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Fishing, thieving, witchcraft: apprehension and mistrust in maritime West Africa

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This article explores the 'apprehension' that permeates life in coastal Sierra Leone as fisherfolk struggle to navigate a precarious economy of overfished waters and overstrained relationships. In a context of deepening uncertainty, social vigilance has come to be regarded as a key survival skill. At sea, even as fishermen strain their senses for evidence of shoaling fish, they remain equally vigilant to rival crews, who may seek to deceive them in their competition for the same depleted resource. When crews return home with empty nets, again, exchange partners regard them with suspicion, watchful for clues that they could have sold their catch covertly in another coastal town. When businesses founder or savings evaporate, people are quick to assume their fortunes must have been invisibly robbed 'in a witch way' by one of their neighbours. And yet, despite the deep mistrust and apprehension through which people regard their social world, moral discourses about this supposedly rampant trickery are nuanced. Despair at believing themselves to have been grifted in some unseen way is often tempered by a weary empathy for their antagonists' poverty, and even grudging respect for their skills of dissimulation.

Although it has a population of around five thousand people – enough to be considered a fairly substantial town by Sierra Leonean standards – Tissana's homes and thatched smokehouses straggle along such a narrow, sandy strip of shore that people are rarely more than a couple of minutes' walk from the sea. By dusk, around a hundred boats will have been dragged from the water, ranging from tiny dugout canoes to impressive vessels requiring a crew of twenty strong men just to haul their yard-long fishing net from the sea. Throughout the day, as they move back and forth along the 2-mile-long beach that doubles as the town's wharf and its main pedestrian artery, residents keep a vigilant eye on the horizon, scanning it for the appearance of a familiar patchwork sail, or the recognizable silhouette of a canoe, heading back to land.

Suspense has always been part of the fabric of life in this wharf town – even in times of relative plenty. Whether they are fishers, boat-owners, fish-smokers, or traders, almost everyone depends for their survival upon fish. The mercurial quality of shoaling fish and the recurrent vigil of waiting for the boats' return combine to lend an overtone

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of nervous anticipation to daily life. Of late, however, this mood of suspense has slid into something closer to dread. Sierra Leone's coastal ecosystem has been radically depleted in recent decades (Diggins 2019; Okeke-Ogbuafor, Gray & Stead 2020). In Tissana, catches are becoming ever smaller and less predictable, and everyone – in boats and on the wharf – has grown wearily accustomed to having their hopes thwarted.

This article explores the sense of 'apprehension' that permeates life in Tissana as people work to navigate a precarious economy of overfished waters and overstrained social relationships. In this coastal town, much as Henrik Vigh (2009; 2015) observed in urban Bissau, people respond to the heightened uncertainty of their collapsing economy by intensively scrutinizing their social and material environment, attempting to perceive the fleeting opportunities and half-concealed threats that define everyday life. As I trace across the ethnographic sections that follow, this emphasis on watchfulness erodes an already fragile sense of the workings of social and material life. At sea, fishermen strain their senses to scan for clues of where fish may be shoaling, but they remain equally vigilant to the actions of rival crews who may seek to deceive them in the competition for the same depleted resource. On land, boat-owners and fish-smokers (*banda* women) work hard to forge bonds of trust and reciprocity with fishermen; but this trust is brittle. When fishermen return home with empty nets, as they so often do, their exchange partners regard them with suspicion, alert for evidence that they may have sold their catch covertly in another coastal town.

This erosion of trust, fostered through perpetual vigilance in a time of uncertainty, also generates new ways of perceiving the occult, for the ocean is not the only space that is hidden from view beyond the horizon. Here, as elsewhere in West Africa, it is assumed that some people possess heightened perceptive capacities (referred to as 'witch eyes' or simply 'eyes') that empower them to see, and to move, beyond the visible surfaces of the material world. Such powers are morally ambiguous: people with 'witch eyes' are not always assumed to be evil. Nonetheless, in a threadbare and uncertain economy, it is disconcerting to be surrounded by people who are both remarkably perceptive and remarkably able to conceal their actions. When businesses founder or savings evaporate (as they are apt to do in Tissana), people are quick to assume that their fortunes must have been silently robbed 'in a witch way' by one of their neighbours.

There is an added pathos to the way in which people turn their sense of apprehension upon their neighbours. The decline in Sierra Leone's coastal ecosystem is due to a combination of factors, including climate change and unsustainable local fishing practices (Okeke-Ogbuafor *et al.* 2020). However, the most visible and striking cause of the ecological decline is that fish stocks have been illegally pillaged by international trawlers (Thorpe *et al.* 2009; Virdin, Kobayashi, Akester, Vegh & Cunningham 2019). Given the explicit and disturbing injustice of this situation, which echoes a centuries-old pattern of violent exploitation by powerful outsiders, I was initially surprised that my neighbours did not seem to devote much energy to reflecting explicitly on the structural violence that underpins their impoverishment. Across Africa, including in Sierra Leone, ethnographers have documented anxieties about 'occult economies' – ranging from zombie labour to witchcraft and medicine murder – that resonate with a satisfying moral clarity by offering clear critiques of corrupt politicians and extractive neoliberal economies (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000; Meyer 1995; Shaw 2002; 2007; Shepler 2014). In Tissana, by contrast, most conversations about 'witches' reflect two immediate tactical anxieties: that no one can ever be fully trusted; and that survival

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depends on the perceptiveness to apprehend what is happening beyond or beneath the horizon.

This article is structured in three sections. First, I trace the key elements in Tissana's discourse on 'witch eyes', contextualizing this within a broader literature on occult economies in Africa. The second section describes how fisherfolk engage all their senses in their fierce competition over dwindling fish stocks and discusses the advantage that 'witch-eyed' fishermen are understood to hold over their rivals. The final ethnographic section returns to the shore and describes the anxious experience of boat-owners and trading partners as they struggle to discern what may be happening just beyond their view: whether in the underworld or out at sea. Across the three ethnographic sections, I emphasize that, whether real or imagined, the moral discourse surrounding these 'tricky' behaviours is surprisingly nuanced. It has long been the case in this region that great value is placed on secrecy, and on 'unusual powers of understanding that enable people to both produce and unmask highly ambiguous meanings' (Ferme 2001: 7-8). So, despite the sense of mistrust and apprehension that permeates social life, people in Tissana make sense of their relationships in part through a long-standing aesthetic which values concealment as an art as much as it fears it as an act of deception.

Beyond the global: local witch worlds and having 'eyes' in Tissana

From the 1990s, anthropologists working in Africa began to recognize that occult discourses and practices once considered relics of a precolonial past were thriving and actively proliferating under the conditions of 'modernity' (Ciekawy & Geschiere 1998; Geschiere 1992). In the intervening decades, a large literature has emerged, tracing how local anxieties about powerful unseen forces have multiplied and adapted to reflect the new injustices of the postcolonial economy (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000; Meyer 1995). In many ethnographic analyses, people's fears about the violence of the occult are interpreted as a metaphor for the structural violence of the contemporary world order. In Sierra Leone, for example, Rosalind Shaw painted an evocative account of the hypermodern dystopia described by her Temne informants, in which: 'skyscrapers adjoin houses of gold and diamonds … street vendors roast "beefsticks" (kebabs) of human meat … and witch airports dispatch planes … to destinations around the globe' (2002: 202). She argued, convincingly, that such images of violent extraction are founded on real experiences of global predation, with historical roots stretching from the Atlantic slave trade. Returning to Freetown in the aftermath of a civil war fuelled, at least in part, by an international hunger for Sierra Leone's diamonds, Shaw (2007) found that anxieties about the proximity and power of the global 'underworld' had deepened even further. Her interlocutors described the horrors of war as having erupted from a global landscape of spiritual corruption: a hidden and highly interconnected world in which anyone, from politicians to village healers, to international statesmen, could be suspected of participating in the unseen violence of witchcraft and human sacrifice. Similarly, when many Sierra Leoneans regarded the 2014 Ebola epidemic as an international occult conspiracy, anthropologists made the case that such anxieties were rational and grounded on real experiences of political violence, neglect, and exploitation (Leach 2015; Shepler 2014).

I had expected to encounter similar types of occult anxieties in Tissana, expressing frustration and impotence in the face of global economic injustice. Although the town is located on Sherbro-owned land, its multi-ethnic population is dominated by Temne-speaking migrants from the north of the country; the region studied by Shaw. My

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neighbours knew that Plantain Island, which is clearly visible from Tissana's beach, had once been home to the busiest slave forts on the Upper Guinea Coast. More urgently, they were painfully conscious that illegal international trawlers were plundering their coastal waters with seeming impunity, enabled by indifferent or corrupt political leaders. According to national and international law, trawlers are forbidden from entering Yawri Bay and, if caught, they should be made to pay heavy fines by the Sierra Leonean government. At the time of my fieldwork, however, there was no effective policing and international boats frequently entered inshore waters unchallenged. Local crews often encountered these 'pirate' trawlers at sea and witnessed the enormous catches they hauled, using vast nets that dragged along the ocean bed collecting everything in their path. Fishermen described watching in horror and incredulity as trawlers discarded tonnes of edible catch back into the water because, according to the opaque logic of some distant marketplace, those species were not considered valuable. The trawlers' disregard for coastal communities goes beyond the plunder of fish: they often ruin the nets of local fishermen and, as Moses[1] describes here, sometimes even endanger their lives:

> If you capsize in the sea … [the crews of trawlers] will never try to rescue your life! They will never rescue the life of we the African people … They will just move away. They even cover their numberplates so that, if they damage your nets in the sea, where will you report them with no numberplate?

Given the extent to which local lives and livelihoods were being destroyed by unaccountable fishing fleets serving unseen markets in wealthier parts of the world, one might expect Tissana to be particularly fertile territory for anxieties about predatory witches participating in violent international occult economies. The stories people exchanged about witches were, indeed, rich and wide-ranging, but rarely did they offer any clear 'moralizing metacommentary' (Sanders 2003: 339) on the corrupt nature of the global economy, or, indeed, of Sierra Leonean politics. Instead, the 'witch-eyed' people who moved in hidden spaces around Tissana were most often described in disconcertingly relatable terms: as neighbours who used their heightened skills of perception and mobility to cheat their trading partners or to gain tactical advantages in fishing.

According to my interlocutors, the key thing that sets witches apart from other people is not their uniquely predatory or violent nature, but rather their possession of eyes powerful enough to perceive beyond the surfaces of the social and material world. These extraordinary senses enable them to navigate into shadowy spaces 'not located in real dimensions or space or time' (Lamp 2008: 50). Here, for example, Ami is describing Tissana's thriving witch town:

> They have a big shop there, at that tree. A big witch shop … [They sell] everything! Like food, rice, clothes, pans, anything you could want … There are loads of tin-roofed houses and they all have generators. It's a big place! A whole town! Only we don't see it. You can only go there if you have those witch eyes.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Ami's description of this unseen world is its relative mundaneness. Far from being an exotic global hub of extraordinary wealth (cf. Shaw 2002), Tissana's underworld is imagined as a disconcertingly local place. In fact, a surprisingly large subsection of people is assumed to have access to this hidden space, including most infants, twins and their siblings, sorcerers, and anyone else who simply

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happens to possess vision powerful enough to enable them to see beyond the surface of the visible world. Here, Ima and Dulai are discussing their own young children:

> *Ima*: Asana can 'see' perfectly! He's a twin. You know that? His companion died. One time … he turned himself into a snake!
> *Dulai*: Yes, it is true! I was asleep in my bed … and I saw Asana. He was standing by my bed and then he turned himself into a snake: a big one. Really! Ah! Asana, Asana, he's a 'witch'! He's powerful! But I love him. I want him to go to school. Or, if not that, maybe he will be a footballer.
> *Ima*: Baby Jenny now, in Africa we say she's a *gbeshe* [the child born after twins] … She is even more powerful than a twin … She is perfect. Even though she's so small – she doesn't say it – but she sees everything. She knows everything. But we now; we don't see. Except maybe if we go to school.

Even as Dulai and Ima draw connections between a series of familiar characteristics often associated with witchcraft – shapeshifting, heightened intelligence, and exceptional insight – the one thing striking in its absence is any particular concern that their children are, or are going to grow up to be, wicked. Whilst my field notes *were* peppered with descriptions of witches performing human sacrifices in their shadow world, such a capacity for violence was not considered unique to those with access to the occult realm. At the time of my fieldwork, for example, a wave of anxiety was sweeping Tissana in response to an apparent spate of medicine murders: murders perpetrated not by witches, but by 'ordinary' criminals.

Whilst it might be tempting to presume a deep ontological divide between the mundane world and such unseen spaces, there is, as Peter Geschiere observed in Cameroon, 'at the most a distinction of access … the two domains are intricately intertwined in everyday life' (in Fabian, Geschiere, ter Haar, de Boeck & Bastian 2008: 139). Such descriptions of the everyday environment present a challenge to Western epistemology, which usually relies on an authoritative, objectifying gaze as the root of knowledge (Jackson 1989: 6). Michael Jackson has gone further than most anthropologists in attempting to move beyond this ethnographic desire to produce an authoritative account of the world. Instead, his writing emphasizes 'the sense of living in a place, of experiencing it from all sides, moving and participating in it instead of remaining on the margins like a voyeur' (1989: 8). This 'cubist' approach comes to life particularly vividly in his discussion of witchcraft, in which he reveals 'the essential provisionality of beliefs, how they are manipulated, called upon, suspended, invested with different emotional values … in different situations by different individuals' (1978: 34). If interrogated directly about witches, his informants tended to paint a generic image of malicious, violent individuals (1989: 90). And yet what is most interesting about Jackson's work is his willingness to embrace the ambiguity and 'polysemy' of specific stories about witchcraft as they emerged in the lives and relationships of actual people.

> In short, *suwa'ye* [witchcraft] … denotes an indeterminate power or faculty. And though this power of *suwa'ye* is in essence 'wild' or extrasocial, whether it becomes good or bad depends entirely on how it is harnessed or used (1989: 93).

Harry West's acclaimed book *Ethnographic sorcery* (2008) similarly emphasizes the complexities and contradictions of witchcraft: not so much a clearly defined set of evil practices as a diffuse field of thought and action that encompasses many shades of morality and aspects of life. It is, West argues, this amorphous quality that makes witchcraft discourse such a powerful medium for reflecting on the hidden operations of power that shape everyday life.

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My neighbours were quick to acknowledge that the exceptional insight that came with having 'eyes' could, potentially at least, be used in any manner of productive ways. People who had studied in high school sometimes told me that the correct English translation for the Krio word 'witch' was 'scientist', and that the foreigners who created high-technology gadgets, or who knew how to find resources such as diamonds and minerals in Sierra Leone's ground, were empowered with the same heightened capacities – to see far. Whilst some people were born with innate perceptive powers, others – as Joseph explains here – made a conscious effort to acquire 'witch eyes':

> Yes, some people want [to be a] witch! They want to be able to 'see', whether to become a sorcerer, or for fishing, or for business. They go and buy the leaves from a sorcerer. They take that medicine, and they drop it in their eyes so that – *whrooom!* – they can see everything! … Some people use their eyes to promote themselves in business or to protect themselves or their family.

To some extent, this is nothing new. Discussing the Mende region in which she carried out her fieldwork in the 1980s, Mariane Ferme describes a topography in which 'the perceptual domain is destabilized by forces that inhabit features of the landscape, that lie beneath the surface of solids and fluids' (2001: 5). Moving through a world so densely populated with unseen forces, her interlocutors understood that even 'poor strangers … may become rich and powerful through the strategic, though illicit, exploitation of secret knowledge of the landscape' (2001: 2). But anthropologists across the continent have observed a heightened sense of insecurity, a foreboding feeling that unknowable realms have become more proximate, threatening to 'inhabit and overgrow' the manifest world. Filip De Boeck sees this deepening unease arising out of a particular moment in African history as growing numbers of people find themselves struggling to navigate daily lives through worlds that are – economically, politically, and socially – 'incomprehensible' (De Boeck in Fabian *et al.* 2008: 143).

In Tissana, certainly, this struggle to see beyond the surface of the social and material world seems to have become both more urgent and more futile as fisherfolk watch the pillage of their coastal ecology. In the section below, I turn to the ocean and the fishermen who navigate its increasingly unfathomable depths. Since local fishermen cannot compete with the sonar technology of international trawlers, they channel their energy in the only direction possible: into increasingly tense competition with one another, as they vie to apprehend fish shoaling beneath the water.

Perception, apprehension, and navigating fishing grounds

I had been living in Tissana for almost a year when, one morning, a visiting boat captain from Plantain Island took a long stick and sketched me a map of Yawri Bay in sandy ground. Aside from the coastline, which I recognized easily enough, Tomi's map revealed a topography that I found altogether unfamiliar. He did not mark any of the villages, roads, or rivers which I tended to think of as the region's most prominent landmarks. Rather, he carefully parcelled out an intricate mosaic of distinct watery spaces, the defining characteristics of which – the depths of their seabed and the strengths of their currents – were all utterly invisible to me. To the far side of Plantain Island, for example, he marked a series of small fishing grounds running away from the coast towards the Atlantic Ocean. He pointed to them in turn – 'Konah, Kaisa, Pokeh, Katatabul' – and explained how each differed from its neighbouring fishing ground in some important aspect of its invisible, underwater terrain. Beyond that, he indicated where the continental shelf slid off into the deep Atlantic: 'We call that "Open", that's

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the big, deep sea, there, where those trawlers pass … Then, all along here, between Bompeh and Konah grounds, there is a deep channel of water. We call that "Gutta [gutter] Ground"'.

It was Tomi's map that first revealed to me just how much detailed knowledge fishermen have about the hidden, three-dimensional topography they traverse each day in their boats. But he also emphasized what a thoroughly populated and highly socialized space these fishing grounds around Plantain had become. 'First time', he told me, 'when you went to sea, you were on your own'. Captains had relied on their experience to intuit where the fish might be concentrated. Depending on the tide, the season, and weather conditions, a knowledgeable man could look at the water and make an informed guess as to where he might find fish. However, as catches have become smaller and less predictable, even veteran fishermen – men with a deep embodied knowledge acquired through long years of practice – are discovering to their dismay that the ocean has become increasingly unfathomable. With an ever-greater density of boats vying to catch a diminishing supply of fish, knowledge is a profoundly contested resource. So, aside from steering across a physical topography, the contours of which are hidden from view beneath the water, fishermen are constantly working to navigate a tense field of socially produced knowledge, in which their friends and rivals in other boats are as likely working to distort or conceal important information as they are to share it.

The introduction of mobile phone technology has contributed to a complex knowledge economy between fishermen. Boat captains begin each morning by listening to the various rumours circulating on the wharf, trying to build a picture of where in Yawri Bay fish are currently 'dying' in the greatest numbers. In some cases, as Tomi describes here, individuals may choose to nurture relationships by sharing precious information: 'If I've got a friend in another boat, he might call me, and say, "Are the fish dying where you are? Because here … there are loads!"' How far this information can be trusted, however, is never easy to discern. The communities that surround Yawri Bay are close-knit, and people depend on strong social networks to provide a vital safety net. Back on land, fishermen invest heavily in their friendships with 'brothers' in other boats, often generously gifting large portions of their catch to the men in less successful crews (Diggins 2017). Whilst at sea, however, the relationships between rival boats can become much more fraught. Most men I asked agreed that it would be rare to encounter fish in such numbers that one would consider inviting another boat to come and share in the plenty. More often, the relationship between boats is one of intense competition in which information is carefully guarded as the source of competitive advantage.

As I travelled aboard one of the passenger canoes (*pampa*s) that commute twice weekly to Freetown, I, together with my fellow female passengers, was given a tantalizing glimpse of a male world from which we were usually excluded. During a three-hour journey, we might pass close enough to shout greetings to the men aboard a dozen or more large crew boats as they stood under the glaring sun, scanning the horizon about them, scrutinizing the water for evidence of fish shoaling just beneath the surface. Often, several boats would be congregated tightly together, slowly circling one another. As Yusef explained, 'When you see them all like that, near-near to one another, it means that [they know] the fish are there. In all those boats, they are all watching, watching, watching the water'.

We occasionally happened to pass one of these large boats just as its crew had broken their vigil. Their engine would be on full blast, churning the water behind them, as the

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boat swerved to intercept a shoal they had spotted. All the men on board were in motion, working rapidly as a team to cast their net before any of the boats nearby were able to move to catch the same fish. On one occasion, my *pampa* passed a crew just as they were hauling their net from the water. From our cramped perches along the edge of the passenger canoe, we all turned and craned to see what kind of catch they had landed. My fellow passengers commented: 'Do you see those men there? They're pulling their net! Ah! That's hard work, there!' and 'Look at all those fish! They are happy today! Look, the other crews are all watching them'. And it was true. The sea was so congested that day that three or four other similarly sized boats were close enough in the water to have an easy view of the successful fishermen. The others had not cast their nets yet and were standing watching as their rivals dragged their heavy, glittering catch from the sea. As our *pampa* slid through the water between them, the tension had felt palpable. I recalled Pa Brima's comment, only a few days previously in Tissana, that: 'In the town, you see us, we fishermen all have one heart. But when I'm at sea, I don't want any man to get more than me!'

Attempts to capitalize upon 'knowledge differentials' are an essential characteristic of many economic environments – from the stock market to the bazaar (Geertz 1978; Walsh 2004). Yet there can be little doubt that fisheries have specific material characteristics that infuse this competition with a heightened urgency. In a context where everyone is vying to detect the same evasive resource, often the only thing separating a triumphant boat from the many others who return home empty-handed is the fact that one crew learned, fractionally faster than its rivals, where exactly the fish were to be found. It is therefore a recurring characteristic of oceanic life, in otherwise disparate fishing cultures around the world, that intense competition is often paired with 'clear signs of secrecy, misinformation, and deceit' (Acheson 1981; Palmer 1990: 157).

So, whilst successful fishermen are skilled at reading the environment for evidence of fish, they invest at least as much energy scrutinizing one another's movements for evidence that other crews might be attempting to conceal important information. As Mohammed describes here, crews take care to manage their performance so as not to disclose information to rivals in nearby boats:

> You're all there … watching, watching … Perhaps I might be standing here but I can see there are fish [behind you]. I wouldn't hurry! I'd paddle slowly … I paddle slowly … I'd wait, wait, wait, for the right moment. Then, BAM! I'd cast my net. Whoever casts their net first, it's done! Even if you were right there, closer to the fish than me, you don't have the right to cast your net now.

In this atmosphere of acute rivalry, with each success and each defeat playing out under the vigilant attention of dozens of competitors, a man's identity as a competent fisher is always on the line. With fish stocks in decline, the stakes in this rivalry have become much higher. These moments of adrenaline-filled competition occasionally erupt into more outright confrontation, and even violence. As another crewman, Alusine, put it:

> It's a war! It's like this: you see fish … far over there. I see them too. I want to go and catch them. You also want to catch them. So, you'll paddle. I'll paddle fast to try to catch them. Fishermen can fight at sea! Eeeee, bone to bone! Physical! Boats can come near to each other, like this, and fight!

As you watch these dynamics play out in Sierra Leone, it is particularly fascinating that when rival boats vie for up-to-the-moment information, they do so within a particular cultural context: one in which, as Ferme described, 'strategies of concealment permeate multiple levels of discursive and spatial practice, from the realm of regional

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politics to the more mundane realms of domesticity and productive activities' (2001: 1-2). This dynamic is neatly encapsulated in the initiation societies that play such a central role in customary politics, where esoteric knowledge is dispensed by society elders only frugally and piecemeal, in ways that reinforce the mysterious charisma of those in power (Murphy 1980). However, a person's access to powerful knowledge is not only determined by their structural position within society. In a context in which 'it is taken for granted that all people are hungry for knowledge' (d'Azevedo 1962: 14), this worldview also allows for the possibility that potent secrets are concealed within the everyday landscape, available to be acquired and exploited by anyone with sufficient interpretive skills.

Across the Mandé world, of which Sherbroland forms a periphery, it is forest hunters who are most often credited with the heightened ability to read subtle clues in the landscape, and so to access the potentially powerful forces concealed just beneath the surface of the visible world. In the farming villages a few miles inland from Tissana, where people rely heavily on bushmeat as their main source of protein, hunters are important figures in their community, and not only because they provide their neighbours with access to a much-coveted food resource. Hunters' skills – to see what others cannot – qualify them as individuals with an uncommon depth of wisdom and insight, 'great knowers' (Ferme 2001: 27) in a much broader sense. Here, Pa Albert is telling me about his friend and neighbour:

> They are not ordinary people, hunters. Like Pa Suarez: his father was a hunter and now he, too, is a hunter … When they watch an animal – maybe it is just something in the light, or the way that they move – but a hunter can know that it is a witch, turned himself into an animal. You know, very often, hunters know things that we don't know. They see things when they are in the bush at night. But they do not easily talk about them.

Yet the very skills that Pa Albert so admired in his friend also imbue forest hunters with unpredictable – and dangerous – potential. Because they enter spaces others fear, and perceive forces that remain invisible to their neighbours, hunters are sometimes themselves suspected of shapeshifting to animal or spirit form when they enter the bush by night (Leach 2000: 577). 'A hunter is not', as Melissa Leach puts it, 'necessarily the sort of person one would want one's daughter to marry' (2000: 582). In fact, the ambiguous powers embodied by hunters – to see far – are very similar to the qualities Tissana's residents attribute to the people they call 'witches'.

As other ethnographers have demonstrated, the heightened sensory and interpretive skills of the hunter may be put to new uses in urban settings (Hansen & Verkaaik 2009: 5) or frontier economies (De Boeck 2001). Experienced fishermen at sea, like experienced hunters in the forest, learn to read a combination of visible, but often extremely subtle, clues in their surroundings. As Hans Lucht described this in the Ghanaian context:

> A fisherman known to have 'good eyes' can see where, for instance, a school of fish is moving or how the weather is developing, or 'knows' the behaviour of sea birds and how they follow the fish. A fisherman can also have a 'hunch', 'dream' or 'feeling' that is then collectively acted on (2011: 198).

An acute observer will notice a flicker of motion just beneath the water's fluid surface or will instinctively sense that the men in another boat are moving just a little bit too deliberately. And, in keeping with Sierra Leonean images of 'hunting' more generally, the most masterful fishermen are credited with possessing an innate embodied advantage over their competitors. Some of the largest commercial fishing

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boats in Yawri Bay employ one crew member known as the 'phone-man': so-called because his heightened senses enable him to 'hear' the fish in a way that other fishermen cannot. When the boat arrives in the fishing ground, the phone-man enters the sea. Usifu describes this as follows:

> You know how, we people, we have our different-different languages? Well, so it is with fish. If you go in the water, if you know how to listen, you can hear them when they talk to each other. Every different fish has its own language. They listen to where they are … and they follow them … And when they get to where [the fish] are, they wave and tell the boat to come and cast its net …
>
> I know a bit. They showed me a bit, but I can't do it like they do. I can hear [the fish], but I can't tell the difference between the big ones and the small ones.

These exceptionally skilled crewmen are paid many times more than anyone else in their boat – and not without good reason. If there was one thing everyone agreed on, it was that boats with a phone-man on board consistently brought home noticeably larger catches than their rivals. Where there remained some room for disagreement, however, was on the ontological status of the phone-men themselves. Whereas Usifu emphasized the acute senses and practical experience required to accurately decipher the underwater soundscape, most people explained these abilities as one expression of an innate state of superhuman sensory awareness: a state that is most simply summarized in Tissana as being a 'witch' or possessing 'witch eyes'. As Moses put it, 'Phone-men … have "witch eyes". They can "see". They go into the water. They hear the fishes when they talk. They can talk to them. They call them all into one place'.

This slide between 'listening' for the fish and directly communicating with them was one that almost all my interlocutors made. Both the Krio and the Sherbro language use a single word to denote sensory 'hearing' and linguistic 'understanding' (*yehri* and *thee*, respectively). So, although I never heard anyone describing a phone-man literally shapeshifting into a nonhuman form – as both hunters and 'witches' are described doing in forest contexts (Ferme 2001; Leach 2000) – they are certainly assumed to take on qualities that blur the boundary between fishermen and their prey. As one elder, Mammy Kaddy, described this:

> When they're casting the net, their witch goes under the water. He can stay under water for a long time, maybe an hour. He gathers the fish together under the water, while the boat is sitting there on the water, waiting. They know how to do that.

When I asked whether people were not afraid that they would be known as a witch, she replied:

> It's not so secret. No! You pay the person! People boast of it, in fact! They boast of it. And you can see, when the boats come back, the ones who have a witch get more fish.

In urban Bissau, Vigh explores how a long-valued ability 'to see behind and beyond the present and presented' (2015: 111) has taken on new urgency in contemporary times as new forms of economic, political, and social volatility have left people struggling to navigate a profoundly unpredictable world. In Tissana, one sees this dynamic most clearly at work out at sea, where collapsing fish stocks have left rival fishing crews engaged in increasingly fierce competition to perceive fleeting clues: both in their material environment and in the gestures and actions of their rivals. In this context, the heightened insight of 'witch-eyed' fishermen is regarded with a combination of respect and envy, as a skill which enables them to continue navigating productively – for now, at least – through an impoverished and increasingly unreadable marine environment.

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In the ethnography that follows, I explore how, in town as out at sea, life is characterized by constant and intensifying vigilance as individuals employ all their skills of insight and intuition in the struggle to discern other people's unseen actions and intentions.

Perception, apprehension, and navigating economic relationships

As once-bountiful catches have become smaller and less reliable, it is not only trust in the natural environment that is eroding; fisherfolk find themselves regarding their entire lifeworld with a heightened sense of apprehension. This unease permeates all aspects of life, corroding people's ability to trust the social relationships upon which they depend. Living and working in such an atmosphere of pervasive mistrust, the knowledge that some people can act in ways invisible to their neighbours can become a source of considerable anxiety. This problem is especially acute for boat-owners, female fish-smokers (*banda* women), and other investors whose livelihoods are dependent upon their ability to successfully judge which fishermen can be trusted – and how far. As I explore over the following pages, hidden spaces – at sea and in the 'underworld'– are assumed, by most people who are excluded from them, to be the site of all manner of illicit economic strategies.

I sat with Hawa on the wharf one morning as she pointed out the different boats in the distance, calling each of the sailors by name as they slid towards the horizon. To her trained eye, the distinctive pattern of each retreating boat's colourful patchwork sail rendered it as instantly recognizable as the fisherman's face would have been. 'Like, my man's sail, for example, it's red and orange. So, when I come to the beach, I can see him straight away'. There had been a time – only a few decades ago – when it had been common for Tissana's boats to spend their entire day fishing in the shallow waters within sight of the shore. Occasionally, shoals of fish do indeed still congregate in the waters immediately around the Shenge Peninsula. On these days, if you stand on the beach and look out to sea, the water seems to be teeming with slow-motion activity. During lulls in more interesting gossip, women waiting on the wharf look up, and idly point out to one another which fishing grounds appear to be popular that day, and where the different fishermen are coming from or going to land. However, as fish stocks have declined, men now routinely travel far greater distances in search of fish – and beyond the view of those of us on the shore.

For the many people anxiously anticipating the fishermen's return on the wharf, it is a matter of intense concern to speculate what might be happening beyond their sight at sea. As they go about their work in gardens, kitchens, and smokehouses, their conversations are consistently drawn back to sea, across the watery skyline: speculating where the fish might be shoaling and worrying aloud which boats, if any, will return to town with a decent catch. In theory at least, a large proportion of the men at work in the sea each day 'owe' their catch to a specific individual in town. These debts are part of ongoing reciprocal relationships through which land-based fisherfolk attempt to gain access to a shrinking supply of fish. For example, *banda* women do everything in their power to nurture exclusive customer relationships with fishermen. These ties are multifaceted and often include an element of friendship, romance, and everyday gift exchange. But women also routinely lend fishermen money in return for the promise that they will sell them, and no one else, their catch (Diggins 2019). In an economy as tight as Tissana's, women's livelihoods are very often hanging in the balance as they gaze out to sea: depending on their

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customers both catching fish and honouring their promises to bring those fish home.

The Krio word for 'lend' is *tross* – derived from the English word 'trust' – although, in practice, debt relationships in Tissana are far more often characterized by a palpable sense of suspicion. As Andrew Walsh has highlighted, anthropological discussions of exchange have been so overshadowed by classic theories about the 'spirit' of reciprocity (Mauss 1990 [1925]) that we tend to downplay the importance – and the frightening fragility – of *trust* as the centre of exchange relationships.

> The gift and the grift aren't so far apart as some might assume. Where the rhythm of the gift is ideally regular and continuous – give, receive, reciprocate; give, receive, reciprocate; give, receive, reciprocate – the rhythm of the grift differs only by one beat – give, receive, reciprocate; give, receive, reciprocate; give, receive … nothing (Walsh 2009: 65).

Theorists have debated whether trust is a fundamental characteristic of human nature (Løgstrup 1997 [1956]), or whether trust relationships should more meaningfully be understood as a site of struggle; one entailing a contested, ambivalent 'leap of faith' (Simmel 1964 [1950]). In Tissana, it is certainly the latter. Here, as across Sierra Leone, the precariousness and instability of economic life are compounded by the legacy of a civil war in which many became accustomed to regarding social life with an all-embracing and deep-rooted sense of unease.

So, on the frequent occasions when boats return home with empty nets, those on the wharf are quick to assume that they have been conned. Women tended to describe the ocean as a social landscape of hidden trickery and deception, speaking with weary authority about how routinely crewmen would exploit the invisibility of their fishing grounds at the expense of their customers on land. When a fisherman asked to borrow money to buy a new canoe, claiming he would repay our household in fish, my friend Buema had been vociferous in her attempts to protect me from what appeared to her a blatant attempt to 'grift' me:

> Don't give him! Don't do it, Jenny … This is where my mother bore me! I know fishermen! … He'll ask and ask and ask you for money. He'll take your money, until you can't afford your transport home, but he'll take your fish and sell them somewhere else.

Fishermen were routinely described as selling their fish, in secret, in another town along the coast, only to return home empty-handed, claiming that they had not managed to catch anything. Sometimes, I was told, they even colluded with another crew, transferring their catch into a different boat at sea, and sharing the profit between them. Yet, however dubious they might be that their *tross* will be repaid, *banda* women have no option but to continue investing their meagre capital, building economic relationships with seagoing fishermen.

The obligations of crewmen to the owners of their boats, whilst much more explicitly power-laden, are also structured by debt. In addition to providing the fishing equipment, boat-owners act as patrons to the men who work in their boats: providing food and accommodation, and often lending them money to cover one-off costs such as marriage payments or medical expenses. In return, fishermen are expected to be loyal and to work hard for their 'boss-man', in conditions that many experience as exploitative (Diggins 2015). Once indebted, fishermen are essentially tied into a relationship of bonded labour, with no option to leave the crew. For one day of the week, crew members are allowed to keep their catch and divide it amongst themselves to sell to

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their respective customers. On the remaining days, everything they catch 'belongs' to the boat-owner.

However, boat-owners, like *banda* women, are painfully aware that the moment they sail across the horizon, it is impossible to know with any confidence what fishermen are actually doing. By the end of my eighteen months in Tissana – much of which I spent sitting on the wharf with my neighbours, peering at the ocean, awaiting the reappearance of a particular familiar patchwork sail – I had developed a fairly strong sense of the world they imagined there, over the horizon; and of the slippery, strategic economic games they assumed the men to be playing on the open sea. I lost track of the number of times that I heard the following kinds of sentiments from current or former boat-owners:

> [Fishermen] are all the same. That was why I just decided to leave [the fish business] in the end. You know … I invested so much money, so much money – new boat, new engine, new net. I never saw even 1,000 leones from that boat. Nothing. I gave the boat to someone who I thought I could trust, a cousin of mine, and he went out and found crewmen, and then they just enjoyed themselves! They are very, very untrustworthy people, fishermen (George).

> Well of course, for me, right now, I don't trust my fishermen. I am heartbroken. Why? Because … those boys who fish in my boat – they don't do right by me. For the whole month, if I get any fish, I am lucky! … Always [they tell me] 'no catch!'; always 'no catch!' (Timbo).

Some boat-owners told me that they paid one crew member extra in return for 'snitching' on his colleagues. Other boat-owners work to nurture social networks across the neighbouring fishing towns in the hope that someone will inform them if their boat's crew turns up one day to sell their catch in secret. However, such intelligence is always patchy and unreliable.

There are echoes here of the fragile 'confidence' that Walsh (2004; 2009) describes shaping the economy of his Malagasy sapphire-mining fieldsite. In a predicament that parallels that of Tissana's land-bound fisherfolk, local gem dealers have no choice but to base their livelihoods upon reciprocal relationships that they know to be dangerously brittle; dealing with international trading partners who subsequently vanish into a mysterious global sapphire market, the contours of which they know themselves to be ignorant of. Faced with a reality in which traders all too often took stones on credit, never to return, Walsh's informants, like mine, navigate through an economic landscape in which '[s]peculation and suspicion go hand in hand – the former as the best stand-in for unavailable certainty, and the latter as a necessary buffer against assurances of certainty and transparency in an ambiguous context that appears to offer little foothold for openness, honesty, or trust' (Walsh 2004: 226). There is, as he notes, an inherent fragility 'in all systems of moral and economic exchange in which reciprocity and confidence play key roles' (2009: 59). This fragility is especially marked, I would add, in contexts such as Walsh's fieldsite and my own, where one group of economic actors is far more mobile, and so by its nature far less amenable to be held accountable, than the other.

The predicament faced by land-based fisherfolk is that they can rarely perceive with absolute clarity whether they have, as they are apt to suspect, been 'grifted'. Fishing is, after all, an innately unpredictable business – and it has become much more so in recent decades. It is quite possible that, on the many occasions Timbo's crew returned home empty-handed, they were being completely honest: they had simply failed to catch anything. This is not, however, the explanation favoured by Timbo, George, or any of the

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other countless boat-owners and *banda* women who are nowadays all too accustomed to disappointment on the wharf. As declining catches mean that crews increasingly return home with empty nets, their inability to fulfil their social obligations leads to heightened speculation that fishermen are inherently slippery, untrustworthy people. David was expressing a widely held truism when he told me: 'People in Tissana are not reliable … If you went from [one end of town to the other], it would be hard to find five reliable people'.

People in Tissana understand all too well that the reciprocal relations upon which they depend for survival are inherently fragile. In situations such as these – where 'the most needed relationships are the ones that have the most potential to do the most harm' (Walsh 2009: 59) – trust is never a 'natural' response to social interactions, but rather the result of a deliberate, anxiety-provoking process of deliberation and weighing up of risk. As Lotte Meinert has observed, in situations of long-term uncertainty and instability, 'distrust may be the starting point for most social interaction, and trust may be something that people strive toward and perhaps temporarily, or never, succeed in achieving' (2015: 120). This is an environment in which it is generally taken for granted that all people are driven by the necessity to seize whatever narrow sliver of opportunity they have to make a profit, even if, as is often the case, these opportunities might involve some level of trickery or deception.

It is in this respect that, for those who cannot access them, the ocean and the 'underworld' share a surprisingly similar dynamic. For, although I have been at pains to stress that people with 'witch eyes' are not always considered uniquely 'evil' by nature, people are all too conscious that witches, like seagoing fishermen, have ample opportunity to exploit their unseeing neighbours. In a context of generalized mistrust, their 'different intensity of insight' (Vigh 2015: 121) gives people with 'eyes' an advantage in almost every sphere of social and economic life. As the following conversation with an elder called Jacob reveals, the knowledge that their social world is so heavily populated with invisible agencies only exacerbates the common experience, shared by many in Tissana, that they have frustratingly little control over their own material livelihoods:

> This is another thing a lot of people are complaining about: this money business … If you have money, you see it, you can touch it and count it, but it does not come to anything. And you can think and think and think and you do not know where all that money has gone. It leaves you just like a breeze … in your hands. If someone sees you counting money, they will grow envious of you, and they 'put witch on you'; and the money, it just goes!

There is nothing exceptional about Jacob's conviction that the structural violence of his poverty must be underpinned by some more deliberate criminality, perpetrated by one or other of the people closest to him. Similar rumours circulate widely through everyday conversation in Tissana, where people very often make sense of their own impoverishment through the logic that one or other of their neighbours must have stolen from them, invisibly, 'in a witch way'; covertly robbing their money and good fortune. The Sherbro term for this invisible theft is '*tofi*'. Many people share Jacob's suspicion that, when the money they worked so hard to earn 'turns to breeze' with depressing predictability, it can only be that they must have been robbed imperceptibly by their 'witch-eyed' neighbours:

> Sometimes, it will happen, they know how to steal from you, in a way that you cannot see. So, the person has to pay you 100,000 leones, and, as they are standing there, you count the money, and it

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> is all there. But when you go home and look again, it is only 80,000! They have stolen it by *tofi*! (Pa Dulai, elder).
>
> If you're trying to do business with someone who has 'witch eyes', you'll never see any benefit. They will always take your money. You won't know how because you can't see them do it. But they do it by *tofi* (Miriam, *banda* woman).

As we have seen, this nagging sense – of suspecting that one must have been robbed, and yet having no tangible evidence of any wrongdoing having taken place – is not limited to people's experience of doing business with witches. It is a frustratingly familiar quality of economic life on the Kagboro Coast. In an economy as tight as Tissana's, relationships between crewmen, boat-owners, and *banda* women often come under considerable strain. This encompassing uncertainty risks undermining people's ability to feel confident in even the most mundane or intimate economic relationship, or to know how to assess the morality of any economic tactic. Yet, even in this ambience of generalized mistrust, individuals' social and economic survival continues to depend on the ability to forge relationships founded on patterns of reciprocity (Diggins 2015; 2017).

Conclusion

This article has traced the relationship between apprehension, social invisibility, and mistrust in coastal Sierra Leone and has explored how this relationship fosters a particular set of anxieties about the occult. I have argued that, as fish stocks have declined and economic lives have become ever more precarious, vigilance has come to be regarded as a key survival skill. This emphasis on constant watchfulness erodes an already fragile sense of trust in the dependability of social life and the reciprocal relations upon which everyone depends. People find themselves attempting to manoeuvre through an unpredictable world in which everyone assumes that the best chance of scraping a reasonable living may be to risk tricking one's rivals at sea, and one's boss-man and business partners on land. Faced with a world in which, as Jacob told me, 'Whenever a person is poor, you know he is tricky', they extend this logic to their 'witch-eyed' neighbours and assume that they, too, often use their heightened vision and mobility to outmanoeuvre their fellows.

Whilst the 'diffuseness and ambiguity of discourses on the occult' (Ciekawy & Geschiere 1998: 1) are well recognized, there is a particular analytical appeal to ethnographic work that traces how occult anxieties reflect global structures of economic and political violence (cf. Sanders 2003). One of the best-known examples of research in this vein is Rosalind Shaw's careful analysis of her Temne interlocutors' anxieties concerning predatory witches and other violent occult forces. Fears of a violent global underworld can, she argues, be interpreted as embedded memories of the slave trade (Shaw 2002), and as a medium for reflecting on the injustices of the contemporary global economy (Shaw 2007). In Tissana – a town of predominantly Temne-speaking fisherfolk – I had anticipated that any conversations about witches might follow a similar pattern, reflecting explicitly on questions of economic injustice and extraction.

What I encountered was, in many respects, more poignant. Daily conversations about 'witches' tended to mirror a more general preoccupation: that one had to be constantly vigilant against the likelihood of being cheated or tricked by a member of one's own social world. In a context where everyone is striving to see and act beyond the visible surfaces of social life, even the definition of a witch can be hard to pin down: people may be 'witch-like' to varying degrees, depending on their powers

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of perception and capacity for concealment. It is possible, of course, for competing explanations for misfortune to 'enfold into one another without ever being resolved' (Wilhelm-Solomon, Bukasa & Núñez 2017: 147). My interlocutors understood, all too clearly, that international trawlers were undermining their coastal ecology, and that this was part of a long, grim history in which rural Sierra Leonean communities had been exploited and marginalized by remote, unaccountable actors. But, as Elizabeth Cooper and David Pratten note, 'recognizing the power of distant forces on present life does not necessarily help people to resolve the immediate uncertainties and insecurities that they experience' (2015: 7). Weary of struggling to balance their livelihoods in a context of unrelenting material uncertainty, they channelled their anxieties and frustrations – and their tactical energies – in the arena where it seems most possible to exert some power: the micro-struggles of their closest economic relationships (Booth, Leach & Tierney 1999: 23; Whitehead 1990).

As I have argued throughout the ethnographic sections of this article, however, it would be reductive to read individuals' justified *anxiety* – at having to negotiate their livelihoods through so slippery a social sphere – as evidence that they are condemning their neighbours' *morality* in any straightforward way. The role of morality in economic relations is often far from self-evident; especially in regions of the world, such as Sierra Leone, where the authority of the law has too often 'been used to justify, administer, and sanction Western conquest and plunder' (Mattei & Nader 2008: 1). Tissana's residents seem to share Nancy Scheper-Hughes' view that 'trickery' may become an essential skill of social navigation for those living in conditions of extreme precariousness (2008: 47). The moral discourses about the supposedly rampant 'trickery' taking place in the hidden spaces of the ocean and the underworld are therefore nuanced and ambivalent. Anger and despair at believing oneself to have been 'grifted' in some unseen way are often tempered by a weary empathy for one's antagonist and their poverty, and even grudging respect for their superior skills of perception and concealment that enabled them to mask their true intentions.

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NOTE

[1] I use pseudonyms.

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Pêche, vol, sorcellerie : appréhension et méfiance dans l'Afrique de l'Ouest maritime

Résumé

Le présent article explore « l'appréhension » omniprésente sur les côtes du Sierra Leone, où les pêcheurs s'efforcent de naviguer dans une économie précaire de surpêche des océans et de surtension des relations. Dans un contexte d'incertitude croissante, la vigilance sociale est devenue une compétence cruciale pour la survie. Tout en scrutant l'océan à la recherche des bancs de poisson, les pêcheurs doivent aussi rester vigilants aux autres équipages, en concurrence avec eux pour une même ressource déclinante et qui peuvent tenter de les doubler. Quand un bateau rentre bredouille au port, les acheteurs regardent l'équipage avec suspicion, à l'affût d'indices qui montreraient qu'il a vendu sa prise en catimini dans une autre ville côtière. Quand une entreprise fait faillite ou que des économies s'évaporent, on est prompt à croire que c'est un voisin qui l'a dérobé sans être vu, « par un moyen sorcier ». Pourtant, malgré la profonde méfiance et l'appréhension manifestée vis-à-vis de l'environnement social, les discours moraux sur cette malice prétendument omniprésente sont nuancés. Le désespoir d'avoir été escroqué par un moyen invisible est souvent tempéré par une compassion pleine de lassitude pour la pauvreté de l'antagoniste, voire un respect réticent pour son talent de dissimulation.

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