CHAPTER 14

FRAGMENTS OF THE LIFE HISTORY OF FUSENG-BE

A Temne Woman Sold in Freetown, Sierra Leone in the Early Nineteenth Century

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Fuseng-be was among a number of adults and children sold illegally as slaves in the abolitionist colony of Sierra Leone in the early nineteenth century. References in colonial administrative records make it possible to trace aspects of the life history of this young Temne woman who was born in an area less than 80 kilometres to the north-east of Freetown in the early 1790s. Although Fuseng-be did not write a narrative of her experiences, her story is told in court records in Freetown after she lodged a complaint about her ill-treatment with an official at Fort Thornton in 1809.

Fuseng-be, alias Betsey (also Fee Seng be, alias Betsey), was a young Temne woman of approximately 16 years of age, who was sold in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in 1808. Her sale took place less than four weeks after the settlement had been transferred to British Crown control on 1 January 1808. Her estimated age suggests that she was born in 1792. This was the same year that over 1,100 Black Loyalist settlers from Nova Scotia arrived in Sierra Leone to start a new life free from slavery. As a result of a complaint, Fuseng-be, lodged with a Justice of the Peace at Fort Thornton in January 1809, the newly-appointed governor, Thomas Perronet Thompson, instigated an enquiry into her illegal purchase by one of these Nova Scotian settlers. The circumstances of her sale were examined in the newly formed Vice-Admiralty Court and reported in the colony's newspaper. In the course of proceedings, testimony given by various deponents revealed rare biographical information on aspects of Fuseng-be's

life. This evidence can go some way towards helping us to understand Fuseng-be's experiences of slavery through her own eyes, although aspects of her story were also recounted by European court officials and witnesses. Through the fragments of surviving evidence, it is possible to reconstruct a picture of a young African woman separated from her home and kin through enslavement, but who developed a range of strategies to secure her own release from slavery.

The case of Fuseng-be has a wider significance; the sale and use of Africans as slave labour in the abolitionist colony of Sierra Leone was a recurrent problem for the authorities in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1791, the directors of the Sierra Leone Company explained in their first published report that they would not 'deal in slaves themselves, nor allow of any slave trade on their ground'. Abolitionist promoters considered that they had the right to prohibit the sale of Africans within this area of territory, as they claimed that the land occupied by the settlement had been sold, rather than leased, to them by neighbouring Temne leaders. Their intention was not only to halt the export of Africans on slave ships, but also to ensure that Africans were not held as slaves within territory claimed by the settlement. In orders sent out to their employees in West Africa, the directors stated that 'we wish you not to permit any one to continue to be a Slave in our district'. This intended slave-free zone was impossible to maintain in practice. The purchase of Temne and Sherbro people brought into Freetown from neighbouring areas can be traced during the period of administration by the Sierra Leone Company, between 1791 and 1807, as well as during the period of British Crown control from 1808 onwards. Freetown was established in the midst of an area on the Upper Guinea coast supplying Africans for export in the transatlantic slave trade, and was located in close proximity to the slave fort at Bunce Island. Ships carrying Africans for sale into the transatlantic slave trade regularly sailed past Freetown in the period up to 1807. The town was visited by local slave merchants, including the Eurafrican traders William Cleveland and Betsy Heard, who sometimes brought their own slaves into the colony. Regulations introduced in the colony concerning slavery were at odds with local African practice on the sale and usage of labour. These differences were a source of ongoing tension, particularly when Africans from neighbouring areas sought asylum in Freetown and refused to return to their masters.

By the time Fuseng-be made her way up the hill to Fort Thornton on 9 January 1809, she had been living in the household of Warwick Francis, her master, for almost a year. When she arrived at the Fort, she complained to John Donald McGregor that she had been ill-treated by her master's wife. With the injuries she had sustained, the walk uphill would have been arduous. McGregor

reported how 'two of her toes were very near off, and very offensive'. Finding a suitable time when she could leave her master's house unnoticed and make her way to Fort Thornton would have required some careful planning by Fuseng-be. She may have picked up intelligence or rumours in the colony that Governor Thompson was interested in rooting out cases of slave sales, and took the risk of leaving her master in the hope that she would receive a favourable hearing. She complained that, despite her injuries, she was 'obliged to go to wash at the brook, carry water, beat rice, and do all other work about the house'. Her appeal to government and court officials for redress was a type of strategy used widely by other enslaved women in different settings in East and West Africa.

The case of 'Fee Seng be, alias Betsey', was brought before the Vice-Admiralty Court on 4 September 1809. During the proceedings, attention was focused on the circumstances in which this 'Native of Africa' had been sold. It was established that Francis had purchased her at his house in Freetown on 28 January 1808 from a local trader named Peters, a regular visitor to the colony. It emerged that Fuseng-be had already changed hands twice before being brought into the colony. Peters informed Francis that he had purchased Fuseng-be from a trader named 'Young Smart' at a place called 'Rolullom', and that Young Smart had in turn purchased her from her father. The reason for her sale is not explained in this account, although sales of family members to repay debts or to alleviate poverty were among a range of possible reasons for enslavement. If Fuseng-be had remained in the hands of one of these African traders, her case would not have come to the attention of officials in Freetown, as slave sales in the hinterland were still legal. Settlers who left the colony could still own and sell slaves outside its boundaries, but colonial officials were prepared to step in if any of these individuals (as in the case of Fuseng-be) were brought to live within the boundaries of the colony or were purchased by settlers in the British colony.

Francis haggled over the sum demanded by Peters for Fuseng-be and eventually succeeded in bargaining her price down from $120 to $100. As a result of this purchase, Fuseng-be was taken into the household of this man, aged approximately 51 years, who had been a slave on a plantation in South Carolina. He was one of the Black Loyalists who had fought for the British in the American War of Independence, and who had migrated to Sierra Leone after a period of re-settlement in Nova Scotia. It is likely that Warwick Francis was the same person listed in the Book of Negroes in 1783 as 'Warwick, 26, stout fellow [...] Formerly Slave to Aaron Jellet, Charlestown, So[uth] Carolina; left him five years ago'. This description is consistent with evidence Francis gave to Paul Cuffe in 1812 about the cruelty inflicted on slaves by Jellet. Francis's

experience of enslavement in the southern states of America is also confirmed by the reports he gave of cases of cruelty on another South Carolina plantation by John Draten [Drayton].

In the course of investigations, Fuseng-be's status was described using terms with varying meanings. When McGregor asked Fuseng-be if she was an apprentice to Francis, she answered that 'she was his servant'. The fact that the conversation was conducted through the means of an interpreter may, however, have generated confusion as there were important differences between how Africans viewed slavery and 'British attitudes about slavery and pawnships, indentures, apprenticeships and subordinate status within its own settlement'. When summoned before McGregor, Francis gave contradictory accounts of the woman's status within his household. He initially claimed she was an apprentice bound to him for eleven years. It was in the interest of Francis, a settler who held various civic and religious positions in the settlement, to protect his reputation by claiming he had not intended to use her as a slave. When he was asked to explain his actions to the magistrate, he claimed that it was pity that had motivated him to buy her. By reporting that Peters had told him that she would be sold to a slave ship if no one purchased her, Francis attempted to claim humanitarian motives for his actions. He intimated that, by purchasing Fuseng-be, he had saved her from a far worse fate. He asserted that he intended to 'put her on his farm to raise fowls and ducks', an explanation suggesting a milder and less demanding form of servitude. Francis may have thought that this explanation would find favour with colonial officials, interested in promoting agricultural pursuits. Yet, Fuseng-be's account of her role to McGregor reveals that she had been used to carry out a range of menial and laborious household tasks. Francis also tried to lessen his culpability by stating that it was her father who had sold her in the first instance. He claimed that his actions in acquiring Fuseng-be had been approved by Acting Governor Thomas Ludlam, and he produced a paper certificate signed by Ludlam to support his claim. This printed certificate granted permission to Francis to keep Fuseng-be, alias Betsey, as a house servant for seven years. The stark internal contradiction in testimony given by Francis, however, was his admission that he had purchased Fuseng-be for his own use. It was reported in the *African Herald* on 18 November 1809, that when McGregor advised Francis to let Fuseng-be return to her own country, he said he 'could not do this, because he had bought the girl and paid for her'.

The sale of Fuseng-be was not an isolated incident of Africans being purchased for use in the colony. After Thompson took up office, eight other purchases were reported in the colony's newspaper, the *African Herald*, in November and December 1809. Four of these cases involved the purchase

of females between 1805 and 1808: three girls were bought in neighbouring areas and transferred into the colony, and another girl was purchased from a Portuguese slave ship and taken into the colony. George Nicol, a European carpenter formerly employed by the Sierra Leone Company, admitted in August 1808 that he had arranged for the purchase of a 'native girl' of about seven years of age. He had instructed a person named Dominique Garel to purchase a young girl from Pedro Naimbanna (also known as Bartholomew Naimbanna), and he paid $60 for the girl in March 1806. Following his acquisition of the girl, he re-named her Nancy and took her to his house. In explaining the circumstances of Nancy's purchase, Nicol's testimony also revealed how Nancy's mother had changed hands several times among settlers in Freetown. Nancy's mother had been given to a Frenchman named Berault in partial repayment of a debt, and Berault had given her to Sophia Small, a Nova Scotian shopkeeper in Freetown. Thereafter, Small passed the woman on to George Nicol, suggesting that each saw some value in her labour. Nicol explained that Nancy's mother was old and decrepit, and he implied he had shown compassion by agreeing to her request to purchase her daughter so that they could live together. In common with Francis, Nicol thereby tried to shift some of the moral responsibility for her purchase by claiming that it was the girl's family who had initially made her available for purchase. In defending his actions, Nicol claimed that he had acted 'ignorantly, blindly, and for lack of better knowledge'. This explanation lacks credibility, however, as the same newspaper article reported how he had purchased another girl from a Portuguese slave ship for $100. This girl, aged around 11 years, was described as a 'Native of the Bijuga islands' (Bissagos or Bijagós Islands). His track record of purchases also included the payment of $100 for a boy named Yabo in June 1805. Yabo, one of 'two Mandingoes' who had been brought to Freetown by a European trader named Lee, recounted how he was 'stolen in the night, and not taken in any war'. His account suggests, therefore, that he was enslaved in a manner illegal under local African law, through kidnapping.

Even fewer biographical details are available for two girls purchased by Captain Smith in Sherbro, to the south of Freetown, in 1805. The report in the *African Herald* on 2 December 1809 indicated that one of the girls, named Phoebe, was aged approximately eight years and was sold for around $50 or $60. Smith subsequently acquired a twelve-year old girl named Bessy by swapping her for a boy of 11 years of age whom he had already purchased for $80. No further biographical details are available for each of these girls. Fragmentary references in colonial records point to the presence of other girls in Freetown being held in coerced labour relationships.

Thompson did not baulk at using the term 'slave' to describe Fuseng-be's status. In the judgment he handed down in the Vice-Admiralty Court, he pronounced that she had been 'illegally sold or disposed of as a slave in this colony, and as such to be adjudged forfeited to His Majesty'. As a result, her name was entered in the Register of Liberated Africans (held at the Sierra Leone National Archives), and she was ascribed the unique identity number of 100. Fuseng-be was grouped together in the Register with enslaved Africans who had been released from the American ships *Baltimore* and *Eliza* in March 1808. Her circumstances of enslavement were different from those of the 148 men, women and children with whom she was listed under the category of 'Slaves Seized in the Colony' in the Register. As she had been trafficked internally, Fuseng-be did not share the same experiences as those Africans who had been sold into the export trade from Africa. In contrast to the others with whom she had been listed, she had not been embarked on a slave ship, transported in the Middle Passage and intercepted partway through the journey by a Royal Navy vessel. Even so, Thompson's use of the legal processes of the Vice-Admiralty Court to deal with her case meant that she was classified as a 'Captured Negro' or 'Liberated African'. As such, she could be disposed of using the same methods adopted for other 'Captured Negroes', including apprenticeship.

Two months after his purchase of Fuseng-be, Francis acquired another two African girls to add to his supply of household labour. He took two girls named Creasa and Sasia from among the Africans disembarked from the *Baltimore* and the *Eliza*. He paid $20 for each girl, and this must have seemed a good deal compared to the amount he had paid for Fuseng-be just two months earlier. The manner in which Ludlam dispersed the Africans among the settlers reflected administrative confusion about what should happen after their release. He may have envisaged that the settlers would take responsibility for the training and education of the Africans in the form of apprenticeship but, judging by the testimony from officials and settlers in Freetown, this payment of $20 a head created the impression that they had been sold to them as property. The two girls were no doubt placed in Francis's household, and it is possible that they provided companionship for Fuseng-be.

It is unclear how long Fuseng-be remained in the household of Warwick Francis. Although McGregor had initially advised Francis that he should allow her to return to her home, she was formally allocated as an apprentice to him following the adjudication of her case by the Vice-Admiralty Court in 1809. In effect, her appeal for help to the colonial authorities had failed. Admittedly, it was her mistress whom she had accused of cruelty, but allocating Fuseng-be

to Warwick Francis did not remove the possibility of continued use and abuse of her in the household by this mistress. These circumstances may explain her absence from a listing three years later, which attempted to track the movements of 1,991 Captured Negroes released between 1808 and 1811. The 'List of Captured Negroes on Hand December 31st 1810 and of those Received, Enlisted, Apprenticed, Disposed of to December 31st 1812', held in the United Kingdom's National Archives at Kew, did not record her death. The absence of information in her entry was interpreted by the colonial authorities to mean that she was among those who had 'deserted to Native Towns in the back parts of the Country'. If so, her flight from the colony was a form of resistance to her conditions in Francis's household, although another explanation for her absence from the colony was the possibility that she had been re-sold in the hinterland of Freetown.

Only a partial reconstruction of Fuseng-be's biography is possible, and the trail of evidence comes to a halt when she was approximately 20 years old. There is scant evidence on which to comment regarding her life before the sequence of three sales commencing late in 1807 or early in 1808. Whilst the testimony in court mentions her father, there is no extant account of her wider family relationships and the nature of her upbringing. How she lived her life after the court case cannot be retraced from the available documentation. Her case is, nonetheless, extremely revealing. Unable to speak English, she still managed to glean knowledge of her rights within an abolitionist colony and contact a British military official to make her case for freedom, or at least amelioration of her treatment. She retained the use of her African name when she contacted McGregor in 1809, even though her new master had given her the name of Betsey following her arrival in Freetown.

Her name was recorded in a variety of different ways in the Register of Liberated Africans and other colonial documentation, and included Fuseng-be (the most frequently used version), Fee Seng Be, Fusengbe, and Fuseng-bé. The variations in spelling, use of a hyphen and an accent in different versions, suggest that those recording her name were unfamiliar with its African linguistic origins, and attempted to record it phonetically. After interviewing her through the use of an interpreter, John Donald McGregor reported that he believed she was 'of the Timmaney tribe'. This is consistent with the deposition of Warwick Francis, who reported that the trader Peters had brought 'a Timmaney girl named Fuseng be into this Colony'. As her father lived at 'Rolullom', it is likely that this was also Fuseng-be's place of birth. This settlement was located two days' travel from Rokon on the Rokel river, indicating that Fuseng-be

was brought into Freetown from a distance of approximately 70 kilometres to the north-east. This is not dissimilar to the distance of approximately 100 kilometres over which Africans destined for export in the southern Sierra Leone trade were moved in the early nineteenth century.

Fuseng-be's case highlights a number of apparent ambiguities and contradictions in relationships which developed in Freetown, despite the fact that the declared purpose of the settlement was to eschew all forms of slave trading and slavery. Although Francis had first-hand experience of slave systems in the Americas, he was still prepared to buy a young African woman and haggle over her monetary value. As Kristin Mann notes in the case of Brazil, one of the first purchases made by men and women who had acquired their freedom was that of an enslaved African. Francis may similarly have seen this as an 'important marker of freedom', as well as a source of labour to increase his own wealth. Judging by Fuseng-be's testimony, she was treated harshly and bore the scars of her mistreatment. This is all the more striking as Francis gave evidence to Paul Cuffe in 1812, testifying to the appalling cruelties that he had seen inflicted on enslaved men and women in America. This was not an isolated incident of cruelty. Accusations were made against other settlers and officials who had acquired coerced or dependent labourers from among groups of enslaved Africans released by Royal Navy patrols from 1808 onwards. Nancy, a young girl released from an American vessel by HMS *Derwent* in March 1808, lodged a complaint against Susannah Caulker, a Nova Scotian woman who had taken her as an apprentice. In her testimony, reported in the *African Herald* on 29 July 1809, Nancy reported that she had left Caulker's household because 'she beat her'. In her testimony to the court, Nancy explained that after being beaten with a switch on her back, she was made to lie on the ground whilst her mistress rubbed pepper into her broken skin.

Fuseng-be's experiences confirmed Governor Thompson's view that officials of the Sierra Leone Company (including Ludlam) had concealed the existence of slavery in the colony by using terms such as apprenticeship and redemption in place of 'slavery and purchase'. Alimaamy Dalu Mohammedu Dumbuya (also known as Dala Modu), a Muslim trader who had been expelled from his settlement at Dalamodiya on the outskirts of Freetown for slave trading, was drawn into this debate on the existence of slavery in the colony. In testimony given before Governor Thompson in 1809, he stated that there were slaves living in Freetown. He explained that he had offered to show Ludlam 'country provement [i.e. proof] by pointing out the Slaves', if all the inhabitants were turned out of their houses. Ludlam did not take him up on this offer.

As Freetown was a settlement of fewer than two thousand people in 1807, it would have been difficult for Francis to conceal the presence of Fuseng-be in his household. Francis may have considered that concealment was unnecessary, beyond claiming that she was a servant or an apprentice. One of the complaints made by Dala Modu was that Ludlam turned a blind eye whenever settlers were found to hold slaves, but his own actions were subject to detailed scrutiny.

Evidence discussed in the Vice-Admiralty Court in 1809 drew attention to a wider problem of internal slave sales. This internal marketing of individuals was a long-running problem, which proved difficult for the colonial authorities to police and prevent. Settlers who purchased Africans in early nineteenth-century Freetown typically misrepresented their status to the colonial authorities by claiming that they were apprentices, servants in their households or children who had been sent to live with them for a period of education. Governor Thompson attempted to track the presence of Africans in households and the reasons for their presence through regulations introduced in October 1808. As the population of Freetown expanded rapidly with the influx of Liberated Africans, however, it became even more difficult to verify whether adults and children were employed legitimately as servants or trafficked as enslaved labour. In 1853, more than four decades after the case of Fuseng-be had been adjudicated by the Vice-Admiralty Court, a Commission of Enquiry traced more than one hundred cases of adults and children purchased as slaves and brought into the colony. Females were in particular demand, with 68 of the 117 reported cases relating to women and girls. Manjah or Charlotte, 15 or 16 years of age, was a few years younger than Fuseng-be when she gave evidence about her experiences of enslavement in August 1853. In common with Fuseng-be, she had been sold a number of times to different masters before being taken into Freetown in 1848. She reported how she was cruelly treated by her mistress who was 'always be telling me that I was her slave – that if she should kill or sell me, no one would ask or harm her for it'. In common with Fuseng-be, she resisted her circumstances of enslavement by taking the opportunity to approach a colonial official and plead for her release and protection under the laws of the colony.

Fuseng-be's case demonstrates how settlers in Freetown were attempting to extend their wealth and status through building up property in people, even in the heart of an abolitionist colony. Conversely, Fuseng-be's response to her sale in Freetown demonstrates how individuals purchased and treated as slaves were prepared to deploy a range of strategies to secure their freedom.

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