

ETHNIC IDENTITY, NATIONALISM, AND INTERNATIONAL STRATIFICATION The Case of the African American

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Insofar as Western European nations—in particular Britain, France, and Germany—were among the earliest to industrialize, the imposition of their hegemony on Africa and Asia created a new basis for status allocation within a global stratification system. This article will attempt to explore the relationship between contemporary levels of ethnic or racial inequality within the United States and the global status of country of origin for a number of ethnic groups.

An examination of the history of the changing economic and political fortunes of the countries of origin of different racial/ethnic groups will illuminate the factors that have determined the status of immigrant groups within American society. It will be argued that there are at least two major systemic factors involved: (a) the status of the nation of origin within the global stratification system so that the higher its international status on the criteria of economic, political, and military dominance, the higher the social status accorded group members by the dominant group within the United States; and (b) changes in the international status of the country of origin will be reflected in revisions of status level for such ethnic/racial groups. The latter factor is supported theoretically by Omi and Winant's (1986) concept of racial formation and will be exemplified in the case studies presented below.

THEORETICAL EXPLANATION SOF THE U.S. STRATIFICATION SYSTEM

The characteristics of social stratification and its bases are well established and documented in the literature. Among scholars, Gerth and Mills (1946), Davis and Moore (1945), Bendix and Lipset (1958), and Kerbo (1983) speak to the institutionalization of unequal access to scarce resources and the differential allocation of rank and prestige to groups bearing specific "valued" characteristics, real or imagined, physical or intellectual. Similarly, proponents of the elitist view of American social structure have demonstrated not only the importance of shared social background and values among the "power elite" but also the degree to which such inherited advantages contribute to the maintenance of elite social status and the opportunity for its members to control the social, political, and economic institutions (Domhoff, 1970; Dye, 1966; Lenski, 1966; Tumin, 1985). The critical contribution of the ascribed status of race/ethnicity is inadequately examined, the privileges of "whiteness" being invisible to those so endowed. Among stigmatized ethnics, Jews have used the survival technique of changing the family name, but African or Asian ancestry with visibly distinguishing characteristics of skin color and texture of hair cannot be so simply discarded or disguised.

These realities contradict or discredit theories of assimilation (Glazer & Moynihan, 1963; Gordon, 1964) or the "melting pot" theory, whose basic assumptions held that abandonment of ancestral culture and traditions was the key to entry into mainstream America and access to social, economic, and political opportunity.

EUROPEAN IMMIGRATION AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

We will begin by exploring the national origins of immigrants to the United States and the historical, economic, and sociopolitical conditions of the world system of those periods. U.S. immigration policy offers a window on a possible correlation between national origin and group social status. National status will be shown to be

allocated, imposed, and created by the economic relations inherent in imperialism, colonialism, and industrialization. Just as the upper class within a class-based system determines the norms and values of a society—exploiting the labor of the working class for the benefit of the upper classes—so within the international stratification system, the imperial power determines the position of the colonized by exploiting the latter's resources. Informal United States immigration policy has always reflected a preference for immigrants from northwestern Europe, that is, Anglo-Saxons. Early immigration data show that between 1607 when the English founded Jamestown in Virginia and 1790, the English accounted for almost 60% of approximately 4 million White Americans, almost two thirds of whom were indentured servants. The 19th century saw the beginning of massive waves of migration to the United States with some fluctuations in the volume of arrivals, but one observes an important shift in the geographic sources of immigration. Before 1880, about 80% of all immigrants came from the United Kingdom, Ireland, Germany, and Scandinavia. By 1900, immigrants from Italy, Russia, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire accounted for more than one half of the total number of immigrants. In response to nativist protest, the Dillingham Commission's (1911) immigration policy resulted in the National Origins Systems Act of 1929. The result provided for quotas that favored immigration from northern European countries (the basis for the quota was 3% of the number of persons descended from each nationality as recorded in the 1920 census), effectively restricting immigration from the rest of Europe and most of the rest of the world. Britain, Ireland, and Germany were allocated 70% of the quota for the Eastern Hemisphere. In sum, between 1820 and 1920, approximately 33 million persons had entered the United States, and immigration was unrestricted for Europeans until roughly 1920 when legislation to severely curtail entry was introduced.

The demand for labor by a rapidly expanding industrial economy and a determination to crush the growing strength of labor unions, the drying up of labor from the preferred countries, together with the effects of World War I had overridden nativism and anti-Popist sentiments and opened the door to previously "undesirable"

immigrants from southern and eastern European countries. The "whitening" of southern Europeans had begun, both in response to the freeing of African slaves and the fear of working-class coalitions being formed between former African slaves and the cheap imported European factory laborers and steel and coal mine workers. The possibility of a class struggle evolving was real. The concept of being "White" and privileged took root, yet the preference for immigrants from northwestern Europe persisted with periodic eruptions of nativism at the increasingly visible presence of the "new" immigrants. Census data indicate that 48% of the total population were of foreign birth, and immigrants from those areas constituted more than 50% of all immigrants to the United States, Italians being close to one fourth of them (Carpenter, 1927). Resentment toward the new and "unassimilable" arrivals is vividly captured in a bitter comment by Henry James, the American author, expressing his distaste for persons he encountered on Boston Common: "No sound of English, in a single instance escaped their lips; the greater number spoke a rude form of Italian, the others some outlandish dialect unknown to me . . . the people . . . were gross aliens to a man" (James, 1907). Interestingly, one must note that the geographical regions from which these southern and eastern European immigrants came were not "nations" until the 1870s. The immigrants were landless peasants and serfs from small rural communities whose identities were defined by ties and loyalties to family, clan, and ethnic group. Their job skills or work experience did not distinguish them from freed Africans, being similarly uneducated agricultural workers.

Nationalism, the political ideology on which the consolidation of provinces and minor states came to be based, was a 19th-century European invention (Kedourie, 1960). It, perhaps more than any other concept, drew on the significance of blood race/ethnicity as a basis for cohesion and solidarity. For example, Germany did not become a nation state until 1870 when Bismarck united the German kingdoms of Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony, and Wurttemberg and a number of free cities. Similarly, the unification of a number of powerful city states and principalities into the state of Italy was not realized until 1870. As far as the rest of southeastern Europe was

concerned, the Hapsburg Empire ruled over Austria and what were later to become the nation states of Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Bosnia. None of these entities, preoccupied as they were with interethnic wars, could be compared with the international maritime trading empires of Britain, Spain, Portugal, or France.

But long before the implementation of the National Origin System Act of 1929, Asian immigration had been ended with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1908. We will now address these immigration policy decisions and the differences in the relative power (military and economic) of the United States and Japan and of the United States and China as reflected in the legislation.

CHINESE IMMIGRATION AND THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT OF 1882

Although the East Coast and the Midwest were inundated with European immigrants, the West Coast drew its labor from the Pacific Rim, specifically China and Japan. Between 1851 and 1858, more than 200,000 Chinese had emigrated to work on the railroads in California. Ethnic hostility and exclusion took many forms. In 1852, the governor of California wanted restrictions placed on the Chinese on the grounds that Chinese "coolies" were unassimilable, lowered the standard of living, were heathens, and were economic opportunists who would eventually overrun the state. In 1854, a California Supreme Court decision effectively disenfranchised Chinese immigrants by denying them the right to testify against a White man. Violence against Chinese became commonplace. In 1871, some 22 Chinese were lynched in Los Angeles, and in 1885 in Wyoming, 29 Chinese were murdered and their property looted and destroyed. In 1879, public protests against the presence of Chinese (tripling from 40,000 in 1860 to 120,000 in 1880) had reached such a pitch that more than 95% of eligible voters in California voted for the exclusion of Chinese. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act finally passed into law denying naturalization rights to Chinese and outlawing Chinese immigration for 10 years. Chinese laborers

were barred from entry in 1884, and in 1892 the Chinese Exclusion Act was extended for another 10 years.

Chinese immigrants had no recourse, neither could they expect protection from the Chinese Emperor for a number of reasons. As was the case with central and southern Europe, China in the 1840s and until the fall of the Manchu dynasty was neither a politically united empire (its warlords were preoccupied with their internal power struggles) nor had it begun to industrialize. Western imperial rivalry was being fought out on mainland China as on the continent of Africa, although China was never partitioned, and by the 1870s, China was effectively under the political control of the major European powers, Britain, France, Germany, and Russia. Each had established "spheres of influence" by force and negotiated treaties that gave them economic footholds over considerable land areas and trading ports. The Burlingame Treaty signed in 1868 forced China to offer significant concessions to American merchants and ship-pers eager to enter the Chinese market in exchange for permitting Chinese emigration. Chinese identity was framed by family, kinship group, and clan (Hsu, 1963). China's weak political position and low international status is further evidenced by the military defeats she suffered—the conquest of Manchuria by Japan in 1905 and humiliation by the British in the "Opium" wars that ended with the British taking Hong Kong and forcing China to pay reparations for British losses. It was not until 1928 that Chiang Kai-Shek's military forces brought the semi-independent provinces under one umbrella as a unified China, much as Bismarck had done to create Germany from the Hapsburg and Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1848.

THE JAPANESE AND THE GENTLEMEN'S AGREEMENT: 1908

Japanese immigration followed Chinese, and between 1890 and 1900 approximately 20,000 had arrived on the mainland from Japan and Hawaii where they had already emigrated to work on the sugar cane plantations. Although initially welcomed because of their industry, compliant nature, and willingness to accept low

wages, their attempts to improve their economic positions soon aroused the ire of the White American community. Newspaper editorials and legislation record the intensity of anti-Japanese sentiment. The *San Francisco Chronicle* (1910) comments,

Japanese ambition is to progress beyond mere servility to the plane of the better class of American workman and to own a home with him. The moment that this position is exercised, the Japanese ceases to be an ideal laborer.

During the 1910s, harassment of Japanese occurred in ways both petty and significant, and numerous pieces of legislation, clearly designed to hobble the immigrants' opportunity to earn a living or to set down roots, were proposed. They included forbidding them using and owning power engines, prohibiting their employing White girls, declaring the inheritance of agricultural land by Japanese illegal, and raising the cost of a fishing license fee from \$10 per year to \$100 for Asians. The saliency of ethnicity for White Americans and their concern that non-Whites be confined to the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder informed many laws or efforts to pass restrictive legislation. To highlight the intent of the law, the then Attorney General Webb declared,

The fundamental basis of all legislation . . . is, race undesirability. It seeks to limit their presence by curtailing their privileges . . . for they will not come in large numbers and long abide with us if they may not acquire land. . . . And it seeks to limit the numbers who will come by limiting the opportunities for their activity here. (Webb, 1913)

Despite these obstacles, the Japanese succeeded in securing a significant share of the truck farming market. Their economic success was met with the passing of a more serious restriction, the California Alien Land Act of 1913. Now, as persons ineligible for citizenship, they were prevented from land ownership and could only lease agricultural land up to a period of 3 years. Land already owned could not be bequeathed. Although state law and local custom persecuted the Japanese and their children, at the national level an entirely different picture emerges. Attempts to force Japanese

children into segregated schools as had been done to the Chinese children were unsuccessful largely as a result of presidential intervention. The furor in Japan at this serious racial insult had the potential to provoke an international incident. President Theodore Roosevelt's concern not to offend the emperor and the Japanese nation could fairly be related to Japan's recent demonstration of its military strength—a convincing defeat of the Russian army in 1904 (an event that had stunned all of Western Europe and the United States)—followed by the conquest of Korea and Manchuria in 1905. Japan had effectively claimed a place within the higher levels of the international stratification system by its military prowess, and President Roosevelt recognized this. And so, unlike the Burlingame Treaty that China signed from a position of weakness or the unilateral imposition of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1908 between the governments of Japan and the United States was a bilateral agreement between political and military equals. Japan agreed to halt immigration to the United States, whereas the United States undertook to ensure that Japanese citizens in the United States would be protected from discriminatory acts. Unlike China, Japan remained a fully independent nation during the flowering of Western imperialism. It had abandoned its feudal past, survived the Meiji restoration, and embarked on its own imperial expansion and industrialization. By 1930 Japan would conquer large parts of China in its march to becoming the industrial giant of the Far East.

AFRICA, COLONIALISM, AND THE SLAVE TRADE

The history of Africans in the United States as slaves is inextricably tied to the colonization of both the United States and Africa and Britain's rise to supremacy among mercantilist nations in the 17th century. Until the early 17th century, the Portuguese and the Spanish were the great maritime powers, having the "unexplored parts of the world" allocated to them by Papal Bull of 1493. With the Reformation, Protestant Britain could compete with the Portuguese, who monopolized the slave trade. By 1652, almost a century

later, the British were participants in the slave trade, and as the 18th century began, British ships were supreme on the high seas and had a 30-year monopoly to supply slaves to the Spanish colonies in the West Indies. In West Africa, from which the majority of slaves were brought, kidnapped, or stolen, political structures in 17th and 18th century West Africa broadly resembled that of much of eastern and southern Europe and China—monarchical empires and fragmented communities bound together by traditional tribal social organizations in which tribute was owed and paid to the most powerful military overlord. The kingdoms of Ashanti, Dahomey, and Yorubaland were engaged in territorial expansion and warfare much as the German provinces or the Austro-Hungarian empire. Among the Yorubas (Egbas, Ijebus, and Ifes), internecine war led to the decline and eventual disintegration of the ancient Oyo empire, the loss of authority by the Alafin (King) of Oyo, and the decentralization of power to his former vassals. Early trading relations were in commodities of pepper and palm oil and turned to the more lucrative trade in slaves much later. The breakup of the Oyo empire provided the opportunity for European traders to strengthen their foothold, playing off one group against another. Ethnic rivalry fueled continuous raiding parties and warfare, and as was traditional, prisoners were sold as slaves to any willing buyer. Invitations from indigenous chiefs for armed support against an ethnic rival or entry into a temporary strategic alliance with British or French traders were transformed into opportunities for widening economic and political control. A case in point is that of Akitoye, Ologun (king) of Lagos, Nigeria. In exchange for British military aid to drive out his nephew and rival Kosoko, Akitoye promised to end the slave trade from Badagri, a major slave-trading station on the island of Lagos. In the long run, the *quid pro quo* resulted in the annexation of Lagos as a British colony (Burns, 1929).

FROM PROTECTORATE TO ANNEXATION AND COLONIAL STATUS

It is important to note that British colonization occurred through several stages, sometimes deliberate and overt, as in the Akitoye

case described above, but often almost imperceptibly slowly, a response to opportunity or sheer expediency. For example, with the escalation in the volume of commodity trade, traders sought a more formal presence of their metropolitan governments for their protection. The latter, not slow to recognize the economic value of their citizens' entrepreneurial activities, signed treaties and established consulates. So it was not long before local chiefs were co-opted or stripped of their autonomy, leaving them as symbolic heads, maintaining law and order under the direction of the local representatives.

Indirect rule had been implemented, and the judicious and sometimes imperious use of force or threat of its use ensured the cooperation of traditional leadership. A few examples will suffice. In 1854, the British Consul for the Bights of Benin and Biafra (Nigeria) deposed and exiled King Pepple of Bonny (Burns, 1929). In 1875, the Brassmen were punished by a naval expedition for having seized a French brig and for other alleged breaches of their treaty, and in 1887 the British government deported King Jaja of Opobo to the island of St. Vincent in the West Indies for having persuaded up-river tribes not to trade with Europeans and protested at being forced to sign an agreement allowing free trade. King Jaja was punished for being a monopolist, behavior no different from that of the French, British, or Germans who did not hesitate to use force to exclude competition from what they considered to be their markets or spheres of influence (Burns, 1929).

These incidences document the gradual but steady erosion of traditional authority and unmistakably conveyed to the African populace that their leaders were powerless in the face of European deception and military power. What had begun in the 16th century as a trading relationship between equal partners was to end in the 19th century with the political conquest of African peoples and the colonization of their territories and empires. The political naiveté of indigenous kings and chiefs had led them to seek relief from marauding traders by requesting protection from European monarchs, initiating the establishment of consulates, later protectorates, that eventually progressed to colonization, annexation, and subordinate status. But the most significant outcome was the

degradation of their status as independent social, cultural, political, and economic entities, a loss from which the continent, its peoples, and their descendants have not recovered.

COLONIALISM AND THE INTERNATIONAL STRATIFICATION SYSTEM

In colonial Africa, the imperialists systematically denigrated and partially destroyed indigenous social and political institutions. Most significantly, the economy of the nations in the periphery were distorted to serve those of the core nations, thus the "underdevelopment" of former colonies. Ghana and Nigeria produced cacao beans as cash crops for export to the factories of Cadbury in England; palm oil, for the manufacture of soap in Liverpool; and Nigerian cotton to the textile mills of Manchester, to be woven into fine cotton goods. The "seconds" (rejects) were exported back to West Africa and the West Indian colonies, replacing the hand-woven cloths of Africa. This process reflects the early stages of the formation of the *core/periphery* relationship, the core nation exploiting the raw materials of the nations in the periphery to create its wealth (Chase-Dunn & Hall, 1991; Chirot, 1976; Jenkins, 1970; Lagos, 1963; So, 1990; Wallerstein, 1980).

A new set of normative social relations were imposed to reflect the new sociopolitical reality—superior status to the representatives of the colonizer and subordinate status to the colonized. Thus, the stigma of low status attaching to a colonized nation encompassed its member citizens and the ethnic identity of its descendants. Historians have concluded that whereas in 1879 approximately 90% of the continent was still formally under traditional African sovereignty, by 1900 almost the entire continent was under European rule (Burns, 1929; Oliver & Atmore, 1969).

Germany's entry into the "Scramble for Africa" provides compelling evidence that international prestige and rank were associated with the breadth of imperial power because claims to colonies or protectorates had to be supported by effective authority in the

regions claimed. This intensified the struggle for control of Africa and undoubtedly contributed to the premature establishment of formal authority of the metropolitan countries in Africa.

The bases for the current system of international and ethnic stratification can be seen to derive from the process of emergent capitalism, the creation and consolidation of nation states in Europe, and imperial expansionism, colonialism, and competition among European nations. The scramble for Africa that occurred between 1880 and 1900 in which Britain, France, and Germany partitioned Africa into spheres of influence resulted in a tumultuous overturning of African sovereignty. As Victor Hugo, the French writer, observed in an editorial that appeared in a French West African newspaper,

Africa (was) the common property of the European nations, to be appropriated for European purposes with or without the consent of its inhabitants. (Hugo, 1877)

AFRICAN AMERICANS, ETHNIC IDENTITY, AND GROUP STATUS

What are the consequences of colonialism for Americans of African ancestry or Africans in the diaspora in general? It would appear that the most extreme case of the negative impact of low international status of a country on its members is that of African states for Africans in the diaspora and on African Americans in particular. African Americans find themselves in a qualitatively different situation from either Chinese or Japanese Americans. Arriving as slaves beginning in the 17th century, African slaves and their descendants were not free until the 19th century with the passage of the 13th Amendment (1865). Despite this, they were denied the actual enjoyment of the rights and privileges as evidenced by a series of amendments and Supreme Court decisions—the 14th and 15th Amendments (1868, 1870); *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1892); *Brown v. the Board of Education*, Topeka, Kansas (1954); the Civil Rights

Act of 1964; and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. With little authentic knowledge of their ancestral homelands, culture(s), or traditions, they instead widely rejected Africa as ancestral home, with the exception of one state, Ethiopia. The reasons for the rejection should be obvious in the light of the foregoing. On the other hand, Ethiopia was the exception because it was the single African nation that had a long and illustrious history reflected in its international status. It bears comparison with Japan in that it was a politically independent nation that had successfully fended off European intrusion and, in 1896, had inflicted a military defeat on Italy in the decisive battle of Adowa. It was a monarchy with an emperor, Haile Selassie (with god-like status among his subjects). It was a member of the League of Nations, an international committee composed of the most powerful nations in the world following the end of World War I.

The colonial status of Africa continued until the 1950s when political independence was granted or won by most states. But decades of underdevelopment and economic exploitation have made it increasingly difficult to bridge the ever-widening technological gap that reinforces the core/periphery relationship. "Divide and conquer" colonial strategies have sharpened interethnic rivalry into deep political cleavages. In Nigeria, for example, typical of former colonies, the task of creating a single nation with shared values, goals, and a sense of peoplehood from collectivities of linguistically and ethnically diverse peoples (among whom are traditional rivalries) has proved elusive. Rather, the territory has devolved into a myriad of ethnic provinces, a contemporary reversion to precolonial geographic and ethnic homelands. Economic growth resulting from the discovery of extensive oil fields has led to her becoming a significant player in the world market and has had a recognizable psychological impact during the 1960s and 1970s on African Americans, seen in a growth of ethnic pride and awareness. The civil rights movement in the 1960s owed much to the explosion of political and budding economic independence among African nations. African Americans became interested in serving as Peace Corps volunteers, assuming ethnic African symbols ("Afros," "dashikis").

INTERNATIONAL STATUS, ETHNIC GROUP STATUS IN THE UNITED STATES

How are these sociopolitical historical events and processes reflected in the relationship between the international status of a nation and that of its members within American society? Primacy of place for the British in particular has already been explored. Its imperial power deriving from the resources of its colonial dependencies enabled it to confer the highest social status on its members. As "White" came to replace European national origin, all persons of European ancestry have enjoyed a social status higher than those whose origins are non-European. The principle of global economic dominance nevertheless still operates as in the modern-day decline in the status of Britain with loss of empire and economic superiority and its replacement first by Germany during the 1960s and 1970s when the German economy dominated the world market, then by Japan in the 1970s and 1980s. Although Japan's adversarial role in World War II had negative effects for Japanese Americans, its rapid postwar modernization and later domination of the global economy not only restored its status but led to the imitation of its business management strategies. An important indicator of Japan's high ranking is reflected in the results of studies using the social distance scale and the high rate of intermarriage of Japanese Americans with Whites (Bogardus, 1968).

Chinese Americans, on the other hand, are highly endogamous and retain strong local ethnic communities and associations. Although the two Chinas—mainland China and Taiwan—exist in different relationships with the United States, nevertheless each confers national status benefits on its citizens as a result of its peculiar location within the world system. On one hand, Taiwan's entrepreneurial energy and strategic location and on the other, mainland China's potential economic and political power ensure that both are accorded respect. Chinese Americans benefit from both sources of international status. African nations, however, have not been able to sustain their initial promise and have, for the most part, declined into a new state of political instability and economic dependency. Today they remain on the periphery of the global economy, of minor strategic interest to the new world system. Despite social and

political gains by the African American population, their status as a group remains lower than that of any other ethnic group, even including the most recent immigrants from southeast Asia.

CONCLUSIONS

Viewing stratification systems within nations as a reflection of the global economic stratification system offers a perspective that provides greater insight into the origins of internal stratification systems, particularly that of a multiethnic society such as the United States. The case studies seem to support the main arguments of this article. The high status held by Britain and other imperial European nations was conferred on their immigrant representatives in the United States, and the possibility of class revolution in the United States led to the inclusion of all persons of European descent under a "White" umbrella. Although some European immigrants were initially excluded, their treatment was still muted compared with that meted out to those who originated from China and Africa. The reasons have been presented. In contemporary times, Japan ranks among the leading capitalist nations of the world, and Japanese Americans may be said to have achieved the status of "honorary" Whites, as Andrew Hacker recently opined. China (mainland, including Hong Kong today and Taiwan) is generally speculated to replace Japan as the next economic giant in the global economy due to the raw potential of its massive population, its military threat, and the remarkable success (Taiwan and Hong Kong) as semiperipheral societies, and as manufacturers of finished goods for the global market, albeit using the cheap "sweatshop" labor of its citizens. Thus, Chinese Americans as an ethnic group now enjoy a relatively respectable status, although it is by comparison lower than that of Japanese Americans. Africa, by comparison, remains largely noncompetitive within the postindustrial global economy (a peripheral economy in the world system). Its constituent nations remain mired in interethnic wars and unstable political systems reminiscent of mid-19th-century Europe rather than contemporary industrialized societies. Given that the

likelihood of any individual African state achieving economic global dominance in the near future appears slim, no revision of ethnic group status appears imminent for African Americans.

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AMISTAD AND THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

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Director Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* is a dramatic portrayal of a well-documented but little-known 19th-century slave revolt and its repercussions. The year was 1839. A young man, called Sengbe Pieh, from the Mende ethnic group of Sierra Leone was captured as a slave and, along with other men, women, and children, transported across the Atlantic to Cuba where they were purchased by Spanish plantation owners, Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montez. It was while the enslaved Africans, numbering 53, were subsequently being shipped from the Cuban capital of Havana to the port of Puerto Principe in the schooner, *La Amistad*, that the mutiny occurred. Using a nail removed from the deck, Sengbe freed himself and other fellow slaves and then overpowered the crew, killing half of them.

Sengbe then ordered Montez to sail in the direction of the rising sun, that is, eastward toward his homeland of Africa. However, a strong gale drove the *Amistad* along the coast of the United States and, after drifting off course for 2 months, the ship was captured by the U.S. Navy and taken ashore to New London, Connecticut. Thence began a prolonged court fight that unraveled several fundamental legal issues that Spielberg captures so dramatically and effectively. Were the jailed "Amistad Africans" guilty of murder and piracy as charged before District Judge Andrew Judson? Did Montez and Ruiz have a legitimate claim to the Africans as their slaves? Or should the courts capitulate to the "ownership" demands of the Spanish crown claimed by young princess Isabella II (Anna Paquin) and supported by the U.S. Secretary of State, John Forsyth? At the crux of the interminable legal rambling was the key question of the

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