

The Legacy of Noble Warriors

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, October 29, 2003

A story is reborn with every telling.

Take the tale of the “Amistad” mutiny. I’ve long been captivated by the story of Cinque, the noble Mendi warrior from Sierra Leone who led the uprising against his Spanish captors and tried to force them to sail back to Africa. I’ve been impressed by abolitionists who rallied to the cause of the Mendi as part of their campaign to end slavery in the United States. And I’ve been inspired by former president John Quincy Adams’ oratory before the Supreme Court that won the Africans their freedom by proving they had been illegally enslaved. It’s a tale of drama and courage, of justice and redemption, of good defeating evil. No wonder Steven Spielberg chose it for a film.

The story has been retold most recently as the replica of the “Amistad” has traveled from port to port, providing lessons for school children from Portland, Maine to Toledo, Ohio, with visits to Detroit, Chicago, Buffalo, and nine other harbors. At each stop, thousands of schoolchildren have heard the story of Kali, the young “Amistad” African boy who was taught to speak and write English and crafted letters to John Quincy Adams.

“Some people say Mende people dolt because we no talk American language. We Mende people think, think, think,” Kali wrote. Throughout slavery, African Americans were prohibited from learning to read and write in several states of the union. It was one of many rights denied them along with freedom of movement, the freedom to earn money and even the freedom to gather for a funeral. That’s why education has been such an important part of African Americans’ never-ending struggle for equality. It was largely free African-Americans who established the first black schools in cities like Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and Boston.

Kali was lucky. He was taught to read and write by Yale students who took an interest in the “Amistad” captives. In fact, education is at the heart of this story of liberation. Kali’s American defender, John Quincy Adams, was a linguist and scholar. The son of the second president of the United States, he had a brilliant career as Secretary of State and was an enlightened and visionary thinker. But when he became president himself, he was derided for what we would label a progressive environmental agenda, such as

his proposal for a survey of the nation's coasts, land and resources, as well as American participation in global efforts "for the common improvement of the species." President Adams lost his bid for a second term.

Thinking he would retire from public office, Adams instead was elected to the House of Representatives. He became an outspoken champion for the oppressed. "We have done more harm to the Indians since our Revolution, than had ever been done to them...There are crying sins we are answerable for before a higher jurisdiction," he wrote in 1837, when his plan to provide territory to native Americans was defeated by those in Congress who promoted extermination and eviction. But when Southern members of Congress put forward a "gag rule" that prohibited any discussion of slavery in the House, Adams refused to be silenced. Year after year, he denounced the rule, until after eight years it was finally defeated.

Congressman Adams was 72 and nearly blind when he accepted the highly politicized "Amistad" case, believing this would be his last great service to his country. After two years, the hard won but successful court verdict was a shot in the arm of the abolitionist movement across the country.

The stories of Kali and John Quincy Adams cross at the intersection of education and passionate commitment. After the "Amistad" success, Adams considered retirement, but realized he could not. "While a remnant of physical power is left to me to write and speak, the world will retire from me before I shall retire from the world."

Adams was true to his word, spending his latter years insisting on social justice for people like Kali, who begged the elderly man, "All we want is make us free." That wish was granted. The abolitionists raised money to send Kali and the other Mendi Africans back to Sierra Leone, where they lived out the rest of their lives. Adams, in turn, breathed his last breath at his desk in Congress. On his tombstone is inscribed, "Near this place repose all that could die of John Quincy Adams."