

## 2 The Impact of Violence on Relationships

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Violence plays a central role in the production and reproduction of social relations. An analysis of intimacy and violence therefore requires examining the influence of violence on relationships over time. Relationship dynamics are influenced by complex pasts as well as by the particularities of contemporary life. This chapter first considers how, even though relationship dynamics and routes to adulthood have always been multifaceted and messy, historical models of marriage paint pictures of a simpler, more linear past. In urban areas, Sierra Leoneans perceive these historical models of marriage, in which achieving social adulthood and financial stability were prerequisites, to have been disrupted by the civil war (1991–2002). Violent experiences during that period reconfigured prevailing gender positions involving a strong husband and a protected wife, and deconstructed marriage as the main relationship form. The chapter reflects on the impact of such violence on men and women, and then moves on to analyse how young people deal with these changed relationship dynamics in Freetown today.

In contemporary Freetown, where conventional pathways towards social adulthood are blocked by the structural violence of socioeconomic marginalisation, those confined to the youth stage of their lives employ an elaborate system of doing favours and collecting debts to navigate everyday life and build possibilities for adulthood. This also affects intergenerational dynamics. Especially among other generations, the complexities of the present lead to a longing for an idealised, simpler past that has never truly existed.

Today's changing social landscapes reveal two contradictory trends. On the one hand, urban dynamics foster diverse relationship practices, which are carefully labelled with various pidgin terms. In Sierra Leone's urban centres, (transactional) relationship forms that had to be kept hidden in rural communities can now be lived openly. Urban life encourages the formation of social alliances through the exchange of gifts, goods, or services that contribute to a reciprocal economy of desire. In the gap that has opened between previous models and what may be,

people can experiment with desire more openly, as women are no longer solely accessible to married individuals.

On the other hand, although the protective association of the family suffered during the war, households and communities continue to be the main informal institutions that mediate unbearable violence or problems between partners. However, their protection, recognition, and support are extended only to committed relationships. Youth who are unable to build formal alliances between households through marriage create relationship forms that traverse easily between such expectations, their personal desires, and the constraints weighing on them. Examining their tactics allows me to ask what relationship expectations and practices are ‘doing’ in the lives of young people and in their relationships. In this chapter, I tease out how relationships are lived and negotiated between the residues of the past and the constraints of the present with regard to underlying aspirations and various expectations.

In doing so, I also portray the underbelly of such creative navigation skills by showing that the bridging systems do not offer the same security as marriage. I also show how, in situations characterised by economic scarcity, attempts to satisfy these differing demands of starting a household and sustaining a committed relationship while fulfilling personal aspirations often create dynamics that foster violence. Understanding violence in relationships therefore requires an understanding of the complex factors weighing on relationships.

### **The Social Achievement of Marriage and the Desire for Others**

In Sierra Leone, ideals of viable partners historically revolve around gender parallelism, in which there are differing but complementary roles for men and women (e.g. Ferme 2001). Within this frame, spouses are those who hold together a social fabric that incorporates previously separated households. Getting married is therefore a social responsibility that requires having achieved social adulthood. This is echoed in older ethnographies, where marriage practices were at the core of analysing Sierra Leone’s social, political, and economic fabrics. In works such as Eberl-Elber’s *Westafrika’s letztes Rätsel* (Eberl-Elber 1936) or Bledsoe’s *Women and Marriage in Kpelle Society* (Bledsoe 1980a), youth appear as an analytical category to explain larger organising principles and (power) dynamics relating to kinship, social organisation, and generation. At that stage, youthhood was mainly analysed as a transitional phase of coming of age, which was passed during initiation periods that lasted between several weeks and a few months (Little 1965; 1966; Jedrej 1976; Bosire

2012). Indeed, before the civil war, when over 90 per cent of Sierra Leoneans were still members of a sodality, the ‘youth’ period of life was short. Before initiation, a person belonged to the household of their parents. After initiation, a person completed the transition from child to adult by marrying and starting a household, thereby becoming a big man or big woman. According to William Murphy, it was the ‘secret’ connected to sodality membership that used to ‘separate elders from youth’ and supported ‘the elders’ political and economic control of the youth’ (Murphy 1980: 193).

Marriage is therefore at the heart of adulthood. Marriage, in turn, is enabled by the exchange of capital, which serves as the physical manifestation of the symbolic, social, political, and economic ties binding individuals and households together. In Sierra Leone, the groom visits the bride’s family to officially voice his intention of marrying and to distribute money or goods to her family. The closer the kin relation, the more money is given. However, important members of the community, such as neighbours, pastors, or – in village settings – the chief, are also included in the distribution of money.

Completing bride price payments symbolises that the bride’s affection has been earned and that she is now a full part of the groom’s household.<sup>1</sup> This is reflected in marriage terminology, which revolves around sexual possession and gendered positionality. Mabinti (64) from Allentown told me: ‘When a Mende man asks for a woman’s hand in marriage, he says *nya longa nyahin gi sorvah*, which means “I want this woman for sex”, or “I want this woman for possession” ... The parent of a man says *inyahin majuah*, “he possesses a woman”. For a woman, the parents say *ihindui majua*, “she possesses a man”’. Mabinti also explained the Limba and Temne marriage terms to me: ‘In Limba, a man says *yama demmyeh nil yando kai ka demnya*, “I am the one sitting or placing her/a woman down”. A woman says *dehna demmyeh ya ma*, which means “he is the one marrying me”. However, the interpretation is rather that it is him [sic] who sat me down, or *donah demnyo yan*, meaning “it is here, I am seated or placed down”’. When a Temne man asks for a woman’s hand in marriage, he says *iyaima nintei*, ‘I want to see something’, and a woman agrees by saying *ipobaal*, ‘I am obeying’.

<sup>1</sup> In 2009, with the Registration of Customary Marriages and Divorce Act, the Sierra Leonean state urged all spouses to register their marriages to legally share equal access to land and property and to be protected in case of divorce and to be recognised in inheritance cases. Marriages can occur in a church or mosque (religious marriages), in the community (traditional marriages), or at the city council (registered marriages).

These exchanges establish a union not just between two persons, but between two families. Teeth and tongue are firmly placed in the mouth. They are part of the larger structure of cells, tissues, systems, and organs that make up the human body. Marriage is thus about social relations and symbolises a person's relationship with society. It enables the building, rebuilding, and maintenance of households, lineages, and social unions (Eberl-Elber 1936; Bledsoe 1980a; see also Radcliffe-Brown 1950). Because marriage is part and parcel of kinship and alliance structures, kin groups continue to exert considerable power after the wedding (Wardlow 2006).<sup>2</sup> The union provides a safety net for kin groups, who will be supported by the newly formed household in old age. In turn, kin groups form a protective association supporting spouses when they experience problems within their marriage (Chapter 6).

Yet, unsurprisingly, my research collaborators made it clear that marriage was never the only conjugal form. As everywhere in the world, people may be attracted to or fall in love with someone who is not their spouse. However, before the civil war such relationships were severely constrained in Sierra Leone. Owing to the financial security needed on the groom's side, young men found it difficult to raise the bride price required to marry. Instead, older men married young girls who had just completed their sodality initiation and included them in polygynous households (Richards 2005). Nevertheless, some girls and young women were drawn to boys or men of their own age (Leach 1994; Ferme 2001). Marina Temudo (2019) argues that because in Guinea-Bissau such love affairs are common but not tolerated in village settings, designated spaces for agreed love outings were created that provided time away during which women could have extramarital affairs before returning to their spouses. In Sierra Leonean village settings, such arrangements were never openly accepted and extramarital relationships needed to be carefully concealed (Schneider 2020b).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the fines and hardship attached to being found out – the 'women trouble' – was chiefly responsible for men 'running away' to the city (Richards 1998). However, when the civil war commenced, marriage patterns and secret love affairs were irrevocably transformed. The conflict also interrupted initiations and therefore the 'smooth' transition from childhood to adulthood. Moreover, it brought changes to the governance of elders over youth,

<sup>2</sup> Families also influence the choice of marriage partner.

<sup>3</sup> Bledsoe (1980a), who compared women's lives in rural and urban areas, found that women in urban areas tended to live more autonomously from their families, married later, and had more access to wealth and property. Now, almost 40 years later, relationship practices in Freetown are constantly renegotiated.

with the result that marriages outside warring factions came to a near halt. The extensive violence that led up to and accompanied the civil war and its aftermath continue to affect relationship practices today.

### **Residues of a Violent Past Continue to Linger**

This destabilisation and encroachment of violence on everyday lives did not begin with the civil war, nor did it end thereafter. The civil war can be located within a much larger history of violence, rupture, and transformation. Colonialism and slavery had ensured the perpetuation of violence for centuries beforehand. Yet, research collaborators never mentioned colonialism and slavery when they spoke about interpersonal relationships. They referred to history in terms of ‘before the war’ and ‘after the war’. The silences around centuries of colonial violence, during which women and girls – and men and boys – were uprooted, trafficked, subjected to extreme forms of violence, killed, or left to die, point to collective, ongoing trauma, which is transmitted from generation to generation (see Rothberg 2008: 226, 230; Craps 2010: 53). These traumas persist but defy language partly because of the severity of injuries caused, partly because little acknowledgement followed (e.g. Schneider 2023a; for analyses of such traumas, see, e.g. Nkrumah 1974; Erikson 1994; Lascelles 2020). This raises the question of how one accounts for the pain and violence of prolonged exploitation that is not mentioned. After the civil war, there were apologies, reparations, and regrets. After slavery and colonialism, however, there was hardly an acknowledgement of wrongdoing, let alone a real apology. The violence of empire and racism continue to linger, now taking shape in seemingly benevolent development and rights discourses in which ‘white people know best’ and ‘have come to help’. There is therefore no before and after. Time and global paradigms of colonial exploitation do not pass; they accumulate (Baucom 2001). Silences may thus not be absences but presences of what Viviane Saleh-Hanna brings to the fore in her conceptualisation of a black feminist hauntology (Saleh-Hanna 2015). They simultaneously indicate a coping mechanism and a resistance to being defined by – and perceiving the world through – colonial logics, such as the reductive binary of ‘coloniser’ and ‘colonised’.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Saleh-Hanna married Toni Morrison’s (1987) concept of ‘rememory’ with Jacques Derrida’s (1993) ‘hauntology’ to show how structural racism permeates and constructs race and class, gender and sexuality, place and space, and life and death as binary conceptions that enable conquest and suppression.

The civil war was a response to pre-existing social, political, and economic conditions of inequality that continued into the neo-colonial post-independence era (Abdullah 1998). At this time, gerontocratic exploitation increased. In response, youth from the 'former slave classes' opposed the prevailing 'labour exploitation and lack of freedom of opportunity' (Richards 2005: 586). They fought against the common notion of 'having wealth in people' (Bledsoe 1980a) and thus the control of young men's labour and of women by a few elite men or elders through the institutions of slavery and polygynous marriage. They also resented the constraints resulting from 'women trouble', when monetary fines and free labour were imposed on them for having relationships with women and girls who were married to these elite men or elders (Ferme 2001; Diggins 2015). Their main aim, according to Paul Richards, was to escape dependency and patriarchy, and construct a different future for themselves.

During the war, brutal atrocities were committed by fighting factions consisting in large part of 'girls, boys, young men and women' (Human Rights Watch 1998; Ellis 1999; TRC 2004a: 2 n.41; Coulter 2009: 54). It is estimated that, taken together, all fighting factions systematically subjected up to 250,000 women and girls of all demographics to sexual violence. Violence was often accompanied by abuses against family and community: 'Relationship practices and values were deliberately undermined in that child combatants raped women who were old enough to be their grandmothers, rebels raped pregnant and breastfeeding mothers, and fathers were forced to watch their daughters being raped' (Human Rights Watch 2003: 4). It is estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 women were part of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF)<sup>5</sup> (Friedman Rudovsky 2013). Some women and girls joined of their own accord, but many were abducted. They were fighters, 'bush wives' through forced marriage, domestic workers, or slaves (Human Rights Watch 1998; 2003; Human Rights and Dufka 1999; Coulter 2009: 51; Cohen 2013; Marks 2014). Many women and girls remained with the RUF for long periods and in that time gave birth to children (Coulter 2009: 51).<sup>6</sup>

The literature on the civil war has done important work in focussing on women and girls not only as victims of, but also as participants in violence. However, it engages mainly with the activities of fighting factions (e.g. Coulter 2009; Cohen 2013; Marks 2014). Significantly less

<sup>5</sup> The RUF fought and eventually lost the 11-year civil war in Sierra Leone.

<sup>6</sup> Even though about 30 per cent of under-age fighters were female, 'only 506 girls, compared with 6,952 boys, went through the DDR' (Friedman Rudovsky 2013; see Shaw, Waldorf, and Hazan 2010).

attention has been given to experiences of violence among the civilian population, those who ‘remained at home’. Yet these experiences featured most heavily in the stories of my research collaborators, who described how the civil war changed relationships and violence within them. *Love and Violence* thus carries scholarship on violence during conflict beyond fighting factions and into households. It shows the ways in which the violence of the civil war impacted on domestic relationship dynamics, gender roles, and ideals of partnership. At the same time, it draws connections between larger histories of structural violence and the recent history of conflict. It is therefore imperative to read this analysis of shame, emasculation, and disintegration in light of the country’s and the region’s wider history.

Mr Chernor Barrie (86), who lives at King George’s old age home, explained:

Before the war, sex outside of marriage and even teenage pregnancy was not so common. But violence in marriage and between spouses and children was normal and expected. We had no law in place that punished men for violence against their wives ... We have this long tradition, this norm of beating the woman with a belt or with objects and having the woman go sit down and be silent and the man to force her to sex. The Temne even say that if your husband does not beat you, he does not love you.

During the war the violence escalated, and men felt like they can just have any woman. Not only the rebels and the army men participated in the violence. For example, when there was a coup, many times the families scattered. Then girls, instead of being raped by everyone, were looking for one guy who could give them food and shelter and that guy could do to them whatever he wanted. He could beat them and *bambrus* [here, rape] them many times every night.

One experience foregrounded in many interviews was the helplessness that men and boys experienced when witnessing how their wives, daughters, and sisters were abducted, raped, and killed. Mr Mohamed (35), my research assistant in Allentown, explained:

During the war, it was very common for the women to be abducted. The girl I told you about, my main girlfriend, the one who punched me with an electric cord when she found out that I was cheating; the beautiful one. When the rebels came to Freetown, they abducted her and took her to the bush. And then she was with one of the rebels, and she became pregnant. Then one day, he was beating her and kicking her in the stomach, and that is when she started bleeding and died. That is how I lost her.

I was told repeatedly that losing partners and daughters to rebels was emasculating for men. They felt unable to protect their families and loved ones. Referring to Mr Mohamed, Rafieu (37), his brother-in-law, explained:



You know what is common here? Like Mr Mohamed now, he has loved this one woman so much, like so, so much. You know how he always talks about this. But then the rebels came and took her, they just took her, and he could do nothing. He has never loved since. But it happened to many. They just came and took our women, or we had to allow our women trading their bodies for foodstuffs to neighbours and police and ... everybody. It is shameful, like what kind of men were we, you know? It has really, really impacted [us].

Rafieu's description of the experience of shame during the conflict and its effect on men's lives was echoed in many conversations. Bonnie Mann shows how 'shame taps into the memory of a deep, bodily incapacity to *live* without engaging the regard and the embodied agency of someone else' (Mann 2014: 122, original emphasis). Shame is therefore 'an impotence-making experience' (Kaufman 1980: 9 cited in Mann 2014: 122) that negates independence and creates a state of feeling 'very weak and very powerless toward things of the greatest importance' (Nussbaum 2004: 177 cited in Mann 2014: 122). Papa Jones (87), from King George's old age home, illustrated this emotion by describing how 'during the war it became common that you can just have any woman, just like that, not only your wife. By now, it is habit and it will hardly ever change. But also, your wives and daughters were not under your hand anymore. Others can just come and take them. You are completely powerless'.

Papa Jones clarifies the effect of the civil war in negating previous boundaries because it became common to just 'take women'. Access to women was no longer dependent on the approval of kin and community or on a woman's affection and her willingness to transgress limits. Indeed, the protective shield of the household was rendered entirely ineffective. It became nearly impossible for men to guard their mothers, wives, and daughters from the grasp of others. Women and girls who stayed at home were consequently subjected to extreme forms of violence.

Rachel Kalish and Michael Kimmel developed the notion of 'aggrieved entitlement' (Kalish and Kimmel 2010: 452) to analyse men's use of violence 'to avenge a perceived challenge to their masculine identity'. 'For many men', Kalish and Kimmel stated, 'humiliation is emasculation', which 'must be avenged, or you cease to be a man. ... Aggrieved entitlement is a gendered emotion, a fusion of that humiliating loss of manhood and the moral obligation to get it back' (Kalish and Kimmel 2010: 454; see also Mann 2014: 121). In Sierra Leone, marital rules and responsibilities that designated belonging and positionality became meaningless. Wives could no longer be 'placed down' safely in a man's home, and men could not live up to the demands of heading a household. The humiliation and shame that men felt when they could not prevent their loved ones from being subjected to violence undermined



the ideal of strong and protective masculinity. Because aggrieved men were unable to avenge such violence, some became increasingly violent towards those loved ones they could not protect. Consequently, as Fatima (79), who lives at King George's, stated:

Women were not safe anymore from nobody. During the war, violence came from all sides. Our men were traumatised or afraid, so they would become very angry. Then they beat, and they forced us without mercy. Even those who were never violent before. To be protected, we had to trade sex for foodstuffs, or for not being exposed. Then, our men became even angrier. They knew they cannot protect us, and we must sex others, but they hated us then, and then we would be beaten by both: the neighbour and the husband.

What Fatima's portrayal also shows is that women officially and visibly became the main breadwinners, while men's failure to provide and protect was exposed. To return to the metaphor of teeth and tongue, these experiences of paralysis in the face of violent encroachments on male authority and against those whom men are supposed to protect, the subsequent impossibility of embodying and enacting expected roles, and the resulting shame are like teeth that have been knocked out of the mouth (war) or have fallen out after decades of malnourishment (structural violence, colonialism) and that now lie outside the mouth in a place where they can no longer perform their role. They can still be recognised as teeth, are preserved as teeth, but they cannot be put back into the mouth. While the tongue may be burnt, swell, or be hurt, it will always remain in the mouth. By contrast, teeth do not retain their role forever, unless they successfully perform it. They will eventually be replaced by other teeth, and, even if they are not, it will become more difficult though not impossible to eat. This symbolic knocking out of healthy teeth, the falling out of teeth that have become loose or rotten, or the pulling of teeth that have become infected, and that have thereby hurt the entire mouth, all lead to reactions and counter-manifestations. Men (the teeth) seek to demonstrate how securely placed they are, how steadfast and how essential they are for the mouth. One such means of doing this is violence.

In many interviews, violence seemed to be the result of an inability to adhere to gender ideals and expectations. Darren (29), who was a child during the war and who hid with his extended family in the Naimbana Street mosque, pointed out:

Outsiders don't ever understand the real issues, the real consequences of the war. Everyone was inside. People were tense. There was much fighting and disagreement among adults ... Space was limited, so we saw what they do to themselves in marriage. Family members everyone, but we could never ask because the bigger problem was outside.

Without a doubt, these experiences led to a reconfiguration of relationships. Despite the declaration of peace in 2002, the trauma of war has 'left scars which run through the fabric of households, families and communities' (Mills et al. 2018). Consider the explanation of Amadu (40), a mechanic at Star Motors garage: 'Because men became useless during the war, after the war they had to prove themselves. They were very harsh and violent to establish control in the house again. Also, they probably violated others during the war. That stayed with them. For women as well. Then, children are raised the same way again. It becomes a system'. The problems Darren described, which were buried below 'the problem outside', were not a focus of post-conflict recovery. This has led to the prevalent notion, here illustrated by Eleanor (43), a mother from Allentown and Mr Mohamed's wife, that

everybody suffered but sometimes I think that those who actually fought and those who were abducted had it better you know, because later on they got money and support through the DDR [Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration programme].<sup>7</sup> For us here, we got nothing. We were raped by friends, uncles, neighbours. We had to do unspeakable things to put food on the table. We were always in one room, so, so many of us. Trust really suffered because everyone exploited everyone because we had to, and you learnt that deep down people are black. That attitude stayed with us.

Scholars analysing the reintegration process have pointed out its shortcomings in attending to fighters and victims alike (Shaw 2007; 2014; Shaw, Waldorf, and Hazan 2010; Ainley, Friedman, and Mahony 2015). Similarly, Sierra Leonean officials such as Charles Vandi, the director of the Gender Desk at the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs (MSWGCA), disclosed that

many of the fighters from all groups did not go through the DDR process. Especially problematic are not the actual fighters but civilians who engaged in violent practices but slipped through the net as they were never targeted by the DDR in the first place. Still, violent practices had been the norm and are now normalised both by men and women. People who lived through the war are now starting new families, and these children grow up with the same practices in the household and learn to see them as normal and common. This leads to a vicious spiral of violence.

<sup>7</sup> The DDR was implemented by the Government of Sierra Leone and supported by the World Bank and other international institutions and NGOs. It marked the official end of the civil war in Sierra Leone. The DDR is considered a success story: 'A total of 72,490 combatants were disarmed and 71,043 demobilised, and 63,545 former combatants participated in the reintegration segment, including 6,845 child soldiers' (Solomon and Ginifer 2008). However, its impact on households and individuals is less clear and is seen more critically (Solomon and Ginifer 2008).

As we can see, peace-time violence is related to war-time violence; current violence to past violence; and future aspirations to imaginaries of the past. The ‘system of violence’ that research collaborators described has tainted the ‘moral economy of relationships’ (Burrill, Roberts, and Thornberry 2010), and, as a result, many forms of violence are now perceived as normal aspects of any relationship (see Chapter 4). Relationship dynamics have thus been deeply influenced by Sierra Leone’s (recent) violent history. As the ethnographic material has revealed, after the war the security previously attached to marriages could not be restored in the capital city, the authority of the family was diminished, gender relations were transformed, and relationship practices changed considerably. Those coming of age today are deeply affected by these ruptures. They are unable to return to previous ways of reaching adulthood. At the same time, the expectations that elders have of them remain largely unchanged, and gender ideals of a male provider and female dependant are still strong. This leads youth to break away from traditional relationship ideals and try instead to live and love in new ways.

### **Youthful Loving in Freetown Today**

In the hastily transforming hub of post-pandemic Freetown, there is a disconnect between relationship practices, on the one hand, and ideals of marriage and gender parallelism, on the other. In the post-war landscape, people’s lives are determined not only by family ties and kin hierarchies. People do not switch neatly from their family home to their own home (see Eberl-Elber 1936; Ferme 2001). Rather, as has been observed across sub-Saharan Africa, families are often scattered across the country and people grow up with distant relatives, often also with friends (e.g. Newell 2012; Stasik 2016). The hold of elders over youth continues to loosen. But past ideals still linger, and partners continue to demand economic and social protection. This leads to complex discussions about what love and relationships mean in Sierra Leone today and how relationships should be lived and negotiated between these competing and contradictory forces.

Because predetermined pathways from sodality initiation to marriage have become unwalkable, the ‘youth’ stage of life is no longer brief but extensive. This trend is not only observable in Sierra Leone. After the civil war, the concept of a ‘crisis of youth’ gained currency in Sierra Leone as well as beyond its borders. While it was ‘initially used to explain the involvement of young people in armed conflict’, scholars came to see that ‘the inability of young people to attain social adulthood because of continuing gerontocratic and patrimonial control of resources’ was being ‘experienced much more widely among youths’ and for a much longer

period (Peters 2011: 129; see also Moyi 2013; Diggins 2014; Enria 2015). Concurrently, the category of youth began to subsume vastly different groups for widely different purposes (Schlegel and Barry 1991; Durham 2000: 116; Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006; see Mead 1929).<sup>8</sup> In Sierra Leone, for example, the National Youth Policy ‘defines “youth” as anyone from 15 to 35’; a youth is ‘someone who is no longer a child, but not yet a “big man” or “big woman”’ (Shepler 2004: 10). Many of the men I spoke to stretched this category until well into the forties while the women I spoke to had often referred to themselves as ‘big women’ as soon as they had had their first child or had undergone *ansa bele*, which is when a man accepts responsibility for a woman’s pregnancy.

Economic constraints must, of course, be taken into proper consideration as a dominant pressure upon all such concerns. Oki of EAUC explained:

If I don’t have [money], I must stay off you. When I see them [girlfriends], they say they want to eat and then I am ashamed. So, I just lay down with her and otherwise I keep to myself. Sierra Leone bothers today. The women ask for much because they themselves have nothing. We have nothing, and they have nothing. It is really not easy. Only when I have something small, when I have like SLL 5,000 [GBP 0.45] or SLL 10,000 [GBP 0.89], then I call a bike (motorcycle taxi) to take me to her, but when I don’t have anything, I keep to myself.

Oki experiences shame because he is unable to provide for the basic needs of girlfriends and lovers. This ties in with the work of Bonnie Mann, who showed how experiencing shame ‘makes gender very heavy’ (Mann 2014: 2). The condition of urban poverty makes it impossible for many individuals to pay bride price and to re-establish previous roles of male supporter or female dependant. Oki’s inability to embody the masculine ideal of the provider leads him to ‘keep to himself’. These constraints have been noticed by various scholars (see Masquelier 2005; Grant 2006). For Sierra Leone, Michael Jackson (2011) described how, in a world of limited means but unlimited desires, the possibility to live and love can be thwarted for men by the impossibility to provide and protect. In his work on the ambivalence between popular ‘love music’ and economic constraints in Freetown, Michael Stasik analysed how the latter become traps confining people to youthhood (Stasik 2016: 223).

<sup>8</sup> In fact, Foucault already suggested in 1979 that ‘youth as they become defined as a concrete category of social analysis become increasingly a socially problematic category, and studies of youth are too often studies of deviance or of problems needing programmatic intervention’ (Foucault 1979 cited in Durham 2000: 116).

However, some research collaborators have embraced changing social and gendered ways. Amadu (24) of EAUC explained this in the following way:

A wife needs to be maintained financially. Well, even a girlfriend needs to be maintained. That is why you can only get married once you have become a big man, secured a job, and so on. For us, it is far too early. Maybe end of thirties or later. For now, girlfriends are hard to keep; they demand a lot. This is why we often have fast-fast relationships. But the things are shifting somehow, and girlfriends also often find ways to gain something maybe through other lovers or through some work.

In Freetown today, women are better able to achieve social adulthood than men. In a country where the labour market is gendered, they can find employment in the informal sector more easily than men and are often able to gain some resources from partners and lovers (Leach 1994). Women are therefore usually the main breadwinners in their homes, irrespective of the nature of their marriage or relationship (Pessima et al. 2009).

Not only are both partners actively engaged in making a living, thereby turning traditional dependency models on their head, but economic constraints also foster a multitude of informal and alternative relationship arrangements. Multiple, transitory, transactional, and rapidly developing relationships are employed in people's efforts to make a living in constrained environments (see Stasik 2016 for Sierra Leone or Lewinson 2006 for Tanzania). Young people in particular live various relationship forms. Stasik observed that '(love) lives and relationships ... are often characterized by chronic states of emotional uncertainty and dissatisfaction. Severe economic struggles and disparities lead to an increasing monetization of young people's relationships, driving them either into a fragile flux of multiple partners or out of intimate engagements altogether' (Stasik 2016: 215).

My fieldwork revealed, however, that research collaborators were not *driven*; they were the *drivers*. Their lives were not characterised by 'a fragile flux', nor did they give up on relationships. On the contrary, they tried to negotiate a situation where they could simultaneously live their desired relationships and adhere to the expectations of elders. To manoeuvre between experimentation and expectations, young people inventively used the staged exceptionalism in which the category of youth placed them. To understand these tactics, it is therefore important to trace what happened to the notion of youth in Sierra Leone.

### **Tactically Employing the Social Construct 'Youth'**

Today, youth are described as 'the coming generation', who aspire, manoeuvre, or strategise (Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006; Vigh

2006b). As such, they are the main target of development aid, socioeconomic restructuring strategies, and the state's attempts to build the foundations for a prosperous future. Youth are those people who are responsible for addressing and solving the problems and struggles that older people face in contemporary Sierra Leone. Simultaneously, they are said to constitute the biggest threat to these aspirations (Chapters 8 and 9). Youth are stuck in a stage of 'waithood' (Singerman 2007: 6; Masquelier 2013: 475; Honwana 2014), and in many ways they are the people whom one should be worried about (Restless Development Sierra Leone 2012).<sup>9</sup> Current media reporting in Sierra Leone, for example, uses the term 'youth' predominantly for those citizens with 'issues' (Campbell 2017). Students are simply described as students until forms of protest or deviant behaviour turn them into youth. 'Youth' therefore goes together with distinctive tags that cover a broad range of often contradictory characteristics.<sup>10</sup> Youth in Sierra Leone are said to be the embodiment of the 'angry, disenfranchised' (Thomas 2016), or the 'lost generation' (O'Brian 1996). Reference is often made to (remobilised) ex-combatants, unemployed youth, and members of gangs (for critical discussions, see Christensen and Utas 2008; 2010; Shepler 2010; Utas and Christensen 2016). We have read about 'militant', 'evil', and 'massacring',<sup>11</sup> 'mobs' (Lupick 2012) of youth. With reference especially to urban areas, youth are described as 'runaways' who aim to 'escape' the patriarchal structures of elders (Diggins 2014). In Freetown, they are given tags such as 'idle' (World Bank 2013: 8), 'inactive', or 'floating'. In their aim to make a living, they are said to be 'chaotic' and 'dysfunctional' (Pratt 2012). Consequently, youth are simultaneously 'dangerous' and 'endangered' (Scheper-Hughes 2004: 16, 45), destructive and destroyed, 'prone to violent behaviour' (World Bank 2013: iv), 'fragile', and 'vulnerable' (Scheper-Hughes 2004: 16, 45). They are, as Deborah Durham said, a "social shifter" fuelling generational debates and constructions, engaging the social imagination, and challenging our thinking about agency' (Durham 2000: 113). These notions of youth as 'the problem' have also been picked up by policy-makers (see Chapter 8).

<sup>9</sup> For a critical analysis of the problems of the connections that the 'crisis of youth' literature draws with war and conflict in Sierra Leone, see Peters (2011).

<sup>10</sup> This language even extends to incidents where severe police violence is used against young people, such as when, in Kabala, police forces shot and injured several young men who were protesting the government's decision to relocate a youth village that had been promised to them since 2014, thereby killing two (Thomas 2016). In Thomas's article, the language shifts between youth (those who protest), boys (those who are shot), and students (those who are injured).

<sup>11</sup> See Peters and Richards (1998) for a critical discussion.

Young people in Freetown react creatively to these extreme expectations and contradictory classifications. Far from succumbing to these tags, many of those research collaborators who classify themselves as youth use this staged exceptionalism to their own benefit. Based on the realisation that ‘as youth we can do nothing right anyways’, as Barrie (32), a self-proclaimed hustler, said, they connect certain characteristics to the category. They see it as a fluid stage before settling down that involves the temporary rejection of formal employment and marriage and the absence of dependants. Their status as youth allows them to find informal means of gaining income, which would no longer be socially acceptable once they are big men or big women. The anonymity of such labour allows them to keep their income to themselves or share it with friends and girlfriends rather than family. Hence, youthhood becomes a way to manoeuvre around kinship reciprocity.

Only two members of EAUC are formally employed, and many of them reject such employment at the youth stage of their lives. Suge describes this sentiment:

You see, we in Africa we have this extended family. As soon as you started working, all relatives will send children to you so that you pay for their upkeep and schooling. You can't refuse that because you would go against the tradition. It is strain-ful. So, work can be a burden actually, and you will be in debt at the end of the day. When you are a man, yes, you work, but now as youth we are still free somehow, you know?

Suge's sentiment was widely shared. It seems that what counts for most young people in Freetown is not the distant future – for example, marriage and having children – but rather the present or the near future. Recognising personal and economic limits and making ‘the best’ of the present are the tactics they employ. Members of EAUC seem not to focus on longing for a future, which they cannot reach currently, but on negotiating possibilities for securing and spending income (for themselves and their lovers) from day to day. Sabrina (24), a scholar, who often sleeps at ‘24’, explained this attitude in the following way:

The future is always tomorrow, but for us now, the security only lies in today. Me, I am not thinking about how I can be married or successful later, I am just thinking about how I can make most of today and maybe accumulate something, you see? The country is broken. So, no need to look for job or change or something like that. But people, friends, and neighbours, they are stuck with you, so you rely on them.

Instead of searching for formal employment or looking for a spouse, young people try to secure daily life through the strategic employment of social resources, attract informal jobs, extend networks of friends, and raise their



status in society. Through skilled manoeuvres, a youth can become the popular 'go-to person' for any situation – whether it is to seek relationship advice, fix a phone, or make a business connection – and resources can usually be gained in one way or another from such exchanges.

However, the distant future is not ignored entirely, as young people try to 'prepare' themselves for coping with future hardship and mobilising resources quickly. In fact, a closer look reveals that the tactics of today are built on a strategy aimed at creating possibilities for tomorrow. Research collaborators collect 'debts' from friends and relatives by assisting them, and thereby build a network of people who 'owe them' and will be ready to help when necessary. This leads to the creation of webs of power, with the aim of ensuring the dependency of social networks.

When I asked people why they rarely refuse when they are asked for favours and go the extra mile to help even if it is not convenient for them, I was usually told that this is because it will go straight into their 'debt bank'. A negative balance is what is desired here. Through helping as many people as possible, favours are accumulated that serve as provisions for the future. Debts have interest rates and become progressively heavier throughout the course of life. Mr Twin (79) from Allentown explained this in the following way:

When we are both in school, maybe you will always ask me for help with homework or something and I will always help you. But then later when you have a successful job in maybe a bank or in politics, then I will come and say: 'Listen friend, I will need a job here, or my son needs fees for college'. Before, there wasn't much to give, but now the stakes are high. So, it is good to collect as much as possible early on and then cash in when the earnings are high.

Alima (25), one of Amadu's girlfriends, elucidated that 'you never know what the future holds, so it is worthless to worry about it. But if you know you can give something today, you should always do that because you don't know what you may need tomorrow. If you give, they must give back in the future'. Alima's idea chimes with that of Marcel Mauss (1970; also Anthrobase 2016) about how gift economies involve the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to provide a return gift (Strathern 1988). If gifts are not returned, equality and respect between the parties is unbalanced. In their interviews, older research collaborators in particular described in detail the time that elapsed between receiving and returning goods or favours. They depicted the growing chains of connection accumulated through the passing of time and the frequency of the trading. The 'debts' they collected when they were young were now helping them to get by.

While market economies foreground the object of exchange, gift economies create a bond between exchanging parties in the *longue*

*durée*. Over time and through reciprocal gifts, multifaceted moral bonds are created between the exchanging parties. Gifts in Mauss's sense are more than things changing hands; they encapsulate the very fabric of every society (Anthrobase 2016). Favours, gifts, and debts are therefore a way in which youth try to erect bridges between scarcity and aspirations to traverse the social world from day to day. At the same time, they try to 'prepare' themselves to fulfil the demands that will accompany big-manhood and big-womanhood. The bonds these exchanges establish are intended to create a solid foundation on which one can later erect an adult life. This relates to Henrik Vigh's finding that in Bissau young people adhere to a praxis they call *Dubriagem*, which relates to 'immediate survival as well as to gaining a perspective on changing social possibilities and possible trajectories. It is both the praxis of navigating a road through shifting ... circumstances as well as the process of plotting it' (Vigh 2006b: 52).

This form of 'social navigation' (Vigh 2006a) is the basis for how young people live their relationships in Freetown. Youth engage in tactical considerations of the near future embedded in their immediate relations with the world. At the same time, they are careful not to venture too far beyond acceptable limits, so that they do not undermine the strategic considerations of a long-term future based on community-sanctioned practices and obligations. In a dynamic and imaginary way, people who classify themselves as 'youth' therefore 'situate themselves in a social landscape of power, rights, expectations, and relationships – indexing both themselves and the topology of that social landscape' (Durham 2000: 116; see also Shepler 2004; Enria 2015). They are sensitive to their position within 'fields of power, knowledge, rights, notions of agency and personhood' (Durham 2000: 117). And it is within this fabric that relationships are lived.