



THE

JOSEPH CINQUEZ,

—AMISTAD—
REBELLION

AN ATLANTIC ODYSSEY OF
SLAVERY AND FREEDOM

MARCUS REDIKER

Author of the SLAVE SHIP



The *Amistad* Rebellion





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The *Amistad* Rebellion

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Marcus Rediker



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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

For Wendy,

with love



CONTENTS



Introduction Voices

One Origins

Two Rebellion

Three Movement

Four Jail

Five “Mendi”

Six Freedom

Conclusion Reverberations

Acknowledgments

Notes

Index

Illustration Sources and Credits



Voices

During the moonless early hours of July 2, 1839, several captive Africans quietly slipped out of their fetters in the hold of the slave schooner *La Amistad*. One of them had managed to break a padlock, which made it possible to remove the chain that reeved them together and held them down in the hold below the main deck of the vessel. Forty-nine men and four children made up the human cargo of the *Amistad*. They had sailed from Havana, bound for the new plantations of Puerto Príncipe (Camagüey), Cuba. A few hours earlier, in cramped, airless quarters below deck, they had made a collective decision to seek a different fate.

A group of four men—Cinqué, Faquorna, Moru, and Kimbo—led the way as they climbed up and out of the hatchway onto the main deck. They moved with the grace and precision of warriors accustomed to daring midnight attacks. They picked up belaying pins and barrel staves and stole over to the ship's boat, where the mulatto cook and slave sailor Celestino lay sleeping. They bludgeoned him to death. As more men escaped their irons and swarmed up on deck, they opened a box of cane knives, tools they were meant to use in cutting sugar cane, but which would now serve the purpose of self-emancipation. The sight of flashing blades caused the two sailors who were supposed to guard against such uprisings to fly over the side of the vessel into the water. Captain Ramón Ferrer armed himself and fought back against the insurgents, killing one and mortally wounding another. Four or five of their comrades counterattacked, surrounding the captain and slashing him to death.

In a matter of minutes the *Amistad* rebels had turned the ship's wooden world upside down. They captured the two men who had considered themselves their owners, José Ruiz and Pedro Montes, clapped them in manacles, and sent them below deck as their prisoners. They took control of the ship and organized themselves to do the hard work of sailing it. But in their new-won freedom lay a dilemma: they wanted to return to their homes in southern Sierra Leone, but none of them knew how to navigate the schooner. After some debate they decided to keep the surviving Spaniards alive in order to help them sail the vessel eastward, toward the rising sun, which had been at their backs as they made the Middle Passage on a slave ship two weeks earlier.

Montes had been a merchant ship captain; he was experienced in the ways of the sea and shrewd in the ways of men. He used his specialized knowledge of the deep-sea sailing ship to deceive his new masters. During the day, he followed orders, sailing east, but he had the sails kept loose and flapping in the wind to slow the *Amistad*'s progress. By night he steered the vessel back to the west and the north, hoping to stay near the islands of the Caribbean and the coast of North America in order to be intercepted and saved. After eight weeks, he got his wish: a U.S. Navy survey ship captured the *Amistad* off Culloden Point, Long Island, and carried the Africans, the Spaniards, the cargo, and the schooner to New London, Connecticut.

What would happen to these African rebels now anchored in one of the world's leading slave societies? Would they be returned to Cuba to be tried—and certainly executed—for their crimes of mutiny, murder, and piracy, as the diplomats of Spain, and many American slaveholders, demanded?

Or would they, as Lewis Tappan and other abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic insisted, in the aftermath of the abolition of the slave trade, be allowed to go free? Had they not defended their own natural rights by killing the tyrant who enslaved them? These questions would engage people of all stations and several nations in fierce debate, propelling the *Amistad* rebels to the center of a massive controversy about slavery and the rights of unfree people to shape their own destiny. The rebellion became one of the most important events of its time.

An epic struggle ensued. Assisted in their legal battles by distinguished attorneys Roger S. Baldwin and former president John Quincy Adams, who made dramatic speeches before the United States Supreme Court in February and March 1841, the *Amistad* rebels won their freedom, to the joy of half the nation and the consternation of the other half. After a successful fund-raising tour organized by abolitionists, the rebels set sail for their African homelands in November of that year. The abolitionist movement claimed a great, historic, and altogether unlikely victory.

The popular memory of the *Amistad* rebellion has ebbed and flowed with the political tides. In its own day the event captured the popular imagination. A mere six days after the vessel had been towed into port, a drama troupe at New York's Bowery Theatre performed a play about its story of mutiny and piracy. Commercial artists converged on the jail where the *Amistad* Africans were incarcerated, drew images of Cinqué, the leader of the rebellion, reproduced them quickly and cheaply, and had them hawked by boys on the streets of eastern cities. Artist Amasa Hewins would paint a 135-foot panorama depicting the *Amistad* Africans as they surrounded and killed Captain Ferrer and seized their freedom by force of arms. Another artist, Sidney Moulthrop, would create twenty-nine life-size wax figures of the Africans and the *Amistad* crew, cast and arranged to dramatize the shipboard insurrection. Both artists would tour with their creations, charging admission to those eager to see a visual reenactment of the uprising. Meantime, thousands of people lined up daily to pay admission and walk through the jails of New Haven and Hartford to get a glimpse of the *Amistad* rebels, who were "political prisoners" before the phrase had been invented. When the case moved to law, citizens jammed the courtrooms to capacity and beyond, refusing to leave their seats during breaks for fear of losing them. Ministers delivered thundering sermons; correspondents wrote hundreds of highly opinionated newspaper articles; poets penned romantic verses; and those for and against slavery debated furiously, all about the *Amistad* rebels, what they had done, its morality and meaning, and what their fate should be. Discussed in public as never before, slave resistance became not only a main political issue of the day but a commercial entertainment—a commodity that circulated in the ever-growing American marketplace, shaping public opinion and ultimately the outcome of the case.

The fascination would not last. After the Civil War the memory of the *Amistad* waned, barely kept alive by two related groups: abolitionists and African American writers and artists who wanted to glory in victory and remember the long, arduous struggle against slavery. In the dark times of Social Darwinism and scientific racism the *Amistad* uprising faded from public view. It disappeared from histories of the United States written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and indeed saw no major revival until new social movements exploded in the 1960s and 1970s. Especially important in this regard were the civil rights and black power movements with their demands for a new history of the United States that took seriously the long, bloody battle against slavery and racism. The Mississippi Freedom Summer Schools taught about the *Amistad* rebellion, while activists named their sons Cinqué after its heroic leader. "History from below" raised the consciousness of struggles past and present, and post-'60s historians made the *Amistad* story part of a new, more democratic and inclusive vision of the American past. Yet knowledge of the shipboard insurrection among the general public remained limited.¹

A new phase in popular memory and culture began in 1997 with the appearance of Steven Spielberg's movie *Amistad*, which carried the history to millions of viewers, many of whom had never before known of it. Although not a commercial success, the film had a broad impact, creating a veritable cottage industry around the history of the event: school curricula incorporated the rebellion; children's coloring books depicted it; museums and art galleries celebrated it; novels, plays, and operas dramatized it. Independent efforts by organizers in Connecticut to fund and re-create the vessel came to fruition after the appearance of Spielberg's film, resulting in a modern *Amistad* based in Mystic Seaport.²

The history and especially the movie gave the *Amistad* insurrection a renewed presence in American popular culture. The rebellion rapidly became one of the best-known events involving slavery in all of American history, and Cinqué joined Underground Railroad "conductor" Harriet Tubman and runaway slave-turned-eloquent-abolitionist Frederick Douglass as the most recognizable individuals of African descent associated with the histories of slavery and resistance in America.³

Yet the history and the movie have told only part of the story. The drama of the courtroom has eclipsed the original drama that transpired on the deck of the slave schooner. The American actors—abolitionists, attorneys, judges, and politicians—have elbowed aside the African ones whose daring actions set the train of events in motion. Curiously, the American legal system has emerged as the story's hero—the very system which, in 1839, held two and a half million African Americans in bondage. This triumphalism may be comforting to an American audience still haunted by the legacy of slavery, but it is deeply misleading.

This book tells the story of the *Amistad* in a different way. It begins in southern Sierra Leone, in West Africa, where those who would eventually find themselves aboard the *Amistad* were, by various means, captured and enslaved, inaugurating an odyssey of epic proportions. These multiethnic people—mostly Mende, but also Temne, Gbandi, Kono, Gola, and Loma—came from humble backgrounds. They were commoners and workers; a few had been slaves. Born of societies that shared commonalities of belief and culture, these West Africans began a long, slow process of social bonding and self-organization, first at the Lomboko slave-trading "factory" on the Gallinas Coast, where they were held for several weeks awaiting Atlantic transport on a slave ship called the *Teçora*. Under the extreme, terrifying conditions of the Middle Passage they bonded as "shipmates," cooperating for the sake of survival. The process continued in the barracoons, or slave barracks, of Havana, where they were held and, after two weeks, sold under humiliating circumstances, as if they were cattle. Guided by the practices of a powerful all-male secret society in their homelands called the Poro Society, they organized themselves to carry out the rebellion aboard the *Amistad*. Under the pressure of necessity they worked together to sail the vessel 1,400 miles from the north coast of Cuba to the northern tip of Long Island; several of their comrades died of dysentery and dehydration along the way. Captured by the United States Navy and charged with piracy and murder, they were incarcerated in New Haven, Connecticut. The maritime leg of the odyssey featured violence, suffering, and self-emancipation.

The Atlantic circa 1839



The rebels now took their drama of slavery and freedom onto an American stage. Once they reached the shores of Connecticut, their courageous revolt inspired profound popular interest among artists, playwrights, actors, theatergoers, journalists and writers, readers, lawyers and judges, politicians, and citizens, but especially among abolitionists, who flocked to the jail in large numbers. The *Amistad* Africans slowly built an alliance with other antislavery activists as they studied reading, writing, and religion, all the while organizing themselves and developing their own independent African identity. “the Mendi People.” They worked with abolitionists such as Lewis Tappan and political figures such as John Quincy Adams to keep their case before the public and to mount a strong legal defense of the freedom that they had won by arms aboard the *Amistad*. The small group of African captives who took desperate action on the high seas caused some of the most powerful people in the world to debate the meaning of what they had done, including monarchs (Queen Victoria of Britain and Queen Isabella II of Spain), presidents and former presidents (Adams, Martin Van Buren, and John Tyler), statesmen, high-ranking government officials, and Supreme Court justices, among many others.

The meaning of the rebellion and trials was shaped not only by American political realities but by broader Atlantic ones, for the *Amistad* had sailed into a huge and historic wave of slave resistance. David Walker’s *Appeal...to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) had emphasized the continuing relevance to freedom struggles of Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution. Sailors black and white spread the revolutionary word by smuggling the pamphlet into slave societies. Nat Turner had led a bloody uprising in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831, and Sam Sharpe had followed with his “Baptist War” in Jamaica in 1831–32. Other revolts, for example, in Brazil and Cuba, erupted against the backdrop of a growing abolitionist movement and indeed helped to make it possible. William Lloyd Garrison founded the *Liberator* in 1831 and Great Britain abolished slavery in its West Indian colonies in two stages, in 1834 and 1838.⁴

Wherever contemporaries debated the meaning of the *Amistad* rebellion, the ghosts of Walker, Toussaint Louverture, and Turner hovered above their heads. *Noticioso de Ambos Mundos*, a Spanish language newspaper published in New York, posed a “delicate question” amid the debate about whether the *Amistad* rebels should go free: “Let us then see if the [American] Government establishes the principle that it is lawful for a slave to kill his master, because then they can with impunity rise up in Washington, and slay all masters and all members of the Government that allowed slavery.” The broad Atlantic struggle against slavery generated the larger meaning of the *Amistad* controversy.⁵

The meeting of African insurrectionists and American reformers in the New Haven jail was an unprecedented and historic moment. The rebels had made a revolution in miniature aboard the ship, which inspired sympathetic coverage in the press, especially the *New York Sun*, and in turn generated intense fascination among the public. Tappan and other abolitionists responded, struggling to control and direct the enormous popular interest toward their own purposes, building in the process a determined, energetic, interracial defense campaign. Many who supported the *Amistad* struggle were not, strictly speaking, abolitionists; moreover, they celebrated the heroic insurrection in ways that made moderate abolitionists uneasy. The Africans themselves, through their actions on the vessel and their noble bearing in jail, continued to inspire an unprecedented interest in the fearsome subject of slave revolt. To many, especially African Americans enslaved and free, the *Amistad* rebels rekindled the radical egalitarian hope of the American Revolution.⁶

The insurrectionists and reformers who met in Connecticut jails represented the two main wings of a global movement against slavery. Black rebels had long played an important role in America’s antislavery movement, especially by their audacious escapes from slavery, which inspired and mobilized abolitionists throughout the northern states. The *Amistad* case publicized a more controversial form of resistance—outright rebellion—and gave enslaved rebels and their resistance a

more important place in an expanded, radicalized movement against slavery. This movement would help to establish the right of unfree people to seize freedom through armed self-defense and to claim their place as equals in society.⁷

Even though slave resistance was ubiquitous throughout the turbulent 1830s, revolts were infrequent, even rare, occurrences, especially in the United States. Slaveholders always enforced the consequences of a failed revolt with hangings, maimings, and violent repression of all kinds. Most slaves, like most other people, were reluctant to risk everything in a gamble few before them had won. But an example of success changed everything. This, of course, was part of the importance of the Haitian Revolution. The black men and women of Saint Domingue had demonstrated the bottom rail could be placed on top. Until 1839, slaves in mainland North America could find no similar example of success. Slave rebels had failed in New York in 1712 and 1741; in Richmond, Virginia, in 1800; in Louisiana in 1811; and in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1822. That record of failure changed in 1839 and with it changed the worlds of American slavery and abolition.

A history of the *Amistad* rebellion from below is supported by a collection of sources unique in the annals of New World slavery. Because the makers of the maritime insurrection spent twenty-seven months in Connecticut (nineteen of them in jail) and because their cause was both controversial and well publicized, they met thousands of people from all walks of life, both within the walls of the jails and without. Journalists and ordinary citizens visited them, conversed with them through translators such as the Mende sailor James Covey, and transcribed their life stories, noting their work and nationality (hunter, Temne), where they lived in Africa (“two moons march to the coast”), and how they were enslaved (captured in war, kidnapped). Other visitors drew their portraits and silhouettes. Phrenologists measured the size of their skulls. Yale professors such as Josiah Gibbs compiled and published vocabularies of their languages. Many of these visitors published their findings in business newspapers such as the *New York Journal of Commerce*, in penny-press papers such as the *New York Sun* and *New York Morning Herald*, and in abolitionist periodicals such as the *Emancipator* and the *Pennsylvania Freeman*. As many as 2,500 articles were published altogether, many of them written by correspondents who had visited the African rebels in jail. No other makers of a modern slave revolt generated such a vast and deep body of evidence, which in turn makes it possible to know more about the *Amistad* Africans than perhaps any other group of once-enslaved rebels on record, and to get to know them, individually and collectively, in intimate, multidimensional ways, from their personalities and sense of humor to their specifically West African ways of thinking and acting during their ordeal.

Throughout their odyssey the *Amistad* rebels struggled—sometimes alongside the American abolitionists, sometimes against them—for a voice of their own. As abolitionist Joshua Leavitt noted soon after they were brought ashore, “these unfortunate persons, who have been committed to prison and bound over to be tried for their lives” could not “say a word for themselves.” Of course the rebels could and did say many words for themselves, but for weeks no one could understand them. Here entered a group of African sailors, most notably James Ferry, Charles Pratt, and James Covey, whose cosmopolitan knowledge of multiple languages finally allowed the rebels to tell their stories of origins, enslavement, and insurrection. Ferry had been liberated from slavery in Colombia at age twelve by Simón Bolívar, Pratt and Covey by the British naval anti-slave-trade patrols. They were experienced in the struggle against slavery and they would be denounced by proslavery critics as “half-civilized, totally ignorant” sailors, who, like other men of color and low standing, were not to be trusted or believed. The motley crews of ship and waterfront played a critical role in the *Amistad*

case.⁹

Leavitt's observation lingers. The *Amistad* rebels' struggle for voice led them to learn English, to study American political culture and to use it for their own ends, to tell both individual and collective stories about what had happened to them and why. Even so, it was no easy matter for them to be heard in their own times, above or even alongside the voices of evangelical Christians; lawyers, politicians and diplomats; middle-class antislavery reformers; and proslavery ideologues. And it has proved no easy matter to hear them today. This is a history of the *Amistad* rebellion from below. That, literally, is how and where the *Amistad* case began, with the eruption of armed rebels from the hold on to the main deck of the vessel. By viewing the courtroom drama in relation to the shipboard revolt, or, put another way, the actions taken from above in relation to those taken from below, the entire event, from causes to consequences, appears in a new light. This history puts the *Amistad* rebels back at the center of their own story and the larger history they helped to make. Theirs was an epic quest for freedom.¹⁰



Origins

On a May evening in 1841, an overflow crowd at the Presbyterian Church on Coates Street in Philadelphia listened as a Mende man named Fuli spoke about “man-stealing” in his native southern Sierra Leone: “If Spanish man want to steal man, he no steal him himself, but hire black man; he pay him I don’t know how much.” Fuli referred to the urbane, cigar-smoking Spanish slave trader Pedro Blanco and his ally, the African King Siaka, who dressed in gold lace garments, drank from silver bowls, and mobilized soldiers and kidnappers in the interior of the Gallinas Coast. “The man catchers live in villages,” continued Fuli, “and honest people live in cities. If they come to the cities, the magistrate say you bad man, you go away.” Some “honest people” took more direct action; they shot the man-stealers as they would other beasts of prey, “lions and tigers.” Fuli and others sought to protect themselves against the slave traders, but they did not always succeed, as his own presence in Philadelphia attested. Fuli then demonstrated his knowledge of the Bible to the audience, interpreting his own experience and that of his comrades on the *Amistad*: “The man stealer, he walk crooked, he no walk straight, he get out of the high road. He walk by night, too, he no walk in the day time.” He referred, in a single answer, to the books of Deuteronomy (24:7), Psalms (82:5), and Isaiah (59:8). He himself had been stolen around two and half years earlier by those who walked—and enslaved—in darkness.¹

Until that fateful moment, Fuli, whose name meant “sun,” had lived in Mano with his parents and five brothers, humble people who farmed rice and manufactured cloth. A portrait drawn by a young American artist, William H. Townsend, depicted him with a mustache, a broad face, prominent cheekbones, a full forehead with a slightly receding hairline, and distinctive, almond-shaped eyes. He was five feet three inches tall, apparently unmarried, and said to be “in middle life,” which probably meant his late twenties. According to one who knew him, Fuli was a “noble-spirited” man and decidedly not someone who could be enslaved without resistance.²



One night, in darkness, a group of King Siaka's soldiers surrounded Mano and set it aflame. Fuli said that "some were killed, and he with the rest were taken prisoners." Apparently separated from his family (their fate is unknown), he began a monthlong march through Vai country and ended up at Fofa, Lomboko on the coast, where he was purchased by the notorious Pedro Blanco. He was a victim of "grand pillage," a brutal, plundering kind of warfare that had long helped to fill Atlantic slave ships with bodies.³

Margru, one of four children aboard the *Amistad*, took a different route to the slave ship. Born in Mendeland, she was about nine years old, a mere four feet three inches tall. Her name reflected parental love and affection. Townsend sketched her with a large, high forehead, curly hair platted above each ear, and a slight smile at the corners of her mouth. Her manner was pleasant, quiet, reserved, and rather shy. She lived with her parents, four sisters, and two brothers. Her father was a trader, whose practices of credit and debt entangled him in some way with the slave trade. He pawned Margru, meaning that he left her in the possession of another trader for an agreed-upon period of time as a surety against commodities he had been advanced on credit—a practice common to many parts of West Africa. When he did not return in time to pay off his creditor—literally to redeem Margru—she was enslaved to satisfy the debt.⁴



Margru

Moru was a Gbandi man, born in Sanka. His life took a hard turn when, as a child, both of his parents died. Surviving evidence does not suggest how he grew up, or with whom, but it appears that at some point he became a warrior, and eventually a slave; perhaps he was captured in battle. His master, Margona, a member of what would become the ruling house of Barri Chiefdom in the Pujehun District of Gola, was a man of wealth with "ten wives and many houses." At some point, for reasons unknown, Margona sold Moru to a slave trader, who marched him twenty days (probably a couple of hundred miles) to Lomboko, where he was sold to Belewa, or "Great Whiskers," a Spaniard. Moru was described as "middle age, 5 ft. 8 ½ in. with full negro features," and drawn by Townsend to have small eyes, full lips, high cheekbones, and a somewhat suspicious look.⁵



Moru

The webs of Atlantic slavery were broad and intricate, and many of the people who guided and shaped the destinies of Fuli, Margru, and Moru, as well as Siaka and his warriors and Blanco and his overseers, lived far from the societies where man-stealing took place. Decisions taken by kings and queens and presidents, imperial planners, merchants, and plantation owners profoundly influenced what happened to the two men and little girl who found themselves at Lomboko and eventually aboard a slave ship under sail to Havana. Intercontinental and transoceanic forces linked England and Spain to the Gallinas Coast, and, across the Atlantic, to the slave societies of the Americas, especially Cuba, Brazil, and the United States. The process and the logic that governed from afar the lives of captives Lomboko, and indeed millions of others, were clearly explained a generation earlier in an unusual tract published in London.

The Voice of Blood

In 1792, at the peak of a broad popular agitation against the slave trade in Great Britain, an abolitionist published an anonymous pamphlet, in which Cushoo, an African who had been enslaved in Jamaica, engaged an English gentleman, aptly named Mr. English, in conversation. Cushoo had been owned by a friend of Mr. English. He begins by saying, “Ah! Massa Buckra, pity poor Negroman.” Mr. English responds, “Why, Cushoo, what’s the matter?” The matter, in short, was capitalism and slavery—more specifically, how a violent, exploitative global system hid its true nature in the benign form of commodities, especially slave labor-produced sugar and rum, the likes of which Mr. English and others around the world consumed, without understanding how they were produced and at what human cost.⁶

Mr. English does not understand, but the ever-patient and outwardly deferential Cushoo answers his questions and, in so doing, challenges the rationalizations that lie behind them. He explains in simple and vivid terms how the slave trade and slavery actually work. He shows that the pleasure Mr. English takes in eating sugar depends on the misery of the many. Those who produce his sugar are violently exploited in Jamaica and yet invisible in England. The material chains of slavery and the global chain of commodities are linked.

As the conversation unfolds, Cushoo gives the English gentleman what amounts to a lesson in the political economy of global capitalism. The message is that everything turns on commodities. The “poor Negro was bought and sold like cattle.” The slave trade is fueled by “brandy, rum, guns, and gunpowder,” which create wars throughout West Africa and in so doing help to manufacture the ultimate Atlantic commodity: the slave. By consuming the commodities rum and sugar, Mr. English

supports the slave trade and the extreme violence on which it depends.

“In what manner?” asks the agitated gentleman.

“You pay for kidnap and murder of poor Negro,” comes the quick retort.

E. How? I don’t understand you.

C. O me soon make you understand, Massa—You pay de grocer—

E. Yes, or he wou’d not thank me for my custom.

C. Den de grocer pay de Merchant—de merchant de Sugar Planter—him pay de Slave Captain—de Slave Captain pay de Panyarer [kidnapper], de Cabosheer [village chief], or de Black King.

E. By this round-a-bout way you make us all thieves and murderers.

C. No round-about Massa, it come home straight line—only—

Cushoo thus invites Mr. English to follow the money involved in creating the commodity, from England, to Jamaica, to Africa, and back again. He wants Mr. English to join the abolitionist boycott of sugar that was then gaining strength throughout England. Cushoo had learned from previous struggles what might now be possible. His friend “Yalko say dat good while ago dey drink no tea in ’Merica—de Bostonian trow all in de sea. Ha! Ha! Dey made tea wid salt water.” An Atlantic cycle of rebellion meant no tea then, hence the Boston Tea Party, and no sugar now. In the end, Cushoo’s combination of historical knowledge, worldly experience, and pidgin eloquence persuades Mr. English to join the sugar boycott.

The pamphlet articulated what would eventually become one of the slogans of the antislavery movement: “sugar is made with blood.” The point was announced in the title of the pamphlet: *No Rum! No Sugar! or, The Voice of Blood*. Cushoo would be the “voice of blood” in order to illustrate two passages from the Bible:

“What hast thou done? The Voice of thy Brother’s Blood Crieth unto me from the ground.”
(Genesis 4: 10)

“My God forbid it!—shall I drink the blood of these men?” (I Chronicles 11: 19).

For perhaps the first time in history a member of a mass movement for fundamental social change had made a simultaneous popular critique of the exploitation of labor, the commodity form, and the capitalist world market. In this scenario, consumers were unconscious vampires.

Fuli, Margru, Moru, and indeed all of the *Amistad* Africans exemplified Cushoo’s argument. The man-stealer may have walked crooked, as Fuli said, but the straight line of the Middle Passage, from expropriation in Africa to exploitation in the Americas, was an axis of modern capitalism. The profit to be made in a far-reaching system of sugar production shaped the enslavement of Mende, Gbandi, Temne, Kono, and others inland from the Gallinas Coast of West Africa, their transportation across the Atlantic aboard the Portuguese or Brazilian slave ship *Teçora*, their landing in Havana, Cuba, and their reshipment aboard the *Amistad* for Puerto Príncipe and its hinterland booming with the production of sugar. Cubans shared the early nineteenth-century aphorism: “Con sangre se hace azúcar”—Sugar is made with blood.⁷

The Atlantic in 1839

The Atlantic coordinates of the *Amistad* rebellion were London and Seville in Europe, the seats of the British and Spanish empires, whose monarchs, Queen Victoria and Queen Isabella, took an interest in the case; Cuba and the northern Caribbean, where the rebels were meant to work and where the revolt exploded; Connecticut and Washington, DC, where the trials took place and high-ranking American

politicians, including presidents and ex-presidents, as well as middle-class reformers, got involved; and the Gallinas Coast of West Africa and its hinterlands, where Pedro Blanco, King Siaka, Fuli, Margru, and Moru lived. The growing capitalist economy linked these people, disparate of class and region, within a larger Atlantic economic transformation that combined bondage and industrialism.⁸

In 1839 Great Britain was the “workshop of the world.” It was the first industrial nation and the preeminent imperial power, not least because of its Royal Navy. Manufacturing and maritime power went hand in hand. Merchant ships linked the markets of the world and naval ships protected Britain’s interests therein. The island nation’s role in the *Amistad* affair was indirect but important. Because the social movement that produced *The Voice of Blood* had successfully abolished the slave trade in 1807 and had pushed the state to conclude treaties with Spain and Portugal to end their slave trades, the British navy was deployed on the coast of West Africa to intercept illegal slave ships, waging a kind of war by sea against the trade. The Gallinas Coast was a major theater of battle, especially after the same movement abolished slavery throughout the British Empire in 1838. Pedro Blanco and his slave factories would be targets of special importance for the anti-slave-trade patrols.⁹

Spain had long dominated the Atlantic world, but was in decline in 1839, much of its vast empire destroyed by the Spanish–American wars of independence that took place between 1808 and 1829. Standing out amid the ruins, however, was the dynamic colony of Cuba, whose rise as a sugar-producing power owed everything to a successful revolution a generation earlier in neighboring St. Domingue, where 500,000 enslaved Africans had altered the course of world history. Until 1791 they had produced almost a third of the world’s sugar, made with blood under the most horrific conditions. Their revolution, coupled with the decline of sugar production in British colonies after abolition, opened the global market for sugar planters in Cuba and Brazil, who became the world’s hungriest consumers of transatlantic slave labor in the early nineteenth century. In 1839, enslaved people of African descent made up about 45 percent of Cuba’s one million people. The illegal slave trade boomed and sugar production soared. In the half century between the beginning of the Haitian Revolution and the *Amistad* rebellion, Cuba’s sugar production increased ninefold, making the Spanish colony the world’s new leading source of the sweet commodity. The voice of blood was calling with full-throated urgency.¹⁰

The United States was a fledgling power, an increasingly massive continental empire in its own right, and one deeply riven by conflicts over the institution of slavery. With a highly productive agricultural hinterland based on family farms and free labor in the north and on plantations and slave labor in the south, and a growing class of industrial workers located primarily in the northeast, the United States was pursuing continental expansion—its “manifest destiny”—and Native American groups, one after another, suffered bloody expropriation. As slavery expanded westward, the abolitionist movement grew amid a logic of polarization between north and south. The arrival of the *Amistad* rebels off the coast of Long Island in August 1839 was seen in some antislavery quarters as positively providential. It would rile the nation.¹¹

When the *Amistad* Africans departed Lomboko in April 1839, they sailed head-on into a huge and historic wave of slave resistance that had been rippling around the Atlantic for a decade. From Toussaint Louverture to David Walker and Nat Turner, rebels throughout the Americas had struggled against a common plight. Resistance to slavery also convulsed the home region of the *Amistad* rebels in this period, as people captured by King Siaka and settled in “slave towns” rose up and waged a long, bitter, and partially successful struggle for freedom, the Zawo War, between 1825 and 1842. The *Amistad* rebellion may be seen as an oceanic extension of this struggle in West Africa and a linchpin that connected it to Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, and Virginia—an Atlantic geography of resistance. Taken together with the revolt led by former Virginia slave Madison Washington aboard the American slave ship *Creole* in November 1841, it capped a formative, decadelong wave of rebellion.¹²

Origins of the Amistad Africans

The slave trade tried to create a faceless, anonymous mass of laborers for the plantations, but the *Amistad* Africans can be known as individuals—who they were, where they were from, what nations and ethnic groups they were part of, what sorts of work they had done, what kinds of families they had lived in, how old and how tall they were, and finally, how they were enslaved and how they got to Fofonbo on the Gallinas Coast. Much can be known about the thirty-six men and children who were still alive in early 1840, considerably less about eight others who can be identified by name, bringing the total to forty-four of the fifty-three Africans who were aboard the schooner during the uprising. Little evidence has survived about the other nine. Everything the rebels did, from the moment of enslavement to the moment of repatriation and afterward, was based to a large extent on their experiences in Africa before capture.¹³

The *Amistad* Africans were multiethnic, or motley: the original fifty-three consisted of people from at least nine different groups. The dominant group were the Mende. Of the thirty-seven for whom a cultural identity can be recovered, at least twenty-five, and as many as twenty-eight, including Fuli and Margru, called themselves Mende. Four—Moru, Burna (the elder), Sessi, and Weluwa—were Gbandi. Bagna, Konoma, and Sa were Kono. Pugnwani was from the Kono chiefdom of Sando. Pie and his son Fuliwulu were Temne, while Gnakwoi was Loma, Beri was Gola, and Tua was Bullom. Burna suggested that among the ten men who died at sea after the rebellion were one Kissi and one from the multiethnic Kondo confederation. This represents most of the major culture groups of southern and eastern Sierra Leone in the first half of the nineteenth century. All except the Bullom were located in the interior, fifty to two hundred fifty miles inland.¹⁴

These groups had different histories and cosmologies, but they shared common cultural characteristics, practices, and beliefs, especially about kinship, family, ancestral spirits, and the afterlife. Most people lived in villages, towns, or cities that consisted of small conical houses, built of mud wattled around posts and sticks, with thatched roofs and compressed earth floors. Many settlements, especially among the Mende, were palisaded against the chronic threat of war. Town walls were twelve to fifteen feet high, three feet thick at the bottom, eighteen inches thick at the top, with sharpened sticks at the apex. Depending on the size of the population, the compound would have had four to six well-guarded gates and might encompass five to forty acres of land.¹⁵

Islam was spreading slowly through the region, largely among members of the upper classes, who converted, usually in superficial ways, grafting a thin layer of the new religion onto a long-held core of traditional spiritual beliefs. Muslim holy men, variously called *maribouts*, *mori-men*, or *book-men* were growing in number on the Gallinas Coast and in its hinterlands, often as advisers to chiefs and kings such as Siaka. They also played a role in warfare by helping to create charms or amulets, locally called *greegree*, believed to have protective supernatural power for those going into battle. Arabic writing on a small bit of parchment was a common part of the charm or “medicine.” Cinqué’s second-in-command on the *Amistad*, Grabeau, had seen people in his hometown write “from right to left.” The Irish abolitionist Richard Robert Madden noted that one unnamed *Amistad* African knew how to recite prayers in Arabic.¹⁶

The Gallinas Coast, Sierra Leone, and the Windward Coast, 1839–1843



The *Amistad* Africans came from a region about which people of European descent in 1839 knew almost nothing. Even though Europeans had traded in Sierra Leone since the sixteenth century, and mapped its coastline, few had gone inland and they were therefore especially ignorant of the Mende, whose name first appeared in print only in 1795. “Mende” did not appear on maps of West Africa prior to the arrival of the *Amistad* in Connecticut. By the 1830s, the people the name referred to—largely “Liberated Africans” taken by the British off captured slave ships and settled mostly around Freetown—had become known by another name: Kossa, or the variations Kosso or Kussoh. This added confusion to ignorance. When an American abolitionist explained that “we had a book in which their country is described as *Kossa*, they [the *Amistad* Africans] say, that is not its true name, but it is a *term of reproach*, a name that has been applied to the Mendi people by the English, and by those who dislike them! This accounts for their never having mentioned the word *Kossa* to their teachers and friends.” Kossa was indeed a term of contempt, used by the acculturated settlers and recently freed slaves of African descent brought to Sierra Leone by the British. The *Amistad* Africans initially identified themselves by town and leader, not language group.¹⁷

Those who traveled into or near Mende country in the mid-nineteenth century imagined it to be a vast land, teeming with people. American missionary and abolitionist George Thompson, who lived among the Mende and spoke to both African and European travelers, thought that the land of his hosts “stretches eastward hundreds of miles—for weeks’ journey. This we know, for we have often seen persons from the interior from such distances. Doubtless many millions of people speak the Mendi language, for we do not find it in its purity till we get some 200 miles back from the sea.” A British missionary named A. Menzies later noted that Mende was spoken in twelve districts, only three of which had he been able to visit over an eighty-mile expanse. He too was sure that Mende country was immense. The *Amistad* Africans themselves told their teacher that Mende was “a very *great great* country.” It was, in fact, less a country than a large agglomeration of localized societies loosely connected by a common, though regionally variable, language.¹⁸

Where had this numerous and expansive people come from? Some “old Mendians” told missionary John Brooks that “their forefathers came from the east,” making war against western tribes, capturing large towns, settling and building farms along the way, intermarrying and forming alliances “with the people around them.” The elders succinctly described what historians now call the “Mende Invasions,” in which Mende warriors pushed south and west beginning in the middle of the sixteenth century, conquering and settling as they went, and permanently altering the political and cultural geography of southern Sierra Leone. Over the ensuing two centuries, the Mende shared a common language and culture over a wide geographic expanse, but they formed no large political state, had no sense of unity and shared little sense of common identity. Victorious warriors gathered their families, friends, and soldiers to form farms and villages on newly conquered lands.¹⁹

Leadership among the Mende was, for the most part, earned rather than inherited. Kings, chiefs, and “big men” tended to be those who combined military and economic acumen and resources in what were predominantly small, decentralized societies. These leaders, usually in concert with a council of elders, ruled patrilocal and patrilineal societies, meaning that young families lived with or near the family of the husband and that the male line defined identity and property transmission. The Mende were also polygynous: a man could take two or more wives at the same time, if he had the necessary wealth. “Polygamy is common among the wealthier classes,” explained the *Amistad* Africans. “Big men” in the region had “a plurality of wives, and if a king hundreds.” Siaka’s son, King Mana of the Vai, for example, was said to have five hundred wives. The accumulation of wives at the top often created a shortage of women for the poorer males, who found it difficult “to get even one.” Bride-wealth costs could be prohibitive—four, five, or six bullocks and other goods. Wealth in Mende

society was reckoned by the number of wives, children, slaves, and cattle a man had. Only thirteen of the *Amistad* Africans indicated that they had wives, which was a comment on their relative youth and class.²⁰

Almost all of those held captive aboard the *Amistad* were commoners, people who worked the land or plied their craft. And the commons of Mende country was rich—decidedly not a place for the “starving savage” of imperial imagination. Wild bush yams and coco in particular made it easy to live with little work. “Blessings are scattered with a lavish hand,” admitted the exasperated Thompson, who sought to discipline his Mende congregants to a Protestant work ethic. The lavishness included nuts, grapes, pineapple, orange trees, and fig trees. Learning to survive in the bush was an essential skill. The *Amistad* Africans explained to their teacher, “Their soil is very productive, and they are obliged to labor but a small part of the time to procure the comforts of life.”²¹

Only four of the *Amistad* Africans claimed any kind of elite status. Gbatu explained that his father “is a gentleman and does no work.” Fakinna’s father, Bawnge, was a “chief or king” at Dzhopoahu, in Mende country. It was said that Cinqué’s father was a “big man” in his own society. Several others, on the other hand, had been slaves. Yaboi had been captured when his village was surrounded by soldiers in an act of grand pillage and thereafter served a Mende master as a slave for ten years before he was sold to “Luiz, the Spaniard.” Pugnawuni, a Sando man, was enslaved and forced to work for two years cultivating rice before he too was sold to the Spanish traders on the coast. Kimbo’s experience encompassed both ends of the class structure: his father was a gentleman, he said, but after his death, Kinna was enslaved by his king (probably because his father was in debt) and given to a son who resided in Bullom country. He was then sold to another Bullom man, who sold him to a Spaniard at Lomboko.²²

The Mende, like the Temne and many others from the Gallinas area, were traditionally rice farmers. Working the rice fields was a primary experience among the *Amistad* Africans. Cinqué, Grabeau, Bagna, and Bagna described themselves as “planters of rice,” while several others also mentioned the staple crop of the “Grain Coast.” Rice lands were communally owned and labor was cooperative. Men and women tilled the plentiful rice fields as the young and the old fended off the small yellow ricebirds that could destroy a crop. In an upland system of rice production that depended on rainfall, they worked a given piece of land for two or three years, then let it lie fallow for five or six years before returning it to cultivation. Women had especially important roles in threshing rice, in ways that seemed to anthropologist Kenneth Little to have shaped their forms of dance: “There is a very close and striking similarity between the rhythm and movements of the Mende dancer and the rhythm and movements of a woman treading and threshing rice.” They grew rice to eat and to sell, especially as the slave trade expanded and bondsmen had to be fed in the barracoons and on the ships. Some of the *Amistad* Africans may have been feeding the monster that would eventually devour them.²³

Their communities were economically sophisticated, and several men engaged in more than one occupation. Burna the younger “was a blacksmith in his native village, and made hoes, axes, and knives; he also planted rice.” Sessi, a Gbandi man, was also a blacksmith, a trade he had learned from his brother and one that carried prestige and spiritual power. Grabeau planted rice and worked as a merchant, traveling widely (and learning four regional languages) to sell ivory and camwood. Pie, on the other hand, was a hunter. He had killed five leopards in Temne country, “3 on the land, and 2 in the water,” for which he may have earned royal distinction. One leopard skin he “hung up on his hut, to show that he was a hunter.” His weapon of choice seems to have been the European musket. His hands had been “whitened by wounds received from the bursting of a gun barrel, which he had overloaded when showing his dexterity.”²⁴

The division of labor was sufficiently developed in Mende and other societies to make iron and cotton manufacture significant parts of their political economy. Iron ore was of especially high quality

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