Africans*, Case Files, 1790–1911, Records of District Courts of the United States, Record Group 211, National Archives at Boston, Waltham, MA; John Quincy Adams's Request for Papers relating to the Lower Court Trials of the Amistad Africans (Petition for Certiorari), in *United States, Appellants, v. The Libellants and Claimants of the Schooner Amistad, her tackle, apparel and furniture, together with her cargo, and the Africans mentioned and described in the several libels and claims*, Appellate Jurisdiction Case files, 1792–2014, Records of the Supreme Court of the United States, Record Group 267, National Archives Building, Washington, DC; the Opinion of the Supreme Court in *United States v. the Amistad, United States, Appellants v. The Libellants and Claimants of the Schooner Amistad, her tackle, apparel, and furniture, together with her cargo, and the Africans mentioned and described in the several libels and claims, Appellees*, Appellate Jurisdiction Case Files, 1792–2014, Records of the Supreme Court of the United States, Record group 267, National Archives Building, Washington, DC. Many of these and other related materials are available online [<https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/amistad>](https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/amistad).

From a Sierra Leone standpoint, the corpus of relevant documents is housed in the Sierra Leone Public Archives, in Freetown, and concerns the operations of slave trading vessels, the British West Africa Squadron's attempts to halt the trade, and the resettlement in Freetown of liberated Africans. The original Registers of Liberated Africans who were taken off slave ships by the Royal Navy from 1808 to the 1840s document more than 85,000 individuals. In addition, "Letterbooks" provide information on the treatment and "disposal" of tens of thousands of "receptive" Africans, court records, treaties with local chiefs, and other

documents that are essential materials for any research on Sierra Leone. A vast corpus of this material was digitized with a grant from the British Library Endangered Archives Program (EAP443/1, 2011 <<https://doi.org/10.15130/EAP443>>).

From a Cuban standpoint, primary sources located on the island, and the former Spanish metropole, are fundamental for studying the *Amistad* case. For Spain, the rebels of the *Amistad* were legitimately owned by Ramon Ferrer, the owner of the vessels. Cuban and Spanish documents are a testimony of that pretense. In the Archivo General de Indias in Seville, in the Ultramar collection, as well as in the Archivo Historico Nacional in Madrid, in the collection Trata de Negros, there is evidence of trading operations conducted by the owner of the *Amistad*, diplomatic negotiations, and domestic discussions around the case. The Archivo Nacional de Cuba collections Escribania and Notaria de Marina, and Miscelanea de Libros, possess records on Ferrer's commercial and personal activities and the schooner *Amistad* before the rebellion. The first report written by the colonial authorities on the uprising can be found in the collection Gobierno Superior Civil, 1272/49909, of July 1839.

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Notes

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