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The African Origins of the *Amistad* Rebellion, 1839

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ABSTRACT: This essay explores the *Amistad* rebellion of 1839, in which fifty-three Africans seized a slave schooner, sailed it to Long Island, New York, made an alliance with American abolitionists, and won their freedom in a protracted legal battle. Asking how and why the rebels succeeded, it emphasizes the African background and experience, as well as the "fictive kinship" that grew out of many incarcerations, as sources of solidarity that made the uprising possible. The essay concludes by discussing the process of mutiny, suggesting a six-phase model for understanding the dynamics of shipboard revolt, and showing how such events can have powerful historical consequences.

The *Amistad* rebellion is one of the most famous shipboard revolts in history. In 1839 fifty-three enslaved Africans rose up, killed two members of the Cuban slaver's crew, made prisoners their so-called "masters", José Ruiz and Pedro Montes, took control of the vessel, and sailed it to Long Island, New York. These self-emancipated rebels were then captured by the United States Navy, towed ashore, and incarcerated in New Haven, Connecticut, where their cause became a political controversy and a popular sensation, in the United States and around the Atlantic. In jail they built an alliance with American abolitionists and fought a long and ultimately successful legal battle to avert return to slavery in Cuba. Nineteen months after the revolt, they won their formal freedom before the United States Supreme Court and, eight months later, their repatriation to their native Sierra Leone. It was a major victory in the worldwide struggle against slavery.[1]

The *Amistad* rebellion was part of a massive Atlantic wave of resistance to slavery during the 1830s. David Walker's *Appeal […] to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829) had emphasized the continuing relevance of Toussaint L'Ouverture and the Haitian Revolution to freedom struggles. Sailors, black and white, spread the revolutionary word by smuggling the pamphlet into

1. This essay draws on material presented in my book, *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (New York, 2012).

slave societies. Nat Turner led a bloody uprising in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831, and Sam Sharpe followed with his "Baptist War" in Jamaica in 1831–1832. Enslaved Africans in southern Sierra Leone waged a prolonged revolt called the Zawo War against Spanish and African slave-traders. 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 Boston in 1831 and Great Britain abolished slavery in its West Indian colonies in two stages, in 1834 and 1838. Shipboard revolts on the *Amistad* and the *Creole* in 1839 and 1841 were victorious exclamation points in this powerful cycle of rebellion.[2]

The *Amistad* rebellion also occupies a special place in the longer history of revolts aboard slave ships. Such risings were not uncommon, occurring on as many as one slaving voyage out of ten over the three and a half centuries of the gruesome trade in human bodies, even though slave ships were designed to make uprisings difficult, if not impossible, and slaving captains possessed a time-tested body of practical knowledge about how to prevent revolt, from the use of ethnic conflict to the application of torture and terror. *Successful* revolts, however, were extremely rare, which raises the question, how did the *Amistad* Africans do it? What follows is a narrative of the *Amistad* rebellion, beginning with a description of the schooner itself, followed by an account of what happened in the mutiny and an analysis of what made it successful. The essay suggests a model for understanding mutiny on slave ships and other kinds of vessels.[3]

THE REBELLION

The European deep-sea sailing ship, of which the slave ship was an important type, was the most important machine of what has been called

2. Henry Highland Garnet, *An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (Buffalo, NY, 1843); Peter Hinks, *To Awaken my Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park, PA, 1997); C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York, 1989; orig. publ. 1938); Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York, 2003); Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca, NY, 1982); Adam Jones, *From Slaves to Palm Kernels: A History of the Galinhas Country (West Africa), 1730–1890* (Wiesbaden, 1983), pp. 89–94; João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia* (Baltimore, MD, 1993); Robert L. Paquette, *Sugar is Made with Blood: The Conspiracy of La Escalera and the Conflict between Empires over Slavery in Cuba* (Middletown, CT, 1988); James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York, 1996).

3. David Richardson, "Shipboard Revolts, African Authority, and the Atlantic Slave Trade", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 58 (2001), pp. 69–92, 73–74; David Eltis and David Richardson, *Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (New Haven, CT, 2010), p. 189; Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York, 2007), pp. 291–301. See also the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, available at http://www.slavevoyages.org/.

the age of sail, roughly 1450–1850. When mutineers seized such a machine, they took possession of a technology that combined unprecedented speed, mobility, and, because of their cannon, destructive power. Because such ships were highly variable in size and number of people aboard, the type of vessel and its various material characteristics shaped the way mutiny happened.[4]

The *Amistad* was a long, low schooner, a two-masted craft common around the Atlantic in the early nineteenth century. The vessel was small by the standards of the day, 64 feet long, 19 feet 9 inches wide. It was essentially a coastal trader, but it had made longer voyages from Cuba to Jamaica, and its coppered hull suggests the possibility of a transatlantic slaving voyage or two. Built for speed, with limited carrying capacity, the schooner could outrun most British ships policing the slave trade and hence became a preferred vessel after the commerce in bodies had been outlawed in 1807–1808 in Great Britain and the United States.[5]

Before departure from Havana on 28 June 1839, bound for Puerto Príncipe, Cuba, a region of burgeoning sugar plantations, Captain Ramón Ferrer filled the hold of roughly 6,600 cubic feet with a big, well-sorted cargo: the enslaved (49 men, 4 children) as well as manufactured goods for plantation use: cog wheels, iron castings, and mill rollers. The cargo also contained fabrics and clothes, items for everyday use (soap, iron pots, leather goods), and a huge amount of food: 600 pounds of rice, as well as bread, fruit, olives, sausages, and "fresh beef". There was much less on board to drink: only 6 casks of water. As it happened, in the days leading up to the voyage, ship captains in Havana were having "great difficulty of finding a sufficient quantity of water casks", as one of them put it. The shortage would have consequences.[6]

4. Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, ch. 2.

5. See Quentin Snediker's excellent article on the history of the vessel, "Searching for the Historic *Amistad*", *Log of Mystic Seaport*, 49:4 (1998), pp. 86–95, in which he cites Captain George Howland, "An Autobiography or Journal of his Life, Voyages, and Travels with an Appendix of his Ancestry", 1866, typescript 295, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, Rhode Island, and Temporary Registry #15, for the schooner *Ion*, ex-*Amistad*, New London Customs Records, RG36, National Archives at Boston, Frederick C. Murphy Records Center, Waltham, MA [hereafter NAB]. Howland bought the *Amistad* at auction on 15 October 1840.

6. For detailed accounts of the cargo, see *New London Gazette*, 28 August 1839; "Superior Court", *New York Morning Herald*, 24 October 1839; *The Intelligencer*, 27 October 1839; and the Libel of José Ruiz, 18 September 1839, US District Court for the District of Connecticut, NAB. On the scarcity of casks, see Captain J. Scholborg to R.R. Madden, Havana, 28 June 1839, West India Miscellaneous, 1839; vol.: Removal of the Liberated Africans from Cuba, Superintendent Dr Madden and Superintendent Mr Clarke, Foreign Office; Correspondence from Dr R.R. Madden, Mr D.R. Clarke, and the Foreign Office relating to the removal of the "Liberated Africans" from Cuba, 1839, Colonial Office (CO) 318/146, National Archives of the UK [hereafter NA]. The letter carried the same date as the *Amistad*'s loading and departure from port.

Unlike the large slave ships, the *Amistad* did not have a lower deck, where the enslaved would be jammed together overnight and in bad weather. It was a single-deck vessel with a hold, which measured 6 feet 6 inches from the top of the keel to the underside of the deck above, with headroom diminishing on both sides as the hull curved upward to meet the outer edges. The bulky cargo already stored in the hold left limited room for the human freight, which was jumbled in with, and on top of, the hogsheads, casks, and boxes. The enslaved, crammed below deck, had very little headroom. Indeed, the hold was so crowded that half of the captives would have to be quartered on the deck and forced to sleep in the open, overnight, in chains for the three-day voyage. The rest were fettered and kept below.

The deck of the *Amistad* was crowded, especially during the day, when 60 people (53 Africans, 5 crew members, and 2 passengers) inhabited its 1,200 square feet, much of which was devoted to the masts, the longboat, the hatchway, and other shipboard fixtures. The *Amistad* also lacked a barricado on the deck, a defensive bulwark behind which the crew could retreat in the event of an uprising and from which they could fire their muskets and pistols down on the insurgents. The *Amistad* did have a galley with a brick oven for the preparation of the captives' food – a telltale sign of its slave-trading purpose. It also had a large hatchway amidships for the easier movement of bodies above and below during the voyage. It had 10 sweeps (oars) for self-locomotion and easier maneuvering along the treacherous shoals and inlets of the north coast of Cuba.[7]

The voyage of about 300 miles began well, with a good wind. Yet Captain Ferrer, who had made the passage many times, knew that the winds could shift and that the usual three-day voyage could stretch to two weeks or longer. He immediately put the enslaved on short allowance, conserving food, and especially the understocked water, for the additional time they might be at sea. On the second day out, the small vessel ran in to a storm, no doubt terrifying all of the Africans on board, but probably not the experienced sailors, who would have known harder weather. Turbulence without was soon matched by turbulence within.

The first sign of trouble came early, when on the night immediately following departure "one of the sailors observed that the slaves were coming up from the hold of the forecastle, and that they made some noise, on which account the sailor reprimanded them and told them to be quiet and go down into the hold". This seemed innocent enough; "murmurings" and commotion were common on slave ships. Crowded conditions

7. Dwight P. Janes to Lewis Tappan, New London, 6 September 1839, Sierra Leone Papers, American Missionary Association, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana [hereafter ARC].

produced anger, frustration, and fights among the captives and with the crew. Currents of tension and violence coursed through all slaving vessels, including the *Amistad*.[8]

The hardware of bondage was part of the charge. Grabeau and Kimbo, both leaders in the resistance, remembered that "during the night they were kept in irons, placed about the hands, feet, and neck. They were treated during the day in a somewhat milder manner, though all the irons were never taken off at once". The captain and crew slapped manacles, shackles, and neck-rings on the captives, especially overnight because some of the prisoners slept near them, on the deck. Kinna remembered the neck-rings as a special humiliation: "Chain on neck – you know dey chain ox". Fetters turned human beings into property, but not without a struggle.[9]

Casual violence was commonplace on slaving vessels, and the *Amistad* was no exception. Captain and crew alike used whips, clubs, and fists to terrorize and control the captives. On the deck of any deep-sea sailing ship could be found many tools and other items that handily became instruments of violent discipline. Cinqué and Bau recalled, "The captain of the schooner was very cruel; he beat them on the head very hard with any thing he could catch." Cinqué remembered with fierce anger a time when the slave-sailor and ship's cook Celestino slapped him on the head with a plantain. The cook would pay dearly for his mistake.[10]

The *Amistad* Africans also complained that they were given too little to eat and drink on the voyage – "half eat half drink" was how Fuli described short allowance. In concrete terms this meant two potatoes and one plantain twice a day, in the morning and evening. The fare may have been enough for the children on board, but it was too little for the men. Kinna recalled that the captain "gives us but little eat". Cinqué and Bau added that they were kept "almost starved" – this on a vessel full of food.[11]

Water was an even greater source of strife. Grabeau and Kimbo recalled that "their allowance of food was very scant, and of water still more so. They were very hungry, and suffered much in the hot days and nights from thirst." The allotment of water was half a teacupful in the morning and half a teacupful in the evening. As the prisoners suffered, they watched the crew wash their clothes in fresh water. To make matters worse, Celestino taunted them by taking long drafts in front of them. Kinna recalled, "He drink plenty, long". On a craft sailing through the tropics in midsummer,

8. "The Amistad", *New London Gazette*, 16 October 1839.
9. "Narrative of the Africans", *New York Journal of Commerce*, 10 October 1839.
10. "Private Examination of Cinquez", *New York Commercial Advertiser*, 13 September 1839.
11. "Mendis Perform", *New York Morning Herald*, 13 May 1841. In collective memory the amount of food had shrunk by 1852 to half a plantain per meal; see Hannah Moore to William Harned, 12 October 1852, ARC, for a remarkable oral history of the event taken from survivors at the Mende Mission thirteen years after the event.

the Africans simply were not given enough water to support nature.[12] At least some of the captives seem to have been able to move around the vessel during the daytime, and they took matters into their own hands. They searched for water and they found it below decks. To satisfy their burning thirst, they tapped and drank it, without permission.

When they were caught, Captain Ferrer decided to teach everyone a lesson. At least five men – Fuli, Kimbo, Pie, Moru, and Foone – and perhaps as many as seven (Sessi, Burna) – were each, by turn, restrained and flogged.[13] "[F]or stealing water which had been refused him", Fuli "was held down by four sailors and beaten on the back many times by another sailor, with a whip having several lashes". He referred to the lacerating cat-o'-nine-tails, the primary instrument of power aboard a slave ship. The sailors then flogged the other four, then repeated the entire cycle of punishment four times on each person. In order to maximize the torture, the seamen, with Ruiz's permission, mixed together "salt, rum, and [gun] powder" and applied the burning compound to Fuli's wounds. Not surprisingly, for sailors used gunpowder in tattooing, the marks of the wounds on Fuli's back were still visible months later. Kinna pointed out another disagreeable use of the compound: "Rum, salt, powder – put togedder, make eat dis I tell you". Months later, one of the Africans was still "lame, so as hardly able to walk, as he declares from blows received on board the Amistad".

Tensions aboard the schooner escalated amid the hunger, thirst, violence, torture, and blood. As the Africans later announced, "They would not take it".[14] Shortly after the morning meal of Monday 1 July, Cinqué and Celestino squared off in a fateful encounter on the deck of the *Amistad*. Tension had been rising between the two. Celestino had cuffed Cinqué and had likely been greeted in return by fiery eyes of resistance. He expanded his campaign by taunting the proud prisoner, of whom it could have been said, "Dat man ha big heart too much".[15]

Because the two men shared no common language, Celestino communicated by signs and gestures – "talking with his fingers", as one African recalled – and the menacing cook's knife he held in his hand. In

12. "Mendis Perform".

13. Testimony of Cinqué, 8 January 1840, United States District Court, Connecticut, NAB; "Narrative," *New York Journal of Commerce*, 10 January 1840.

14. "Ruiz and Montez", *New York Commercial Advertiser*, 18 October 1839; "Mendis Perform", "Plans to Educate the Amistad Africans in English", *New York Journal of Commerce*, 9 October 1839; "To the Committee on Behalf of the African Prisoners", *New York Journal of Commerce*, 10 September 1839.

15. "Ruiz and Montez". The phrase in pidgin English used by liberated Africans in Freetown to describe a proud person such as Cinqué is recorded in Robert Clarke, *Sierra Leone: A Description of the Manners and Customs of the Liberated Africans; with Observations upon the Natural History of the Colony, and a Notice of the Native Tribes* (London, 1843), p. 11.

order to answer the questions that were on every captive's mind – where are we going and what will become of us at the end of the voyage? – Celestino drew his blade's edge across his throat: they were going to a place where they would all be killed. The cook then made a chopping motion with his knife to show that their bodies would then be hacked to bits by the white men. He took the imagined bits of flesh to his mouth: they would be eaten. He gestured to a cask of salt beef, implying that it was filled with the bodies of Africans from a previous voyage; he gestured again to an empty cask indicating that therein lay their fate. As Cinqué noted, "The cook told us they carry us to some place and kill and eat us". Kinna added that Celestino "with his knife, made signs of throat-cutting. &c., and pointed to the barrels of beef, and thus hinted to Cinquez, that himself and his companions were to be cut up and salted down for food like beef". He pointed to "an Island ahead where the fatal deed was to be perpetrated". His words had direct impact, although they did not terrorize and pacify, as he had hoped they would. Instead, they galvanized the Africans to action. Every account of the uprising told by any of the *Amistad* Africans emphasized the decisive importance of Celestino's threat as a catalyst of rebellion.[16]

That night, after the vexed encounter between Cinqué and Celestino, as the *Amistad* sailed past Bahia de Cadiz a little before midnight, a storm arose from the shore. Rain poured from a dark, cloudy, moonless sky. Ruiz remembered it as a "black night". High winds prompted Captain Ferrer to order all hands aloft to take in the topsails to reduce the power of the wind to buffet the vessel. In a couple of hours, the rain stopped and the storm abated. All of the crew and passengers, except the helmsman, retired and were soon "sunk in sleep".[17]

A bigger storm was brewing in the hold of the vessel. Celestino's murderous sign language had created a crisis among the captives. As Grabeau stated and Kimbo affirmed, his sinister threat of death and cannibalism "made their hearts burn". Kinna remembered, "We very unhappy all dat night – we fraid we be kill – we consider". Soon, "We break off our chains and consider what we should do". Crowded together in the hold of the ship, they debated what to do in the face of an unspeakably horrible mass death.[18] An "old man" named Lubos had earlier reminded everyone that "no one ever conquered our nation, & even now we are not taken by fair means". Someone, probably Cinqué, responded, "Who is for

16. *Farmer's Cabinet*, 19 November 1841; Joseph Sturge, *A Visit To The United States In 1841* (London, 1842), Appendix E, p. xliv; Moore to Harned, 12 October 1852; "African Testimony", *New York Journal of Commerce*, 10 January 1840.

17. "Mendis Perform"; "The Long, Low Black Schooner", *New York Sun*, 31 August 1839; "The Amistad".

18. "Narrative of the Africans"; "Mendis Perform"; *Youth's Cabinet*, 20 May 1841.

War?". Most were, but a small group of Bullom men held back, fearing to "make war on the owners of the vessel". Lubos asked whether they would rather be "slaughtered for Cannibals" or "die fighting for life". Only one of these choices was an honorable death.

Lubos carried the day and the decision for war was taken, but now the Africans faced a literally iron dilemma. How would they get out of the manacles, shackles, neck-rings, chains, and padlocks that rendered them unable to move about the ship? Cinqué later remarked that "the chain which connected the iron collars about their necks, was fastened at the end by a padlock, and that this was first broken and afterwards the other irons". Kinna also stated, "We break off our chains", but he later added a second, somewhat different description of what they did: Cinqué found a loose nail on deck and used it to pick the central padlock. Whether the locks were broken or picked, a substantial number of men were soon free of their chains and ready to fly into action, awaiting Cinqué's "signal for them to rise upon their vile masters and the crew".[19]

At 4 am the ship was in almost total darkness. Everyone was asleep except the sailor at the helm. Cinqué, Faquorna, Moru, and Kimbo climbed up from the hold through the hatchway and on to the deck. It is not clear whether they had to break open the grating or whether it had been left unlocked by mistake. They crept quietly toward Celestino – not Captain Ferrer – as the first and primary object of their wrath. He was sleeping in the ship's long-boat, which lay in the waist, on the larboard side, near the cabin. Along the way Cinqué picked up a belaying pin, or handspike, used to turn the ship's windlass, and his mates did likewise, quietly gathering weapons from the deck. They surrounded Celestino and clubbed him repeatedly with hard, crushing blows. Fuli later recalled, "The cook was killed first – was killed by Jingua [Cinqué] with a stick, while lying in the boat". Burna agreed: "He saw Cinguez strike the cook with a club, probably a handspike". During the beating, Celestino did not cry out or groan, did not make any sound at all, according to Antonio, the captain's Afro-Cuban cabin boy. The only sounds to be heard in the damp night air above the rolling of the sea and the creaking of the ship were the thuds of wood on flesh and bone.[20]

19. "Narrative of the Africans"; "Mendis Perform"; "Anniversaries – Amistad Freemen", *Youth's Cabinet*, 20 May 1841; John Warner Barber, *A History of the Amistad Captives, being a Circumstantial Account of the Capture of the Spanish Schooner Amistad, by the Africans on Board; their Voyage, and Capture near Long Island, New York; with Biographical Sketches of each of the Surviving Africans. Also, an Account of the Trials had on their Case, before the District and Circuit Courts of the United States, for the District of Connecticut. Complied from Authentic Sources, by John W. Barber, Mem. of the Connecticut Hist. Soc.* (New Haven, CT, 1840), p. 11; "The Amistad Negroes", *Farmer's Cabinet*, 19 November 1841; "The Amistad Captives", *Liberator*, 19 November 1841.

20. "African Testimony"; "The Case of the Africans Decided for the Present – Habeas Corpus not Sustained", *New York Morning Herald*, 25 September 1839.

Now began "the whooh", as Burna called the chaos of open rebellion that engulfed the small deck. The commotion woke up the captain, who was sleeping on a mattress not far away, as well as the rest of the crew, and Ruiz and Montes, who were in the cabin. Ferrer called out, "Attack them, for they have killed the cook". Amid the confusion and uproar, those under attack scrambled frantically in the dark for arms, grabbing whatever was close at hand; there was no time to load pistols or muskets. Captain Ferrer seized a dagger and a club and fought furiously to defend his vessel from capture. The two sailors, Manuel and Jacinto, who were supposed to be the armed guard to prevent what was now happening before their very eyes, threw themselves into the battle, one with a club, the other with no weapon at all. Montes armed himself with a knife and a pump handle, screaming all the while at the Africans to stop, to be still. The unarmed sailor yelled to Montes to get the dead cook's knife and give it to him. Ruiz grabbed an oar as he scrambled from his passenger's quarters, shouting "No! No!" as he came on deck. Ruiz then "stood before the caboose and halloed to the slaves to be quiet and to go down into the hold". They ignored the command of their former master; indeed, more Africans escaped their chains and joined the fray, now wielding fearsome machetes. Seeing that the situation was far beyond exhortation, Ruiz called to Montes to kill some of the rebels in order to frighten the rest and to restore order. He believed, wrongly, that the Africans were all "great cowards".[21]

At first the crew and passengers were able to drive the rebels from amidships beyond the foremast, and at this point Captain Ferrer, who desperately hoped that this was a rebellion of the belly, commanded Antonio to fetch some sea biscuit and throw it among the rebels in the hope of distracting them. He knew they were hungry – too little food had been a complaint since the voyage began. Antonio did as his master commanded, but the insurgents, he explained, "would not touch it". Antonio himself opted for neutrality: he climbed up the mainstays, where he would watch the struggle unfold, safely from above.[22]

As the battle raged, Captain Ferrer killed a man named Duevi and mortally wounded a second, unnamed rebel, which infuriated the other Africans and made them fight harder. He also wounded others, as Kale recalled: "Then captain kill one man with knife and cut Mendi

21. "The Long, Low Black Schooner"; "Case", *New York Morning Herald*, 22 September 1839; "The Amistad"; "The Case of the Captured Negroes", *New York Morning Herald*, 9 September 1839. On the little girls and their discovery of the cane knives see Madden to A. Blackwood, Esq., 3 October 1839, Correspondence from Dr R.R. Madden, Mr D.R. Clarke, and the Foreign Office relating to the removal of the liberated Africans from Cuba, 1839, Colonial Office (CO) 318/146, NA.

22. Interview of Antonio, "The Long, Low Black Schooner".

people plenty". Two of the rebels attacked Montes with an oar, which he grabbed and used to hold them off. Montes wrestled with the men until one of the sailors cried out that he should let it go or they would kill him. At this point, a blow to his arm caused Montes to drop his knife. He groped desperately around the deck in an effort to find it. Ruiz continued to scream at the rebels to stop fighting and go below, but they ignored him, soon disarming him of his own makeshift weapon.[23]

Suddenly the tide of battle turned – red. An insurgent wielding one of the machetes slashed one of the sailors, who cried out "Murder!" He and his crewmate saw not only defeat but certain death in the ever larger, machete-wielding mob, so they threw a canoe overboard. They would not have had time to lower the longboat, which was in any case heavy with the battered corpse of Celestino. They jumped into the water, leaving the remaining four to battle many times their number. Of one of the sailors, Kinna recalled: "He swim – swim long time – may be swim more – we not know". The two sailors, cut and bleeding, eventually crawled into the canoe and began paddling for land. They had about eighteen miles to cover and it was by no means certain they would make it.[24]

Someone now gave Montes "a powerful blow on the head with a cane knife, and he fell senseless on the deck". Stunned, with another deep wound on his arm and "faint from the loss of blood", he roused himself, staggered from the battle scene, and fell headlong down the hatchway. Once below, he remained conscious enough to crawl into a space between two barrels and hide beneath a canvas sail. It was a frail hope against death.[25]

On deck, Cinqué and the other leaders of the rebellion now surrounded Captain Ferrer in a fury of flashing blades. Faquorna apparently struck the first two blows, Cinqué the final, fatal one. Antonio testified, "Sinqua killed Capt with cane knife – see it with my eyes".[26] When the time for the death blow came, one of the brave combatants, Kimbo, proved to be squeamish: "When the Captain of the schooner was killed, he could not see it done, but looked another way". Slashed several times on his face and body, the captain collapsed on the deck, bloody, crumpled, and lifeless.

23. Kale to John Quincy Adams, 4 January 1841, John Quincy Adams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society. Fuliwa stated, "Capt. Ferrer killed one of the Africans, Duevi by name, before the Africans killed him". See "African Testimony". Kinna later alleged that Captain Ferrer had killed two of the Africans. One of them, unnamed, seems to have died later of wounds inflicted by Captain Ferrer.

24. "Mendis Perform"; Ruiz: "The cabin boy said they had killed only the captain and cook. The other two he said had escaped in the canoe – a small boat". See "The Captured Slaves", *New York Morning Herald*, 2 September 1839.

25. "Mendis Perform".

26. Testimony of Antonio, 9 January 1840, United States District Court, NAB.

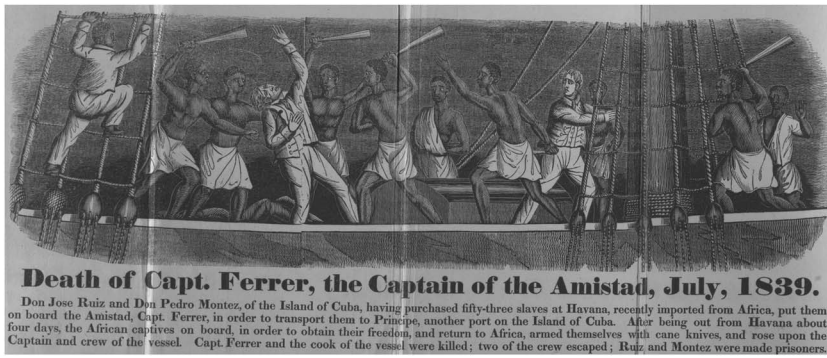

Figure 1. "Death of Capt. Ferrer, the Captain of the Amistad, July 1839". This most famous image of the *Amistad* rebellion was drawn by engraver John Warner Barber, who visited the Africans in New Haven Jail and depicted the rebels as identifiable individuals – Cinqué at the far left with the cane knife in hand, attacking Captain Ramon Ferrer, and the similarly armed Konoma at the far right, rushing into battle.
From A History of the Amistad Captives *(New Haven, CT, 1839). Courtesy of Marietta College Library. Used with permission.*

The rebels danced, yelled, and beheaded the captain in a carnivalesque moment of victory.[27]

They now went in search of Montes, whose ragged, heavy breathing gave away his hiding place below deck. An enraged Cinqué found him and swung at him twice with his cane knife, narrowly missing. Montes begged for his life, to no avail as Cinqué prepared to swing again, until Burna stayed his arm. Cinqué and Burna then carried Montes up to the deck, where he saw Ruiz, "seated upon the hen coop with both hands tied". He, too, was pleading for his life. The rebels laced the two Spaniards together, "making at the same time horrible gestures" and threatening to kill them. Someone dragged young Antonio down from the stays and tied him to the two other prisoners. After a little while, Ruiz recalled, the insurgents "made signs that they would not hurt me". The new masters of the vessel then locked their prisoners below as they went through the captain's cabin and also familiarized themselves with the cargo.[28]

With two dead, two overboard, and three disarmed, bound, and begging for their lives, an eerie silence came over the blood-stained deck. The rebellion was over. The social world of the *Amistad* had been turned upside down. The captain and cook had been killed, the sailors had been forced to

27. "The Long, Low Black Schooner"; "The Negroes of the Amistad", *New Hampshire Sentinel*, 2 October 1839. According to the oral history as relayed by Hannah Moore, "the ocean reverberated with the yells and frantic dances of a savage clan". See Moore to Harned, 12 October 1852.
28. "The Long, Low Black Schooner"; "Case".

jump overboard, and the slaveholders were now prisoners. Those who had once been slaves had won their freedom in a desperate armed gamble.

SOURCES OF SOLIDARITY

What made the *Amistad* rebellion possible, and what in the end made it successful? The answers to these questions lie in a set of common characteristics and experiences that served as bases for the rebels' collective action. Most of the commonalities were based in the West African cultures from which they came. Others had emerged during their various captivities, in Lomboko (the slave-trading factory where they had been taken for shipment), on the transatlantic Portuguese slave ship *Teçora*, in the Havana barracoons (where they stayed ten days), and on board the *Amistad*. Out of these experiences grew a solidarity manifested in the uprising.

Who were the rebels? They were a motley crew, consisting of at least ten different ethnicities or nationalities. Yet they shared an unusually large capacity for communication among themselves: almost two-thirds were Mende, several others could speak Mende, and almost all were multilingual, as was common in their region of origin. All came from societies in which they were accustomed to working together for the good of the whole. Almost all were commoners: several practiced communal rice farming; others were urban weavers.

Crucially, all came from communities governed by the Poro Society – the powerful all-male secret society that trained warriors, declared war, organized rites of passage, settled disputes, and maintained social discipline. When it was observed that Cinqué "had been accustomed to command", the meaning of the phrase was two-fold: he had military experience and discipline and he had wielded authority in the Poro Society, which was by far the most significant means of self-organization known by, and practiced among, the *Amistad* Africans, whether Mende, Temne, or Kono.[29]

The rebels also shared a set of profound experiences based on their common misfortune of enslavement. All had been expropriated from the land and enslaved, although by various means, whether judicial ruling, kidnapping, or military action. All had endured a long, debilitating march, by land and water, to the coast. All, except the four children, were young, strong, able-bodied men, who had been separated from the families and kinship systems that had previously governed their lives. The very characteristics that made them desirable as slaves, whose youthful labor power could be exploited, made them dangerous as potential rebels. All had been

29. Barber, *A History of the Amistad Captives*, pp. 8, 11, 13. For evidence of Cinqué's Poro marks, called "tattoos", see *Pennsylvania Freeman*, 26 September 1839.

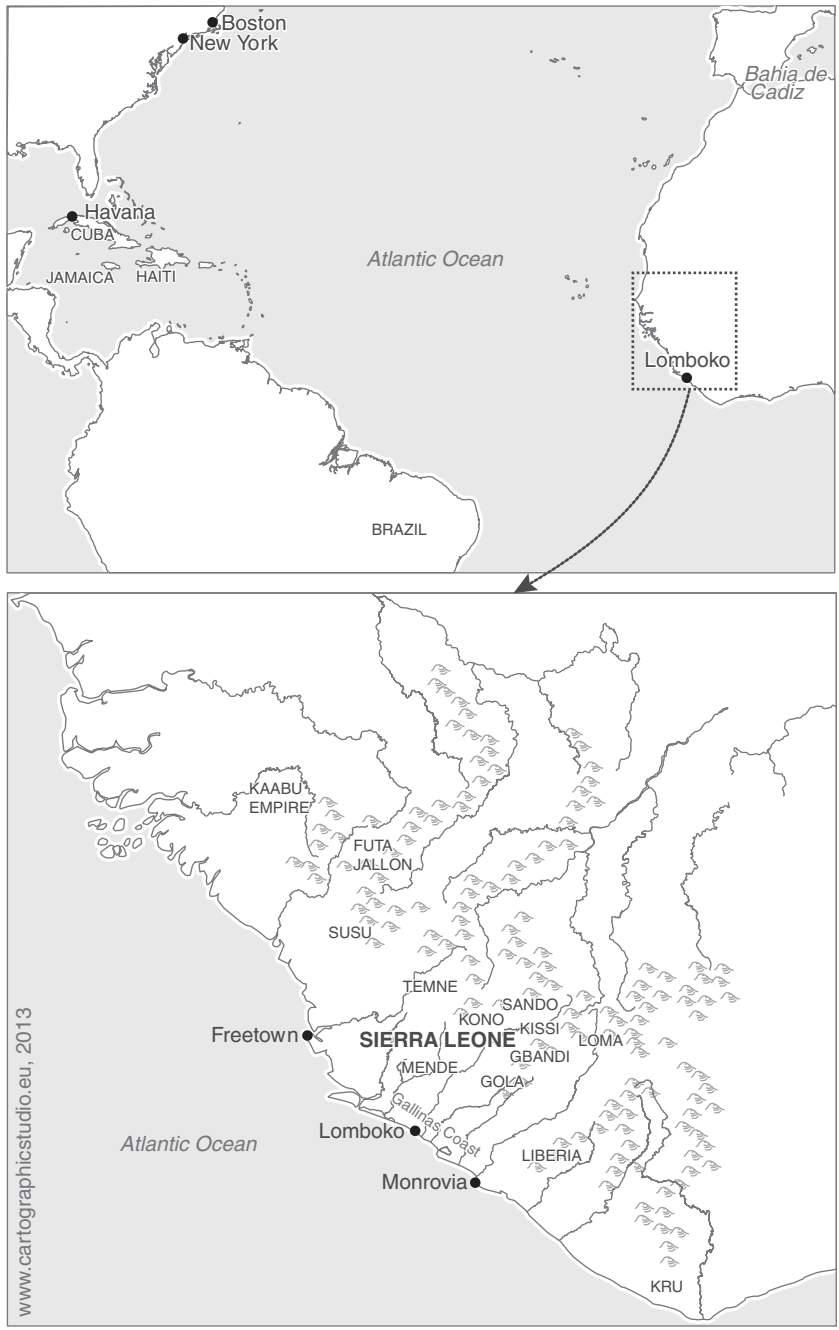

Figure 2. The Gallinas Coast, Sierra Leone, and the Origins of the *Amistad* Africans, c.1839.

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imprisoned at Pedro Blanco's Fort Lomboko, on the Gallinas Coast. It was here that Cinqué and Grabeau met and began a conversation about freedom that would last several years. Grabeau testified that he "met the others for the first time" at Lomboko, where they began to take shape as a strange, new, accidental collective.[30]

All had experienced the slave ship and its Middle Passage, jammed together with 500–600 others in miserable circumstances for "two moons", many dying along the way, the survivors developing a "fictive kinship" that grew among the "brothers" and "sisters" of a common ordeal. Those bound for the *Amistad* wailed in anguish when they were separated from other shipmates on sale in Havana, and those who remained together repeatedly explained that "they were all brought from Africa in the same vessel", a powerful source of solidarity. Shared sufferings in the Havana barracoons and aboard the *Amistad* strengthened these ties.

The *Amistad* Africans, in sum, boasted commonalities of work, culture, government, enslavement, youth, geographic origins, sites of cooperation (factory, ship), and fictive kinship as "shipmates". In the broader context of the history of the slave trade, they exhibited unusually strong common experiences, social characteristics, and cultural connections, all of which combined to create a broad basis for collective rebellion, in a small place at a specific moment in time. They did not choose their way into the dilemma that confronted them aboard the *Amistad*, but they did choose their way out.

THE PROCESS OF SHIPBOARD REVOLT

Uprisings aboard slave ships (and, I would argue, on other types of ships) proceeded through six phases, some social, some technological. But they could – and did – break down, allowing the conspiracy to be discovered, and thereby to fail, at any point along the way. The phases were: forming an original core of rebels (what the Mende called *Ko-biye*, the attacking force, or vanguard, that would lead the rebellion); forming a collective that would carry it out; getting out of the irons (this phase would not apply to all mutinies); finding weapons; fighting the battle and seizing control of the ship; and eventually sailing the ship to freedom.

Cinqué and Grabeau, both Mende, constituted the original core of the rebels. The former was, in the idiom of the society from which he came, a "head war man", experienced and selected as such by his comrades in the hold of the *Amistad* in the run-up to the rebellion, which he subsequently led with bravery and success. The latter was apparently a high-ranking member of the Poro, evident from his extensive scarification and a fact offered later by someone who knew him in Mende country before his

30. "African Testimony".

enslavement: he was "connected with a high family, though poor himself". These two men thus represented a perfect combination of military, spiritual, and political authority as it existed on the Gallinas Coast and in its hinterlands – and, finally, in the displaced, mobile circumstances of the African diaspora aboard a slave ship in the northern Caribbean. Everyone on board would have recognized them immediately as leaders.[31]

Around these two leaders formed a secondary group: Burna, the third leading figure, and Moru – both Gbandi; Shule ("fourth in command, when on board the schooner") and Kimbo – both Mende; and Fa and Faquorna, nationality unknown. All had been warriors in their native societies. They now stepped forward because of their knowledge and experience of combat. They studied the ship and whispered their findings to each other in the hold. They wanted to know how the vessel worked, how many were the crew, what were their habits, what were their arms. (The crew was small; they kept no regular watch; they had muskets, pistols, and whips.) The warriors would have seen that the prospects for rebellion aboard the *Amistad* were much greater than they had been on the *Teçora*.[32]

The collective was formed (phase 2) through the organizing efforts of the *Ko-biye*, according to the principles of the Poro Society. Drawing on the host of experiences above, the collective came into purposeful existence during the meeting described by Kinna as the time when "we consider". During the "palaver" held in the hold, someone, probably Cinqué, asked, "Who is for War?". By the end of the meeting, the group had achieved unity, or, in Mende, *ngo yela*, which meant "one word" or unity. The oral history of the rebellion kept by the rebels themselves recalled their decision: all had "one word WAR!! and war immediately". They decided as a group to rise up, seize the ship, and sail home, or to die trying.

Even though a clear leadership had been established immediately before and during the uprising, the collective continued to meet and act together as the situation unfolded. As Ruiz noted, "a few days" after the rebellion the group met and officially chose Cinqué as their leader; he had earned the position through action, in the customary Mende way. They also allocated other positions among themselves: Sesse, who apparently had some seafaring knowledge (probably aboard the *Teçora*), would steer and "make sail". Foone would be the group's cook. Guided by Poro practice, the collective would be the sovereign decision-making power.[33]

These common experiences required a spark, a catalytic event, to bring them into full force. This lay in the confrontation between Cinqué and Celestino, which cannot be understood without a knowledge of Mende

31. *Vermont Chronicle*, 8 June 1842.
32. Barber, *History of the Amistad Captives*, p. 11.
33. *Ibid*.; Moore to Harned, 12 October 1852, ARC. On Grabeau's background, see *Vermont Chronicle*, 8 June 1842; Testimony of Antonio.

and neighboring cultures. Celestino's cannibalistic taunt resonated with a potent set of beliefs. In the interior of Sierra Leone, as elsewhere, it had been widely believed for decades that the strange white men who showed up on the coast in "floating houses" were cannibals. Enslaved Africans had on more than one occasion pointed to casks of beef as holding the flesh of previous captives and to puncheons of wine as holding their blood. West African slave-owners had long strengthened discipline in their own societies by threatening to sell slaves to the white men, who would, they explained, carry them across the "great waters" and eat them.

Since a large majority of the *Amistad* captives came from deep inland and had never seen white men, their ships, or even the sea, they took Celestino's threat of cannibalism seriously. Strengthening the grim prospect was another common belief, that cultural power could be wielded through the control and manipulation of body parts, which provided access to the world of malevolent spirits. Witches and sorcerers made special efforts to secure the body parts of famous warriors, whose hair, teeth, and bones might be used to create potent "medicine". Was Celestino a witch, a *honei*, who used his powers on behalf of the white men? Did Cinqué, as a warrior, feel especially threatened by the taunt? One of the main functions of the Poro Society was to punish, and at times to execute, witches and sorcerers who worked against the common good.[34]

Phase 3: how would the Africans get out of the irons – the manacles, shackles, neck-rings, chains, and padlocks – that rendered them immobile and unable to move about the ship? Whether the locks and chains were picked or broken, it was a matter of no small significance that two of the forty-nine enslaved men were blacksmiths, who knew the properties of iron intimately from their work. Sessi was described as "a blacksmith, having learnt that trade of his brother; he made axes, hoes, and knives from iron obtained in the Mendi country". When speed was crucial to avoiding detection, getting so many people out of irons was necessarily a communal undertaking.[35]

Phase 4 of the rebellion concerned the acquisition of weapons. At the beginning of the uprising the rebels used tools, handspikes, sticks (probably barrel staves), whatever they could find lying around on the deck. Then came a decisive discovery in the hold of the *Amistad*: a box of cane knives meant to be used by slaves in Puerto Príncipe, probably themselves. At the first trial of the *Amistad* Africans, for piracy and

34. W.T. Harris and Harry Sawyerr, *The Springs of Mende Belief and Conduct: A Discussion of the Influence of the Belief in the Supernatural among the Mende* (Freetown, 1968), p. 83; Jones, *From Slaves to Palm Kernels*, p. 185; Anthony J. Gittins, *Mende Religion: Aspects of Belief and Thought in Sierra Leone* (Nettetal, 1987), p. 122; Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, pp. 266–269.
35. *New York Journal of Commerce*, 10 October 1839; *New York Morning Herald*, 13 May 1841; *Youth's Cabinet*, 20 May 1841; Barber, *History of the Amistad Captives*, p. 11.

murder, a cane knife was presented as evidence to the grand jury and described by a newspaper correspondent:

> […] it is a most formidable weapon in the hands of a resolute man, [c]ould be wielded with deadly effect; it is about 3 feet long, 3 or 4 inches wide at the end, and narrowing until it enters the handle, where it is about one inch and half wide; the handle is of horn with a knob at the end.

The rebels transformed a tool of exploitation into its opposite – a tool of emancipation.[36]

How the captives found their weapons of self-emancipation has long been one of the mysteries of the *Amistad* rebellion. It so happens that Havana-based British diplomat and Irish abolitionist, Richard Robert Madden, knew how it happened and explained the process in a letter of October 1839. Writing of the *Amistad*, he noted:

> There was much merchandize also on board, and amongst the rest a package of swords or machetes as they are called, which are used for cutting down canes. The female negroes of the party, true to their sex, indulged their curiosity in examining the contents of various packages around them whenever there was an opportunity, and faithful also to the communicative character of the fair part of humanity, they imparted the information they had acquired to their male friends, and the latter true to themselves, and faithful to one bold man among them who became their chief, they acted on it.

The "female negroes" were the three little girls – Margru, Kagne, and Teme, each about nine years old. They were not, as Madden seems to suggest, on a shopping expedition. They were, rather, trapped on a slave ship, but they had freedom of movement that others did not have. They used their intelligence, their ability to range freely, and their ability to communicate to find the cane knives and inform their male shipmates of the location, thereby making the successful rebellion possible.[37]

The battle for control of the ship, the fifth stage in the process of mutiny, drew on two aspects of previous experience. First, warfare – much of it connected to the slave trade – had been extensive in the homelands of the *Amistad* Africans from the mid-1820s up to the moment of their shipment out of Lomboko in April 1839. All of the men aboard the *Amistad* would have been trained as warriors in defense of their villages and cities. Gnakwoi had been a "war boy" who fought with the notorious mercenary warlord, Goterah. Cinqué and Bau explained that "they had been in battles, in their own country, using muskets". They had almost surely been soldiers in the army of King Amara Lalu, who fought

36. *New York Morning Herald*, 22 September 1839.

37. The *New Hampshire Sentinel* reported on 4 September 1839: "After killing the captain and the mulatto, Joseph ransacked the cabin below, and having found a quantity of sugar knives, armed the rest of the slaves."

the aggressive expansion of King Siaka, the paramount king allied with the Spanish slave-traders. Grabeau had military experience of a distinctly ironic, not to say contradictory, sort: he had, at one point in his life, fought in a war against "insurgent slaves", not far from the American colony of Liberia. He would now use his martial skills to fight as an insurgent slave himself.[38]

The fundamental practices of Mende warfare were apparent in how the uprising took place. The weapon of choice was a knife. Mende warriors always preferred knives – the cutlass at home, the very similar cane knife aboard the *Amistad*, the discovery of which must have seemed a gift of the ancestral spirits. Moreover, they used typical Mende tactics: they used a moonless night to launch a surprise guerilla attack (in Mende, *Kpindi-go*), using war shouts and swinging their blades wildly in a successful effort to make their opponents abandon position so that victory might be more easily achieved. The goal of warfare was not slaughter but capture, of people and place, both of which were quickly achieved on board the vessel. They also performed a Mende war dance ritual, *kootoo*, as they celebrated the killing of Captain Ferrer.[39]

The two sailors who jumped overboard during the mutiny and managed to get back to Havana pointed out another crucial experience: "the Captain, owner of the schr., [Ferrer] was warned, previous to sailing, to keep a look out for the negroes, as they had attempted to rise and take the vessel in which they were brought from Africa". The subversive experience of slave-ship revolt was thus already present aboard the *Amistad.* Nothing more is known about that rebellion as it was not mentioned in any other documentation surrounding the *Amistad* case. Yet it is of first significance that the veterans of a failed rebellion aboard the *Teçora* would have another chance to get it right, and get it right they would.[40]

The sixth and final phase of the rebellion was perhaps the biggest challenge of all. Could they sail the schooner to freedom? The decision was taken to keep Montes alive because he knew how to navigate the vessel. The original plan of revolt may not have included killing Captain Ferrer, who might have been more useful in sailing the ship. As young Kale explained to John Quincy Adams: "We never kill captain; he no kill us". Even though Ruiz and Montes "made fools of us, and did not go to Sierra Leone", as Cinqué explained, he and his comrades did learn to handle the ship well enough to make it to a place that was not "slavery country". They set sail, hauled anchor, used the boat, and managed to go ashore at least thirty times during the voyage after the rebellion, all of

38. "Private Examination of Cinquez"; Barber, *History of the Amistad Captives*, pp. 8, 13; *Vermont Chronicle*, 8 June 1842.
39. For the African background to the rebellion, see Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, ch. 1.
40. Correspondence from Havana, *New York Journal of Commerce*, 25 July 1839.

which bespeaks no small amount of skill. Most of the places they anchored and went ashore remain unknown: did they go ashore in South Carolina or Virginia only to discover that these places *were* "slavery country"? Their ability to sail the ship may have owed something to the sickness of white crew members aboard the *Teçora*, a common problem on Atlantic slave ships, which was solved by bringing African men out of the lower deck and teaching them the rudiments of sailoring – how to hand, reef, and steer on a sailing ship.[41]

The successful rebellion aboard the slave schooner *Amistad* progressed through stages that would have characterized mutiny on other types of vessels: the formation of the core and the collective, the acquisition of weapons, the struggle for control of the vessel, and the effort to sail it to a free place. Only the enslaved and some indentured servants and convicts would have to free themselves of their fetters as a third stage. Naval and merchant sailors were not only unchained (unless in the bilboes as punishment), they were trained in the use of arms and frequently had pistols, muskets, and cannon at their disposal. They also had much higher levels of the necessary maritime skill to sail the vessel after capture. These were great advantages. Convicts, servants, and slaves, to have any hope of success, had to find weapons and comrades with some seafaring knowledge among them, and in many cases they did. A successful revolt on a slaver such as the *Amistad* would have been perhaps the most difficult of all mutinies to carry off.

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

The planning and execution of the rebellion – and no less the long, dangerous, even tortuous voyage afterward – were great achievements. Acting on shared common experiences and West African precepts of self-organization, the *Amistad* Africans had done what few of the millions before them had done: waged a successful uprising aboard a slave ship, then sailed the vessel to a place where they might secure the freedom they had fought for and won. Their armed self-defense forced abolitionists, in America and around the world, to make revolutionary arguments in defense of their resistance and against the institution of slavery itself.

As Attorney Roger Baldwin explained to the justices of the Supreme Court, the *Amistad* "had been taken by force out of the hands of Spanish subjects, was not sailing under Spanish colors, had lost its national character, and was in the full possession of the Africans". John Quincy Adams made the same point before the same court: "The Africans were in possession, and had the presumptive right of ownership" of the *Amistad*; "they were on a voyage to their own native homes [...] the ship was

41. *New York Journal of Commerce*, 20 March 1841.

theirs". And of course the *Amistad* Africans themselves knew what they had achieved, even as posterity was beginning to paint them as hapless victims. Indeed, young Kale wrote to Adams, telling the great man exactly what he should say to the Supreme Court: "If court ask you who brought Mende people to America? We bring ourselves. Ceci hold rudder."[42]

The shock waves of the *Amistad* rebellion reverberated in many different directions – throughout the Caribbean and Brazil, where a successful revolt put the master class on the defensive; back to Europe, where monarchs, middle-class reformers, and workers took great interest in the case; to the Bahamas, where once-enslaved African Americans aboard the *Creole* would take their captured vessel to freedom in 1841; to Africa, where the *Amistad* rebels returned in January 1842, bringing missionary abolitionists and an international track of the Underground Railroad with them; and throughout America, where the movement against slavery took a radical turn, especially among African-American abolitionists, leading in a direct line to John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in 1859 and Civil War in 1861. The agency of fifty-three enslaved Africans on a small vessel in the northern Caribbean in 1839 rippled far and wide around the Atlantic.

42. *New York Journal of Commerce*, 23 February 1841 and 26 February 1841; Kale to John Quincy Adams, 20 March 1841. Note, however, that Kale wrote his letter on 4 January 1841, six months before Baldwin and Adams made their arguments in court.