



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Competition, payment and flexible trust on a Sierra Leonean fishing boat

Cecilie Baann

NIVA, Norwegian Institute for Water Research, Oslo, Norway  
Email: [cecilie.baann@niva.no](mailto:cecilie.baann@niva.no)

## Abstract

This article analyses a competitive payment practice common aboard artisanal fishing boats in Sierra Leone. The competition for payment between crew members on board fishing boats complicates common discursive claims about generalized mistrust in post-war Sierra Leone. Through a phenomenological ethnography of working relations at sea, I show how competitive practices generate flexible trust between crew members. Competing in what is known as *handfailure* produces moments where others' intentions and moral character become legible, allowing fishermen to forge and revise trust in light of shifting evaluations of trustworthiness. The trust forged through *handfailure* differs from older patron-client relationships between boat owners and fishermen, and from the interpretations of social breakdown in fishing communities given by government officials. The article contributes to recent anthropological conversations about mis/trust by showing how, in contexts where people question trust or claim that mistrust is widespread, trust can nevertheless be forged anew on more flexible and negotiable terms.

## Résumé

Cet article analyse une pratique de paiement concurrentielle courante à bord des bateaux de pêche artisanale en Sierra Leone. La concurrence pour la rémunération entre les membres d'équipage des bateaux de pêche complique les affirmations discursives courantes sur la méfiance généralisée en Sierra Leone d'après-guerre. À travers une ethnographie phénoménologique des relations de travail en mer, l'auteur montre comment les pratiques concurrentielles génèrent une confiance flexible entre les membres d'équipage. La concurrence qu'ils se livrent à travers ce qu'ils appellent *handfailure* produit des moments où les intentions et le caractère moral des autres membres deviennent lisibles, permettant aux pêcheurs de forger et de réviser la confiance à la lumière des évaluations changeantes de la capacité à être digne de confiance. La confiance forgée à travers le *handfailure* diffère des anciennes relations patron-client entre propriétaires de bateaux et pêcheurs, ainsi que des interprétations de la rupture sociale au sein des communautés de pêcheurs que donnent les agents de l'État. Cet article contribue aux récentes conversations anthropologiques sur la confiance/méfiance en montrant comment, dans des contextes où certains doutent de la

confiance ou prétendent que la méfiance est répandue, la confiance peut néanmoins se reconstruire sur des bases plus flexibles et négociables.

## Resumo

Este artigo analisa uma prática de pagamento competitiva comum a bordo de barcos de pesca artesanal na Serra Leoa. A competição pelo pagamento entre os membros da tripulação a bordo dos barcos de pesca complica as afirmações discursivas comuns sobre a desconfiança generalizada na Serra Leoa do pós-guerra. Através de uma etnografia fenomenológica das relações de trabalho no mar, mostro como as práticas competitivas geram uma confiança flexível entre os membros da tripulação. A competição naquilo que é conhecido como *handfailure* produz momentos em que as intenções e o carácter moral dos outros se tornam legíveis, permitindo aos pescadores forjar e rever a confiança à luz de avaliações variáveis da fiabilidade. A confiança forjada através do *handfailure* difere das antigas relações patrono-cliente entre proprietários de embarcações e pescadores, e das interpretações do colapso social nas comunidades piscatórias dadas pelos funcionários governamentais. O artigo contribui para as recentes conversas antropológicas sobre a má/confiança ao mostrar como, em contextos em que as pessoas questionam a confiança ou afirmam que a desconfiança é generalizada, a confiança pode, no entanto, ser forjada de novo em termos mais flexíveis e negociáveis.

## Introduction

Colourful wooden fishing boats dot the ocean along the West African coastline. On board are fishers, most of them men, labouring to find fish that supply local, regional and global markets. In Sierra Leone, fish accounts for around 80 per cent of the animal protein consumed and is thus vital for food security in the country. Furthermore, given high unemployment rates, the fishing sector, which employs around 500,000 people (MFM 2021; Kassam *et al.* 2017; Seto *et al.* 2017), is significant for the country's economic and political stability, and for people's everyday *an-to-mot*.<sup>1</sup> This article centres on working relations, and a competitive payment practice, on board the artisanal fishing boats of Tombo, a fishing town of around 40,000 people located on the Western Peninsula in Sierra Leone.

Relations on board the Ghanaboats, the biggest and most commercially oriented type of boat, are marked by ecological conditions of increasing scarcity and widespread mistrust in post-civil war Sierra Leone. This has stimulated a form of competition between the crew members over the catch called *handfailure*.<sup>2</sup> *Handfailure* is an emic term that fishermen use to describe the way in which they compete to grab profitable fish as they are caught in the net. If you enter the competition, but someone else grabs the fish first, your hand has failed you: hence *handfailure*. It is a form of payment for labour that has developed since the civil war, in an increasingly resource-exhausted environment. *Handfailure* as individualized competition aligns with narratives of eroding trust and (post-)conflict social breakdown in Sierra Leone

<sup>1</sup> This means 'hand-to-mouth' in the Krio language and is often used to connote a meagre, precarious livelihood.

<sup>2</sup> I have previously analysed *handfailure* in the context of ecological scarcity, considering *handfailure* through the lens of precarity (Baann 2022a). See also page 421 in this article for further elaborations.

(Hoffman 2003; 2011; Utas and Christensen 2016; Peters 2011). In this vein, fishermen explain that there is no help or solidarity between the crew members either ashore or at sea.

Nevertheless, and in contrast to fishermen's accounts of pervasive competition, a phenomenological analysis of *handfailure* shows that it is not merely an individualistic response to such harsh living conditions. Rather, an analysis of the working relations and hard labour involved in hoisting a fishing net and competing to grab fish shows how fishermen must entrust agency to the other crew members as they work together. As intense episodes of *handfailure* competition punctuate an otherwise long day of heavy, manual labour, the fishermen use humour and mocking playfulness to assess the intentions and motivations of their fellow crew members, while allowing the *bossman* (the skipper or boatswain) a mediating role if the competition escalates into conflict. Paradoxically, only through shared labour does each man have the opportunity to grab his own individual *handfailure* prize. In a context considered widely untrustworthy and deceitful, *handfailure* allows fishermen to attune their bodies to the work of others and share the hard labour required for each to get 'paid'. Through a nuanced reading of relations aboard Ghanaboats, I argue that the competitive practices of *handfailure* produce moments where the intentions and character of others become legible and require fishermen to entrust agency to others, recognizing the shared labour involved in finding and catching fish.

I show how competition activates novel forms of mis/trust that, in turn, may challenge more pervasive forms of mistrust that exist outside a particular competitive arena. As Zidaru and Hopkinson (2024) point out, competition involves deferral of agency to others, often one's competitors. That said, trust is not inherent to competitions, or to any other regulated social interaction per se. However, understanding the terms of specific competitions, and approaching competition as a process that brings people in close contact with others, reveals how competitors get to know the character and intentions of others as they compete, even if only fleetingly. I analyse the significance of these moments of legibility, and how the terms of the competition shape what I call flexible trust.

Flexible trust is situational and closely linked to the legibility of others on particular days and in particular competitions. For those participating in *handfailure* competitions, the moments when the intentions of others become legible are used to build flexible trust that pertains to the boat and its crew members, on that specific day or during a seasonal period of fishing under similar conditions (for example, good catches). Furthermore, the terms of this trust are flexible and forgiving (cf. Carey 2017: 7), just as the broader rules of the *handfailure* are negotiable. Instead of affording trust to those who strictly accord with rules, or grounding it in social positions or networks, trust between the crew members is grounded in the negotiability of rules, because participating in these negotiations contributes to increased mutual legibility.

Recent anthropological attention has shown how mistrust is an active and prosocial disposition towards others, not a mere lack of trust (Mühlfried 2018; Carey 2017). For instance, Matthew Carey shows how people in Morocco's Atlas Mountains build meaningful, respectful and functional relationships that last many years, starting from the proposition that they fundamentally mistrust one another. Elsewhere, in other African contexts, mistrust has been seen as the most common

'starting point' (Meinert 2015: 118) from which relations are built and through which lives are sustained. Across these contexts, however, acts that undermine trust are seen to cause irreparable change, making mistrust the new default position with which to approach the world. Trust is painted as 'unforgiving' (Carey 2017: 40), in part to stress the prosocial affordances of mistrust. Interpersonal trust has certainly been undermined in the post-war Sierra Leonean context, and mistrust has become a popular disposition towards others. Yet, I argue that fishermen seek to build a more flexible and forgiving form of trust through *handfailure* in the face of this erosion, rather than simply turning to mistrust as a default disposition. Trust, in other words, can be more flexible and forgiving than recent analyses of mistrust might suggest.

This article is based on eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork in Sierra Leone in 2019, largely in the fishing town of Tombo. The fieldwork was concerned with understanding maritime livelihood practices in the context of shifting ecological environments and with increasing international presence, including Asian trawlers catching and exporting fish and increasing numbers of international development projects targeting the fishing sector. In addition to a group of fish-processing women, and my closest interlocutor, whom I call Mr A, I became associated with a fishing boat throughout the year. While I also conducted interviews with crew members on other boats, and went fishing with a few more, I prioritized fishing with the boat I call *Surprise*, which is the focus of this article. In a context where women rarely go to sea, I wanted to respect the invitation of the community leaders to go fishing only with specific boats, including *Surprise*.

I begin this article by describing a case of *handfailure*, before situating *handfailure* as a practice of payment for labour. I trace how a widespread sense of eroded trust in post-war Sierra Leone has precipitated changes in working relations in the fishing industry, including the development of *handfailure*. In a post-conflict setting characterized by widespread mistrust (cf. Ferme 2001; Bürge 2018; Keen 2002), competitive practices such as *handfailure* obviate the need to trust boat owners on patrimonial terms and enable a valued form of individual autonomy (see also Diggins 2018; 2019). Simultaneously, *handfailure* affords specific acts of trust as the crew members defer agency to others through shared embodied labour and by controlling information. These novel forms of flexible trust reflect broader West African practices of renegotiating the terms and rules of exchange (e.g. Berry 1993; Guyer 2004). Participating in *handfailure* reveals crew members' intentions and experiences to each other. This knowledge is carefully managed and selectively shared among the crew, reflecting the assertion that intimacy in West Africa often rests on holding and selectively sharing information about others (Ferme 2001; Shaw 2000). By participating in *handfailure*, and by continuously negotiating the rules of these competitions, crew members come to know and flexibly trust each other while working at sea.

### **A case of *handfailure***

The sun's height indicated that it was nearly noon, and *Surprise* rocked gently with each haul of the fishing net. In synchronized motion, the working teams at the stern and the bow hauled the net closer to, and aboard, the boat. To cheer themselves on during the hard labour, the fishermen took turns to lead the group in song and

rhythmic storytelling. Although I was yet to learn Temne, the most common language used aboard *Surprise*, I recognized a storyline in Ishmael's song, sung in a mix of Temne and Krio, centring on the abilities of his crewmates.

Alhassan's eyes find good fish

*Alhassan's eyes find good fish*

Wurie help to guide the boat.

*Wurie help to guide the boat.*

Ishmael called out the names and the skills, and the rest of the crew repeated his words. The beat made by the call-and-repeat<sup>3</sup> style of song guided the two working teams to keep the rhythm. Sometimes the lyrics elicited laughter; at other times individual fishermen would answer to their names, as if to confirm their skill and dedication to the crew and the boat.

During a line in a song about Audu, our *let-go-man*, a position referring to his responsibility for the setting (letting go) of the net from the boat and his ability to keep the net straight and untangled, a murmur went through the working team at the bow. Only the stern team repeated Ishmael's line before the song died out. Someone had spotted a *kini* fish<sup>4</sup> caught in the net, and everyone's attention turned towards the boat's railing and the net. Although the team at the stern kept hauling together, they did so while glancing towards the bow. Up until now, both the bow team and the stern team had kept their rhythm of hauling the net in coordinated teams, the stern team doing the hard work of hauling the net closer, and the bow team picking out the herring and *latti*<sup>5</sup> gilled in the fishing net as they hauled it into the boat. Neither herring nor *latti*, both small pelagic fish, would fetch a good price at the wharf markets, and thus they did not cause excitement among the crew. *Kini*, however, was a prized fish and always in demand at the wharf. It is served at weddings, sold to the upscale markets of bigger cities, or dried and exported to Europe and the USA. Word of a *kini* in the net drew everyone's attention.

Now, the team at the bow was hauling the net quickly into the boat. Herring. Three *latti*. Another two herring. Then the *kini* appeared from the water, wriggling in the net. The two fishermen nearest to the fish glanced at each other as they did one final, heavy pull to get the fish into the boat. Then, in a split second, they threw themselves forwards, hands fully extended towards the fish. We watched with excitement as Alhassan's left hand tried to grab the tail of the fish that his right hand had just missed. Milton, with a hard grip around the fish's gills, raised the *kini* in the air triumphantly. Some of the crew cheered him on, while others laughed at Alhassan's fumbling. Alhassan shouted some angry words at Milton, perhaps hoping to get some support from the other crew members, but the result was clear. Alhassan's hand had failed him, and the valuable prize went to Milton.

<sup>3</sup> Often known as echo songs, these are distinguished from call-and-response songs where the call is answered by a response instead of simply repeated. Both styles were frequent in the work songs on the fishing boats.

<sup>4</sup> Juvenile barracuda (*Sphyraena* spp.).

<sup>5</sup> *Ilisha africana*.

### Changing modes of payment

*Handfailure*, literally ‘the failure of the hand’, is a slang term<sup>6</sup> in the Krio language. This form of competition is common aboard Ghanaboats, the largest artisanal fishing boats in Sierra Leone. The boats are named after the Mfantse fishing communities that migrated from Ghana to Sierra Leone in the 1960s (Hendrix 1983; Krabacher 1992). Ghanaian migrants introduced new and more efficient fishing techniques, with larger, planked fishing canoes and a ring-net style of fishing.<sup>7</sup> Today’s Ghanaboats are 20-metre-long wooden planked canoe-style boats that employ up to twenty-five men and can bring back fish worth several million leones.<sup>8</sup> Ghanaboats, like most other boats in Tombo, are owned by a boat owner, who can be male or female. Many of the male boat owners go fishing with their own boat, but many also employ a skipper or boatswain, called *bossman*, to run the boat and crew.

Ghanaboats use ring nets to catch pelagic schools of fish such as herring and bonga. A ring net forms a wall around the school of fish, and, when the boat comes full circle, the school of fish is trapped inside the ringed net or gilled in the mesh. Then begins the hard work of hauling the net into the boat. Nets are hauled by two working teams, one at the stern that handles the cork (top) side, and the other at the bow that handles the lead (bottom) side. Hauling the net takes around an hour, depending on the number of fish caught. The crew working the cork side do the heaviest labour, while those working the lighter lead side are considered a little further up the crew ranking. Their rank is reflected both in their lighter workload and in the fact that they are responsible for picking the fish out of the net as it is hauled into the boat. This leaves room for *handfailure*.

The crew of Ghanaboats in Tombo, like *Surprise*, do not receive a regular salary for their work. Instead, they carry bags that they fill with a proportion of the day’s catch. What the bag contains depends on how many fish and what type of fish they can grab, and what they are given by the *bossman*. If they wait for the *bossman* to indicate how much of the common catch each should take, they receive mainly small pelagic fish such as herring, which rarely provide much money when sold at the market. To make a living wage, the fishermen instead seek to fill their bag with the most valuable fish caught in the net. They do so by grabbing (or trying to grab) the fish that is gilled in the section of the net they are pulling, in *handfailure* contests.

A narrative of fishing being a source of quick money, where there is always a chance of getting an astronomical catch, remained widespread in Tombo in 2019. ‘One day, you see fisherman go to sea with holes in his pants, the next day he is building a house! Only one day at sea!’ a young fisherman once told me. Even Captain M on

<sup>6</sup> None of the fishermen I worked with in Tombo had Krio as their first language. Instead, they mix Krio and English expressions with their first languages, of which Temne is the most common. *Handfailure* is likely to have developed in a multi-linguistic context, and thus may not have a direct relation to other correct Krio expressions such as ‘*get na hand business*’. Simeon Koroma described it in personal communication to me as slang Krio, and it is likely that it has developed in the specific context of fishing through a commonly shared experience.

<sup>7</sup> Now known as *Ghanachain*, meaning Ghana net, then often spoken of as Ali nets, which is the term that foreign fisheries consultants often still use.

<sup>8</sup> 1 million leones equalled roughly US\$100 in 2019 and roughly US\$50 in 2022. In July 2022, the leone was re-denominated, as the central bank launched new notes removing three zeros but retaining their value.

*Surprise*, who otherwise closely kept track of the fuel expenditure and daily profits, sometimes spoke of incredible one-day catches: 'If you go to sea for two years without even putting 10 million in the bank, just maintain the boat and do repairs, then your time will come. In one day, you can get an 80, 90, 100 million catch.'

For the crew members, the opportunities provided by payment through *handfailure* were considered a potential life-changer. For example, I once met Pa Siaka coming back from the wharf, grinning. 'Look,' he said, and held out a fat stack of money. 'Over a hundred thousand! Just from this!' He gesticulated with his hands, as if grabbing fish from an invisible net. In 2019, this sum could feed a family for a week and was considered a substantial reward for a day's labour.

Despite these stories, and the fact that coastal towns such as Tombo continued to be a destination for economic migrants, average profits in the artisanal fishing sector keep going down. Good days like Pa Siaka's were rare. Older fishermen told stories of how, in their youth, they would *flop the boat* (fill it to the brim) several times a year. I did not once encounter this during my fieldwork. In my final interview with Captain M, he was optimistic about the crew's economic future, but could nonetheless recount only four times in recent months when the crew had made more than 3 million leones. 'There are fewer fish in the sea, and so many boats,' he concluded. Throughout the one-year operation, the boat acquired a substantial loan for fuel from its patrons, and it was now time for renovations, increasing the indebtedness.

Many fishermen – especially young men – felt that they were left to fend for themselves in the industry. Abdul, a taxi driver who went fishing a few times a month, explained:

When I go to sea, there is no salary; it is a fight for survival! . . . If I want to go to sea, no one helps me . . . I bring my own bag and I go. No one says anything, no one helps.

The 'fight for survival' that Abdul referred to was how fishermen often described the individual character of making a living from the sea. At times, it was described in positive terms as a form of individual control over time, individual success or (*hand*) failure in acquiring fish, and a form of freedom from exploitative patronage relations. At other times, the fight for survival connoted the experience of being *left alone*, without support from either family or authorities, or as being cheated out of something that was shared by selfish individuals.

Elsewhere, I have analysed *handfailure* practices in the light of increasing ecological scarcity, situating West African artisanal fishing in a history of continued colonial extractive relations, and understanding *handfailure* as a form of 'living through precarity' (Baann 2022a). This understanding aligns with how many fishermen explained *handfailure*. Seeing the current ecological precarity as an extension of the difficulties experienced during the civil war, they connected their precarious living conditions with an erosion of social trust in the present. Such a structural reading of *handfailure* practices highlights how people continue to live through precarity and marginalization produced through global extractive relations. However, it also reproduces the dualism between competition and collaboration. This perspective 'from the shore' explains *handfailure* as a tactic of individualistic accumulation that obviates the need to trust others, eliminating webs of patronage and dependency

which characterized economic distribution among fishermen (and others) before the war. A phenomenologically grounded perspective ‘from the sea’ reveals a different analysis of *handfailure*, shedding light on the intertwinement of competition and mis/trust in everyday working relations. To understand *handfailure* and the individual competitive accumulation of fish and profit by crews, this practice must be situated within longer trajectories of social relatedness, centring on trust and secrecy, in Sierra Leone. I now show how the growth of Ghanaboat fishing was connected to both increased migration and changes in working relations in the fishing sector following Sierra Leone’s civil war from 1991 to 2002.

### Trust and changing working relations on board Ghanaboats

Accounts of how *handfailure* became the ordinary payment system on Ghanaboats focus on changes in the fishing sector following Sierra Leone’s civil war. Before the war, people remembered having more solidarity with one another, explaining that a boat crew was like a family. The boat owner was responsible for lodging, feeding and providing for his crew. In exchange, the fishermen worked for free and received only a small amount of *plassas fish* (‘fish for the soup’), which they could cook themselves or give to family members. The boat owner kept the remaining fish but also incurred all the costs of running and repairing the boat. One day a week, however, was for the fishermen, meaning that the owner had no entitlement to whatever they caught on that day.<sup>9</sup>

By 2019, this was no longer the case in Tombo. Rather, boat owners, or the *bossmen* on their behalf, had little responsibility for their crew, and fishermen told me that they would never consider working ‘for free’ several days a week. Some fishermen still received accommodation from boat owners or senior crew members, but this was balanced by these fishermen being responsible for other services, such as cooking or cleaning, or extra contributions to boat maintenance. Average crew members received no salary other than their bag containing *handfailure* fish and their proportion of the day’s catch. If the catch was poor, so were the contents of the bag. While it is difficult to calculate the average pay of a Ghanaboat fisherman in Tombo, most of the fishermen I interacted with would make ends meet with their earnings, but that was it. During periods with poor catches, most crew members borrowed money from family members or supporters, or relied on other forms of income. This made *handfailure* prizes particularly significant.

Fishermen’s lack of economic commitment to a boat was in part connected to increased migration to the coast. Before the war, the crew remained with a boat for a long period, and thus delayed payment was more acceptable. With increased migration to the coast, crew members without a fixed position would often shift between different boats, depending on the boat’s reputation and recent luck at sea. Thus, the fishermen preferred to receive payment for a day’s work rather than having to commit to a boat for a longer period.

---

<sup>9</sup> Diggins (2018), writing about fieldwork on Tissana in 2010, notes how this system of paying fishermen in free days (two days in Tissana) had been operated over the previous fifteen years and was considered a newer and more independent form of payment than sharing fish or money every time a boat went to sea.



Finally, the end of the war coincided with a period of decreasing catches, which led many boat owners to borrow money from the crew members for their boats' running costs:

When fish became scarce, the fishermen would 'trɔs' the *bossman* money for fuel, but then the *bossmen* refused to pay them back. The fishermen did not agree, and complained, but then the *bossman* refused to cook for them and lodge them. So instead, they all took their [*handfailure*] bag to sea every day to collect their payment.

This was how Mr A explained the shift from payment once a week to daily *handfailure* payments. In 2019, boat owners rarely borrowed money from crew members, but were instead entangled in negotiations over *handfailure* fish – and, by extension, assessing the negotiability of the guiding rules of *handfailure*, a point to which I will return in the final part of the article. Returning to the quote above, *trɔs* is the Krio word for trust, as well as for lending fish, money or other material things. In everyday conversations, *trɔs* was used to indicate a relationship, as when people claimed that 'Sierra Leoneans don't *trɔs* one another', and, in terms of the material credit relation, in statements such as 'he *don trɔs* [lend] me money'. In Mr A's narrative, *trɔs* indicated money lent to the boat owner or *bossman*, a usage Jennifer Diggins (2018) also employs in her analysis of credit relations in the fishing economy of Tissana, south of Tombo. Trust in Sierra Leone must be shown in material ways; to *trɔs* someone money or fish is thus to establish a credit relation, but also to 'do' a relationship (Bolten 2014; see also Baann 2022b).

*Handfailure* fish should not be likened to a gift or loan, and, as such, *handfailure* fish is not *trɔssed* fish. However, participating in *handfailure* resembles a form of navigational interaction (see Vigh 2009) through which the fishermen may come to trust their fellow crew members, even if only for a very short while. *Handfailure* may thus be interpreted as a pragmatic adaptation to living in a world of mistrust; where the reliability of 'stranger' migrants is doubted and the trustworthiness of boat owners is questioned. Instead of materializing relationships on board the fishing boats by entrusting the boat owner with a whole week's catch, each individual fisherman grabs his own profit, and remains (at least in theory) free to invest the fish profit in the relationships he deems viable.

*Handfailure* might thus be seen to align with neoclassical economic understandings of competition as eliminating the need for interpersonal trust in market relations. This could be further interpreted as a consequence of the increasing integration of coastal fisheries in West Africa into a global, neoliberal economy, given the ideological association of competitive self-interest with neoliberalism (Ganti 2014; Appel 2019; Ong 2006; Elyachar 2005). However, this tells us little about the forms of interaction that guide *handfailure*. By showing how *handfailure* involves negotiating the rights to a valuable fish, I shed light on how social cohesion and trust are practised and produced in contemporary coastal Sierra Leone.

### Negotiability through position, humour and shared work

Although *handfailure* practices and rewards are constantly negotiated both in situ and post-fishing, they do involve rules and established behaviours. Here, I trace some of

the social relations and regulations on board Ghanaboats that shape *handfailure* practices, and how these are negotiated. It is the negotiability (Berry 1993) of *handfailure*'s rules that allows both for crew members' 'marginal gains' (cf. Guyer 2004) through competition and for forging flexible trust through the process of negotiation.

*Handfailure* is a form of goal-oriented competition (see Thorbjørnson 2019: 12, drawing on Simmel 1955), guided by two general rules. First, a fisherman can't leave his place while the net is being hauled. Hauling the net is strenuous work, as the large Ghana-net is made of multifilament nylon yarn that carries its weight in water. Hauling together with the other crew members eases the heavy load on all. Songs and encouraging words like 'Manpower! Manpower!' are used to boost energy and guide the rhythm of crew members' efforts. The crew's energy level increased and decreased with the amount of fish hauled from the sea and with their level of physical exhaustion. Importantly, both the feeling of the weight of the net and its actual weight change as crew members attune their bodies to each other as they work. I first noticed this practice when I began to help haul the net myself.

For a novice, simply balancing on the boat can be a challenge. The boat rocks in the waves and with each haul of the net, and its planks are slippery from mud, fish scales and water. Balancing on the boat while hauling the net comes with time and practice, but also through attuning one's body to the boat and the net being hauled. The first few times I tried to 'help' haul the net, I was too excited and hauled out of sync. Several times I had to catch myself from falling, using the net to balance myself. 'Easy, take time,' advised Audu, standing beside me. 'Look,' he continued, and bent down to the gunwale to grab a section of the net, ready to haul. But before he hauled, he made an exaggerated move of gazing over to the four other men hauling the lead section of the net. As they reached down in synchronized motion, Audu did so too and heaved his section at the same time as they heaved theirs. '*Strong, saful* [gently, careful],' Audu concluded, and continued the work.

This was the only time I was directly instructed in hauling the net; similarly, I rarely heard other newcomers receive instruction. However, the *bossman* often told new recruits to work the cork section, placing them between other crew members, a position that makes it difficult to be out of sync, as long as the person in front of and behind you keep the rhythm. Once, a junior fisherman, recently arrived from Makeni, placed himself at the very back of the line of cork haulers. After ten minutes of heavy hauling, he looked tired and began to haul out of sync. 'Watch it,' one of the others said, as he moved forwards when the rest leaned backwards. Getting the net into the boat is easier when bodies move in synchronized motion. Furthermore, while heaving, the changing *feel* of the net's weight informs the fishermen about the energy level of their fellow crew members. Although this was never discussed, I, like other novices, learned it through participation. Although I was the weakest crew member by far, I could feel when the man on either side of me got tired, as the weight of the net increased for me. The more senior members of the lead crew, such as Audu and Ishmael on board *Surprise*, also noticed this and would often heave with more strength, or start singing an encouraging tune, as if to compensate for the tired fisherman between us, or to allow others a small break.

It follows, then, that the first general rule of *handfailure* is to stay put as the net is hauled and to grab the fish as it arrives, possibly stretching without letting go of the tension on the net. Doing so in choppy waters on a slippery wooden canoe tilted at

least fifteen degrees towards the heavy fishing net is an advanced skill, which hints at why seasoned fishermen tend to be more successful in their *handfailure* than novices. The second general rule is that one may only grab fish from one's own section of the net – from where one hauls down to the railing of the boat. Grabbing fish from another man's section is criticized and can lead to sanctions. That said, not letting go of the tension on the net and not grabbing fish from other men's sections are more like guidelines to be negotiated than hard and fast rules. In practice, it is not always easy to establish who a section of the net belongs to, or how early one can stretch to grab a fish. This hints at how the guiding rules themselves are part of the negotiation, a point I return to below.

The simple, bodily realization that the net is less heavy when the crew works together is a potent experience that attunes crew members' bodies towards those of others, and away from concentrating on grabbing the most valuable fish as they come aboard. While *doing the handfailure* enables each fisherman to earn a (small) living, hauling the net together acknowledges the equal rights of all crew members to part of the catch, and to practise *handfailure*. This embodied solidarity also affects *handfailure* practices, because *handfailure* tends to break the rhythm of this heavy work, from which follow two embodied observations. First, *handfailure* allows for necessary breaks, punctuating the heavy labour with moments of playful competition and laughter. I will come back to this below. Second, just as the net becomes lighter when one hauls together, it becomes heavier when someone does not carry their weight. It thus becomes all too evident when a crew member is too focused on taking fish for himself, as the shared load of the net increases for those around him. Hauling together, interspersed with episodes of *handfailure* competition, or simply fishermen taking fish out of the net, thus produces moments when the character of the other fishermen becomes more legible, a key to building trust between the crew members. In addition to the embodied experiences with others' intentions, the two general rules of *handfailure* competitions add another layer of legibility, but also of entrustment, as the fishermen must entrust agency to their fellow crew members to haul the net aboard the boat. The paradox of the competition is that each fisherman must depend on the others for his own competitive gain.

In practice, *handfailure* appears chaotic and confusing. I was rarely able to see clearly whose hands were first or who did what, when several fishermen scrambled for a fish. In the first few months I went fishing, I tried to ask afterwards about the episodes of *handfailure*, trying to understand what had happened. A few times, when the outcome had been undisputed, Abibu or one of the other crew members gave me a brief account of whose part of the net it was and whose hands were where – in doing so demonstrating the embodied skill required both to compete and to follow the process of competing. At other times, answers were less forthcoming, partly because the other crew members had also struggled to discern exactly what had happened, but also partly because information itself is part of the competition, a point to which I will return in the final section of this article.

Practising *handfailure* is more than asserting one's right to a fish through social conventions and rules. It is a competition. Fishermen must coordinate their hands and eyes as they spot a fish in the net, keep their balance on the boat, and hope that they are more skilled in doing so than their crewmates. At the same time, *handfailure* is also a form of competitive negotiation, which involves playing the social relations on

board the boat. It is a socially and materially negotiated process, between crew members, between fisherman and net, and between fisherman and a slippery fish. Furthermore, this competitive negotiation involves a competition over the guiding rules themselves, as crew members use their social skills and position on board the boat to win a fish or ease arguments. This negotiation resembles Sara Berry's (1993) analysis of agrarian African economies. Labour arrangements and transactions in land-use rights, Berry argued, were subject to open-ended negotiation. The rules, terms and expectations of transactions were never set in stone, but always renegotiable. Similarly, in *handfailure* competitions, the guiding rules of *handfailure* are negotiable, primarily through skilled social and diplomatic work on board the boats.

*Handfailure* tends to generate laughter, and the competitive episodes live on throughout the day as the fishermen talk about them and mimic elements from the competition. This infuses the strenuous and monotonous work of hauling a heavy net with playful and competitive energy. Winning the fish and keeping the peace often involves more than simply getting there first. A smile or a joke – maybe a clumsy manoeuvre to imitate either one's own or one's competitor's balance – is a small gesture that makes the competition an enjoyable performance for other crew members and a skilled form of workplace diplomacy. While the net is hauled, the fishermen often store *handfailure* fish in their *trossis* – that is, the trousers they are wearing – to avoid others stealing their fish from the shared boat compartment. Wobbling around in *trossis* full of fish, or jokingly acting up when a wet fish wiggles inside one's trouser leg, are ways in which fishermen defuse situations that could otherwise be soured with jealousy and accusations of improper conduct. Furthermore, negotiation practices often involve direct invocations of solidarity, as the crew members playfully ask their competitors to yield the catch because of how hard they have worked, how much their girlfriend at home is nagging them for fish, or how their sick mother would bring blessings to the whole crew if she received a fine fish like the one just caught. These calls for solidarity are used tactically to 'win' a fish, but they also link life on the fishing boats to relations and networks on land.

Although there is a hierarchy of positions on board the boats, everyone has their role to play in *handfailure*. Many of those with a position of authority also participate in *handfailure*; using (without abusing) one's authority is as much a navigational skill as when two equal crew members compete. While hauling a fishing net, the role of the *bossman*, apart from securing his own fish, is to ensure that peace is kept on board. Captain M on board *Surprise* was known as a cool-headed boss. As well as participating in much of the hard labour of hauling the net, he earned the crew's respect by intervening in cases of *handfailure* when he sensed that they might take a bad turn. Although it may seem jovial, *handfailure* can get heated and violent. '*Handfailure* is the reason for all these fights,' the harbour master once told me, after a group of fishermen had been brought to the police – a serious, but not uncommon, consequence.

Crew members build legibility and trust among themselves through shared embodied labour and diplomatic negotiation over the rules of *handfailure*. Seeing trust thus as a situational process, not only as an individual quality, nuances the claim that there is 'no trust in [post-conflict] Sierra Leone'. That said, *handfailure* is not free of conflict. In the final section, I detail an episode when *handfailure* itself 'failed', to argue

that *handfailure* produces a particular, flexible form of trust through the selective disclosure and concealment of information.

### Mis/trust through rules and shared labour

For young fishermen, *handfailure* enables a form of opposition to the patrimonial logics that often shape employment, and salary negotiation, in Sierra Leone and the wider Upper Guinea Coast (Utas 2012; Murphy 2016; Diggins 2015; Peters 2011). As the fishermen establish their individual relation to the fish prize through *handfailure*, they detach the practice of acquiring fish from wider patrimonial networks and socio-economic indebtedness. Working in close quarters with twenty or so competitors establishes a form of intimacy between the crew members. As others have argued (Broch-Due and Ystanes 2016; Geschiere 2013; Carey 2017), there is no straightforward relationship between intimacy and trust. In Sierra Leone, intimacy and relatedness have a treacherous recent history, as many of the atrocities of the civil war happened between people who knew each other, were related, or had previously supported one another. During my fieldwork, many told me how people used to be more considerate towards each other, and more willing to share resources and burdens, before the war. A naive openness was shattered during the war, as brother killed brother, rebels slaughtered the farmers who had fed them, and politicians used and abused the violent labour of young Sierra Leoneans to further their own position and riches (Utas and Christensen 2016; Christensen and Utas 2008; Hoffman 2011). The war experience foregrounded a paradox: namely, how those who had received support, for example through kinship relations or political patronage networks, could turn out to be treacherous enemies. This was regularly mentioned by my interlocutors in Tombo as a reason for people not wanting to trust people with whom they were close, who were kind to them, or who supported them economically or materially. That being said, I want to bring attention to another dimension of intimacy: namely, knowledge.

Being in close proximity not only means that the crew members entrust agency to their fellows as they collectively pull the net in order to compete, but they also entrust each other with information, especially information about *handfailure* competitions and prizes. Showing how trustworthy one is with information, and avoiding publicly exposing others, is essential to building trust between the crew members. Let me illustrate with a vignette of an instance when trust was compromised on board *Surprise*. The episode happened during the rainy season, when catches were extremely poor:

I had joined *Surprise* and the crew on one of their few fishing trips during the 2019 rainy season – a grey July morning. We drove and drifted slowly around, for hours on end, without any memorable fish sightings. In the late afternoon, the crew finally threw the net in the water after Ishmael and Captain M had spotted a small school of herring, hoping it might also indicate other, more valuable fish feeding in the same area. It took over an hour and a half to heave the net on board. Not because the net was heavy with fish, but because the crew lacked motivation and energy. The tiny catch of herring mixed with some

*swit-wata*<sup>10</sup> was barely enough to give each crew member some fish to eat, let alone cover the daily running cost of 250,000 leones<sup>11</sup> for fuel and oil.

Heading home, Captain M and Audu were dividing the catch between the crew members based on positions, as is their responsibility on days with poor catches, when one of the junior fishermen muttered a protest. ‘What makes you think you can accept that fish,’ he snapped at his fellow, who had just been given two dozen herring.<sup>12</sup> ‘You already have your *handfailure*!’ This first caused confusion, and then a bigger argument followed between Captain M, two of the senior crew members and the two young ones. While we hauled the net, Captain M had spotted the few valuable fish and claimed them as part of the boat’s fuel money. ‘How can we go fishing the next time if there is no fuel money,’ he told a grumbling crew member, who wanted to grab one of the few more valuable fish for himself. Thus, Captain M thought that none of the crew members had grabbed any *handfailure* fish. Hearing that one of the junior fishermen, outed by his buddy, had done so, Captain M became angry. ‘You are all fighting for yourself . . . Next time, I will leave you at the wharf!’

This episode was unique in that Captain M took an active role in denying any valuable fish as *handfailure* prizes, and in that one junior crew member ratted out his buddy. Between the crew members, it was much more common that eager eyes kept the information to be (potentially) disclosed at a later point, which again produced a form of situational entrustment between the crew members. Furthermore, it is significant to note how Captain M was critical both of the fisherman ‘stealing’ *handfailure* fish and of the crewmate who ratted him out. I connect this with my earlier inquiries, where I asked about the details of a *handfailure* episode. My questions, as well as the crew member disclosing information, were out of bounds, because they claimed to know the ‘truth’, and, furthermore, they suggested that there was a singular truth to be known. Just as Guyer (2004) has argued about non-equivalence in transactions (see also Zidaru and Hopkinson 2024), marginal gains through unequal accumulation were possible as there was no public exposure of the ‘real’ value of objects, or the ‘correct’ process of a transaction.

Similarly, information about *handfailure* is more often than not kept between a few crewmates, rather than discussed openly on the boat or at the wharf. *Handfailure* is guided by a deeper notion of trusting one’s comrades not simply to play by the rules, but also with information about adherence to the rules and associated events as they unfold. That makes the rules of the competition themselves negotiable, and, as such, it is through interactions in the negotiation process that crew members come to be legible to one another, even for just a fleeting moment. I argue that it is this dialectic of legibility and negotiability that enables the flexible trust between the crew members. It is flexible as it is not an absolute state; rather, it must continually be

<sup>10</sup> *Swit-wata* (Krio for sweet, or good, water) is a mix of various kinds of fish that cohabit on sandy or muddy sea bottoms.

<sup>11</sup> Around US\$25 in 2019.

<sup>12</sup> With herring selling for a fairly high price at 1,800 leones per dozen during the rainy season because of shortages, this would give the crew members a pay of 3,600 leones for the day’s work (around US\$0.36 in 2019).

practised and (inter)acted. This makes the question of information, and of what actually transpired in a case of *handfailure*, so potent. As suggested by Meinert (2015), writing on trust in Uganda, and Carey (2017), discussing mistrust as a prosocial disposition, information and 'truth' about action and intention are always negotiated through social interactions.

Information about the other's fish grabbing is a valuable resource, which the fishermen may use to establish social relations and flexible trust. Using information tactically as a way to get to know others can further deepen social engagement and trust. As with Meinert's interlocutor Peter stating 'I study people before I tell [the truth]' (2015: 126), people in Tombo would similarly strategize and calculate based on an initial assumption of *mistrust*, rather than trust. However, 'studying people', as Peter put it, and participating in *handfailure* – where one observes the acts of others and has to decide what to do with the information – also entangle *oneself with others*. Much more common than ratting out one's fellow crew member to the *bossman* (and another reason for the *handfailure* fights at the wharf) was for fishermen to claim part of someone else's *handfailure* prize because they had 'kept the information'. 'That man saw his friend take a big catfish, and wanted something for not telling the *bossman*,' Abibu told me once, after we had witnessed a loud argument about to turn violent. Working in close quarters on the Ghanaboats, it is almost impossible for acts to go unnoticed by one of the other twenty or so pairs of eyes. As a fisherman fills his bag with fish, another crew member will always be watching.

The flexible trust of acting according to the rules of the competition, and allowing each man to participate on established terms, exists alongside a form of situational trust through information, as the selective sharing of information enables the negotiability of the general rules of the competition. As Bürge (2018) has argued about the hustling carried out by motorcycle drivers in Makeni, and as Vigh (2009) shows in the context of urban Guinea-Bissau, making relations through the control of information is central in a 'hustling economy' (cf. Thieme 2018). In a longer trajectory, Rosalind Shaw (2000) reflects on secrecy in relation to personhood and social relatedness in Sierra Leone, drawing on the history of the slave trade and of other socio-economic predatory relations. The idiom of '*tok af, lef af*' (talk half, leave half), she argues, is vital to understanding how people see selfhood and relatedness in an untrustworthy social world. Through participating in *handfailure*, a form of trust through the selective management of information develops. In the above case from the rainy season, the fisherman who called out his buddy disproved himself by showing how he was *not trustworthy* with the information. It thus comes as no surprise that he was left out of the competition on the following occasion, not being allowed to rejoin the crew on board *Surprise*.

The flexible trust that fishermen 'harness through the hustle' (Thieme *et al.* 2021) is a way of envisioning alternative future trajectories. As such, a selfish *handfailure* participant, who fails to keep these alternative trajectories in view, is left at the wharf the next day. A fisherman's right to his own *handfailure* is upheld only as long as he upholds the rights of others. The temporal horizon is thus longer than the immediate instant of grabbing and gaining. Given how luck at sea is in constant flux, and the true powers of the world are secret and concealed (cf. Ferme 2001; Diggins 2018), *handfailure* ensures that the crew work together and acknowledge their interdependence, but it also stimulates each man's motivation for personal gain through

camaraderie and competition. In a wider environment of mistrust, *handfailure* allows fishermen to develop temporally contingent forms of flexible trust, as they entrust agency to one another and compete over scarce resources by upholding and negotiating the rules of the competition.

### Competition, trust, and the view from the boat

*Handfailure* prizes ensure a form of individual survival in a precarious and resource-depleted marine environment. Entangled in the global capitalist economy, Sierra Leonean fishermen have few opportunities to participate on equal terms with large industrial trawlers connected to lucrative foreign markets. This makes it easy to understand competitive practices such as *handfailure* as a product of globally circulating neoliberal logics of competitive individualism. In addition, in a post-conflict setting where people highlight extensive mistrust between citizens, neighbours and crew members, payment through *handfailure* could be interpreted as an economic practice that obviates the need for trust. In contrast to these interpretations 'from the shore', I have focused on the working relations and embodied practices 'at sea' on board fishing boats, to complicate the assertion that *handfailure* competition either undermines trust or obviates the need for it.

For the young fishermen, *handfailure* enables new forms of socio-economic relations that do not depend on trusting *bossmen*, boat owners or other patrons in patrimonial terms. As the fishermen stake a claim to the fish prize through *handfailure*, they detach the acquisition of fish (and payment) from patrimonial networks and socio-economic indebtedness. At the same time, this does not mean that the fishermen are detached from social relations, nor that they seek to maintain independence in every aspect of their work. On the boat, fishermen engender new forms of more flexible trust as they labour together and participate in *handfailure*. Working together entails a form of intimacy through knowledge, as the intentions of others become fleetingly legible, and one's own individual gain is dependent on the fishing net being heaved by fellow, equally motivated crew members.

In a socio-material world considered untrustworthy and deceitful, where the true intentions of people and the true power of things are always masked and concealed (Shaw 2000; 2002; Ferme 2001), people often take mistrust to be their default position towards others. Recent literature has shown that mistrust is a prosocial disposition (Mühlfried 2018; Carey 2017) that can engender collaborative, meaningful social interactions and relationships. In this article I have shown how trust, however, does not disappear as a social process from contexts where people claim that it is eroded. Rather, while mistrust seems to be a default position, people still forge trust, but on more flexible and forgiving terms. Through the *handfailure* competitions, the fishermen ground trust in the continued negotiations over the *handfailure* rules and proceedings, as it is through the combination of shared bodily labour and the social interactions of negotiations that the fishermen become mutually legible.

**Acknowledgements.** The author wishes to thank the fishermen on board *Surprise* and other Ghanaboats in Tombo, as well as everyone else who has willingly shared their knowledge and experience. Without their help, this research would not have been possible. The research was conducted during the



author's PhD fellowship at Aarhus University and the University of Edinburgh as part of the ANTHUSIA research project (EU grant agreement no. 764546).

## References

- Appel, H. (2019) *The Licit Life of Capitalism: US oil in Equatorial Guinea*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Baann, C. (2022a) 'Doing the *handfailure*: at the margins of global capitalism', *Anthropology Today* 38 (4): 7–10.
- Baann, C. (2022b) 'Navigating seas, smoke, and social relations: making a living in a Sierra Leonean fishing town'. PhD thesis, Aarhus University and University of Edinburgh.
- Berry, S. (1993) *No Condition Is Permanent: the social dynamics of agrarian change in sub-Saharan Africa*. Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bolten, C. E. (2014) 'Social networks, resources, and international NGOs in postwar Sierra Leone', *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 4 (1): 33–59.
- Broch-Due, V. and M. Ystanes (eds) (2016) *Trusting and Its Tribulations: interdisciplinary engagements with intimacy, sociality and trust*. New York NY: Berghahn Books.
- Bürge, M. (2018) 'Mis(sing) trust for surviving: confronting complexity and the un/known in Makeni, Northern Sierra Leone' in F. Mühlfried (ed.), *Mistrust: ethnographic approximations*. London: transcript.
- Carey, M. (2017) *Mistrust: an ethnographic theory*. Chicago IL: HAU Books.
- Christensen, M. M. and M. Utas (2008) 'Mercenaries of democracy: the "politricks" of remobilized combatants in the 2007 general elections, Sierra Leone', *African Affairs* 107 (429): 515–39.
- Diggins, J. (2015) 'Economic runaways: patronage, poverty, and the pursuit of "freedom" on Sierra Leone's maritime frontier', *Africa* 85 (29): 312–32.
- Diggins, J. (2018) *Coastal Sierra Leone: materiality and the unseen in maritime West Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Diggins, J. (2019) 'Collapsing fish stocks, gendered economies, and anxieties of entrapment in coastal Sierra Leone', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* NS 00: 1–18.
- Elyachar, J. (2005) *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, economic development, and the state in Cairo*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Ferme, M. (2001) *The Underneath of Things: violence, history, and the everyday in Sierra Leone*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press.
- Ganti, T. (2014) 'Neoliberalism', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43: 89–104.
- Geschiere, P. (2013) *Witchcraft, Intimacy, and Trust: Africa in comparison*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Guyer, J. I. (2004) *Marginal Gains: monetary transactions in Atlantic Africa*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hendrix, M. K. (1983) 'Technology and tradition in West African maritime fisheries: Tombo, Sierra Leone'. ICMRD Working Paper 8. Kingston RI: International Center for Marine Resource Development (ICMRD), University of Rhode Island.
- Hoffman, D. (2003) 'Like beasts in the bush: synonyms of childhood and youth in Sierra Leone', *Postcolonial Studies* 6 (3): 295–308.
- Hoffman, D. (2011) *The War Machines: young men and violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Kassam, L. et al. (2017) 'Sierra Leone fish value chain with special emphasis on Tonkolili District'. Report. Penang: Worldfish.
- Keen, D. (2002) "'Since I am a dog, beware my fangs": beyond a "rational violence" framework in the Sierra Leonean war'. Crisis States Programme, Working Paper 1. London: Development Research Centre, LSE.
- Krabacher, T. S. (1992) 'Technological change and household food supply in a West African maritime economy', *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers* 54: 49–76.
- Meinert, L. (2015) 'Tricky trust: distrust as a starting point and trust as a social achievement in Uganda' in S. Liisberg, E. O. Pedersen and A. L. Dalsgård (eds), *Anthropology and Philosophy: dialogues on trust and hope*. New York NY: Berghahn Books.

- MFMR (2021) 'Fisheries management plan of Sierra Leone: marine fisheries sector 2020–2025'. Freetown: Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources (MFMR). Available at <<https://www.mfmr.gov.sl/2021/05/28/fisheries-and-management-plan/>>, accessed 31 May 2022.
- Mühlfried, F. (ed.) (2018) *Mistrust: ethnographic approximations*. London: transcript.
- Murphy, W. P. (2016) 'Transnational and local models of non-refoulement: youth and women in the moral economy of patronage in postwar Liberia and Sierra Leone' in J. Knörr and C. Kohl (eds), *The Upper Guinea Coast in Global Perspective*. New York NY: Berghahn Books.
- Ong, A. (2006) *Neoliberalism as Exception: mutations in citizenship and sovereignty*. Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Peters, K. (2011) 'The crisis of youth in postwar Sierra Leone: problem solved?', *Africa Today* 58 (2): 129–53.
- Seto, K. et al. (2017) 'War, fish, and foreign fleets: the marine fisheries catches of Sierra Leone 1950–2015', *Marine Policy* 83: 153–63.
- Shaw, R. (2000) "'Tok af, lef af": a political economy of Temne techniques of secrecy and self in I. Karp and D. A. Masolo (eds), *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press.
- Shaw, R. (2002) *Memories of the Slave Trade: ritual and the historical imagination in Sierra Leone*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Simmel, G. (1955) *Conflict and the Web of Group-Affiliations*. London: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Thieme, T. A. (2018) 'The hustle economy: informality, uncertainty and the geographies of getting by', *Progress in Human Geography* 42 (4): 529–48.
- Thieme, T. A., M. E. Ference and N. van Stapele (2021) 'Harnessing the "hustle": struggle, solidarities and narratives of work in Nairobi and beyond: introduction', *Africa* 91 (1): 1–15.
- Thorbjørnson, S. O. (2019) *What Happens to People in a Competitive Society: an anthropological investigation of competition*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Utas, M. (ed.) (2012) *African Conflict and Informal Power: big men and networks*. London: Zed Books.
- Utas, M. and M. Christensen (2016) 'The gift of violence: ex-militias and ambiguous debt relations during post-war elections in Sierra Leone', *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 6 (2): 23–47.
- Vigh, H. (2009) 'Motion squared: a second look at the concept of social navigation', *Anthropological Theory* 9 (4): 419–38.
- Zidaru, T. and L. Hopkinson (2024) 'Competition and mis/trust in Africa and beyond', *Africa* 94 (3): 339–356.

**Cecilie Baann** is a researcher at NIVA, the Norwegian Institute for Water Research. Her PhD research focused on coastal livelihoods in West Africa, tracing changing socio-economic and material relations between humans, and between humans, water and fish. She is currently involved in several research projects on human–plastic entanglements, tracing the lives and afterlives of plastic in modern livelihoods.