

Slippery Fish, Material Words:
The Substance of Subsistence in Coastal
Sierra Leone

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This book is dedicated to Pa Yanker, who is the wisest person I know; and to Salta, who is the strongest.

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A Note on Translations

Tissana is a highly multilingual community. Almost all the conversations quoted in this book were conducted in the *lingua franca*, Krio and translated by me into English. Where no adequate English translation exists for a word, I have retained the Krio terminology. However, ambiguity does occasionally arise as a result of the closeness between English and Krio. Below is a list of Krio terms used in the text, including a few which appear familiar but have a subtly different meaning than English speakers might assume.

Alehn	A wharf town; OR the act of migrating between wharf towns.
Baff	Large rubber tub used for measuring fish.
Banda	Smokehouse for drying fish.
Banda-woman	Fish-processor.
Bonga	The bony, herring-like fish that swim in large shoals through the Yawri Bay.
Boss-man	The owner of a boat, who may or may not also go to sea as the captain of the boat.
Bundu	Women's initiation society.
Devil	Nature spirit, occasionally embodied in the form of a masked figure. The word has no particular implications of evil.
Dreg-man	Lowly labourer.
Fetish medicine	Powerful esoteric substances that may be used to harm, heal or protect from danger.
Fetish people	Ritual specialists.
Gbeshe	The person born after twins (who, in common with twins themselves, is usually considered a 'witch').
Ghana-boat	12-15-man fishing vessel.
Kustoment	Respective partners in a long-term trading relationship.
Sim-boat	Onshore dragnet fishing method.
Phone-man	A 'witch-eyed' fisherman able to hear fish moving beneath the water.
Plassas	The leaf-based sauce, eaten with rice and fish.
Plassas Fish	Fish for household consumption, often given as a gift.
Poro	Men's initiation society.
Stranger	Migrant.
Swear	To put a curse on someone (typically the unknown or suspected perpetrator of a crime).
Tross	To loan money, or to sell on credit.
Turn-Turn	To manipulate/charm.
Wap	To give fish away, free, to the people who come and beg on the wharf.
Witch	A person, sometimes described as possessing 'four eyes', who can see, and so move, beyond the superficially visible landscape. The word does not necessarily imply evil.
Yele boat	3-5-man fishing vessel.

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List of Abbreviations

EJF	Environmental Justice Foundation
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

Chapter 1. Introduction

‘When a person blesses you, that's how they add [to your wealth]’

Throughout the day in Tissana, almost every person's attention is trained, even if only from the corner of their eye, towards the ocean: waiting.

Although it has a population of around 5,000 people — enough to be considered a fairly substantial town by Sierra Leonean standards — Tissana's homes and thatched smokehouses (*bandas*) straggle in such a narrow, sandy strip along the shore that one is rarely more than a couple minutes' walk from the sea. Together, a bundle of familiar stock images — coconut palms, mango trees and bright wooden boats — lend Tissana a veneer of easy, tropical tranquility. But this first impression belies the anxious, youthful energy of life on this maritime frontier. Moving back and forth along the two-mile beach that doubles as the town's wharf and its main pedestrian artery, Tissana's residents keep a vigilant eye on the horizon, scanning it for the appearance of a familiar patchwork sail, or the recognisable silhouette of a canoe, heading back to land. Even as women and men go about their work in gardens, kitchens and smokehouses further inland, their conversations are consistently drawn back out to sea, across the watery skyline: expressing sympathy for the fishermen exposed under oppressive sun or torrential rainy season downpours; speculating where the

fish might be shoaling; worrying aloud which boats, if any, will return to town with a decent catch.

By dusk, around a hundred boats will have been dragged out of the water, to rest in single file under the trees that line the long wharf. Some are tiny dugout canoes of the kind Sherbro men have used to navigate this coast for generations. Nowadays, however, these traditional vessels are far outnumbered by heavier, plank-built boats, the most impressive of which require a crew of twenty strong men just to drag their heavy kilometer-long seine nets from the sea. Weighed down with a large catch, a plank-built boat will – within moments of landing on Tissana Wharf - already be surrounded by a crowd, ready for what my friend Jacob was fond of calling ‘the scramble for fish’.

A slight and softly spoken young man, Tito bore no outward resemblance to the bombastic ‘big man’ of West African cliché (Bayart 1993 [1989]; Strother 2000; Bentor 2008). Yet, as owner of the longest fishing net in Tissana, he was a prominent figure in the local economy. On a day-to-day basis, the crew of Tito’s boat were as likely as any other to return from sea disappointed. Occasionally, though, they succeeded in filling those kilometre-long nets to their capacity and, when they did, the catch would be spectacular enough to generate considerable commotion in town. Here, Tito is describing one such day. Long before his crew reached land, women up and down Tissana’s two-mile wharf had spotted the silhouette of his boat moving unusually heavily in the water, weighed down with the day’s remarkable catch. By the time the fishermen finally drew back to their landing site, they had met several hundred people there awaiting them expectantly on the shore.

The fish that we gave people passed ten *baffs*¹ ('bath-pans')! More than 500,000 leones [£100], if I had sold them. That's what we gave away to people. Big fish — fine fish... to the mummies, the girlfriends, the brothers, to all those people who just came and begged, no more — we gave them all. (Tito, boat owner)

Half a million leones is a substantial amount of money in Tissana: a bustling, though impoverished, fishing town on the shores of Sierra Leone's Yawri Bay. At the time of my fieldwork, it would have been enough to buy a small canoe complete with fishing tackle. But Tito was not exaggerating. I had been there on the wharf that morning, as crowds of expectant women waded chest-deep into the sea to press around his boat, and had witnessed when this 'scramble for fish' eventually dispersed: tens of dozens of people drifting home, relieved, each wielding a fine fish or two for their household's cooking pot.

This ethnographic snapshot allows us to glimpse some of the most distinctive material qualities of life in Tissana, the frontier town that forms the ethnographic locus of this book. It points to the powerful sense in which maritime space is gendered: whilst most of my male neighbours led highly mobile lives, for women, time and watery space take on altogether different properties. They may be equally dependent on the ocean and its resources, but for Tissana's women the seascape is an inaccessible space: a horizon across which they watch their partners disappear each morning, and from where, they hope, they will see them return bearing fish. Further, what is revealed in the image of dozens of hopeful supplicants pressed around Tito's boat is the visceral material urgency driving people's everyday pursuit of fish on the wharf. Day-to-day life for many people in Tissana is permeated with a profound sense of material insecurity: that the

¹ From the English word 'bath', these large rubber tubs — about a metre across and 50cm deep — are the standard measure by which smaller fish are sold on the wharf.

fragile, unpredictable fishing economy may one day soon fail to meet their most basic livelihood needs. In a town where many are only just managing to survive at the edge of subsistence, land-based fisherfolk invest an enormous amount of their creative energies, working to build and sustain the webs of social relations (*subabu*) that might enable them to ‘catch’ fish on land.

On a less exceptional fishing day, Tito’s crew would have been content to have caught even half of the amount of fish that they gave away on that day. Yet, when I asked if Tito ever grew tired of being so relentlessly begged by neighbours and strangers on the wharf, he had seemed rather taken aback by the question:

No! I don’t get annoyed! If you do good, you yourself will get. When a person blesses you, tells you: ‘Thank you, may God bless’, that’s how they add [to your wealth]. But if you just hold [your catch] and say, ‘This is only for me’, you never know what you will meet up. This money, we find it now but we don’t know how [long] it will last with us.

In Tissana, as in all places, material transactions depend upon two people judging that, at that moment, the things they are exchanging are somehow ‘equivalent’ in value (Guyer 2004). The closer one examines this seemingly simple concept, its complexity multiplies, for nothing ever becomes ‘valued’ in a historical vacuum² (Roitman 2007: 158; Blim 2012). When we come across a surprising situation, such as a town in which poor fishermen routinely exchange the very substance of their subsistence for the spoken blessing of a stranger, it serves as a vivid reminder that, in any

² Earlier this year, a group of prominent anthropologists met to debate the possibility of developing a single ‘theory of value’, encompassing both meanings of the word in English: that is, the cost of our material possessions and the essence of our most deeply held political and ethical convictions (Otto, 2013; Lambek, 2013; Graeber, 2013; Sahlins, 2013). Ultimately, their ethnographic studies pointed in such a diversity of directions that the conveners concluded by arguing that ‘anthropology denotes an ‘anti-theory’ of value, and this is exactly where its strength is situated’ (Otto 2013: 4).

economic context, even the most routine daily act of valuation must inevitably connect into a much broader set of philosophical convictions about the substance of the material world they inhabit.

In this frontier town, fish are the substance out of which relationships are nurtured, and the subject of countless daily negotiations, both dramatic and mundane. Fish form the basis of almost every meal and the foundation of almost every person's livelihood: almost all working-aged men are sea-going fishermen, and most women earn at least part of their living buying fish on the wharf and drying them to sell on at marginal profit to the traders who gather here from across Sierra Leone. For many people, fish are also the source of profound, and deepening, anxiety. Fishing never was a predictable business, but it has become radically less so in recent decades. By the time I began fieldwork in 2011 a combination of local overfishing and damaging exploitation by internationally-owned trawlers had left Sierra Leone's once bountiful waters worryingly degraded (EJF 2012).

This juxtaposition of high levels of mobility and the urgent material need for close social networks generates a complex web of social tensions. So, as fish catches have become smaller and more erratic in recent decades (EJF 2012), many fisherfolk reflect on their growing impoverishment through discourses that emphasise their *moral* ambivalence at being drawn back into binding webs of interpersonal dependency. A tension animating many aspects of everyday life is how, through the strategic deployment of material gifts, people are able to nurture the *subabu* they depend upon for their survival, whilst simultaneously attempting to eschew other, less appealing social entanglements.

In common with many of Sierra Leone's fishing towns, Tissana has experienced rapid population growth in recent decades as a steady stream of marginalised young people, facing limited opportunities at home, relocated to the coast hoping to find a new kind of life on the sea.

As such, this frontier economy provides a window into broader patterns of youth 'navigation' (Vigh 2009) in contemporary Africa. Right across the continent, anthropologists have been describing the struggles young people face, as they attempt to come of age in precarious worlds shaped by extended periods of economic decline, political neglect, and violence. In many parts of Africa, youth have found themselves trapped in situations in which the 'possibilities of living decent lives are negligible' (Christiansen *et al*, 2006: 9). In the 1990s and early 2000s, Sierra Leone provided a tragically brutal case-in-point. As the country spiralled into eleven years of civil war, violence came to be understood as a viable form of migrant labour and a unique opportunity for social mobility by a generation of frustrated young people who saw no opportunities for themselves anywhere else (e.g. Peters 2011, Utas 2008, Vigh 2006).

Unlike most ethnographic studies to emerge from Sierra Leone in the past two decades, this is not a book about violence; nor is it even, explicitly, a book about post-war 'reconciliation'. I arrived in Tissana in 2010, eight years after peace was officially declared, at a time when the scars of fear and violence were gradually becoming less raw. And yet, this immediate legacy of societal collapse continued to shape people's everyday lives in profound ways; people who were struggling to build viable livelihoods in a context in which the political, economic, and moral fabric remained brittle and threadbare. At a personal level, this violent history had implications for individuals' ability to establish the trusting relationships they depend upon for their survival. In a town of migrants, it is often impossible to know what stories might lurk in one's neighbour's past.

The Sierra Leonean state, which had already been extremely fragile even before its infrastructure was shredded by civil war, has yet to recover from the violence of the 1990s. It is in places like Kagboro, which lack the infrastructure and political connections to attract outside investment, that the grinding pace of post-war reconstruction is most acutely felt. One might imagine that the decade following the end of violence would have been characterised by a growing

sense of reintegration into postwar national politics, coupled with a steady increase in material security and wellbeing. But the people I knew in Tissana inhabited a landscape in which basic institutions remained in tatters: the police were ineffective; the health clinic and schools were desperately under resourced; the only access road, all but impassable. Here, as Lorenzo Bordanaro recently observed in Guinea-Bissau, most people experience the state as 'irrelevant' in shaping their everyday strategies of survival and resilience (2009: 39).

And yet, despite its peripheral position in relation to the state, there are other respects in which Tissana is part of a highly interconnected, cosmopolitan world. For all its apparent remoteness, the town depends for its very existence on its position within wider flows of people, cash — and fish. Sierra Leone's population depends on fish for 64% of its dietary protein (Laurenti 2008: 64). Spreading for almost two miles along the southern shore of the Kagboro Peninsula, Tissana Wharf sits almost exactly at the centre of the country's most productive fishery. Each week, traders converge here from every major market town as far as Koidu on the eastern border. Fish dried in Kagboro's smokehouses eventually find their way to household cooking pots in every corner of the country, from Freetown's crowded slums to the remotest forest village. The town is one of a cluster of bustling multiethnic wharf towns (*alehns*) that surround the busy fisheries of the Yawri Bay and the Sherbro River estuary. Fishermen move easily back and forward between these neighbouring coastal settlements. Where captains take their boats, or land their catch, will vary from day to day depending on where they believe they are most likely to encounter shoaling fish, or fetch the best price for their catch on the wharf.

Set against this backdrop, this book traces the material strategies adopted by men and women as they struggle to survive at the intersection between a depleted ecology, a threadbare postwar state, and a social order in which the basic rules of authority, kinship, intimacy, and trust are all perceived to be in a state of flux.

Problematic

Like Tissana, wharf towns all along Sierra Leone's coast began to mushroom from the 1960s as steady streams of rural migrants were drawn by new economic opportunities on the coast. In some respects, the social history of these burgeoning fishing communities echoes that found in accounts of frontier boom towns all across Africa (Mitchell 1956; Boswell 1969; De Boeck 2001; Walsh 2003, 2009). When large numbers of young people converge in an unfamiliar landscape, a space opens up in which new patterns of moral economy emerge. In a region in which we have come to correlate 'memory' with the collective scars of slavery (Shaw 2002; Ferme 2001) and civil war (McGovern 2012; Bolten 2012), Tissana's older residents look back with nostalgia to the youthful energy, conspicuous consumption and seemingly easy 'freedom' of their town's brief boom time years.

Nowadays, however, this optimistic narrative is wearing thin. The stagnation and marginalisation, experienced in most parts of postwar Sierra Leone (Leach 2015), have been exacerbated in coastal communities by an ecological crisis with roots in the global political economy of fuel and fish. Climate change (Lam *et al* 2012), and destructive overexploitation by trawlers serving European fish markets (Lucht 2011, EJF 2012) have led to a collapse in fish stocks across West Africa. As is too often the case, an environmental crisis caused by overconsumption in some the world's wealthiest places, is being felt most strongly by its poorest and most vulnerable populations. Tissana's fisherfolk are well aware that their impoverishment is shaped by broader structures of global economic injustice. But, operating from a position of powerlessness, they were more likely to focus their resentment and frustrations much closer to home (cf. Booth *et al.* 1999: 23; Whitehead 1990; Schoepf and Schoepf 1988). As catches become ever smaller and less predictable, this unrelenting material insecurity creates tensions that are ricocheting through the fabric of households and communities, putting new pressures on families, friendships and gender

relations. Many fisherfolk reflect on their growing impoverishment through discourses that emphasise their *moral* ambivalence at being drawn back into binding webs of interpersonal dependency.

What interests me in particular are the ways in which social and economic relationships are shaped by the material – *and immaterial* – fabric of this maritime world. Within this broad category, I include the physical contours of the coastal topography, as well as the specific substance of fish and other valuable livelihood resources: but I also include the particular social construction of space, value, and materiality.

At its core, then, this is a work about the materiality of human relationships: of social bonds formed and lived under conditions of such stark economic uncertainty that, very often, ‘love’ and ‘livelihood’ are difficult to disaggregate — and even more difficult to trust. Relationships in Tissana often have a peculiarly fleshy, ethnographically observable aspect: one can go a long way towards mapping the town’s fluctuating networks of love, friendship, debt and obligation simply by watching the flows of fish and rice weaving their shifting patterns through Tissana’s social fabric. However, this region of West Africa also raises a particular set of problems for any ethnographer interested in the materiality of economic life.

Across the Upper Guinea Coast, a rich ethnographic literature attests to the importance of strategies of ‘secrecy’ at every level of social and political life (Ferme 2001; Bellman 1979, 1984; Murphy 1998; Shaw 2002). In the maritime economy, this diffuse regional aesthetic of secrecy intersects with a coastal topography that provides ample opportunity for people to move in and out view, across the watery horizon. Within the contours of this physical and economic landscape, Sierra Leone’s famed ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ (Ferme 2001) finds palpable expression, and a

weight of material urgency, in everyday gendered transactions of fishing, gift-exchange and relatedness.

Running as a thread throughout my ethnography, I examine the ways in which unambiguously pragmatic livelihood strategies are interwoven with material strategies that might appear to belong to the sphere of 'ritual' or 'esoteric' practice. Anthropologists working across West Africa have often pointed to the ways in which spiritual agencies are seen to inhabit material substances (Ferme 2001; Tonkin 1979; Last 1998; Soares 2005), in a context in which hidden, sequestered realms of knowledge and action play a central role in political life (Shaw 2002; Piot 1993; Murphy 1998; Leach 2000). This interweaving of material substances with immaterial agencies has been discussed, both for its intrinsic interest as one facet of a complex regional cosmology (e.g. Jędrej 1974, 1976; MacGaffey 1988; Tonkin 2000); and also for the ways in which it supports a regional model of charismatic power (Ferme 2001; Strother 2000).

What I reveal through my ethnographic discussion, is how these particular constructions of im/materiality are both revealed — and produced — through the mundane practices of artisanal fishing, gift-exchange and relatedness. My approach is to treat the material value of fetish medicines, swears and blessings not so much as a matter of 'belief', but rather as an economic fact with direct consequences for the ways in which people seek to balance their tight livelihoods. The blessings Tito accepted in exchange for his precious fish encapsulate this problematic. Despite their communication through so seemingly ephemeral a medium as speech, the people I knew in Tissana insisted that blessings carry a weight of value far beyond that of 'mere' expressions of gratitude or goodwill. Indeed (as I discuss in Chapter 7), fisherfolk describe spoken blessings, and exchange them, as though they were a material element of the economy.

But why does it really matter if a blessing is treated as materially valuable, just as fish are? In an economy as tight as Tissana's, this surprising valuation has powerful consequences for people's livelihoods. It enables somebody with nothing to survive. By adopting an economic perspective, grounded in a detailed description of people's everyday livelihood strategies, we can begin to see how seemingly esoteric realms of knowledge — about the relationship between 'agencies, and their material forms' (Ferme 2001: 4) — become *relevant* in people's lives through their economic practices: through the decisions they make about how to invest their meagre resources, in fishing, trading and building relationships.

It could be tempting to summarise Tissana's economic history as a series of familiar trajectories: between relative degrees of impoverishment or precarity; from more 'socially embedded' to more 'market-based' modes of organising economic life, and then the inverse. Although these shorthand categories do capture many important aspects of people's shifting economic experience, they overlook the most interesting distinctive qualities of social transformation on this coast. As I discuss in the sections below, most of Tissana's residents have lived through a period in which the material substance of landscape they inhabit and the resources they depend upon for their survival have changed.

In the first section, I introduce some of the key themes that emerge in existing accounts of Sierra Leone's rural moral economy. I consider how the autopsy of Sierra Leone's civil war revealed a seam of resentment amongst dependant farmers, the depth of which appears to have been underestimated in earlier ethnographic accounts, before considering how these patterns of marginalisation were entangled in broader structures of neglect and economic exploitation. In second section, I spend a few pages contemplating where 'morality' resides in the economic order. My suggestion is that people's intuitive sense of what is permissible or possible in economic life is, for the most part, taken for granted. The 'morality' of economic behaviour is most likely to become

the subject of explicit public reflection, available to ethnographic observation, at moments of important social rupture. One of the core propositions running through this book is that the anxieties that preoccupy people in Tissana often gain their particular salience through the juxtaposition against the agricultural hinterland that many left behind when they decided to relocate to the sea. In the third part of this chapter, I contemplate how certain well-known characteristics of Sierra Leonean agrarian culture have either been undermined or taken on new forms within the Yawri Bay's watery topography, to shape the unique contours of Tissana's moral, social and economic life. I end by returning to reflect in a more general way on how people's pragmatic judgements of exchange value may offer a window into their taken-for-granted knowledge of the material order.

A Moral Economy of Rural Sierra Leone

Whilst little research has been published on Sierra Leone's vibrant commercial maritime world³, my focus on the mundane contestations of economic life places this monograph within a well-established genre of regional ethnography. Some of the richest work to emerge from Sierra Leone in the pre-war period had explored the everyday material tensions that ran half-hidden through agrarian households and villages (Richards 1986; Ferme 2001; Leach 1994). Across the broader West African region, anthropologists have highlighted the legacy of slavery in shaping the complexity and ambivalence of contemporary family relationships (Argenti 2010). There is a long intellectual precedent, too, to my own interest in the ways people conceptualise and 'use' wealth, with ethnographers of Sierra Leone often describing the wealth of 'big' people measured in terms of their mastery of valuable 'secret' knowledge, and their ability to protect, provide for and patronise a large number of dependants (d'Azevedo 1962b; Ferme 2001; Murphy 1980).

³ Carol MacCormack's (1982) household survey of Katta village, conducted in the late-1970s, is one exception.

Rice farming across the forested regions of the Upper Guinea Coast is labour-intensive. Land itself is rarely in short supply and, in principle at least, anyone who begs permission from the head of a landholding lineage can expect to be granted access to an area of land to cultivate. Far more challenging is mobilising the labour required to clear the densely foliated land and coax a harvest from its unforgiving soils. Against this ecological context, a constant preoccupation for the head of any farming household is how to cultivate relationships of dependency, through marriage, fostering, moneylending and other forms of patronage (Leach 1994), with people who will then be obliged to provide labour on their farm. The flip side of this relationship is that for most people in farming communities, their identity, safety and well-being — even their most basic food security — are all contingent upon being able to rely on the protection of some more powerful patron (d’Azevedo 1962a; Richards 1986; Booth *et al.* 1999).

It is difficult to understand the resonance of these power relations without some sense of a not so distant history in which domestic ‘slavery’ (*wono*) had been one of the region’s most important institutions (Little 1967 [1951]; Ferme 2001; d’Azevedo 1962b; Murphy 1980). Estimates vary but by some reckonings as many as three-quarters of the population of the Upper Guinea Coast had been ‘slaves’ in the early part of the 19th century (Holsoe 1977: 294). They ‘provided the basis, in fact, of the social system, and upon their labours as domestics depended, very largely, whatever agricultural culture [Sierra Leone] possessed’ (Little 1967 [1951]: 37).

In 1928, domestic slavery was outlawed by the colonial regime: although then (as now) it was not immediately clear to the British administrators what exactly it meant to be a ‘slave’ in Sierra Leone. Certainly, the institution bore little resemblance to shackle-and-chains models of slavery familiar from colonial plantation economies (Rodney 1970; Hair 1971; MacCormack 1977b). Precolonial European visitors knew very well that it was common for people to be bought,

captured or tricked into dependency, but they often had difficulties distinguishing these individuals from their 'free' neighbours by any visible measure of material wealth or lifestyle (Kopytoff and Miers 1977: 5). In a region in which social personhood is typically described as *depending* upon 'belonging' to a group 'in the double sense of the word in English — that is, they are members of the group and also part of its wealth, to be disposed of in its best interests' (ibid: 9) — to be owned as a 'slave' was to occupy one position, albeit a particularly powerless and stigmatised one, within a social structure in which *all* persons were 'owned'. So, for example, migrants would sometimes voluntarily place themselves in positions of absolute dependency very similar to that of a 'slave' after fleeing their home following war or a personal dispute (ibid).

Over ninety years have passed since slavery officially became illegal in Sierra Leone, but the legacy of these historical power structures continues to be strongly felt in rural areas today. It remains the case, for example, that the most powerful individuals in any village are invariably those able to demonstrate the longest genealogical roots in the land. More vulnerable people, the ones most likely to end up working as labourers on another person's farm, typically trace their descent from people who arrived in the village more recently, as client strangers or captured slaves (Murphy 1980; d'Azevedo 1962a; Sarró 2010; Berliner 2010).

Behind this apparently simple model of inherited power, commentators have repeatedly emphasised the subtlety of the ways in which people attempt to manipulate the labour of their weaker neighbours (Murphy 1980; d'Azevedo 1962a; Ferme 2001). So, whilst a person's high status is typically legitimised in terms of their direct descent from the village's original founding figure, it is apparently fairly common for elders to reinvent the public version of descent accounts to more closely mirror the lived reality of village politics, extending the ancestral roots of successful people deeper into their village's genealogical history (d'Azevedo 1962b: 510). Meanwhile, Caroline Bledsoe (1980, 1990b, 1995), Mariane Ferme (2001) and Melissa Leach (1994) all emphasised the

range of covert strategies that enabled women (in particular) to manoeuvre successfully through this economic environment, even from a position of apparent weakness. Taken together, this body of literature produced a highly nuanced image of how men and women in hunter-farmer villages worked to navigate a complex web of overt and covert relationships in order to balance fragile livelihoods in an unpredictable ecology.

Until the 1990s, then, ethnographers had tended to emphasise that, for all the evident stratification of village-level economics, ‘differentials [of wealth] are fluid, even reversible’ (Leach 1994: 185; cf. Richards 1986; Booth *et al.* 1999). However, viewed retrospectively through the dark lens of civil war, the patronage system has come to be viewed by many with a heightened misgiving, as a key source of the frustrations that had eventually erupted so destructively in rural communities (Richards 2004, 2005; Murphy 2010; Knörr and Filho 2010; Peters 2010).

Civil War and Economic Life

Over the past two decades much of the discussion of Sierra Leone’s economic life has been preoccupied with making sense of the violence that ravaged the country throughout the 1990s. The conflict had initially perplexed outside observers: Sierra Leone was not divided by any obvious ethnic or religious tensions; nor had combatants seemed able to articulate any coherent political motives for fighting. In any case, the violence was far more often directed against civilians than enemy soldiers. Nothing about this war made sense within traditional models of war-as-nation-state-politics. Then, towards the end of the 1990s, a new theoretical framework came to the fore, which appeared to render the conflict legible to Western observers: the violence, we were told, was driven not by political grievance but by the simple logic of economic ‘greed’ (cf. Collier 2000).

Starting from the common observation that all factions relied heavily on cash from the sale of alluvial diamonds, many commentators reasoned that the war had been, at heart, *about* diamond wealth (Douglas 1999; Gberie *et al.* 2000; Malaquias 2001); that everyone, from warlords to impoverished young fighters, had been drawn into the conflict by the promise that fortunes were to be made on the violent fringes of an illicit global trade. This explanation resonated powerfully in the international media where, alongside emotive images of amputees and Kalashnikov-toting children, 'blood diamonds' have come to be seen as one of the key icons of the Sierra Leone war.

If this 'blood diamond' discourse can be read as a bleak meditation on the corrupting potential of incorporation into the global capitalist order, anthropologists with a more specific ethnographic knowledge of the region responded by drawing renewed attention to the fissures inherent in 'traditional' economic life. When anthropologists began listening to the accounts of ex-combatants, the narratives they heard consistently painted a much more brutal image of village life than we were used to seeing. Again and again, young men claimed that they had been driven from their villages — and into one or other of the rebel factions — because they were routinely exploited by their wealthier neighbours, who abused customary law in what essentially amounted to patterns of indentured labour (Richards 2005, 2004; Peters and Richards 1998; Peters 2010; Humphreys and Weinstein 2004, 2006). In place of an earlier interest in the contingency and mutability of patron-client relationships, post-war ethnographers are much more likely to emphasise the brutal inequities of village life. A prominent thread in postwar ethnographic descriptions of agrarian life in Sierra Leone is summarised neatly here, by Paul Richards: 'The more docile among the descendants of the former farm slaves continue to work the land for subsistence returns. Others, less willing to queue in line for increasingly uncertain patrimonial scraps, default on their fines, are hounded into vagrancy and end up as protagonists of war' (2005: 585). This book is strongly informed by the work of scholars, including Paul Richards and Krijin Peters, who

emphasise the importance of this deeper history in understanding the tensions that characterise contemporary Sierra Leonean society. What we do need to be careful of, however, is sliding towards teleological narratives of how Sierra Leone's history of slavery led, inevitably, to a violent modern war (Jackson 2005). The danger is that we arrive at an image of peacetime life as inherently — inevitably — pathological (see Reno 2003: 156).

A Crisis of Youth?

In the rural context, most rebel fighters described themselves participating in a 'revolution' against the injustices of a gerontocratic society. The dowry system, combined with patterns of formal and informal polygyny, excluded the poorest rural men from marrying. In a context where social maturity has long been defined by one's ability to marry and support a family, these long-term bachelors found themselves trapped in an indefinite state of 'waitthood'; unable to make the transition into adulthood⁴ (Honwana, 2014).

However, these local frustrations cannot be disentangled from wider patterns of political exclusion and economic inequality. For much of the 20th century, men who were excluded from 'coming of age' in the agrarian economy had been able to escape the limited opportunities of village life by pursuing new kinds of livelihoods in Sierra Leone's emerging urban centres, or in the diamond mining and gold mining regions that were fueling the nascent national economy (Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962). By participating in new, European forms of education and labour, rural migrants were able to transform themselves; accumulating sufficient resources to return home and establish themselves in the centre of society (Utas 2003: 140). Sierra Leoneans had, by the mid-20th Century, fully incorporated the 'myth' (Ferguson 1999) that their country was destined to continue

⁴ As the Poro society gradually declined in prestige, participation in the society's initiation rituals is no longer sufficient to achieve adulthood.

developing along an inevitable path toward ever greater prosperity and global integration. The personal aspirations of young people were hitched to this broader narrative of national modernisation, through the expectation that high quality Western-style educational and well-paid employment opportunities would become increasingly available (Utas 2003).

But history failed to live up to this promise. In the 1980s and 1990s, the IMF, the World Bank, and other international donors imposed severe limitations on state spending, as part of a neoliberal programme of reform that had been supposed to lead to economic growth. Instead, these structural adjustment policies left Sierra Leone — like much of sub-Saharan Africa — spiraling into an extended period of economic decline and stagnation. The funding of state services was radically undermined, leading to a decline in the quality of education, a reduction in the number of job opportunities, and dwindling salaries for the few still able to access paid work (Utas 2008: 116). As Sierra Leone's economy collapsed, young people in urban as well as rural areas found themselves politically, socially and economically blocked from participating in the modernity they yearned for. Ferguson has written powerfully about the profound sense of 'abjection' (1999) experienced by many across Africa, as their promised future retreated into an imagined past:

Once modernity ceases to be understood as a telos... the stark status differentiations of the global social system sit raw and naked, no longer softened by the promises of the "not yet"...; Rather than poor countries being understood as behind "the West" ... they are increasingly understood as naturally, perhaps even racially, beneath it. (2006: 15; 19)

The perception, common amongst Sierra Leone's youth, that they had been stripped of their futures by forces beyond their influence was to become 'socially explosive' (Utas 2008: 112) during the war. As the economy collapsed, violence came to be perceived by some young people as a rare opportunity to escape the 'social death that otherwise [characterised] their situation' (Vigh 2006:

31). For these 'abject' youths, joining a rebel faction appeared to offer a new promise of upward mobility and respect in a system that no longer offered any other hope of social transformation (Utas 2008: 117).

Most literature about youth in Sierra Leone focuses on the perspectives of young ex-combatants. However, as Krijn Peters highlights, about ninety-eight percent of young Sierra Leoneans never took up arms (2011: 130). These young civilians have remained relatively overlooked; particularly in rural areas. Peters' recent research has demonstrated that non-fighters in rural areas shared many of the ex-combatants' grievances. If asked, they would complain about selfish elders, the inequity of the customary marriage system, and the lack of education and employment opportunities that leave them stranded in an open-ended state of 'youth-hood' (Peters 2011).

Anne Menzel's (2016) postwar research in Sierra Leone's second city, Bo, points to a similar frustration about the lack of 'good' patronage (cf Bolten 2008). She describes how, seven years after the official declaration of peace, people in Bo were so frustrated with the continuing levels of poverty and youth unemployment, that many feared an imminent spiral back into civil war (2016). Whilst these fears were not fulfilled, her ethnography demonstrates John Davis's argument; that war 'is continuous with ordinary social experience; and people place it in social memory and incorporate it with their accumulated culture' (1992: 152). In many parts of post-war Sierra Leone, peace was experienced as fragile and provisional. Indeed, from the perspective of Menzel's young informants, 'there would not be peace as long as able-bodied young men like [them] remained unable to even properly feed themselves, let alone provide for a family' (2016: 85).

'Post' War Sierra Leone

Social scientists are only just beginning to understand the ways in which Sierra Leone's social fabric has been transformed over the past three decades (Højbejerg *et al*, 2016). Some recent literature emphasises the new spaces for social creativity that were produced by the ruptures of war, 'in the formation of new identities and cultures' (Ibrahim and Shepler 2011: viii). And yet, eleven years of conflict did almost nothing to resolve the underlying 'crisis of youth' that had propelled so many to participate in the violence. The war left behind a crippled national economy, a devastated infrastructure, a legacy of massive peri-urban overcrowding; and, whilst there have been attempts to rebuild the state, these have been fragmented and incomplete, 'leaving a situation of uncertainty for many people on the ground' (Leach 2015: 826). Indeed, for large sections of the population, life opportunities are even more precarious now than they had been in the 1990s (Peters 2011, Hoffman 2011), creating a situation described by Bürge, in which 'practically everyone' is anxious about the 'omnipresent pending danger to remain or become youth, that is to say, not a full member of society' (2011: 62).

Danny Hoffman (2007) provides another striking image of youth in urban Sierra Leone in the early 'post war' years. Despite the official declaration of peace, the young men in Hoffman's ethnography moved through a fluid regional economy in which violence remained one of the few available livelihood options. As they traversed national borders, scraping a living from whatever opportunities they could access, his informants also slid fluidly between identities: sometimes trying their luck as diamond miners, or posing as refugees to claim international aid; sometimes smuggling goods across national borders, or joining one of the army factions in Liberia or Cote d'Ivoire. The image he paints is of a terrain in which young men — whether or not they had ever been combatants — were leading radically unstable, fluid lives. Echoing Simone's (2003) account of the postcolonial metropolis as a site of constant, restless movement, Hoffman argues that the

urban economy of postwar Freetown was indistinguishable from that of the broader war zone; a social world in which ‘no social category... signifies or guarantees stable habitation, and everyone is potentially on the market’ (2007: 418).

In 2013 and 2014, the Ebola crisis that ravaged Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea stood as a stark illustration of the limits of postwar recovery in this region. In all three countries, attempts to control the outbreak were handicapped by such desperately neglected health systems (Abramowitz 2014, Ferme 2014), such threadbare national infrastructures, and such a profound absence of trust between populations and those in power (Leach 2014, 2015) that the outbreak spiralled into an epidemic of a previously unimagined scale; eventually infecting over 25,000 people (WHO 2015).

As Melissa Leach and Annie Wilkinson have argued, the scale of this crisis can only be understood in the context of a much deeper history of structural violence, operating at a global as well as a regional level (2014; Leach 2014, 2015).

The ‘weakness’ in health systems in the region needs to be seen not just as technical but as the result of particular political economies of neglect — including those fostered by the aid system. (Leach 2015: 823)

These ‘interlacing’ histories of injustice and exploitation stretch back to the Atlantic slave trade, and extend to include the hollowing out of state services through cold war era programmes of structural adjustment, as well as more recent patterns of extractive economic development. The post-war period has been characterised by a model of development based on internationally financed schemes to annex land for private-sector resource extraction. The mining of iron ore, diamonds and gold has proved extremely lucrative for a small elite, and led to an official GDP

growth of 21% in 2013 (Leach 2015: 821). Yet such projects have brought negligible benefit for the majority of the population and, in many cases, have led to population displacement and an undermining of local livelihoods and institutions (Wilkinson and Leach 2014). In this respect, contemporary patterns of resource extraction appear to reinforce one of the war narratives, discussed above: that, in this region, global economic forces have been deeply destructive of local wellbeing and stability.

There is one final point I want to emphasise about the different explanations of Sierra Leone's civil war, and the skepticism shown by local communities to global actors in the postwar context. Whether violence is understood as a grass roots 'slave revolt' against distinctively local forms of exploitation (Richards 2005: 580) or as the tragic by-product of a global greed for local resources (Gberie *et al.* 2000), what is striking is that both narratives locate the root cause of the country's terrible implosion in the catastrophic moral failure of one or other economic system. So, whilst the discussion is rarely framed explicitly in these terms, these two arguments represent two quite different standpoints on a broader debate that has preoccupied social anthropologists for decades, and that is also a major concern of this book: *what is the relationship between 'economics' and 'morality'?*

The Intersection of Economies and Moralities

The past fifty years have been a period of dramatic social and economic upheaval along Sierra Leone's southern coast, as settlements like Tissana were transformed from subsistence hamlets to busy hubs of commercial fishing, fish-processing and trade. Elsewhere across the

postcolonial world, a rich ethnographic literature attests to the fact that members of recently subsistence economies often respond with deep moral ambivalence in the face of newly introduced market-based systems of reckoning value and mobilising labour (Bohannan 1959; Ong 1988; Burkhalter and Murphy 1989; Hutchinson 1992). Historically, this unease was often interpreted by anthropologists as a ‘natural’ response to the moral vacuity of market relations (Taussig 1980; Luetchford 2012), which were thought to erode the moral bedrock of society.

Over the past couple of decades, these polarised models of economic life have been challenged from a number of different directions. Firstly, following Bloch and Parry’s (1989) important edited volume, it is nowadays well recognised that people around the world appropriate, represent and use money in a whole range of different ways. Ethnographers elsewhere in West Africa have stressed that — far from going hand in hand with ‘individualism’, as Western models tend to assume — the circulation of cash is inseparable from the production of social relations. In rural Ghana, for example, Sjaak van der Geest found, ‘money does not sever relations, it binds people together’ (1997: 450). Important relationships that would, at one time, have been maintained by other forms of gift-exchange are nowadays linked with the flux of money, making cash an indispensable means of realising reciprocity (cf. Cornwall 2002; Barber 1995; Hasty 2005). His observations could be taken as one illustration of Appadurai’s (1986) more general argument, that *all* ‘things’ are capable of acquiring quite different social meanings as they circulate from one context to another, often shifting from an anonymous commodity to a highly personal gift, and back again.

More recent ethnography emphasises that market systems are in fact infused with, and shaped by, moral discourse; and not only in the sense that commercial supply chains (Tsing 2013) and industrial labour regimes (Sanchez 2012; Rajak 2011) often depend upon personalised relationships of the kind anthropologists tend to associate with ‘gift’ economies. The very concept

of ‘free market’ trade can, in certain circumstances, become an *ideological* aspiration (Otto and Willerslev 2013: 15), typically entangled with ideals about individual freedom, personal expression, and the potential (at least) for social mobility (Browne 2009; Carrier 1997). Whatever we might think of the real-world consequences of economic liberalism, its ideological potential is visible in many contemporary development initiatives, for example, which aim to ‘empower’ poor people through credit-lending projects in which ‘adapting to the market has been presented as an ethical imperative’ (Elyachar 2005: 9; cf. Dolan and Scott 2009).

One difficulty with studying the ‘morality’ of economic life is that, for most people most of the time, morality is essentially indistinguishable from custom or habit (d’Andrade 1995; Howell 1997). Zigon has argued that it is only when people come up against some kind of social rupture that they become tangibly aware of having to negotiate right from wrong; and that it is in these crises, as ‘persons or groups of persons are forced to step away from their unreflective everydayness and think through, figure out, work on themselves and respond to certain ethical dilemmas, troubles or problems’, that moral reasoning becomes an active social process, open to ethnographic study (2007: 140).

As we have already seen, civil war — and the sense-making that follows it — is one context in which previously unquestioned aspects of economic life might become the focus of widespread moral commentary. Another, less brutal situation in which moral rupture is likely to become a common feature of daily life is when people find themselves navigating through a period of dramatic social change. It is no coincidence, for example, that the very term ‘moral economy’ was first coined by the social historian E.P. Thompson (1971) to describe one such moment of rupture: this time in 18th-century England, at a time when rural economies had been shifting away from older paternalist models of food marketing, towards a newly capitalist order in which landlords were absolved of their responsibility to protect their tenants in times of dearth. Whilst Thompson

is most often cited for his analysis of the market as ‘heartless’ and ‘disinfested of intrusive moral imperatives’ (1971: 89-90), the more general point worth stressing is that the protections that peasants had once taken for granted only became the subject of an active moral discourse (in this case, in the form of food riots) at the moment when they were stripped away (Thompson 1991; Edelman 2012).

Over a century later, and facing the demise of the 20th-century welfare system, Andrea Muehlebach made a similar observation: ‘Many of Europe’s most famous public intellectuals...[are] engaged in their own acts of grieving; a grieving quite ambivalent in that it is directed toward an object *never quite loved*’ (Muehlebach 2012: 6, my emphasis). In both cases, is that it is the experience of living through a moment of important economic *change* that instilled in people a heightened sense of the moral complexity of their economic lives. As Joel Robbins described of his fieldwork with the Urapmim, a Papua New Guinean society recently converted to Pentecostal Christianity, ‘For those caught living between a traditional cultural system and one they have newly adopted, morality is likely to provide the window through which they can see the contradictions with which they have to live’ (2004: 14).

With this in mind, and given that ethnographers have so often worked in societies freshly reeling from their exposure to the hegemonic forces of global capital, it is not terribly surprising that the anthropological literature on economic change should be particularly rich in examples of people responding with moral unease to the unfamiliar logic of wage labour and colonial currency (Bohannan 1959; Ong 1988; Burkhalter and Murphy 1989; Hutchinson 1992). It is in these liminal spaces of social history, where people find themselves consciously working to reconcile their experience of participating in two quite different socio-economic systems, that the everyday economic order is most likely to become the site of active moral reflection. What we ought to be careful of, however, is sliding from this important *methodological* point towards a more

generalising set of assumptions about what *kinds* of economic change are likely to disrupt people's sense of natural morality, and why.

My own ethnography points to a quite different history of economic change, and of the moral anxieties it stimulates. The strongest motive farmers cited for leaving home to seek a new life on the sea is that commercial fishing appeared to offer an escape from a long-resented 'traditional' rural economy of bondship and pawnship. By the time of my fieldwork in 2010-11, Tissana's commercial heyday was already a memory. With fish stocks in noticeable decline, my neighbours reflected upon their creeping material impoverishment through a discourse that emphasised the changing character of their personal relationships. According to popular perception, the 'free' economic transactions of Tissana's boom years are being encroached upon once more by sticky bonds of debt and social obligation.

In the ethnographic chapters that follow, I describe how men and women in Tissana navigate these bonds of debt and obligation, and I explore how they invest their limited resources: in the attempt to access fish and money, but also to accumulate the spoken blessings of strangers. I examine how people work to build and manage their vital webs of social and economic relations through material gifts of fish and rice, but also through the strategic use of fetish medicines. Through this detailed description of everyday material negotiations, we can begin to see how seemingly esoteric fields of knowledge — about the scope of the material world and the limits of human agency within it — are relevant in *all* people's livelihoods.

The Material Form of the Landscape and its Resources

In recent years, a growing number of writers from across the social sciences have become interested in exploring the extent to which people's lives are shaped by the material *substance* and

physical spaces of the worlds they inhabit (Coole and Frost 2010; Ingold 2007; Harvey 2006; Miller 2005). Within Africanist ethnography, a good example of this broad resurgence of interest in the material ‘stuff’ of economic life can be found in the work of Maxim Bolt. His ethnography, set in a farm workers’ settlement on the Zimbabwean-South African border, examines how the substance of cash becomes relevant within the particular landscape of a border work camp. In a world ‘characterised by transience and a conspicuously absent police force, money’s *form* matters. Cash is a burden’ (Bolt 2012: 2, original emphasis). Bolt demonstrates that his interlocutors were motivated to spend their wages fast, and subsist for the rest of the month on credit — not because of any cultural associations with cash as inherently ‘hot’ (Walsh 2003; Wilk 2007) or ‘polluting’ (Werthmann 2003; Shipton 1989), as has sometimes been claimed in frontier towns elsewhere in Africa — but rather because, living in dorms and often surrounded by strangers, the most likely alternative is to be robbed. In any economic world, there will always be important social repercussions arising from the fact that the things we consider valuable and want to possess have particular material properties. However, as Bolt’s study recognises, the ‘materiality’ of social life is not limited merely to the things we exchange and consume. ‘As human beings... we live our lives surrounded by, immersed in, matter’ (Coole and Frost 2010: 1) and fully acknowledging this fact means exploring how our economic relationships play out within the physical contours of a particular topography.

One cannot live long amongst fisherfolk without developing an acute awareness that, as Acheson puts it here, ‘marine adaptations are one of the most extreme achieved by man’ (1981: 277). In a context such as coastal Sierra Leone, where rainy season storms are ferocious, and navigation technology rudimentary, the force and danger of the ocean are rarely far from people’s minds. Indeed, it is striking that many aspects of the Yawri Bay’s commercial fishing economy have developed, in a relatively short space of time, to mirror those described in commercial fisheries elsewhere. From the fluid migration patterns (Acheson 1981; Jorion 1988; Marquette *et al.* 2002),

the deliberate valorisation of ‘living in the moment’ (Astuti 1999), to the highly charged gendered relationships (Allison and Janet 2001; Béné 2007; Westaway *et al.* 2007; Seeley 2009), and the widespread air of competition and mistrust (Andersen 1980; Beuving 2010; McGregor 2008) — I repeatedly came across examples of how life in Tissana appeared to conform to the global stereotypes of fishing life. Each of these characteristics will be fleshed out in detail in the ethnographic chapters of this monograph, but I spend a few pages here, briefly contextualising these social changes within their regional ethnographic setting.

History and Space

Around the world, most coastal communities regard the ocean as too wild a space to be divided up to be claimed — or indeed inherited — as private property. As we will see in **Chapter 6**, this often leads to intense competition between rival fishermen, all of whom are able to make an equally legitimate claim on the same ‘commons’ resource (Andersen 1980; Schoembucher 1988; Beuving 2010). A further consequence of fluid ‘commons’ wealth is that it effectively undermines the relevance of ancestral history as a source of social privilege.

As mentioned above, most classic ethnographic literature on the Upper Guinea region is concerned with describing hunter-farmer forest villages. In agrarian communities of this kind, the most eagerly sought-after resources fall into two broad categories. Firstly, a person’s relationships to living and dead members of the landholding lineages determines whether they will be able to claim a ‘natural’ right to farm the land (MacCormack 1986). Secondly are the resources that enable farming households to coax a successful harvest from that unforgiving forest landscape: plenty of hard human labour, and the esoteric knowledge to enable the land’s capricious productive forces (cf. Ferme 2001). The value placed on these particular resources helps reproduce a pattern of social hierarchy and cosmological power that is literally grounded into the land and its history. In Sherbro

farming communities in the 1970s and 80s, for example, MacCormack (1986) described how ancestors and ancestresses of village-founding lineages were considered to inhabit the contemporary landscape, and were revered as the ultimate source of good and bad fortune. The implication had been an apparently direct correlation between the depths of a person's historical roots in the land, the depths of their legitimate knowledge of the forces of nature concealed within it, and their ability to claim moral and material authority over other members of their community. So, although it was recognised that even a poor stranger could potentially become a powerful patron, such a radical reversal in status was only conceivable through the 'strategic, *though illicit*, exploitation of secret knowledge of the landscape' (Ferme 2001: 2, my emphasis).

For those migrants who chose to leave their farming villages behind to pursue livelihoods as fisherfolk, uprooted from the land, there have been far-reaching repercussions. Even for the minority of people whose ancestors had inhabited this coastline for several generations, Tissana's transformation from a subsistence fisher-farming village to a commercial fishing town entailed a radical reorientation away from value rooted in the productive forces of the land and its history. Reliant instead upon a slippery and highly mobile underwater quarry, members of Sierra Leone's burgeoning commercial fishing economy have learned to develop new, quite different modes of negotiating social belonging and economic power: not only between 'landlords' and their tenants (Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962; McGovern 2012), but also more broadly across a shifting fabric of households (Chapter 5), business partnerships (Chapter 4) and boats (Chapter 3).

Gender, Concealment and Space

Perhaps the single most striking way in which the physical topography of the Kagboro Coast shapes how people are able to negotiate their social relationships is that men and women are empowered to move in quite different ways through the maritime space. Tissana's seagoing

fishermen lead highly mobile lives, pursuing their quarry across the Yawri Bay. If they judge that it may increase their chances of landing a good catch, boat captains often choose to base their boat, and land their fish, on a rival wharf for a period of days or weeks. As wharf towns all around the shores of these fishing grounds have burgeoned over the past few decades, the bay itself has become an increasingly congested — though unequivocally *male* — space, in which rival crews actively compete against one another to hunt the same limited, elusive shoals of fish. For Tissana's women, reliant upon the success of their male business partners at sea, yet unable to venture out to sea themselves, the oceanscape is regarded through a field of half-trust and uncertainty (see Chapters 4 and 6).

This emphasis on the hiddenness of gendered agency connects into one of the strongest recurrent themes in Sierra Leonean ethnography. Gendered initiation societies play a central role in customary politics, and have been capturing the imagination of European visitors for at least the past two hundred years (Winterbottom 1803; Aldridge 1894). Although often described in English as 'secret societies', the label does not refer to a society whose *membership* is secret. On the contrary, almost all men are joined into the lower echelons of the Poro, whilst practically every woman is a member of the Bundu. Rather, the institutions' 'secrecy' resides in the powerful esoteric 'medicines' (*ifohn*) that form the core of each sodality's identity.

At one time, young people of all genders would have spent several months or years secluded in their respective societies' 'bush': a sacred space carefully segregated beyond the limits of the public landscape of the village. During this period of separation, children were transformed into fully gendered adults, passing through a series of physical ordeals and bodily transformations as well as receiving gender-specific instruction on life skills ranging from farming to military tactics, childbirth, and the confection of their society's most common *ifohn*. Much of the research focusing directly on initiation societies has been concerned with exploring the relationship between secrecy

and power. For, even whilst imparting some basic knowledge to initiates, it was the elders' mastery of other, more powerful, esoteric knowledge that imbued them with the charisma to exercise almost indisputable authority over junior members (Little 1966; Murphy 1980; Bledsoe 1984). Already, by the 1940s, Kenneth Little was describing the Poro as an institution in decline: its importance undermined by the introduction of colonial forms of education and political authority (Little 1948: 8). And yet, six decades on, sodalities show no sign of disappearing from Sierra Leone's political landscape. The picture in Tissana, for example, was mixed. Nowadays, Poro initiation is a simple, day-long ceremony and most of the men I knew were keen to stress that the society held little coercive power in their lives anymore. The Bundu society had experienced no such decline, and continues to play a central — celebrated — role in women's everyday social lives.

In the 1970s and early 80s, societies drew considerable attention from feminist anthropologists in part, because of the evident political power wielded by female society leaders (MacCormack 1982; 2000). What seemed even more resonant at the time was that the *process* of initiation appeared to encapsulate the central argument being made in anthropological theorisations of gender: that gendered difference is not biologically given, but rather socially produced (MacCormack 1977a, 1980; Bledsoe 1984; Lamp 1985). So, for example, in her fieldwork amongst Sherbro speakers in the 1970s, Carol MacCormack (1980) emphasised that Sherbro men and women were both active in what we might gloss as 'public' and 'private' spheres of social life. Both laboured on the farm, engaged in commercial trade, contributed to training children, and invested considerable creative energy nurturing networks of social relations. Sherbro speakers *did* express a strong and explicit ideology of gendered difference: but central to this ideology was the knowledge that gendered difference had to be actively *produced* through rites of spatial separation, cultural training, and bodily transformation. Far from viewing pregnancy and birth as an inevitable function of their female bodies, Bundu women 'with their secret knowledge, public

laws, legitimate sanctions, and hierarchical organisation, bring women's biology under the most careful cultural control' (MacCormack 1977a: 94).

Plenty of ethnographers before me have suggested that the aesthetic of secrecy, so clearly epitomised by the high fences and esoteric practices of the region's sodalities, also finds expression across a whole range of more 'banal' contexts (Bellman 1984; d'Azevedo 1962b; Ferme 2001; Gable 1997; Murphy 1998; Piot 1993). One thing that is striking about the commercial fishing economy is that 'men's space' has come to be segregated 'women's space' in additional, quite different ways, with profound repercussions for the ways in which people of both genders are able to manage their social and economic lives. In the maritime context, Sierra Leone's famed 'hermeneutic of concealment' (Ferme 2001: 6) intersects with a watery topography that provides both an unusual level of opportunity and particularly powerful material incentives to be strategic about how much of their lives they reveal to their neighbours, lovers, business partners and rivals (cf. Palmer 1990). And, rather as Bledsoe recommended, my focus in this book is not on temporary gendered separation *per se*, but rather on the frictions that emerge for men and women in the highly-charged spaces where their two worlds re-converge on the shore (especially **Chapters 4 and 6**).

Fish and the Substance of Relatedness

Back on land, the particular material qualities of fish work to foster certain distinctive patterns of relationships. Tissana's economy exists because of fish, and almost every individual in town depends for their subsistence on being able to catch, dry or exchange them. Fish are the basis of almost every meal, the foundation of almost every household economy, and the subject of a thousand daily dramas, large and small. From my own perspective, it sometimes seemed as though they were the very substance out of which Tissana's shifting social fabric was woven.

Sitting on the wharf as the fishing boats returned from sea, or in the busy shared kitchen of my own compound as residents distributed their rice in dishes of various carefully calibrated sizes, I observed who was giving what to whom, in exchange for what, and under what circumstances.

Such a materialist approach would resonate well with my neighbours' own accounts of their interpersonal lives. In many cases, the people I knew were negotiating tenuous livelihoods close to the edge of subsistence. As other ethnographers have found in similarly impoverished settings elsewhere in this region, people's daily priorities are very explicitly focused on meeting their basic material needs: almost all other aspects of their relational lives are ultimately refracted through that lens (Cornwall 2002; Leach 1995; Whitehead 1984, 1990). In particular, this book could be read as building on Caroline Bledsoe's (1980, 1990b, 1995) excellent research amongst Mende and Kpelle speakers in the 1980s, in which she paints an uncompromisingly honest picture of the tough personal choices poor men and women are sometimes forced to make: nurturing certain relationships, and neglecting others, in the basic struggle to balance viable livelihoods.

However, fish are not just *any* commodity. They have a specific physical form, and that substance has powerful consequences for the ways in which people in Tissana are able to use them to form social and material relationships. Firstly, as property, fish rot fast. In a town with no refrigeration technology, this simple fact injects economic life with a peculiarly heightened urgency. Boat captains must sell their catch or give it away as soon as they return to land, otherwise watch helplessly as the source of their sustenance and wealth decays into a pungent health hazard. Secondly, as prey, fish are mobile, invisible and highly unpredictable. This not only encourages fishermen to adopt similarly fluid migratory patterns themselves, but also requires people to invest an inflated amount of creative energy and material resources nurturing the social networks that will enable them to survive when their catches fail.

Because their catches *will* fail. It looks increasingly likely that the existing crisis in Sierra Leone's fisheries will deepen even further in the coming years. In addition to existing problems of fisheries management and defence against illegal trawling, ecologists identify West Africa as one of the regions most vulnerable to climate change (Lam *et al* 2012).⁵

These factors combine to mean that Tissana lends itself unusually well to a study foregrounding the materiality of social life. One can go a long way toward tracing the town's ever-shifting lattice of kinship, love and obligation simply by watching gifts of fish and counter-gifts of rice weaving their complex patterns, in real time, through Tissana's social fabric. However, as I explore in the following section, relationships are not only forged through tangible exchanges of fish, rice and cash. They are also cultivated and manipulated in other, less visible but equally material ways: through the movements of concealed fetish medicines and bodily substances for example, or through the strategic mobilisation of spoken blessings or curses. A central observation of this book is that these things are *integral* to the everyday business of economic survival, in ways that challenge any intuitive ontological distinction between the material and immaterial, the 'supernatural' and the banal.

Immaterial Forces and the Substance of Relatedness

My experience in Tissana forced me to relearn what exactly counts as material in the world of economic transactions. In Tissana, the work people invest in managing their stretched livelihoods often incorporates the use of swears, blessings, amulets and 'fetish' medicines:

⁵ Rising sea temperatures are expected to have an adverse effect on marine resources, exacerbating existing threats to the livelihoods and wellbeing of fishing communities. Some models predict that, the number of people able to make a living in fisheries-related work will have shrunk by half by 2050 (Lam *et al* 2012).

substances and technologies that we might instinctively gloss as belonging to the world of 'religion' or 'ritual', but which are, in fact, integral to the mundane economic order. To some extent, this is not particularly surprising. There is a large literature within historic and contemporary ethnography highlighting the absence of any sharp, conceptual distinction between material and spiritual domains. In Giovanni da Col's recent account of Tibetan 'cosmoeconomics', for example, he tells us, 'transactions of forces such as fortune, luck, and vitality materially inhabit economic exchange and conceptions of value' (2012: S191). Steven Gudeman's (2012) description of a Colombian peasant economy offers a similarly compelling account in which he describes how the 'energy of life' circulating through crops and the bodies of livestock and human beings is conceptualised as a form of currency. But, if this talk of materially valuable 'forces', 'energies' and 'blessings' all sounds rather exotic, we might do well to remember that the value of money could quite reasonably be construed as equally mysterious. On a day-to-day basis, we are not called upon to wonder *why* those tatty pieces of paper can be exchanged for a week's groceries, nor, more bizarrely still, how it is possible that the weightless numbers in our bank accounts can be digitally swapped for a piece of furniture.⁶ I am struck by the parallels between this 'suspended disbelief' about the value of banknotes, and Olivier de Sardan's comments about the power of sorcery, spirits and magic charms for the Songhay people he knew in Mali:

The practical efficiency of fetishes goes without saying. All that is banal. Ancestors, spirits, sorcerers or magic charms are all familiar concepts in regard to which 'disbelief is suspended', and which need no justification. There is no question of believing or not

⁶ There have been the repeated moments in Western history when the materiality of money, *the stuff it is made of*, has changed. During each of these transitions — whether with the introduction of paper banknotes, the removal of the gold standard, or the currently soaring value of the stateless internet currency, 'Bitcoins' (Maurer 2011) — changes in the materiality of wealth sparked considerable existential uncertainty, as people were forced to question what *really* is holding their economy and, by extension, their society together.

believing: it is not a case of belief, but of fact, not of the fantastic but of the routine. (1992: 11)

However, just as we have already seen to be the case with previously unquestioned ideas about the 'morality' of economic life, so, too, the material assumptions that underpin economic habits are most likely to be raised to the level of visibility and called into question at moments when people find themselves navigating between two markedly different systems of reckoning value. To begin with the most obvious and powerful example: I have already spent some time discussing Sierra Leone's history of domestic slavery and its continuing importance in shaping the more subtle forms of social 'ownership' that persist in rural areas today. These patterns of reckoning wealth and prosperity in terms of 'people' are nowadays recognised as a characteristic feature of life in farming villages across this region (Booth *et al.* 1999). However, Walter Rodney (1966, 1970) famously argued that it was only through their dealings with European slavers, and the lucrative incentives they offered for captured men and women, that African elites first learned to view other human beings as a potential form of *property*. Following in the wake of Rodney's influential work, some of the most interesting scholarship about the Upper Guinea region has continued to unpick the ways in which contemporary values, beliefs and social structures have been shaped through its long, violent history of integration into the Atlantic slave economy (Shaw 2002; Ferme 2001).

⁷ In fact, the economic value system *both in West Africa and Western Europe* were challenged and transformed through their long economic encounter with the other. In a series of extraordinary articles, for example, William Pietz illustrated how even that apparently most archetypical African valuable — the 'fetish' — emerged as a distinct category in both continents' economic discourses only as a result of centuries of miscommunication around exactly this 'mystery of value' (1985: 9). When, in the 15th century, members of European feudal and West African lineage economies faced one another on the coast for the first time, each came up against the problem that their new trading partners judged the allure of things according to a logic entirely different from their own (Pietz 1987, 1985). Portuguese merchants had derided as

Rodney (1966, 1970) was describing a period of radical rupture in West African history. However, the general theoretical point also holds true in moments of less violent upheaval. Any significant change in people's everyday economic experience has the potential to transform — or, at the very least, catalyse a more active philosophical reflection about — their sense of the material substance of the world they inhabit. In the post-industrial world, for example, we are living through a historical change in the material substance of the things we value and want to claim as property. An increasing number of things once assumed too fluid, too minute or otherwise ungraspable to be 'owned' are, for the first time, being privatised. In a global economic order in which genetic sequences (Boyle 2003), company brands (Foster 2013) and atmospheric carbon (Dalsgaard 2013) can all have a monetary value, it no longer seems nonsensical to claim that 'intangible assets are worth more than brick-and-mortar assets' (Foster 2013: 59). Any newly emergent way of understanding property inevitably brings with it new patterns by which relationships can be mediated materially (Busse 2012: 120-1).

Just as we see taking place in public debates across the post-industrial world as people adjust to the trend toward privatising 'intangible assets', Sierra Leone's recently burgeoned fishing population have had to respond to the changing material basis of their economic lives by grappling to figure out afresh what exactly 'value' is and where it resides in the material world. In Sierra Leone, the interweaving of 'agencies, and their material forms' (Ferme 2001: 4) can be seen, for example, in the fact that spoken words are often considered a powerful ingredient in the confection of amulets and medicines (Bledsoe and Robey 1986; MacGaffey 1988; Shaw 1997a), or

fetigo (witchcraft), any object that their new trading partners valued as powerful and precious, but that fell outside Portuguese assumptions about what kind of materials were capable of holding value or commanding respect.

in the fact that seemingly inert material objects are credited with the power to catch and punish criminals (Jędrej 1976; Tonkin 2000). However, scholars have tended to discuss this construction of im/material agency in Sierra Leone within a very particular framework: as one facet in the underlying workings of the ‘politics of secrecy’ (Bledsoe and Robey 1986; Bellman 1984; Murphy 1980, 1998; Tonkin 1979; Soares 2005).

Mariane Ferme’s (2001) erudite description of ‘the underneath’ of a Mende agrarian landscape achieved something that no earlier study had quite managed: capturing the extent to which unseen forces weave through the entire material fabric of Sierra Leonean life, reaching far beyond explicitly ritual contexts:

[S]ome of these agencies, and their material forms, appear to coincide with others that drew the attention of scholars of comparative religion... But this continuum also includes transformative powers of incompletely controlled forces and materials whose history in Sierra Leone is linked not so much to religious belief as to the material experience of modernity and the magic associated with it. (2001: 4)

However, for Ferme too, the study of im/materiality seems analytically inseparable from the study of ‘secrecy’. Her argument is that Sierra Leone’s culture of secrecy developed out of its violent history of slaving, during which there had been very real dangers associated with speaking or acting openly. Other ethnographers had already highlighted the layers of ambiguity and conflicting meaning that riddle spoken discourse in this region (Bellman 1984; Piot 1993), but Ferme went further: seeking to reveal how ambiguous meanings are concealed beneath, and produced through, the material landscape, in the ‘tension between surface phenomena and that which is concealed beneath them’ (2001: 1). Ferme then sets herself a considerable challenge of deciphering for an English-speaking readership how the topography of Mende farms, villages and

forests might be read as a shifting text of hidden metaphors and metonyms, the ‘semantics’ of which evaded all but the most skilful of her Mende informants:

The ability to recognise these clues, and to make one's own interpretation of them gain acceptance among many, forms the basis of the achievement of power in Mende society. However, this process is characterised by struggles, whose outcome is rendered all the more uncertain by the shifting grounds of a hermeneutic of ambiguity, which has been activated by a violent history. (Ferme 2001: 20)

The subject of Ferme’s analysis, like mine, is the material fabric of ‘everyday’ economic and political life — including a whole range of ostensibly rather mundane activities, such as braiding hair, weaving nets and making cloth. However, her analytic approach emphasises that the true ‘meanings’ carried within these material practices are legible only to a very small minority of Mende people.

Without seeking to contradict Ferme, I was motivated to explore the relationship between the tangible world and its unseen agencies for quite different reasons. My starting point was simply to describe the ways in which my informants were working to survive under conditions of extreme material uncertainty: the things they exchanged, and the ways in which they sought to build and nurture relationships. However, as I suggest in the following section, people’s pragmatic, everyday assessments of material value can be a window into a diffuse field of practical knowledge about the substance of the material order, and the scope of human agency within it. This loose, embodied knowledge of the world is akin to what Foucault (2005 [1966]) called an ‘episteme’. Unlike previous scholars of the history of knowledge, his interest had not been to explore *what* people knew at other times in history, but rather to excavate the shape of the ‘epistemological space’ (ibid: x) that set the most taken-for-granted limits within which it was possible to know the

world or act within it. Similarly, my own interest in this book is not to decipher the layers of hidden ‘meaning’ that preoccupy Ferme in her study of the Mende landscape. Rather, I explore how the lived anxieties of precarious livelihoods are both shaped by – and productive of – a particular of field of shared knowledge about the moral and material *Order of Things* (ibid). One point I want to emphasise is that, whilst the political use of secrecy and complex understandings of material agency are *both* important facets of social experience in Sierra Leone, it does not follow that they are always two aspects of the same phenomenon.

Map of this Book

The five ethnographic chapters of this book were conceived of and written as a series of interrelated empirical studies, rather than elements of a single linear argument. Each reveals a different facet of a material, social and economic order that is in flux. The structure unfolds in a pattern that broadly echoes the structure of this introduction. The early chapters discuss how the specific tensions I observed in Tissana speak to a broader anthropological discourse on 'morality' in times of economic change. The second analytical thread, which comes particularly to the fore in the final two substantive chapters, explores how people's knowledge of the material order both shapes, and is simultaneously *shaped by*, the practical challenges and micropolitical struggles of economic survival in a rapidly changing economic order.

Chapter 2 sets the context of my research, introducing Tissana as a town of apparent paradoxes: a lively, cosmopolitan space, which is also a site of economic exclusion and decline. The chapter sketches a brief economic history of the town, tracking the successive innovation in fishing technology, which enabled its rapid growth from a subsistence fisher-farmer hamlet fifty years ago, to a commercial fishing town. It ends with a discussion of my research methods and limitations.

Chapter 3 speaks strongly to regional ethnographic debates. It tells the stories of some of the young men who chose to risk everything, to leave their farming villages and establish a new kind of life on the sea. The migrants' accounts often closely mirror the grievances expressed by young rebel fighters in the aftermath of Sierra Leone's civil war, circling around the themes of patriarchal exploitation. The chapter discusses the migrants' hopes that the fishing economy might offer a level of personal autonomy that would be unthinkable within the patron-client strictures of agrarian life, but ends by acknowledging that, in fact, many vulnerable men find themselves drawn rapidly back into extractive forms of patronage.

Chapter 4 continues to explore this tension between people's hopes for 'independence' and their experience of becoming rapidly re-entangled in more binding patterns of economic relations. Through the lens of gendered negotiations, between fishermen and the women who buy and dry their fish, I develop a picture of the constricted forms of material agency available to Tissana's most vulnerable residents. We see, for example, that for the very poorest crewmen, choosing to work with a strong female customer can provide them with a vital safety net whilst allowing them to avoid outright dependency to the owner of their boat. This chapter also explores the repercussions of the Yawri Bay's declining fish stocks for patterns of gendered power. As the balance of supply and demand slides ever further out of their favour on the wharf, *banda* women have learned to invest an ever-greater proportion of their creative energies and material resources, working to build enduring *social* relationships with the fishermen whose catch they want to buy.

Set against a broader regional context in which a person's most basic well-being depends upon being embedded in networks of supportive kin, **Chapter 5** describes some of the practical ways in which people work — by exchanging gifts of fish, rice and other substances — to create the networks of kinship that offer the only form of security net in a highly precarious environment.

In such a highly mobile population, the resultant tangle of relatedness bears little resemblance to the neatly hierarchical lineage structures described in classic ethnographic accounts of this region (d'Azevedo 1962a; Little 1967 [1951]). Yet, for all their apparent inclusivity, 'potato rope families' come with their own risks. When ties of kinship can never simply be taken for granted, but must instead be continually re-created materially, then, without sufficient material resources, even the most seemingly 'natural' family bond is vulnerable to atrophy or collapse.

Running throughout the first three ethnographic chapters, we will see repeated examples of 'fetish' medicines (*ifohn*) circulating through the everyday economic order, and forming an integral element of people's mundane livelihood strategies. However, **Chapter 6** marks a gear shift away from the tangible patterns of exchange, to dwell more explicitly on the ways in which people's economic lives are threaded through with material strategies of a less visible kind. There are multiple layers of hiddenness that riddle Tissana's topography. This is a world in which men disappear across the horizon each day, into a watery topography only half-imagined by their neighbours and relatives inland. So, too, a large proportion of Tissana's population is assumed to have access to an invisible space — sometimes referred to as 'the witch-world' — that maps onto the visible surfaces of the townscape. My goal is to explore the phenomenology of felt ignorance and mistrust that permeate economic life in a context in which much of that which effects a person's livelihood is necessarily hidden from their view. Finally, **Chapter 7** returns to the problem introduced at the beginning of this Introduction, to ask why it *matters* — practically and theoretically — that people in Tissana value spoken words as a material element of the world of transaction.

consequences in people's lives. It enables those with nothing to survive, because fishermen — eager to take every available precaution to mitigate the insecurity of their own precarious livelihoods — are prepared to invest considerable resources earning the blessings of neighbours and strangers on the wharf.

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Appendix: Illustrations

PLATES



Plate 1: The Highway, the only land route to Shenge.



Plate 2: Fish traders preparing for a journey along the Highway.



Plate 3: Fishing Canoe.



Plate 4: Yele boat.



Plate 5: Men and women *sim*-boat fishing.



Plate 6: A disappointing sim-boat catch.



Plate 7: The passenger canoe (*pampa*) to Tombo.



Plate 8: Fisherman weaving a new fishing net.



Plate 9: The ever-busy wharf on Plantain Island



Plate 10: Buema pictured with one of the pots from George Thomas's era.



Plate 11: Fish traders from Kono preparing to leave Tissana after almost a month in town.

MAPS

Map 1: The Yawri Bay and the Sherbro Estuary

