

EPILOGUE



Mystery has long surrounded Lomboko, the slave-trading factory where the *Amistad* Africans were incarcerated and forced aboard the slave ship *Teçora* in mid-April 1839 for a death-filled middle passage to Cuba. This was partly a matter of design by its owner, Pedro Blanco. His trade was illegal and therefore the location was kept secret, for fear that the British anti-slave trade patrols would find and destroy the factory, as indeed they eventually did, in December 1840 and, upon its rebuilding, several times thereafter. Gruesome stories of floggings, starvation, and mass death circulated along the coast about what happened at the complex of buildings, mostly barracoons, at the mouth of the ever-shifting swampy and estuarial waters of the Kerefe River on the Gallinas Coast. In 1983, the leading historian of the region, Adam Jones, stated that Lomboko was now lost under water, its connection to the slave trade almost entirely forgotten, and the efforts of subsequent researchers to find the place failed. The mystery deepened when nearby Vai-Mende village elders, who knew about Lomboko, insisted that it has not withstood the ravages of nature and time and could no longer be found.

In May 2013 I traveled to Sierra Leone to look for Lomboko and other connections to the *Amistad* rebellion, especially living local memory of the uprising and the people who made it. The trip was originally suggested by Konrad Tuchscherer, a specialist in Sierra Leone's history who teaches at St. John's University. We recruited our

mutual friend Philip Misevich, also a historian of Sierra Leone at St. John's, and Taziff Koroma, lecturer in linguistics at Fourah Bay College in Freetown, who would be our translator and cultural broker. We were accompanied by the documentary filmmaker Tony Buba and his crew: Jan McMannis, John Rice, and Idriss Kpange (Concept Multimedia, Freetown). As we embarked I realized I was finally answering a question posed to me a couple years earlier by Geri Augusto of Brown University, who studies the transit of knowledge systems in the African diaspora: "When are you going to Sierra Leone to learn the part of the story only the elders there know?"

We left Freetown for the far southern Kerefe/Gallinas region, one of the poorest and most remote parts of one of the world's most poverty-stricken countries. Underdeveloped in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the European slave trade and a subsequent British imperialism that sucked vast quantities of laboring bodies and glittering diamonds out of the country, Sierra Leone has been weakened further in the late twentieth century by a long, bloody civil war that left more than fifty thousand dead and hundreds of thousands with amputated limbs. Much of the fighting took place in the southern and eastern parts of the country. We traveled on roads cratered by bombs meant to hinder the deployment of troops more than a decade earlier.

We stopped in several villages near the historic location of Lomboko to ask about the history and whereabouts of the mysterious place. In Gendema—once the Vai King Siaka's thriving, opulent seat of empire, now a tiny village of abject poverty—Town Chief Mamadou Massaquoi told us in no uncertain terms that Lomboko no longer existed. (A descendent of King Siaka's royal line, Mamadou, when questioned, answered that he knew nothing of the *Amistad* captives and added, why should he? They were "just slaves" and therefore of no concern.) Several other chiefs and elders likewise told us Lomboko was lost and that we would not find it. Each time we heard these words Konrad's face expressed ever greater determination to find the place.

After two long, hot days of interviewing we were weary and discouraged. We began to head north out of the region. Yet Taziff—a

small, energetic Mende man always in motion and always talking—was not willing to admit defeat. He instructed our driver to pull over as we entered the village of Funehun. He jumped out and strolled around a local market to ask if anyone there knew anything of Lomboko. A young man stepped forward to say that the people of a remote fishing village called Toko, about seven miles downriver, would know. There was no Toko on our detailed map, but off we went, on a “road” that would more aptly be described as a bush path. The Funehun man rode with us to make sure we found it.

With thick verdant growth scratching our windows and our heads bobbing as we negotiated one deep, water-filled rut after another, we finally emerged into a clearing with seven or eight small huts made of mud, wattle, and thatch, more or less identical to the homes the *Amistad* Africans would have inhabited in the 1830s. Taziff approached a stout, older man, Vandi Massaquoi, and asked if he had ever heard of Lomboko. The man answered clearly and decisively: “Yes, and I know where it is.” He then gestured at his two teenage sons standing nearby and said, “These boys are fishermen on the river. They know where Lomboko is. They have seen the remains of old buildings there.” An electrical current shot through our group, instantly transforming disappointment into hope. Can you take us there, asked Taziff, adding for emphasis, the old Malcolm X phrase, in English, “by any means necessary.” The man smiled and said he could. We walked with him and his sons down a two-mile path through the bush that led to the Kerefe River. Along the way we met Toko’s town chief, a young, thin, wiry-strong man who was returning to the village from work on the river. He joined our group and reversed course.

Three old dugout canoes awaited us at the end of the path, two of which did not appear up to the task. One had been used as a container for the distillation of palm oil; the oil itself had been skimmed off, leaving a canoe full of strangely sweet-smelling orange water. The second canoe was missing part of its bow. The fishermen flew into action, bailing and cleaning, and in fifteen minutes we were ready to board. The three largest members of our group (Phil, Konrad, and me) lost their heads in the enthusiasm of the moment and we all got into

the same canoe. We soon pushed off into the lazy green river, beginning what was, without a doubt, the eeriest, most surreal journey of my life. The town chief and the two young fishermen propelled us along with hand-carved paddles, expertly navigating an endless maze of mangrove swamps, dodging the wild profusion of tall, white, grainy, ropy roots that stand high out of the water. Lush vegetation bloomed around us as fish skittered in the water here and there. Crocodiles and even the more dangerous hippopotamus inhabited the swampy river, but we were too full of purpose to consider them. Fifteen minutes into an hour's ride our overburdened canoe began to take on water, but the canoe man was undaunted. He stopped, bailed out the water with a wooden bowl, and in no time had us back on our way. He zigzagged among the mangrove roots and finally steered us through an eighteen-inch opening between two dense, tangled thickets. Ahead of us lay a sandy beach at what seemed to be the very end of the earth. Here was Lomboko, or at least part of it. No wonder no one else had ever found it.

We had arrived on an island called Kabuti, which in Vai means "Beyond the bush strawberry tree." The island was shown on a British admiralty chart of 1839 as "Kambating" (see the map on page four of the illustration insert). The island was one part of the Lomboko complex, perhaps the only surviving part. On the chart are drawn dark rectangles to represent "buildings," barracoons, slave holding pens. Pedro Blanco held the enslaved in this isolated place, surrounded by crocodiles, pending transfer by canoe to the main port across the river, where he and his mostly Kru workers loaded the slave ships with thousands of people, including those who would end up on the *Amistad*.

When we disembarked and went ashore, we quickly discovered that Vandi not only knew the location of the place, he knew a tremendous amount about it. His family had lived in Toko for generations, and he had heard stories about Lomboko from his forebears. Their source of knowledge was local lore and the printed word. Vandi's grandfather had read a missionary's account of the *Amistad* case, perhaps written by the American abolitionist George Thompson, who lived in Mende country for several years in the nineteenth century.

Vandi's first point to us was that the beach had been built by slave labor: no other island in the area—and there are many—has a beach. Pedro Blanco had it built as a landing place for the canoes of local traders who brought to the island the slaves he would purchase. We had unwittingly reenacted the very process of arrival on the island by which the enslaved of southern Sierra Leone moved from their native continent into Atlantic orbits, toward Brazil, Cuba, and the United States, mediated by this liminal place called Lomboko. I imagined the manacled captives of “slavery times,” as people here call it, stepping out of the canoes and trudging ashore amid the taunts and shoves of slavers and soldiers. Wherever they had come from must have seemed far away once they had arrived in this desolate, forbidding place.

Toko's town chief, who had so deftly paddled one of the canoes, now wielded his machete with equal grace, slashing a path that enabled us to walk inland from the beach, through overgrown vines, brush, and thin, scruffy trees. Immediately we saw the chilling sight of raised soil and rotted organic material that would have been the wooden foundations of the barracoons. Twenty or thirty feet farther along Vandi announced that this was the place where Pedro Blanco had set up a canopy, as protection against the sun, beneath which he conducted business with King Siaka, guns for slaves. (He added that rum, wine, tobacco, and salt were also traded from this spot.) Blanco's European employees trained Siaka's soldiers in the use of “the white man's gun,” which became the basis of the king's rapidly growing power throughout the region. Vandi emphasized that Blanco did not stay on the island but rather at another part of the Lomboko complex, near what is today the village of Mina. He also noted that the Spanish slave trader at some point left Lomboko and had not died there.

Taziff asked Vandi if he had heard any stories about the people of the *Amistad* at Lomboko. He said he had and that they had all been held in this place. He added that Sengbe (as Cinqué is called in Sierra Leone) was known as a great warrior and upon capture had begged to be put to death, as befit an elite fighter. For some unknown reason, perhaps gratuitous insult and degradation, his captors refused and brought him to the island as a slave. Vandi explained that he wasted

no time in organizing an uprising, which was suppressed but prompted the slavers to separate him from all of the other bondsmen to limit resistance. They took him to another island and held him in solitary confinement until it was time to load him and the others on a slave ship.

We were stunned by Vandi's knowledge, which was confirmed by or consistent with primary and archival evidence to which he had no access. He knew much about Pedro Blanco and King Siaka and he knew well the practices of the slave trade. His portrait of Cinqué as warrior and fomenter of rebellion on the island was consistent with what we know of his role in revolts aboard the *Teçora* and on the *Amistad*. Even the response of the Lomboko slavers paralleled what navy officers and jailers in Connecticut did when they held the *Amistad* Africans captive: both groups separated the leader from his comrades in fear of his power to inspire revolt. Of course we will not know for sure that the island was part of Lomboko until archaeologists analyze its material culture, but Vandi's detailed account of place and time past was impressive and convincing.

Vandi also solved a nagging problem for us: why no one else we talked to had known the whereabouts of Lomboko—and why other researchers had failed to find it. Several people in nearby villages, even King Siaka's own Gendema, said Lomboko was either destroyed or underwater; no one knew where any part of it could be found. Vandi explained that a redrawing of the lines of the chiefdoms in the Pujehun District of southern Sierra Leone had resulted in the placement of Lomboko outside the Gallinas-Peri Chiefdom, where it had long resided, into the Kpaka-Mende Chiefdom, whose people were now its official overseers. This is why no one else we visited knew about Lomboko while Vandi and the people of Toko did; the link to Lomboko had vanished when a government map was redrawn. We too might have missed it entirely, had not Taziff discovered the strategic connection.

As we returned by canoe to Toko at twilight, the mysterious Magritte-like time of evening when the landscape is darker than the luminous deep blue sky above, it seemed entirely fitting that our suc-

cessful search for Lomboko and its history from below should have depended on the knowledge of fishermen who worked on the Kerefe River. Lomboko was now part of their commons, which they knew intimately, like no one else, because their survival depended on it. They had carried us to a dark part of the past, a small, isolated place that had historic implications for the peoples of the four continents that surround the Atlantic.

Our other main goal, in addition to finding Lomboko, was to visit villages in southern and eastern Sierra Leone and to talk with elders about the memory and meaning of the *Amistad* rebellion and the people who made it. Setting out from Freetown we visited ten villages and towns: Bangorma, Blama, Bumbe, two villages with the name Dzhopoahun, Folu, Gendema, Kandowalu, Jojoima, and Mano. Several of these places had been the homes of various *Amistad* veterans before their enslavement. This we knew because they had given their village or town of origin and named their local chief or king when asked by Americans about their lives back in Africa. Were any of these people who played historic roles in the struggle against slavery remembered back home, and if so, how?

The eastern Mende village Folu was promising from the outset. Not one but two of the *Amistad* Africans, Grabeau and Fabanna, came from there, and both apparently returned, Fabanna briefly, before he went back to live at the Mende Mission, and Grabeau permanently as far as we know. Both had been men of significance in the village before their enslavement: Grabeau was a member of a rich and powerful family (although poor himself), and he was also apparently a high-ranking member of the Poro Society. Fabanna was a self-described “big man.” These facts increased the likelihood that one or the other might be remembered in Folu.

But were we in the right place? There are several villages in Sierra Leone called Folu. We chose the one south and more or less equidistant from the towns Segbwema and Daru, north of the Gola Hills, about twenty miles from the Liberian border. It seemed to be an appropriate distance from the Gallinas Coast, as both Grabeau and

Fabanna had traveled a long way to Pedro Blanco's factory. Yet such information about travel could be deceiving: an enslaved person might be sold from one trader to another, then work for a time before being sold to someone closer to the coast and the dreaded Lomboko. This Folu seemed our best bet.

When we arrived we noticed right away that the village had an unusual, and quite beautiful, physical configuration. It was surrounded by tall cottonwood trees that would have served lookouts and self-defense well. It was, we later confirmed, founded as a palisaded war village to protect against the slaving expeditions of hostile warriors. In contrast to Gendema, the small, impoverished village that had once been King Siaka's rich imperial headquarters, the once-raided Folu was now prosperous, boasting about six hundred people divided into four sections, each with its own head man, rice fields, and a lively cultural life.

After Taziff spoke to the town chief, Asumana Samai, requesting that he summon the elders with the longest and best memories, we assembled at the home of the man who was said to be the wisest and most learned in town: Pa Brima Kallon. The building was made of old mud bricks but the roof was new, zinc rather than thatch, a sign of village prosperity. Pa Brima was "the father" of the settlement, and had long been a leader; his son was now the paramount chief of the entire region. Dressed in a loose-fitting long brown robe, he greeted us with a kindly regal smile from his hammock as his chickens clucked underfoot. Cataracts could not dim the sparkle of his eyes. Another five elders and several important younger people joined us on the long porch. Dozens of villagers—especially older men and women, and younger women with their children, those not working in the rice fields on this hot, fly-filled late afternoon—gathered around, keenly interested in whatever was going to happen.

After Muslim prayers blessed our undertaking, we introduced ourselves. John C. Kallon spoke for the village, saying that he was a teacher and that "he was born here, and this was his home." He then indicated the presence of important people beginning with Chief Samai. He noted the presence of elders Sheku Kallon and Mama

Fodie Haloa Kallon, “the oldest lady in this town; they call her ‘the mother.’” John then pointed to Imam Fofie O. Konneh, head man Bockarie Kargoma, and Imam and teacher Yankuba I. Konneh. We gave a brief explanation of our purpose in visiting Folu, but rather than pose leading questions, we decided to ask about the history of the village. Pa Brima’s first words were “The one who founded this town is . . . Chief Bohbohwa.”

I knew immediately that we were in the right place. Grabeau and Fabanna had both mentioned that their king was a man named “Bawbaw,” noting that he lived in the village. (Taziff later explained that “Bohbohwa” means “Big Bohboh” or “Bohbohwa the Great,” as the founder is now remembered.) Pa Brima continued, detailing the settlement of the village amid the slaving wars. The early village warriors, he explained, did not capture slaves to sell to the likes of Pedro Blanco, but rather kept them as laborers, domestic slaves, to expand the population and strengthen the village against attack. By the time Pa Brima finished his history of Folu, the crowd of villagers surrounding us had grown deep, everyone listening with quiet, intense concentration.

At this point, with Taziff’s assistance, I told the assembled the basic story of the *Amistad* rebellion—that forty-nine men and four children, all from southern and eastern Sierra Leone, had been enslaved and shipped from Lomboko to Havana, where they were sold and reshipped aboard the *Amistad*. They rose up, killed the captain of the vessel, and sailed to the United States, where, in a struggle of great international importance, they won their freedom and eventual repatriation to Sierra Leone. Two of those men came from this very village, I said to a hushed crowd. These men had explained in America that they were from “Fulu” and that their king was named “Bawbaw.” This information created a rush of excited murmurs. I will never forget the beaming pride on Pa Brima’s face.

Amid the excitement, we encountered the same dilemma we faced in every village we visited: the names the *Amistad* Africans were known by in the United States were poor approximations of their actual names. The names had been written down by Americans who

had no knowledge of Mende or any other West African language; most of them found West African words strange, incomprehensible, and unpronounceable. Names were therefore usually mangled when rendered in English. So in Folu, as elsewhere, we had to play a communal game: what could have been the real names of these people the Americans called “Grabeau” and “Fabanna”?

The collective wisdom (confirmed by Taziff, who is an expert on these matters) was that “Grabeau” was actually Gilabau, which means “let this one be saved,” poignantly suggesting death among the family’s previously born children. This conclusion came close to a phonetic spelling of the name (Gi-la-ba-ru) offered by a man who visited the *Amistad* Africans in jail. “Fabanna” was apparently Faba, with emphasis on the second syllable. Yet we could not seem to get any further in the discussion of either man, even though their proper Mende names had been deduced; they stirred no memories. The elders repeated the names and shook their heads, no. Nothing was coming back to them. We were in the right place but we had hit a dead end.

I began to tell the villagers what I knew of each man in the hope of unlocking the memory of a story. As I talked about Gilabau I saw John tap his temple with his finger, indicating that he remembered something relevant to the discussion. He said that his father had narrated much history to him so that he would preserve it. This included a story of a man named “Johnny,” who during “slavery times” was sent far away, he did not know where, but when he returned to the village he spoke “broken English.” The community therefore gave him a new English name, Johnny. He did not know the man’s previous name. As soon as John spoke the new name, several others on the porch blurted out “Johnny!” more or less simultaneously, indicating they too had heard stories about the man. Suddenly we had something to work with.

Johnny was a traveling merchant who knew many languages, explained John. According to the documentary record, Gilabau was indeed a mobile trader who sold camwood and ivory over a broad expanse that included Gola country and Liberia, both near the village of Folu. We know from other sources that Gilabau spoke Mende, Vai,

Kono, and Kissi. Johnny was known for his courage as a warrior and for his ability to bring people together, said Yankuba Konneh. Gilabau was a warrior, second in command after Cinqué while the group was in America. He would have been deeply involved in keeping the “Mende people” together during their long and trying ordeal. Johnny was a weaver, added Pa Brima. Gilabau, like several of the *Amistad* men, had also been a weaver.

As the villagers drew their portrait of Johnny, I announced that I had a picture of Gilabau, who may have been the man remembered in the village. I opened the book (page eight of the illustration insert) and pointed to a reproduction of the pencil sketch done in New Haven jail by the American artist William H. Townsend. People rushed to gather ‘round, a few (in this village without regular electricity or running water) holding cell phones aloft to take photos of the image. I circulated the illustration, asking if anyone in the village resembled this man. Several did, I was told. Somehow the image made the history real in ways that words could not.

Soon afterward Fodie Haloa Kallon, who sat on the porch in a colorful print dress and a white turban, dropped a stunning new fact into the conversation: “Johnny was my grandfather,” she announced quietly. Pa Brima smiled; he had known all along. Could it be true? Gilabau had probably been in his twenties around 1840, which means that he may have lived another fifty years or more after his return. If he fathered a child later in life, that child may have had a child of his or her own in the early twentieth century. Had we found a descendant of one of the *Amistad* Africans? It was impossible to be sure, but it certainly seems possible. As soon as the village mother declared her kinship, the ritual adoption was complete. Gilabau was Johnny and he was now their “ancestor,” part of their village history. He was theirs; they were convinced. The mood was happy, animated, exultant.

I suddenly realized why the discussion meant so much to these Folu villagers. Ancestors—whose spirits are called *ndebla*—are crucial to the cosmology of Mende people: they are revered living presences who inhabit the landscape, who must be approached and appealed to by rituals, and who must be kept happy if one is to prosper in the

present and future. We had, without fully realizing it, brought an ancestor home to Folu—or at the very least we had brought home his story, which gave new life to his memory. Gilabau was being received and welcomed with joy.

Soon a man stood up and sounded a discordant note: “Did you say our ancestor killed a white man?” Yes, he helped to kill the Cuban slave trader Ramón Ferrer, captain of the *Amistad*. The man wondered, with a grave look on his face amid a sudden and heavy collective silence, “Will we get in trouble for that?” In that instant the ghost of slavery, race, and colonialism hovered above the village. I assured the man, and everyone else, that no one in the village would get in trouble. The information they had given us would be used only for the purposes of research and teaching. The man smiled as relieved laughter broke out all around and the festive mood returned. Another man was a bit embarrassed by the expression of worry and reminded everyone that they were descended from brave warriors.

As the formal meeting broke up, we talked with the elders and villagers who were eager to follow up on points discussed earlier. Imam Fofie Konneh emphasized the local Gola influence on the development of gymnastics in Poro training, the likes of which Gilabau/Johnny had mastered. John asked if I could send photographs of the portrait of their ancestor, as well as a copy of my book for the school. Pa Brima wanted us to see the nearby grave of Bohbohwa, the great warrior-founder, the very man Gilabau and Faba acknowledged as their king. In a final show of hospitality, the town chief assembled a group of bright-eyed children in purple school uniforms to sing for us. Soon we departed Folu for the next village, in search of more local history of the *Amistad* rebels.

I came home from Sierra Leone with a deepened understanding of my own book. Our group had talked to fishermen, elders, chiefs, and teachers, and to professors, truck drivers, playwrights, and students, and learned from all of them. I learned anew an old truth: a book is never finished. I tested my ideas among people who knew vastly more about the cultures of Sierra Leone than I ever could, and I gained new

understandings in the process—of the physical environment, the ecologies, and the life ways of an ancient land. Fishermen on the Kerefe River and commoners from the village of Folu not only contributed their own knowledge to my project, they reaffirmed one of the guiding principles of history from below: anyone who would understand how working people make history must use all available means of research, including fieldwork, and explore all possible sources, some of which are living and far from the traditional archive.

Perhaps most important of all, my conversations with the people of contemporary Sierra Leone suggested how much we still have to learn about the *Amistad* rebellion and indeed about the entire African background to the history of the Americas. The sometimes painful but always deeply human links of Atlantic history live on, showing how an isolated island and a small village thousands of miles away were, and remain today, part of American history.