

Cinqué of the *Amistad* a Slave Trader? Perpetuating a Myth

Howard Jones

I think the *Journal of American History* owes Cinqué an acquittal.

—Anonymous reader of manuscript for the *Journal of American History*

For more than fifty years a story has circulated both inside and outside the history profession that Joseph Cinqué (Sengbe Pieh), leader of the *Amistad* mutiny in 1839 and the central character in Steven Spielberg's movie *Amistad*, became an international slave trader upon his return to Africa in 1842. The release of the movie in 1997 heated the controversy by subjecting Spielberg to the charge of romanticizing a black figure who preyed on his own people. Debbie Allen, the film's producer (who had convinced Spielberg to do what he called his "most important movie"), encountered the allegation while on a TV talk show and, both there and later in the press, attributed the story to rumor and innuendo. Soon afterward, Richard Grenier made the same indictment in the *Washington Times*. But the most widely known accusation came in *USA Today* and on CBS's *Face the Nation* from the noted film critic Michael Medved of the *New York Post* (and was repeated by Martin F. Nolan in the *Boston Globe*). Medved quoted the two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison. In *The Oxford History of the American People*, a 1965 Book-of-the-Month Club selection still available in Penguin paperback, Morison wrote: "The ironic epilogue [to the *Amistad* story] is that Cinqué, once home, set himself up as a slave trader."¹

During the early 1980s, in writing my book *Mutiny on the Amistad*, I tried to find evidence that would resolve this serious charge against Cinqué.² The effort

Howard Jones is University Research Professor and chair of the Department of History at the University of Alabama. Earlier versions of this essay appeared in four public addresses: the Pitkin Memorial Lecture at the New Haven Colony Historical Society; a lecture at the opening of the Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Rebellion at Yale University; and guest lectures at the University of Nebraska and Purdue University. The author wishes to thank the following people for assistance in preparing this essay: Arthur Abraham, David Chapman, David Brion Davis, Robert P. Forbes, Rebecca Hankins, Robert W. Harms, Melanie Hill, Clifton H. Johnson, Lawrence F. Kohl, Forrest and Ellen McDonald, Eric McKittrick, Al Marder, Pete Maslowski, William Peters, George Rable, and James A. Rawley.

Readers may contact Jones at HJones@tenhour.as.ua.edu.

¹ Sengbe Pieh was Cinqué's Mende name. The Spanish slave traders in Cuba changed his name to Cinqué in their fraudulent attempt to claim that he had been born on the island. Debbie Allen in *Denver Post*, Dec. 14, 1997; Richard Grenier, "The End of Slavery," *Washington Times*, Jan. 1, 1998; Michael Medved in *New York Post*, Dec. 14, 1997; Martin F. Nolan, "Amistad: Stone Touch," *Boston Globe*, Jan. 10, 1998, p. A11; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York, 1965), 520.

² Howard Jones, *Mutiny on the Amistad: The Saga of a Slave Revolt and Its Impact on American Abolition, Law, and Diplomacy* (1987; New York, 1997).

proved fruitless. Research in archival holdings in Spain, England, Cuba, Sierra Leone, and the United States failed to uncover documentary materials that fleshed out Cinqué's life after his return to Africa. Indeed, even among the extensive records of the American Missionary Association (AMA, founded in 1846 as a result of the *Amistad* affair and the first American missionary group in Africa), I found nothing conclusive on the issue. But in my recent attempt to deal with this issue anew, I came to realize that tracing the tale's origins was almost as fascinating and historically revealing as finally answering the touchy question of whether Cinqué had become a slave trader would have been.

I learned in the fall of 1997 that the sole acknowledged source of Morison's charge about Cinqué was a *novel*—published by John Day Publishers in 1953 as *Slave Mutiny: The Revolt on the Schooner Amistad* and written by William A. Owens, longtime professor of English at Columbia University, noted Texas folklorist, and author of many works of historical fiction. Clifton H. Johnson, now emeritus director of the Amistad Research Center (established in 1966 at Fisk University in Nashville and now located at Tulane University in New Orleans), has believed for some years that *Slave Mutiny* provided the most influential basis of the charge. This is the novel, republished in 1968 as *Black Mutiny* and reissued by Penguin Books under that title in 1997, that Debbie Allen optioned (for \$275, according to a talk she gave in Memphis in 1997). Despite the book's fictional character, DreamWorks Studio in Hollywood credited *Black Mutiny* "as a major source of reference material" for Spielberg's *Amistad*. Indeed, had Spielberg known Owens's motive for undertaking the project, it would doubtless have proved even more appealing. Owens had been reared in east Texas, where he associated with blacks on a regular basis and became deeply concerned about civil rights. Explaining his attraction to the *Amistad* affair, he wrote, "I am tremendously interested in the Negro question and can see in this story of a hundred years ago some valid things that ought to be said again today." His novel tells the *Amistad* story in dramatic narrative style, complete with manufactured conversations and other undocumented information. "Where it could not be [documented]," Owens wrote to Bertram Wyatt-Brown, then a graduate student in history, in late 1960, "I created, trying to keep in mind the temper of the times, trying to make the story reflect accurately but *emotionally* the attitudes of the people involved."³

At the close of his novel, Owens asserted that Cinqué became an international slave trader and that evidence existed to support this allegation. Soon after Cinqué's return to Africa, Owens wrote, "stories came back" that he

had collected a band of Mendi stragglers on the coast opposite Sherbro. . . . His growing strength led to conflict with other chiefs, to building fortifications for

³ William A. Owens, *Slave Mutiny: The Revolt on the Schooner Amistad* (New York, 1953); William A. Owens, *Black Mutiny: The Revolt on the Schooner Amistad* (1968; New York, 1997); William A. Owens to Sheila C. Pelligrini, Oct. 20, 1947, folder 23, box 13, finding guide 1, William A. Owens Papers (Cushing Library, Texas A&M University, College Station); Bertram Wyatt-Brown to Owens, Nov. 16, 1960, folder 26, *ibid.*; Owens to Wyatt-Brown, Dec. 22, 1960, folder 23, *ibid.* Actually, the movie option sum was \$250. See Owens's contract with Debbie Allen of Redbird Productions in Los Angeles, California, Oct. 22, 1984, folder 6, box 3, finding guide 3, *ibid.* I want to thank Jessie Ann Owens, daughter of William A. Owens, who graciously consented to my quoting from her father's papers. Owens died at the age of eighty-five in December 1990.

protection, to taking and selling slaves to pay for all the things he wanted. Stories drifted back that he was living like a white trader, like Pedro Blanco, profiting from his experience in New England, buying goods and power with the gold of the slave trade.

Although no one should expect citations to documents in a novel, Owens explained in the “Afterword” of *Slave Mutiny* that he had placed all “typescript copies” of documents he used in the “Amistad collection” of the New Haven Colony Historical Society Library in Connecticut. “The factual background,” he assured readers, “can be documented in every important detail.”⁴

Thinking that this collection might provide the documentation Owens used in claiming that Cinqué traded in slaves, I was surprised to learn that it did not. Indeed, the collection is not in New Haven—and has not been for some time. The executive director of the New Haven Colony Historical Society Library, Robert Egleston, informed me that he had been unable to find any record of the papers. Johnson has a different account that rests on his research experience in New Haven some forty-odd years ago. “If I remember correctly,” he recently told me, “when I asked for the Owens documentation, there was a folder but it was empty. However, no one there at the time remembered his removing it or even depositing it. . . . I left with the impression that the documents had been there and [had been] removed by someone.” Johnson is now “convinced that Owens himself removed the notes” a short time after the book’s publication in 1953 and deposited them in his native state of Texas at the Cushing Library of Texas A&M University. Johnson’s statement is compatible with that of the historian Samuel Flagg Bemis, who wrote his 1956 book, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, while at Yale University and offered a description of the documents that suggested he had used them.⁵

I therefore turned my attention from the Northeast to the Southwest, where I discovered that the story had a much broader foundation than a single novel. In early January 1998 Owens’s daughter granted me permission to quote from his papers. Their examination proved valuable for two reasons: They contained no evidence to substantiate the accusation about Cinqué, but, even more intriguing, they included correspondence that sheds light on the origins of the charge. Owens, I found, had not invented the story; it existed long before he wrote his novel. He doubtless read it in a 1946 history of the American Missionary Association entitled *New Day Ascending* and written by Fred L. Brownlee, a former executive secretary of the organization. Although Owens made no reference to Brownlee’s work in the materials used in writing *Slave Mutiny*, he was aware of it. In his letter proposing a book on the *Amistad*, Owens referred to *New Day Ascending*, erroneously describing it as a novel and next mentioning an actual work of fiction, Blair Niles’s *East by Day* (which does not mention the allegation of slave trading by Cinqué). Cinqué, wrote Brownlee,

⁴ Owens, *Slave Mutiny*, 308, 311. The pagination in *Slave Mutiny* and *Black Mutiny* is the same.

⁵ Howard Jones, notes of conversation with Robert Egleston, Nov. 12, 1997 (in Howard Jones’s possession); Clifton H. Johnson to Howard Jones, Dec. 18, 1997, Aug. 10, 1999, *ibid.*; Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union* (New York, 1956), 384n2.

became “chief of his tribe and, strange to say, a collaborator in supplying slaves for the American market.” But in making this serious charge, Brownlee provided no documentation and thereby raised questions about its credibility. Perhaps, as Debbie Allen claimed, the story originated in rumor and innuendo, or what might more charitably be called oral tradition. In any case, I realized the futility of tracking down the exact origins of the story and focused on why, in the absence of documentation, a myth has become a virtual fact.⁶

The accusation against Cinqué became well known in the history profession in April 1969, when the preeminent historian of the South, C. Vann Woodward of Yale University, made the declaration in his presidential address (“Clio with Soul”) before the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians (OAH) in Philadelphia. Woodward was concerned that the recent emphasis on black history in the profession would lead to the portrayal of black characters as without blemish, and he therefore urged fellow historians to construct balanced assessments that included human frailties as well as strengths, regardless of race. In preparing his address, Woodward had read Owens’s novel and asked him, in February, for citations to the documents supporting his assertion regarding Cinqué. Particularly striking to Woodward was the irony in Cinqué’s becoming a slave trader after his exposure to New England reformers. “It is an extremely interesting outcome of his adventures in America,” Woodward wrote Owens, and “[I] would like to be able to cite original sources if I am challenged.”⁷

Owens’s response came a week later in a letter that was curiously vague and confusing. He expressed regret that the typescript papers he had deposited in the New Haven Colony Historical Society had been (contrary to Johnson’s belief) “misplaced, especially since I get requests like yours fairly frequently.” In any case, he declared, “information on Cinqué after the return to Africa was not among them.” Owens explained that in his research during the early 1940s he had found “letters” stating that “Cinqué had become a slave trader” among the papers of the American Missionary Association (then housed in the New York office of the missionary board that oversaw the AMA). “The major testimony seemed to be that he became a slave trader.” But, in an interesting twist, Owens admitted that he had “failed . . . to make copies of these letters” and that when he later attempted to reexamine the papers (after their relocation at Fisk in the late 1940s), they were “in unsorted boxes and with no chance to get at them again until long after publication dates” set for *Slave Mutiny*.⁸

⁶ Jessie Ann Owens to Jones, Jan. 8, 1998 (in Jones’s possession); Fred L. Brownlee, *New Day Ascending* (Boston, 1946), 25; Blair Niles, *East by Day* (New York, 1941). For the reference to Fred L. Brownlee’s book, see William A. Owens, “The *Amistad Mutiny*,” book proposal, n.d., folder 7, box 23, finding guide 1, Owens Papers. There is also reference to Niles’s novel in Owens to Pelligrini, Oct. 20, 1947, folder 23, box 13, *ibid.* Niles declared that Cinqué “at first reverted to his former savagery” before “acting as interpreter at the Mendi Mission.” *East by Day*, 306.

⁷ C. Vann Woodward to Owens, Feb. 4, 1969, folder 29, box 13, finding guide 1, Owens Papers. I want to thank Clifton H. Johnson for his account of the reaction to C. Vann Woodward’s presidential address. Howard Jones, notes of telephone conversation with Clifton H. Johnson, Dec. 17, 1997 (in Jones’s possession). For Woodward’s concern about the writing of black history, see the final form of his presidential address, C. Vann Woodward, “Clio with Soul,” *Journal of American History*, 56 (June 1969), 5–20.

⁸ Owens to Woodward, Feb. 11, 1969, folder 29, box 13, finding guide 1, Owens Papers. At least twice, Owens wrote that he had been surprised and perplexed by the New Haven Colony Historical Society’s “misplacing” his papers. See Owens to Mary B. Dahl, March 11, 1969, *ibid.*; and Owens to Christopher D. Morris, July 6, 1971, folder 7, box 11, *ibid.*



The Return of the Amistad Captives was painted by Hale Woodruff to mark the centennial of the *Amistad* mutiny. Oil on canvas, c. 1940. Courtesy New Haven Colony Historical Society.

Even though Owens had failed to produce the evidence, Woodward proceeded “with the assurance that somewhere in the Fiske University archives I could, if necessary, dig up the letters you once read that will bear out this wonderful story.” Relishing the prospect of ruffling more than a few feathers, he concluded: “I have already discovered that the story shocks, dismays, and fills with incredulity some pious New Haveners.”⁹

Woodward’s claim about Cinqué before the OAH caused a furor. Led by Sidney Kaplan, a specialist in African American history, numerous historians in the large audience hotly challenged Woodward to produce documentary citations for his assertion. Unable to do so, Woodward soon after the conference telephoned Johnson, then director of the *Amistad* Research Center at Fisk, requesting a search of the more than three hundred thousand documents from the American Missionary Association’s archives there. Woodward needed verification of the charge, both to satisfy his critics and to support subsequent publication of his address in the *Journal of American History*. Kaplan likewise telephoned Johnson, making the same request. Kaplan also wrote Owens, seeking documentation. Kaplan was completing an introduction to a reprint of a contemporary account of the *Amistad* story and wanted to include a brief section on Cinqué’s life after his return to Africa.¹⁰

Johnson’s research report yielded *nothing* to substantiate the charge against

⁹ Woodward to Owens, Feb. 18, 1969, folder 29, box 13, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Howard Jones, notes of conversation with Clifton H. Johnson, Dec. 12, 1997 (in Jones’s possession); Sidney Kaplan to Owens, May 16, 1969, folder 29, box 13, finding guide 1, Owens Papers.

Cinqué and, in fact, raised questions about the veracity of Owens's claim. Most compelling is the statement by Johnson's research archivist, India M. Watterson, then a graduate student in history at Vanderbilt University: "Materials in the American Missionary Association Archives regarding Cinqué contain no information that can either uphold or deny stories that Cinqué engaged in slave trading after his return to Africa from the United States." News about the former *Amistad* captives frequently appeared in letters from the missionaries at Mende in Sierra Leone, she noted, with individuals usually singled out as "one of the Amistads." In October 1845 William Raymond, one of the missionaries who accompanied the freed *Amistad* captives back home to Africa, wrote a letter from Freetown, Sierra Leone, to the New York abolitionist Lewis Tappan (instrumental in securing the *Amistad* captives' victory in American courts) in which he declared that Cinqué had "emigrated to Jamaica." Two years later, in October 1847, a letter in the *American Missionary* magazine published in New York seemed to corroborate the earlier story. An English missionary, a Thomas Garnick who had joined the Mende mission the previous February, asserted that Cinqué was "in the West Indies." Moreover, Watterson continued, the Mende Mission Book was a fairly complete history of the mission's early years, and it made no reference to Cinqué. Indeed, the AMA files did not contain any letters written after 1878 and therefore did not even substantiate "the story of Cinqué's return to the mission in 1879 and his subsequent death and burial there" (which Owens also had included in his novel). Woodward forwarded the report from Watterson to Owens, betraying a sense of unease by declaring it "a mystery what became of the 1879 correspondence that I assume you used in New York before the archives were transferred to Fisk."¹¹

Despite the serious nature of the allegation about Cinqué and the urgent inquiries from Kaplan and Woodward, Owens waited three months before replying evasively. To Kaplan, Owens attributed his "long delay" to "a very busy time of my year" and blandly explained that he had had "no time for further looking into my *Amistad* records." He promised to send the information in September—which he (an experienced professional writer) must have realized would come too late for Kaplan's publication deadline. He offered Woodward a similar response. He had been "extremely busy with [his] work with the Summer Session" and had "not had a minute to spare to the *Amistad* research." He insisted, however, that Watterson's research report did not undermine his claim. In a statement implying that someone

¹¹ India M. Watterson, "Research Report on Cinqué," May 15, 1969, enclosed in Woodward to Owens, May 27, 1969, folder 29, box 13, finding guide 1, Owens Papers. See also Arthur Abraham, "Sengbe Pieh: A Neglected Hero?," *Journal of the Historical Society of Sierra Leone*, 2 (July 1978), 28; and Albert P. Miller to Alonzo N. Lewis, Feb. 28, 1904, in Alonzo N. Lewis, "Recollections of the *Amistad* Slave Case," *Connecticut Magazine*, 11 (no. 1, 1907), 128. See accounts of Cinqué's death in Simeon Baldwin, "The Captives of the *Amistad*," *Papers of the New Haven Colony Historical Society*, 4 (1899), 364; Ellen Strong Bartlett, "The *Amistad* Captives: An Old Conflict between Spain and America," *New England Magazine*, 22 (March 1900), 89; and Clifton H. Johnson, "The *Amistad* Incident," in *Amistad II: Afro-American Art*, ed. David C. Driskell (Nashville, 1975), 34. Rev. Albert P. Miller claimed to have conducted the funeral services in Sierra Leone for Cinqué. See Lewis, "Recollections of the *Amistad* Slave Case," 128. For a skeptical view of Miller's account, which points to the lack of corroborative evidence in the American Missionary Association (AMA) papers, see Abraham, "Sengbe Pieh," 28.

may have removed such incriminating evidence from the file before its transfer to Nashville, Owens emphasized to Woodward, "I did see the material in the office of the American Missionary Association [in New York], not at Fisk." Furthermore, Owens claimed to have new information: "a researcher who worked in New Haven last month [July 1969] reported that he had found two sources from the 1840s that confirmed that Cinqué became a slave trader." Owens assured Woodward that he would send the materials as soon as he received them.¹² But no record shows that Owens sent this supposed information to either historian; no one has found the letters he referred to in the AMA file; and no one in the past three decades has found either the name of the researcher or the alleged material that Owens mentioned in his letter to Woodward.

After hearing from Owens, Kaplan and Woodward had important decisions to make. To both historians' credit, they did not mention the accusation about Cinqué in their publications. Kaplan's article, entitled "Black Mutiny on the *Amistad*," appeared in the summer 1969 issue of the *Massachusetts Review* and in an anthology entitled *Black and White in American Culture* (1969). Woodward's presidential address constituted the lead article in the June 1969 issue of the *Journal of American History*. In the address, Woodward warned against "compensatory exaggeration" in attempting to correct the historical record of black achievements. "It is a misguided form of white philanthropy and paternalism," he asserted, "that would attempt to compensate by exaggerating or by celebrating ever more obscure and deservedly neglected figures of the past." At the conclusion of the essay, Woodward noted the irony that Haiti, the first black republic, nonetheless retained a harsh system of labor akin to slavery. Liberians, he added, created the second black republic and then, in another irony, engaged in the African slave trade. Given Woodward's well-known interest in irony, it is clear where he had intended to insert the allegation against Cinqué. And yet, even though Woodward did not include the reference, the damage had already occurred. Many historians had heard his accusation at the OAH meeting, and the published version of his address did not contain a correction of the oral presentation. Indeed, it did not mention the issue.¹³

The strange tale of the missing AMA documents has since become even stranger. Johnson informed me in December 1997 that when he conducted research at Fisk in 1955–1956 (two years after Owens's book appeared) for his doctoral dissertation on the American Missionary Association, he saw no such letters as those referred to by Owens. The AMA records, Johnson attested, "remained in the packing crates in which they were shipped from New York ca. 1947. I saw no evidence that any of the cases had been opened. In fact, I saw no evidence that they had ever been used." The

¹² Owens to Kaplan, Aug. 18, 1969, folder 29, box 13, finding guide 1, Owens Papers; Owens to Woodward, Aug. 18, 1969, *ibid.*

¹³ Sidney Kaplan, "Black Mutiny on the *Amistad*," *Massachusetts Review*, 10 (Summer 1969), 493–532, reprinted in *Black and White in American Culture: An Anthology from the Massachusetts Review*, ed. Jules Chametzky and Sidney Kaplan (Boston, 1969), 291–330; Woodward, "Clio with Soul," 18, 19–20. For Woodward's attraction to history's ironies, see C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (1960; Baton Rouge, 1993), chaps. 9–11.

materials were still bound in “nineteenth-century string” that he was the first to cut. The so-called evidence referred to by Owens, Johnson believes, never existed.¹⁴

The correspondence among Woodward, Kaplan, and Owens is anything but conclusive—except in raising suspicions about Owens’s undocumented claim. He never cited any specific evidence save for a shadowy reference to “letters” that he implied had mysteriously disappeared from the AMA collection. He did not make copies of perhaps the most sensitive documents allegedly contained in the collection. He could not recall any details about the materials he claimed to have seen. He did not mention Brownlee’s book, which had appeared seven years before *Slave Mutiny*. In fairness, Owens had conducted his research in New York more than two decades earlier, making it no surprise that he, the author of numerous other works in the meantime, should find it difficult to recall documentary details. Nonetheless, Owens’s evasive responses to the two historians’ inquiries about the AMA documents, combined with his failure to identify them by names and dates, cast doubt on his claim that they once existed and have since disappeared. His mention of other documentation presumably in New Haven is likewise specious—particularly as he did not produce (nor has anyone since) either the “two sources” or the name of the “researcher” who had found them. Most likely, he had read the story in Brownlee’s book but had then forgotten where he had read it.

Even more disturbing than Owens’s nebulous responses is the use that historians have made of his novel. Woodward had depended on Owens’s unspecified claim to make a serious public charge about Cinqué, admittedly out of a legitimate concern about objectivity, but also because it was a “wonderful story.” Morison’s highly popular survey, published in 1965 and cited as authority by Michael Medved, likewise drew its accusation about Cinqué from Owens’s novel.

Verification of this last claim requires an explanation. In 1962, three years before Morison’s *Oxford History of the American People* appeared, he and Henry Steele Commager coauthored the fifth edition of a widely used college-level, two-volume textbook entitled *The Growth of the American Republic*. In that edition, for the first time in the book’s publishing history, the charge against Cinqué appeared, in almost exactly the same words (in a separate paragraph for emphasis) as would be found in the 1965 Oxford volume: “The ironic epilogue is that Cinqué, once back home, set himself up as a slave trader.” Thus *The Growth of the American Republic* provided the basis for *The Oxford History of the American People*. The four earlier editions of *The Growth of the American Republic* (1930, 1937, 1942, and 1950) did not mention the *Amistad* case—which demonstrates the impact of Owens’s novel on Morison’s thinking. *Slave Mutiny* appeared in 1953 and is the chief source cited for the *Amistad* discussion in Morison and Commager’s revised textbook of 1962. The same sentence about Cinqué appears in the 1969 edition (by Morison, Commager, and William E. Leuchtenburg) and in the 1980 edition; in the shortened version of

¹⁴ Jones, notes of telephone conversation with Johnson, Dec. 17, 1997; Johnson to Jones, Dec. 18, 1997 (in Jones’s possession).

this work, *A Concise History of the American Republic* (1983), the identical words make one more appearance.¹⁵

There is no way to determine the extent of Owens's influence. Thousands of readers, including those who later became teachers at various levels, have been exposed to Morison's assertion, derived from Owens and disseminated in three widely used surveys of American history, that Cinqué became a slave trader. *Slave Mutiny/Black Mutiny* appeared in bookstores not only throughout the United States but also in other countries, including England and Israel. It was under contract more than once as a play and at least twice it came under option for a movie. The novel became a Liberty Book Club selection and was nominated for both Columbia University's Bancroft Prize (for American history and diplomacy!) and the Pulitzer Prize (presumably also in history). When it first appeared in 1953, *Time* magazine's review highlighted the claim about Cinqué: "Wise now in the white man's ways but primitive as ever in his ethics, the black apostle of freedom turned slave runner to recoup his fortunes." Less than a week later, the *New York Herald Tribune* emphasized the same theme in its review of *Slave Mutiny*: "Cinqué returned to Africa and to an ironic destiny that would have saddened some of his more zealous supporters in America." In 1969 the Chicago public schools adopted *Black Mutiny* as a resource book. More recently, the public was exposed to the charge in Medved's column in *USA Today* and on *Face the Nation*. Countless people, historians and the general public alike, have accepted Owens's unsubstantiated story. Indeed, in a best-selling history of the African slave trade's Middle Passage entitled *The Slave Trade* (1997), the British historian Hugh Thomas cited only one work in discussing the *Amistad* revolt: William Owens's novel.¹⁶

Historians should have paid more attention to Owens's cautionary words. Even though his book assured readers that documents supported "every important detail," he had, after all, written a novel. In December 1960 he specifically warned the fledgling historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown that *Slave Mutiny* rested in part on fabricated material. Wyatt-Brown had begun research on his dissertation, which

¹⁵ Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic*, 5th ed. (2 vols., New York, 1962), I, 559, 563; Samuel Eliot Morison, Henry Steele Commager, and William E. Leuchtenburg, *A Concise History of the American Republic* (New York, 1983), 228. Leuchtenburg joined the first two authors in preparing the sixth and seventh editions of the textbook (1969 and 1980). For the quoted statement, see Samuel Eliot Morison, Henry Steele Commager, and William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Growth of the American Republic*, 6th ed. (2 vols., New York, 1969), I, 505.

¹⁶ On the presence of *Slave Mutiny/Black Mutiny* in England and Israel, see Owens to Maurice Crain, May 11, 1953, May 13, 1954, folder 3, box 13, finding guide 1, Owens Papers. Inquiries about publishing in the German Democratic Republic and in Italy (but with no evidence of a contract with either) appeared in Gertrude Gelbin to Owens, Sept. 12, 1955, folder 25, *ibid.*; and Fabio Coen to Crain, May 2, 1953, folder 3, *ibid.* For interest in it as a play, see Beatrice Gross to Owens, Sept. 4, 1958, folder 7, *ibid.*; and Annie L. Williams to Gross, Oct. 13, 1958, *ibid.* On movie options, see Owens to Marc Friedlander, March 29, 1963, folder 26, *ibid.*; Williams to Robert Breen, March 11, 1964, folder 27, *ibid.*; Owens to Harold Pallatz, Nov. 10, 1970, folder 2, box 15, *ibid.*; and contract with Debbie Allen, Oct. 22, 1984, folder 6, box 3, finding guide 3, *ibid.* For the book club and book prizes, see Richard Walsh to Owens, July 22, Oct. 16, 1953, folder 25, box 13, finding guide 1, *ibid.* On use in Chicago schools, see Marion M. Meyer to Owens, March 20, 1969, folder 2, box 15, *ibid.* *Time*, May 4, 1953, p. 118, clipping, folder 14, box 23, *ibid.*; *New York Herald Tribune*, May 10, 1953, clipping, *ibid.*; Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1440–1870* (New York, 1997), 857.

grew into the biography *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War against Slavery*, and had asked Owens about materials used in writing “his most interesting novel.” The work, Wyatt-Brown added, marked a “successful blending of historical authenticity and dramatic presentation.” Owens’s response was revealing. “I must in all honesty warn you about *Slave Mutiny* as an exact source for material,” he declared. “Much of it can be documented. Where it could not be, I created.”¹⁷

Alarming words that went unheeded: Wyatt-Brown cited Owens’s work twice in a chapter on the *Amistad* case. Indeed, Wyatt-Brown wrote that “Cinqué, proud, alert, and rebellious as ever, returned to Africa to become a chief among his people and to enter the slave trade himself.” Although Wyatt-Brown’s supporting note for this assertion did not cite Owens, the portrayal of Cinqué reflected that of the novelist. Most interesting, the two documents referred to by Wyatt-Brown in that same note do not furnish proof for his charge. The *Emancipator* of December 10, 1841, could not have been the source because that issue appeared before Cinqué’s return to Africa the following January, and the other work cited in the note, a brief memoir that includes a letter from a black missionary at the Mende mission in 1878–1879, contains no reference to Cinqué as slave trader.¹⁸

Spielberg’s *Amistad* rekindled the controversy. Possibly in response to the movie, Louisiana State University Press reissued Wyatt-Brown’s biography of Tappan in paperback in 1997, assuring further perpetuation of the charge about Cinqué. And Plume publishing house in New York (a division of Penguin Books) did the same with Owens’s *Black Mutiny*, re-releasing it on the mass market in 1997—in paperback (with the word “Fiction” printed on its spine and back cover) and on audiotapes. Indeed, in an improbable irony, Debbie Allen herself inadvertently promoted the charge of slave trading by persuading DreamWorks to use the novel as one of its so-called historical sources for *Amistad*. Although the accusation did not appear in the movie, *Black Mutiny* rolled by on the screenplay credits, encouraging film goers to read the book.¹⁹

Owens’s undocumented charge against Cinqué continues to fascinate the general public and the press as well as the history profession. A reader recently wrote *Parade* magazine, asking the damning question: “How could Spielberg omit this important fact?” The magazine editors did not hide their sentiments when they dutifully responded with Morison’s statement in his *Oxford History of the American People* and then, after conceding that a debate exists over Cinqué’s life after his return home, led readers to believe that no white historians question the charge. “Many black scholars,” *Parade* wrote in a highly revealing statement, “contend that reports of [Cinqué’s] trafficking in slaves are based on unverified rumors.” I faxed a letter

¹⁷ Owens, *Slave Mutiny*, 311; Wyatt-Brown to Owens, Nov. 16, 1960, folder 26, box 13, finding guide 1, Owens Papers; Owens to Wyatt-Brown, Dec. 22, 1960, *ibid.*; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War against Slavery* (1969; Baton Rouge, 1997).

¹⁸ For citations to *Slave Mutiny*, see Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan*, 222nn10, 13. For the other citations, see *ibid.*, 225n48.

¹⁹ Debbie Allen had optioned Owens’s novel for a movie during the 1980s but failed to convince a company to undertake the project. For her contract with Owens, see note 3 above.

to *Parade*, disputing this accusation by summarizing my own findings and offering to write an article to that effect. I received no response. After a couple of months had passed, I telephoned the magazine's home office in New York, only to learn that *Parade's* editors had no interest in the matter since, they said, the movie's theater time and popularity had passed. Not long ago, I was a guest on a Chicago radio program focusing on the *Amistad*, during which a listener called in to announce how "shocked" everyone would be to learn that Cinqué trafficked in slaves after his return home. Challenged to cite the evidence, the caller indignantly declared that he had heard this "fact" years ago.²⁰

After my book first appeared in 1987, Paul Finkelman unequivocally stated in a review in the *Georgia Historical Quarterly* that Cinqué "eventually dealt in slaves." In the midst of a heated debate on the subject among historians over the Internet in December 1997, Finkelman claimed to have "read a number of sources indicating that Cinqué traded in slaves when he returned to Africa." He asserted that in writing *Mutiny on the Amistad*, I had failed to find the "number of sources" he had seen on Cinqué's trading in slaves, but, Finkelman continued, "I am without my personal library at the moment and cannot track down the references." We should not be surprised, he noted matter-of-factly, that Cinqué traded in slaves: "Most West Africans did; it was part of West African culture." Then, in a remarkable retreat from his earlier tone of certainty, Finkelman added, "Slavery and the slave trade are everywhere in West Africa, so *it would seem likely Cinqué could have been involved in it.*" And he concluded: "None of this proves Cinqué was involved in selling or enslaving others, only that if he was it would not have been surprising."²¹

In a somewhat similar vein, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian William S. McFeely criticized my book in a *New York Times* review for not including a "discussion of the highly controversial claim that Joseph Cinqué got into the slave trade after returning to Mende." I wrote McFeely, asking for citations to the evidence so that I would finally know the answer to this question. The reply came, hastily scribbled on a postcard: "I'm away from a university library. My recollection—I can recall standing in the stacks of the Yale library; I may have a note slip back in Athens [University of Georgia]—is that the accusation, detailed, about Cinqué being in the slave trade after returning to Mendi was in an article in a journal and written, I'm reaching back into my memory here, by an Africanist." I have been unable to find this article.²²

Of considerable interest are the views of Arthur Abraham, a former professor of African history at the University of Sierra Leone and a world-renowned specialist in Mende history, language, and culture. Indeed, he served as Spielberg's chief cultural

²⁰ "Walter Scott's Personality Parade," *Parade*, May 3, 1998; Jones to Dakila Divina, Parade Publications, June 29, 1998 (in Jones's possession).

²¹ Paul Finkelman, review of *Mutiny on the Amistad* by Howard Jones, *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 72 (Spring 1988), 157; Paul Finkelman, response to multiple recipients of the H-SHEAR (Society for Historians of the Early American Republic) discussion list, Dec. 16, 1997, at <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~shear/>. Emphasis added.

²² William S. McFeely, review of *Mutiny on the Amistad* by Howard Jones, *New York Times Book Review*, Jan. 18, 1987, p. 10; Jones to William S. McFeely, July 28, 1988 (in Jones's possession); McFeely to Jones, Aug. 5, 1988, *ibid.*

adviser on the movie *Amistad*. Both in Abraham's 1978 book, *Mende Government and Politics under Colonial Rule*, and in a conversation with me in January 1998, he emphasized the importance of distinguishing between the "slavery" of the Americas and the "slavery" of Mende in West Africa—as shown in a courtroom scene in the movie. Whereas in the antebellum South slavery entailed a complete loss of freedom for life, in Mende it usually meant a limited time of servitude, during which a person owing a debt might pawn off his child as a domestic servant. These so-called slaves were vital to the African economy as a source of manpower and a means of currency exchange. More significant, they often became part of the extended family system, making familial membership and discharge of a financial obligation through this system almost indistinguishable. In some cases, Abraham explained, persons in such servitude to influential families could move up the social scale, a few becoming part of the judicial system and even passing sentence on free people.²³

Was Cinqué a participant in even this domestic form of the slave trade? Abraham asserted that after working in the archives of Sierra Leone all his professional life, he had never found one shred of documentary evidence to support that charge. But this fundamental truth, Abraham wryly added, seems to have eluded Cinqué's critics. In the court system, we give the defendant the benefit of the doubt until the evidence proves otherwise. But for some reason, this basic principle of justice does not apply to Cinqué. More than a few people, Abraham lamented, *want* to believe this of him.²⁴

But Owens did not fabricate the charge. As noted earlier, stories of Cinqué's alleged slave trading had circulated, doubtless encouraging Owens to include the assertion in his novel. Even Abraham, a staunch defender of Cinqué, joined others in reporting the rumors before dispelling them. In his 1978 article Abraham declared that numerous such oral accounts had reached the Mende mission. "Some said that he had become a great war-chief; others, that he had given up Christianity and become a wealthy slave trader." And, of course, Brownlee had made the charge in 1946.²⁵

²³ Arthur Abraham, *Mende Government and Politics under Colonial Rule: A Historical Study of Political Change in Sierra Leone, 1890–1937* (Freetown, Sierra Leone, 1978), 7–8, 10–11, 18–26; Howard Jones, notes of telephone conversation with Arthur Abraham, early Jan. 1998 (in Jones's possession). For similar comments about African slavery, see a letter from William Raymond, who had accompanied the *Amistad* blacks back to Africa in 1842 and worked as a missionary in Sherbro near the coast, in *American Missionary*, March 1847, p. 38 (microfilm: reel 1), in *Amistad Schooner Case Collection, 1839–1968*, comp. William Peters (New York Public Library, New York, N.Y.), American Missionary Association Papers (Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, La.); John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (New York, 1994), 19–20; Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (Cambridge, Eng., 1983), 5, 13–14, 143; and John J. Grace, "Slavery and Emancipation among the Mende in Sierra Leone," in *Slavery in Africa: Historiographical and Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (Madison, 1977), 418, 420–25.

²⁴ Jones, notes of telephone conversation with Abraham, Jan. 1998. One might note another irony: in three of his writings Abraham cited Owens's *Slave Mutiny/Black Mutiny* without categorizing it as a novel: Abraham, "Sengbe Pieh," 30; "Sengbe Pieh," in *The Encyclopaedia Africana Dictionary of African Biography* (20 vols., Algonac, Mich., 1979), II, 144; Arthur Abraham, *The Amistad Revolt: An Historical Legacy of Sierra Leone and the United States* (Freetown, Sierra Leone, 1987), 27.

²⁵ Abraham, "Sengbe Pieh," 28; Brownlee, *New Day Ascending*, 25.

The probability is that Owens simply passed on a story that had been told so many times that it took on the illusion of truth. He may well have heard the many rumors of Cinqué's slave trading. In his research in the AMA papers, Owens doubtless read the story in Brownlee's book. It appeared seven years before Owens's novel and bore the strong stamp of reliability because of Brownlee's position as a high-ranking AMA official. But Brownlee's account, like the rumors, rested on no documents, leaving questions about its factual foundation. Lack of evidence posed no problem for either writer, however. By the time the story reached Owens (as when it had reached Brownlee), it was so prevalent that it *had* to be true.²⁶

Yet, this hypothesis, even if true, does not exonerate Owens of blame for the lingering controversy. When Woodward and Kaplan asked Owens for the evidence of his assertion, he gave equivocal and delayed responses to legitimate queries, failed to provide exact citations to the documents while testifying to their existence, and left the dark implication that someone had confiscated the evidence. The truth is undoubtedly less enthralling. Owens probably could not recall his sources. If so, he should have admitted as much. Had he remembered reading the story in Brownlee's work, he surely would have told Woodward and Kaplan. The lack of documentary proof would not have cast a shadow over Owens. He was a novelist and did not bear a historian's responsibility for verifying the story.

Whatever the truth regarding Owens, the unsupported story about Cinqué has become a self-sustaining legend, made into "fact" by virtue of having been told so many times. The general reading public understandably assumes that sound scholarship undergirds historical writings. In this instance, however, historians have failed their readers by relying on a novelist. The charge against Cinqué has no known basis in fact. Yet neither Medved nor Nolan (nor even *Parade*) is at fault in repeating the accusation about Cinqué. All readers have a right to expect accuracy in historical works.

The central question remains: Why did Morison and Woodward (and others) accept the story? Part of the explanation, I suspect, lies in decisions that preceded their involvement in the controversy. One can easily envision the historians going to their libraries at Harvard and Yale to check sources on the *Amistad* and locating *Slave Mutiny* (or *Black Mutiny*) by its Library of Congress call number of E447.09—thus it was shelved in the history section alongside numerous nonfictional accounts of slavery. Perhaps they read a review of the novel in one of their region's finest journals, the *New England Quarterly*—highly favorable and nowhere categorizing the work as fiction. Perchance they read the *Saturday Review*, in which the historian Louis Filler praised *Slave Mutiny's* accuracy even as he noted its fictional character. Owens, Filler asserted, wrote "with close concern for the record" in presenting "a fresh approach to one of the most stirring cases" in America's history. Without referring to specific instances in the work, Filler declared that the author's method "is not so much to fictionalize [the historical record] as to cast it in narrative form, adding dialogue, for the most part, from documented sources." In his own book, *The Crusade against Slavery*, Filler proved more forthright in terming *Slave*

²⁶ Abraham, "Sengbe Pieh," 28.

Mutiny “a novel, written with delicacy and grasp.” In the *New York Times Book Review*, the Pulitzer Prize–winning historian Samuel Flagg Bemis wrote: “We cannot accept [Owens’s] story as scholarly history, despite the factual basis. It is . . . a quasi-novel.” Bemis’s 1956 study, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, included a chapter on the *Amistad* in which he made clear that Owens was a “novelist” before calling *Slave Mutiny* an “exciting book, a dramatic evocation of verisimilitude in action and dialogue.” But then Bemis came dangerously close to endorsing the work’s scholarly value by noting that Owens had “deposited in the New Haven Colony Historical Society typescripts of newspaper comments and editorials on the case, and of letters from collections of personal papers (not always identified) which are useful to the historian.” Bemis had undoubtedly seen Owens’s materials before their removal from the New Haven Colony Historical Society. But his statement suggests that the papers bore historical significance. Owens’s documents are fragmentary, saying nothing about the slave-trading issue and, indeed, adding little to the historical record.²⁷

To understand the reasoning of Morison and Woodward, one must place them in the context of their times. Some historians of Morison’s generation regarded the institution of slavery as benign and relatively harmless to blacks. In one instance Morison wrote: “Owing to his capacity for hard work, in addition to his adaptive abilities and cheerful spirit, the Negro made an excellent slave.” In another: “Southern slave-owners understood and loved him as a slave; Southern gentlemen still love him ‘in his place.’” And in a passage on the African slave trade: “victims of the system who were shipped to America, provided they survived the passage, were better off than those who remained in bondage in Africa.” Adopting an apologetic approach, historians might cite the charge against Cinqué to help absolve the guilt of white practitioners of slavery.²⁸

Woodward’s stance was different from Morison’s, but the atmosphere in which he wrote was no less demanding in shaping historians’ views. Woodward wrote in the midst of an upheaval in the profession during the 1960s, when much historical writing had come into question, particularly its caricatures of blacks as Sambo-like. He was understandably concerned that historians pursue objectivity, that in giving blacks their due in history, the profession must realize that they too were human and capable of mistakes. Indeed, this principle is probably the key to understanding the entire dispute over Cinqué—that even the most well meaning people can commit errors in judgment.

Another reason for such widespread interest in the story is the seductive appeal of irony. Both Fred Brownlee in his work on the AMA and Blair Niles in his novel on the *Amistad* revolt highlighted Cinqué’s return to primitive ways. Owens doubtless found himself drawn by the image of the noble savage reverting to savagery and

²⁷ Marian Stoll review of *Slave Mutiny* by William A. Owens, *New England Quarterly*, 26 (Sept. 1953), 416–20; Louis Filler, “Cost of Freedom,” *Saturday Review*, June 13, 1953, pp. 37–38; Louis Filler, *The Crusade against Slavery, 1830–1860* (New York, 1960), 167n22; Samuel Flagg Bemis, “‘Old Man Eloquent’ Spoke Up for Freedom,” *New York Times Book Review*, May 17, 1953, p. 18; Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Union*, 384n2.

²⁸ Morison, *Oxford History of the American People*, 505–6.



The Amistad Memorial, sculpted by Ed Hamilton, was placed in front of New Haven City Hall in September 1992. This three-sided bronze relief sculpture, fourteen feet high, shows Cinqué in Africa before his kidnapping (in the first side, pictured above); the second shows him during the *Amistad* trial; the final side shows Cinqué preparing to board a ship to return to his homeland. On the top of the memorial an anonymous figure appears to be slipping into the waves—a memorial to those Africans who did not survive the ocean passage. *Courtesy Amistad Committee, Inc.*

hoped, correctly, that a large reading public would give in to the same allure. Wyatt-Brown did. “I was especially interested in the ironic twist,” he wrote Owens, “the noble savages—returned to savagery at the end.” Both *Time* and the *New York Herald Tribune*, as shown earlier, focused on Cinqué’s reversion to primitivism. Woodward found irony virtually irresistible in constructing a historical narrative. Admittedly, irony can frame a story and provide a snappy ending. The danger is that reliance on irony in writing history can convert a piece of fiction into truth by entic-

ing the historian into believing it. A prime example of this trap is the controversy over Cinqué.²⁹

Regrettably, this long-standing controversy over Cinqué has raised serious questions about the integrity not only of the movie but also of the *Amistad* heritage. If Spielberg made a movie about a defender of freedom who later became a slave trader, he undercut the deeper meaning of that movie and cast a shadow over the historical importance of the *Amistad* rebels and their allies. If Cinqué emerges as anything less than what he was in real life, his contribution to humanity is diminished, as is the honor bestowed on him by the establishment of several black colleges as a result of the historical event, the erection of his statue near the New Haven Green, the building of a replica of the *Amistad* at Mystic Seaport, and the movement in several states to incorporate the teaching of the *Amistad* affair in the public schools. "Everyone wants to discredit Cinqué," complained Rebecca Hankins, an African American archivist at the Amistad Research Center. It was "sad," she observed, "that American society continues to block African Americans from having heroic figures to emulate."³⁰

My study of Cinqué leads me to believe that he could never have participated in a practice that had already destroyed his life. Not only was he a victim of the international slave trade, but on his return home his wife and three children were missing—perhaps also its victims. If Cinqué had been a wealthy slave trader, as Owens insisted, the Mende missionaries would certainly have reported that news, either in the Mende Mission Book or the *American Missionary*. They highlighted the activities of others from the *Amistad*, and they quickly reported Cinqué's so-called backsliding from Christianity by August 1846, even though admitting that he "never professed to be a converted man." Furthermore, one wonders why Cinqué was in Jamaica (if that claim is true) during the mid-1840s. Surely an allegedly well-known trader would not have risked arrest and certain death for the international crime of slave trading by visiting an island on which the British had abolished slavery. It is just as inconceivable that he as a slave marketer would have frequented a place where the AMA had just established a mission. If Cinqué was there, he perhaps had signed a three-year contract with the British, who were recruiting free blacks to work in Jamaica, and had used the island as a stepping-stone to travel through the Caribbean in a desperate search for his family. But in the absence of evidence, one cannot know.³¹

²⁹ Brownlee, *New Day Ascending*, 25; Niles, *East by Day*, 306; Wyatt-Brown to Owens, Nov. 16, 1960, folder 26, box 13, finding guide 1, Owens Papers; *Time*, May 4, 1953, p. 118, clipping, folder 14, box 23, *ibid.*; *New York Herald Tribune*, May 10, 1953, clipping, *ibid.*; Woodward, *Burden of Southern History*, chaps. 9–11.

³⁰ Jones, notes on telephone conversation with Johnson, Dec. 17, 1997.

³¹ For examples of letters regarding other Amistads that do not mention Cinqué, see William Raymond, Feb. 19, 1844, *Union Missionary*, May 1844–August 1846, p. 11 (microfilm: reel 5), *Amistad Schooner Case Collection*, comp. Peters; Raymond to Thomas Dove, July 1, 1845, *Union Missionary*, Oct. 1845, p. 78, *ibid.* See also a discussion of the Mende mission that refers to Teme and Margru, two of the *Amistad* girls, without talking of Cinqué, in Lewis Tappan, *History of the American Missionary Association: Its Constitution and Principles* (New York, 1855), reel 4, *ibid.* For the claim that Cinqué went to Jamaica, see Raymond to Tappan, Oct. 9, 1845, *Union Missionary*, March 1846, p. 101, reel 5, *ibid.* The West India Mission Committee in Boston sustained the mission among emancipated slaves in Jamaica. *American Missionary*, Oct. 1846, p. 5, reel 1, *ibid.*

This unfortunate saga involving Cinqué underlines the importance of accuracy in history. Historians, of course, may rely on novels to enrich their teaching and research. But they must be careful not to blur the line between history and fiction and thereby present “facts” that rest on rumor, gossip, hearsay, or any other types of unsubstantiated information. Novels and films have the capacity to recapture the texture of an historical event far more effectively than historians can do in class or in their writings. But neither novels nor films can serve as evidence of fact.

Justice presumes innocence rather than guilt. The time has come to grant Cinqué an acquittal.