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Africa: Slave Trade Tourism and the Problem of Public History in Post Colonial Societies *“Sengbe Pieh (Joseph Cinque) Comes Home”*

Charles Haffner, The Freetown Players

Available online at www.yale.edu/glc/publichistory/haffner.pdf

The Amistad Revolt of 1839, which I hereby choose as a case study for my presentation, is now one of the most celebrated episodes in the annals of African American slave history. But if the Amistad Revolt is famous in the United States, until very recently it was almost completely unknown in Sierra Leone. As late as 1985 almost no one in Sierra Leone had heard of Sengbe Pieh (or "Joseph Cinque"), the Mende man from Sierra Leone who led the revolt aboard the *Amistad* slave ship. Even though Pieh and most of his followers were Mendes, the largest ethnic group in Sierra Leone, the story of their epic struggle for freedom was almost completely unknown in their native land.

In my 15 minute presentation, I will give a brief explanation of how my theatre group, the Freetown Players, led a decade-long campaign to bring the memory of Sengbe Pieh and the *Amistad* back to Sierra Leone. (*Freetown*

Players are commonly called “Freetong” Players, “Freetong” being the lingua franca krio word for Freetown).

We produced a play called "Amistad Katakata" (Amistad Upheaval) and composed a popular ballad to tell the story of the Amistad Revolt. In the end our use of drama and popular music succeeded in bringing Sengbe Pieh back home. Indeed, today the portrait of Sengbe Pieh appears on our currency notes; the *Amistad* Revolt is covered in our secondary school history curriculum; and our capital city is adorned with many images of Sengbe Pieh.

But our success did not take place without a struggle. In my presentation I will describe how my Freetown Players Theatre group has used popular drama to teach this rather controversial and ethnically charged *Amistad* subject to the predominately 85% illiterate Sierra Leonean public. I will also describe the vested interests that resisted our efforts to promote the memory of the *Amistad* Revolt in Sierra Leone, and how our group, the Freetown Players, overcame their objections to our campaign for the memory of *Amistad*.