Chapter 2

Narratives of Colonial Encounters

This chapter aims at mapping a historical landscape of Sherbro/Krio relatedness on the Peninsula. It invokes written sources concerning the Sierra Leone Colony and the analysis of oral traditions that I collected. The combination of these two types of sources gives some picture of Sherbro presence on the Peninsula since the nineteenth century and on the early conditions of their encounter with the black settlers. But this chapter should not be taken as an exercise in ethnohistory. Its aim is to provide some insight into the way that Sherbro and Krio today imagine their common history. In this respect, my 'reconstruction' follows local patterns and draws attention to discourses of autochthony and indigeneity. In this way, it also examines (as does Chapter 3) the collective dimension of identity performance.

As mentioned in the introduction, Sherbro ethnogenesis emerged from a series of interactions among various groups along the Sierra Leone coast. These interactions include the population movements from the interior and contacts with Europeans that followed the opening of international trade routes as early as the sixteenth century. In the nineteenth century, parts of the territory of Sherbro-speaking populations were incorporated into the British Crown Colony: the Freetown Peninsula in 1808 and Bonthe Island in 1861. As local populations came into close contact with the settlers, the definition of the Sherbros as a distinct ethnic group became clearer in colonial censuses. Nevertheless, today, the identification as Sherbro also depends on people's relations with neighbouring groups. Depending on where they live in Sierra Leone, Sherbro populations may be seen as assimilated into the larger Temne or Mende-speaking groups. On

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the Peninsula, Sherbro populations are closely associated with the Krio group. Across Sierra Leone, they are perceived and perceive themselves as people who can rapidly *krionayz*, or become Krio.

Though Sherbro identity depends on interaction with others, such interaction is sometimes perceived as diminishing 'Sherbro' distinctiveness. When I started my fieldwork on the Peninsula, the trope of cultural decline structured identity discourses. I was told many times that the 'original' Sherbro culture was disappearing in the area. I was told that Sherbros had *krionayzd* and that it would be better for me to do research on Bonthe Island and, particularly, the Turtle Islands – small remote islands to the south of the country – because only there would I be able to grasp what remained of the 'true' Sherbro culture. I did not take this advice, choosing to investigate precisely the problem of relations with others. How do these mixes, bridges and junctures of culture and social relations constitute the heart of Sherbro identity on the Peninsula?

Demographics in the Sierra Leone Colony

Assessing precisely the early relations between local populations of the Peninsula, the colonial state and its representatives remains difficult. Despite the inclusion of the Peninsula within the Colony in 1808, colonial archives do not give much visibility to indigenous groups of the region. One of the first colonial acts of violence towards local populations of the Colony, it seems, was silencing them and rendering them invisible in colonial texts. Moreover, the historiography of Sierra Leone has not yet addressed the interactions between populations of the Peninsula and the colonial state, and historical sources are elusive on those between Liberated Africans and local groups (see Cole 2006; Scanlan 2017).

However, oral histories in the Sherbro and Krio communities offer rich narratives of colonial encounters with the British settlers, the Liberated Africans, and other people who fled slavery and/or resettled in local communities throughout the nineteenth century. This discrepancy between written and oral history informs us on the singular position that indigenous populations of the Peninsula assumed in relation to the process of state formation in Sierra Leone. Local communities remained isolated and to a large extent invisible to colonial authorities (see Chapter 1). Nonetheless, local populations were part of a new political and administrative set-up, in which the settlers, particularly those living in nearby settlements, acted as a connecting factor. They encountered the colonial system directly, through the presence of Liberated Africans and colonial administrative processes, such as censuses. This positioned the Peninsula as a space between rurality and urbanity, but also as a space 'unknown' and opaque for colonial officers in Freetown.

Thus, present-day narratives of colonial encounters focus on interactions from below: how local populations met with new settlers, and especially with

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the Liberated Africans, in the nineteenth century. This focus helps the Sherbro local authorities, who convey such narratives, in establishing historical precedence and substantiating claims of autochthony on the Peninsula. At the same time, those narratives give some insight into the historical depth of the relations between Sherbro and Krio populations in the region. But before we engage in this analysis, it is important to provide an overview of what we know of Sherbro historicity on the Peninsula.

Until the 1820s, the colonial authorities could not make any serious claim to control, or know much about, territories beyond Freetown itself. Written sources about local groups that inhabited the region when the Province of Freedom was established in 1787 do not mention Sherbro populations. They mainly concern Temne chiefs with whom the British settlers signed territorial treaties to secure their presence in the region (see the Introduction).

The first population censuses, from 1811, were confined to Freetown and recorded only a few names for local and settler populations. The 1811 census totalled 1,917 inhabitants in Freetown, mostly Nova Scotians and Maroons. References to 'natives' in the colonial archives covered workers, labourers and traders who came to the Colony to work and were identified by the British as Temne, Mandingo or Kru (Kuczynski 1948: 75, 80).[1] Despite their jurisdiction, British officials continued to view rural areas beyond Freetown and their populations as belonging to the Temne chiefs from whom the first settlement had been purchased. As Scanlan stresses (2017: 18), they were more concerned with 'affairs within the colony … than [with] the Africans who shared the Peninsula with colonial settlers'. The 'small hamlets dispersed throughout the peninsula' were believed to be Temne settlements (Kuczynski 1948: 75), and it was not until the 1820 census that the identity of populations residing in villages spread out along the Peninsula was considered (ibid.: 84).

As a result, descriptions of ethnic distribution along the coastline during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected the general lack of knowledge and concern for local interethnic relations by the British colonizers. Dominant accounts distinguished between speakers of Mampa Bullom (Sherbro) along the southern coast and speakers of Bullom to the north, both groups being separated by the Peninsula. Koelle (1854: 2) notes that the Bullom living north of the Sierra Leone River are separated from the Mampa Bullom 'by the Timne territory'. In the twentieth century, McCulloch (1964: 75) states that 'the Bullom … tribe is divided geographically into two sections, which are separated by Temne chiefdoms and by the Colony'. This contrasts with Hair's analysis (1967a) of language distribution prior to 1787, which presents Bullom territory as continuous from south to north. Such accounts did not integrate data on local populations living on the Peninsula.

Against this background of reduced knowledge about indigenous populations, demographic data referring to Peninsula populations should be treated

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with some scepticism. According to the 1827 *Report of the Commissioner of Enquiry*, 'natives' residing in villages spread out along the Peninsula were not considered before the 1820 census (Kuczynski 1948: 84). Between 1820 and 1822, the *Missionary Register* records an increase from 1,046 to 3,526 'native' inhabitants. Kuczynski (ibid.: 85–86) explains this increase by three factors: all indigenous people were not included in the 1820 census; some were originally included in the number of Liberated Africans; and from 1820 to 1822, more indigenous people immigrated to the Colony. The first mentions of Sherbro populations appear in the censuses of 1847 and 1848. For the year 1848, the census indicated a population of 'Sherbros' of 1,527, which made them the second largest group after the 40,243 Liberated Africans and their descendants born in the Colony.[2] The report also mentioned 'a few hundred of Sherbros' living in the rural districts of the Colony.[3]

Two main factors can explain why Sherbro-speaking populations begin to appear in censuses from the mid-nineteenth century. One is that with the gradual resettlement of former slaves along the Peninsula, which marked one of the first contacts between the Colony and local populations, colonial accounts began to recognize and distinguish Sherbro and other local groups that were present. A second factor is that Sherbro were indeed moving to the Peninsula. Some of these movements were for political reasons, as wars broke out to the south of the Yawri Bay.[4] Fishing migration from the southern coast of Sierra Leone also accelerated throughout the nineteenth century, as the Colony gradually turned into a safe haven and a dynamic economic place. By the mid-nineteenth century, fishing had become a key economic activity supporting the development of the Colony (see Chapter 3). Those two processes also triggered seasonal and permanent migration, and contributed to moulding a Sherbro identity on the Peninsula that made the group's presence 'visible'.

Mentions of Sherbro populations in censuses followed three decades of intensified resettlement. In the early nineteenth century, new villages were founded by groups of Liberated Africans, like Leicester, Regent and Gloucester, in the mountains behind Freetown. In 1818 and 1819, some of those groups moved south: among others, they founded Charlotte and Bathurst in the Peninsula hills, Kent on the Atlantic coast, and Hastings and Waterloo on the east (Luke 1939: 54). York was not a 'new' settlement per se: in 1819, about 200 disbanded soldiers of the Royal African Corps settled in a pre-existing Bullom settlement. They were soon joined by Liberated Africans. Scanlan (2017: 169) notes that 'by 1822, nearly 8,000 people lived in the villages, compared with 5,600 in the capital'. In the 1830s, Bullom villages were chosen as resettlement sites. Labourers from Fernando Po who had been captured by slave ships were resettled with other farmers 'at the Bulom village Funkia, named "Goderich" after the Secretary of the State' (Fyfe 1962: 188). Other recaptured slaves settled in the villages

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of Sussex and Tombo (ibid.: 209; Hendrix 1985: 69). Fittingly, oral traditions in these three settlements recall the coming of the recaptured slaves.[5]

Knowledge of Peninsula populations prior to the foundation of those settlements was scarce. As Liberated Africans settled on the coast, colonial authorities became aware of the presence of local populations. Looked at critically, it appears that the Sherbros came into being in British colonial records because of the role played by their villages in hosting former slaves. They became part of a scheme of supervision that had its roots in the parish system. Under Governor Charles MacCarthy, who administered Sierra Leone from 1814 to 1824, the Peninsula was divided into parishes, and the Liberated African villages were supervised by clerics of the Church Missionary Society. With the village system, MacCarthy hoped to develop commercial agriculture and make the Colony economically productive. Missionaries were expected to oversee agricultural work and educate Liberated Africans in order to prevent them from running away from the Colony (Scanlan 2017: 177). The village system also allowed MacCarthy to extend political control over the Peninsula's territory (ibid.: 184). Therefore, it is not surprising that the first censuses covering the whole Colony appear in 1818, 1820 and 1822, after the foundation of Liberated African villages to the south.

Nevertheless, the scope and nature of Sherbro relations with the British colonial administration is not recorded in historical sources. One reason that we may advance for the continued neglect of attention to local populations lies in their economic specialization. They were integrated into the Colony's economic networks through the fishing trade. This trade was important for supplying Freetown markets, but it was not part of the export production that the colonial administration aimed to develop throughout the nineteenth century. Thus, little attention was directed to managing or administering the population that engaged with it.

Furthermore, it is still unsure whether British administrators had a clear view of the ethnic and linguistic make-up of Peninsula villages. They continued to rely mainly on information from settlers and missionaries in places where those people had interactions with local populations, like Sussex, Tombo or York. In other places, information about 'natives' was even more unreliable. The result is that despite the increasing detail in censuses, the demographics of the Peninsula continued to remain hazily known. A map of the 'Sierra Leone Colony, 1853' reproduced in Peterson's book (1969: 192), for example, shows a rather domesticated landscape to the north, but only an approximate representation of villages to the south, with only two bearing the label 'native village' (with the exception of York and Kent, which were populated by the new settlers). Some of those villages along the Peninsula may have been 'old' pre-existing Bullom, Mampa Bullom or mixed population.

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Krio 'Strangers' and Sherbro 'Hosts'

Although we do not know much about the groups that populated the Peninsula in the early nineteenth century, contemporary Sherbro accounts assume that the Sherbros were present. However, it is important to ground those accounts in the general perception of the Sherbros as an indigenous group that has no history of migration from the hinterland. Sherbros liked to point out that they had 'always been by the sea' and had been in contact with Europeans early on. They were, according to all groups' oral and historical accounts, 'firstcomers' among indigenous groups. As far as we know, there were Bullom-speaking peoples on the Peninsula before the sixteenth century and certainly by the onset of British colonialism. Certainly, more Sherbro populations moved to the coast in the early years of the Colony. As Corcoran (2014: 7) observes, 'while Sherbro are regarded in some ways as the most autochthonous of the autochthonous, their 500-year connection with the West and position within the Colony as opposed to the Protectorate also associates them with the Colony, the British, and the Krios'.

It is precisely this connection that Sherbro oral accounts address when they detail the arrival of Liberated Africans near or in their communities. In this way, they assert autochthony with little need for historical data. Narrators in Sherbro settlements usually framed the coming of the Liberated Africans as a positive interaction and silenced possible conflicts with locals, as well as between locals and colonial authorities who would have been in charge of resettlement schemes. Colonial officers or missionaries remain absent from those stories. This narrative technique of omission presents a general message of peaceful interactions between the Liberated Africans (and their Krio descendants) and Sherbro groups.

This chapter and the next present group accounts. Vansina (1985: 19) defines such accounts as 'the oral memories … [that] embody something which expresses the identity of the group in which they are told or substantiates rights over land, resources, women, office and herds'. Group accounts are institutionalized versions of the group's history. They present an official narrative that can help in terms of legitimating relations of power and justifying identity claims and rights over resources. Oral tradition constitutes a social device, by which groups who consider themselves as firstcomers can establish the primacy of their political and land rights over groups of latecomers (see Lentz 2006b). In this light, group accounts constitute a central narrative performance to legitimate Sherbro claims of being autochthonous.

Nowadays, for example, people trace family connections in places such as Bonthe, Shenge and other places along the Yawri Bay. As family histories, these narrations may point to relatively recent migration from the southern coast, and these narrations do appear alongside other oral traditions that incorporate migration stories. For example, the foundation of many villages is explained by the early migration of a fisherman coming by canoe from the Sherbro coast.

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However, the cliché of migration most often indicates an imagined cultural link to Sherbro and Mende people living to the south of Sierra Leone (see Miller 1980: 32). Even when they are assumed to reflect actual movement, these stories about migration do not contradict Sherbro populations' claim to autochthony, as they continue narratologically to position Sherbros as hosts to other groups, including the descendants of the settlers, the Krios.

Following Miller (1980: 6), I approach oral traditions as historical narratives that include three components: clichés (or stereotypes); episodes (the narrative story that gives a human quality to stereotypes); and personal reminiscences (what narrators remember of their own experience). The performance of oral traditions is also significant in understanding how they contribute to ethnic identity and relations, but this theme will be taken up in Chapter 3. Here, I focus on the dimensions of structure and content. From this direction, the narrative process depends on the selection and emphasis of certain events that are significant in the present context (Murphy and Bledsoe 1987; Tonkin 1986; Vansina 1985). As Choo and O'Connell (1999: 2) point out, the historical narrative 'imposes a discursive form on the events … and gives meaning to [them] by presenting the events, agents and agencies as elements of identifiable story types'. Oral traditions in Sherbro settlements present us with 'story types' that pertain to the past relationships of Sherbros with strangers. While historically grounded, they provide social norms for the construction of identities and group relations in the present (Knörr and Trajano Filho 2010: 16).

Collecting group accounts, along with mapping settlements, allowed me to get a sense of the social structure of communities and of the way in which ethnic groups positioned themselves towards one another. Along the Upper Guinea Coast, oral traditions provide a social code by which hierarchies between firstcomers and latecomers are established. By selecting events of local political significance – or 'pivotal events' – such as an early migration or a matrimonial alliance, people can position themselves as firstcomers and lay claim to land and leadership (Murphy and Bledsoe 1987). Along similar lines, Sherbro narrators selected 'pivotal events' to construe 'Sherbro' as a group of firstcomers in relation to strangers.

Historical settlements of the Peninsula are said to have either a Sherbro or Krio origin. Of the settlements in which research was conducted, seven of them – Baw-Baw, Bureh Town, Lakka, Mama Beach, Number Two River, Tokeh and Kissi Town – were described as Sherbro villages (*Sherbro vilej dɛm*) because they were said to have been founded by Sherbros. Five of them – Dublin and Rickett on the Banana Islands, Hamilton, Kent and York – were described as Krio villages (*Krio vilej dɛm*) as they were founded by settlers in the nineteenth century. Finally, three of them – Goderich, Sussex and Tombo – are known for having a Sherbro part of town (*Sherbro Tɔng*) and a Krio part of town (*Krio Tɔng*). As will become clear, several of the other settlements also contain ethnically named

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'towns', and those names usually refer to the ethnic background of families who settled there first (often as 'strangers').

The terms 'Krio' and 'Sherbro' are employed in all settlements to mark social and historical patterns of settlement. Nevertheless, reporting these designations may convey a false impression of clear-cut social and cultural distinctions. Families are related and individuals may be able to use the two identities interchangeably based on the context. At the same time, this differentiation has historical roots and appears in oral traditions both to present Krios as 'strangers' to Sherbro hosts and to describe a long-term social alliance that now unites Krios and Sherbros against populations who migrated to the Peninsula more recently. By reaffirming each other's social positions as hosts and strangers, both groups position themselves as 'the original' inhabitants of the Peninsula, dating back to the nineteenth century, in opposition to the recent political and land claims of other groups. Therefore, I am including in this chapter oral traditions collected both in Sherbro and Krio settlements, since they present narrative commonalities.

Oral traditions are embedded in spatial configurations that associate groups with places. Sherbro 'towns' are situated by the beach. The origins of Sherbro settlements are typically traced back to the arrival of a first settler, who came by sea in search of new fishing grounds and founded what is now called *Sherbro Tɔng* (Sherbro Town) or *ol tɔ*ng (old town). In many settlements, the landscape is divided between Sherbro Town, which is nearest the seashore (down) and

Figure 2.1. Old town, Baw-Baw, 2011. © Anaïs Ménard

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populated by fisherfolk, and other parts of the settlements that extend inland near the Peninsula Road (up). These upper parts are said to have been inhabited later. The up/down separation applies in Bureh Town, Lakka, Mama Beach, Sussex, Number Two River and Baw-Baw, where a steep slope and a stream separate the Sherbro settlement from the rest of the village. This geographical arrangement makes Sherbro 'towns' seem rather secluded. In Tokeh, the old town has been replaced by tourist bungalows, but there remains a physical boundary between the new and old parts of town marked by the end of the tarred road and the start of a sandy path leading to the seashore.

Despite the diversity of populations in the region, the historical presence of Sherbro-speaking populations on the Peninsula is rarely disputed. In my attempt to collect oral traditions, I discovered that even in places where recent populations had accessed leadership and where conflicts with Sherbro landowning families existed, headmen directed me willingly towards Sherbro elders. For instance, in larger settlements, such as Goderich and Tombo, new 'towns' have emerged more recently, with names given by later immigrants, such as Allen Town, New Town or Englandville. Headmen usually advised me to get the history of each town, while acknowledging the Sherbro origin of the 'old' settlement.[6] Although recent immigrants challenged the claims of Sherbro families with regard to landownership and political authority, they did not contest Sherbro autochthony per se.

Figure 2.2. Fishing beach, Baw-Baw, 2011. © Anaïs Ménard

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In Krio and Sherbro settlements, oral traditions tended to be concordant in presenting Sherbros as autochthonous populations. Sherbro elders (some of whom also resided in Krio 'towns') had the authority to provide me with 'accurate' historical information.[7] In some places, the distinction between Krio and Sherbro elders was not clear-cut. In Tombo, I was directed towards one of the previous Sherbro headmen, only to find out that he claimed his family to be Krio. In several meetings, such as in Hamilton, York and Sussex, Krios and Sherbros spoke with one voice. Personal interviews did not reveal significant discrepancies between the oral traditions narrated in meetings I held with several individuals and their particular versions collected later.[8] Sherbros and Krios generally agreed on a representation of earlier history corresponding to a particular code of arrival that set up a hierarchy between Sherbro 'hosts' and Krio 'strangers'. When they did disagree, Sherbros often had the last word on the ground that they had been present prior to the arrival of the former slaves.

Sussex is a striking example of a geographical division between two 'towns' based on a precise code of arrival. It separates Sherbro Town from King Town (also informally called Krio Town). The landscapes of the two settlements provide a sharp contrast. King Town has large streets and spaced wooden houses, also referred to in Krio as *bodos*, arranged in a square pattern. It has a Methodist church that was built by the Wesleyan Mission in the mid-nineteenth century. Sherbro Town is situated at the end of King Town, on a small peninsula, with only one access road and one footpath connecting it to King Town. It is much smaller and densely populated. It has narrow paths, basic mud-and-thatch dwellings, but also a few cement houses, and a recently built Catholic church.

Regarding the background of this particular landscape, oral tradition asserts that the arrival of the slaves was a fundamental moment in the creation and expansion of the area. I was told that the precolonial name for Sherbro Town was Bompethok, which indicates the position of the settlement as 'the land that stretches out into the sea'. Oral tradition describes the coming of a British captain, who had been based in Kent since 1789. He arrived with slaves[9] and walked along the Peninsula to find land for them. The first time they reached Bompethok in 1824, Sherbros sent them away, fearing to allow any strangers to settle near them. Undeterred, they returned three more times, until Sherbros, after telling the slaves that Bompethok would not welcome strangers, finally conceded that they could settle outside of their village, in a bushy area above Bompethok. This is claimed as the historical explanation for the Sherbro word used to designate Krios, *abeka*, which means 'let us put them there'. The settlers called their new place King Town, and both entities were later incorporated into the village of Sussex. Yet, the differentiation in names (Sherbro Town/Krio Town) remains. In fact, some Sherbro elders reminded me that the original and appropriate name for Sherbro Town is Bompethok and that the name Sherbro Town was later applied by Krios.

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This oral tradition in Sussex establishes Sherbros as firstcomers. Liberated Africans did not come to an empty land, but were strangers who had to fight for social acceptance. Oral traditions in Tombo and Tokeh also mention the name *abeka* for Krios, which confers social superiority to the Sherbros who allocated the land where the newcomers lived and named the people in commemoration of this allocation. The historical hierarchy thus created between hosts and strangers gives the sense of a timeless presence of Sherbros in the region.

Competing Narratives

The strict hierarchy implied by oral tradition has little foundation in actual social reality. Krios and Sherbros along the Peninsula coast are part of the same families. In Sussex, mention of the name *abeka* caused laughter among people living in Sherbro Town, as the term is rather obsolete and almost everybody had family connections to both parts of the settlements. This type of laughter was also an indication that the assumed 'purity' of Sherbro populations conveyed by historical narratives was also a fictional feature of their present identity. Nevertheless, the oral tradition is presumed to present a historical truth that can structure, explain and legitimate social relations – even against other empirical data.

The moment of encounter between Sherbro populations and Liberated Africans creates a 'pivotal event' that proves the historical precedence of both groups in the area vis-à-vis very recent migrants. Krio elders, by endorsing the status of their ancestors as strangers, validated a local version of history that established the existence of Sherbro precolonial settlements. In doing so, they also reaffirmed their right to present themselves as hosts to populations who had arrived more recently, even if this was sometimes contested by Sherbro actors. Thus, Sherbro and Krio claims of autochthony appeared mutually reinforcing. Oral traditions offered Sherbros and Krios a common historical ground upon which to build a discourse of unity in opposition to the political and social claims of other populations. On the Peninsula, Sherbros and Krios claim to be *wanwɔd* (a Krio word derived from the English 'one word'), which stands mainly for political alignment. Being *wanwɔd* is usually brought up in order to substantiate both groups' historical presence on the territory of the Peninsula. In this context, the collective aspects of identity performance become clearer, as groups share an interest in narrating a version of history that consolidates their social and political position.

Proving historical continuity was important with respect to ongoing debates with Temne-speaking populations. The question at stake was which group 'owned' the Peninsula originally. History, literature and school textbooks used in Sierra Leone report that the British acquired the Peninsula from Temne chiefs of the Koya chiefdom, which shared a boundary with the Sierra Leone Colony to the northwest (see the Introduction). But, as a Krio man from Kent explained, the destiny of the Peninsula then diverged from that of the Temne lands:

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> We [Krio and Temne] had this discussion [about the boundaries of the Koya chiefdom] for a long time. If you look at history, even Waterloo was inside Koya. The whole Peninsula was Koya but the Peninsula became the land of the slaves. It was differentiated. It became a Krio land. It changed into a Krio land and one cannot claim it to be Koya anymore. If Temnes claim this land on historical ground, it would bring disputes.

Once transferred to the British, the land became 'Krio land'. Unlike Temne chiefdoms, the Peninsula became a land where many populations coexisted. In such a place, he meant, any particular ethnic claim – but especially a Temne one – would likely stir up conflict.[10]

Elders in Sherbro settlements contested the written version of history. They were quick to stress that King Naimbana and King Tom were actually Sherbros. Further, they said that these kings were the only legitimate landowners; therefore, the land was Sherbro. As evidence, I was often told that when the British arrived, they asked King Gbana, a Sherbro king, 'What is your name?' and the King responded 'name Gbana', which was distorted as Naimbana by the settlers and misinterpreted as a Temne name. I was meant to understand that the general pattern of misassigning Temne identity to Sherbro kings had occurred to King Naimbana and King Tom as well. Sherbro elders, instead of relying on 'official' history, crafted a locally grounded historical narrative based on their own first encounter with the settlers as strangers. This narrative stressed colonial interactions from 'below', as opposed to the 'above' transactional relations between Temne chiefs and the British described in history books, and served to justify Sherbro historical primacy at a local level.

The issue was politically sensitive. For instance, in the early 2000s, as the first Temne headman was elected in Tombo, one Temne resident revived the controversy by proclaiming around the settlement that the town belonged to the Koya chiefdom. The town authorities called the Temne tribal head to bring the argument to an end (in the Western Area, each ethnic group is represented by a tribal head). A Sherbro man recalled: 'In front of [the Temne tribal chief] and the headman, [this man] had to recognize that we were the ones hosting them.' The political care with which the matter was handled indicates the sensitivity of the issue and the fact that the conflict could have escalated. Nevertheless, interviews with Temne-speaking populations revealed that their representations of the Peninsula as a part of Koya continued to provide them with a justification for their presence and their land claims.

Ambiguous Identities

The subtleties of oral tradition, conveyed through shifts of emphasis even within established narratives, are possible because of the ambiguity of ethnic identity

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on the Peninsula. Historical narratives that concerned Sherbro/Krio relations maintained an interesting paradox: while they reasserted the host/stranger relationship, they also tended to present Sherbros and Krios as indistinct peoples with common historical roots.

Despite the stipulated distinctions between Sherbro hosts and Krio strangers, people also used oral traditions to maintain a form of ambiguity about their respective identities. Both groups highlighted their 'alliance', albeit for different purposes. Krios used oral traditions to claim indigeneity. In colonial society, the settlers and their descendants were perceived, and perceived themselves, as non-natives. Even if they were black and of African descent, they had a higher social status and different legal rights than 'natives' (see Chapter 4). The native/non-native dichotomy implicitly referred to the specificity of the settlers as a non-African group (Goerg 1995: 177). The settlers were 'non-natives' in the sense that they were no longer tied to their 'tribal' roots.[11] Categories that represented them in colonial censuses shifted progressively from 'Liberated Africans and their descendants' to 'Creoles'.[12] Those categories separated the settler-descendants from 'natives', despite the fact that they had also mixed with local populations (ibid.: 119). Nowadays, people of Krio origin continue to be considered as 'non-natives'. Thus, it has also become important for Krios on the Peninsula to emphasize their historical ties with Sherbro populations to prove their Sierra Leonean origins.

In many Krio places, people described their slave forefathers as Sherbro 'returnees'. In Hamilton, I collected the following oral tradition from Mr Davies. Mr Davies' father was Sherbro, born and raised in Sussex, and his mother was Krio. The early settlers of Hamilton, he said, were Sherbros who were captured and taken into slavery. He included among these Sengbe Pieh, the hero of the Amistad revolt.[13] When they escaped slavery, these Sherbros came 'home' and gradually populated the various settlements of the Peninsula. Those who settled in Hamilton planted corn, said Mr Davies, which explained the original name of the settlement *Kangbeh*, the Sherbro word for maize. Under colonial administration, the village was renamed Hamilton. In contrast to other Sherbros of the Peninsula, these early inhabitants preferred agriculture to fishing. When other groups arrived at the coast, among whom were other 'returnees' (who later became Krios), the resettled Sherbros married them. This is how the village became a Krio place. Mr Davies' story contrasted with Sherbro accounts: in his version, Sherbros are not quite firstcomers; they were an early group of returnees, who later mixed with other returnees and became Krios. In this version, there is a subtle repositioning of the Sherbros as an indigenous group of Sierra Leone, but not an autochthonous group of the Peninsula. Nevertheless, they still precede all other ethnic groups and Krios.

Mr Davies' presentation was not unique. Oral traditions in Krio settlements often described black settlers as returnees, implying that these settlers

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were people who had been taken away from the Sierra Leonean coast. Narrators usually mentioned two processes of settlement: people from the coast, who were captured in the early days of the slave trade, but escaped, and the later resettlement of Liberated Africans. In Mr Davies' account, those epochs are separated, with Sherbros returning in the first wave and 'Krios' in the second wave. However, his mention of Sengbe Pieh is an example of 'descending anachronism' (Miller 1980: 16) by which the narrator transferred Pieh's return to Sierra Leone in 1841 to an earlier time. Indeed, the return of Sengbe Pieh is a symbolic event, also used by narrators to emphasize their group's links with the transatlantic world. In both Hamilton and Tokeh, for instance, I was told about the recent coming of Americans who claimed to have Sherbro roots and tried to learn the basics of Sherbro customs and language.[14] For some people, this project constituted an additional proof that 'returnees' had been Sherbro.

Knowing the ethnic origins of the slaves who embarked on the Middle Passage is a complex historical endeavour. Nevertheless, the general distinction of two phases of returnees that is conveyed by local identity discourses is borne out by historical research. Between 1800 and 1815, the origins of Liberated Africans reflected the relatively limited scope of the patrolling capacities of the British, which means that 'many slave ships brought to Freetown were captured within close proximity of the colony' (Anderson 2013: 107). In other words, many of the earliest Liberated Africans did originate from the Sierra Leonean coastline and interior.[15] Later on, although there is evidence of the presence of Bulloms and Sherbros among the Liberated Africans of the Colony, they constituted a small proportion of a much wider group of people of both Sierra Leonean and non-Sierra Leonean origin. Colonial censuses also show that a few Liberated Africans were of Sherbro origin.[16]

However, colonial censuses give a poor picture of the resettlement patterns of returnees. The censuses underrepresented the former captives who escaped the Colony to return to their home societies (Curtin and Vansina 1964: 187; Jones 1990: 52) and those who settled further away in 'native' villages of the Peninsula.[17] For Sherbros captured along the coast, resettling in nearby villages of the Colony, where people practised fishing and may have spoken Mampa Bullom, may have been relatively easy. As we shall see, some Sherbro narrators referred to people who 'escaped' as founders of local places, like Tokeh.

Other Krio oral traditions privileged representations of the past that presented the black settlers as Sierra Leonean 'returnees' who were unable to remember their roots. A Krio from the Banana Islands living in Bureh Town explained that when 'the slaves' were taken away, they forgot their language and came back unable to trace their family. As a consequence, they started to speak Krio and to live as Krios. These representations provided Krios with an easy explanation for their subsequent social mixing with Sherbros. Although their ancestors had forgotten it, they were Sherbro who had been taken in slavery and

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had returned home after a long and painful absence. The moment of 'return' is described as the reunion with one's kin after the experience of slavery, thereby grounding Krio identity in Sierra Leonean history. A further implication of this story is that the 'forgotten' Sherbro identity was nevertheless preserved as a certain affinity for associating with Sherbro people.

In Sherbro settlements, people also interpreted the return of the slaves in terms of a broken family continuity. A first version of the foundation of Tokeh, which is presented in Chapter 3, mentions the migration of a fisherman from Shenge to the Peninsula. Yet, one of the men who had been chosen to tell me that story later told me that the founding families of Tokeh, who all have English surnames, were people who had escaped slavery:

> The slaves founded this village. When the white men came, they followed the coast to capture slaves. All people on the coast were Sherbro. Some of these people managed to escape and did not go back to the Provinces. They remained on the coast. The British people took their relatives. All that they knew is that they had been taken from the coast. They did not know the hinterland. From Tokeh to Goderich, when they escaped, they stayed on the coast. The young ones managed to escape and created settlements. It is the same in Bonthe: anywhere they could settle near a beach, they did so.

There is no mention here of the cliché of the original migration, but only of individuals who escaped slave traders. The narrator seems to situate the 'return' of Sherbros in the early days of slavery. Thereby, he juxtaposes those early 'returns' with the settlement of the Liberated Africans, which results in a shorter historical sequence (Miller 1980: 17).

Furthermore, these two moments were a juxtaposition to the other story of migration from Shenge, which was not meant to be contradictory. Taken together, the two stories illustrated the preoccupation of positioning Sherbro populations towards different groups and participated in the construction of hybridity via the historical imagination. The first story of migration established historical precedence and domination over later groups, Temne agriculturalists in particular (see Chapter 3). The second story grounded the origins of Krio-ness in the return of Sherbro slaves on the coast, thereby emphasizing the ambiguity of origins, as the Krios of the region could also be considered (historically) Sherbro.

In many cases, Sherbros used oral traditions to stress the Krio dimension of their identity. These narratives supported the construction of Sherbro ethnicity as 'hybrid' – being both 'native' and Krio (see Chapter 4). Through them, Sherbro elders addressed the processes of *krionayzeshɔn* by which Sherbros had become Krios. In Tombo, a representative of Sherbro landowning families (who defined

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himself as Sherbro/Krio) told me that the community existed before 1812, which marks the first record of Tombo in official papers. The first inhabitants, he said, lived in the Peninsula hills as a way to hide from slave ships coming from the Plantain Islands, the Banana Islands and Kent. Each day, fishermen would leave their canoes in the harbour after fishing and retreat back into the hills. Eventually, some desired to move down from the hills.[18] Then, a man settled near the shore in a swampy place to do gardening. Women started coming to him to ask for vegetables.[19] Fishermen began to bring their canoes closer, in the part of Tombo called Kassi. In 1812, the first headman of the settlement was Tombom. Around that time, white missionaries came from Kent and walked along the coast to evangelize people. They met Sherbros in Tombo, educated some of their children and baptized them with English names. The person concluded:

> We do not have Krio people here. It is not a place founded by Krios. The people who call themselves Krio are adopted Sherbro people. You know that Sherbros call Krios *abeka* – let us put them over there. It is because they told the missionaries to build a church outside of the village. They gave them a place for the church and for the children whom they educated.

This narrative reinforced the Sherbro origins of the village and explained how people came to be Krio. The second half of this quote refers to a historical process by which black settlers fostered children from local groups and evangelized them. Historical records testify that the Liberated Africans were resettled in Tombo in the 1830s near Sherbro Town, on the road from Kent to Waterloo that opened in the 1820s. The village had no permanent missionary, but had a school and three Christian churches (Hendrix 1985: 69). The account is therefore a plausible description of Sherbro to Krio identity shift through adoption and conversion. Although the narrative does not mention the local negotiation of those two identities (becoming Krio while remaining Sherbro at the same time), it accounts for the early process by which Sherbro of the Peninsula acquired English surnames and converted to Christianity.

Alternatively, as a man in Bureh Town once told me: 'Only a few original Krio are left. If you look for Krios, unless you consider Krios of Sherbro origin, you will not find Krio people in Sierra Leone anymore.' His formulation is initially baffling, as one might expect more people self-identifying as Krio to have emerged out of decades of migration, intermarriage, urbanization and modernization. Here, though, he postulates an original group of Krios (probably returnees) who have disappeared, except those who have Sherbro ancestors who 'became' Krios.

Moreover, Sherbro settlements were made of successive waves of migration from the interior. In many places, people who define themselves as Sherbros

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have other origins. For instance, in Baw-Baw, many people proved to be of Temne origin, whereas in Bureh Town, Mende and Lokko origins were more common. This testified to the progressive incorporation of strangers into Sherbro communities. Historical narratives incorporated those (certainly more recent) migrations, while weaving them with colonial history: in other words, the histories of families of various ethnic origins who migrated to the Peninsula were transposed to a preceding epoch.

The version of the foundation of Mama Beach, which I collected from the Sherbro headman, illustrates this process. Like many settlements, Mama Beach is divided between a lower (old) part and an upper part, where many new fisherfolk have settled. Population pressure in the upper part has led to important land conflicts with two neighbouring communities, PWD Compound and Bonga Wharf (on this issue, see Chapter 8). Mama Beach's lower part is subdivided into three 'towns' near the wharf (Lokko Town, Mende Town and Sherbro Town) and towns farther away from the sea, occupied mostly by latecomers.

According to the headman's story, the settlement was founded in 1832 by three friends: Pa Gbanka, Pa Smith and Pa Thompson. Each of them built in his own area, and people named each area after the ethnic origin of the founder: Pa Gbanka founded Sherbro Town, Pa Smith Lokko Town and Pa Thompson Mende Town. Pa Thompson was a very close friend of Pa Gbanka and he decided to move from Mende Town to live nearer to his Sherbro friend. Originally both Lokkos and Mendes were farmers, but then Mendes started to fish with Sherbros. The story concluded by stating that the history of Mama Beach allows people to welcome Mende, Sherbro or Lokko, whereas Temne 'are sent' to (that is, are asked to settle in) PWD Compound or Bonga Wharf.

When I asked the headman about the presence of early settlers in this area, the story was mixed with contradictory information about the slavery roots of the founding fathers:

> [These families] start from slavery times. When the white man came to the coast, he met the Sherbro people. They exchanged men for rum and tobacco. When they brought these people back, they founded Freetown. When Freetown started to be crowded, people moved: they opened places in Kent, Banana, York, Kissy, Wellington, etc.[20] From there, they discovered the place. There was a tussle between the Smith, the Thompson and the Benga [Gbanka] as to who discovered Mama Beach first. But they did not come from upcountry. These people had always been by the coast.

This statement attributes Liberated African origins to three families otherwise described as originating from the interior. But this contradiction can be explained. Claims of autochthony, which respond to the presence of migrants,

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require Sherbros to prove their long-term presence on the Peninsula. Either as slave traders or victims of the trade, Sherbros are said to have always been on the coast. Nonetheless, autochthonous origins are also needed to support landownership under customary law and to confront migrants' land claims (see Chapter 8). Mendes and Lokkos are likely to have worked as farmers, and Mende roots were often used to support land claims. Furthermore, the 'return' of original families from slavery binds the three ethnic groups in a founding moment that occurred prior to later migration.

Mama Beach oral tradition merged two historical steps in one: the arrival of the Liberated Africans and the progressive incorporation of local families into the Krio group. Otherwise, interpretation of origins was left open: the three founders may have been returnees, although it is more likely that they were later immigrants who had been raised as wards of Krios – through a practice of child-fostering that I will further detail in Chapter 4. Individual stories of elder members of families in Mama Beach revealed both a history of migration from the interior to the coast and the adoption and upbringing of a parent in a Krio settlement, such as nearby Kent. The three founding families therefore appeared connected through a similar experience of *krionayzeshɔn* (taking up the attributes of Krio identity), which opposed them to populations who had arrived on the Peninsula more recently, with an emphasis on Temne-speaking groups. In this context, the ability to *krionayz* established both precedence and social superiority. The mention of colonial history pointed to the higher status conferred to the black settlers and the strategies by which local populations engaged with those unusual strangers.

Conclusion

This chapter has offered an overview of the role of oral traditions in providing an explanation for the social proximity of Krio and Sherbro populations on the Peninsula. Historical sources reveal that their relations are grounded in the colonial context of the movement and resettlement of former slaves in the Sierra Leone Colony. Oral traditions do not contradict such sources, but present an alternative view of the colonial encounter. They emphasize the role of hosts that the Sherbros assumed vis-à-vis the Liberated Africans. At the same time, both Sherbro and Krio narrators played on the ambiguity of origins (of returnees) to highlight that the sociocultural proximity between the two groups may have had an even longer history and preceded the moment of the colonial encounter.

The result is that oral traditions establish several kinds of moral actors in terms of ethnic identity, migration and settlement history, occupation and relations with others. In general, community-origin stories established autochthony (for Sherbros) and indigeneity (for Krios), and assigned positive values to processes of

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krionayzeshɔn. So structured, they legitimated Sherbro claims to local land ownership and acknowledged an indigenous cultural identity for Krios. These narratives also played on the tension between purity (by establishing ethnic boundaries and Sherbro autochthony) and heterogeneity (by maintaining the ambiguity of Sherbro/Krio ties). Thus, they also served as an illustration of contemporary individual experiences of a hybrid identity. Historical narratives expressed a Sherbro/ Krio alliance in the present based on common social, economic and ritual practices that will be detailed in the following chapters. Depictions of this alliance smoothed over historical junctures and tensions that may have otherwise existed between local populations and the settlers in order to make a continuous social landscape. In the next chapter, I will examine how those historical links produced a common social and geographical space that unites Sherbros and Krios.

Notes

1. The census taken in 1817, for instance, listed 1,009 African 'natives' who had come to work in Freetown (Kuczynski 1948: 84).
2. Colonial Office, Great Britain. 'Sierra Leone. No. 25', in *The Reports Made for the Year 1848* (1849: 304–05).
3. In the 1850 census, there is no specific mention of Sherbros, who, it seems, were included, like other local Africans, under the category 'native strangers', which totalled 3,516.
4. After the Caulker-Cleveland War, which opposed James Cleveland, a fierce slave-trader who ruled on the Banana Islands, and Stephen Caulker, Chief of Bumpe, the Banana Islands fell under the administration of the latter between 1797 and 1810. Stephen Caulker, who had Anglo-Sherbro ancestry, forged good relations with the Colony. As British squadrons patrolled coastal waters, the north of the Yawri Bay became safer, while slave-raiding intensified to the south. In the same period, the chiefdom of the Caulkers was politically divided and drawn into war, which disrupted security and trade along the southern coast throughout the nineteenth century. Referring to Tombo, south of the Peninsula, Hendrix (1984: 9; 1985: 68) assumes that Sherbro migrants founded the old settlement around 1800 in search of a more stable environment.
5. There is also evidence of the use of the Sherbro language in reports by Reverend G.R. Nyländer, who translated Christian hymns 'in the Sherbro dialect of Bullom' for chief George Caulker of the Banana Islands in 1820 (Hair 1963: 7).
6. The 'old' Sherbro names of various settlements are known, although their origin and meaning may be given different explanations. For instance, people commonly use the name *Funkya* for Goderich. One local interpretation is that *Funkya* is derived from the Sherbro word 'funk', which means cotton.
7. In two locations, the situation was different. In Goderich, the Sherbro and Krio versions of oral tradition differed. Both groups claimed to have founded Oba Funkya, the part of Goderich closer to the sea, which is distinct from Sherbro Town. The Krio version is predominant, as Sherbro populations are less numerous and identifiable. Moreover, the Banana Islands were considered a 'Krio place' only. People acknowledged that Sherbros had lived on the islands during colonial times, but said that they had left long ago for the Sherbro coast.

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8. I am referring here only to oral traditions that concerned the establishment of settlements. However, other narratives could lead to tensions between both groups: for instance, stories about land-use rights and the collection of taxes from other groups of strangers. In other words, Krios also asserted their historical rights over land (and sometimes parts of the beach), which they considered that they had acquired over generations.
9. The word 'slaves' is often used in oral traditions to refer to Liberated Africans and their descendants who settled in or near Sherbro communities. Sometimes, narrators also employ 'Krio' retroactively as a name for early settlers who had yet to undergo processes of creolization that led to the emergence of Krio identity.
10. The competition between Freetown's social elite and Temne leaders for cultural and political monopoly in the Sierra Leone Colony became stronger at the end of the nineteenth century (see Bangura 2017). In the 1890s, migration of Temne-speaking populations to the Colony intensified and British colonial authorities introduced elements of tribal rule by recognizing the authority of the Temne Tribal Headman to administer Temne people, thereby creating competition with the Freetown Municipal Council. 'Temneness', via the development of cultural associations and Islamic education, came to represent 'a useful alternative to the Freetonian way of life' (Bangura 2017: 193). Temne and Freetonian identities became mutually exclusive.
11. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Christian education and conversion were designed as a means to sever the ethnic affiliations of the former slaves. In response to this policy, many Liberated Africans escaped and re-created 'ethnic enclaves' (Scanlan 2017: 178) outside of Freetown. Both within and outside Freetown, some of the groups of Liberated Africans preserved their ethnic identities for generations, such as the Aku descended from Yoruba recaptives.
12. On the history and uses of the names 'Creoles' and 'Krios', see Chapter 4.
13. Sengbe Pieh is usually presented as a Mende man born near the Gallinas coast (see Abraham 1978). He was captured by Spanish slave traders in 1839 and freed after the Amistad trial. He returned in 1842 to Sierra Leone to establish the Mendi Mission near his village. This mission marked the beginnings of the American Mission Association (AMA) in the United States. But as Sengbe Pieh's home had been destroyed and his family killed, he helped the missionaries to settle on Bonthe Island and became a trader (Osagie 1997: 73). The early presence of the AMA in Bonthe have raised competing claims over Sengbe Pieh's origins, since many Sherbros claim that he was born and buried on Bonthe Island.
14. People commonly referred to the project initiated by the American historian Joseph Opala that connects Gullah people in South Carolina and Georgia to Mende communities in Sierra Leone, from which they extrapolated the venue of other Afro-Americans to the Peninsula in the context of 'roots tourism' (which had no connection with the Gullah project). Joseph Opala lived in Hamilton in the 1990s, during which he helped to connect the community with the US embassy to fund the building of the secondary school. He suggested the name 'Sengbeh Pieh Memorial Secondary School' in order to attract US funding. However, there appears to be no historical link between Hamilton and Sengbe Pieh. Before this initiative, this historical figure was hardly known in Hamilton (Joseph Opala, personal communication). Thus, Mr Davies merged those contemporary elements in his narrative frame.
15. Anderson (2013: 126) shows that there were twenty-two people of Sherbro origin among the Liberated Africans who enlisted in the West Indian Regiments and the Royal African Corps. It is not known whether some of them chose to return to Sierra Leone when they were demobilized, but it is known that between 1817 and 1819, disbanded soldiers were

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'the earliest inhabitants of several villages … including Wellington, Waterloo, Hastings and York, settlements that were later to see an influx of liberated Africans' (ibid.: 110).

16. Colonial Office, Great Britain. 'Sierra Leone. No. 25', in *The Reports Made for the Year 1848* (1849: 305).
17. This explains the difference between the number of Liberated Africans who were landed and the total population of Sierra Leone (Curtin and Vansina 1964: 187). On the mobility strategies of Liberated Africans, also see Domingues da Silva et al. (2014).
18. Hendrix (1985: 68) also reports that between 1812 and 1840, inhabitants moved gradually from an original site to the present location of Sherbro Town in Tombo.
19. Sherbro elders claimed that the name Tombo was derived from the Sherbro *A koni thombok ko* (I am going to ask for vegetables) because it was a gardening area.
20. Kissy and Wellington were Liberated African villages established in 1916 and 1919, respectively, on the eastern side of Freetown. They are now neighbourhoods of the capital city.

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