

Steven spielberg's movie, amistad



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Steven Spielberg's movie, Amistad, tells the story of a slave ship revolt that greatly affected the issue of slavery in the United States of America. The U. S. Supreme Court decision to send the slaves back to Africa proved to be a major defeat to the pro-slavery Southerners, and a significant victory for the abolitionists.

Spielberg's movie captures the essence of this issue and demonstrates the significance of the Amistad case but fails to be historically accurate.

Characters are created, altered or even omitted and some incidents are added for the purpose of adding to the drama and emotion of the movie. The slaves are particularly misrepresented from their physical appearance to the way they approached the new Christian religion imposed upon them. Cinque, the headstrong leader of the enslaved Africans, is one of the most important characters of the Amistad case and thus should be investigated most thoroughly. From the examination of historical newspaper articles, we find that Cinque's personality and physical traits are accurately represented.

An article printed in the Charleston Courier truthfully describes Cinque as a man of " adhesiveness, concentrativeness and firmness...[indicating] unshaken courage, and intense love of home and kindred..

. and just the man to invent and become the leader in such an event as that which has thrown him on our shores." 1 It is these adjectives on which Spielberg seems to base his interpretation of Cinque's character. Spielberg also presents Cinque's love of home with a flashback to his capture and enslavement in his homeland. Cinque's role as a leader during the uprising on the Amistad and the details of the mutiny are mostly portrayed

accurately, although Spielberg fails to include certain essentials of the incident.

Strangely, Spielberg omits Antonio who plays a key role as the mediator between the Spanish-speaking Cubans and the African slaves. Spielberg also alters the physical appearance of the rebels to give them a more threatening image. In his diary, John Quincy Adams describes the Amistad mutineers: “ They are, all but one, young men, under 30, and of small stature—none over 5 feet 6.”² Reasonably, Spielberg opposes Adams’ primary account and instead, creates a more domineering presence of the slaves by casting taller African Americans with muscular physiques. This gives a more believable and dramatic effect to the actual revolt. Although Cinque is the main character of the movie, Spielberg noticeably doesn’t give enough credit to the rest of the Africans.

The other Amistad Africans seem to be overshadowed by Cinque’s evident leader role, although many of them could be equally effective leaders. In the movie, Cinque explains that he doesn’t feel he deserves to lead his people and that he is only well respected because he inadvertently killed a lion that was threatening his town. “ I’m not a big man, just a lucky one,”³ Cinque explains to Joadson. It should be noticed that important colleagues of Cinque are not even mentioned in the movie, such as Kale, “ the boy, who has been in correspondence with Mr. John Quincy Adams.”⁴ Not only has Spielberg neglected to mention certain characters, he has also created a fictional character of his own.

Theodore Joadson, played by Morgan Freeman, has never been mentioned in historical accounts of the Amistad mutiny though he plays an important role in the movie. The most significant character alteration Spielberg has made is that of Attorney Roger S. Baldwin. “ I dined at Mr. Baldwin’s with 8 or 10 others–Mrs.

Baldwin is a daughter of old Roger Sherman,” 5 writes Adams in his personal diary. Adams describes Baldwin as ‘ old’ and in reality Baldwin is much older and definitely more revered than his young, working-class counterpart portrayed in the movie. The mood of the movie is also inaccurate at times. For one thing, Spielberg neglects to emphasize that Connecticut was a slave state during the time of the Amistad case.

“ There are very few States in the Union where the slave population has increased in so rapid a ratio,” 6 notes the New York Journal of Commerce, and a private correspondence of a pro-slavery newspaper noticed that “ it is certain that, for some cause or other, [abolitionists] have been especially anxious to get their pupils out of our territory.” 7 Obviously, the Africans would have a considerable disadvantage in the pro-slavery sentiments within the slave state of Connecticut. One should also take note of the differences in the role of religion between the movie and historical evidence. There is historical evidence to support that the Mendi were exposed to many missionaries during their time in America, but the Mendi’s reaction to Christianity is portrayed differently. The movie affirms that the Mendi were exposed to many Christian ideas as demonstrated when Yamda and Cinque interpret the pictures of Jesus’ resurrection, but the movie stresses the

religion of the Mendi and their belief in ancestors while historical evidence proves otherwise. “ Send us home.

Give us Missionary. We tell Mendi people Americans spoke truth...We tell them there is one god.

You must worship him,” 8 Kale writes to Adams. Finally, certain factual aspects of the court cases are also faulty. The fundamental questions arising from the court case were all presented accurately, but a major treaty between Spain and Great Britain was not mentioned in the movie. This treaty stated, “ the slave trade is prohibited to the subjects of each.” 9 In fact, there was limited focus on the communication between Secretary of State Forsyth and the prepubescent Queen Isabella II of Spain in Spielberg's adaptation of the Amistad issue.

Generally, Spielberg's adaptation of the Amistad Mutiny and the subsequent controversial court cases were factually accurate. Certain representations of characters contradict evidence found in historical documents, but they serve to enhance the sympathy for the Africans. Likewise, Spielberg's interpretation of religion and the emotional atmosphere of Connecticut oppose factual evidence but increase audience response to the atrocities of slavery by making the movie more dramatic. Nevertheless, Spielberg's movie Amistad, achieves its purpose of encouraging popular interest in the history of slavery in America.