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Historical Memory and a New National Consciousness: The Amistad Revolt Revisited in Sierra Leone¹

IN THE YEAR 1807 THE SIERRA LEONE COMPANY, which helped to found a small community of settlers in the area of Sierra Leone called Freetown, decided that Freetown had become too much of a burden for it to maintain.² What else could the Company do, faced with the constant barrage of problems from the settler community that constantly challenged the authority of the Company—the Temne natives who saw both the Company and its settlers (the Nova Scotians, Maroons, and rescued slaves from other African countries) as a threat to their own existence; the French who had, at least once, attempted to claim Freetown as a booty in one of its territorial skirmishes with the British? Overburdened indeed, the Company handed over to the British, and Freetown became a Crown Colony in 1808. From then until Sierra Leone became an independent nation in 1961, the colony was a proud jewel in the British crown because it stood out as Britain's benevolence to Africa—a home for displaced Africans and for returning captives from the Americas.

Sierra Leone of the 1800s was a colony struggling to define itself. Even its borders were not clearly defined; it could hardly have been called "a nation," or for that matter "a people." Far from being a community melting pot, Sierra Leone was a place where recaptives tended to identify with communities with which they shared deeper historical ties and a deeper historical consciousness. Thus, for example, the Maroons from the West Indies, the Nova Scotians, and other recaptives fresh off the coastal areas of West Africa often lived in separate communities and erected complex social boundaries in their interaction with each other. Needless to say, the recaptives' relationship

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with the natives of Sierra Leone was culturally strained. Settlers and natives were suspicious of each other. Out of this chaos of an imposed historical identity, Sierra Leoneans struggled to etch themselves into the canvas of national identity.

It was against this historical backdrop that the Amistad captives, originally captured in and around Sierra Leone, returned to Sierra Leone in 1842. Their return was not marked by any fanfare. No welcoming party awaited them. Indeed the return of the captives could not have been of any particular interest to the growing settler community of Freetown, for they all had some personal story of mishap; all recaptives were either captured into slavery (or their ancestors were) or were free Negroes in the Americas who decided that life in Africa would be preferable to the vicissitudes of white racism. The Amistad captives' story was just one more settler-story whose particular nuance disappeared into the public canvas of nation-building.

Why then, after one hundred and fifty years, has the story returned as a memorable event in Sierra Leone? What accounts for the lack of interest in years past? My genealogical project attempts to understand the years of silence and the story's mnemonic reappearance in the national consciousness of the Sierra Leonean people.

The literature on collective memory seems to suggest that a society's selection and ascription of significance to a historical event is not an arbitrary process. According to Barry Schwartz and other collective memory scholars in an essay titled "The Recovery of Masada: A Study in Collective Memory,"

Memory of the past is preserved mainly by the chronicling of events and their sequence; however, the events selected for chronicling are not evaluated in the same way. To some of these events we remain indifferent; other events are commemorated—they are invested with an extraordinary significance and assigned a qualitatively distinct place in our conception of the past. (148)

Consequently, collective memory scholars pay much attention to the analysis of the commemorative processes of history. According to George Herbert Mead in *The Philosophy of the Act* (81) and Maurice Halbwachs in *On Collective Memory* (40), how a society understands its past is significant to how that so-

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ciety constructs its present values. However, Mead and Halbwachs differ in their theoretical emphasis, as Schwartz points out: "While Halbwachs seeks to show how the present situation affects our perception of the past, Mead's aim is to understand the use of historical knowledge in interpreting the present" (Masada, 149). Nonetheless, both scholars believe that the past is, in the words of Barry Schwartz, "a social construction shaped by the concerns and needs of the present" (Social Change, 221).

Constructionist theorists like Halbwachs and Mead also agree that our mnemonic exercises in recovering history are not arbitrary and random but constructively employed to meaningful and useful ends: in other words, because the past helps us interpret our present day reality, we are careful to select material that will in fact serve the purpose of interpreting the present. Thus we learn that past events are commemorated "only when the contemporary society is motivated to define them as such" (Masada, 149). We should note further that for Mead the past always implies a present reality. It is only *from the standpoint of the present that we can recall the past*. The past exists because there is a present from which we exercise the images of the mind "backward." In the same vein, the future exists because we exercise our minds from the standpoint of the present "forward." In "The Sociological Import of G. H. Mead's Theory of the Past," David R. Maines *et al* summarize Mead's radical conception of time in this manner:

The question of boundaries marking off the past, present, and future are fundamental for Mead, but he maintained that no matter how far we build out from the present, *the events that constitute the referents of the past and future always belong to the present*. (161; emphasis added)

Since the present determines our conception of the past and future, it is safe to say that the past and future, like the present, are dynamic and given to change. In *The Philosophy of the Present*, Mead states that the past is "as hypothetical as the future" (12); the past is not "final and irrevocable" (95) as we so often believe; the past's structural meaning—and meaning is always in the present—is constructed on the basis of a given present. As Maines *et al* conclude, "For Mead, the existence of events is beyond doubt: the meaning of those events, however,

is problematic" (165). So whether the past is mythical or implied objective, its validity lies in the position it occupies in society's shared consciousness or collective memory. By implied objective past Mead means that a past action must have occurred for the present to be what it is. By extension, the Amistad events are believable because they happened *in fact* and they led to, and fit in with, the establishment of the Mende mission in Sierra Leone in the nineteenth century. The evidence of the Mende mission and its contribution to the nation are still very much in place today.

Yet the Amistad event of 1839-1842 as an objective past registered little on the consciousness of the nation of Sierra Leone. Although the final stage of the incident played itself out in Sierra Leone, it left no visible marks on the collective memory of the nation. Why did the nation forget? More importantly, why does the nation now remember? Interestingly, it is not as if this event has not been chronicled anywhere. In America, both before and after the American civil war, many books were written on the incident. In Sierra Leone, such books are available in university libraries; but the Amistad event has never been studied as part of the official history of Sierra Leone, and it has never been studied in the school system or translated into the folk traditions of the people. In other words, it is an event that Sierra Leoneans, before the 1980s, never identified with as part of their national history. I intend here to trace how the validity of this objective past has recently taken its place in the shared consciousness of the people of Sierra Leone.

The events of the Amistad story began in 1839 when a group of African slaves on board an American-built schooner named *Friendship* (*La Amistad* in Spanish) mutinied, killed the captain and the cook, and took charge of the ship. Little did they know at the time of their action's significance. Two Spaniards, Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montez, had chartered the schooner from the owner and captain of the *Amistad*, Ramon Ferrer, to transport their recently bought slaves. A Portuguese slave trader, Pedro Blanco, had purchased and transported some six hundred slaves on board a Portuguese slaver *Tecora* from a slave holding port south of Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, to a barracoon just outside Havana, Cuba. It was in one of Blanco's advertised sales that Montez bought three girls and one

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boy all under twelve years of age, and Jose Ruiz bought forty-nine men. On June 28, 1839, Ferrer, the captain of the *Amistad*, his half caste cook Celestino and African cabin boy Antonio, together with Ruiz, Montez, two other Spanish seamen and the fifty-three Sierra Leonean slaves, sailed for a port near Puerto Principe. Due to contrary winds, the journey took longer than expected, and on the third night the slaves, led by Sengbe Pieh (known in America as Joseph Cinqué), armed themselves with cane knives, fatally attacked the captain and the cook, and took charge of the ship. In the ensuing struggle, Montez was wounded by the Sierra Leonean slaves, the two other Spanish seamen escaped overboard on a small boat, and two of the slaves lost their lives. The charismatic leader of the revolt, Sengbe Pieh, then ordered the ship to sail east, towards the rising sun, in the direction of Africa.

Although the slaves all seemed to speak or understand Mendi, the dominant language in southwest Sierra Leone, they were from the interior parts of Sierra Leone and had no navigational skills. Consequently, they had to keep Ruiz and Montez alive so that they could navigate the ship. These two men had no intention of taking the slaves to Africa. During the day they headed east as commanded, and at night Montez sailed west and north by the stars, hoping to reach American shores. The schooner followed its erratic route for almost two months until it was captured on August 26 by Commander Gedney and his crew who were on board the *Washington* near Culloden Point, Long Island, New York. Gedney towed the *Amistad* to New London, Connecticut. The Africans were charged with murder and piracy and jailed in New Haven. When the case, taken up by the abolitionists, eventually reached the Supreme Court, the Africans won their freedom, and on November 27, 1841, they boarded the *Gentleman*, along with some American missionaries, for Free-town, Sierra Leone.³

The case caused plenty of tension among three major Western powers—Spain, England and the United States. As Spain sought ways to influence the American government to repatriate the *Amistad* slaves to Havana for trial, she found herself testing the strength of her 1817 treaty agreement with England on the suppression of the African slave trade. England reminded the American government of its duty to free the Africans who



CINQUÉ

portrait by Nathaniel Jocelyn (1796-1881)

(Courtesy of New Haven Colony Historical Society)

Reproduced first in MR Summer 1969, Volume 10, No. 3

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were, according to its treaty agreement with Spain, free men, not slaves. In the United States, constitutional questions about the nature of man sorely tried the validity of the American justice system. The American government itself was on trial as President Van Buren, who on two occasions tried to influence the courts against the captives, was seemingly “tried” and found wanting by former President John Quincy Adams, who defended the Africans and won. Cuba and the Spanish world as a whole lost diplomatic triumphs as hopes for compensation and the return of the schooner, with its human cargo, were dashed.

Indeed, the outcome of the Amistad trial had far reaching effects both in America and abroad. It was, for the American Antislavery movement, which had suffered numerous divisions in its ranks, a rallying point, a time of healing and a refreshing new sense of direction. The publicity of the case exposed more Americans to the debate over slavery, and sympathy for the Antislavery agenda increased.

Although with the return of the captives to Africa, the immediate fascination and celebrity nature of the case disappeared from the American psyche, the historical impact of the Amistad incident continued to have its effect on both the United States and Sierra Leone. For example, the Amistad Committee, headed by Lewis Tappan, which had supported the Mende captives in America, saw its role strengthened, and its desire to see them embrace Christianity in their homeland expanded, into a new consolidation called the American Missionary Association (founded in 1846). The AMA has been credited with establishing hundreds of schools and colleges for blacks during the reconstruction years. In this way, it helped lay the foundation for the Civil Rights Movement decades later.

Sierra Leonean historian Arthur Abraham notes that Sierra Leone, as a nation, also benefitted from the processes set in motion by the Amistad incident, even though “the origins are mostly forgotten today” (23). Abraham further points out the “positive consequences” of American missionary work in Sierra Leone: churches and mission schools helped to “create an elite group that excelled not only in Sierra Leone but in the United States as well” (21). Members of this elite class would later press for independence from its colonial rulers—the British.

Ironically, both nations have paid little attention to the origins of these well-documented historical and cultural events. As Clifton Johnson points out in a contribution to David Driskell's *Amistad II: Afro American Art*, it is mainly artists and writers in the U.S. who have kept the "drama of the Amistad incident" alive in the U.S. imagination (15). For Sierra Leoneans, unfortunately, ignorance of the grand events of the Amistad story largely robbed them of a victorious national identity. In recent years, however, the Amistad story has been birthed in the imagination of Sierra Leonean artists.

My interest in the Amistad episode began when I read Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), a novel that takes the Amistad incident as its point of departure. In reading through microfilms about the Amistad revolt, which impressed me as a truly revolutionary story, I was shocked to find out that the principal actors in the revolt were from Sierra Leone. I was not only born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, but also received my formal education there. In all my years in Freetown I never once heard this revolutionary story told; it was not a part of our school curriculum. Therefore my encounter with the Amistad case opened for me a window through which I could contemplate the past and the present. What did I, as a child of independence, know about our history, our ancestors, and their struggles to survive in a land ridden with slave-catchers long after the Atlantic slave trade was banned? What possible memories could be buried in the national psyche that needed to be exhumed for long lost markers of identity? How could an event of the Amistad's magnitude escape memory?

I wish to suggest, in line with Mead's theory of the past, that up until 1992 the Amistad was only an inherited past, that is to say an implied objective past. I hasten to argue that the Amistad's factual existence in the past does not necessarily make for an inherited memory. Although I agree with Mead's essay "The Nature of the Past" that the *refusal to remember* does not mean that "the past is lost" (238), Sierra Leoneans actually *forgot* the Amistad story. What, then, does it take to remember the collective past? Constructionist theorists of the past see tradition and commemorative rites as transmitted through a "guiding pattern" to "subsequent generations" ("Social Change," 222). This transmission is important because, as Schwartz states, "Stable memories . . . creat[e] links between the living and the dead

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and promot[e] consensus over time" (222). The Amistad account entered history but not memory because the mnemonic structure of the oral tradition, which is the guiding pattern common to Sierra Leonean groups, was not in place in the Amistad story. Most of what we recall today about the Amistad is culled from written history about the events in the U.S. Even the events that followed in Sierra Leone were largely transmitted through the letters of missionaries to their home base in the U.S. Given that, even today, some 80% of the Sierra Leonean population is illiterate, the existence of written chronicles could never translate history into memory. We should also remember that the Amistad captives returned not to freedom but to a land under colonial rule. Should the colonial masters have celebrated the colonized's momentary victory over the master class by declaring a national holiday, or the like? British colonial education characteristically discouraged all national histories and, by imperially instituting its own history, Colonial Britain instilled in Sierra Leoneans an attitude of self-cynicism.

This attitude of self-cynicism can be seen, perhaps more clearly, in the legendary resistance of Bai Bureh, a Temne chief, to the attempts of the British to impose a hut tax on Sierra Leonean natives. The Colonial administration in 1897 attempted to curtail the deteriorating relations between the different ethnic groups and clans by imposing a house or hut tax throughout the hinterland. Since the natives were to pay either in cash or in kind—mainly produce from the land, the District Commissioner hoped to stop the inter-ethnic raids incited by the continued demand for slaves and the resulting incapacitation of land cultivation. This seeming good will on the part of the Colonial government, A.B.C. Sibthorpe, a shrewd Sierra Leonean historian of the era notes, lacked good judgment:

That a people not accustomed to pay tax to their natural Kings, and without knowledge of it in their traditions, that such a people, their Chiefs and their Kings, would easily submit to taxation ought not to have been supposed. Common-sense should have dictated that they all would act 'as a bull unaccustomed to the yoke' [Jer. xxxi. 18]. (125)

The Colonial power's naive arrogance agitated the citizens in the Protectorate on whom the levy had been imposed; this led

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to armed resistance in some districts. Historian Joe Alie notes that Bai Bureh, “a resilient general” and “military strategist” (145), initiated a “successful guerrilla warfare” against the Colonial government (146). His initial success incited other communities to resist the hut tax aggressively. Lives were lost on both sides of the struggle, but in the end, government forces maintained their pre-eminence. Although Bai Bureh gave himself up nine months later, he had evaded capture for months, and his name, to British ears, commanded a certain fear and respect. Though he became a state prisoner and was banished to the Gold Coast until 1905, it is on record that Her Majesty the Queen pleaded that Bai Bureh be treated humanely. He did return to Sierra Leone and was reinstated Chief of Kasseh.

Sierra Leoneans now view Bai Bureh’s ingenious resistance ambivalently. To their minds, Bai Bureh’s legendary ability to make himself invincible in defiance of British might has a victorious ring, but, being a practical people, Sierra Leoneans concede his mortality in his ultimate surrender to the British. Often recalling the Bai Bureh story, Sierra Leoneans deal with both the ambiguity of victory and defeat, invincibility and mortality. Distancing themselves from both victory and defeat, from both the British conquerors and the conquered natives, Sierra Leoneans, in a spirit of cynicism almost unique to them, are adept at making themselves unruffled spectators, umpires at the game of life. Situating themselves as commentators who can mold any event to a manageable size, they whittle down to size the major events of the Bai Bureh story as illustrated in this song handed down from generation to generation:

Bai Bureh was a warrior
He fought against the British,
The British made him surrender,
I ala Koto Maimu
“*E Koto Maimu, E Koto Gbemitong,*”
*I ala Kortor Maimu.*⁴

The first two lines of the song are chanted as historical fact, untainted by any social commentary. The third line, in its very presentation, sharply deviates from this objective slant. It is no longer that Bai Bureh surrendered himself to the British, as the story officially goes, but that the British “made him” give

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himself up. By making Bai Bureh's active move to surrender a passive one, any residue of heroism that might have accompanied his decision to surrender himself is erased from the picture. Also, the song makes no reference to the fact that he was restored to his former position as chief. Consequently, in the fourth, fifth and sixth lines of the song, rendered in Temne, the public distances itself from the great warrior's then predictable fall through their decision to ridicule what they choose to define as his personal failure.⁵ Sierra Leoneans are generally intolerant of failure, and they absorb Bai Bureh's failure—and by extension the nation's failure—with a well-rehearsed indifference to the idea of success. Besides, the settler communities, the Krio people, who were the elite in the nation, tended to identify with the colonialists more than they did the indigenous natives. This "psychopathology" (141), as Frantz Fanon puts it in *Black Skins, White Masks*, aptly describes the fault lines along which the very idea of nation has been forged. Thus for Sierra Leoneans, their collective memory, as a nation, easily translates into a collective amnesia, especially when what they remember highlights the present failures of the nation.

This ambivalent and unstable character of national memory, as in the case of Bai Bureh, was certainly more marked fifty years earlier when Sengbe Pieh and the Amistad captives reached the shores of Sierra Leone. The victory they had celebrated in America all but dissipated once they reached their native land. When the missionaries and the captives embarked from the *Gentleman* in 1842, their plans to stay together and build a mission house around Mani, Sengbe Pieh's much talked about village, evaporated with each passing day. First, the African American couple who had volunteered, along with the other missionaries, to build the Mende Mission, perceived that the leader of the mission, Raymond Williams, was not capable of keeping everything together. They left for Liberia on the next available ship. Then word came that Pieh's village had been razed, and his family killed. With the vision that would have kept them together no longer feasible, the liberated captives mostly scattered. Nonetheless, Sengbe Pieh did help the AMA with much needed contact and the missionaries finally settled in Bonthe Sherbro. Pieh, however, was restless. Desouza George, in his play *The Broken Handcuff*, describes Pieh as a man who "could not quite gather the bits and pieces together again" (32). Pieh decided not to stay

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with the missionaries. He became a trader and then faded from historical significance.

From Pieh's tragic experience, we can surmise that his memorable loss of land and family symbolizes a loss of memory in the psyche of the nation. Having fought for his freedom in the United States, Pieh returned not to his wife and two children who were, perhaps, captured into slavery, or killed, but to the reality of territorial wars instigated by the still thriving slave trade. Under the conditions of return to their native land, the Amistad group had little basis on which to hand down the beautiful story of victory in the U.S. With the ever-present danger of being recaptured into slavery, the issue of their survival remained unresolved. This reality, coupled with the fact that there was a power tussle between Pieh and Williams over who should lead the mission in Sierra Leone, slowly but surely chipped away at the profound nature of their victorious experiences in America. It should not be surprising to us, therefore, that Pieh and the other freed captives chose, in neglecting to perform the story's continuity through the oral tradition, to forget their own story. Liberated Africans, in general, seem to have handed down and established in the minds of Sierra Leoneans, not their sporadic victories of eluding capture, not even their achievement of freedom after capture, but their irreducible conviction that *captivity is a way of life*. The experience of Sengbe Pieh in his native land as well as the experiences of many Sierra Leoneans thereafter did not establish a basis for them to commemorate their past.

Why then is the Middle Passage experience of the Amistad captives receiving such attention in Sierra Leone today? During my visit to Sierra Leone in April of 1994, I examined the means through which diasporic memory of the Amistad event has been articulated in the Sierra Leone society. I discovered that through the active medium of cultural performance the event has taken on new-found significance and the result is a cultural and historical unfolding of a new political awakening.

The inception of the African Studies Department in 1985 at Fourah Bay College, now the University of Sierra Leone, should be credited with the initial steps taken in disseminating knowledge about the Amistad incident. Although Fourah Bay College was founded in 1876 and was considered the Athens of learn-

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ing in West Africa, it was not until a decade ago that young, enthusiastic Humanities faculty at the University were able to achieve their dream of seeing the establishment of an African Studies Institute. Ethno-musicologists, historians, anthropologists, and theater specialists are some of the core-faculty in this department. Joseph Opala, an American anthropologist and a lecturer at Fourah Bay College from 1985 to 1991 was also a key player in the Amistad story in Freetown. His course titled "Art, Anthropology, and National Consciousness" was the Pandora's box in introducing students to the Amistad affair. In acquainting students with past historical figures of stature, Opala laid emphasis on the historical importance of the Amistad incident and the role Sengbe Pieh played. Perhaps Opala's success in getting through to his hearers was heightened not just by the fact that students were being exposed to this story for the first time but also, as Desouza-George, a lecturer of theater arts in the African Studies Institute points out, by the fact that Opala's lectures were, in themselves, "captivating and infectious."⁶ Opala, it seemed, had learned the value of putting the oral tradition to work, the guiding pattern through which Sierra Leoneans are most influenced. Desouza-George found inspiration for his play *The Broken Handcuff*, a play that honors the spirit of Sengbe Pieh, from one such lecture to the Fourah Bay College history students in 1989. Charley Haffner, a student at the institute in 1986, also found inspiration for his play *Amistad Kata Kata* from this eye-opening encounter in one of Opala's lectures (See Figure One).

Haffner's play would become the channel through which a majority of the Sierra Leone population gains access to Sengbe Pieh as hero. Haffner, founder of *The Freetong Players*, the first professional theater group in Freetown, and one of the most popular theater groups ever, told me of the effect Opala's lecture had on him. He said simply, "I wept when I heard [Sengbe Pieh's] story." Observing Haffner's emotional response, Opala encouraged Haffner to write a play on Sengbe Pieh for his thesis project. The end result was the play *The Amistad Kata Kata or, a story of Sengbe Pieh and the Amistad Revolt*, which premiered at the British Council Hall May, 1988. Before Haffner's play, the general public knew nothing about the Amistad story. Acquainted with a history of defeat for so long, many doubted that



Fig. 1: The Freetong Players in a street performance of the play, *Amistad Kata Kata or, A Story of Sengbe Pieh and the Amistad Revolt*, written by Charley Haffner.



Fig. 2: A 5,000 Leone bank note, the highest circulating denominator, with a picture of Sengbe Pieh imprinted on it.

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such a victorious-sounding incident could ever have occurred. As Haffner said, "Sierra Leoneans denied that it ever happened. They felt that I made up the whole story as it was not possible, in their judgment, that any such accounts could exist that they knew nothing about" (4).

It is in response to the constant negative reflection of themselves that Desouza-George, in *The Broken Handcuff*, comments on the dishonorable manner in which Sierra Leoneans treat their heroes, and in effect their own national identity:

Ridicule. That is the usual epitaph we ascribe to the memory of our valiant sons of the soil. Those worthy sons we neglect as we bask in our chronic aura of nationalistic indifference and ignorance. (2)

Denied the opportunity to cast the Amistad story in a dismal light, Sierra Leoneans found Haffner's *Amistad Kata Kata* beautiful but of little use to them. It would take several modes of presentation, formal theater presentation, street drama and improvisations performed in a variety of settings, to convince the populace that the story was not fiction but historical reality. Nonetheless, the play in no small measure introduced the people to a new sense of national and historical awareness. With gratitude, the people embraced the Freetong Players as a theater of relevance, a theater for the people. The play in fact catapulted Freetong Players to both national and international prominence. In 1992, through a grant from the National Black Arts Festival, Charley Haffner and the Freetong Players toured New Haven, Connecticut, where the dialectics of freedom for the Amistad captives had been hotly debated a century earlier, and other North and South eastern cities of the United States.

Although denial of the Amistad story was dispelled through constant education, the ingredients needed to make the story not just a known historical past but an "available past," a commemorative event belonging to the people of Sierra Leone, was still wanting. The Amistad plays by Charley Haffner and Raymond Desouza-George were certainly educational to Sierra Leonean audiences; even before these plays, the cultural icon of the Amistad had appeared on a 1985 stamp pointing people to their own forgotten history. Still, the Amistad story did not quite

inscribe itself on the national psyche as usable in the present, as valid to one's own experiences. Mead's theory of the symbolically reconstructed past emphasizes the use-value of past events as determinant of the kinds of historical past we recall for present use. What, then, was the present time in which this revelation was born?

In the 1980s, Joseph Momoh, the army chief-of-staff of Siaka Stevens' All People's Congress (APC)—the one-party government in power—succeeded Stevens as Head of State through an undemocratic process of "heir to the throne." Having known Momoh as Stevens' most trusted bodyguard, Sierra Leoneans received Momoh's conferred leadership in an indifferent and cynical manner. Their cynicism was articulated mainly in their re-christening of his name from Joseph to Josephine, a name they felt was more suited to his overfed, overly pampered, round figure. During Momoh's regime, cultural advocates like American Joseph Opala requested that the APC government commission a publication on the neglected heroes of Sierra Leone, and the book finally emerged, titled *Sierra Leonean Heroes*. Since 1968, the All People's Congress had ruled Sierra Leone as its personal property and offered very little in terms of national esteem and integrity. Corrupt officials grew fat on bribes, while the people languished in poverty that worsened with each passing year. John Cartwright in his work *Political Leadership in Sierra Leone* points out that the chronic skepticism of the populace towards government started with the very first two Prime Ministers of Sierra Leone, Sir Milton Margai and his brother Albert Margai:

. . . the effects of the Margais' style of politics had accustomed most people to thinking that politicians were out primarily for their own good, that professions of altruism were to be treated skeptically. Politics was a source of material payoffs, not of sacrifices. (266)

Sierra Leone has been plagued with unprofitable leadership since its independence in 1961, thus enhancing the anxieties of nationhood which has beset its very attempt to define itself as a place of "unity, freedom, justice."⁷ It is no wonder that even with the publication of *Sierra Leonean Heroes*, meant to pro-

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mote the richness and diversity of Sierra Leonean cultures, the demoralizing lifestyle of the nation's leaders continued to feed the barren trope of cultural nationalism. It was not until the National Provisional Revolutionary Council (NPRC) overthrew the Momoh government in a military coup on April 29, 1992, that the work received an unprecedented acclaim in paintings of artists and youths in search of heroic symbols to match the enthusiasm with which they hailed the NPRC. Opala's recent work on street art, *Ecstatic Renovations*, gives a detailed analysis of this exciting cultural outburst. Opala writes of the series of almost incidental events that led to the establishment of Sengbe Pieh as national hero in *Ecstatic Renovations*:

The April 29 coup occurred during a symposium at City Hall, named for the Amistad Revolt, and when young people took to the streets to celebrate [the coup], they found a ready-made symbol of their liberation in the form of a twenty-foot model of the ship Amistad on the City Hall steps. They paraded it through the streets, chanting praises to the soldiers and Sengbe Pieh.

This spontaneous iconographic moment made available to the revolution symbolized the dramatic directions being taken by the new regime; it was a regime sailing swiftly in the determined direction of hope, liberty and justice. This iconographic representation in the form of the Amistad ship became an imprint in the nation's unconscious. Lloyd Warner's *The Living and the Dead*, Michael Kammen's "Revolutionary Iconography in National Tradition," and Barry Schwartz's "Social Context of Commemoration" all draw our attention to the significant role iconography plays in the collective memory of a people. Schwartz makes reference to the "pictorial" significance of representation (377). Iconography is the often quiet, yet effective, way to commemorate dated events. Far beyond official celebrations, iconographic representations such as paintings and busts continue the work of harmonizing national identification with the celebrated historic moment, thus making the historical past part of the present-day landscape.

Indeed, the NPRC government in Freetown was quick to realize that the cultural icons displayed by young enthusiasts

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were in fact doing the work of the revolution. Artists—painters, dramatists and musicians—became the unofficial cheerleaders for the government. The birth of the NPRC was, as it were, the birth of a new cultural identity. The political revolution and the cultural awakening were so intertwined that each helped to fuel the other. Although, as Opala points out, the present NPRC government did not officially take over the unfolding cultural revolution, it acknowledged its impact on the political scene. Furthermore, through the cultural significance of the Amistad event to the United States, the NPRC regime received recognition in the United States, thus affirming itself at home. Opala notes:

by another coincidence, Captain Strasser was in the United States for the unveiling of a statue of Sengbe Pieh, only five months after the coup, generating considerable publicity back home. Strasser was seeking treatment for wounds he suffered in the Rebel War, and, otherwise, would probably not have left the country so soon after taking power. (10)

Such cultural events did indeed strengthen Strasser's political base, and the political revolution, in turn, made Sengbe Pieh, leader of the Amistad revolt, "the unofficial symbol of the [NPRC] revolution" (Opala, 10).

To the youth of Freetown, the parallels between Pieh and Strasser were unmistakable: like Sengbe Pieh, Head of State Valentine Strasser was doing the unprecedented in Sierra Leone history. Like Sengbe Pieh who, in one fell swoop of a cane knife, resisted the established tradition of slavery, Strasser was defying a tradition of African nation regimes: corruption in high places. Like Sengbe Pieh who was believed to have been in his twenties, Captain Strasser took the helm of government as a mere youth in his twenties. Easily, Strasser's popularity rides on the back of the re-discovered hero, Sengbe Pieh, but more interestingly, Pieh's ascendancy to national recognition and identification has rebounded to memory because of its present usefulness in the new political environment. It was not long before the NPRC government accepted artists' request that Sengbe Pieh grace the nation's currency (See Figure 2). Sengbe Pieh's appearance on wall paintings around the city and in many neighborhoods has made the Amistad event household vocabulary. Opala notes that

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this type of “patriotic art showcasing the nation’s history and culture” is unprecedented in “a country with almost no tradition for patriotic imagery” (6).

The incident is now a collective memory celebrated, and revitalized, by the people because they are now able to see a reflection of part of themselves in the struggles of Sengbe Pieh and the other slaves. Collective memory in this sense, as Schwartz and others point out, “becomes a significant force in a dialectic of social change” (“Masada,” 160). The Amistad incident, to which the people now have access, was appropriated to express their present recognition of themselves as historical agents. It took the direct impact of the new political upheaval, the audio-visual advantages of the theater, and the iconography of wall paintings and sculptures in *an interpretive exchange with the people’s social interests and concerns* to elevate Sengbe Pieh and the Amistad event to the present status as the symbol of a new national consciousness.

NOTES

¹I wish to thank the Research and Graduate Studies Office of the Liberal Arts College, and the Minority Office, The Pennsylvania State University, for providing the financial assistance which made this research possible. I am equally grateful to members of the *Free-tong Players* theater group and to Raymond Desouza-George of the University of Sierra Leone for allowing me to interview them. They helped sharpen my interest on the topic of the Amistad.

²In 1787, the Sierra Leone Company, made up of men like Granville Sharpe, Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce and Zachary Macaulay, formed an anti-slave trade movement in England. Concerned about the increasing numbers of the Black Poor in England, they helped found a settler community in the West African nation of Sierra Leone. For a comprehensive history of The Sierra Leone Company read Christopher Fyfe’s *A History of Sierra Leone*, Chapters I-V. See also Part III of Utting’s *The Story of Sierra Leone*.

³The following books can be consulted for an expanded version of the Amistad story: *The Amistad Affair* by Christopher Martin, London: Abelard-Schuman, 1970; *Black Odyssey: The Case of the Slave Ship Amistad* by Mary Cable, New York: Viking Press, 1971; *Mutiny on the Amistad* by Howard Jones, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

⁴The italicized words are sung in Temne, Bai Bureh’s tongue, to poke fun at the manner in which he supposedly gave himself up. The words mean: He hollered, “Master, I beg; oh, Master, I beg, oh,

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Master, It's enough." He hollered, "Master, I beg."

⁵The youth of Sierra Leone today remain the noticeable exception to the self-cynicism which has plagued earlier generations. They have rejected the all-too-familiar portrait of Bai Bureh in a meditative and defeatist posture, in favor of a dynamic, conquering hero. Like the Amistad hero Sengbe Pieh, Bai Bureh is one of the heroes in the present cultural awakening. His portrait graces the one-thousand Leone bank note of the present political regime.

⁶Cited in the foreword to Opala's *Ecstatic Renovations*.

⁷The words "unity, freedom, justice" are inscribed on the Sierra Leone coat-of-arms. Ironically, these watchwords which should guide the nation in the path of development have been barren in their true realization. Until recently, the nation has been politically divided along ethnic lines, and the continued looting of the national treasury, and its consequent moral degeneration, has denied the people any true sense of freedom and justice.

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