

THE STORY OF THE AMISTAD AFRICANS

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Cobblestone Magazine, Feb. 1993, Vol. 14 Issue 2, p36

Accessed through iConn.org

Locked in a crowded Connecticut jail cell with thirty-two fellow West Africans, a world away from his village in Sierra Leone, eleven-year-old Kali longed for the familiar surroundings of his homeland. He missed the wide blue sky and tall palm trees of Mendeland. He missed running and playing with his friends. He wished he could be back home with them, fishing in the river again. A tear glistened in Kali's dark eyes as he thought about his family his sister and brother, his mother and father. So much time had passed since he had seen them.

The date was January 4, 1841. Kali and the other prisoners, all of whom had been kidnapped in Africa and sold into slavery, had been fighting for their freedom for almost two years. Their fierce determination to return home, coupled with the efforts of a group of supporters who believed in the right of freedom for all, would soon make them the first slaves ever to gain their freedom through the U.S. courts.

The Amistad Africans, as Kali and his group were known, first came together in the spring of 1839 at an illegal slave market in Havana, Cuba. There, two Spanish slave traders had purchased the original group of fifty-three, planning to bring them to a sugar cane plantation on the other side of the island.

Once aboard the Amistad, the Africans revolted against their captors. After an ill-fated attempt to sail back to Africa, both ship and Africans were taken into U.S. custody in Long Island Sound. The group was charged with murder and mutiny and jailed in New Haven. Kali, though only nine, was kept with the men. The three girls in the group - Teme, age twelve, Kagne, age ten, and Margru, age seven - were sent to live with the jailer and his wife. Criminal charges were soon dropped because of a lack of jurisdiction, but the ship's owners then claimed that the Africans should be returned to them as "cargo." Finally, after two trials and several months' imprisonment, the court ruled that the group be freed and returned to their homeland. The U.S. attorney, acting on the orders of President Martin Van Buren, appealed that decision, and the case was now pending before the Supreme Court.

Looking around at his companions gathered in the damp cell, Kali, a small, dark-skinned boy with a stout build, felt a deep love for these brave men. Cinque, who had led the revolt aboard the Amistad, was acknowledged as the group's leader. A strong, powerfully built

man in his mid-twenties, Cinque also was kind and gentle and showed much concern for Kali and the others. He, like the small, wiry Grabeau, had been a rice planter at home. Several of the others were blacksmiths. Almost all were married and had been snatched away from their families. Young Kali, who had been taken while walking along a road in his village, shared their pain of separation from loved ones.

The past two years, though difficult, had held some moments of happiness, thought Kali. Many of the townspeople in New Haven had befriended the captives, visiting them and bringing them food and clothing. Professors and students from Yale University had come regularly to instruct the captives in religion and English, bringing them Bibles and books to read. And several local clergymen who strongly disapproved of slavery had banded together with other abolitionists from around the United States to raise funds for the Africans' defense. These supporters, who called themselves the Amistad Committee, had hired several of the best local attorneys for the captives' earlier trials. Now that the case was going before the Supreme Court, the committee members felt that an attorney with a national reputation was needed. They decided on former president John Quincy Adams. Though not an abolitionist, Adams was a strong foe of slavery, and even though he was seventy-three years old and had not appeared before the Supreme Court in thirty years, "Old Man Eloquent" agreed to take the case. Now Kali, a bright boy who had quickly learned English, was chosen by Cinque and the others to write a letter to Mr. Adams.

"Dear Friend Mr. Adams," he began. "I want to write a letter to you because you love Mendi people, and you talk to the grand court." Speaking for all the captives, Kali poured out his heart, ending with a plea to "make us free."

The next month, Adams successfully argued the Africans' case. On March 9, 1841, the Supreme Court justices ruled that the Amistad Africans were free men and should be returned to their homeland. Six months later, Kali and his countrymen returned to Sierra Leone.

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