

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, I have explored the ways in which relations of reciprocity between ethnic groups have, over time, led to the construction of Sherbro identity as a hybrid one – one that has integrated the sociocultural attributes of other ethnic identities into its own definition. Sherbro identity may coincide with other identities (Mende, Temne and, more strikingly, Krio), but Sherbro is not a ‘creole’ identity in any of the usual understandings of the term. Sherbro identity remains distinct, even when it is expressed through the attributes of other identities. Being Sherbro contains the inherent possibility of appearing as an ethnic ‘other’ (while remaining proudly Sherbro and disclosing it when necessary).

The hybridity of Sherbro identity is visible through processes by which individuals transcend cultural and ethnic boundaries in the course of social interaction. It also refers to a process by which Sherbros (as individuals and as a group) reproduce a pivotal social position in discourse and practice. Commenting on Bhabha’s and Bakhtin’s works, Papastergiadis (2000: 194) observes that what is at stake in semiotic approaches to hybridity is the way that ‘performances and texts ... hold difference together’ or join ‘separateness and unity in a single semantic field’. Performances of Sherbro identity productively deploy ‘differential identities’ (Bhabha 1994: 219), thereby continuously redrawing socioethnic boundaries, opening up spaces for the negotiation of difference and producing continuities.

For better analytical clarity, we can say that the hybridity of Sherbro ethnic identity is expressed in two patterns: ethnic transformation, which allows for the frequent and easy crossing of ethnic boundaries; and the integration of a Krio component – that is, the experience of Sherbro identity as both Krio and *kɔntri* (indigenous). This position allows Sherbros (as individuals or as a group) to either emphasize cross-ethnic ties and identifications or, on the contrary, produce

boundaries and establish hierarchical relations with other groups. Sherbro identity is not experienced as 'mixed', but as both intrinsically pure (indigenous/ autochthonous) and heterogeneous.

Importantly, the hybridity of Sherbro identity is performed, both individually and collectively, in ways that continuously naturalize 'ethnic' identities and relations. Village origin stories *appear* to be only a form of oral history that traces encounters between distinct ethnic groups. Closer analysis shows how these narratives construct 'purity' out of more mixed historical circumstances. Nevertheless, Krios, Sherbros and others agree about *how* these stories ought to be enacted in the present – there are also recognized rules to establish lines between singular socioethnic identities. So too, practices like marriage, child-fostering, initiation and other community rituals are pursued (and performed) by individuals because they are agreed upon across ethnic lines as appropriate ways to express 'pure' ethnic identities, interethnic relations and also hybridity.

In contrast to these contours of Sherbro identity, many aspects of social, political and legal practice in Sierra Leone continue to refer to identities that were crafted as pure and bounded categories in the colonial system. The delineations of local ethnic groups on the Peninsula and their relations prior to British colonial rule cannot be reconstructed with certainty. British records become more detailed as non-indigenous African groups, mostly freed slaves, were settled on the coast. From that point on, groups became known from the colonizer's perspective through the opposition between 'urban' non-natives (inhabitants of the Colony) and custom-based natives. Colonial knowledge and its techniques (like the census) distilled the image of local peoples into recognizable ethnic groups, plus a mixed population of settlers and their descendants.

Hybridity, of course, played at the margins of the colonial state. Even as some identities were purified, new plural identities were produced. Taken together, hybridity worked in contradictory ways: it subverted the colonial gaze, but also reaffirmed the role of colonial categories in granting specific privileges (Bhabha 1994). In colonial Sierra Leone, the non-native (and later Krio) category gained social value. Sherbro hybridity on the Peninsula was built on the encoding of these power relations. The hybridity of Sherbro identity illustrates the impact of colonial language and the value hierarchies of the colonial imagination on processes of identity making and on social relations. These hierarchies and power relations continue to be re-activated in the contemporary social context in the form of identity performances.

Social Structures in the Making of Sherbro Identity

Ethnic identity is a social construction, and it is linked to social structures and relations. Reciprocity is a regime of value that frames the many social interactions that make identity perceptible. Specifically, the social experience of

reciprocity (in the context of power relations between groups) is key in explaining the emergence of hybridity. The present sociocultural contours of Sherbro identity, as well as its boundaries (towards more or less flexibility), are linked to a social arrangement based on reciprocity between hosts (or firstcomers) and groups of strangers (or latecomers). Across Africa, similar relations between hosts and strangers unfold around matrimonial alliances, ritual processes and land allocation. This type of social arrangement establishes social (and often ethnic) boundaries between groups, while making crossovers and cultural integration possible. In other words, it is a socially ambivalent model of interaction.

The heterogeneous nature of Sherbro identity on the Peninsula resulted from local communities constructing reciprocal interactions with two different types of newcomers: other local groups and non-indigenous settlers. While first-comer Sherbro communities successfully assimilated strangers from other ethnic origins, they also built a kin and social alliance with the settlers of the Colony, which did not result in assimilation.

Integration in Sherbro society differs from classic examples of landlord/stranger relationships as analysed in neighbouring patrilineal societies. Where the logic of patrilineality is strong, children of stranger men who have married local women have difficulty gaining full membership in the local community. By contrast, since precolonial days, matrification has positively correlated with the rapid assimilation of in-marrying men and their children into coastal Sherbro communities. On the Peninsula, male strangers were – and still are – expected to become a member of the Sherbro community by conforming to local rules of integration, which include marriage, initiation and/or adoption of a fishing livelihood. Matrification implies that the children of Sherbro women and foreign men are considered to belong to their mother's descent group. The ritual process mitigates social hierarchies, as children of stranger men can achieve Sherbro identity and local belonging by initiating into the local Poro. Initiation places children under the aegis of their maternal uncles and integrates them as part of the social and political fabric. It achieves 'ethnic transformation' inasmuch as strangers and their children change ethnic affiliation and social allegiance.

Colonialism added a new pattern to existing interethnic relations on the Peninsula. In the nineteenth century, the relations between local populations and the settlers of the Colony circumvented the usual host/stranger relationship. It was the colonial administrators, and not local communities, who provided the settlers with land. The settlers did not control customary rights to land or local political matters in a direct way. However, they appeared to have more social and educational capital, which they could use to create patronage relationships with local populations. Sherbro communities were drawn to adopt a number of settler ways and to attract settler patronage.

In the new pattern, neither newcomer nor firstcomer could be said to have assimilated to the other. Sherbro communities and those of the settlers remained

separated, but the two groups did interact, with matrifocality remaining an important principle. In the process, the Krios incorporated many Sherbro social and cultural elements in the making of their own society and vice versa. Over time, too, there emerged the contemporary situation in which Sherbros and Krios are said to comprise the same families, which is manifested by similar surnames. Each ethnic group maintains its distinct identity, but marriages merge the two groups in actual families. Membership in initiation societies strengthens kin and friendship ties, and allows individuals to assert dual community loyalty. Taken together, it is clear that social relations prioritizing matrifocality and initiation support a Sherbro identity that does not involve a relation of subordination between the *kɔntri* and Krio elements or expressions of it.

The result of long-term interactions between Sherbro and the settlers who became Krio is that contemporary Sherbro ethnicity on the Peninsula now bears the sociocultural markers of identities (Krio and *kɔntri*) that were presented as antagonistic by the colonial regime. Its postcolonial deployment is marked by ambivalence, Sherbros having the possibility to present themselves both as *kɔntri* and as Krios. People in Sherbro localities express this specificity by using the terms *civilayzd*: this indicates a higher social status related to a Krio identity and lifestyle, and at the same time a Sierra Leonean indigenous status (*kɔntri*). They can alternatively employ the Krio register, with the aim of displaying social distinctiveness, and the *kɔntri* register, to mark an indigenous identity. ‘Krio’ and *kɔntri* have become claim-staking categories with reference to an audience and a context. This case also shows that the Krio identity may be incorporated and used as a social constituent of the ethnic identity of another group.

Although the high social value of Krio identity was forged in the colonial context, in the twenty-first century, ‘appearing Krio’ is an important step for people of all ethnic groups who aspire to a ‘modern’ urban life on the Peninsula. In this context, Sherbros present themselves not only as firstcomers in their own land, but also as a bridging group for other people to *krionayz*. In this sense, ethnic hybridity opens up ways for individuals of various ethnic backgrounds to claim a higher social status. ‘Becoming’ Sherbro allows them to access the attributes of Krio identity and use them along those of the *kɔntri* register. In this regard, it is important to pay attention to the ‘transformative’ nature of hybridity itself and its relation to inequality: beyond the figure of the ‘bridging person’ and the synthesis it operates, hybridity also builds on movement and logics of accumulation (Papastergiadis 2000: 15). The integrative potentialities of Sherbro identity significantly rely on power differentials between groups and the possibility it opens up for other people to access social capital.

Finally, the hybridity pattern presented by Sherbro identity may not be a marginal one in West Africa. The ascription of hybridity to the marginal subject, subordinated and racialized, is a common line of analysis, which is useful for underscoring the ways in which ‘the hybrid interrupts dominant identifications

and reveal refusals and blockages of hegemonic nationalist order' (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk 2021: 95). The Sherbros themselves are small in number, yet they neither comprise a rarefied cosmopolitan group, nor are they 'marginalized' subjects, too subordinated and racialized to participate equally in the dominant national order. The processes of cross-ethnic identifications and transformation described in this book instead point to the regions of ambiguity that (still) exist between ethnic groups in the postcolony, and to the inventive individual uses of those areas of contiguity that connect singular identities – thereby enabling exchange, meeting, sharing and identifying across groups – to redefine the post-colonial self and the collective (see Cohen 1994).

Old Patterns, New Politics

The landlord/stranger reciprocity model remains relevant in African contexts where political and land rights depend on membership in the socioethnic group. I have addressed recent changes on the Peninsula that explain current tensions between local populations and groups of latecomers, as their respective discourses mobilize diverging concepts of 'rights': while Sherbro populations emphasize their status as autochthones, which would give them control over politics and land, strangers break free from the authority of local political authorities to negotiate their rights directly with the state. Two main factors contribute to this situation. The first is the absence of any legal provision in the Western Area that would allow Sherbros to claim customary property or communal land. In reaction, they emphasize their 'native' (indigenous) identity as the basis for entitlement. The second is the combination of acute land pressure and speculation, which raises land prices and produces severe economic precarity. The inability (or unwillingness) of the state to regulate access to resources creates the feeling that the economic success of migrant groups, who secure land and control the fishing business, is achieved at the expense of local populations.

This conflict strikingly illustrates the ambivalence of reciprocity as a model of cultural action, embedded in power relations between social groups (patrons and dependants) who have rights and obligations towards one another. Actors understand landlord/stranger reciprocity as part of a larger cultural frame in which they operate over a long period of time and through which they assess social change. The way in which groups continue to position themselves in relation to this arrangement is grounded in historical imagination – namely, representations about how similar relations have worked in the past, why they have succeeded or failed and how these processes may inform contemporary views on trust. For Sherbros, the contemporary performance and definition of their local hybrid identity is contingent upon the ways in which relations of power with other groups are remembered, experienced and anticipated.

The emergence of autochthony, in this respect, is that of a discourse about ‘rupture’ that conceals processes of social reproduction. Land disputes, by pointing to an erosion of practices of reciprocity at the heart of social life, confirm Murphy’s argument that ‘the moral economy of dependency is also ... [one of] violence and punishment (or, rebellion)’ (2010: 42). The patrimonial model, by framing group relations within a moral ethos of loyalty, operates as a double-edged sword producing precarious social stability. By referring to breaches in reciprocity, latecomers engage in frontier processes that are central to the political culture of the region. They create new polities, thereby replacing integration with political scission. Conversely, Sherbro hosts do not see much advantage to be gained from tolerating groups of strangers who refuse integration through marriage, ritual practice or friendship.

The scale of migration has had an impact on the way in which hosts receive strangers, but also on the way in which strangers themselves see their own place within the host society. In areas with a high proportion of latecomers, people see an advantage to building up their own resources and leadership. Conflicts about Poro rituals and sacred groves in these places appear as the ritual expression of disputes over power and land. In customary arrangements, initiation puts an end to the ambiguous status of strangers: it aligns kin alliance with legal and political rights so as to produce full citizens. Yet, local citizenship, limited to community assets and political rights, does not correspond to strangers’ conceptualization of the ‘modern’ citizenship for which they yearn. ‘Modern’ citizenship, which latecomers associate with the deployment of the state, opens up ways to quick rewards: political patronage, economic rents and land ownership. By contrast, they may see little advantage in assimilation to local communities. Global forces, macroeconomic relations and national policies intersect with changes in local power differentials, modifying the perception of reciprocity (and its corollary, indebtedness) not as a value that produces community, but as a burden that needs to be alleviated in order to actualise one’s social, political and economic potentialities. From this perspective, the gradual rejection of initiation is not a rejection of Sherbro political and ritual authority per se, but a rejection of a specific political culture that strangers do not see as compatible with their own understanding of ‘development’ and ‘modernity’. It remains to be seen whether the mutual desire for recognition can yield new frameworks for reciprocity (and new narratives to naturalize those frameworks) on a par with the landlord/stranger relation, or whether this old framework will be replaced by new models for organizing ethnic relations in a still relatively weak state that insists on instrumentalizing ethnicity as a proxy for the rights of citizenship.

Discourses of autochthony, Sarró notes (2010: 232), occur in societies that have been described as highly incorporative. Indeed, the landlord/stranger model is flexible and has been compatible with changing political trends and population migrations for several hundred years. My ethnography demonstrates

that this shift can be explained if we analyse the emergence of autochthony as the outcome of the limits of integration mechanisms. In the current context, the channels of reciprocation that usually guide social relationships between local populations and strangers have weakened. The presence of the 'other' has become non-negotiated and experienced as a form of social violence. Using Shack's terminology (1979a), Sherbro have become 'involuntary hosts'. As they experience changing power relations locally (although these may be grounded in changes situated at the national and global levels), the landlord/stranger reciprocity as a mode of managing otherness turns into autochthony as a process of othering. At the same time, the landlord/stranger model already contains a potential for contention, as it stabilizes relations of domination that, ultimately, call for social change (Murphy 2010).

In this context, people in Sherbro settlements produce moral discourses that emphasize why strangers may become 'good' or 'bad' in reference to an ideal type of reciprocal relations. Moral values become expressed via kinship, fishing or initiation. These discourses redraw the boundaries of the moral community by excluding some people while including others. Sherbro stigmatize 'bad' strangers, who disrupt the social foundation of local communities, while maintaining mechanisms of integration for people who show an eagerness to be incorporated. Moreover, the possibilities for integration through kinship, fishing and initiation are widely known among strangers themselves. Local processes of integration are still at work, as evidenced by periods of Poro initiation in 2012, 2013 and 2016 that gathered initiates of various ethnic origins.

Thus, despite the ongoing (and intensifying) essentialization of ethnic identities on a political level, invocation of the landlord/stranger model is one of the many ways in which people may preserve fluid identifications and cultivate more peaceful relations in daily social encounters (see Ammann and Kaufmann 2012). Both ongoing social integration and conflict are visible in the contemporary lives of local communities on the Peninsula. Articulated in family and friendship circles, Sherbro narratives of identity may point to the highly diversified make-up of the region and to the permeable contours of Sherbro identity. However, in land and political matters, they can take an essentialist tone for people to express feelings of being dispossessed of their 'attributes of power' (Shack 1979a: 12) – namely, political and ritual authority, economic resources and access to land. At the same time, conflicts with Temne-speaking strangers testify to the long-term coexistence of the two groups in the region. Sherbro analyse this relationship as a 'negative' one, but a relationship nonetheless, which shows that conflict itself can become a mode of relation that takes on its full meaning from a historical perspective.

Trust, Recognition and the Future of Hybridity

The positive aspects of ethnic hybridity may be jeopardized by a pervasive situation of 'insecure modernity' (Laurent 2013), perpetuated by postcolonial governments, in which individual survival depends on one's ability to capture rents and access social and political connections. From the Civil War to Ebola, Sierra Leone is recovering from successive crises that have not only affected economic structures, but have also revealed a deep distrust in institutions (Leach 2015). On the Peninsula, people often stated that interpersonal violence – physical violence, but also the lack of trust and solidarity – was a critical problem resulting from an economically and socially insecure environment. Populations felt dispossessed in many ways and conflicts heightened the feeling of not being in control of one's life (see Jackson 2011). Local fishing livelihoods are threatened by the overexploitation of resources, and economic insecurity forces people to fight for the most valuable asset: land. New economic perspectives, like tourism, remain precarious and rest on the entry of foreign capital in the region. Living the 'precarious modernity' thus endangers processes of integration, while demonstrating their importance in mitigating the effects of rampant economic deregulation.

Thus, discourses of reciprocity also constitute a metadiscourse about social trust in a postwar environment marked by suspicion and a lack of interpersonal confidence. Rebuilding trust in public institutions and political leaders in the postconflict phase proved to be difficult (Mitton 2009). The absence of political trust often correlates with statements about the lack of 'trustworthy' people in society at large (Stovel 2006: 234–41). Carpenter (2011: xx) writes that two years after the war, 'the post-conflict zone was described by Sierra Leoneans as fragile, unstable, and uncertain – a place where safety was unknown and trust was hard to come by'. Like other anthropologists, during my fieldwork, I observed that trust was a scarce resource and that interpersonal relations, particularly close ones, continued to be apprehended in terms of suspicion, danger and potential violence (see Jackson 2004). Trusting was perceived as a sign of individual weakness and a form of naivety in an insecure environment that prompted people to engage in dishonesty, trickery and deceit. People's skills of survival were grounded in their ability to conceal – their strategy, opportunities, wealth, etc. – so as to avoid jealousy, witchcraft and other means by which others would take advantage of them.

However, trust is critical in building reciprocal relations, as it helps actors to frame their expectations about the results of the exchange (Ostrom 2003: 50–51). During my fieldwork, the local discourse on reciprocity related directly to the postwar context and to the possibility of recognizing others as allies. Landlord/stranger reciprocity was a mode of relating that was necessary for those who would live in a shared community space. It ensured local recognition, as a form

of social esteem for groups with differentiated professional abilities and economic assets (Honneth 1995: 113, 122). It also enabled the recognition of long-term family connections. In a context of generalized mistrust, entering relations of reciprocity indicated positive qualities of openness and honesty. It remained an important channel for building social capital within a locality, thus reproducing the idea of communities based on 'moral ethnicity' and shared values.

During the 2010s, in which this book came into being, reciprocity was presented as a value that fostered social cohesion, cultural mixing and peaceful coexistence. It became a metaphor for the national body politic and the possibility of rebuilding a nation based on cross-cultural relations (by opposition to ethnopolitics), genuine care and trustworthy relations. Landlord/stranger arrangements appeared as a safe and stable tool, a ready-made response to postwar insecurities, despite their uneasy interaction with state institutions, multiparty politics and the politicization of ethnicity. As a mechanism that reduced the anxiety created by social relations, the landlord/stranger arrangement remained a central piece of the local social imaginary that helped people make sense of destabilizing social phenomena.

At the same time, ensuring recognition via other patrimonial channels had become essential for survival, thereby undermining the very basis of local cohesion. This rendered the discourse on trust even more pressing and relevant, in an area that in recent years had turned into a brutal socioeconomic frontier. In this environment, hybridity, as a product of integration, continued to be valued positively, but the parameters within which groups could engage in such a model were tightening as other narratives took precedence.