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The Moral Dilemmas behind Sacrifices Made by Colonized Peoples in the Name of Freedom

After overtaking their Spanish captors in a riveting seaborn battle, the African protagonists of *Amistad* (1997), directed by Steven Spielberg, endure a strenuous legal proceeding in the United States. Multiple issues arise for Cinque (Djimon Hounsou) and his peers in their pursuits of freedom, most of which can be attributed to the immoral nature of the country’s colonial history. Unethical legal circumstances, including perjury and racism, and miscommunications due to differing linguistic backgrounds complicate the events and subject the captured individuals to further turmoil. The Mende people must become both flexible and resilient to see triumph, liberating themselves from the numerous constraints of colonialism. In *Amistad*, the adoption of anglicized versions of language and religion–English and Christianity, respectively–is necessary for Cinque and his African counterparts to obtain their physical and spiritual freedom. Yet in accepting them, they compromise their own native cultures, an inevitable effect of colonialism.

There are a few instances in the film in which the Mende people use the language of the colonizers, a purposeful choice on Spielberg’s behalf to starkly contrast those occasions with an otherwise lack of verbal communication between them and the Americans. The first example of an enslaved African using English occurs in a court scene where Cinque repeatedly proclaims, “Give us free” (*Amistad* 01:26:00-01:35:20). While Holabird (Pete Postlethwaite) questions Captain Fitzgerald (Peter Firth), Cinque begins to panic, furthered by dark lighting, close-up shots in which tears can be seen accumulating in his eyes, and audible quivers are layered over the dialogue. Although Captain Fitzgerald’s testimony is objectively in favor of the captured Africans, the language barrier between them and the Americans subjects Cinque and his peers to rely solely on their interpretations of the men’s cold body language and stern attitudes. Captured by a dynamic shot in which the camera performs a zoom in, empowering him from a technical aspect, he utters his first words in English and proceeds to stand up, a physical manifestation of his passion, intensified by opera music. By rejecting his native language, Cinque provides the individuals in the courtroom with the opportunity to see his utter pain, hoping that the majority will humanize him for the first time. As the Mende people infrequently communicate with the Americans in the same language, most of them, besides Roger Sherman Baldwin (Matthew McConaughey), Theodore Joadson (Morgan Freeman), and ultimately, John Quincy Adams (Anthony Hopkins), fail to develop a strong connection with them, contributing to an ongoing dehumanization perpetuated by the hierarchical nature of colonialism. The close-up shots of the other people’s faces in the courtroom demonstrate Cinque’s success—they are struck by his raw emotion. Despite this daring act, it is not until the end of the film when Cinque’s social defiance manifests itself in true liberation, another occasion where he uses English to demonstrate his sentiments.

The final interaction between Baldwin and Cinque again exemplifies a necessary linguistic compromise in order to adequately convey one’s emotions to the other. After winning their Supreme Court case, the Mende people rejoice, pleased to see an end to their colonial suffering (02:19:29-02:23:55). One by one, Cinque thanks John Quincy Adams, Joadson, and lastly, Baldwin, reflected by a series of reverse shots that centralize each individual. Cinque demonstrates his gratitude by uttering, “Thank you, Baldwin” (02:23:08). In this instance, the use of English encaptures the extent of his character development at the hands of colonialism. The man who was once silent and distant from the Americans has formed a true bond with Baldwin, and he feels that the only way for the lawyer to encapsulate his sentiments is if he adapts himself to the language of the oppressor. Whereas in most other occasions the men maintained communication without using the other’s linguistic system, Spielberg purposefully chooses to represent Cinque as English-speaking to demonstrate just how much being the subject of colonialism has changed him fundamentally, as he deviates from his native language.

Another representation of the rejection of one’s culture throughout the film is in regards to Christianity—while Cinque first resents it and struggles to understand its importance, it ultimately becomes an integral part of the Africans’ spiritual liberation. The instance mentioned above in which Cinque proclaims, “Give us free” (01:26:00-01:35:20), is directly followed by his first true inquiry into the Bible. The scene is a compilation of reverse, close-up shots in which the director makes allusions between the Mende people’s struggles and Jesus’s, in conjunction with the dialogue which affirms this claim (01:35:22-01:39:50). By acknowledging that Jesus also experienced physical torture on Earth, yet when he died, he went to Heaven, Yamba (Razaaq Adoti) explains to Cinque that their futures could be just as hopeful, giving them the means to take comfort in what is to come rather than fear it. Throughout the scene, the use of jump cuts with images of a priest praying in Church reminds the viewer that this form of worship is part of coloniality, as the practice is inherently western. Before this scene, there was no instance in which the Mende people’s native religious practices could give them the faith that they take in the Bible. This explains why the acceptance of Christianity comes to be so crucial for their mental health while on their paths to freedom, although it represents a rejection of their native traditions.

Although at first, Cinque was hesitant to practice Christianity, as it encapsulates a change in his people which can directly be attributed to colonialism, it does not take long until the men are fully indoctrinated into this new form of being. After winning their first major court case and thinking that they have gained their freedom indefinitely, the Mende people, in unison, begin to chant praises toward the Bible (01:40:59-01:45:45). While the beginning of the scene is categorized by anxiety surrounding their fates, and the intense monologue that Judge Coglin (Jeremy Northam) delivers reflects this sentiment, the latter half is starkly contrasted by the loudness of the crowd’s uproar, either in favor or against the verdict, and the Africans’ shackles clinking. The fact that Yamba and others’ immediate reactions are to lift the Bible in celebration represents an important development in the theme of Christianity. Whereas in earlier scenes it was merely a topic of curiosity, it gains much more significance in their lives and deeply infiltrates their ways of being, replacing what they once felt for their hereditary cultures.

The time the Mende people spend under the control of the Americans fundamentally changes them in many respects. The individuals in the film experience an evolution characterized by the adoption of new practices–specifically regarding English and Christianity–which come to overtake their native cultures, a phenomenon that can be observed in many slaves and colonized peoples. This form of erasure is distinctly stereotypical of colonialism, and *Amistad* serves as a case study of the detrimental effects that an unstable relationship with freedom has on one’s psyche. While the Mende people sacrifice their native languages and religions in an attempt to obtain peace, the Americans rarely make similar compromises, as the nature of colonialism subjects them to a position of privilege and hierarchical superiority. The legacies of the lived experiences in *Amistad* can be observed internationally to this day–from the thousands of glorified Christian churches worldwide in places that were subjected to European colonial ruling, to the fundamentally flawed structures of government and power that disproportionately affect people of color in countries including the United States.

Works Cited

*Amistad*. Directed by Steven Spielberg, performances by Djimon Hounsou, Matthew McConaughey, and Morgan Freeman, DreamWorks, 1997.