

1839 or the Odyssey of Freedom

By Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch

Abducted in Africa, detained in Cuba, the slaves aboard the *Amistad* ship organised a rebellion in 1839, before reaching the United States where they were subsequently imprisoned. The survivors were ultimately taken back to Sierra Leone, following a long publicity tour set up to pay for their homeward journey.

Reviewed : Marcus Rediker, *Les révoltés de l'Amistad. Une odyssée atlantique (1839-1842)*, Seuil. [The Amistad Rebellion : An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom, Penguin Books]

Marcus Rediker provides us with an excellent study on the *Amistad* revolt, a supposedly well-known event. This new analysis appears even better to me than his previous work that was translated into French in 2013.¹ The latter was remarkable; however the theory defended by the author was somewhat biased: according to him, the racial violence that still persists nowadays in the United States takes its roots in the revolts and the scandalously repressed mutinies on slave trading ships.

One may partially agree with this theory. Yet the intrinsic violence of slavery appeared well before that time, in Africa, with the abductions, the lootings, the detention of people in barracoons, the slave forts on the coast and with the fact that enslaved Africans had already been very much aware of their own servile condition on the African continent for several months, sometimes years. Marcus Rediker's previous book also partly made an emotional plea aimed at emphatically convincing the white American readership of the horrifying condition of African slaves. There is nothing of the sort in this present work, and that makes it more powerful: the facts that are stated and the analysis revealing their complexity are properly fascinating.

¹ *À bord du négrier. Une histoire atlantique de la traite*, Paris, Seuil, 2013 (*The Slave Ship : a Human History*, 2007). See the interview of Marcus Rediker by Ivan Jablonka for *La Vie des Idées*, December 13, 2013.

The rebellion

The author has collected an impressive range of documents from written and oral sources in Cuba, the United States and Sierra Leone. His detailed narrative relies on the constant analysis of his sources, of their reliability, their interpretation, and their impact on their contemporaries, both of Western and African origin. As a very well written work, this book reads like a novel, while manifestly not being one: every detail is backed up by reliable information and the story, although it has a “happy ending”, is terrifying.

The facts, as we recall, were popularised in 1997 by a Steven Spielberg movie. When she clandestinely sailed away from a Sierra Leone fort –situated in British territory where slave trading had been outlawed since 1807–, the *Amistad* ship was transporting more than fifty slaves – many of them being of Mende and Temne origins, from the inland. There were a few women and about ten children, among whom three little girls. The ship was headed for the slave island of Cuba.

The prisoners did not belong to the upper classes of society; some of them were already slaves when they boarded the *Amistad*. Born into societies with common cultural traits and religious beliefs, they learnt collective self-organisation from the moment they were led to the factory where they were penned up like cattle. During the dreadful Middle Passage, they developed a very strong bond and they became close companions, cooperating to ensure their survival. This bond was fostered by their belonging to a powerful West African secret society that existed in their home region, the Poro, and by the extraordinary persona of the man who was to become their leader, Cinqué.

Detention and press campaign

Imprisoned for two weeks in the barracoons of La Havana, waiting there to be sold again, they organised themselves and successfully carried out their rebellion on the ship, killing the captain and incapacitating the other sailors. Then, they somehow succeeded in steering the ship for more than 1,400 miles, sailing as far as the northern tip of Long Island, where they were imprisoned in New Haven, in the slave-free state of Connecticut.

This marked the beginning of a long American story that involved slavery and anti-slavery advocates: journalists, writers, artists that sketched numerous portraits of the rebels, theatre directors that popularised their adventure, lawyers, judges, politicians and citizens from all sides of the political spectrum got involved in their case. In prison, the detainees learnt to speak English and to read the Bible.

After three years of various adventures, even their defenders were surprised when they were finally acquitted. The survivors, thirty-odd people, were then repatriated to Sierra

Leone, not without difficulty and after a long publicity tour aimed at paying their passage back home.

Field work

This work, which is extremely well documented, enables the reader to understand the character of every protagonist (in particular thanks to one of the author's discoveries, the personal diary of a young girl, a member of one of the host families with whom they stayed during the eight months following the Supreme Court decision to free them in March 1841). The numerous obstacles encountered by anti-slavery activists in the United States are thoroughly studied, as are the evolution of public opinions and the personal development of these involuntary heroes who knew perfectly well, with remarkable cohesion and cleverness, how to defend their cause.

The part of the study that perhaps displays the most originality deals with the return of the survivors to Africa and the fate they encountered there. The author's field work was very efficient. The memory of this narrative has indeed survived much more than we could have imagined. This part of the work – as well as the analysis of their original background a few years before their abduction and of the “monitoring” of their evolution during their adventures – enables the reader to understand all the different facets of this extraordinary story, not only seen from the vantage point of Africa but also Cuba and of course, the United States, twenty years before the abolition of slavery.

The whole narrative is carefully and cleverly set against the different contexts of that era. This is indeed a great work, that goes far beyond micro-history.

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