Chapter 3

Framing Reciprocity
From Settlers to Strangers

In this chapter, I examine how Sherbro communities of the Peninsula interpret their relations with other groups in relation to social arrangements characterized by reciprocity. Through the establishment of reciprocal exchange, settlers can acquire the status of strangers to the Sherbro host group. In the past, reciprocity was deployed differently, depending on whether it concerned members of local groups, who were considered subordinate, or the settlers of the Sierra Leone Colony, who were 'prestigious' strangers with whom Sherbros wished to be associated. I argue that those two modes of reciprocal relations resulted in two different types of integration informed by the specific kinship patterns of the Sherbro group.

I turn again to narratives in order to analyse people's perceptions of the norms of reciprocity by which they expect to frame their relations with other groups, as well as the discourses that they craft about those relations, which inform their definition of Sherbro identity in the present. What is striking is how the narratives interweave tales of kinship and fishing with ethnic relations – thus merging several material forms with the symbolic logic of reciprocity. As in Chapter 2, although many of these narratives appear highly personalized, they reveal much about the collective performance of ethnic identity as well; the scenarios, relevant actors and strategies are all commonly recognized and deployed.

Narratives about the establishment of host/stranger relations typically focus on wife-exchange, which becomes the symbol of a political alliance – that is, if wife-exchange does not necessarily entail active cooperation, at least it may prevent open conflict between affinal kin. Kinship idioms tell the audience

about the type of arrangement created with strangers (domination/subordination, cooperation etc.), what prerogatives they acquired and what obligations they 'owed' to their host. They respond to a question about political alliance – namely, with whom (or against whom) is it possible to ally and why? To whom is it possible to give and from whom should one receive? (Caillé 2007: 84).

However, kinship idioms are not the only way by which Sherbro oral traditions express relatedness. Fishing constitutes another 'substance' of reciprocity – it is a livelihood that entails a specific type of economic cooperation between groups. When cooperation in fishing appears impossible, it reveals dysfunctional relations and breaks in the 'cycle of return' expected between hosts and strangers. Accordingly, in oral traditions, fishing is a central material practice that unites economic actors (men and women of various origins), but also becomes a metaphor for group relations. Narrators often told about the establishment of kinship relations in conjunction with economic arrangements in the fishing economy.

Before turning to the narratives, two notes need to be made. The first concerns the presentation of the material in this chapter: substantive background information is mixed in with the analysis of the narratives. As in Chapter 2, I have used secondary sources based on substantial archival and historiographical work to better read the narratives against historical evidence. Nevertheless, these narratives are still 'stories'; they have the moral function of identifying precisely which situations, actors and motivations should be the relevant ones of social life. Their construction presents us with stereotyped accounts of intergroup relations and reveals the importance of collective performances in shaping Sherbro identity in relation to other groups. The second note is to acknowledge the Sherbro kinship system against those of other groups, and the role of kinship in strategies of integration.

Cognatic Descent and Matrifiliation

Anthropological evidence points to the fact that the Sherbros were initially a matrilineal society, but that matrilineality eroded as they came into contact with larger patrilineal ethnic groups and the English system of inheritance on the coast (Hall 1938; Hoffer 1971). MacCormack, who wrote the most compelling research on Sherbro society, observes that by the 1960s, Sherbros could be said to have a cognatic descent system (Hoffer 1971; MacCormack 1979). Membership to a descent group could be traced through either female or male kin, and inheritance depended on the social prestige of both the female and male lines. MacCormack, for example, observes that people can give preference to patrilineal descent, yet matrilineal claims are invoked in instances of the high social status of a female ancestor, mother or father's mother. She concludes that Sherbro 'descent groups consist of the resident nonunilineal descendants of an ancestor' (1979: 185). My own data support MacCormack's analysis. Some forty years

later, Sherbro communities of the Peninsula retain several matrilineal features. Group identity and social rights predominantly continue to be 'transmittable through women' (see Day 1983: 84). Matrifiliation is still relevant for claiming local belonging and accessing political leadership (see Chapter 7). However, inheritance, including land rights, can be claimed on both female and male lines.

The cognatic descent system, on the Peninsula, has retained what could be termed a matrilineal principle in relation to the assimilation of male strangers, meaning that matrilineal ties are considered more valid in establishing the identity of a child born of ethnically mixed parentage. Descent from a Sherbro woman, along with membership in the local male or female initiation society (Poro or Bondo) ensures belonging to the local Sherbro community. This principle coexists in practice with patrilineal ones (for instance, when deciding a child's family name or postmarital residence) and cognatic inheritance (individuals who are Sherbro on both sides of their family tree can choose which one to value when claiming rights). Overall, the Sherbro descent system is characterized by a high degree of fluidity in kinship affiliations.

Beyond the immediate context of the family and social reproduction, the cognatic system of Sherbro society enables processes of social integration that differ from those observed in patrilineal societies. In forest societies of the Upper Guinea Coast, for example, anthropologists observe that the patrilineal system establishes a relation of subordination 'between the descendants of politically superior patrilineage, defined as first-comers and as wife-givers, or mother's brother, and the descendants of subordinate patrilineages, defined as latecomers and as wife-takers, or sister's sons' (Højbjerg 2007: 237). The hierarchy between lineages of mother's brothers and sister's sons typically corresponds to a hierarchy between groups of hosts and groups of strangers. Lineages of strangers do not hold the same rights to access political functions within the chieftaincy system (see Murphy and Bledsoe 1987).

In Sherbro society, by contrast, the possibility of matrifiliation allows for a more flexible type of social stratification. Integration implies that strangers affiliate to a Sherbro matrilineage by way of marriage and initiation into local societies (the 'ritual process' described in Chapter 7). In this case, the postmarital residence rule, which is virilocal, does not apply. Matrifiliation entails that children of in-marrying men can upgrade their social status through the female line (MacCormack 1979: 198). They access the political and social rights conferred by belonging to the matrilineage (for instance, political leadership). However, this possibility requires the stranger's sociocultural assimilation ('becoming' Sherbro). This matrilineal pattern of integration competes with the kinship systems of other ethnic groups, such as the Mende and Temne, both of which are patrilineal. As a result, oral traditions usually describe Sherbro relations with strangers as highly unstable. Latecomers to a local community may seek to impose their own patrilineages as politically dominant.

The case of the black settlers of the Colony presents us with another type of host/stranger configuration that has carried over into contemporary Sherbro/Krio relations. In this case, the possibility of assimilation was balanced by both compatible kinship systems and prestige differentials. The settlers were strangers to the Sherbros, yet they held a more prestigious social status, linked to the relations they had established with the British and their exposure to Christianity. Murphy and Bledsoe (1987: 136) argue that in Liberia, indigenous populations responded to the arrival of Americo-Liberians by seeking their patronage and assistance, and by positioning themselves as subordinate 'clients'. Sherbro communities used marriage and child-fostering to associate themselves with the settlers. The settlers' villages may have remained politically distinct from Sherbro settlements, but both populations engaged in social and economic cooperation, and were, ultimately, linked by kinship.

Furthermore, the Liberated Africans, as they settled on the Peninsula, were a group of diverse people who had to invent a new mode of coexistence in newly established villages. It is safe to assume that their mode of tracing descent was quite flexible and accommodated for the various cultural influences and family configurations that characterized their new society.[1] Thus, kinship arrangements with Sherbros were likely to adjust to the local patterns of cognatic descent and virilocality (for instance, if a settler married a Sherbro woman).

Those historical processes of intermarriage and integration, fostering and patronage led to the emergence of a Sherbro/Krio social and territorial unit, which I define as a residential zone. The residential zone concept, coined by Kopytoff (1977), refers to a larger area, not limited to the actual place of residence, in which people can relate to their matrilineal kin despite patrilocal residence. If the Peninsula is viewed as a residential zone, then much about the coexistence of Krios and Sherbros, as two distinct groups not related via the processes of assimilation, becomes less confounding. Further, if a strict concern for matrilineality is shifted to a recognition of the importance of *matrifocality*, then we gain even more clarity. Tanner (1974: 131) defines matrifocality as an attribute of any kinship system in which '(a) the role of the mother is structurally, culturally, and affectively central and (b) this multidimensional centrality is legitimate'. In the matrifocal model, women have relative power within the kin group: they control economic resources and participate in decision-making processes concerning kin. Furthermore, the role of women is culturally valued. Finally, the emotional bond between mother and child is strong and important. Tanner emphasizes the role of kinswomen in an individual's life and 'a cultural patterning of affect and of interpersonal relations that promotes kin ties to and through women' (ibid.: 137).

Krios and Sherbros are integrated in a residential zone bound by the centrality of relationships established through women. Individuals maintain close relations with family members by nurturing maternal kin ties in scattered

settlements. Local discourses emphasize that the early adoption of the fishing livelihood in settlements established by the black settlers would have contributed to reproducing this social pattern. Although livelihoods in Krio and Sherbro settlements are now diversified, fishing remains part of the local ideology that presents Krios and Sherbros as residents of a common coastal territory.

Storytelling and Performance

Narratives about kinship as an alliance (or a political arrangement) imply a certain form of storytelling, which revolves around the discourses of representatives of the local political power, mainly Sherbro elderly men. This focus may mask discourses of subaltern groups (women and youth) about their own relations with strangers. In reporting those narratives, I am sensitive to the feminist critique that highlights a male bias in studies of reciprocity (see Weiner 1976). However, in this West African case, reciprocity structures local politics (the question of who has power over whom), which is informed by male logics of exchange, including the exchange of women. As a result, male voices remain dominant in the narration.

This focus on elderly male narrators is also justified because it emphasizes the construction of authority that is central to performances of Sherbro collective identity. In turn, such performances constitute a mode of production of social power vis-à-vis other groups. In the remainder of this chapter, I base my analysis on two stories of village foundation: the first collected in Bureh Town and the second in Tokeh.

In July 2011, as I started preliminary research on the Peninsula, I recorded historical narratives about the foundation of several settlements to the south. During those encounters with local political figures, I was not yet known as 'the anthropologist working with Sherbro populations'. On these two trips, I was accompanied by one of my contacts in Kissi Town, Mrs Koroma. I presented myself as a researcher, interested in local history, and stated my wish to conduct further fieldwork in the year to come. Later, those early interviews proved crucial, as the people who had narrated those stories became key interlocutors.

The two stories were told to me in Sherbro. This was the choice of the narrators, Mr Small in Bureh Town and Mr Johnson in Tokeh. They chose to speak in Sherbro and to translate their stories (or have it translated by one of the participants) into Krio, since my command of the Sherbro language did not allow me to understand them fully. This choice, in front of a person they did not know yet, participated in the linguistic performance of ethnic identity. Both narrators positioned themselves as legitimate interlocutors for a researcher who showed an interest in Sherbro populations. Furthermore, they reinforced their authority by displaying their linguistic abilities in a social environment in which the Sherbro language has disappeared from daily use. The language choice structured the

interaction between performers and audience. The audience, of course, 'plays a key role in assessing the significance of the talk' (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 70) and in this case lends credibility to the story by recording it and reporting it in a written form. The use of the Sherbro language aimed at making stories reliable and authoritative, in an environment that has seen Sherbro local political power increasingly eroded and fragilized.

In Bureh Town, a village of a few hundred inhabitants, the choice of Mr Small as my interlocutor did not raise any issues: he had been the longest ruling headman and appeared as the prominent elderly figure of Bureh Town. Mrs Koroma knew Mr Small and introduced me to him. In Tokeh, by contrast, a large settlement that shelters many new populations, the right to tell history was a contested issue and the narrator, Mr Johnson, used his position as a deputy headman to impose his own narrative. However, both narrators asserted their authority and competence to 'recontextualize' the oral text in response to circumstances of the local political environment. This recontextualization became part of a performance of power that framed intergroup relations (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 76). Their identity as Sherbro speakers (and, I would learn later, as powerful men within Poro) gave those stories a flavour of authenticity, while presenting autochthony as a collective property of the Sherbros.

An Origin Story: Unusual Strangers

Here is the version of the foundation of Bureh Town (Bakyama) narrated by Mr Small:

> A man came from Bonthe. His name was Bureh Kyama, and he was the first person to plant a tree in this town, which became Bakyama. He arrived here first in 1836. When this man arrived, this was not the place where he started the village. He first settled in Hungkpoh, on the beach. He came with his wife and two children. He was a fisherman. He did not do farming at all. By then, the town was young and there was happiness. They called the place *Maminko*, in Sherbro 'the place where people laugh'. Sherbros call this place happiness – *Mamin* – and Krios call it York. Sherbros call it happiness because things were difficult when they arrived there first, but then other people started coming until it started to grow and become prosperous. But there the sea was rough and the waves were pounding the shore, so they decided to move off from the beach. They came very close to Hunka ('we are here'). If you see those two trees that are standing over there [about a mile from the village along the beach], that is where they started to bury their people, where the indigenes are still buried. From there, they came to the place that we generally call Tribeng, which means 'old town' [in Sherbro]. When they

> settled in the old town, the place began to open and the town expanded. Then in 1845, they settled where the village is presently. Now, how did it get the name Bureh Town? There were five Krio women who were trading fish at that time. Any time they came here [to buy fish], they said [in Krio] 'Leh wi go to Pa Bureh in tɔng' [Let us go to Pa Bureh's town]. From there came the name Bureh Town. When the village started to grow, other Sherbro were visiting from other villages and always said: 'Hin kon yako Gba Kyama' [Let us go to brother Kyama]. In Sherbro, *Gba Kyama* means 'brother Kyama'. From there, the name stayed in Sherbro as Bakyama. When Krios came to stay here, they put their own cemetery where these two other trees are standing. The place stands there until now. That is the only place that they used as a cemetery.

This historical narrative not only depicts the foundation of Bureh Town but also its later relations with York. York was founded in 1819 following a reduction in British military forces and the disbanding of the West India regiments stationed in Sierra Leone. Soldiers were given land and York began with about two hundred of these new colonists. The place was renamed after the Duke of York, yet Bullom called it Momini, which supposedly referred to a pre-existing Sherbro settlement (Fyfe 1962: 136). Momini is possibly a distortion of the Sherbro word *mam* – to laugh. The name used by Mr Small, Maminko, bears the additional location indicator *ko*, but probably refers to the same place. According to Fyfe (ibid.), York colonists married Bullom women, who came to live with them – and perhaps, as Blair (1968: 28) suggests, those women may have been 'amongst the original Sherbro inhabitants of the site'.

Although historical dates are inaccurate, oral tradition in Bureh Town recalls progressive migration from Maminko to the present settlement before the arrival of settlers. It establishes Sherbro historical precedence over the site, while not contradicting later history about the foundation of York by foreign settlers. Mr Small's story focused on the progressive and peaceful interactions with York residents in a geographically distinct village. He described how 'Bureh Town' got its name through an interactional process between the settlers and the Sherbro neighbouring populations. This contrasts with changes in names, such as Hamilton, Sussex, York and many others, that resulted from the imposition of British rule. Though he could have focused his story on the dynamics of external imposition and internal response, and on the dispossession of land that indigenous populations experienced with the establishment of the Colony (Galli and Rönnbäck 2021: 119), this is not the path he chose.

Local oral traditions across the Peninsula emphasized the geographical separation of Sherbro settlements and newly founded Liberated African villages, as indicated by the use of the name *abeka* for the settlers, as was discussed in Chapter 2. These local representations correspond to the present configuration

in which Sherbro and Krio settlements are embedded: they have separate territories and political authorities (village heads). In the Colony, the villages founded by the settlers were usually separate and independent. The political territories of Sherbro and Liberated African villages were clearly differentiated. This aligned with Sherbro political organization, in which authority is dispersed among small-scale scattered settlements. The localization of power among both groups may have facilitated direct – although not necessarily peaceful – relations between the settlers and local populations (Davidson 1969; Day 1983; MacCormack 1980). Each group kept its own distinct identity and interacted on the basis of this distinction.

Liberated Africans did not establish an overarching authority upon Sherbro villages, but created links based on social influence. They became 'prestigious' strangers, who had access to Christianity and literacy via the missionaries. Local populations secured entry into this new society, individually and collectively, through strategies such as marriage and child-fostering, by which the settlers also consolidated their dominating social position (see Chapter 4). On the Peninsula, this type of alliance was established between groups that cohabitated in the same region and forged other types of connections, such as economic cooperation and common ritual practice, which tended to replace stiff hierarchies with more horizontal relations over time. Thus, Sherbros may have looked to their strangers as a possibility to access new assets, while aiming at maintaining their social position as hosts locally.

Mr Small emphasized the continuous and peaceful socioeconomic interactions between Sherbro populations and the settlers in York. The kinship idiom comes to reinforce this description. Interestingly, this idiom is at odds with historical data presented above, which rather stress on marriages between the settlers and Sherbro women. The reason may lie in the discourse about 'egalitarian' exchange that Mr Small wanted to convey.

The figure of the Krio fish trader illustrates the gradual integration of the two populations by way of marriage between Krio women and Sherbro men. Patrilineal logic would have it that the settlers, as wife-givers, were socially superior to the Sherbros and assimilated them within their own group by way of marriage. Yet, the story describes no such assimilation. The reason is to be found in the cognatic descent system of the Sherbros. Mr Small positioned Sherbros as wife-takers, and yet Sherbro communities still relied on their own women to ensure the continuity of their group (see MacCormack 1997: 291). The kinship idiom of Bureh Town emphasizes precisely the continuity of the Sherbro kinship system, despite the settlers' presence. The story implies that Sherbro/Krio relations were not based on sociocultural assimilation, but on the creation of horizontal links between communities via marriage and children. The story does not provide us with information on how children born from Sherbro men and Krio women were considered or to which group they belonged. They may have

been absorbed into their mother's group, but this did not constitute a threat for the sociopolitical continuity of Sherbro communities. Rather, this process only strengthened family links between communities.

When evoking kinship here, I am more concerned with local politics than with descent per se. In reality, marriage, place of residence and child belonging may have been rather flexible and dependent on practices situated at the microlocal level. The implication of this story is that Sherbros could maintain the conditions for the social reproduction of their group and thus political authority over their territory. The narrative associates Sherbro/Krio kinship with a specific territorial configuration that allowed both groups to remain (politically) separate, and yet to relate on the basis of the social and economic exchanges that depended on marriage and kin relations.

Also, the kinship idiom is interwoven with a description of economic collaboration that presents both groups as mutually interdependent. The narrative implies that, for Sherbro hosts, engaging with the settlers on a cooperative basis was more rewarding than treating them as a subordinate group. In the field, people often referred to the fact that the 'slaves' had taught Sherbros how to read the Bible, but Sherbros had taught them how to fish. These transactions were presented as an exchange of equivalent skills in a social arrangement characterized by reciprocity between 'higher-ranked' strangers and 'lower-ranked' hosts.

Fishing and Social Relatedness

The development of collaborative economic relations around fishing between populations of York and Bureh Town constitutes the pivotal event that accounts for subsequent social mixing. In the nineteenth century, fishing became the primary economic activity on the Peninsula. Although on the southern coast, Sherbro-speaking populations usually combined it with farming, due to the proximity of urban markets, fisherfolk of the Colony specialized in fishing early on. Hendrix (1984: 4) observes that by the mid-nineteenth century, the fishing industry 'was a key area of employment and production', including both open-sea and coastal fishing. In Krio and Sherbro fishing towns, farming is considered to be the livelihood of other groups who migrated from the interior. In most settlements, oral traditions mentioned that farming started with the arrival of Mende or Temne migrants, who cultivated crops on lands allocated to them by Sherbro or Krio people. Gardening and hunting were remembered as past activities. Krios in particular were known to have vegetable gardens for their own consumption and to practise agriculture for local trade, such as cassava in York.

Fishing is associated with a particular type of one-man paddle-boat called a Kru canoe (but locally called *kunu-kunu*) that is designed for hook-and-line fishing. Seemingly, the Kru canoe was not part of the traditional fishery of the Sherbro coast.[2] The name instead indicates a Liberian origin, from the Kroomen

who were skilled seamen recruited to work on British ships in the nineteenth century (Hornell 1928: 11; Krabacher 1990: 162).[3] My conversations with Sherbro fishermen confirmed that they believed Kroomen to have introduced this technique on the Peninsula coast (they linked the name *Kru* with the Kroomen). Sherbro fishermen, as I observed their daily fishing routines, used other types of boats and practised net fishing as well. Nevertheless, they usually preferred the hook-and-line technique, with which they caught larger and more valuable species such as barracuda, snapper and ladyfish. In their views, the *kunu-kunu* was a marker of Sherbro identity, as opposed to the motorboat fishing practised by other groups – an issue that will be discussed later on in this chapter.

The fishing economy rests on the economic relationship that unites fishermen with fish traders who process the raw fish and put it on the market. Fishermen have at least one, but possibly several trading partners, to whom they habitually sell their catch. Since fish cannot be stored for long, fish traders smoke it according to a process that can require several days in smokehouses called *banda*. After two or three days, the fish becomes dark brown and 'will last between two and three weeks without a significant loss in quality' (Krabacher 1990: 286). This period can be extended to several months with additional smoking stages. The processed fish is sold in nearby markets and Freetown, yet sellers also travel inland.

Gendered transactions are at the centre of the artisanal fishing economy. Processing fish is a female-dominated enterprise. While men go to sea, it is women who smoke the fish and sell it at the market. The female fish traders can provide parts of the fishing equipment, such as hooks, lines or baits, or food and fresh water before the fishermen goes out to sea. They sometimes also financially contribute to boat repair. Further down the Sherbro coast, Diggins (2018) shows that female fish traders need to elaborate strategies to secure regular business relationships with fishermen in a context of sharp decline of maritime resources. These gendered transactions involve money and various types of help, such as food and loans, but also seduction tactics. Partners who are romantically involved also often team up for business.

Mr Small referred to those gendered exchanges and added an ethnic component to them by describing 'historical' economic transactions between Sherbro fishermen and 'Krio' female traders (in the story understood as women settlers). Thus, the foundation of Bureh Town stands as a metaphor for a Sherbro/Krio sociopolitical alliance based on a common livelihood.

This representation of the local past also has some historical basis. Fisheries on the Peninsula developed with the presence of the Liberated Africans, who considerably increased the demand for fish, but also directly participated in this economy. The settlers resisted colonial attempts to develop commercial agriculture (Scanlan 2017) and some of them adopted the fishing livelihood soon after their arrival.[4] From the 1830s, they developed the construction of large sailing

boats, called 'benefit boats', which accommodated large crews specialized in snapper fishing (Hendrix 1985).[5] Benefit boats carried food and water for a few days. The fishermen used deep-sea lines and processed the fish at sea by drying them over a small fire (ibid.: 70). In 1850, the British authorities reported between 110 and 140 boats and canoes on the Peninsula, particularly sailing boats built by local populations.[6] Melville (1849: 113) counted up to thirty sailing boats at the Freetown harbour. By the mid-nineteenth century, fishermen from York, Kent and Tombo, including many Creoles, supplied large quantities of dry fish for the Freetown markets.[7] Liberated African women in those locations also traded fresh produce and fish (White 1981: 629; 1987: 34). They sold the fish in Waterloo and Freetown, which they reached by boat or by land, but also far into the interior.

This dynamic economic environment surely pushed local fishermen and fish traders in Krio and Sherbro settlements towards more cooperation. They may have shared their techniques and worked together to a certain extent. Although this would be difficult to trace in historical sources, contemporary accounts provide an insight into those early exchanges.

The Kru canoe technique has come to represent a symbol of unity between Sherbros and Krios. Wharfs of Krio settlements have many *kunu-kunus* (Kru canoes). During fieldwork in York, for instance, I counted three motorboats and thirty paddle boats, among which were twenty Kru canoes. Both Sherbro and Krio fishermen stressed that the *kunu-kunu* technique is originally Sherbro and highlighted knowledge transmission from Sherbros to Krios regarding paddle-fishing and boat-carving skills. Additionally, Krio fishermen often mentioned that in the past, fishing on benefit boats drew on Sherbro hook-and-line techniques. Many people said that processes of transmission were facilitated by seasonal fishing migrations. Krio fishermen on the Banana Islands and in York remembered Sherbros coming from Bureh Town to carve *kunu-kunus* and to teach their skills:

> We have carvers here, but they learned from Sherbros in Bureh Town. They came here to teach them. People from Bureh Town used to carve a lot here. In the 1980s, some stayed up to six months here. Now the fish has reduced [and they don't come as often]. But even if we know how to carve Kru canoes, they will still do it better than us.

Conversely, fishermen in Bureh Town also recalled the names of famous Sherbro carvers who used to practise their skills along the Peninsula and passed on their knowledge.

Sherbro knowledge is not only technical knowledge. *Kunu-kunu* hard-earned fishing skills are enshrouded in the secrecy of the Poro initiation society. Poro initiation and fishing are both linked to a process by which young men

have to prove their masculinity by acquiring a strong and independent nature and by showing no fear of danger. Going to sea can be compared to entering the Poro sacred grove, in which the initiation takes place: both present aspects of peril, knowledge, mystery and magic that only initiates can understand and master. Both are places of male socialization and individual accomplishment. In the past, fishing regulations were dictated by the Poro society. By planting the Poro wooden stick in the littoral zone, Poro members could prevent overfishing in certain areas (Hall 1938: 5). Although this is no longer the case on the Peninsula, most *kunu-kunu* fishermen are also Poro members.

Indeed, initiation remains necessary to become a recognized fisherman, as it gives access to ritual knowledge by which fishermen protect themselves at sea and increase their catches. During fieldwork, some young men who had dropped out of school and wanted to do fishing were instead encouraged to become members for this reason. Similarly, Poro membership provides extended networks of sociability. Poro groves are situated along the beach and members often hold their meetings on the beach. For Poro members, the Peninsula is not experienced as a succession of settlements, but as a continuous stretch of beach along which they move and meet. Non-initiated fishermen not only feel excluded from these gatherings, but also fear them and are scared of enforced initiation (see Chapter 7). As seasonal fishing migrations between settlements remain frequent, even Krios often take the decision to become members in order to circulate freely between fishing locations.

Similarly, *kunu-kunu* carving requires not only specific technical abilities, but also the support of other Poro members. When a fisherman needs a new canoe, he calls on other fishermen for help: choosing the tree, cutting it down and bringing it to the village. In Sussex in 2011, Poro members continued to organize community work for the making of a new *kunu-kunu*. Fishermen living in neighbouring settlements were asked to join in, and the group headed into the forest for a day, led by master carvers, who learn their skills through apprenticeship. Everyone took a turn at the less skilled work, after which the carvers hollowed out the trunk with specially designed axes. By the end of the day, the canoe was dragged down to Sherbro Town. There, the master carvers continued work on the canoe for two or three weeks before it was finished. In general, fishermen preferred to order their canoes in towns where carvers were considered competent and had a solid reputation.

Kunu-kunu fishing, as a technique common to Sherbro and Krio fishermen, is central to the material culture of the Peninsula and includes social, economic and ritual dimensions. Both populations highlighted its practice as a strong element of their identity. Fishing, in contemporary accounts, appeared as an expression of Sherbro/Krio social relatedness, thereby erasing the conflicts that existed between them or may have existed in the past between local populations and the settlers. Krios were positioned as strangers in that they depended on

Figure 3.1. Master carver at work in the Peninsula forest, 2011. © Anaïs Ménard

Sherbro knowledge for the adoption of the fishing livelihood. Yet, the semantics of fishing expressed not only long-term interactional processes and social relatedness, but also the existence of a common coastal zone of residence that was forged through mobility practices.

Residential Dynamics and Matrifocality

Sherbro and Krio populations on the Peninsula are part of a residential zone that is characterized by two dynamics: the geographical and sociopolitical separation of Sherbro and Krio settlements, and high intersettlement mobility due to fishing. People usually identify social mixing and fluidity in the Sherbro/Krio residential zone as an outcome of the preoccupation with fishing and related practices of mobility. In the following section, I consider how mobility and matrifocality combine in people's accounts of social relations between groups.

Sherbro/Krio common family networks are said to have emerged from fishing mobility. When fish become scarce in an area, fishermen go *alɛn*, which means that they migrate seasonally to places with higher fish concentrations (see also Diggins 2018; Krabacher 1990). Mobility is further necessitated by the fact that there is no alternative activity to alleviate economic strain when the fishing is poor. During the rainy season, women can support the household by engaging more intensively in trade. Yet, dependence on a single subsistence

Figure 3.2. Dragging the canoe down Sherbro Town, Sussex, 2011. © Anaïs Ménard

activity demands that fishermen migrate more often and for longer periods. They regularly go fishing in other settlements, sometimes for several months, before returning. For *kunu-kunu* fishermen, the scope of movement is limited: they go to settlements of the Peninsula that they already know and to which they can return regularly. The decision to move is based on fishermen's knowledge of fishing seasons, but also on information provided by kin and friends in other places.

Most fishermen initiate relationships with women in settlements where they migrate seasonally and those women can also become their business partners. Thus, it is common to meet Sherbro fishermen with multiple relationships in several settlements on the Peninsula. Many of them also have an 'official' woman in their village of origin. This multiple-household pattern was given by some fishermen as the reason why they would not marry their woman back home, as a married woman would likely ask for financial compensation if she learned about 'girlfriends' in other places. Such multiple relationships are usually tolerated, even if they can cause conflict in couples: most women know that their husbands have lovers along their fishing route. They endure those situations, as long as they receive enough money to run the household and the husband does not bring back a lover to live with him as a second wife or establish her as the official wife. Fishermen who do so are publicly shamed, as I observed during my fieldwork.

Many people could identify family members in other settlements as a result of the *alɛn* practice. As one Sherbro fisherman in Tokeh told me, referring to his family in York:

> Krios and Sherbros are mixed up. Sherbro people can go *alɛn* to York and keep a woman there. My mother is a Decker [family name] and her big brother used to go *alɛn* to York and got children. The children are all Decker. This family owns half of York … All the Krios in York have Sherbro fathers but they have all become Krio.

Another fisherman in Tokeh mentioned that the similarities in the family names in Tokeh and York – Decker, Slowe and Pratt – result from fishermen of Tokeh seasonally living in York and vice versa, and he concluded: 'Fishermen at sea, depending on the wind, will land at York, Bureh Town or Mama Beach … They go where the sea pushes them.'

These patterns of mobility are also cited as the reason why men do not engage as husbands or fathers to a significant degree. Fishermen are regularly absent and seldom take part in daily decision making concerning the household. Their financial contribution to the upbringing of children is not guaranteed, particularly for those born from 'side' relationships. A fisherman may sometimes decide to give a 'side' relationship some level of official recognition. He offers the

woman's relatives some money for them to acknowledge the union, by which he ensures that the children will carry his name (like in the example above of the Decker family in York). Yet, these arrangements are also unstable. Some women choose not to use the father's last name in case the latter fails to provide financial support (money for food, school fees or other payments for children) or to demonstrate a romantic commitment.

Thus, at the local level, people may mix matrilineal and patrilineal principles: in the case of the Deckers in York, children bore their father's surname, but were considered 'Krio' based on matrilineal principles. This situation is typical of the matrifocal pattern of kin relations on the Peninsula. An individual's ethnic identity is usually defined by his or her place of birth and residence, which is therefore determined by whether his or her mother stays in her own village. Although residence (in Sherbro and Krio settlements) is usually virilocal, people born as a result of *alɛn* relationships typically stay in their mother's village and will claim rights on their mother's side, despite bearing their father's surname. In Krio settlements, people can inherit documented properties on their mother's side and rarely claim any in their father's village. This pattern differs in the event that a Krio woman marries a Sherbro man, and thus comes to live with him. In this case, she and her children may adopt the man's name and the children usually self-identify as Sherbro. However, she will also be able to claim rights on the mother's side. These women usually maintain strong relations with kinswomen in their place of origin. Conversely, the inability to visit maternal kin, often due to financial constraints that may prevent travelling, even for a day, may be experienced as a real suffering.

Thus, self-definition as Krio or Sherbro often depends on the place of residence in someone's infancy and childhood (a Krio or Sherbro settlement). The place of birth and residence also determines in which society a child is initiated first: the Hunting society in Krio settlements, and the Poro or Bondo in Sherbro settlements. Despite the possibility to become a member of both, early membership in one or the other society is a further marker of ethnic identity (see Chapter 6). As we have seen, the child's place of residence is not necessarily the mother's place of origin. Nevertheless, people usually remain emotionally attached to their mother's village and relate easily to their maternal kin throughout the Peninsula. They meet their relatives for occasions like weddings, funerals, rituals or ceremonies of ancestors' worship, which are further detailed in Chapter 5.

For women too, mobility and seasonal residence are not uncommon. Women engage in different types of trade, like fish, cookery, beverages and other small items. In recent years, the population increase on the Peninsula has made these activities more profitable. Women can engage in trading activities in other places – often places where they have female kin – for several weeks before returning to their husbands' settlement. They take the children with them or leave them with kinswomen. Additionally, some of them may move for ritual reasons: those who

have an important ritual role in the Bondo initiation society may be called upon to help organize the initiation period in another settlement.

Socialization tends to revolve around the relations between mother and child and among the mother's kin. The emotional bond between mother and child is considered important (Hoffer 1971: 114). Divorce and separation are frequent and the end of a relationship often coincides with the woman's decision to return with the children (regardless of their age) to her hometown – often her own mother's – either for a while or permanently.

On the Peninsula, the mother's village has special emotional and social significance. By 'mother's village', I mean the settlement in which somebody (a man or woman) can rely on maternal kin for support (for instance, child-rearing or need for an accommodation). If the mother lives with her husband in another settlement, the person may choose to go to the mother's place of origin instead where their maternal kin live. The family story of Mr Kargbo (his father's name), who lived in Tokeh, is interesting in this regard. Mr Kargbo and his nine siblings were born in Baw-Baw from a Temne father who had come *alɛn* and settled there. The mother's mother of Mr Kargbo was from Tokeh and had married in Baw-Baw. His mother had been born there. However, when he was a teenager, she came back with the children to her mother's place in Tokeh because of marital problems. The grandmother herself had come back to Tokeh after her marriage had ended. Thus, Tokeh was the place where both his grandmother and mother took refuge, as they could rely on the help of their maternal kin. Mr Kargbo had lived in Tokeh since then and considered it his hometown, which shows how the mother's place can become the main place of emotional attachment.

The mother's place of origin is often also the settlement where an individual is entitled to claim political and customary land rights. In Sherbro communities, the mother, the mother's mother and the father's mother are the most important kin when negotiating one's customary rights in a given settlement. Many people claim customary property on the maternal side. Access to leadership also depends on Sherbro female ancestorship, either on the mother's or the father's side, as evidenced in Chapters 7 and 8. One of my interlocutors, Cho, had lived for more than twenty years in Baw-Baw, yet he still thought about moving back to Number Two River, where he had been raised by his maternal grandmother. He owned land there inherited from his grandmother and contemplated standing as a candidate for headmanship in the future. Cho referred to Number Two River as the place of his 'ancestors': it indicated a strong emotional but also spiritual link to the place, as ancestors are believed to help in personal endeavours. Thus, Cho could both experience an emotional attachment to his mother's place and use matrilineal rights in land and leadership.

The matrifocal pattern that unites Krio and Sherbro settlements is often associated in local discourses with mobility (of both women and men). The

specifics of Sherbro relations with the early settlers – based on coexistence and yet also separation – is held to have generated a type of integration in which each group preserves its specific identity, while stressing close kinship ties with the other. These kinship ties, as we have seen, are often expressed through the central role of women and maternal kin in both societies.

The Intricacies of Assimilation

By contrast, members of other local groups were and continue to be integrated into Sherbro society according to a different pattern of reciprocity. This type of integration, which requires the assimilation of strangers, mainly concerns men who settle and marry within Sherbro settlements, and for whom Sherbros act as wife-givers. Following matrilineal principles, the children of strangers born of Sherbro women are considered to belong to their mother's group. Strangers and their children are expected to assimilate to their Sherbro matrilineage and acquire Sherbro identity over time. In this case, oral traditions describe an unstable combination between wife-giving and the patrilineal ideology of the societies from which the strangers originate. Integrating local strangers presents an inherent risk that the latter may want to impose the authority of their own patrilineage over Sherbro lineages in order to access power. In the present context of the Peninsula, narratives concerning local strangers focus on the integration of Temne-speaking populations, which reflects recent conflicts between them and Sherbros over land ownership and local political leadership, which I will detail in Chapter 8.

The kinship idiom that appears in oral traditions to qualify Sherbro/Temne relations underlines its competitive aspects. As an illustration, I present one version of the foundation of Tokeh. In Tokeh, I was welcomed by the village committee: the headman, his deputy (Mr Johnson) and his secretary. The headman assumed that I was asking for a story told in Sherbro and, since he did not speak it very well, he asked his deputy to narrate his version of local history. Mr Johnson started his story by saying that he had gotten it from his maternal grandmother's little sister, thereby grounding it in a transmission based on matrifiliation:

> The older people were fishermen, who had come from Shenge. When they travelled along this road to go to Freetown, normally they rested at the mouth of the river between York and Tokeh. They stopped, lit a fire and slept. But some of them … decided to settle. The first village was up the hill. *Tokeh ko* – in Sherbro this means 'up there' and *tok* means to rest … The old village is the place where the town started. We have the Douglas, the Slowe, the Decker, the Johnson and the Martin [families] … There were no other people here, except for the Sherbros … The first

> man who came from the provinces and joined them was Pa Santigi and he was Temne. He was the first Temne man to come to this town. He was a farmer and he worked here during the farming season. Then, he would return home when the rains started and the Sherbros would dry fish for him. After some time, Pa Santigi took his brother along to do farming for the Sherbros. The Sherbros welcomed him too and dried fish for him when he returned home … After another rainy season, Pa Santigi's brother returned accompanied with another brother. The Sherbros told him: 'You have started bringing your Temne brothers here, but we do not want plenty of them.' Pa Santigi reassured them and told them that his youngest brother, who had just come, would not cause them any problem. But when he started to work on his farm, the brother met with one of our grandmothers. She was still breastfeeding her son. They kept their love secret … When Pa Santigi decided that it was time to return home, his youngest brother said that he would not go, because he had found a woman. Pa Santigi said: 'What! I have been here longer than you and I have no wife. This is what the Sherbros said, that they did not want any problem here. Well, I will have to meet them and tell them that my youngest brother will not leave?' … He called all the Sherbro elders and said: 'I want to tell you something. This is my brother. I brought him here. But he said he is not going with me because he is in love with your daughter.' The elders asked him who the woman was and he responded 'Mamfuei'. They called Mamfuei, who said: 'This is true. This man said that he wants me to be his wife.' The Sherbros dried fish for Pa Santigi, who returned home. His brother stayed and Mamfuei had a son, Kontham. Pa Santigi's brother brought the Muslim religion here … When he settled, he met the people praying [at church]. So, he too prepared a small place to pray. He built a small mosque … [Those who were not Christians] started to pray with him. He is the first Temne to have settled in this town.

This version of the foundation of Tokeh reveals an ambivalent relationship between Sherbro populations and Temne-speaking settlers. It merges two distinct dynamics of Temne migration. On the one hand, it presents the arrival of Temne-speaking populations as the pivotal event for the expansion of the village. Pa Santigi's brother, in this specific account, was identified as the grandfather (father's father) of the former headman and as having arrived in Tokeh in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, as Miller (1980: 19) notes, references to genealogies are also (and often) used to refer to sets of relationships, in which 'individual figures … turn out to be personifications of social groups'. In this narrative, whether or not he existed as such a factual person, Pa Santigi's brother personifies a Temne stranger's line of descent and Mamfuei represents

the Sherbro matrilineage. On the other hand, the kinship idiom implies an underlying fear of losing one's host status and authority with the arrival of Temne settlers, which refers to the migration of Temne fisherfolk since the 1960s and to subsequent disputes that occurred between the two groups.

Mr Johnson has the Temne strangers describe a perceived reluctance by Sherbros to establish any lasting relations based on a matrimonial alliance with them. He also describes the two groups as distinct with regard to their economic occupations, and this distinction is described as the reason for their mutual tolerance prior to the establishment of kinship ties. He explains that Sherbros and Temnes practised a type of barter system based on farming/fishing exchange. Temnes were allowed to stay in the community for the farming season, but the giving of fish also signifies the existence of amicable relationships.

Mr Johnson's story follows a logic found in oral traditions from Kissi Town, Mama Beach and Tombo. These narratives also mention that, at first, Temne fishermen did not stay on a permanent basis. And they also remained silent on Temne's later involvement in fishing. This allowed narrators to contrast an early idealized relationship of mutual reciprocity with the current situation of competition over land and fishing. In these stories, early interactions illustrate positive exchange and friendship as long as this did not imply affinal kinship. Strangers are left in a liminal position without the possibility of upgrading their social status. Yet, ultimately, one of them initiates a relationship with a local woman and settles.

Because of the settlers' farming activity, it is implicit that settlements were separated. Until the 1980s, Tokeh's old town consisted of a line of houses on the beach side and Temne farmers had their houses farther up, where the new town is situated today. This geographical separation illustrates the liminal status of Temne settlers, who were set apart. Sherbros also stressed that those early migrants were afraid of Poro and chose to settle outside of existing settlements to avoid enforced initiation. The discourse about Muslim strangers (Temne and Fulah) being scared of Poro is a recurring one on the Peninsula, yet most Temne strangers are often members of Poro in their area of origin (see Chapter 7).

Such narratives contrasted with those concerning members of other groups, such as Mende settlers, whose presence was accepted *within* Sherbro settlements. In Tokeh, a Sherbro man with Mende paternal origins told me:

> [Mendes] used to come here and tell people that they had come as strangers. Our people used to give them a place in their houses and ask them what they could do. [Mendes] would say that they were farmers and could be employed to plant cassava. They planted, developed land, set traps for animals … Sometimes, the Mende man would look around and see a woman to marry. But Sherbros did not give anybody to marry to Temnes.

In this statement, the old town is retrospectively perceived as a place where Sherbro and Mende-speaking populations lived together. Mendes were farmers but started fishing, which illustrates an integration process based on marriage and livelihood. The person compared those relations with the refusal of Sherbros to accept Temne speakers as strangers through wife-giving.

Many people explained that Sherbros encouraged Mendes to settle because they were disciplined and complied with local rules. This distinguished them from Temnes:

> Sherbros encouraged Mendes [to settle] more than any other nation [tribe]. And we Sherbros, our own background comes from Mende [land]. [We encouraged them] because they obey and [Sherbros] were not afraid of them. But [Sherbros] don't like Temnes, because they are quick to fight … We [Sherbros] welcomed Temnes, but we all came from Mende [land], we like [Mendes] very much. Even in York, you have a lot of [Mendes]. They are Decker, Shyllon, Martin … they all come from Shenge or Bonthe.

Sherbro populations on the Peninsula liked to trace their origins from the Sherbro coast and stress their cultural affinity with Mendes. These relations were presented as based on historical continuity and on a similar ability to 'become Krio' quickly, like in this statement about Mende descendants living in York. Yet, stories of Mende migration also often described a gradual acceptance of the stranger's presence – just like the gradual acceptance of Pa Santigi and his brothers – as a way to validate the autochthonous status of Sherbros.

Conversely, stereotypes about Temne populations presented them as quarrelsome and aggressive, with 'bad' attitudes that Sherbros did not want to associate with – deceit, competition, dissimulation etc. These depictions had much to do with the ethnic clichés that concerned Muslim trading peoples under colonial rule (Bolten 2008: 36, 178–80). Temnes, who favoured Islamic education, were stigmatized as having 'little or no Western education, then viewed as a hallmark of civilization, high status, and prestige' (Bangura 2017: 130). Temne cultural values collided with colonial discourses about Western cultural hegemony upheld by Freetown's Christian-educated elite. As a result, Temnes were easily presented as unable to emulate the social behaviour and 'way of life' of the Krios. In his narrative, Mr Johnson played on this subtext about Temne behaviour. The implication is that Sherbros mistrusted Temnes and tried to keep them at bay. Thus, intermarriages between Sherbro and Temne populations, as evidenced by the common occurrence of Temne origins among self-defined Sherbros, were downplayed in origin narratives.

Mr Johnson's narrative shows how Temne populations can be rendered negatively in the Sherbro imagination. Mr Johnson's narrative operates on a contrast

between the first settler, Pa Santigi, and the brother. Pa Santigi is careful to maintain temporary relations based on exchange and trust. The fact that Sherbros give him fish materializes those friendly relations. Those relations did not involve wife-exchange and the Temne strangers did not become full members of the Sherbro community – they remained physically outside it, respectful, afraid.

From this perspective, the establishment of kinship ties disrupts the initial relation. The seed of a negative interpretation of the Temne in this story comes from noting that Pa Santigi's brother's relationship with Mamfuei is not part of any official exchange between the groups. It is an incident that remains hidden – not only from the elders of the host group, but also from the elder Temne brothers.[8] Pa Santigi himself is afraid that despite his own good conduct, all Temne migrants will become suspect and lose the hosts' trust because of his brother's conduct. In this story, the Temne appear as an untrustworthy group of strangers: the youngest brother betrays authority figures of his own group, who had negotiated the terms of their presence in the Sherbro community. The Sherbro authority figures forgive, but, by affording beneficence, they create a debt by which they mark their position as power holders.

The kinship idiom that emerged from various oral sources described Sherbro/Temne relations as fundamentally nonassociative. As Fortes (1975: 248) states, the incorporation of strangers into host communities in these stories depends 'on some kind of kinship fiction'. Until there is a marriage (and/or children), the Temne strangers are described as living very much apart from the Sherbro hosts. Sherbro authorities refuse to position themselves as permanent hosts to Temne agriculturalists; they do not give them wives. Ultimately, the authority of the elders is circumvented with the acceptance of the first settler. In this story, like in others, women subvert male authority by imposing a love relationship that they initiated.

These stories frame a kinship idiom that becomes clearer when set against analyses of matrilineality in the anthropological literature. The assimilation of in-marrying men constitutes a disruptive element for matrilineages (Schneider 1961: 18). Wife-giving must be combined with the recognition of descent through females to avoid the creation of competing male lineages, through which strangers may try to exert power (Richards 1958: 246). In Sherbro oral traditions, the integration of settlers is defined as dangerous, since in-marrying men may refuse to comply with the rules of integration (in particular, to be initiated and/or to initiate their male children into Poro, as I will detail in Chapter 7), by which they become associated with the Sherbro matrilineage and subordinate to Sherbro political authority. Instead, they may want to impose the leadership of their own patrilineage over host communities. The tension between matrilineality and patrilineality implies that children of male migrants may privilege social bonds with the paternal line. The child may choose his father as his main reference and engage in political and economic cooperation

with him, which may have severe consequences for the reproduction of the matrilineal group (Schneider 1961: 23). Again, the issue is not about descent in itself, but the ability of host communities to maintain political authority over groups of strangers.

Sherbro oral traditions do not present wife-giving from a matrilineal to a patrilineal group as a problem per se. Some of the other groups that Sherbro populations marry, like the Mende, are also patrilineal. Yet, it is the Temne who are described as refusing their subordinate status following marriage. Oral traditions reflected the way in which Sherbros looked retrospectively at the development of Sherbro/Temne relations since the 1960s, when Temne fisherfolk started to compete with them in fishing. This period marks the gradual emancipation of strangers from their hosts and the erosion of uncontested Sherbro political authority at a local level.

Performing Identity

We can now attempt to draw a comparison between the two oral narratives presented above – Bureh Town and Tokeh – in terms of identity politics. In moral terms, discourses about kinship and fishing frame reciprocity as an ideal type of relationship (which appears successful in the first case and conflict-prone in the second case). In this way, oral accounts draw boundaries between clearly separated socioethnic groups, while suggesting, simultaneously, the subsequent malleability and plurality of Sherbro identity. In these stories, the claim to autochthony merges with issues of sociocultural mixing. Reciprocity becomes a paradoxical process that produces ethnic boundaries, while making them more porous.

Hybridity is encoded in oral texts at different levels. In both cases, hybridity proceeds from perceptions of past and current reciprocal exchanges. The account collected in Bureh Town results from a contemporary view of longlasting and deep social and family connections between populations of Bureh Town and York. These links are accepted and established through historical narration, because they confer a certain prestige to Sherbro families. Like the oral accounts analysed in Chapter 2, they create ambiguity and form the narrative substrate on which Sherbros can claim Krio identity (see Chapter 4).

The account collected in Tokeh tells us of kinship and social links established through mistrust. Yet, as Caillé (2007: 103) observes, the necessity to establish reciprocal exchange is always stronger with suspicious strangers and foes. This ambivalence means that forming an alliance and creating debt is a risky process on both sides – a process that can ultimately turn into betrayal and conflict. At the same time, these stories clearly establish the Temne origin of some Sherbro families, as Temne speakers assimilated into Sherbro society over generations. Thus, despite the fact that Sherbros tend to conceal Temne

origins, as illustrated in Mr Nicol's introductory vignette, these origins cannot be utterly rejected. This requires narrators to find a way to reconcile purity and heterogeneity in the narration itself. In this respect, the performance of Mr Johnson and the metanarrative around his story offered a nuanced approach to identity.

The story offers a historical frame to the consequences of more recent migration, since those identified as 'strangers' are those who now tend to resist local demands for integration and instead seek political autonomy. These conflicts in Tombo and Tokeh are further described in Chapter 7. In this respect, Mr Johnson crafted a coherent critique of the political situation in Tokeh. He presented himself, and not the headman, as the authority figure in possession of Sherbro oral texts. He grounded his legitimacy in his knowledge of language, but also in matrilineal transmission, and the fact that he had always lived in Tokeh, contrary to the headman and his secretary, who had gone to school intermittently in other areas and (in their own view) did not speak Sherbro that well. Mr Johnson embodied the various qualities that create the authority of the performer (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 77): access to oral texts, legitimacy, competence (he recontextualized the story in a credible way) and values (he was able to foreground the importance of the story for Sherbro collective identity). These qualities were recognized by the audience, including Mrs Koroma, who did not know the participants beforehand and nevertheless qualified Mr Johnson as 'the original man of Tokeh'. In brief, he had sufficient background to legitimate Sherbro autochthony.

Mr Johnson could be said to have offered us a story that was a veiled critique of the headman's leadership. Later, I learned that the headman was perceived as having built his power on a Temne electorate and having abandoned his 'Sherbro' identity. For instance, he refused to participate to Poro rituals (because, he told me later, he was a dedicated Muslim convert who had made the Hajj), whereas Mr Johnson was one of the most prominent and active senior members in Tokeh. Mr Johnson's depiction of a crisp religious difference between Temne and Sherbro populations at the end of the story indirectly spoke to this tense local political context. In the discussion that ensued, he mentioned that Pa Santigi's grandson had ruled for seventeen years and implied that the Sherbros had considered him a better headman than the current leadership. Implicitly, he referred to tensions among Sherbros themselves regarding the weight that they should give to Temne strangers in contemporary politics. In this regard, the headman embodied a strategy of acceptance and adaptation, whereas Mr Johnson used the scene to craft a discourse of resistance. In doing so, Mr Johnson shifted the boundaries of ethnic difference by rehabilitating the former headman with Temne origins – which valued the logics of assimilation – and dismissing the authority of the headman with Sherbro roots. In this way, he also underscored the importance to consider Sherbro identity as a plural one.

Fishing Migrations and Fishing Techniques

Let us now turn to fishing as the fulcrum of conflict. As much as fishing is a symbol of Sherbro/Krio social relatedness, it has come to express problematic relations with Temne-speaking populations, who are the most active and numerous fisherfolk on the Peninsula.

Temne-speaking fishermen migrated from the Sherbro coast to the Peninsula very early on. Migrations are mostly documented in Tombo, since it lies at the crossroads of several trading routes. It is the closest port to the Koya chiefdom and it is also an ideal trading point with the Sherbro coast up to Bonthe. Kotnik (1981) suggests that the first large Temne migration to Tombo occurred at the end of the nineteenth century. According to Hendrix (1984: 12; 1985: 71), the main population change instead occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, when Temne fishermen and their families started to settle permanently in Tombo. Similarly, in Tissana, on the south of the Yawri Bay, Diggins (2018: 43) reports that the arrival of Temne-speaking populations is traced to the interwar period and coincided with the introduction of the *banda* smoking technique, which allowed for the expansion of the commercial fishing economy. These developments, along the Sherbro coast and on the Peninsula alike, coincided with a specialization in fishing for bonga, which could be easily marketed in the interior due to its low price (Hornell 1929). The construction of the Peninsula Road at the end of the 1930s, by connecting fishing towns to Waterloo and Freetown markets, also facilitated trade.

Nevertheless, Sherbro people recall the 1960s as the turning point in their relations with Temne strangers. The fishing economy changed radically at the end the 1950s with the arrival of Ghanaian fisherfolk on the Sierra Leonean coast. Fanti speakers, who are well known for their fishing skills, introduced larger motorized canoes for crews of up to fifteen men, and nylon ring nets designed for deep-sea fishing and the harvesting of herring. This technique is now prevalent on the Peninsula. Fishermen deploy the net in a loop around the shoal and paddle the boat to the centre. They start the boat's engine and circle at high speed so that fish are caught in the net's mesh. In 2012, a big wharf like Tombo had ninety-three 'Ghanaian boats' (as they are called locally) in use and fifty in repair. As this technique requires large crews, many fishermen travel for the fishing season. Thus, on the Peninsula, fishing crews also include many Sherbros who come seasonally from the southern coast.

The introduction of this new technique in the 1960s brought important changes to the socioeconomic life of fishing towns. Fishing intensified, along with seasonal migration, as the new boats required large crews at the peak of the fishing season. In Tombo, Hendrix (1984: 19) states that 'the period from about 1955 to 1965 can be characterized as a period of radical social and economic development'. With large catches, the fishing economy became market-oriented

Figure 3.3. Ghanaian boats at Tombo harbour, 2011. © Anaïs Ménard

and women specialized in processing and marketing fish on a full-time basis. Meanwhile, the number of fishermen and fish traders settling in Tombo continued to grow. While Hendrix (ibid.: 12, 19) mentions 438 inhabitants in 1891 and 2,500 in 1967, Kotnik (1981) estimates the population at 7,000 inhabitants in 1981.

However, Ghanaian fishermen were expelled by the Sierra Leonean government in 1967. In Sierra Leone, as in many African countries, the post-independence period was marked by the expulsion of outsiders, as new governments tried to define the social and cultural boundaries of their nations (Skinner 1963). By then, the relations between Fanti speakers and local fishermen had become uneasy. Even before independence, local fishermen had complained of unfair competition and Ghanaians had been prohibited by colonial authorities from fishing in certain areas of the Peninsula. When they left, Temne-speaking fishermen took over the Ghanaian boat technique almost exclusively (Krabacher 1990: 203). By adopting this technique, they came to occupy a major economic niche, by which they reinforced their position as key actors of the local fishing economy. In 2012, Temne-speaking fishermen continued to hold a dominant position in fishing across the Peninsula and to reside in large fishing towns, such as Tombo, Mama Beach and Goderich.

Many Sherbro fishermen mentioned that the Temne-speaking population had trained with the Ghanaians and had acquired their skills. They emphasized the Temnes' massive involvement in fishing after the departure of the Ghanaians as a turning point in host/stranger relations. From the 1960s onwards, Temne fisherfolk settled on the Peninsula in a context of nation building and fast economic change, which may have coincided with a hardening of local group identities. These newcomers were identified collectively by their Sherbro hosts who felt progressively deprived of the monopoly in fishing. Thus, the contemporary use of the ethnic labels 'Temne' and 'Sherbro' reflects historical power relations. In the current political context, it allows people to draw a line between strangers and autochthones, regardless of the patterns of intermarriage that have existed between them.

The relative success of Temne-speaking populations in fishing made their relations with their hosts difficult. The increased commercialization of fishing in some places such as Tombo, Mama Beach, Tokeh and Goderich had several outcomes. Temne families became wealthier and expanded their activity, which created tensions with local fishermen. As Shack (1979a: 16) notes, the fact that migrants pursue economic opportunities 'inevitably gives rise to the belief that their economic success is being achieved at the expense of members of the host society'. Furthermore, more people migrated to the Peninsula during the 1970s and 1980s, and land pressure became a new problem (see Chapter 8). Finally, the sociodemographic ratio between hosts and strangers was progressively

reversed, which made Sherbro firstcomers lose their privileged access to political leadership.

In the present context, the conflict between hosts and strangers has become articulated around fishing technologies and ideologies. *Kunu-kunu* fishing is presented as 'proof' of Sherbro autochthony set against the capital-intensive model dominated by Temne latecomers. Although well-off Sherbro fishermen can also acquire Ghanaian boats and hire seasonal crews, they are quick to stress their rejection of this technology as an identity marker. In their view, a good fisherman has to learn the most difficult techniques first and prove his ability to face danger alone at sea. *Kunu-kunu* fishing illustrates men's courage and skills, and comes first in the learning process of a Sherbro fisherman. When asked about their preference for *kunu-kunu* fishing, Sherbro fishermen usually responded by stressing their independence. 'Sherbro fishermen like fishing alone', they would often say, and they would contrast it with the aggressive and dominating attitude of people fishing in crews, which also corresponded to the behavioural traits underlying the stereotypes about Temne populations. Moreover, being skilled fishermen remains perhaps the main symbol by which Peninsula Sherbros sustain their group identity, in the absence of Sherbro language use and formal customary rights to land.

While the *kunu-kunu* technique was presented as part of a 'Sherbro way of life', ethnicity does not determine individual economic choices, which are rather fluid and depend on many factors, including existing social networks, seasonal routes and capital. Some Temne migrants who had settled in the 1950s and 1960s had also adopted this technique as their own. Their practice of *kunu-kunu* fishing was subject to jokes and underwrote the joking relationship between Temne and Sherbro fishermen, who were on good terms. In Tokeh, for instance, a favourite anecdote among fishermen of both Sherbro and Temne origins was that when a Temne fisherman came to shore with his *kunu-kunu*, Sherbros would not help him to drag it past the waves, but would watch him from afar struggling to reach the coast by himself. The anecdote underscores both groups' acceptance of Sherbro dominance in traditional fishing techniques.

The decline of fish stocks and the increasing competition in the fishing sector have contributed to the 'fixing' of specific technologies as attributes of groups. Sherbros were quick to blame the use of unsustainable fishing methods by Ghanaian boat crews, which, they said, contributed to emptying deep-sea grounds. Fishermen often used nets with smaller meshes that catch younger fish, which endangers reproductive processes. *Kunu-kunu* fishermen also stigmatized Temne fishermen for their lack of knowledge (for instance, it was common to hear sentences like 'Temnes fish but do not know how to swim' or 'Temnes know about trading but not about fishing'). They also often mentioned that they disliked the species that Ghanaian boats' crews caught – sardines and mackerel – which they considered too small and tasteless. A Sherbro fisherman told

me that by fishing with the wrong nets, Temnes catch 'even fishes that are not edible; at least Sherbros don't eat them'. Hendrix (1984: 16) notes that before the 1950s, Yawri Bay fishermen used sardines only as bait. Refusing to share the same food also indicates social differentiation. This statement stressed not only bad fishing techniques and food tastes, but also the perception that Sherbros and Temnes would never belong to the same category of fishermen or to the same social category more generally.

Nonetheless, all local fishermen are threatened primarily by foreign-owned trawlers that catch fish offshore, often illegally, and deplete sea resources at a rapid pace. In April 2019, the Sierra Leonean government banned industrial fishing in the country's waters for a month in order to give fish stocks a chance to regenerate. Yet the results of this initiative were short-lived. Industrial fishing continues to destroy marine ecosystems and exacerbate the vulnerability of local livelihoods.[9] In 2018, many Sherbro fishermen believed that *kunu-kunu* fishing could not be maintained for long. The use of paddle canoes limits catches to near-shore sea grounds, while the rarity of fish stocks obliges other fishermen to go very far (and dangerously) out to sea. Thus, *kunu-kunu* fishermen have suffered much more from the fish stock depletion that had become so blatant the past years, and this technique is gradually becoming the symbol of a lost livelihood.

In recent years, Ghanaian boat and *kunu-kunu* fishermen have competed for the same sea grounds. Ghanaian boat crews can sometimes fish in areas closer to shore, although fishing regulations prevent them from doing so. Near the shore, they meet *kunu-kunu* fishermen, who practise stationary fishing (anchoring at a depth of a few metres and using a line to catch bottom fish). Although motor-boats are not allowed to throw nets in another boat's fishing space, they sometimes encircle the canoes and when they draw the net, they detach the canoe's anchor and the smaller boat capsizes. If the fisherman on *kunu-kunu* gets caught in the net and cannot cut across it, he will drown.

Many such incidents were reported in big wharfs like Tombo. During my stay in Bureh Town, a *kunu-kunu* fisherman was encircled by two motorboats. A fight broke out between the two crews and another canoe fisherman who had come to rescue his friend. The crews pushed the two fishermen in the water and left them for dead, but they managed to reach the shore. When this incident happened, fishermen in Bureh Town were shocked and scared. They discussed extensively the fact that the sea had become a 'wild space' and that local authorities could no longer set regulations. Such ruthlessness, when other men could be left to drown, they said was because fishing was being practised on such a large scale that the fishermen on the water no longer knew each other. And the problem was growing worse: every day, they said, there were new people on the water, many of whom were unfamiliar with fishing. At the same time, government regulations concerning fishing spaces, methods and preservation strategies were hardly respected, if not completely overlooked.

Conclusion

It is possible to identify two strategies by which Sherbro communities in the past established relations of reciprocity with stranger groups. Sherbros and Krios (originally the black settlers of the Colony) became part of a residential zone bound by the central role of maternal kin. The presence of the settlers resulted in specific exchanges: Sherbros accessed the settlers' society by way of evangelization, marriage and child-fostering, while the settlers adopted aspects of the local culture, including the fishing livelihood. This historical process explains some of the ways in which Sherbro identity has acquired a Krio dimension and some of the ways in which Krios have included local elements within their cultural practices. Both aspects are discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively. By contrast, Sherbro communities integrated members of other ethnic groups via marriage and livelihood by a process that required their (and their children's) assimilation into the Sherbro matrilineage. Thus, populations who claim Sherbro identity today are often descendants of assimilated strangers of various origins.

In both cases, oral narratives underline the ambiguity of reciprocal arrangements, which imply social obligation (to welcome strangers) and political interest (for Sherbros to have them on their side), but also gift-giving and amicability (Caillé 2007: 87). Hosts and strangers remain potential foes related by a series of mutual exchanges and debts materialized by various acts of giving (women, children, land, fish, knowledge etc.), of which oral traditions constitute the reminder. As we will see in Chapters 6 and 7, Sherbro communities further secure relationships of indebtedness by specific strategies of ritual initiation.

Oral traditions produce homogeneous representations of ethnic groups. They 'fix' identities by giving historical justification to the categorization of groups as allies or enemies and provide a narrative against which contemporary relations between groups are measured. This reveals the relevance of collective performances for Sherbro identity making in relation to other groups. Oral traditions result from a process of 'selecting' (Miller 1980: 17), by which Sherbro populations emphasize specific aspects of their past relationships with groups of strangers. The description of the Sherbro/Krio alliance veils tensions that may have otherwise existed between local Sherbro populations and the settlers. Similarly, the idiom of nonassociation between Sherbro and Temne populations conceals dynamics of integration that have taken place and continue to exist between both groups. Nevertheless, both types of narrative also show Sherbros' plural identity and ability to code-switch according to socially constructed hierarchies between groups – an aspect that I will explore in the next chapter.

Notes

1. Nowadays in Krio settlements, inheritance rights are based on English law principles of bilateral filiation. This specificity originates in their early integration in the Colony, where English law prevailed (see Chapter 8). Children can inherit properties (house or land), which are usually legally documented, on the mother's or on the father's side.
2. Hornell (1928: 14) reported that Kru canoes 'are especially numerous in the coastal fishery of the Peninsula', but only a few were to be found in Yawri Bay and Shenge. Conversely, more recently, Krabacher (1990: 163) counted only two Kru canoes among hundreds of 'Bullom canoes' (larger canoes that can accommodate net fishing) on the Sherbro coast.
3. The Kroomen began arriving in the Province of Freedom from Liberia in 1793. They were hired as boat crews and soon constituted a labour force to be hired for various kinds of activities developed in the Colony (Kuczynski 1948: 80; Tonkin 2010: 112). In 1822, there were about a thousand Kroomen in Freetown. Some also lived by fishing on the Peninsula coast (Kuczynski 1948: 81, Fyfe 1962: 125, 135).
4. Recent historical work by Galli and Rönnbäck (2021) also shows that soil fertility in the Peninsula area was uneven, and many places were unsuitable for commercial agriculture.
5. This technique was reported along the Sherbro coast and on the Peninsula until the late 1940s (Hendrix 1984; Krabacher 1990: 304). On the Banana Islands, a former Krio captain of benefit boats recalled that he used to go fishing in Shenge under Mrs Bailor-Caulker, who was elected the paramount chief of Shenge District in 1962. The same story was recalled by several people, which would indicate that some benefit boats were still sailing in the 1960s.
6. Colonial Office, Great Britain. 'Sierra Leone. No. 26' in *The Reports Made for the Year 1850* (1851: 179–80).
7. Hendrix (1984: 4) mentions that by the end of the nineteenth century, four ethnic groups – the Temne, Mende, Sherbro and Krio – had produced an extended maritime vocabulary. Hornell (1929: 15) mentions that Kent was a centre for Kru canoe tarpon fishing and refers many times to 'Creole fishermen' in his accounts of the Sierra Leonean coast.
8. A story with a similar narrative frame was collected in Tombo (see Ménard 2017b).
9. For many years, Chinese-owned trawlers have operated in Sierra Leonean waters, practicing illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing. In addition to employing highly unsustainable fishing techniques, most do not abide by national regulations and fish without a licence or in zones forbidden to trawling. In recent years, the impact on the artisanal fishery sector and local economies has been devastating. Local populations' food intake has declined sharply. The depletion of fish stocks and growing inability to make a living has also pushed fishermen working on Ghanaian boats to move to other neighbouring countries like Guinea. The dramatic consequences of trawling have been documented in big fishing towns like Tombo (see the 2022 documentary film *New Boats* by Lansana Mansaray). Yet smaller towns of the Peninsula have also suffered severely from the depletion of fish stocks, particularly in places where people fish with smaller artisanal boats ('mina boat' or *kunu-kunu*) near the coastline.