

Chapter 5

The Tactics of Concealment and Disclosure

Sherbro identity performances build on the legacy of the colonial imagination that construes Krio and *kɔntri* categories as distinct and opposite. The ability to use different social fronts (Goffman 1990 [1959]), at separate times, by displaying the attributes of the Krio or *kɔntri* registers, is central to those performances. Performances of Krio-ness build on the social attributes – education and socialization – described in the previous chapter. As a result, strategies of concealment and disclosure constitute moments of intense dramatization of a person’s ethnic identity. By concealing and disclosing fronts, performers enact hybridity: those performances cause surprise because they transgress usually accepted social boundaries – in this regard, they interrupt the assumptions upon which the social interaction takes place – and yet they also posit this transgression as a normal feature of their identity.

Performances depend on the social context, the audience and the ability of the speaker to command the Krio and *kɔntri* semiotic registers. Sherbros living on the Peninsula are accustomed to switching registers according to locations (their hometown/Freetown). They adjust their performances to one setting or the other. For *krionayzɔ* Sherbros living in Freetown, whose families originate from places such as Bonthe and Shenge in southern Sierra Leone, occasions to demonstrate a *kɔntri* identity are much fewer. Some were born in Freetown with little or no recollection of their ‘home’. Some were born upcountry and educated in prestigious schools. Later, they found employment in Freetown, with little chance to visit their home regularly. In Freetown, they usually maintained a Krio ‘front’ and many also incompletely mastered the *kɔntri* register.

For instance, some mentioned not being initiated, some said that they had never learned how to fish and almost none spoke Sherbro.

For both groups, the social prestige derived from the use of the Krio register relates to Goffman's (1990: 45) definition of idealized performances, as 'in ... most stratified societies there is an idealization of the higher strata and some aspiration on the part of those in low places to move to higher ones.' Agha (2007: 167) notes that prestige registers may be recognized widely in society, and yet very few people may be able to use their emblems. For Sherbros, being Krio and being *kɔntri* at the same time is a source of pride and leads to tactics of dramatization as the most powerful way to produce an accurate image of the 'hybrid' self. These tactics aim at adapting the performance to an audience (i.e. to appear 'Krio' in Freetown), but they can also have a playful dimension, as they often consist in making others believe in a certain performance and suddenly reveal another part of identity.

In this chapter, I focus on ethnic hybridity as an interactional process that allows individuals and groups to position themselves in specific social situations. The first section illustrates those processes from different positionalities (*krionayzd* Sherbros living in Freetown and Sherbros living on the Peninsula) in order to highlight the diversity of strategies by which specific groups of people 'play on' the plural nature of Sherbro identity to craft an image of the self. The second section focuses on collective performances related to religion and rituals on the Peninsula. Following Bell (1992: 90, 123), I approach rituals in terms of practice, as a privileged mode of action that produces communities and boundaries. Through the display and concealment of specific cultural contents, Sherbros use rituals to either associate with or disassociate themselves from Krios.

***Krionayzd* Sherbros and the Performance of Neutrality**

Krionayzd Sherbros living in Freetown can maintain a consistent Krio social 'front' that others rarely question, in settings where displaying a Krio lifestyle is socially valued. In this group, self-perceptions as *krionayzd* concerned mainly people from the middle/upper classes, who tended to work in intellectual environments and to hold highly skilled positions as lawyers, journalists, civil servants or engineers. Thus, the data include a 'class' effect, which makes it different from the analysis of social practices and discourses on the Peninsula. Nevertheless, they reveal the patterns of collective performances of hybridity.

While code-switching is not uncommon in Sierra Leone, the possibility for *krionayzd* Sherbros to navigate Krio identity rests on several interconnected semiotic abilities (that are not necessarily used simultaneously): adopting an unmistakable Krio accent; mixing Krio with British English; squeezing 'deep' Krio, like pithy proverbs, into greetings and conversations; disclosing a typical Krio name (i.e. 'English' personal and family names like Donald Georges, David

Nicol or Agnes Johnson); using formal attire; referring to Krio habits (like eating *fufu* on Saturdays), etc. Their performances are convincing because they are consistent and unambiguous.

From such performances, others can infer a set of individual qualities, such as formal education and a high social position, connected with a higher profession, and deduce that the person producing them is Krio. Certainly, the use of the Krio register represents a social and professional asset in Freetown. It is a prestige register, which is associated with positive psychological traits, such as being hardworking, serious, disciplined and reliable. *Krionayzd* Sherbros rarely refute being Krio. This identity places them in the upper social stratum, and also opens up opportunities and connections that they would otherwise be denied.

Krionayzd Sherbros stress that the use of the Krio register is easy due to the Sherbro/Krio cultural proximity. One man who lived in Freetown and originated from Bonthe summarized it as follows: ‘Sherbros can easily adjust to Krios; they feel comfortable with them because of their common Western education.’ Talking about the impact of education on *krionayzd* Sherbros, a fisherman on the Peninsula told me: ‘If you trace [Krios’] background, they are Sherbro. [These people] will tell you that they are Sherbro but will still claim to be Krio. If a proper Krio person tells you “I am a Krio”, just consider that person to be a proper Sherbro.’ According to this line of argument, educated Sherbros only ‘hide’ under a Krio disguise, and Krios may not be what they appear to be.

While there is ample historical ground for this argument, for the reasons discussed in the preceding chapters, it is critical to point out that *krionayzd* Sherbros in Freetown also succeed in projecting the image that they have always been Krio and that there is no other *kɔntri* identity seeping in around the edges of their being. It is a performance that projects their identity and social trajectory far back into the past, erasing easily detectable traces of any recent migration or enduring social ties to rural communities. *Krionayzd* Sherbros project such an image while never explicitly denying any *kɔntri* connections. They accept an ascribed identity as Krio, while avowing – when necessary – a Sherbro identity.

Yet Sherbro roots do not have to remain forever secret as the price of success; they can be disclosed at times. People in Freetown often recollected anecdotes about the surprise registered by acquaintances or friends when they revealed their Sherbro identity. I witnessed such a moment myself one day when I was talking to a friend at the entrance to his workplace. One of his co-workers passed by and I was introduced, along with the purpose of my research. The person was extremely surprised and slightly embarrassed; for the past twenty years, he had believed that my friend was a Krio.

Over time, the concurrence and congruence of signs in a person’s behaviour convince the audience of a person’s identity. As in this case, when a direct question emerged relating to one’s origins, a *krionayzd* Sherbro would usually choose to reveal Sherbro identity. It is also important to prove an autochthonous status

to avoid the teasing that a Krio can face for being ‘non-native’. Such a disclosure does not reduce the status of the person because Sherbro identity is already considered high status. Again, this has to do with the ‘common knowledge’ that due to history, socialization and education, a Sherbro can also be a Krio.

Stories of disclosure can also become moral tales. One female university teacher from Bonthe shared with me an anecdote that she had been told by her father. First, she reminded me that Bonthe had served as a commercial base for the British. Therefore, people in Bonthe, fishermen and villagers alike, were generally well educated. Her father used to see people coming back from fishing, partially undressed, as they usually are on fishing boats. Every day after fishing, these people would go to a particular shop and discuss prices in Mende or Sherbro. One day, the white shopkeeper became annoyed with them and loudly criticized them with offensive words. One of the fishermen turned to him and said in English: ‘To whom are you alluding?’ The shopkeeper was taken aback. Her father, who was in the shop, was amazed by this response and realized that all the fishermen spoke English. The woman ended the story with the sentence: ‘The least of them knows how to read and write English.’

Such stories were quite common in interviews with well-educated Sherbros. It allowed them to stress that Sherbros, early on, had subverted relations of power that classified ‘natives’ as non-educated, including in remote areas, where the advancement of ‘civilization’ was considered limited. They often referred to Bonthe, which is a key symbol in the historical imagination of the Sherbros (as a group) of their transnational links (see the Introduction). Bonthe Town, situated on Bonthe Island in the Southern Province, was administered as part of the Sierra Leone Colony. Its development around trade since the eighteenth century explains why the discourse on ‘civilization’ is equally relevant there.² On the Peninsula, Sherbro and non-Sherbro people alike also stressed that in the past, a Sherbro person would always be educated whatever his or her livelihood. The recurrent image is that of the educated fisherman; though he might be seen walking around half-naked in his fishing trousers, he could nevertheless outdo a white man in speaking polite and proper English.

In these stories, revealing one’s identity is part of a dramatization process that emphasizes the positive ambivalence of Sherbro identity: one displays intelligence but humility; education but faithfulness to a *kɔntri* lifestyle. Conversely, *kɔntri* Sherbros wish to display these qualities when using emblems of a *kɔntri* identity. Outside of the Western Area in particular, the use of the *kɔntri* register appears to be safer than the use of the Krio register. *Kɔntri* Sherbros were the most likely to have encountered difficulties when travelling, as they are less familiar with the customary system. Many feared the presence of the Poro society and expressed some embarrassment at not being initiated.

In Freetown, as very few people speak Sherbro, fishing has become a critical *kɔntri* emblem. Fishing is not only a relevant cultural practice to Sherbro

ethnicity, as detailed in Chapter 3, but also shows one's willingness to indulge in manual work, which educated people usually avoid. References to fishing become a way of contesting stereotypes of exclusiveness and elitism often associated with Krios. Many *krionayzd* Sherbro mention with pride that they know how to fish and that they usually go fishing when at home on vacation. To borrow Astuti's words on the Vezo of Madagascar, Sherbro-ness is also a type of identity defined by a 'way of doing which people perform' and not simply a state of being (Astuti 1995: 16, emphasis in original). Swimming, paddling (with a *kunu-kunu*) and fishing are activities that make a person Sherbro. In this regard, strangers who adopt this lifestyle in communities of the Peninsula may appear 'more Sherbro' than *krionayzd* Sherbro living in Freetown.

Indeed, *krionayzd* Sherbro may experience shame as a result of their lack of practical skills. When I was staying in Sussex, I met a man who was working as a civil servant in Freetown. He was six years old when he was sent by his mother to Freetown. She forbade him to come back to Sussex because she feared that he would start fishing and neglect his education. On several occasions, he stated that he regretted that his mother had not allowed him to learn fishing. While he acknowledged that discipline had helped him to make a career in government administration, he claimed not to be able to relate to his age mates who had stayed in Sussex. He was a Poro member, but his lack of fishing ability remained a significant difference between him and other members.³ As a result, he stressed other aspects of indigeneity: he insisted on people using his Poro name and had given Sherbro names to his children.

Beyond its associations with a high *and* native social status, Sherbro ethnicity is considered neutral in relation to the context of politicization of ethnic affiliations, particularly those of Mende and Temne identities. The small size of the Sherbro group and the ability of its members to assimilate into neighbouring peoples have played a role in shaping this representation of Sherbro ethnicity, which often becomes an asset. I discussed this with one man, originally from Bonthe but who had lived in Bo throughout his life. Bo is the stronghold of the SLPP in the Southern Province, dominated by Mende populations. He told me:

I worked in Makeni [capital of the Northern Province and stronghold of the Temne-dominated APC] for two years. There, as a Sherbro, I was a neutral person. When I first said that I was coming from Bo, I could feel that people looked at me differently. I could feel some tension. But when I said that I was Sherbro, people approached me more easily. They felt free to talk with me. The moment you say that you are Sherbro, you are different. You are not considered as a potential enemy any more.

This man had a similar experience when coming back to Freetown for work. He arrived to stay with extended relatives of his brother's wife in a Temne/Limba

compound, which also included three Mende households. At first, when he arrived, the Temne landlady thought that he was a Mende and did not speak to him much. When she learned that he was Sherbro, she suddenly became friendly. She even asked him to take her son to Bonthe to start a business. He concluded by saying that if he had been Mende, the contact would have been more difficult and she would not have befriended him to that extent. Conversely, he had no difficulties relating to Mendes in the same compound, since they knew that he was a Sherbro living in Bo and that he could speak Mende too. Hence, he reckoned that disclosing his *kontri* identity changed his relations to people and their attitude towards him.

Sherbro identity usually ensures safe social interactions with outsiders, as it is perceived both as ethnically neutral and socially respectable. This appears to be the outcome of people's ability to integrate into and connect with different ethnic groups. First, it refers to the fact that Sherbro share cultural and social features with both Mendes and Temnes. 'When a Sherbro man sings, he sings in Mende; when he speaks, he speaks in Temne' was the sentence I heard from a Sherbro man in Tokeh with the intent of summarizing both the Sherbro/Temne language proximity and the Sherbro/Mende common cultural practices.⁴

Second, the principle of matrification (although it may appear old-fashioned in present-day Sierra Leone) gives individuals the possibility of strategizing ethnic belonging in social encounters. Sherbro paternal origins can serve as a marker of identity, as patrilineality is the dominant norm in Sierra Leone. At the same time, people can use Sherbro matrification to hide or supplant Mende or Temne paternal origins, which may be difficult to negotiate in specific situations. They can appeal to the specificity of the Sherbro group in that matter.

Third, and embedded in a postwar context, neutrality refers to the Sherbro/Krio relatedness and their similarity in behaviour during the war. Knörr (2010b: 745) indicates that Krios are perceived as having been less involved in the war as perpetrators. The specificities of their identity are reinterpreted in a positive light in the aftermath of the war. Krios are seen as less attached to a particular indigenous identity and thus less likely to support tribalism in national politics. The perceived ethnic neutrality of Sherbros results partly from their Krio affiliation. Like Krios, Sherbros enter the civil service, but tend to maintain a neutral political stance. As I heard several times, 'they can hold key positions in the government but they will stay humble'. Modesty appears as a positive asset that prevents political ambition.

A second local explanation of political neutrality notes that Krios and Sherbros are minorities who do not have a large 'tribal' voting base on which they can build political positions and win elections. In actual politics, some have tried to use Sherbro identity as an advantage. For example, Maada Bio, who won the presidential elections for the SLPP in 2018, is originally from Bonthe, currently a Mende-dominated area. When he ran in 2012, he tried to bring his Sherbro

identity to the fore; however, nationally, he was still considered a Mende, along the usual lines of ethnic partition in politics (see Chapter 1).

On the Peninsula, stereotypes about Sherbros similarly converge: they were presented, and presented themselves, as a peaceful group, who were not involved in war atrocities. As in the Krio case, this perception may be due to their geographical position on the coast, far from the areas where the war started (Knörr 2010b: 745). However, it is unknown to what extent Sherbros in the south of the country may have been active in local (Mende) militias. Yet the image of neutrality remains for all Sherbros. This is perhaps the case because Sherbros who are demonstrably not neutral can always be something else: Mende, Temne or Krio. Stories of concealment and disclosure represent not only a strategic use of ethnic registers, but also the intrinsic possibility of not being categorized (and therefore of not being pointed at).

Both local and migrant populations used stereotypes about Sherbros that emphasized their peacefulness. Some sentences typically returned in conversations: ‘Sherbros do not like fighting’; ‘They want to avoid problems’; ‘When they see problems, they jump in their Kru canoe and paddle far until they think it is safe to come back’. Yet, peacefulness can also serve as a synonym for weakness. Sherbros emphasize that in order to avoid violence, they tend to surrender to force and accept invaders. This was invoked as a justification of their difficulties in dealing with new migrants.

British Sherbros and Krio Decorum

On the Peninsula, performing Krio identity in interactions with migrants, who often come from rural places of the interior, has become a strategy to mark social differentiation. I would like to illustrate this point by reporting a conversation I had with my research partner. One day, when crossing the river between Number Two River and Tokeh, Jonathan and I sat on the boat with a girl who looked about fifteen years old. Jonathan (who did not know her, but had noticed the way she talked and dressed) talked to her in a provocative way, calling her *kɔntri*. The girl escaped quickly when the boat landed, but when we encountered her later, Jonathan started joking again and the girl responded bravely, ‘Mi nɔtɔ kɔntri’ (I am not a country girl). Then I took up the task of making Jonathan (JC) explain himself to me (AM):

AM: Why do you call her *kɔntri*?

JC: Because when she first came here, she did not speak a word of Krio. She is from upcountry. She spoke only Temne. Now she has picked up Krio. You heard that she told me, ‘Mi nɔtɔ kɔntri’.

AM: So if you are not a *kɔntriman*, who are you?

JC: Me? [Pause] I’m English.

AM: How come you're English?

JC: Because I speak good English and I speak good Krio.

[At that moment, two boys passed in front of us conversing in Temne.]

JC: Temne is a *kɔntri* language.

AM: Sherbro is not?

JC: Well, no, we are *civilayzd*. We are able to dress with style. We are able to wear these fine Krio clothes. When we go to church, we don't go with a shirt. We go with print.⁵ Like yesterday, I saw late at night the wife of the headman coming from town. She was dressed like a real Krio woman. She had a beautiful Krio dress and I teased her for that.

AM: So you said that Sherbro is not a *kɔntri* language?

JC: Well ... yes. But the Peninsula [Sherbro] almost entirely adopted the Krio system. We are almost Krio-dominated. If you go to Shenge, every family speaks Sherbro at home. Here they will tell you: my father is Sherbro, my mother is Sherbro, I am a Sherbro but I don't speak it. We are not natives [*netiv*], we are Europeans. If you are a native, you must practise your own system. We are the British Sherbro.

This conversation took place at the beginning of my stay in Sierra Leone, as Jonathan and I had just started working together. My presence clearly influenced the interaction he had with the girl and his subsequent self-representation. At first, he qualified the girl as *kɔntri* and she recognized it as an insult. As we discussed the matter, he justified his position by making an evaluation of linguistic and behavioural signs with reference to the *kɔntri/civilayzd* dichotomy. He opposed these two identities to mark the difference between the social status of the migrant and his own. He defined Sherbro as *civilayzd* with regard to language (the knowledge of English and Krio) and clothing (the print dress). Through metapragmatic evaluation, otherwise disparate signs are turned into normative criteria of group membership 'that convert facts of social difference into measures of rank or hierarchy' (Agha 2007: 75). In this regard, the performance of Sherbro identity is locally specific, as it plays on the historical dichotomy between the rural 'interior' and urban Freetown.

The Krio language is often qualified as a *lingua franca*, as it allows people of diverse ethnic origins to communicate. Moreover, it is the language of government administration and education. On the Peninsula, Krio is the native language of most Sherbros. The expression 'British Sherbro', which I heard many times during fieldwork, designates people's inability to speak Sherbro as an indigenous language, but also claims English as an indigenous language for the Sherbros.

Language loss is sometimes deplored, yet it is seldom stated as a significant barrier to claiming Sherbro identity. For Sherbros, the Krio language can equally serve as an ethnic marker. This is the case despite the perception of Krio as a *lingua franca* that generally has 'little or no indigenous cultural significance'

(Bangura 2006: 158). As in the exchange above, a *kontri* accent in speaking Krio underscored a migrant status in a social environment dominated by the Krio language, while Jonathan demonstrated education related to Krio-ness.

In a Sherbro context, the two languages are linked to different social situations. Krio is valued as the language of education, but also of intimacy, as it is used at home and between relatives. The progressive shift to Krio as a native language is commonly attributed to social achievement: people who are educated and work in Freetown are not willing to maintain knowledge of the language. Most parents also do not try to teach Sherbro as a first language to their children. At the same time, Sherbro is maintained as the language of rituals and its use connects to an important social and emotional part of an indigenous identity. The young generation rarely practise Sherbro, but often learn the basics from their parents and songs in Sherbro during initiation. Thus, both Krio and Sherbro have cultural significance and are co-constitutive symbols of ethnic attachment.

In *Acts of Identity* (1985), Le Page and Tabouret-Keller show that linguistic behaviours indicate individual choices of identifying with, or distinguishing oneself from, a certain group. The choice of language is closely related to specific social situations, since individuals project identities through speech acts. In a context of migration, Krio has become the language of social differentiation. Although most people speak Krio, the way in which Krio is spoken remains a major social indicator. Most people consider that Sherbros speak a purer, clearer Krio than migrants who learned it as a second language. It is not rare for local people on the Peninsula to mock the 'rural' accent of people who recently migrated, as Jonathan did. Hence, the type of Krio accent and vocabulary as well as the selected use of English in certain contexts continue to be emblems of social prestige. Krio identity is projected into speech acts as a way to mark belonging to a higher 'urbane' educated class.

In many social interactions, Krio is opposed to Temne, as both languages compete for the status of *lingua franca* on the Peninsula.⁶ Particularly in the south of the Peninsula, where migration has been important, the Temne language is central to the fishing economy. A female fish trader said:

All Sherbro speak Temne now ... How did Temnes dominate us? Because when you go fishing, when you want to buy fish on the beach, you have to do it in Temne. The whole business is in Temne now. Temnes are more involved in fishing today than we are. They dominate the fishing [business]. So, if I want to enter that business, I have to learn Temne, I have no choice.

As Temne emerges as the language of business, Krio remains the language of education and public meetings, a situation that imbues these two languages with values related to distinct social spheres. The social opposition created through

the use of language between business and education is meaningful, since Temne-speaking populations have long suffered from negative stereotyping in Sierra Leonean society and have been described as ‘uneducated’ with reference to Christian missionary education in colonial society (see Bangura 2017; Bolten 2008).⁷ Local Sherbro populations often stigmatized ‘the Temne’ for their lack of education and ‘rudeness’, which they understood as a lack of proper behaviour. Rudeness, in this sense, was opposed to ‘civilized’. These statements reproduced and reinforced the historical colonial hierarchy that represented Krios and Temnes at the two opposite ends of the civilizational ladder.

Addressing migrants in Krio becomes a way of contesting the prevailing local use of Temne. Krio was employed as the language of resistance against migrants, while also being presented as the language of neutrality. Sherbros argued that Krio is a language devoid of tribal and political implications. Nonetheless, this call for neutrality masked a social strategy, since Krio continued to be used as an emblem of social superiority, as the following examples show.

In Mama Beach, I witnessed a dispute that involved two fishing crews. One worked on a boat owned by a Krio from York and the other worked on a boat owned by a Temne resident of Mama Beach. When the harbour master asked the crews to explain the facts, the Temne crew started speaking Temne. Someone from the other crew protested that this was a general meeting, and thus they should use a language that everyone understands. The Temne captain was invited to speak in Krio. He started mimicking Krios by using many English words. The Krio boat owner noticed and told him to ‘speak locally’ and ‘use the broad Krio’ because people were not familiar with ‘English’. He meant to humiliate the captain of the Temne boat and create an unbalanced social interaction. For his part, by using English words, the Temne captain contested this strategy by mocking the social superiority associated with Krio identity and the Krio language. This, of course, the Krio captain firmly stopped.

Thus, Krio can also be used as the ‘autochthonous’ language – the language of firstcomers, who master it properly – in order to demarcate social positions. My host in Kissi Town, for instance, could speak Temne very well, yet she did not respond to greetings in Temne from female traders passing in front of her house: ‘It is not my language; if they said “Mwe, Saka” [Sherbro greetings] I would reply.’ She added that when people spoke Temne to her, she pretended that she did not understand, although she used Temne willingly in joking relationships with Temne friends. She considered Krio to be the most neutral language to be used with strangers (and she expected strangers to do the same), but also pointed out that migrants should adapt to specific cultural conditions by greeting either in Sherbro or Krio. Yet, she knew that no one would greet her in Sherbro. She used Krio as an emblem of autochthony and a way to maintain (relative) social superiority, knowing that in the Kissi Town area, Temne had supplanted Krio as the common language.

In these examples, as well as in the dialogue transcribed above, the use of Krio marks social and symbolic capital, and is interpreted as such by other groups. Thus, the Krio language, despite its urban 'cosmopolitan' connotations, continues to be opposed to *kɔntri* in a way that positions *kɔntri* as socially subordinate to Krio, which re-enacts power relations that were at the heart of colonial classification. As a result, mastery of Krio and English (or lack thereof) are strong indicators of contemporary social and educational inequalities, which explains that the Krio register remains 'a sought after commodity – even one that can be purchased for a price, through schooling, elocution lessons and the like ... [which] maintains the value of the register for a time' (Agha 2007: 167).

Jonathan mentioned not only language but also clothes as an emblem of Krio decorum to be opposed to the habits of migrants. Blommaert (2005: 203) stresses that 'every act of semiosis is an act of identity' in which we disclose information about ourselves. Dress is a critical example of a nonverbal semiotic sign through which information about identity is being revealed. In colonial Sierra Leone, dress became a sign of social differentiation. The settlers and Liberated Africans used Western dress codes. Later, in line with Victorian values, Krios openly complained about the 'indecent' nakedness of local populations (Porter 1963: 102; Spitzer 1974: 86). Western dress codes pointed to distinct social and moral values that positioned individuals within a socially dominant circle, whereas discourses about the indecency of local Africans maintained them at the other end of the 'civilizational process'.

In contemporary practice, clothes remain a strong element of social performance. The dress code depends on the nature of the occasion and its location. People tend to wear different clothes inside and outside of Sherbro settlements. Krio emblems are usually displayed with relation to formal work, institutions and services in Freetown. For instance, during my stay in Bureh Town, I accompanied my host to a meeting with the Public Relations Officer at the District Council in Waterloo. She put on a print dress for the occasion. She said that I would see her wearing her *lapa* in Bureh Town, that is, the piece of cloth tied around the waist that women wear 'in the privacy of their homes' (Spitzer 1974: 16). However, for such a meeting, she had to dress and look like a Krio; jokingly, she added that she had to make a good impression on the Public Relations Officer and show that she was an educated woman. By this, she acknowledged a direct relation between Krio clothing, education and social respectability. In general, women wear print dresses when going to Freetown or church services, or during travel. Yet, knowing the right way to tie *lapa* and the occasions on which one should use it are necessary conditions to qualify as *kɔntri*. For example, as proof of her Krio identity, one Krio woman explained to me that she had never known how to tie a *lapa* properly because 'Krio women only wear skirts and print dresses'.⁸

The *lapa* is a sign of indigenous identity as it is used during initiation soci-ety performances. Clothes can indicate belonging or nonbelonging to initiation

societies. Men wear the *lapa* during Poro dances. During Bondo initiation, girls learn how and when to wear the *lapa*. In Lakka, when the Bondo society was initiating a dozen girls, Bondo performances of members included songs against a woman who had refused initiation. She was born in Tokeh from Sherbro parents, but had moved to York and then to Freetown at a very early age. She had married in Freetown, but later moved in with her brother in Lakka. When I asked about her refusal of initiation, she explained that her decision not to become a Bondo member was a result of her Krio training:

I would not agree to that. My mother and my father are part of their own [society]. All my sisters and brothers went to Bondo and Poro. It is my big brothers who sent the smaller ones to be initiated in Baw-Baw ... I told [my parents] that I would not go because I am not used to that ... [Bondo women] cause me problems. They hint that [I am not a real Sherbro]. But I am not afraid. I avoid them. I do not go when they have their ceremonies. But when they meet me, they sing against me. I wear long skirts. They will sing 'You, long skirts, you, long skirts' all the time.

Her statement shows that clothes are semiotic signs, which become 'identified with certain social beings and their activities' (Agha 1998: 178). Trajano Filho (2002) shows that the mention of clothes can suggest religious or ethnic differentiation without clearly spelling it out. In this example, Krio and *kɔntri* identities are essentialized through the attributes of the skirt and the *lapa*, which link to normative criteria of womanhood. The song constitutes a discourse over a nonverbal sign: it is a critique of wearing skirts, which indicates the absence of Bondo training. During initiation, girls are said to be taught social rules that prepare them to become adult women – for instance, rules on pregnancy and childbirth, the performance of household duties, and how to conduct their relations with in-laws and Poro members (Bledsoe 1984: 457). The *lapa* is the *kɔntri* dress that infers female skills related to initiation. Similarly, women can be accused of being 'too Krio' when they argue against men: well-trained *kɔntri* women should rather display humility and submissiveness; in these contexts, education and the use of English can be regarded as symbols of arrogance.

Since the end of the Civil War, membership in initiation societies – Poro and Bondo – has revived as a main marker of autochthony (see Chapter 7). It has become important in establishing one's *kɔntri* identity and validating the relationship of Sherbros to the land. The following story, about a woman called Boi, shows how people separate contexts, locations and audiences when using ethnic registers with regard to initiation societies.

I had the opportunity to talk to Boi about her religious involvement when she was in front of her house in Baw-Baw preparing a few kilos of smoked fish in a basket to send to market in Freetown. Her story followed a more or less

familiar pattern for Sherbros. She had an English surname and was born in Tokeh, her mother's town. Her father's family was from Baw-Baw. She could also trace cousins in Number Two River, Bureh Town and Sussex. She attended school in York, after which she married a man from Baw-Baw, whom she had met in Freetown. She lived for over twenty years in the capital and worked as a fish trader at Kroo Town Road Market. For many years, she was elected the chairlady of female traders. She was responsible for guaranteeing traders' rights, representing them at city council meetings and ensuring that new traders registered with the administration.

When she was in town, women at the market thought that she was a Krio. Women from the Bondo society used to tease her, saying that she could not understand *kɔntri* practices. She would reply with a smile. They did not invite her to Bondo performances, which she did not want to attend anyway, although she gave money when the Bondo mask danced for her. The other women stressed her difference and her Krio attitude. She did not comment one way or the other on this. Since her values and her upbringing led others to believe that she was a Krio, she did not see any point in denying it, unless someone asked her about her own background. Moreover, masquerades were often performed on Sundays, which she found annoying because she attended church at Kroo Town Road in central Freetown, and the women dancing and singing outside disrupted the service. It was only in 1984, when her son joined the male initiation society, that she invited the market women to the ceremony. When they came, they were flabbergasted to learn not only that Boi was a Bondo member, but that she was also a *sowei*, a senior ritual leader, in charge of organizing initiations.

In this story, Boi described her life (to me, the anthropologist) according to the normative criteria of Krio identity. Her position as chairlady of female traders implied access to formal education. She also placed an emphasis on a good Christian life guided by moral principles: other ritual practices are not rejected, but do not supersede church obligations, such as going to Sunday services. Both practices are compatible, but should not be mixed. For her, Christianity remained the only possible religious reference in Freetown's social context. As Fashole-Luke (1967: 10) argues, Krio Christianity and African traditional beliefs are equally maintained, but 'kept in watertight compartments and are seldom, if ever, allowed to come together or interact upon each other'. Along the Peninsula, people continued to separate ritual duties as indexes of Krio or *kɔntri* identities, despite the fact that Christian practices may at times incorporate 'traditional' elements, as will be shown more clearly in the last section of this chapter.

Boi intended to distinguish herself from the other women, whom she pictured as lacking respect towards individual choices and religious beliefs, but also lacking the curiosity to enquire about her identity. By stating her ability to conceal her *kɔntri* identity, she wanted to make a statement about her mastery of Krio social codes – and her ability to 'appear' Krio when she wanted. The

story drew a distinction between Sherbros and members of other ethnic groups in their ability to perform Krio-ness. Using Krio codes allowed Boi to present a consistent Krio 'front' to the other women, thereby maintaining her position of authority and social prestige. By describing the attitude of the other women, who took her identity for granted, she expressed a sense of intellectual and social superiority over them. By carefully knowing how and when to conceal or disclose her dual identity, she succeeded in achieving the social prestige of being both an educated Krio and a *kɔntri* woman of high rank.

Boi's narrative reveals how individuals navigate between Krio and *kɔntri* registers in different geographical and social locations. Her uses of her two social identities are related to her capacity to separate religious practices, their contexts and audiences.⁹

At the time of my research, her social habits revealed the same strategy. She went to Freetown for Sunday services and was an active member of several church female organizations. When she was there, she maintained a Krio social 'front'. Krio women can be part of Bondo, but they tend to conceal it (see Chapter 6). Boi did not display Bondo membership in town so as to earn respect as a Krio woman. Yet, she had launched a Bondo initiation period in Baw-Baw. She organized one or two initiations every year in various Peninsula settlements. She stated that demands for initiations had accelerated in recent years and she had more requests than she could meet. In Baw-Baw, where she was often teased for being Krio, she became a defender of initiation societies and embraced the revival of Bondo with much fervour, as an emblem of Sherbro *kɔntri* identity.

Christian Standards in Marriage Practices

In the remainder of this chapter, I am concerned with the way in which Sherbros intentionally stress particular religious aspects in rituals – either a Christian heritage or African spiritual beliefs – in order to represent themselves as Krio or *kɔntri*. Ritual practices, as collective performances, constitute a significant space for displaying the cultural content of identity. They bind communities together in a process of boundary making vis-à-vis other groups (Bell 1992: 123). People in Sherbro settlements separate two types of performances: those attached to Christianity and those attached to the persisting 'traditional' religion. References to Christianity may be used to display the inclusion of Sherbros within 'the Krio system', while *kɔleho* – the Krio term for 'culture' – stresses their attachment to ritual practices and beliefs related to the Poro and Bondo initiation societies. As Sherbros display one aspect of their identity, they tend to conceal the other one, although both may integrate mixed influences.

References to Christianity speak to a Sherbro/Krio community and provide a historical explanation for subsequent population mixes. Krios in Kent and York, for instance, attributed Sherbro/Krio relatedness to the Sherbros'

early adoption of Christianity, which influenced education and child training. In turn, people in Sherbro communities presented the adoption of the 'Krio system' as a positive outcome of mutual knowledge transmission. While Krios learned fishing, Sherbros accessed Christianity and formal education, as Jonathan once commented:

Most Sherbros are Krio and most of those Krios are Sherbro. Krios came as evangelists to tell us about salvation. After fishing, we used to wash our nets and maintain them. We did not have time to open a book. Krios were more educated. Most church activities were organized by them. Krios civilized us and taught us to go to church every Sunday.

In Sherbro settlements, community bylaws are said to derive from a Christian heritage. Fishing and market activities are forbidden on Sundays. In Muslim-dominated communities, such as Tombo and Kissi Town, Sherbros complain of the lack of respect shown towards the Sunday rule, although they cannot require Muslim fishermen to take a day off from their economic activity. In Mama Beach, in order to preserve the tranquillity on Sundays, the headman allowed boats to depart but not to land. Fishermen sold the fish in neighbouring settlements.

Life-cycle rituals, such as weddings and funerals, are strongly influenced by Krio social and ritual standards. A church marriage – also called a 'pimpon' wedding with reference to the car's klaxons at the end of the ceremony – is still regarded as 'an index of civilization' (Tonkin 2010: 124). Such marriages are considered more prestigious – and more stable – than customary ones. The bride and groom are usually engaged (*put stop*), albeit often only the day before the church wedding, with a calabash and an engagement ring. A customary wedding is simpler and less costly, as it involves only a ceremony at home.

Most people cannot afford a church wedding, but it is valued more than a customary marriage. Both women and men emphasized that customary marriages fail easily, due to patterns of multiple relationships (see Chapter 3). I often heard comments that women did not respect their husbands when they were not married at church. Church weddings also have significant financial implications and demonstrate the man's willingness to marry. They are therefore also considered a sign of the woman's social value. Not being married at church is an argument that women bring up in disputes when they want to contest their husband's authority. There is an expectation that a customary marriage should eventually be sanctified by a church wedding in order to be taken seriously on both sides. As this rarely happens, church weddings as a social standard become a counterargument supporting the fluidity of relationships and individual freedom.

When customary marriage is not possible, either because the man cannot afford it or is already married in his home village, it is usual to witness the practice

of *put smol tin*, whereby the man presents the woman's family with some money and gifts so that they will acknowledge the union. This usually involves giving envelopes with money to the woman's relatives (parents and siblings) as well as to key figures of the community (mainly the headman, the elders, the pastor and the imam). For Sherbros, this practice differs from a proper engagement before a church wedding, which may be at odds with practices of other ethnic groups.

The following example illustrates the point. In Sussex, a man of Temne origin living in King Town came to engage a woman in Sherbro Town. We gathered in the parlour of the woman's family house and envelopes were distributed to the woman's relatives. A female elder of the woman's family led the ceremony and conducted the talk with the man's uncle. After the distribution, the uncle offered a small wrapped parcel:

THE FEMALE ELDER: What is this parcel for?

THE UNCLE: To engage [her name]. Now, no man should come between him and her.

THE FEMALE ELDER: You came to engage her or to lock the door [*lok di domot*]?

THE UNCLE: We only engage.

THE FEMALE ELDER: We know the difference. You did not come to engage her. I am your daughter-in-law. You came to lock the door, to lock the back door. We shall close the door and have a watchman. This is the gate he should watch.

The female elder then called the woman close to her and told her:

They came to know how we are doing in this town. They brought one Krio [the parcel]. It is too heavy for me. Please interpret it for me. He said they came to lock the door, to keep the fence up. At night, you should have come back here. We decided to lock the door. Now you agree and you're happy to have the door locked and to be inside. Find the security now.

The young woman handed the parcel to her elder brother, but because he lived overseas, it was clear that he would not be able to watch over her. Everybody laughed at her decision.

The man's family chose to display his commitment by merging both Krio and *kɔntri* elements in their demand, with the expectation that the woman's family would appreciate it: they brought not only envelopes, as is usually practised in Sierra Leone, but also a parcel, which is a reference to Krio engagement ceremonies. During the ceremony, which usually takes place the day before the church wedding, the man's family presents a box that contains a Bible, a ring

and a calabash covered with white cloth and containing small items, such as a needle, thread and kola nuts (see also Fyle and Heroe 1977: 12; Spitzer 1974: 30; Wyse 1989: 11). The fact that the female elder publicly mentioned that it was Krio showed social appreciation of the gesture, as it referred to the adoption of Krio practices by Sherbros.

Nevertheless, the female elder also used the ritual as an opportunity to stress the cultural and social distinctiveness of Sherbros from other ethnic groups. She implied that the man's family had made a mistake in calling the demand an 'engagement'. She reminded the man's uncle that the engagement procedure was a different ritual and said that this should be referred to as *lok di domot*, meaning that the family accepts the responsibility of controlling the woman's behaviour until the man marries her. The *lok di domot* does not represent a binding decision in the way that engagement does, since the woman continues to wait for a proposal, during which time her family assesses the seriousness of the man according to his readiness to marry. Hence, *lok di domot* does not necessarily imply an established relationship. The decision of the young woman to hand over the parcel to somebody who cannot control her (the elder brother who lives overseas) illustrates the point. The woman's family considered the man's demand, but downplayed its implications. Although Sherbros most often marry the traditional *kɔntri* way, and rarely at church, the intention was to demarcate social positions and hierarchies between hosts and strangers by including Sherbros within Krio Christian culture.

It is now possible to contrast this case with the description of a 'pimpom' wedding I attended in York. During this event, references to Christianity were used to validate existing networks of sociality between Sherbro and Krio settlements. As I recorded in my notes:

At the invitation of a York [Krio] family, I attended the wedding of one of their daughters to a fisherman originally from Bureh Town [a Sherbro settlement], but who had been raised in York [a Krio settlement]. The day after the engagement, the wedding was to take place at the Anglican Church. The groom was soon to become a pastor of the Methodist church and had asked a reverend from his own religious denomination to perform the ceremony. The groom and bride were dressed according to Christian standards respectively in suit and white dress. The reverend began by welcoming people from York and the neighbouring villages. He announced that people from the Banana Islands, Bureh Town, John Obey and other surrounding villages were invited to a special service of the Methodist church on the second following Sunday. The ceremony commenced. The reverend told the couple about the benefits and duties of marriage life and used extensive references to the relationship between Sherbros and Krios. Hence, he told the groom: 'You are a fisherman, so

fishes are your friend. You are not the friend of the fishes because you catch them but fishes are your friends because they bring you money. And you know these fishes have bones and this lady here is your sweetest bone. When you suck it, a tender juice comes out of it, doesn't it? It is this bone that will remain in your throat, in your heart.' He followed up the maritime metaphor with a statement on the need to confront adversity together: 'They will paddle their own canoe now. You will let them paddle their own canoe. Sometimes, it will not be easy, the sea will be rough and sometimes there will not be any fish in the sea. But it is a challenge for them now.' Once married, the bride and the groom faced the crowd, each with a wicker basket to take offerings. The reverend once again joked with the congregation, telling people to put money in the first basket and fill the other with fish. Everyone laughed. The amount of offerings was important. Following this light-hearted moment, the newly married couple came out of the church. Relatives congratulated them. The *Jolly* mask [the *Jolly* is a masquerade society that performs at various social occasions] had been invited and danced in front of the church. Finally, the couple entered the car that would lead them to their respective families in Bureh Town and York to receive the blessings of their parents.

Occasions such as weddings offer opportunities to reaffirm the social and familial links between Sherbro and Krio settlements. In this example, these links are of two kinds. First, before the ceremony, the reverend called on people from both Krio and Sherbro settlements to attend a common service at the Methodist church. Church attendance still plays an important role in attaching people to various places. For instance, it is not unusual for individuals who were raised in York and who returned to Bureh Town or Tokeh later in life to continue attending Sunday services in York. Second, the reverend used jokes in his sermon to refer to the social and economic significance of fishing in Sherbro/Krio relationships. The Sherbro ethnic background of the groom is both an object of mockery – as the Krio bride is called his 'sweetest bone' – and admiration. The offering baskets resemble those used by fish dealers to hold the smoked fish. By saying that one should fill the man's basket with fish, the reverend praised fishermen for making the York community prosperous: fishing is the backbone of the local economy and many women in the church are also fish dealers, so everyone should be grateful and give him money on that day.

These references indicate the interaction and interdependence of Sherbros and Krios in the fishing economy. Later, I asked the father of the bride whether her husband would insist on her joining the Bondo society. He replied that two of his daughters, who lived with men of other ethnic origins, had decided to join. In the case of this marriage, he said that his son-in-law was not part

of 'the Sherbro culture', meaning that he was not part of Poro. As a result, it seemed unlikely that the young man would encourage his wife to join Bondo. Their marriage was to be almost entirely Krio. The bride's father explained that his son-in-law was raised by a Krio and the newly married couple planned to settle in York, where there is neither a Poro nor a Bondo bush. Finally, he said: '[My son-in-law] has the Krio system, so they could marry like that, without complications. The only culture [*kɔlɔhɔ*] that he has is fishing.' Thus, his fishing skills were considered to be the main indicator of his Sherbro training and *kɔntri* identity – a practical competence that thus *made* him Sherbro despite his otherwise Krio lifestyle. At the same time, the father of the bride asserted 'the Krio system' as a proof of the cultural closeness of Sherbros, which allowed a union based on Krio Christian terms.

Religious Variations in Rituals

As discussed above, language, education and dress are all drawn upon in performances of individual and collective identity. This final section concentrates on the use of religious rituals to differentiate between Krio and Sherbro settlements. In Sherbro places, rituals are framed within African spiritual beliefs, whereas in Krio places, they refer to Christianity. Yet, both groups mutually influence each other's cultural practices, as we shall see now.

Sherbro/Krio networks of relatives rely on mutual attendance at rituals. These social events are of two kinds: family ceremonials, such as weddings and funerals, and community rituals, like rituals for the dead and rituals such as the *Kuk fɔ tɔng* (Cooking for the town) and *Kuk fɔ warf* (Cooking for the wharf), by which spirits are asked to protect the town and fishermen at sea. Both are important social occasions through which relatives meet and maintain their networks (Cohen 1981: 74). For some family events such as weddings, it is common to issue personal invitations, whereas funerals draw people from all settlements. Besides, the practice of wake-keeping the night before the funeral, which is important to both Sherbros and Krios (Fyle and Heroe 1977), is a significant social event. Friends and extended relatives attend wake-keeping in greater numbers than the funerals themselves. Not only the financial contribution but also the time, money and effort needed to come from another settlement are seen as sufficient signs of sympathy by the family of the deceased.

Rituals for the dead are of particular significance to Krios. Many of these customs are of Yoruba origin.¹⁰ On Christian holidays, both Krio and Sherbro families go to gravesides to pour libations for dead relatives, ask them for protection or consult them regarding future prospects. Individuals attend these ceremonies at the place where they feel the strongest connection, yet they can go to various gravesides when settlements are not too far from each other. The fact that Krios and Sherbros participate together in these rituals is of particular

significance, since it allows people to emphasize common ancestry, acknowledge the geographical space that unites them and display a common historical heritage.

While families in Krio settlements usually prefer going to the cemetery on Christmas Day, families in Sherbro settlements pour libations on New Year's Day. Thus, both can visit various cemeteries. A woman from York, whose mother was a Krio from Banana Island and whose father was a Sherbro from Bureh Town, often visited the three sites every year: she went to Banana Island at Christmas, returned to York to pour libations for her dead child on New Year's Day and eventually went to Bureh Town on the second Sunday of January to visit her father's grave. Most Muslim Sherbros maintain the tradition as well, for people in Sherbro settlements see it as a ceremony separate from Christian influence. A Muslim Sherbro told me, for instance, that 'it is neither Muslim nor Christian; it is a Sherbro tradition'. Some Muslims, instead of visiting the grave, place the *sara* inside their house, which is an offering that consists of rice-flour balls mixed with sugar, also called rice bread, and kola nuts, with water and soft drinks. Thereby, they can perform an alternative ritual on a day associated with a Sherbro tradition. Some Christian Sherbros also carry on the *sara* tradition for deceased Muslim parents.

Such occasions can assume a community-oriented dimension. For instance, on New Year's Day, the headman also pours libations for the community and asks for the renewed confidence of the dead in his own leadership. In Bureh Town, oddly, the New Year's Day ceremony takes place on the second Sunday of January. As a result, it is an event that attracts people from the entire Peninsula, sometimes very loosely connected to Bureh Town. Most people arrive on Saturday night to enjoy music, drinking and dancing – including the usual football match between Bureh Town and another Peninsula team – which is followed on Sunday morning by family rituals at the cemetery. The cemetery is a mile from the village, and the long walk on the beach is fuelled by heavy drinking. The occasion allows people who have not met for a long time to catch up and feel part of a larger Peninsula community.

Nevertheless, the ceremonies for the dead are also an occasion for Sherbros and Krios to perform differences of *kɔlɔɔ*. In the next two paragraphs, I present New Year's Day ceremonies that I attended on 1 January 2012 in Baw-Baw (a Sherbro settlement) and in Sussex/King Town (a Krio settlement).

In the early morning of 1 January, I was invited in Baw-Baw by the representative of the Martin family on the mother's side to witness the pouring of libations for the ancestors. We formed a group of about ten people and stopped at several sites. All rituals were carried out in the lower part of Baw-Baw, near the beach. We stopped first between the line of houses and the Poro sacred bush. I was told that until a few decades ago, women were buried behind their houses, not far from the graves of men inside the Poro bush. Family members poured

gin in one glass, water in another, and opened a bottle of soft drink. Everybody knelt, hands on the ground with upturned palms. Gin and water were poured on the ground, and the male elder asked for blessings in Sherbro. Then, each participant took some of the moist earth, put some on his or her forehead and chest, and drank from the two glasses. The men then entered the Poro bush to carry out a similar ritual for deceased Poro members. We, the women, waited for them. After visiting another woman's grave, we went to the cemetery to honour a recently deceased uncle. Finally, libations were poured on the beach and at the family house, after which everyone went their separate ways. The ritual on the beach was carried out for an uncle who had drowned at sea. Family members formed a line facing the sea and the male elder called the uncle several times with long cries, while others were clapping their hands in a regular rhythm. The group shouted in unison a last call before they poured the libation in the sand.

Later during the day, I witnessed the New Year's Day community ritual in Sussex/King Town. In Sussex, Sherbro Town and King Town have separate cemeteries. The two headmen pour libations separately for their own community. The headman of King Town asked two elders, the oldest woman of King Town and one local political representative, to help him in carrying out the community ritual. They gathered people around the main tree of the beach, some metres away from the cemetery. The headman knelt down and asked for the blessings of the dead. The older woman then poured water on the ground and named protective ancestors. Three glasses were put at the foot of the tree, with gin, water and soft drink. She soaked four kola nuts in the water. She asked each ancestor to bless the town and the headman, and, after each libation, added: 'We are people who do not believe in *meresin* [medicine] but worship God.'¹¹ The group sang several gospels in Krio. The other man poured libations. The headman asked people to choose two representatives from the youth and from the women to talk to the ancestors on their behalf. The older woman then broke two kola nuts and asked for the ancestors' blessings. She threw the four parts, which fell back symmetrically, two halves up and two halves down, meaning that the blessings over the headman's leadership had been granted.

The purpose of this type of ritual – to receive the blessings of the ancestors – is common to both Sherbros and Krios. Both groups perform family rituals (like the one in Baw-Baw) and community rituals (like the one in Sussex). For community rituals, the cast of kola nuts is performed by an elder, who is believed to have more experience in putting requests to the dead. Nevertheless, the religious beliefs that Krios and Sherbros invoke are different, which also points to different practices in the ceremonies for the dead.

Places of burial differ for Sherbros and Krios. Although most Sherbro men are now buried in public cemeteries, until recently sacred groves served as cemeteries for Poro senior members. As a result, members pour libations in the Poro bush. Moreover, upon the death of a member, Poro members perform a secret

ritual over the body, after which it is passed on to the church for public religious funerals. The failure to perform this ritual causes problems: the deceased will not be at peace and instead will appear in dreams and disturb the living. Wake-keeping also involves Poro dances and songs (*sokɔ*). In Krio settlements, the Hunting society can also perform a ceremony over the body of a deceased member before handing the corpse over to the church. In that case, society-related dances are sometimes forbidden by the pastor in charge of the funerals, as I observed in two cases. All people are buried in the same public cemetery. Thus, the pouring of libations does not involve any secret part to the ritual, whereas in Sherbro settlements, the sacred grove is a privileged place for talking to the dead.

The call to the uncle lost at sea involves cultural references to Poro ceremonies. A funeral ceremony observed in Baw-Baw will serve as an example here. The death of the Poro member had not been announced before the following public ceremony. After Poro rituals had been passed over the body of the deceased, the speaker of the society called the women to stand in front of the house of the dead, on the other side of the street, and clap. The door was open, but the threshold had been blocked by a bamboo mat since the first day of the Poro ceremony, which lasts according to the title and rank of the deceased within the initiation society. Poro members, their backs to the door, faced the women, and responded regularly with long cries to the voice of the Poro spirit inside, who spoke the secret language. The spokesperson of the society walked back



Figure 5.1. Headman pouring libations in Sussex/King Town, 2012. © Anaïs Ménard

and forth between men and women, and reminded people in Sherbro about the deceased: that he was sick and that the society had been praying for him during this time. After finishing these reminders, he announced the death to the village. Suddenly, a signal was given by the spirit inside, and the men entered the house with one shout. With the death so disclosed, the women started crying and walked towards the door to see the body. In some other Poro rituals observed during the initiation period, women's clapping marked the liminal space in which Poro members could perform public ceremonies. The women's attendance and participation is necessary for Poro members to perform and for the Poro spirit to talk publicly. Women link the secret and the public parts of the Poro. Their clapping is also a call to the underworld, so that dead spirits can communicate with the living and a spirit of a man lost at sea can return.

The ceremony in Sussex, on the contrary, involves Christian references, gospel songs and prayers. The reference to *meresin* constitutes a meta-discourse that defines Krio identity as opposed to *kontri* beliefs related to initiation societies. Here, *meresin* refers to harmful forces based on occult powers. In Krio settlements, the use of Christian references serves as a justification for practising rituals originally unrelated to Christianity. Some Krio participants felt obliged to justify their presence to me by saying that as Christians, they did not believe that dead people could have any impact on their lives. Yet, they stated that they still felt the need to perpetuate the tradition because 'culture and religion are two different things'. Therefore, references to Christianity are used to conciliate *kontri* practices and religious belonging. Members of born-again churches in particular are discouraged from taking part in these rituals. For Sherbros, the preaching against initiation societies has contributed to the disaffection of New Year's Day celebrations. Krios, by emphasizing Christian faith on the one hand and 'tradition' on the other, can present *kontri* practices as compatible with religion.

The Christian/*kontri* dichotomy is re-enacted in community events that derive directly from local ritual practice, such as the *Kuk fɔ tɔng* and *Kuk fɔ warf*. The *Kuk fɔ warf* is common to fisherfolk along the Peninsula. The ritual keeps the sea spirits satisfied, by which fishermen hope for better catches and fewer accidents at sea. The *Kuk fɔ tɔng* is similar, but places more emphasis on the protection of the community as a whole. These rituals can be performed annually, although this rarely happens. In many Sherbro places, they had not been performed for a long time. In Krio settlements, such as Kent, but also on the Banana Islands, they had been more common in recent years. In 2012, I observed them in Number Two River. The set-up of the rituals differs in Krio and Sherbro settlements, since in the latter, they are organized by Poro members. In performing them, people in Krio and Sherbro settlements maintain a distinction based on religious beliefs. At the same time, it shows that Krios have made rituals of indigenous origin compatible with Christian traditions.

As in the case of the New Year's ceremony, Krios and Sherbro perform this ritual by following similar rules. Fishermen usually put in a request to the headman when fish become scarce, before the rainy season, which is also the most dangerous period for open-sea fishing. On the day of the ceremony, everyone can take part. Food and pots are carried to the wharf or to a sacred location close to it: the cooking takes place there until mid-afternoon. In Sherbro settlements, a small bamboo table is placed at the sacred site where people pour libations, usually at the foot of a silk cotton tree. The table placed under the tree is covered with white cloth and the cooked food is placed under it. In Krio settlements, the food is placed under a small wooden hut, with a piece of white cloth tight on top. Only a few people, mostly elders of the community, are able to perform the ceremony, pour libations and cast the four halves of the kola nuts to seek the blessings of the spirit world. Cooked food is also carried to the main stones or islands in the open sea to please the sea spirits. No one is allowed to eat the food prepared for sacred sites and it is left as such. After the pouring of libations, people eat and any food that is not finished is either left where it is or thrown into the sea.

In this example, it becomes apparent that Krio communities adopted local rituals and beliefs as their own. Their rituals use symbols that establish a link with the spirit world – the silk cotton tree and the sea stones for water spirits. Krios living in Dublin on the Banana Islands also stressed the *kɔntri* practices performed during those rituals. They mentioned that people eat food together out of a common plate. This contradicts the ordinary Krio practice of preparing and offering individual portions, even during other rituals like funerals. By stressing commensality in this case, Krios insisted on the values of togetherness and sharing like proper *kɔntri* people. At the same time, the ceremony is dissociated from initiation societies. People in charge of pouring libations are often members of Hunting, but their role is more closely linked to their prominent social status. On the Banana Islands, the ritual was in the charge of the fishermen's benefit society, which is a form of association introduced by the Liberated Africans (Peterson 1969: 259–64) and by which fishermen provide mutual assistance – for instance, in the event that a fisherman is lost or dies at sea. Members of different benefit societies also invite each other to the *Kuk fɔ warf*.

In Sherbro settlements, Poro members play a key role in organizing the *Kuk fɔ warf*. As people would express it, they 'have the event in their hands' or 'own it' (*na den get am*). On the eve of the ritual, Poro members perform secret ceremonies in various sacred places of the town. Then, in the evening, they organize the *sɔkɔ*, which is public. Senior members send invitations to members in other settlements through Poro channels. On the next day, both men and women cook at the main sacred site. Members of the Poro cook apart. They cover their hair with white cloth. The food that they prepare goes to several sacred sites: the main cotton tree, the sea stones and the island, and a site inside

the Poro sacred grove. In Number Two's *Kuk fɔ tɔng* in 2012, a few elements varied. The cooking did not separate members from non-members, but women and men cooked apart. Each group of three to four people was supervised by an elder, whose head was covered in white. The sacred bush no longer existed, but Poro members maintained a specific site where they poured libations.¹² They had organized the *sɔkɔ* the night before and, on the day of the ritual, they proceeded with the same symbols as during other Poro ceremonies – for instance, the small table covered with white cloth for libations, and white scarves to cover their hair.

People in Sherbro settlements often stressed that 'all of this is *kɔlchɔ*'. In this usage, *kɔlchɔ* becomes the socially acceptable way to refer to local beliefs and practices related to initiation societies. *Kɔlchɔ* is distinct from 'religion'. De Jong (2007: 63, 119) makes a similar observation in Jola society, in which people refer to local initiation rituals as 'tradition' or 'culture' to differentiate their ancestral religion from Islam. The Krio *Kuk fɔ warf* includes prayers, but praying is considered inappropriate in Sherbro settlements. The rituals are a time to gather people around cultural practices branded as 'authentic' and not to display religious affiliations that may sometimes be in conflict with participation in cultural events. For this reason, elders privilege the Sherbro language in performing rituals, such as when pouring libations for the dead (on New Year's Day) or during the opening ceremony of the Poro initiation. Although many people may not fully master Sherbro, a few words in Sherbro are important to express the cultural content of a *kɔntri* identity.

Conclusion

The tactics of concealment and disclosure, which pertain to how individuals perform their Sherbro identity in specific social circumstances, reveal collective patterns of social positioning. Ethnic hybridity is established through social performance, and the decision to emphasize one category or the other depends on the objective(s) of the performer, and how the performance serves in delimiting the social and cultural frontiers of the group vis-à-vis others. The performance of Krio-ness, for instance, can be used as a process of exclusion and humiliation of populations who migrated recently from the interior of the country and do not fully master the Krio language and Krio cultural codes. In this sense, the Krio/*kɔntri* dichotomy, originated from colonial history and grounded in geographical separation, reproduces power relations in the present context.

It has become apparent that performers, in using concealment and disclosure, expect the 'hybrid' self to be disruptive and interrupt the assumptions upon which some social interactions are based. However, these strategies also reveal that Krio/*kɔntri* performances are everyday normal practices. Being Krio is considered an essential part of Sherbro identity, as Sherbros have built a social

capital that allows them to be (and appear) Krio. Moreover, Sherbro identity assumes a mediating position between other (politicized) ethnic identities.

The case concerning ritual performances also forces us to reconsider, explicitly, the claim that Krios have formed, since colonial times, a culturally homogeneous group (Cole 2006; Peterson 1968). In this chapter, as in the preceding ones, I have provided ethnographic evidence of the longlasting interactions between Sherbros and Krios, and I have shown how Krios integrated indigenous influences into their own society. Despite the fact that Krios themselves have sometimes emphasized non-Sierra Leonean roots, such as the Yoruba culture, and have downplayed their relations with local ethnic groups (Dixon-Fyle and Cole 2006: 7), a focus on their relations with the Sherbro communities of the Peninsula shows that they have had varied and ongoing relations of social and cultural exchange. In order to develop this point, in Chapter 6, I examine the dynamics of Sherbro/Krio social relatedness linked to common membership in local initiation societies.

Notes

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1. I use the expression ‘*krionayzd* Sherbro’ according to the local understanding of the terms: Sherbros living in Freetown, whose *kontri* identity remains hidden. They appear as Krio to others and do not mind being mistaken for Krio. This includes people born in the Provinces or in Freetown, but also people born on the Peninsula. I met some who had lived for a few decades in Freetown before returning to the Peninsula for retirement. The data presented here also include their experiences during their years of professional activity.
2. Among *krionayzd* Sherbros, the historical imagination was important in drawing the contours of Sherbro identity. This became even more obvious during my work with members of the Bonthe Family – a Freetown-based organization founded by people of Sherbro origin, most of whom have loose links with Bonthe Island. As they took up the task of organizing the celebrations of the fiftieth anniversary of independence in Bonthe Town in 2011, I travelled with members of the organization – about thirty in total, all quite high-profile people who could afford to travel. The three-day programme involved a lot of sightseeing and people expressed their nostalgia for the past glory of Bonthe. Those who had been raised in Bonthe especially talked about ‘prosperous times’ when the town had been economically well off and developed. They referred to colonial times as well as to the post-independence period until the 1970s, when Bonthe had electricity and an airport, and was called Christmas Island, as many people in Freetown liked to spend the Christmas holidays in Bonthe Town. For instance, a female member of the Bonthe Family told me: ‘Life started here. Civilization started here. Everything started here. We were the first ones to be developed, much before Freetown. Here should be Freetown today.’ This

statement emphasized the nostalgia of prosperous times, but also the past status of Bonthe as a ‘civilized’ place.

3. On the relationship between fishing and the Poro society, see Chapter 3.
4. See Chapter 7 for a discussion of Mende/Sherbro cultural commonalities.
5. The print dress or *kabba slot* is part of Krio traditional attire. It is a dress made of cotton printed fabric and adorned with distinctive embroidery.
6. In the 2004 census (Western Area Rural District), Krio and Temne ranked similarly as first languages, with 36% and 37% of the population, respectively (45% of the population identified as Temne, compared to 5% as Krio). Krio dominated as the second language, with 54% of respondents mentioning Krio compared to 8% for Temne. These figures do not convey locational differences: in the south of the Peninsula, and Tombo in particular, the Temne language was already dominant in the 1980s (Hendrix 1985).
7. In his history of the Temne in Freetown, Bangura (2017) shows that Western education and the European ‘way of life’ were not the only avenues for gaining prestige in the colony. Temne identity, via the development of cultural associations, became attractive to members of other ethnic groups, who learned Temne and adopted ‘Temne values’. Temne elites also championed the development of Islamic education in Freetown ‘as an alternative path to social status in an urban environment dominated by Western culture and mores’ (2017: 133).
8. In the Liberian context, Moran (1990: 68–69) explains that ‘the association between clothing style and status is so strong that “lappa woman” is used interchangeably with “native” or “country woman”.’ Civilized women, who are forced to work on the market and start to ‘tie lappa’ lose their social status and are considered to be no longer civilized.
9. It is important to note that these strategies may vary in other settlements. I would like to report here a conversation with the historian Joseph Opala, who resided in Hamilton in the 1990s. When he settled in Hamilton, a couple of elders came to greet him, among whom was Mammie Johnson, who usually wore the *kabba slot* and prepared ‘Saturday fufu’ (a Krio dish) for him. One night, he heard the society drums beating and learned that Mammie Johnson, who had just died, was a ‘big woman’ of the Bondo. He was extremely surprised. He qualified these tactics of concealment and disclosure for me as ‘Krio by day, Sherbro by night’. This may have been particularly relevant in Hamilton, which is a ‘Krio’ place. By contrast, in Sussex, where there are two separated Krio and Sherbro settlements between which families are related, people told him that a person’s choice of livelihood made somebody ‘Krio’ or ‘Sherbro’. If somebody decided to become a fisherman, he would be considered Sherbro. Finally, in Lakka, he was told that populations were ‘fully Sherbro’ – they did not engage in any activity other than fishing. This speaks to the importance of both historical and social conditions in influencing strategies of identity making, which may differ from settlement to settlement, even in a very localized geography, and to the construction of identity through performance, or identity by *doing*.
10. See Cohen 1981; Fyle and Heroe 1977; Porter 1963; Spitzer 1974; and Wyse 1989.
11. *Meresin* refers to various substances (herbal medicines or ‘leaves’ in particular) used by the members of initiation societies for their esoteric powers.
12. The sacred bush was sold in the 1970s to a local Lebanese entrepreneur. While the details of this transaction were not disclosed to me, it was the first instance of a sacred place being sold for economic purposes on the Peninsula (see the discussion in Chapter 7).