

Potato rope families: sharing food and precarious kinship in a West African fishing town

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Introduction

When I asked whether Jo Kebbe was Jacob's brother, everyone on the veranda looked baffled, as though they had no idea why I would ask such a question.

'Well,' I tried to explain myself, 'Sento is Jacob's sister, and you just said that she's Jo Kebbe's sister so I thought...?'

'No!'

'They're family!' Aminata exclaimed, as though this blanket term ought to iron out any confusion as to how, exactly, the three people were related. But Buema was not prepared to accept such a facile explanation:

'They are not family! What family? Jo Kebbe is a Kebbe! Jacob is a Yannie! What family is that?'

'So...?' It was my turn to look baffled now...

Inspired, Buema leapt to her feet. 'Have you heard of a potato rope family?'

Without pausing to wait for an answer, she took two potato stems from the bench beside her and began to mime planting them in the concrete ground of the veranda. 'This one; you plant it here. You see? And the other one; the other one is all the way over...' She was bending double now, holding the two bundles as far apart as her stretched arm span would allow, 'here! But this

rope, it grows like so. And the other one, it grows like... so... until...'

Slowly, she drew the two stems towards one another along the ground, revelling in her own performance. 'They meet, and join, and look like one rope! Do you see?' She straightened up, triumphant. 'That is what we call a potato rope family!'

The 'potato rope' would be a vivid metaphor for anyone in the fishing towns around Sierra Leone's Yawri Bay. Sweet potatoes are amongst the most widespread and low maintenance of all garden plants; grown, not only for their starchy tubers, but also for the leaves that form that basis of '*plassas*', the staple daily accompaniment to rice and fish. The vines are cut in short, naked lengths and planted in small bunches each a foot or two away from its nearest neighbour across the bare earth. Within a couple of months of being planted, those fragile, isolated stems have grown into such a luscious tangle of roots, leaves, and tubers that — as Buema mimed so vividly to us on the veranda — 'they look like one rope'.

Tissana, where this study is based, is a bustling but desperately impoverished multiethnic town with a fluctuating population of around 5,000 people, almost all of whom depend for their survival, in one way or another, on the commercial fishing economy¹.[□] Despite a worrying decline in Sierra Leone's fish stocks over the past two decades, the Yawri Bay remains one of West Africa's busiest fishing zones: its waters congested with local vessels that range in size from dugout canoes, to large

¹ This article is based on 18 months' ethnographic fieldwork in Tissana, between 2010 and 2011. The research was funded by a doctoral studentship from the UK's Economic and Social Research Council.

engine-powered boats with crews of up to twenty men. One of the most striking characteristics of life in this coastal economy is its high level of population fluidity, with itinerant traders, migratory fishermen, and incomers from rural areas each moving in different circuits through the town (Diggins 2014). Set against this context of widespread population movement, household instability and deepening material insecurity, this article explores the everyday material work that men and women invest in attempting to create and nurture these 'rhizomorphous' networks of family relatedness.

I am certainly not the first ethnographer to suggest that, in certain contexts, 'kinship can be viewed as a process of becoming' (Carsten 1991: 435). Nor is it any coincidence that the best-known examples of 'creative' or 'aspirational' kinship patterns tend to be found in studies of populations living in precarious or unpredictable conditions. From refugees (McGovern 2012, Gale 2007) to boom town migrants, one way of navigating the narrow line between material scarcity and population fluidity is to develop strategies for forging vital social relationships 'on the fly' (McGovern 2012: 748). In rural communities across the Upper Guinea region, it was, and remains, common for 'strangers' to be absorbed, first as fostered children or tenant farmers and eventually (in the manner of a potato rope, if you like) as in-laws or 'nephews' within the lineages of established local families (d'Azevedo 1962). These patterns of 'aspirational kinship', which evolved in the context of many centuries of endemic warfare, displacement, and slavery, became vital once more in recent decades as millions were forced to flee their homes and seek refuge with strangers under conditions of real danger or precarity (McGovern 2012: 748).

This paper explores how webs of affect and intimacy are woven through gifts of fish and rice. In places like Tissana, where hunger is an all too familiar aspect of mundane experience, there can be few more fertile material expressions of the relationship between two people than the ways in which they choose to share, exchange, or withhold food. As Schepler has described:

Food is material, but also symbolic, and literally everyday. Our experience of food is a physical, sensual, shared human experience. Food is embodied, mundane, often gendered in its preparation and consumption. It allows the physical reproduction of bodies, but is part of social reproduction (2011: 45).

Fish move through two parallel economies in Tissana. On one hand, smoked fish move through commercial relationships into wholesale trading networks that supply households across Sierra Leone with a vital source of affordable protein. And yet, at the local level, it is almost impossible to *buy* fish on a small scale for one's own household consumption. Even if one has money, the *only* way to access fish as food, is through the town's vast, wharf-side gift economy.

The fish that circulate in such large numbers as gifts across Tissana's wharf could be read as an example of what Graeber calls a 'social currency': a currency, the movement of which is concerned less with the distribution of material goods, than with 'the creation and mutual fashion of human beings' (2012: 412). In a town of migrants, people invest a huge amount of their social energy and material resources, working to forging webs of affect and social belonging that defy any neat classification between friendship, 'fictive' kinship and biological relatedness. Emphasising the creativity and flexibility of this mode of reckoning belonging, I

discuss how Tissana's massive daily gift economy in raw fish and cooked rice can be read as a throbbing, ever-shifting map of each person's network of friendships, flirtations and 'potato rope' relations.

As the article progresses, however, a more ambivalent picture begins to emerge beneath this image of munificence and mutual generosity. Social scientists describing family life in Europe and America have had to work particularly hard to convince readers that, contrary to our own 'myths' of intimacy, in which we tend to represent the familial relationships as defined by a particular 'bundle of warm emotions', it is actually fairly common for members of intimate relationships to 'remain indifferent to each other or even inflict damage on one another' (Zelizer 2016: 16). By contrast, ethnographers in West Africa — where the historical relationship between kinship and domestic slavery is well documented — have reflected at length on the ambivalent, and sometimes sinister, micropolitics of households and family relations (Argenti 2010, Ferme 2001). Building on decades of work looking into witchcraft anxieties in Cameroon, Paul Geschiere recently expanded his comparative gaze to suggest that, 'a profound ambivalence about intimacy—as desirable yet at the same time frightening—haunts human forms of sociality all over the world' (2013: xxii). In a broader regional context in which patterns of patronage have often been resented as exploitative (Richards 1986, Ferme 2001), gifts of food are not only the substance of survival but can also, potentially, become a potent expression of power. Beyond this, there is a basic level of chronic anxiety built into a system of reckoning belonging that requires people to work — and work *hard* — simply to sustain the intimate relationships they depend upon for material security and social identity. In recent years, this experience

of insecurity has been compounded by an ecological crisis, which has made it increasingly hard for vulnerable people to find the resources to prevent their most intimate family relationships from atrophying and collapsing.

Two Fish Economies

Throughout the day in Tissana, almost everyone's attention is trained, even if only from the corner of their eye, towards the ocean: waiting. Within moments of landing on Tissana Wharf, a successful fishing boat will already be surrounded by a crowd. In a sometimes bewildering clamour of flirtation, begging and bullying, a tangled web of negotiations is played out on the sand between the fishermen in the boat, their customers, girlfriends, neighbours and debtors, as each person attempts to cajole for themselves a portion of the catch. Aside from the professional fish processors (*banda* women), seeking to buy fish in bulk for the wholesale fish trade, one of the things that struck me most when I first arrived in Tissana was the frequency with which both fishermen and *banda* women agreed to give some of their hard-earned fish away, apparently free, to the people who came to beg from them on the wharf.

There are two basic opposing principles that combine to make the strategic pursuit of '*plassas*' fish [fish for household consumption] such a constant preoccupation in Tissana. On one hand — and perhaps this is hardly surprising in a place where one sees buckets of glittering fish almost everywhere one turns — people expect to eat fish every day. A central theme in the myth Tissana's residents

narrate about their town is that, whoever you are, you will ‘eat loads of fine fish’. People who had migrated from towns and villages inland would remember with pity their impoverished diet ‘up-country’ when they had been forced to make do for their meagre protein on the small, dried, bony fish (*bonga*) that provide the staple source of protein for all but the most prosperous of Sierra Leoneans inland. These ‘poor fish’ — as they were sometimes referred to dismissively in Tissana — may have been the foundation of the town’s trade economy, but they were only eaten here as a matter of last resort.

Yet, in apparently perfect contradiction to this attitude, the surprising reality is that, for all their seemingly glorious abundance, it is almost impossible to *buy* fish for one’s own household consumption. Here, Marriama is trying to explain what initially appeared to me a rather baffling contradiction:

It’s not every fisherman who will agree to sell you one or two fish. If you were to go and ask, ‘*Sell-gi* [sell-give] me fish, I want to cook,’ there aren’t many who would agree to sell you them. If you want *plassas* fish, you have to beg.

In a town so thoroughly dominated by fishing, it would be easy to assume that most households have easy and reliable access to a supply of fish, straight from the ocean; but this is not the case. By no means all households contain fishermen. Even for those that do, seagoing men routinely leave home for unspecified periods, whenever their boat captain judges that they are more likely to land a decent catch elsewhere. Fishermen often find themselves unable to work, if their boat or net is damaged; and, even when they do go to sea, there is no guarantee of returning to land with anything at all in their nets. Fishing always was a deeply unpredictable

business, and it has become far more so in recent years: the result of decades of local overfishing, illegal international exploitation (EJF 2012, Lucht 2011), and climate change (Lam et al 2012).

Although it was a fairly large town by Sierra Leonean standards, neither Tissana, nor any of its immediately neighbouring towns holds a regular market. I was not the only newcomer who found this absence perplexing. Harry, a fish-trader whom I spoke with during his first trip to Kabgoro, was initially unsure whether to believe me, that Tissana's substantial population managed without a physical marketplace. "No market? *None*? How is that possible?". He turned away from me, searching for more reliable informant: "But where do you buy your fish?". In fact, if one has money, it is easy enough to buy a wide range of household essentials. A steady stream of petty traders weave through the town each day, toting their produce from veranda to veranda, hawking anything from palm oil, garden produce or rice, to pharmaceutical drugs or secondhand clothing. The only staple food almost *never* sold by petty traders to household customers, is fish.

This is partly the result of structural dynamics within Tissana's commercial fish economy. Fishermen are typically tied into a more-or-less exclusive customer relationship with a single *banda* woman who has first claim to buy and dry as much of his catch as she is able. She, in turn, will usually be tied into similarly binding relationships with her trader-customers from the city. Anything sold on the wharf is therefore destined to be passed through a predetermined chain of business relationships until it arrives, wholesale, in a distant urban marketplace. The result is that alongside the commercial market trade runs a parallel and equally vibrant

economy, in which fish are gifted according to an altogether different set of rules.

The Krio word for this commonplace act of fish-gifting is to *wap*. It would be difficult to overstate the real, material urgency of this vast gift economy, which provides the only source of protein for many of Tissana's residents. I was often taken aback by the heights of anxiety my friends experienced on the days when they had been unable to procure fish. Regardless of how much other food they might have had, a cooking pot devoid of fish is a source of great stigma in Tissana, and is generally taken as evidence of a social unit failing to provide for its members the most taken for granted of basic living necessities. During the rainy season in particular, these days occurred far more frequently than one might imagine, listening to the common optimistic assertions that, 'Here, we eat like gentry'.

Begging for Fish

A constant preoccupation within all non-fishing households, including my own, was how to secure gifts of fish. As a woman, it is a taken-for-granted fact that the best way to secure a reliable supply of *plassas* fish is to 'love' with a fisherman. The flow of fine fish into our own cooking pot fluctuated wildly depending on the ups and downs of Buema's relationship with our neighbour — a married man who lived nearby with his family. I recorded this conversation on a day when Buema was particularly buoyant, having just received a visit from her lover:

When I got home, Buema was glowing. 'Did you see my fish? Over there, by

the well — go and look’. I went over to inspect the two beautiful red snappers, and gasped my appreciation. ‘Fine, eh? Abdul brought them for me! He went to sea today, and he didn’t get anything at all. Just those two fish. And he gave them to me!’

‘Yema [his wife] must be angry...’ I said, which delighted her.

‘Hahaha! Yeah, Yema’s mad! But they’re Abdul’s fish and he gave them to me. So let Yema be angry!’

As Buema’s easy dismissal of Yema’s anger suggests, she expected her affair with the other woman’s husband to be tolerated, however begrudgingly. Although men in Sierra Leone are permitted, by custom, to marry multiple wives, fully polygamous households are rare in Tissana. On the other hand, separation, remarriage and a whole spectrum of extramarital ‘love’ relationships are extremely common for both men and women. Many of these ostensibly ‘illicit’ affairs — like Buema’s relationship with Abdul — were veiled with only the faintest token gestures toward secrecy; and in fact, more often than not, were broadcast perfectly publicly in the daylight movements of large fish, from the boats of fishermen to the kitchens of their lovers. To a sharp observer, the movements of gifts of fish around town could be read as a map of the ever-shifting patterns of ‘loving’ in Tissana. People often asked me quite openly, for example, whether I was having an affair with my married friend, Kumba, because he was so often seen walking through town carrying large fish in the direction of our compound. In fact, his gifts were not motivated by love, but debt (but that is a different story).

In discussions of fishing communities elsewhere in Africa, similar patterns of

gift-giving are often pathologised under the term 'fish-for-sex' and read as evidence of sexual exploitation (Seeley 2009). Such language fails to do justice to the kinds of romances characteristic of Tissana's social life that, in my own experience, were usually underpinned by a very real thread of attraction and sentiment. That said, it is undeniable that single women (and sometimes married ones, too) do have an important material incentive to initiate these kinds of 'love' relationships, which become a key element of their basic livelihood strategies (cf. Leach 1994: 198-199).

When Buema finally called off her affair with Abdul, her daily workload increased dramatically, as we joined the many other households for whom 'begging' on the wharf was a constant daily chore. The level of skill this requires should not be underestimated. If the word 'beg' appears to suggest images of deferential supplication, in Tissana it has quite different connotations. 'Begging' is viewed instead as a form of labour. Indeed, it stands as testimony to Marriama's claim, that 'if you want *plassas* fish, you have to beg', that even the presence of a Western visitor in the house — cash-rich by any local standard — did almost nothing to diminish the amount of work Buema, was forced to invest, finding fish for our cooking pot each day.

This excerpt from my field notes was written on a day that I had gone fishing with the drag-boat crew. The scene it describes took place just after the large crew of men, women and children had spent several long hours wading waist-deep through the shallows, in order to guide the long fishing net in an arc around the beach:

Buema arrived at the shore just as the net was finally being dragged ashore.

She turned to me expectantly: ‘So where are your own fish, Jenny?’ I explained that they hadn’t paid me yet, and left her to go back down the wharf in search of my sandals. By the time I returned twenty minutes later, her plastic bag was bulging with fish; far more than any junior member of the crew had been paid for their hours of hard work. ‘How did you manage to get all those?’ I asked, incredulous, as we walked home. Buema laughed. ‘I beg, and I *barranta* [bully]. I begged them by force!’

On other days, when fish are less plentiful, begging is no easy job. Sometimes, I spent hours trailing Buema on the beach, going to meet one boat after another, as she flirted and pleaded and bullied until, finally, one of her friends or relatives, tired from a long day at sea, agreed to give us something. So strong is the expectation that friendly relationships ought to be made — and made material — through exchanges of this kind that Buema could hardly contain her frustration that my own superficial ‘popularity’ never quite manifested into a flood of fish:

Everywhere we go, they all greet you — ‘Jennifer! Jennifer!’ But they don’t give you anything! Oh, it makes me so angry for you! If they were to say, ‘Jennifer, Jennifer, Look, take this fish!’ — Now, that would be fine!

Buema’s experience illustrates that, whilst gifts of fish do tend to trace existing webs of friendship and affection, it nonetheless requires a considerable level of social skill and labour, to make rhetorical *claims* of relatedness in order to access this vital resource. The following section explores the other side of this dynamic, by revealing how bonds of affect may be built gradually over time, in part through the ongoing

exchange of fish.

Gifting Fish

One morning, when I joined the cluster of breakfast customers on the low benches of Fatmata's makeshift 'cookery', I found them — over the usual plastic bowls of fish soup and cassava — listening attentively to a fashionably dressed young stranger, Victor, a school student visiting his uncle for the holidays. By the time I arrived, he had already been holding forth for some time on the charms and conveniences of his hometown; a fishing town close to the capital. Then, abruptly, his tone changed. For there was one count on which, even Victor was prepared to admit, life in Tissana easily surpassed that in his hometown.

When I go back, I'm going to boast to all my friends; I'll tell them that I've been eating loads and loads of fish! [...] At home, I can't just go to the wharf and expect someone to give me fish for free, as they do for me here. No way! Except, maybe, if you're lucky to have a brother with a boat, maybe then he'll give you something... but my brothers don't have boats — so, me, I have to buy.

As a young, unknown man, with little money and almost no connections in town, it is not immediately evident why local fishermen would choose to instigate a gift relationship with someone like Victor. Certainly, there was little possibility — and apparently little expectation — that he would be able to return the gift (contra Mauss

1990[1925]). The Yawri Bay's population is so fluid that it is a commonplace for people to arrive in Tissana with no existing social network at all. My suggestion in this section is that the massive traffic in gifts of fish, which circulate each day across Tissana's wharf, provides one of the important material routes by which newcomers are able to become integrated into the town's sprawling network of potato rope kinship.

Victor's words both mirror — and, in important ways, differ from — those of a more long-term settler in the town. Having spent his childhood and young adult life in the city, David had grown up accustomed to a level of urban convenience truly luxurious by Tissana's standards. And yet, he told me, he feels more prosperous in Tissana than he ever had done in the city:

The first thing is that, here, we eat fish! Without buying! Even if my own boat did not catch any fish, I will go to my brothers when they 'slam' [return to land]; they will give me something to support my family...

Although both men place equal emphasis on the connection between gifts of fish and bonds of 'brotherhood', the Tissana fisherman is describing a quite different flow of causality between the two. While Victor had stressed that in his hometown, not being lucky enough to have a brother with a boat, he would never be given fish; David — who in fact has no biological kin in Tissana — refers to all those men who gift him fish as his 'brothers'.

David is by now well established in Tissana. He is married to one of the

town's best-known *banda* women, and has a boat of his own. Yet, when he first arrived, a decade earlier, he had had neither the fishing knowledge, the financial capital, nor the social network that one might think would be necessary to set himself up in the town. He goes on to explain how, in his first few months in Tissana, more established fishermen had allowed him to subsist by scavenging the shrimps from their fishing nets:

When I first came here, I didn't know how to fish. I didn't even understand water. But when the others went to sea, to draw *sim*-boat on the sandbar, I'd follow them there. I'd pick-pick the shrimps... But... then, after some time, after watching them, I began fishing for myself, with a hook and line first of all.

According to David's narrative, this initial willingness of the town's fishermen to give him fish — a complete newcomer — not only allowed him to subsist through those first difficult months on the coast, but also began the gradual process of his integration into the social fabric of Tissana. These small gifts were the tangible beginnings of the relationships with men he now considers to be his 'brothers'. Now himself an active member of Tissana's fishing economy, he was eager to stress that he extends a similar generosity to strangers on the wharf:

They say that in Lungi... they only give you fish if you're [already] a friend or family... [but] ... If you come here as a stranger, someone will come to you, give you fish, saying, 'this is a stranger!' We so like strangers!

Given that they often lead such mobile lives — and so routinely find themselves

cast in the role of ‘stranger’ in another fishing town — perhaps it is hardly surprising that Tissana’s fishermen tended to place such particular ideological emphasis on their willingness to give to outsiders. Here, Foday emphasises the strong sense of camaraderie that young crewmen like himself tend to experience on arrival in an unfamiliar fishing town:

Fishermen, we all move around so much; anywhere we go, we are like one big family. We are all brothers... Any wharf town you go to, fishermen will welcome you, find you a place to stay, food to eat, even clothes to wear! Yes! They will even take their own trousers and give them to you. They know that, if they came on *alehn* to you, you would do the same for them.

The parallels with the ways in which David amalgamates the expectation of material generosity with a sense of assumed ‘kinship’ are striking. Foday’s faith that he can consider any fisherman his ‘brother’ is predicated on a trust in the intricate gossamer web of material reciprocity that ultimately links every migratory fisherman to every other, constructing them all — even two strangers viewing one another for the first time in their lives — as though each were already established to the other as ‘donor’ and ‘benefactor’ in equal measure.

We saw in David’s own account of his arrival in Tissana that these small, seemingly free-floating acts of material kindness might, over time, sediment into something altogether more substantial. Out of the loose suspension of gift-giving, his network of ‘potato rope kinship’ eventually settled. There are clear parallels between this pattern, and the ways in which Charles Piot (1999: 52-75) describes the

formation of Kabre 'friendships' (*Ikpanŋŋɛ*). However, if the impression I have given so far is that it's easy to build and maintain social networks, I ought to stress that only a tiny fraction of these gift relationships are likely to formalise into anything resembling a stable kinship bond. In Tissana, 'becoming' kin requires consistent material investment, and relationships that are not nurtured in this way, can rapidly atrophy and fail. To illustrate this point, I turn now to look at some of the patterns by which fish flowed into, and rice was shared within, my own complex, adoptive household.

Collapsing Potato Rope Kinship

The once-grand compound in which I lived was home to an ever-shifting population of around thirty people, too fluid and fissured to be thought of as a single 'domestic unit' in any straightforward sense. Around a small core of long-term residents, other people — relatives, friends, fostered youngsters and strangers — would come, lodge for a while and leave again as their circumstances changed. This particular compound was larger, and therefore more complex than most in Tissana, but the general pattern was far from being unique. In a town of peripatetic fishermen and traders, it was rare for domestic arrangements to bear much resemblance to the 'English term household...[which] implies a special intimacy, a fusing of physiological functions and a real distinction from other types of social relations' (Harris 1981: 139).

For the duration of time that they lived there, most of the compound's

residents attached themselves, with a greater or lesser degree of clarity, to one of the loose units that formed around the different cooking pots in the kitchen. Each of the adults who ate from that pot was expected to contribute to it, whether in cash, fish or garden produce. Although these units had some of the characteristics of what we might call 'a family', they were not always — and certainly not only — defined by genealogical patterns of relatedness. Over any one period, there were usually two to four cooking pots active within the household — although, in the churning social dynamics of the compound these social units were in a perpetual state of arising, dissolving and reforming again in different constellations. Social networks within this single large compound were in a constant state of flux — often in direct response to individuals' success, or failure, to attract a flow of *plassas* fish in their direction.

Living under such cramped conditions, tempers were very often running high. In amongst all the laughter, the gossip, the intimate sharing of one another's small joys and strains, there were also frequent bursts of frustration and acrimony. The patterns by which rice was shared and exchanged between the different pots tended to be a fairly accurate map of the patterns of goodwill between residents. The micropolitics of sharing and withholding food were the largest single source of tension, resentment and, sometimes, hunger.

There is a rich literature in social anthropology examining how people accrete kinship relations through marriage, adoption and fostering. However, ethnographers have historically paid rather less attention to the way in which people may sever certain relationships, or allow others to atrophy. It was Caroline Bledsoe's fieldwork in Sierra Leone that led her to make this important observation:

Arguments that groups are shaped socially must acknowledge equally the opposite potential: eliminating some ties and rendering others marginal.

Divorce and infanticide are examples. However, radical efforts to sever ties are measures of last resort. Dissatisfaction between spouses, for example, is usually expressed more subtly, by neglecting sexual or domestic duties. It may also be expressed by marginalising individuals. (1995: 130)

In Tissanana, many people are living under such extreme material pressure, they are routinely forced to make extraordinarily tough choices: about which of their most intimate personal relations they can materially afford to nurture; and which they can morally and emotionally afford to neglect. And, just as gifts of fish or rice can instigate and nurture relationships, so, too, my field notes are filled with examples of relationships beginning to unravel and collapse because there were no fish to bind them together. Without gifts of fish, for example, girlfriends lose interest in their lovers, and people are ashamed to visit their relatives inland. I saw with one of the families in my own compound that, without the consistent presence of a cooking pot full of fish to hold them together, even fragile domestic units begin to dissolve, and family members scatter in search of other, more materially viable living arrangements.

Aminata had arrived at Site with five of her children, having recently fallen out with her mother in a nearby compound. With a newborn baby to care for, and a petty trading business to run, Aminata was struggling: only rarely did she find time to go down to the wharf and beg for fish. So strong is the stigma against feeding one's

family 'dry rice' [without fish] that, on the days that Aminata had not received any gift of fish, she simply would not cook — even if she had money. Instead, she (like many other people in Tissana) relied on the hope that one of her neighbours would share their food with her. I often heard Aminata complaining bitterly, that none of her wider family or neighbours had any interest in helping her. Speaking behind her back, Buema agreed that her friend would find it difficult to persuade anyone to share her material responsibilities. 'This is what makes men afraid of Aminata. When they see how many children she has, they're afraid to marry her. They don't want to take all those children and have to feed them all'.

For days on end, Aminata's cooking pot could sit cold and empty. And, although they continued to sleep under the same roof, I watched over the course of my fieldwork as all three of her teenage children sought ways to distance themselves from a family unit that appeared to be collapsing. Thirteen-year-old Ibrahim took to selling kerosene in order to pay for his own food. Ima and Marie, on the other hand, worked increasingly hard to attach themselves to alternative cooking pots, spending their days in the compounds of aunts and grandparents, offering to do chores, and so to be fed by these other relatives. Fostering is an extremely common practice in Tissana. Sometimes, young people are sent by their parents in a distant part of the country to live with relatives on the coast. It is just as common for children to move between households much more organically, because their current guardians were simply no longer able to provide for them.

The chances are that Ima and Marie would eventually be absorbed into another household, enmeshed in new, if fragile, webs of potato rope kinship:

although, as we will see, absorption into new households always comes at a risk.

The Dangers of 'Becoming' Kin

Elsewhere in the Mandé world, ethnographers have described infants continuing to develop biological bonds of relatedness after birth, absorbing the material substance of kinship through their mother's milk: milk, which is stimulated and fortified by the man's semen through continued sexual intercourse (Fortier 2001; Cros 1990). In Tissana, by contrast, the women I knew were careful to abstain from sex whilst breastfeeding. Yet, in quite different ways it was possible for the substance of relatedness to pass between a child and the people closest to their mother: not through bodily substances shared in sex, but in food. People often commented on the striking physical resemblances between a child, and the person who had given food to his or her mother whilst she was pregnant.

There are echoes here of Janet Carsten's well-known description of relatedness in a Malaysian fishing community, where individuals come to embody their kinship identity only gradually, over the course of their lifetime, through the continuous process of giving, receiving and consuming food together. In Tissana, much as she described, 'not only is 'social' identity [...] unfixed, but 'physical' identity, a person's substance, is also continuously acquired and alterable' (1995: 225).

If this language of 'giving', 'sharing' and 'becoming kin' appears to imply

selfless munificence, it is worth remembering that kinship itself 'often carries ambivalent or negative qualities, which anthropologists tend to dwell on rather less' (Carsten 2013: 245; cf. Geschiere 2013). Many of Tissana's foster parents *were* conscientious, loving carers to the children in their custody. However, it was taken for granted that foster children were often expected to work the hardest, for the least reward, in order to earn their right to eat from the household cooking pot. To illustrate this tension, here is Sento, describing the sacrifices she made over her long career as a foster mother:

Right now, I've got eleven here...: all on the back of this fish that I sell! Even just now, a Ndema fisherman just came and left his son with me. He's not my relative! He just came here on *alehn*, and when he left, he asked to leave his boy here with me. To foster is not easy-oh! Strain! I manage, though; I endure. Before school, they eat. When they come out of school, they eat! It's not easy. I don't have money-oh! I don't have anything, but I do have patience.

However, here is Finda is contemplating the fine line between familial care and labour exploitation she observed in Sento's home:

Do you see all the children she has there? Some go to school, some don't go to school... Her own children are all at boarding school. But her sister's children now: some are just there to work — to pull water from the well, to dry fish, nothing more! ... If it was England, they'd say it was against 'human rights', wouldn't they? But in a place like Tissana, there are no 'human rights'.

The adult women who shared my compound, would sometimes swap stories of the abuse and neglect they remember having endured as children, living under the 'care' of foster parents who had appeared more interested in exploiting their labour than protecting their wellbeing. For all of these women, some of their most emotive and painful childhood memories concerned being given nothing rotten leftovers to eat. Viewed from this perspective, the intimacy expressed in the offer of food to a hungry neighbour, can easily slide toward a visceral expression of control.

To give a quite different example of the relationship between food and power: The house I lived in had been built by a politician, Pa Thomas, who was by far the most infamous local big-man in Tissana's living memory. Pa Thomas had been famous at the height of his political career for the lavish generosity with which he distributed food to supporters and opponents alike. Throughout his ministerial career he had spent a significant portion of his government budget keeping a store house piled high with sacks of rice: 'We still have the pots now. You've seen them? Big-big-big! ... Anyone who came here to visit, they'd eat till they were belly-full — *pim!* There was always rice for that' (Pa Dulai, Site). Although very few patrons are able to distribute food so regularly, or on such a massive scale, 'big pots' are a widespread symbol of local power across Sierra Leone; one which, as Marianne Ferme put it, 'underscored the centrality of food for occasions ranging from the mundane to the ritual and esoteric' (2001:130),

Pa Thomas is far from being a wholly benign figure in Tissana's collective memory. His leadership was characterised by such levels of political intimidation

that, in many people's estimation, there had been sinister overtones to the 'generosity' that enabled him to manipulate a poor electorate. Here, one of his supporters is reminiscing: 'If ever someone came to him wanting to raise a dispute with him, he'd say, "Come, come, first, let's eat!" He used to say, "When a person has your sweat in their belly, they can do you no harm!"' (Hawa, Tissana).

The big-man's comment could be read as a figurative expression of a much more diffuse dynamic of patronage, whereby one would expect material support (including food) to be repaid with loyalty and political allegiance (Richards 1986:128). During the years of the civil war, even rebel soldiers attempted to win civilian support by distributing food (Schepler 2011: 48). In other contexts, people were explicit in drawing a much more literal connection between consuming food cooked in another person's kitchen, and surrendering control over one's body and social agency.

Jacob was constantly urging me to be more careful in this regard: 'If they offer you rice when you go down [to the other end of town], don't eat it! Do you hear?' The reason for his caution was the common belief that *ifohn wei* (bad medicine) is in wide circulation in Tissana. 'They might have put something in it', he would warn me, sagely, '*to influence you*'. Sensing the resilience of his guest's naïveté, he would never tire of trying to impress the urgency of this lesson upon me, a lesson that most of Tissana's residents had learned from early childhood. For his part, Jacob insisted there were fewer than a handful of close family members whose cooking he would be prepared to eat. Any other gifts were politely accepted and discreetly disposed of. In this sense, hungry children like Ima and Marie are amongst the most vulnerable

people in Tissana — not only because they were often undernourished, but also because their poverty placed them at the mercy of anyone who was prepared to feed them.

Conclusions

This article has explored the ‘human economy’ (Graeber 2012) of Tissana; tracing the ongoing material and emotional labour that my neighbours invested each day, attempting to negotiate webs of friendship and intimacy by giving, receiving, and ‘begging’ for fish on the wharf. Over the past decade, fisherfolk in Tissana, as elsewhere in West Africa, have watched with trepidation as their catches become ever smaller and less predictable. Nowadays, men and women alike are more conscious than ever that their best hope of material security is to be enmeshed in webs of social ties, that will catch them when their catches fail. It is at this juncture — between heightened forms of social fluidity, and the urgent material need for social connectedness — that we can begin to imagine the importance of the kind of relationships Buema was describing when she told me about ‘potato rope families’.

Maurice Bloch has argued that ‘sharing food is, and is always seen to be, in some way or another, the sharing of that which will cause, or at least maintain, a common substance among those who commune together’ (1999: 133). Perhaps there is some truth in Bloch’s suggestion that, in ‘every’ social context, eating together is a powerful expression of personal intimacy and ‘common substance’. However, it seems obvious that the micropolitics of food-sharing take on a completely different tenor in a world — such as Tissana’s — where households

routinely spend their entire income on food; where many people move from one day to the next unsure where their next meal is coming from. In a context where most people have had the experience of going to bed without managing to eat at all, food sharing takes on an emotional and practical urgency that most people in wealthy countries would find difficult to imagine.

In this sense, the experience of Tissana's fisherfolk mirrors poignant accounts from ethnographers in more urban contexts across contemporary Africa, where residents are repeatedly described as struggling to navigate social lives in conditions of 'routinized crisis' (Johnson-Hanks 2005: 367), precariousness, and uncertainty (Vigh 2012; Cooper and Pratten 2015). Such accounts offer an important counterpoint to those post-modern social theorists who, in recent decades, have tended to romanticise mobility and social fluidity as expressions of 'freedom' and 'resistance' (Engebrigtsen 2017). In a context in which the very fabric of social life is in flux, many people share a sense of insecurity about "with whom they can live and work, with whom they can talk and what kind of collective future they can anticipate" (Simone 2006: 360). This stark view is echoed by Achille Mbembe, who points to the 'radicalisation... of temporariness' as a defining — and brutal — feature of neoliberal Africa (in Shipley 2010: 659).

Viewed in this light, the work Tissana's residents invest in building potato rope families should not only be celebrated, as a creative response to uncertainty (cf. Cooper and Pratten 2015). I have suggested that this work of building relationships through material exchange, also needs to be recognized as an unavoidable, all-consuming daily struggle to construct some sense of ontological security. As we

have seen, it is not a struggle at which everyone succeeds. In a context in which relationships must be materially made and remade, rather than ever simply assumed, 'potato rope' families are sometimes liable to collapse as easily as they were formed.

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