

'Testimony of Osuman'

Let the heavens listen and the Earth remain still. I call on all within and high above the Universe to assemble; for I have a claim to make. I want to make my case before the human and universal conscience, that immutable and perfect judge. Heard by History, the undisputed Board of Jury, I know I will be vindicated.

My name is Osuman. I was born in Kanda, in Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone is a state at the edge of Africa. They say the stones beneath the soil where I was born are not only precious, they are the ultimate gift that symbolises love. Everyone loves them!²⁵

I am the only child of my parents. My father, they say, was a wealthy man, at least by definition of our village. Everyone spoke about how kind he was. Every child in our town called him 'Papa Thousand'. He earned his name from his generosity. When he was asked for help he would give nothing less than a thousand Leone (about US\$1). Children would stream to his house for food and to watch television. When I was born eleven years ago, the entire town celebrated with my parents. In every quarter, they spoke about how I was God's gift to my parents for their kindness towards all, was the gift from the Ancestors to fulfil the joy of my parents. The celebrations marking my naming ceremony were the grandest our village had ever known. I saw the pictures and heard the story from the people of my village.

Have you heard about the care the only child of an African couple receives. Beautiful will be the least I can say because of the lack of an appropriate word. I was pampered with any and everything a child in my world could imagine.

War broke out when I had just turned five years. People spoke of the war and how the fighters were horrible. Some of the fighters came from our town. No one knew the motive behind the war. Some said they were fighting to liberate all children and youths. They want to liberate me! I did not understand what that meant because I thought I was living at peace with my parents. My Big Father (the oldest brother of my father) was the chief of our town. Others said the war was about the precious stones in our town while others thought the fighters were after the Government in the big city.

Before long, our town was attacked and people were being killed everywhere. We were not spared. My parents and I were commanded out of our house that Saturday night. It was between day and night. There was crying and wailing everywhere. They asked my father for money, which he gave readily. After they took the money one of them said, 'Let us zero the man.' Bang! Bang! My parents were shot before me. I saw my father fight so desperately for life. He wanted so much to live. He wanted to see his son grow to be a man. My mother lay still in a pool of blood. I was crying and the men whisked me away. I was sent to their training base. At six years old I was trained to fire a gun. They also taught me how to spy on the enemy, and how to hide in the bush.

When I was seven years old they sent me to fight. My first assignment was in my own town. My 'Big Father' was still there. He, they said, had re-buried my parents and had honoured them with a big feast. They sent me with some big fighters. When we entered the village, they arrested my Big Father and asked me to cut off his two ears. They gave me a knife and commanded that I cut off the ears of my Big Father otherwise they would cut off mine. While my Big Father looked on, I chopped off his two ears and away we went. That was the beginning of my long and horrid journey.

I am eleven years old now. Five years of my life was characterized by cutting limbs, killing, raping and drug abuse. Here I am. I cannot trace my relatives. I beg for food in the streets of Freetown. Even if I find my relatives, who will want to take a child like me?

Here is my case. Oh Heaven and Earth! My innocence was exploited, my development was violently suppressed, my identity contaminated almost irreparably; my parents and anything that gave me a sense of safety was annihilated. What crime did my parents commit that justify such violations? What crime did my ancestors commit that I am paying for today?.....The adults of the Earth are guilty. Guilty for commission, omission and/or complicity.

Slightly abbreviated from oral and written evidence of Samuel Gbaydee Doe

25. This reference is to the diamond trade in Sierra Leone, which finances conflict in many parts of Africa.