

A Voluntary Slave?

Belém, Captaincy of Pará, 1780 and 1784

Introduction:

Slaves in the Portuguese Amazon, as in the rest of colonial Latin America, were a heterogeneous group. Some were born in Africa, while others were natives of the colonies. Many slaves who served as domestic servants, peddlers, and other urban workers could accumulate enough money to buy their freedom, while others toiled in perpetuity as field hands. Some belonged to wealthy urbanites and received adequate food and healthcare, but others were the sole slaves of poor farmers. The first of the three documents below centers on a particularly unique slave: one who, according to this bill of sale, had been born free but decided to sell herself into slavery. Of mixed European and African heritage, a young free woman named Joana Baptista apparently contracted with a Spanish immigrant to purchase her for what was, at the time, a large quantity of money and goods.

This “strange and extraordinary proceeding” drew the attention of a captaincy governor, the author of the second document. He suggested a very different interpretation of the sale and called its authenticity into question: Joana, he said, was one of the “lazy and useless people” who had been sent to settle in one of the newly founded villages of the interior, in what amounted to a massive anti-vagrancy and resettlement campaign. Her self-sale was, he claimed, an evasive move.

The third document comes from the chief magistrate of the captaincy, reporting on the petition of a group of sisters, all settlers in the capital city of Belém, to have their Indian servants restored to them. Allegedly, the Indians had been taken from the mistresses’ homes by force, on the orders of the former governor (author of the second document). This last source sheds further light on Joanna’s alleged self-sale – and on the anti-vagrancy campaign that apparently had targeted her and many other Indians in private service – but it does not conclusively solve the mystery of the bill of sale.

Questions for discussion:

1. What were Joana’s professed reasons for wanting to sell herself into slavery, according to the bill of sale? What do the governor’s letter and the magistrate’s report tell us about the possible motivations behind this unique transaction?
2. The governor seemed particularly incensed by the sale. Besides the fact that it (allegedly) represented a circumvention of his anti-vagrancy campaign, why might he have been so opposed to it?
3. What does this group of documents tell us about the concerns and priorities of low-status, non-white people in the colony?

Recommended Reading:

Flávio dos Santos Gomes, “A ‘Safe Haven’: Runaway Slaves, *Mocambos*, and Borders in Colonial Amazonia, Brazil,” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 82:3 (2002): 469-98.

Barbara Sommer, "Colony of the *Sertão*: Amazonian Expeditions and the Indian Slave Trade," *The Americas* 61, no. 3 (2005): 401-28.

David Sweet, "Francisca: An Indian Slave," in *Struggle and Survival in Colonial America*, Sweet and Gary Nash, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

Document 1:

Bill of Sale, made by the *cafusa*¹ Joana Baptista, of herself, as slave of Pedro da Costa for the price and quantity of eighty *mil-reis*², as declared below.

...On August 19 of the year of 1780, in the city of Pará in my [notarial] office, there appeared, on one side, the *Cafusa* Joana Baptista, resident of this city on the street that runs behind the Misericórdia [Hospital]; and on the other, Pedro da Costa, of Catalan³ origins, resident in this city on the street of S. Vicente...

In the presence of these witnesses [the notary and Pedro da Costa], Joana Baptista said that she had always been, since birth, free and exempt from captivity. At present, she found herself without a father or a mother who could take care of her and sustain her for the duration of her life, as well as during her sicknesses; and she did not have the means to live in liberty. Her parents had been the black Ventura, who was the slave of Father José de Melo, already deceased; and her mother was the Indian Anna Maria, who served the same priest.⁴

In order to live in peace, employing herself in the service of God and of a Master who would have to take care of her in her sicknesses and treat her as one who had cost him money, she of her free and spontaneous will, without the interference of anyone, had arranged and contracted with the abovementioned Pedro da Costa to sell herself into slavery as if she had been born of a captive womb and had never been free. [She would] thus serve him until her death, with the agreement that if she someday had children, these would be free and exempt from captivity.

Her sale was made by herself alone to the said Pedro da Costa for the price and quantity of eighty *mil-reis*, half of it in cash and the other half (which is forty *mil-reis*) in goods and pieces of gold... She claimed to have received in full the quantity of forty *mil-reis* in cash, plus a large *rosiclar* (?) of gold and a pair of gold earrings that amounted to eighteen *mil-reis*. That adds up to a total of fifty-eight *mil-reis*... The buyer is obligated to pay what remains in order to complete the sum of eighty *mil-reis*...

[Joana] then stated that she gave up all of the privileges of liberty, which she had until now claimed to have had; and that she submitted herself to the laws and penalties of slavery. From this point on, she let go of all the rights that she might have claimed in her favor, and crossed over from now on into servitude and captivity under the said Pedro da Costa. From now on, she

¹ *Cafuso/a* is equivalent to *zambo/a* in Spanish America, signifying mixed Indian and black blood.

² Portuguese monetary unit

³ From Catalonia province in Spain.

⁴ In Brazil, legal status followed the mother; Joana's mother, as an Indian, would have been either born free or freed upon the publication of the Law of Liberties (promulgated in 1755, implemented in 1757), and so her daughter could claim to have born of a "free womb."

would recognize him as her Master, as if she had never been free and *liberta*⁵... And if at some point her Master, the buyer, mistreats her and she does not get along well in her captivity, then he can sell her to whomever he wants, as a slave, as this is what she would remain.

...The buyer said that he accepted this [legal] document in the declared form...

[A page of notarial formalities and signatures followed; Joanna was said to be illiterate, so she asked for someone to read and sign for her.]

Pará [Belém], 19 August 1780

Marcos José Monteiro de Carvalho [notary]

Source: *Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Capitania do Pará, Avulsos, Caixa 86, Documento 7042.*

Testifying to its extraordinary nature is the fact that copies of the bill of sale can also be found at two other archives in Portugal and Brazil: the Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo (Lisbon), Papeis do Brasil, Avulsos 7, no. 1: 157-159; and the Arquivo do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico Brasileiro, ARQ 1, 1, 4, Folhas 102-103.

Document 2 [cover letter to the bill of sale]:

Letter from the Governor of the Captaincy of Pará, José Nápoles Telo de Meneses, to the Overseas Secretary, Martinho de Melo e Castro

I put in Your Excellency's hands, so that it will be shown to Her Majesty,⁶ the attached [bill of sale], one of the strangest and most extraordinary proceedings of which I have ever heard. And in such an enlightened and humane century, one in which the Royal Greatness of Our August Monarchs has been so committed to the cause of the liberty of its people, it could only happen, perhaps, in this country, where corruption and licentiousness run more rampant than in any other.

[I have made many] efforts to remove a multitude of lazy and useless people from the various fugitive camps and river hideouts. They have lived there in continuous vagabondage, burdening rather than serving the public, because of the constant thefts and insults that they commit. After settling over 900 souls in the villages...the news reached me of a new, scandalous means by which the *Cafusa* Joana Baptista – one of those destined for resettlement in the villages – sought to undermine that effort.⁷ She affected a Term of Enslavement, the solemn sale of her own self to a man [who appears] in the aforementioned infamous document, the copy of which I am sending to Your Excellency.

The age of the aforementioned *Cafusa* being just over 19 years; her physical state being vigorous and strong; her behavior remaining unregulated by her buyer; and, finally, the likelihood that the price of this offense to humanity was never paid: [for all of these reasons] I am persuaded that the formality of it was intended only to mislead the public and thus, by such indecorous means, [permitting Joana] to exempt herself from the execution of my orders. This pretext may also serve as a comfortable cloak over what is actually an infamous and dishonest arrangement [between the two parties].⁸

⁵ A freed woman.

⁶ Queen Maria I.

⁷ The governor is referring to his anti-vagrancy campaign.

⁸ The connotation is that Joana was her buyer's concubine.

As soon as I heard what had happened, I ordered the two to be apprehended. The *Cafusa* should be sent to the village to which she was [originally] assigned, and her unworthy buyer should be punished as merited by his crime.

But since I do not trust solely in my own judgment, I am appealing to Your Excellency, so that upon the closer examination of these circumstances, Your Excellency can tell me what I should do in such a case, or whether this sale is valid, just, and permitted by the pious laws of Her Majesty, so that following his resolution I may competently fulfill my obligations.

May God protect Your Excellency.
Pará [Belém], 31 August 1780.

José Nápoles Telo de Meneses [Governor of the Captaincy of Pará]

Source: *Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Capitania do Pará, Avulsos, Caixa 86, Documento 7042.*

Document 3:

Letter from the Magistrate and General Intendent Mathias José Ribeiro to the Governor of the Captaincy of Pará, Martinho de Sousa e Albuquerque

Your Excellency has ordered that...the Indians who had always served Mariana Maria and her sisters Benta Nunes de Sousa and Francisca Nunes de Sousa...be kept in complete liberty and in the service of these women, though it [will be necessary to] establish the willingness of those same Indians. If they voluntarily want to serve the abovementioned women, they will be kept [in service]...

The attached list was presented to me by Mariana Maria and it indicates those Indians who were in her service, those who are now absent, and the places where they may be found; and finally, those who are still serving herself and her sisters.

The last group declared [on the list] – eight in all, among them men, women, adults, and children – say that they voluntarily want to stay with the abovementioned women...I told them that they would be retained, because Her Majesty has ordered it, and that they would no be perturbed by any person. As for the rest of the [Indians], who are known to be scattered in various places: they must be brought in person to this city to verify their wishes, and if indeed they want to live with their former employers, I will turn them over without delay, as Your Excellency has ordered.

All of these Indian men and women were violently yanked out of the aforementioned women's houses by troops on your predecessor's orders.⁹ He went around taking the servants away from most of the settlers, and with these types of people...he populated a few hamlets that he had founded and given the name of new Settlements. These have since been abandoned by their inhabitants, who had been conserved in these places by force; as soon as they had the opportunity, they deserted, and the establishments were left abandoned, as Your Excellency

⁹ This would be the author of Document 2, the ex-governor José Nápoles Telo de Meneses.

found them upon taking office.

I have reported to Your Excellency everything relevant to the matter, what I have done until now according to your orders, and what remains to be done, once the Indians declared in the attached list appear [before me].

May God protect Your Excellency.

Pará [Belém], 7 September 1784.
Magistrate and General Intendent Mathias José Ribeiro

Source: *Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Capitania do Pará, Avulsos, Caixa 93, Documento 7444 (anexo)*

Translated by Heather Flynn Roller