

# Introduction

This book is about ethnic identity and reciprocity as mutually constitutive agents of social reality. It is a study about the articulation between ethnic identity, as a social construction, and reciprocity, as a regime of value that frames social interactions. With the case study of Sherbro identity in Sierra Leone, I invite the reader to look at ethnic identity through the lens of reciprocal norms and practices that are at the centre of West African social life. I consider how the production and performance of identity is bound to reciprocity as a stable mode of expected relations between groups.

People who define themselves as Sherbro form a relatively small group in Sierra Leone. Nationally, they constitute no more than about 2% of the population. The Sherbros coexist with larger groups, such as the Mende and Temne-speaking populations that each account for a third of Sierra Leone's population, and with other minority groups, such as the Krio. People who self-identify as Sherbro may also hold an ethnic identity from one or more of these other groups. They make those identity claims legitimate and socially valid by pointing to various lines of descent and, in the case of Krio identity, adopting a lifestyle that indexes them as 'Krio'. Whether at the group or the individual level, Sherbro ethnic identity bears out the strongest claims that theoretical discussions of ethnicity have made for the co-constitution of ethnic identities through the selective manipulation of traits and boundaries. However, their possibilities for cross-ethnic identification also reveal people's general ability to adopt various identities in different contexts and situations. Most strikingly, Sherbro maintain a strong sense of 'being Sherbro' despite *and* through multiple ethnic affiliations.

In Sierra Leone, but not only there, to hold multiple ethnic identities does not necessarily produce conflict – either for individuals or for groups. To belong to many kinds of people at once is normal. Sherbro populations, perhaps, are even less conflicted than others about this situation. Through their lives, I have

tried to tell part of the story of how it is possible for them to belong to many groups at once, and in so doing to define themselves as particularly Sherbro.

Since Barth (1969), anthropologists have moved away from the essentialist paradigm that attributes specific 'traits' to a named group. Instead, authors have studied how identities are constructed through historical processes and social practice. The Barthian model, by emphasizing the construction of boundaries, has highlighted the strategic uses of identity and the logics by which groups associate with or dissociate from each other. For most later scholars, Barth's model has been understood to imply that people, under specific circumstances, may claim divergent ethnic identities and may even change ethnic membership (Eriksen 2019: 136). Yet, it is still expected that an individual displays only one ethnic identity at a time, as either an insider or outsider of any particular reference group, and that the boundaries between groups are relatively fixed. Subsequent constructivist approaches have increasingly emphasized the fluidity and fragmentation of identities in a globalized world. Yet, despite the growing influence of concepts that attempt to define 'mixed' identities and cultural practices, such as creolization, hybridity, *métissage* or syncretism (e.g. Hannerz 1987, 1996; Shaw and Stewart 1994; Stewart 2007), the study of contemporary identities in Africa has continuously evaded a close interrogation of practices of cross-ethnic identification.

In the African context, it seems, anthropologists have not been able to develop the study of ethnic identity much beyond the Barthian paradigm. Historical approaches have shifted the perspective by showing that ethnicity (and ethnic groups) is neither stable in time nor independent from wider social and cultural constraints. They evidence the way(s) in which ethnic identities were naturalized and reified by colonial regimes, thereby setting new group boundaries in societies that were almost certainly ethnically mixed in the precolonial past.<sup>1</sup>

Amselle (1999), for instance, uses the concept of 'chains of societies' to describe the flexible configuration of precolonial spaces through networks of relations organized around exchange, politics, language, culture or religion. Similarly, Lonsdale (1994) describes the existence of precolonial 'permeable ethnicities' constituted through the making of communities bound by exchange, recognition, trust and shared moral values. Nevertheless, the ensuing emphasis on the 'fixing' of identities across the colonial and postcolonial periods (or, as Amselle puts it, the 'ethnic fetishism' of the colonizers that replaced and fixed pre-existing fluid social categories) tends to obscure the fact that people continued, under colonial regimes and afterwards, to travel, to cross territories, to settle and marry in different communities, and certainly to self-identify according to their own needs. In other words, 'permeable ethnicities' are not (only) something located in a distant African past (Werbner 2002: 734).

Furthermore, the emergence of local conflicts across the continent since the 1990s has encouraged scholars to focus on the essentialization and politicization

of group identities in the struggle for political power and economic assets within nation-states.<sup>2</sup> As Werbner (2002: 752) points out, this has resulted in an ‘excessive focus on differentiation or opposition, conflict and competition’, which largely dominates the literature on ethnicity. Research on new forms of essentialization, although necessary, did not dispute anthropology’s general assumption about ‘the existence and integrity of collective boundaries’ (Cohen 1994: 124).

Such overconcentration on a Barthian-inspired model of ethnicity in which identity is interactional – but only between distinctly bounded groups – leaves little room for theorizing identity with respect to groups that appear ‘betwixt and between’ (Eriksen 2002: 213–14) and whose members may transcend usual categories of ascription. For such groups and their members, identity is rarely just a matter of negotiating either/or between two or more ‘bounded’ identities; rather, it is a matter of negotiating either/and. Arguing for the use of ‘frontier’ or ‘border’ instead of boundaries, Anthony Cohen invites us to have a closer look at ‘the lines which mark the extent of contiguous societies, or to meeting points between supposedly discrete social groups’ (1994: 125). In this book, I suggest that some identities can be constituted precisely on border lines and in those regions of ambiguity that resist classic definitions of ethnicity. But to understand these identities for what they are requires us to do at least two things: to analyse the historical processes that resulted in the constitution of such identity; and to combine this with a cross-analysis of the contemporary dynamics by which people, individually and collectively, experience, reformulate and maintain their ‘betwixt and between’ status.

In this book, I try to accomplish this dual task with respect to the Sherbros. I adopt a historical perspective that highlights the complexity of ethnogenesis as a multifactorial process (see Fardon 1988; Nugent 2008; Peel 1983), while showing how the production of ethnic boundaries in the past has contributed to setting the conditions for practices of cross-ethnic identifications in the present. I show how the Sherbros have included over time various (ethnic) categories as part of their group identity. My use of ‘category’ refers to the various performances related to a distinct ethnic identity and the ability of actors to use its set of sociocultural attributes (language, dress, habits/behaviours etc.). The category that actors perform is not necessarily the one by which they identify themselves primarily.

The ability of Sherbro communities to form cooperative practices with members of other groups has been crucial to identity formation itself. My focus on reciprocity and its role in the construction of ethnicity shifts this study further along the axis of the subjective dimensions of identity, to probe how people think about these relations of exchange, and how this influences performances of ethnicity in the present. In the following chapters, I argue that the relations of reciprocity that Sherbros established with other groups, by allowing people of multiple origins to integrate into local communities, resulted in a hybrid type of ethnic identity, which valorizes heterogeneity *and* purity at the same time. I

depart from postmodern conceptualizations of hybridity, developed in relation to diaspora and migration studies, which emphasize the ability of cultural hybrids to dissolve boundaries.<sup>3</sup> Sherbro individuals do not see themselves as ‘creole’ or ‘mixed’. The plural nature of Sherbro identity does not break down ethnic categories and differences, but rather allows individuals to engage with them in a socially productive way – which may involve cross-ethnic ties or relatedness *and* strategies of othering (including the rhetorics of autochthony). In other words, the hybrid subject can claim plurality along with purity. We shall see that this ambivalence is related to the inherent paradox of reciprocal exchange itself: the establishment of socioethnic boundaries through exchange also allows crossovers and switches. Here, I extend Marotta’s observation that ‘the hybrid subject, and the cultural space that it creates, does not make boundaries obsolete, rather they are essential to its very constitution’ (2008: 301).

The hybridization of Sherbro identity is the product of historical processes of exchange with populations whom Sherbro groups viewed as strangers. How to make strangers part of the social body – to what extent and in what terms – is a critical question that most societies grapple with. Discourses about ‘the stranger’ illustrate the tension that exists between the acceptance of sociocultural difference within the social body, which is grounded in the commonality of the human experience, and perceived fears that new power relations may endanger the (imagined) inner core of society. Strangers thus often face restrictions regarding their status and activities, and may be maintained in a state of political, economic and/or legal dependency that reminds them of their social debt. A specific type of ‘reciprocal tension’, Simmel (1950: 408) states, characterizes the relationship to the stranger, whose presence and activities are often much needed.

Throughout the following chapters, it should become clear that reciprocity is the form of exchange that Sherbro themselves think about most often in relation to identity. This relational view of self is relevant for many African societies, despite attempts by colonial and postcolonial states to insert fixed boundaries and reduce the complexity of frontier areas characterized by multi-ethnic co-existence and mixing. Precolonial and colonial African societies, depending on their size, political organization and hierarchical structure, accommodated alien individuals in multiple ways, through marriage, adoption, clientship, slavery, friendship, initiation etc. (see Cohen and Middleton 1970). As Shack notes (1979b: 14), these subnational processes, following independence, became subsumed under broader logics of state and nation-building. Yet communities have maintained them as mechanisms of local relevance too, and they have done so *in spite of* national policies that foster conflict between groups. In this book, I analyse those arrangements in the perspective of social debt and examine how the perception of this debt may change, create points of friction and have implication for identity-making. For now, let us approach reciprocity from the vantage point of anthropological theory.

Reciprocity may be defined as a type of cooperative practice that lies at the heart of producing a social fabric. Foundational analyses present gift-giving as a process of exchange that represents the driving force for the establishment of alliances. Practices of gift-exchange produce a normative system that binds different groups of people with social obligations and helps them build a set of common values (Lévi-Strauss 1949; Malinowski 1922; Mauss 1990 [1923–24]). Mauss emphasized the importance of reciprocity by presenting gift-exchange as a foundational principle that reinforces social cohesion and solidarity. In identifying the three obligations ‘to give, to receive and to return’, he showed that social ties are sustained by the continual return of gifts and counter-gifts over a long period, and that the unreturned gift wreaks havoc on its recipient and his social relations. For his part, Simmel (1950) emphasized the centrality of faithfulness (commitment) and gratitude in making human relationships more stable and cohesive – that is, the experience and expression of sentiments in addition to the exchange of calculable and material substances. In those early approaches, reciprocity appears as ‘the moral cement of culture and society’ (Komter 1996: 301) – namely, a social arrangement framed by moral commitment.

In this shared sociological and anthropological tradition, I adopt an anti-utilitarian perspective on reciprocity to emphasize the social value of gift-exchange. In other words, the primary objective of reciprocity is not to acquire goods, but to establish social relations based on cooperation and, more specifically, to create a moral commitment by which people will want to sustain those relations through the exchange of items (goods, services) or people (women, children, slaves), which acquire symbolic value. At the same time, the alliance thus established is always revocable, which marks a shift from peace to war, from trust to mistrust (Caillé 2007: 9–10).

In this book, I am concerned with the lived experiences of reciprocity between people belonging to different ethnic groups – that is, how reciprocal relations and values of moral commitment are imagined, talked about, used and manipulated. Reciprocity is a cultural model of interaction shaped by local representations: representations about the arrangement itself (what should be exchanged, with whom and how), past interactions (how reciprocity was established and practised in the past), relations of trust (who can be trusted and who cannot, based on past interactions and reputation) and anticipated returns (how interactions between groups will change in the future) (see Ostrom 2003). To observe reciprocity under this light is to focus on *expectations* of reciprocity formed by various groups in relation to each other. Expectations do not always materialize, so I also draw a distinction between the general consensus about reciprocity in society – or ‘a shared understanding about how people should interact: an ethic that governs the exchange’ (Walsh-Dilley 2017: 520) – and underlying logics of power relations, hierarchies and conflict. Power relations can subvert established rules

built on (expected) mutual loyalty, and thus make social relations unstable and unpredictable. From this perspective, reciprocity, as expressed by local discourses, appears as the fulcrum around which social change and reproduction are constantly renegotiated.

In order to illustrate this ambivalence, I focus on an institution central to political culture in Sierra Leone and West Africa. This is the landlord/stranger arrangement, which establishes relations of reciprocity between proclaimed 'owners of the land' and people who settled after them, or 'strangers'. The creation of bonds of reciprocity proceeds from the mutual recognition of social identities as landlords and strangers, which may be linked to specific ethnic identities. Although entailing a degree of social hierarchy, such bonds imply 'the recognition of the other person as a potential ally' (Komter 2007: 102). This alliance as it is found across Africa exemplifies the inherent ambivalence of exchange, since it rests simultaneously on the willingness to associate with neighbouring groups and on the need to prevent conflict. In this respect, this type of association is both 'free' and obligatory, based on altruism and on interest (see Caillé 2007: 51–54; Komter 2007: 103). At the same time, by opening up the possibility of long-term relationships and/or assimilation, it affects the production and performance of identity. In the chapters in this volume, I analyse how this institution frames the rhetorics of contemporary Sherbro identity and substantiates practices of cross-ethnic identification.

In taking the Sherbro group as a case study, I limit my argument to the West African context. In societies of the Upper Guinea Coast, reciprocity assumes a distinct set of social forms and meanings, which have been well documented through the ethnographic literature. However, it should be expected that the contours of ethnic identity in other social and geographical contexts is mutually constituted through relations of reciprocity, and that reciprocity is a dominant element in intergroup relations that shapes the expression of ethnic relations in other regions of Africa as well. Patterned relations between patrons and dependants were widespread across precolonial and colonial Africa. These involved forms of feudalism, slavery and wealth-in-people (see e.g. Goody 1971; Guyer 1993; Miers and Kopytoff 1977). Shack and Skinner (1979) also show that host/stranger relations continued to inform strategies of nation-building across Africa in the post-independence period. The continuous relevance of this model for the organization of social life in Africa demonstrates the importance of looking at regional processes as expressions of wider phenomena.

## **Landlords, Strangers and Sherbro Ethnogenesis**

Landlord/stranger relations are a common cultural idiom in Africa for expressing local ideas of identity, belonging and social hierarchies. The local politics of land rights usually delineate social identities and mediate access to political

membership in specific communities (Berry 1993; Lentz 2006a). Kopytoff's analysis (1987) of the precolonial internal frontier shows that this model has a long history on the African continent. Groups of 'frontiersmen' would decide to leave their political community and establish firstcomers' rights on a new land, thereby becoming 'owners' of the land and claiming authority over later migrants. However, Kopytoff's model characterized a context in which large amounts of land were available to claim, which is rarely the case in Africa today.

The landlord/stranger arrangements, which organize the social differences between 'owners of the land' (or firstcomers) and groups of latecomers, are typical of the local institutions in precolonial Africa in that they order patron-client relationships (see Berman 1998). This type of alliance emerged in the West African context of long-distance trade as a means to secure commercial routes and ensure 'peaceful intergroup exchanges' between communities (Brooks 1993: 38). The moral obligation of hospitality by the landlord guaranteed the stranger's safety in a context of slavery and slave-raiding, but also ensured that he was kept 'under control' by local families. By placing themselves under the authority of a local landlord, strangers also secured land use and protection for their properties. They reciprocated by paying taxes, and usually refrained from becoming involved in local politics in order to remain loyal to their landlord (Fortes 1975; Mouser 1975; Shack 1979a). By such arrangements, local powerful men expanded their networks of social dependants, thereby solidifying a political economy based on wealth-in-people – that is, the control of dependents to achieve status and power (Bledsoe 1980; Guyer 1993) – and could use these networks of dependants to administer subterritories and expand local economic activities.

The landlord/stranger relationship was a dynamic system that allowed for the emergence of localities marked by plural cultural and linguistic influences. It did not create fixed boundaries, but instead made it possible for people of various origins to renegotiate social identities and ethnic affiliations according to shifting power relations between groups (Bellagamba 2000: 39–40; Lentz 2006a: 14; Trajano Filho 2010: 161–62). As in other parts of precolonial Africa, ethnic identities in Sierra Leone tended to be fluid, contextual and dependent on flexible social attachment and group membership, networks and mobility.

Thus, based on the premise of reciprocity, landlord/stranger relations allowed people of various origins and backgrounds to form a community of shared values. This corresponds to a type of 'moral ethnicity', which Lonsdale defines (1994: 132) as 'the common human instinct to create out of the daily habits of social intercourse and material labour a system of moral meaning and ethical reputation within a more or less imagined community'.<sup>4</sup> The landlord/stranger alliance defined a common basis for the renegotiation of social positions and land rights within a specific locality. In turn, conforming to the rules of reciprocity produced local belonging and delineated the boundaries of the political community. It set a consensus among the resident groups about how to be a person of virtue and

become eligible for local rights. The distinction between firstcomers and latecomers embedded in structures of patronage, their respective economic occupations and rights, as well as their mutual recognition as significant actors of local communities, were more relevant to social identity than ethnic identity as such. Differences in culture or language had little meaning without the larger moral framework of ethnicity that took patronage systems as its principle.

As such, in analysing the elements available on Sherbro ethnogenesis, I follow Spear's argument that ethnicity was not entirely constructed by colonial forces. Ethnicity, as it appeared in the twentieth century in West Africa, is better understood as a product of the impact of colonial policies on precolonial 'traditions and forms of ethnic consciousness' (Spear 2003: 25; see also Mark 1999; Nugent 2008; Peel 2000). In the early twenty-first century, ethnicity continues to refer back to the precolonial forms and modes of relatedness, even as it is reshaped by colonial and postcolonial policies. Of these precolonial forms, the landlord/stranger arrangement continues to stand out as the most significant. It has allowed Sherbro-speaking communities to integrate various types of strangers in their midst and has contributed to Sherbro ethnogenesis.

Sherbro ethnogenesis is tied to the political and economic history of the Sierra Leonean coast. Historically, Sherbro speakers were predominantly fishermen along the country's southern coast, although they combined fishing with small-scale agriculture. Sea, estuaries, rivers and lagoons were dominant elements in their lives as resources for livelihood, transportation, communication and trade (Davidson 1969; Krabacher 1990: 30).

'Sherbro' designates both a language and an ethnicity. Sherbro belongs to the Mel languages, a subgroup of the Atlantic languages. The Mel cluster is further divided into the Temne branch and the Bullom-Kissi branch (Bullom So/Mmani, Sherbro or Mampa Bullom, Bom and Kissi).<sup>5</sup> Speakers of Bullom So were established along the Sierra Leone River estuary as early as the fifteenth century, while Sherbro was identified as a distinct language on the southern coast sometime after European contact. However, both groups are presumed to be among the earliest inhabitants of contemporary Sierra Leone.

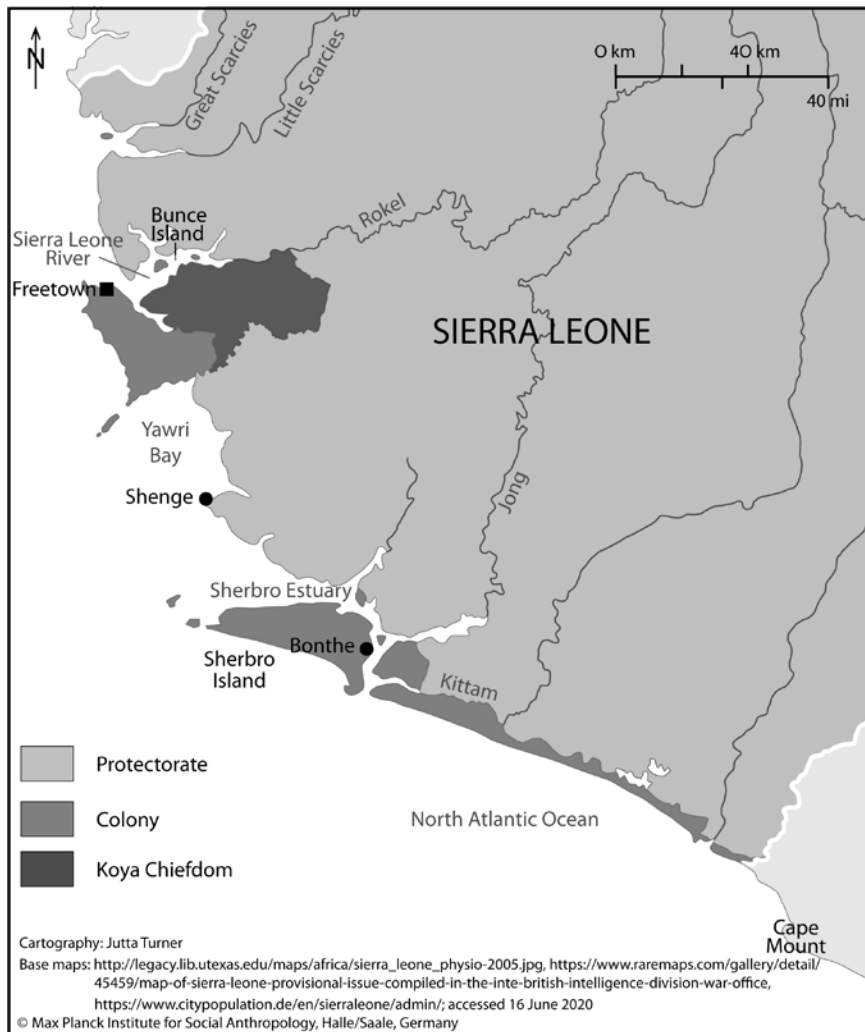
At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Portuguese texts mention Temne and Bullom-speaking populations as the inhabitants of Sierra Leone (Hair 1967a: 253, 1967b: 50). Some texts mention the name 'Sapi' as early as 1506 to refer to coastal people of the Mel language group 'around and on the Peninsula' (Hair 1968: 48).<sup>6</sup> Yet, 'Bullom' and 'Temne' also figure as separate groups in accounts by Pacheco Pereira (1507) and Valentim Fernandes (1508) (Hair 1967b: 50). Comparing the various accounts, Paul Hair (1967a: 254) concludes that Bullom speakers occupied the coastal line 'from near the Scarcies River, past the Sierra Leone peninsula, to Sherbro Island and the Kittam River'.

Hair's evaluation of linguistic continuity in the region shows that the presence of Bullom-speaking populations on the coast was fairly stable over time.



The main historical event reported in the Portuguese sources in the mid-sixteenth century are the so-called Mane invasions, by warriors who were likely Vai speakers and who advanced north along the coast from a region situated around Cape Mount (Hair 1968). Some scholars, such as Person (1961) and Rodney (1967), have argued that the Mane invasions caused a radical sociopolitical rupture among ‘Sapi’ populations. However, linguistic analysis suggests that the Mane invaders were likely assimilated to local communities (Hair 1967a: 256, 1968).

Landlord/stranger relations played an important role in connecting coastal peoples to transnational networks from at least the time of European contact. As early as the mid-fifteenth century, local societies applied their norms of



**Map 0.1.** Sierra Leone at the end of the nineteenth century. © Jutta Turner

hospitality to European merchants. They allowed the Portuguese *lançados*, for example, to settle and to marry women of their patron's kin group. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Sherbro communities to the south of Yawri Bay established matrimonial alliances with British traders. The Royal African Company, chartered by the British Crown, developed its trade activities throughout the seventeenth century and built forts along the coast to secure an economic monopoly over the region against other nations. Some of the British merchants married influential Sherbro women and founded powerful Afro-British lineages.<sup>7</sup> The descendants of those traders, some of whom were educated in England, not only acted as middlemen between the British and African groups, but also played a leading role in the slave trade of the eighteenth century.

It seems likely that the name 'Sherbro' emerged from transnational contacts with Europeans sometime after the establishment of trading posts on the coast by the British in the seventeenth century. The name itself is presumed to be a corruption of 'sea bar', referring to the bar at the Sherbro estuary (Koelle 1854: 2). Traders used the name to refer to the coast south of the Peninsula, from Yawri Bay to the estuary of the Sherbro River. 'Sherbro' thus became the English name for coastal Bullom-speaking populations to the south of Sierra Leone. Another recent analysis by Corcoran (2014: 4–5) is consistent with earlier research (Hall 1938; Pichl 1967) that report 'Sherbro' to be derived from a Bullom political title *Shebora* or *Sherbora*, which was already in use at the time the Portuguese described the coast of Sierra Leone. In any case, though it appears to be a neutral geographical and linguistic designation, 'Sherbro' came into existence as a distinct group based on the specific relations they had with European traders.

The astonishing way that Afro-British families gained positions of power in the region is due, notably, to the way in which landlord/stranger relations were deployed as part of Sherbro political culture. Two factors influenced local patterns of integration. On the one hand, the acephalous structure of the political system enabled strangers to approach directly local rulers for protection. By contrast with large and centralized polities, in which each group could live separately, the dispersion of power in scattered settlements encouraged hosts and strangers to cooperate and create alliances on multiple levels (see Cohen and Middleton 1970: 16). Similar principles are known to have been active widely, if not uniformly, across Africa. For instance, Colson (1970: 40), in her study of Tonga society in Zambia, notes that 'when they settled, [strangers] sought to entrench their position by an appeal to the common values of kinship and neighbourhood'. On the other hand, local patterns of kinship facilitated integration. The cognatic descent system of Sherbro society allowed the children of strangers to derive social rights from their mother, by which they became fully assimilated into local communities. Marriage to a woman of the local group guaranteed strangers' access to equal rights over one or two generations, particularly when this alliance involved a woman of high status

(MacCormack 1979: 198, 1997: 278). This contrasted with patrilineal systems, which produced strict hierarchies in which the children of strangers and local women could not acquire full political rights based on kinship and in which their descendants remained subordinate to dominant patrilineages (Brooks 2003: 51–52). As in Colson's study of Tonga patterns of assimilation, people in Sherbro settlements preferred dealing with strangers 'as potential members of their own society' (Colson 1970: 45).

In the eighteenth century, Bullom-speaking populations became increasingly fragmented under the pressure of larger groups. According to Hair (1967a: 255), they occupied the same stretch of coast, 'but only in pockets, their line being broken by Temne and Mende intrusions, apparently made since 1800'. Along the Sherbro coast, speakers of Mende (from the larger Mande language group) expanded westwards to the shore, which marked the beginning of the coexistence of Mende and Sherbro populations in the southern region. On the Peninsula, Bullom and Temne populations came into closer proximity. In early Portuguese sources, Temne are described as inland people, who occupied territories to the north and southeast of the Peninsula (Hair 1968: 51). They may have started migrating towards coastal territories between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Hair (1967a: 255) contends that, in the eighteenth century, Temne populations at the Scarcies River had extended 'some miles to the south at the expense of the Bullom'. Winterbottom (1803: 3–4) observed that 'the Timmanees ... forced themselves down the river Sierra Leone, among the Bulloms, who formerly possessed the whole region from the river Kisse to the Sherbro'. The Temne and Bullom kingdoms on both sides of the Sierra Leone River became rivals. Earlier peaceful coexistence may have turned into enmity due to the new foreign presence in an expanding trading area. Chiefs who signed treaties with the British at the end of the eighteenth century were identified by the colonists as Temne rulers from the Koya chiefdom, which lay close to the Peninsula. Therefore, Sherbro claims of autochthony are sometimes still contested by Temne populations on the ground that the Peninsula was part of Koya, particularly in towns that are close to the present chiefdom, like Tombo (see Chapter 2).

## **The Peninsula Frontier Zone**

The geographical focus of this study is the Freetown Peninsula region. This choice allows for a closer examination of historical and present relations of Sherbro communities with the black settlers of the Colony later known as 'Krio'. Communities situated in other regions, particularly along the southern coast, would differ in the details, though the general pattern of Sherbro identity and interethnic relations being constructed and negotiated around a common moral core based on landlord/stranger relations would still be visible.

The political geography of today's Sierra Leone still bears the imprint of colonial developments. In 1808, Freetown and its Peninsula became part of a British Crown Colony. The Colony's territory was differentiated from the British Protectorate, which was established over the hinterland in 1896 (see Map 0.1). Freetown was conceived as distinct from the Peninsula on which it is located, but the Peninsula was also distinguished from the 'hinterland' that comprises the majority of the country today. Under British rule in the nineteenth century, the Peninsula became a frontier region. Diverse populations met and developed different types of social, cultural and material exchanges through ambivalent processes of integration and friction (see Rodseth and Parker 2005: 12). As a frontier, the Peninsula remained a remote 'wild' space: it was cut off from the colonial administration in Freetown and yet accommodated new populations. In this role, it became a site for the emergence and transformation of ethnic identities in direct relation to colonial developments.

Coastal settlements of the Peninsula, from the nineteenth century onwards, came to form one of West Africa's 'coastal micro-regions where migrant fishermen of different origins' met and lived together (Chauveau 1991: 15). Canoe migration along the coastline, whether permanent or seasonal, intensified with the modernization of fishery technologies and the constitution of urban markets for fish. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Sherbro-speaking fishermen living along the southern coast migrated northwards, as conflicts between chiefdoms created an unsafe environment along the Sherbro coast (Fyfe 1962). Temne fisherfolk migrated to the north of the Yawri Bay at the beginning of the twentieth century and settled with them (Hendrix 1984).<sup>8</sup>

Processes related to migration, colonization and the growth of inland markets certainly gave more importance to mechanisms of assimilation of migrant fishermen. Like strangers before them, these men took wives in the communities to which they migrated. It is difficult to assess, historically, the distinct ethnic make-up of Peninsula communities. Fishermen may have migrated to 'old' pre-existing Bullom or Mampa Bullom (Sherbro) communities or may have established new ones (see Chapter 2). At the same time, migrations occurring from south to north certainly raised the number and size of Sherbro settlements along the Peninsula coast. They may explain why current Sherbro populations trace family ties to places such as Bonthe, Shenge and other places along the Yawri Bay. In this way, they also acknowledge their social and cultural connections to the south and to the Mende.

In any case, during the nineteenth century, Bullom populations were recognized as firstcomers in coastal areas of the Peninsula, regardless of the uncertainties over their earlier provenance and identity (see Fyfe 1962). Fishermen coming from other areas were assimilating into Bullom communities as early as the nineteenth century, but this process on a smaller scale probably pre-dated this period of large fishing migration. The 'moral ethnicity' binding landlords

and strangers involved not only land allocation and marriage, but also the values of fishing and their ritual ethos. Fishing migration produced multi-ethnic communities of fisherfolk united by their livelihood in small communities of belonging.

As migration accelerated in the twentieth century with the development of Freetown, processes of differentiation appeared gradually, which I will detail in Chapter 1. Yet, until the early twentieth century, rural settlements of the Peninsula remained relatively isolated from Freetown. Connections to Freetown were usually made by sea rather than by the bush paths that connected individual settlements (Melville 1849). Nevertheless, colonial dynamics also impacted ethnicity formation. Even in its rural areas, the Colony was a space forged by direct colonial rule, intense economic activities, and successive waves of migration and urbanization. Sherbro-speaking populations interacted not only with members of other local groups, but also with the black settlers of the Colony. Those interactions started at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the slaves captured by the British on slave ships along the coast were ‘freed’ in Sierra Leone. Members of this new group, called the Liberated Africans, were then encouraged by the colonial authorities to settle along the Peninsula.

As local populations coexisted with many alien groups, it is safe to assume that social arrangements based on reciprocity in this nineteenth-century frontier zone played an important role in shaping the nature of those interactions and, ultimately, in building contemporary Sherbro identity as a bridging category. They resulted in cultural integration: Sherbro populations on the Peninsula characterize themselves partly through their selective adoption of the sociocultural attributes of other ethnic identities. These adoptions are not seen as leading to assimilation, but as allowing for the emergence of a shared system of practices and meanings. In their social practice, actors self-identified as Sherbro easily cross ethnic boundaries. They can relate to multiple ethnic origins and use them strategically. This type of identity performance is the product of a ‘frontier zone’ shaped by mobility and a high degree of social interactions.

West Africa counts numerous instances of ‘frontier zones’ characterized by several centuries of intensifying mobility and high sociocultural diversity. Scholars working in the region have documented practices of cross-ethnic identification both on the coast and in inland areas (Berliner 2010; McGovern 2013; Sarró 2009, 2010). In Mali, for example, Amselle (1998: 52–54) has shown the existence of a ‘system of transformations’ that accommodates for switches in ethnic identity between Fulani, Bambara and Malinke societies. Ethnic conversions result from power relations, as individuals acquire ‘a position of dominant or dominated’ (ibid.: 52) related to the movements and implantation of groups in the region. Conversions from Fulani to Bambara identity, for instance, imply a statutory change, as families are incorporated into dominant lineages and often combine with religious conversion, as the Muslim faith is abandoned in the

profit of fetishist beliefs (*ibid.*: 53–54). Those changes, although reversible, are expected to hold for relatively long periods of time.

Following these authors, one purpose of this book is to use the case of the Sherbro to demonstrate the central role of local politics, particularly of reciprocity, in substantiating such practices. That identity should be conceived, in Amselle's words, 'a political phenomenon or as ratified by the powers that be' (1998: 54) has been demonstrated time and again by scholars working on ethnicity. Yet in the rush to understand repeated 'ethnic' conflicts, the substance of ethnic fluidity – namely, its human realization and related social practice in contemporary societies – has been given less attention than it merits. Taken together, the integrative processes described below, and across West Africa, may be relevant for other regions in Africa where frontier processes have been commonly accompanied by strategies in building wealth-in-people and attracting strangers into productive areas.

### **Reciprocity and Social Integration from a West African Perspective**

Social arrangements between firstcomers and latecomers continue to be very much alive across Africa. They are particularly important for organizing access to resources, such as land and political rights (Berry 1993; Chauveau, Jacob and Le Meur 2004; Lentz 2006a, 2013). The nature of the mutual obligations that bind hosts and strangers usually depends on the economic organization of the local society and its interaction with the productive skills of strangers.<sup>9</sup> The relations between hosts and strangers usually follows what Sahlins (1972) termed 'balanced reciprocity' because they are based on the exchange of differentiated assets (strangers provide goods and labour, hosts provide women and land). Moreover, the relation has symbolic and ritual dimensions, since landlords enact authority over land by establishing ties with local spirits (Kuba 2004; Lentz 2006a, 2006b). The landlord/stranger reciprocity could best be described as an 'arrangement' in Schatzki's terms (2002) – namely, a set of institutions and meanings that structure relations between groups and embrace various dimensions of social life. The concept of 'arrangement' points to the stability of this model through time, despite contextual changes that may relate to mobility, resources, or political switches. Thus, following Bellagamba (2004: 385), I take a 'historicizing' approach to an institution that has persisted since precolonial times and the meaning and significance of which has transformed with the variations of the sociopolitical context.

The implications of this arrangement on social life become clearer when considering the significance of hospitality in gift-exchange theory. Hospitality is a type of nonmaterial gift, which originates in the possibility of future exchange with strangers (Komter 2007: 95), but also creates an initial debt towards hosts that patterns subsequent interactions. The original act of hospitality binds the

stranger with the implicit commitment to display lasting gratitude towards hosts (Simmel 1950). In Sierra Leone, strangers are expected to show ‘respect’ (in the local idiom) to hosts, which includes symbolic payments and political loyalty. Thus, the landlord/stranger reciprocity is a moral agreement that reduces the insecurity that results from establishing social relationships with latecomers (Lévi-Strauss 1949; Malinowski 1922; Sahlin 1972; Simmel 1950) and helps both groups establish stable and sustained relationships (Mauss 1990 [1923–24]). At the same time, it is an inherently unstable combination, as it rests on the political, ritual and moral ascendancy of hosts over strangers.

As such, the landlord/stranger arrangement weaves political and economic interest with a set of morally binding values of gratitude and repayment. Murphy (2010: 40) defines it as a ‘moral economy of dependency: namely – a set of expectations and obligations in reciprocity and exchange between dependents and patrons’. This statement emphasizes the production of differentiated identities and statuses, thereby turning gift-giving into a mode of social control of ‘patrons’ over dependants (see Schwartz 1967). The bond of reciprocity is also a way to install a form of domination and to create debts that can never be cancelled (Godelier 1996).

The process by which strangers display moral values over time (showing respect and gratitude in various ways) can mitigate hierarchies and produce social integration. Strangers differ from outsiders: they are permanent or seasonal residents, related to local populations via marriage and/or economic exchanges. Over generations, they can obtain land, political and economic entitlements, and thus gain relative social status. Overall, relations of reciprocity that occur as part of the landlord/stranger institution work to include new strangers into host societies, thereby achieving social integration.<sup>10</sup> The implication of this is that reciprocity, by building trust and social capital within a locality, also structures identity claims. Identities may be fluid and crossovers frequent, yet they follow certain rules. In other words, it is not sufficient to choose one’s identity; one must have a rightful claim to it. And Sherbro identity on the Peninsula, due to its history, opens up many avenues for individual claims.

Sherbros have integrated and continue to integrate members of other ethnic groups on the basis of reciprocal relations. Two mechanisms lie at the heart of my ethnographic description. On the one hand, Sherbro communities assimilate members of local ethnic groups, who can acquire Sherbro identity. This process manifests in the local use of narratives of ethnic ‘transformation’: people explain the mechanisms by which their ancestors or they ‘became’ Sherbro over time. In Sherbro society, the establishment of a kin alliance and the adoption of local ritual practices are central to this integrative process. Other anthropologists working in societies of the Upper Guinea Coast point to the processual nature of identity and the existence of ‘idioms of transformation’ (Berliner 2010; McGovern 2013; Sarró 2009, 2010): it is possible to ‘become’

a member of an ethnic group by adopting a specific set of social and ritual practices. Those processes allowed for the emergence of fluid ethnic identities across the region (Trajano Filho 2010: 162). In Sherbro society, it explains how people can invoke and navigate other ethnic categories as constitutive of Sherbro identity, including the Temne and Mende categories that oppose each other on the national political scene.

On the other hand, historically, Sherbro communities built social and family networks with the black settlers of the Colony. In this instance, the strangers belonged to a colonial world to which local populations aspired. Sherbro populations employed strategies, such as marriage and child-fostering, to secure entry into the settlers' group. They acquired Krio identity over time, as part of their self-definition, and yet remained *kɔntri* – a Krio word derived from the English 'country' that translates as 'rural' or 'indigenous'. They could combine both identifications, despite the fact that the two identities were presented as mutually exclusive under the British colonial regime. Sherbros continue to position themselves as both Krio and *kɔntri*, thereby assuming an inbetween social status.

The dynamics of ethnic transformation and the inclusion of a Krio component into Sherbro identity – as processes that drew socioethnic boundaries while exposing Sherbro communities to outside influences – resulted in what I define as ethnic hybridity. Through this focus on hybridity, ethnicity appears ever more clearly as a 'set of relations' produced by historical forces (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). Sherbro ethnicity – in its definition and practice – has incorporated the structures of inequality that brought 'dissimilar groupings into a single political economy' ordered by colonial social classifications (ibid.: 54). Yet, in the Sherbro case, it did not lead to fixed distinctions, but to a possibility of crossing boundaries.

Ethnic hybridity is the result of reciprocity as a mode of interaction that achieves social and cultural integration. Processes of integration produced the distinct sociocultural contours of Sherbro identity, while constructing it as a fluid and unbounded practice. Sherbro identity became plural and able to accommodate various categories of identification. As a result, it assumes a mediating position between social and ethnic categories that continue to be viewed as antagonistic in the Sierra Leonean context (Mende/Temne, Krio/*kɔntri*). At the same time, Sherbro identity is experienced as fundamentally 'indigenous' to Sierra Leone, and the perpetuation of this identity on the Peninsula is closely related to the fishing livelihood and proximity to the sea, as Sherbros understand the seashore to be 'their' land. Yet, this fundamental relation between identity, land and livelihood has been questioned in recent years, as has been evident in a recent upsurge in autochthonous discourses.



## **Autochthony and the Politics of Recognition in the Postwar Context**

The Peninsula, in the wake of Sierra Leone's Civil War (1991–2002), has undergone significant political and demographic changes. The receptivity of hosts towards strangers has changed, which makes it a productive case to observe shifting power relations between groups and subsequent adjustments in reciprocity discourses and practices. The scale of internal migration has played a role in triggering the rhetoric of autochthony: local populations, fearing that groups of newcomers may become politically empowered, reassert their firstcomer status by stigmatizing and excluding them.

The Peninsula case combines the various factors that have otherwise led to conflicts based on autochthonous rights in other African contexts:<sup>11</sup> a demographic shift, a context of democratization, a relative economic differential between hosts and strangers, and scarce resources (in particular, land). Starting with the demographic shift, the population of the Western Area – i.e. Freetown (the Western Area Urban District) and the Peninsula (the Western Area Rural District) – has grown rapidly during the two decades following the Civil War.

Censuses since 1963 show that the region has always attracted rural migrants. Population growth in the Western Area Rural District marked its sharpest acceleration between 2004 and 2015 when its population increased by 154.9% from 174,249 to 444,270 people (Statistics Sierra Leone 2017: 99). It is the administrative district that gained the most population in Sierra Leone in this period of time. Freetown, of course, continued to be a hub of migration, as was expected, but to a lesser extent than the Western Area Rural District. The report on the 2015 census (Weekes and Bah 2017: 7), commenting on the growth in the Western Area Rural District concludes that 'population growth ... is probably due to large scale migration from the other regions during and after the eleven-year war' and that its negative impact is 'currently evidenced by large scale destruction of forests for settlement purposes'.

Sierra Leone's post-independence censuses did not record the ethnic identity or languages of its citizens on the Peninsula until 2015. Nevertheless, it is safe to assume that Sherbro populations already constituted a minority group on the Peninsula in the 1980s. Yet, until the Civil War, land was available and local communities could maintain territorial separation between their own settlements and more recently established ones. Tokeh, for example, remained a Sherbro-majority settlement of a few hundred inhabitants, even as larger villages like Tombo were mixed. Since the 2000s, it has been much harder to maintain ethnospatial boundaries. The availability of land has decreased sharply. Land shortage drives an intensification of discourses of ownership that encompass both the claims of autochthony of specific families based on oral history and the supposed autochthony of the Sherbro group at large. Landowning families

strongly resist newcomers' claims to land, as well as their claims to political sovereignty that would tear off sections of existing settlements (see Chapter 8).

Conflicts over land, as in other regions of Africa, have been key to the modification of landlord/stranger relations and the solidification of ethnic boundaries. Often, those conflicts result from state interventions in the allocation of land ownership. Changes in policies, when granting economic advantage to groups perceived as later settlers, can durably modify the relationships between them and their host communities. In Guinea, McGovern (2013) describes how the policy of 'mise en valeur' adopted by Sekou Touré's regime in the 1960s attempted to eradicate the customary system of land-use rights in Loma society and encouraged individual ownership of land. State laws gave Manyá speakers the possibility to obtain land rights without negotiating a customary arrangement with the Loma 'original' landowners, whereas those rights were previously tied to the cultural and social assimilation of Manyá speakers into Loma society. Manyá speakers felt less obliged towards their hosts to 'become' Loma (we find here the 'idiom of transformation' described above), which, in turn, participated in the construction of 'fixed' ethnic distinctions (*ibid.*: 103).

On the Peninsula, postwar governments have played a central role in transforming relationships between landlords and strangers towards conflicts based on autochthony. Speculative practices and the commodification of state land in the region have caused an exponential rise in land value. Thus, land has become a main economic asset for autochthonous families in a context of economic insecurity. Although long-term tenants can rightfully claim land ownership under customary law, those families are less inclined to grant this right altogether. As a result, groups of strangers have turned towards the state as an alternative patron that can mediate access to local rights. In some places, they have secured the right to claim political independence from their host communities and elect their own headman, which also gives them relative control over land (including the right to sell land).

The political strategy adopted by newly settled populations has been facilitated by the return to multiparty politics in the postwar period. The strategy for democratization has exacerbated the need for political leaders to secure a voting base, particularly in the Western Area that is more ethnically and culturally diverse than other regions (see Chapter 1). During the last two decades, newly settled populations have both acquired demographic weight and reinforced their economic advantage in commercial fishing (see Chapter 3). Along the Peninsula, their local representatives have made clever use of those assets to establish relations of patronage with political leaders and members of state bodies in Freetown.

In this light, autochthony is a response to local economic vulnerability in the postwar moment. In a shattered Sierra Leonean economy that leaves most of the population in conditions of extreme poverty, Sherbro narratives of

dispossession have become a trope against the backdrop of recent migration. Local populations have seen their influence eroded by demographic growth, political changes and conflicts over productive resources. As a result, they have tied their social status as firstcomers to a more bounded and exclusive version of ethnicity (Geschiere and Jackson 2006; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000).

However, in this book, I emphasize how claims of autochthony arise as a manifestation of unstable relations of reciprocity. Previous analyses of autochthony have productively theorized the impacts of political liberalization and the market economy on the production of local identities. At the same time, they tend to overlook local interpretations of conflicts that do not necessarily emphasize causal relations beyond the local or national level, but point out breakdowns in the local context itself. Reciprocity, in the West African region and beyond, often constitutes the local prism by which global factors become filtered: discourses about reciprocal relations reflect long-term social interactions, produce power relations and legitimate shifting uses of ethnic identity, including autochthony. Local understandings of ethnicity, as Chun (2009: 343) argues, only have 'meaning in these local contexts of experience and power, even as they work out tensions, conflicts and contradictions that may be rooted ultimately at the global level'. Reciprocity institutions, embedded in local political cultures, are central in mediating external forces (Walsh-Dilley 2017) – they help people to make sense of their integration into global systems by accommodating or contesting change. On the Peninsula, local discourses reveal that developments at the national and global levels are considered meaningful inasmuch as they indicate a continuation or a breakdown in moral values related to reciprocity, thereby determining the balance between social reproduction and social change.

Thus, populations on the Peninsula do not interpret their contemporary conflicts as being primarily over resources. They see conflict as the result of a breakdown in relations of reciprocity, and in a lack of mutual recognition of status, obligation and responsibility. This interpretation is consistent across the ethnic and social groups with whom I conducted fieldwork. Specifically, people saw conflict arising from the breakdown of landlord/stranger relations. The landlord/stranger arrangement normally guarantees political and legal recognition at the local level. Recognition involves both respect (giving the other rights) and social esteem (recognizing the other's cultural difference and abilities) (Honneth 1995). By entering into this type of alliance, groups of strangers are acknowledged as contributing to the construction of the political community (for instance, by providing ritual leaders, by leading economic activities or by ensuring political mediation). In many ways, it is an alliance by which groups seek social existence by *doing* something for the common good. As Hilgers (2011: 42) notes, there are degrees of autochthony that correspond 'to the position that each group occupies in the common space' and those positions reflect 'at least implicitly, the contribution of each one to the success of the collectivity'.

Reciprocal relations give social substance to various groups and mark their belonging to the collectivity.

In this light, landlord/stranger conflicts are, in Honneth's words (1995: 135–39), struggles to achieve patterns of mutual recognition. They are responses to subjective experiences of disrespect, as people who engage in conflicts feel that they are denied rights or moral relations. Although the local perspective emphasizes the expectation that these relations contribute to stabilizing the common good, further analysis demonstrates that the landlord/stranger arrangement is also a model of cultural action that legitimates political and social changes 'resulting from dependents having strategically gained positions of domination' (Murphy 2010: 42). The disruptive character of power differentials opens up the possibility to contest the relationship and emancipate from the original alliance (see Gouldner 1960: 174). Dependants can renegotiate their status by accusing patrons of failing their obligations, for instance, by refusing to grant land ownership or by levying taxes that land users perceive as undue. Such conflicts often result in political schism and the founding of a new political community. Chapter 8 presents several such cases along the Peninsula. The fact that groups of strangers may want to sever their ties with their patrons appears as a common scenario in Sherbro oral traditions. In this respect, conflicts based on autochthony can be viewed as attempts to redraw the boundaries of the original 'moral' community that set common values for different social groups.

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Having described the general theoretical arch of this study, let us now turn to some details and examples. Here I sketch out how Sherbro populations are integrated with other ethnic groups (via the transformative idiom and kriolization) and draw the distinction of a Sherbro identity from these patterns of integration, as a product of the 'frontier zone' described earlier.

During my fieldwork, I spent a good amount of time sitting with Mr Nicol on the porch of the community centre of Kissi Town. I had met him towards the beginning of my research. Mr Nicol, who was in his late fifties by then, was severely disabled and did not move from his wheelchair. When not staying in Kissi Town for research, I used to visit him regularly. We chatted about the latest news or just sat quietly, watching cars that drove by and greeting people who passed. People came to see him for various matters, as Mr Nicol had been the headman from 1981 to 2004. In 2010, a 'stranger' had become headman, challenging the ruling primacy of landowning families. Many inhabitants complained that 'the Temne' had taken over and that they dominated fishing in Kissi Town. Through it all, Mr Nicol remained available on the porch of the community centre, where people met with him. The headman himself came to discuss cases and receive his advice, particularly concerning land disputes.

During my stay in Kissi Town, Mr Nicol and his sister Mrs Koroma took me with them to Mokemba, their mother's village, about 50 kilometres down the coast. The first wife of Mr Nicol came from the same area. In Mokemba we were welcomed by Mr Nicol's family. I noticed that people conversed both in Sherbro and Temne. Mrs Koroma pointed out to me that Mr Nicol was addressed by his Temne nickname *Chemideif*. As she told people about my work, I was asked to record the founding myth of Mokemba told in Sherbro by an elderly woman. The myth foregrounded the long-term coexistence of Sherbro and Temne populations in Mokemba, but when I enquired more about it, people evaded my questions.

Later, I asked Mr Nicol how he had acquired the Temne name of *Chemideif*. He told me that he had been initiated into Poro, the male initiation society that marks local belonging and transition to adulthood, in Mama Beach, a neighbouring community on the Peninsula. During the initiation, he was given his society name, Pieh. Later in life, he took part in Poro festivities in Mokemba and sang the following song in Temne: 'Don't ask me, don't ask me [*chemideif*]. Then, whom should you ask? ... the head of the society, the one who takes the money from Bondo, the one who eats the money.' The song tells about the authority of the heads of the Poro society and mocks their propensity to appropriate the money paid by the heads of Bondo, the female society.<sup>12</sup> Ever since those festivities, the name of *Chemideif* had stuck.

Mr Nicol's names revealed the complexity of his social identity. His great-grandfather on the paternal side was a Mende migrant from Panguma, who had been 'adopted' (fostered) by a Krio. In the process, the family had acquired the British surname Nicol. Mr Nicol could not speak Mende, but his father had given him a Mende name, Kagbindi. People knew about Mr Nicol's Mende ancestry. A community of Mende migrants on the Peninsula had approached him to represent them as their next Mende tribal head.<sup>13</sup> He also had two Christian first names: Charles and George. He had acquired the first through baptism and the second through sponsorship, when a British resident of Freetown had paid for his schooling and given him a new name. Finally, he had acquired the society name of Pieh through the initiation in Mama Beach, although in Mokemba, he was known as *Chemideif*.

Mr Nicol always defined himself as Sherbro, at times as Mende and often as Krio. He traced his Sherbro origin on both sides of the family tree. His father's mother was part of the Leigh family from Freetown and owned the entire land of Kissi Town (see Chapter 8 for a detailed explanation of land disputes in Kissi Town). She was an 'educated Sherbro' and therefore could also be called a Krio. On his maternal side, his grandparents had migrated from Mokemba to Tasso Island. They had converted to Islam and changed their name to Kargbo, a last name usually associated with populations of Temne or Limba origin.

Yet, Mr Nicol was careful to avoid making any family connection to the Temnes. He explained to me that before his mother's father changed his name

to Kargbo, he was called Samuel Johnson, a name that was obviously Sherbro, and he argued that Temne populations had entered the Mokemba area only after his family had migrated.

At the time of Mr Nicol's grandfather's emigration, matters may have been different and a Temne connection may not have been as problematic as in the present moment. In any case, though Mr Nicol could also sing (if not speak) in Temne and carried a nickname because of it, he distanced himself from a 'Temne' ascription in terms of identity and ancestry.

### **The 'Transformative Idiom'**

Mr Nicol is not unusual among the Sherbros in having multiple known ethnic identifications. Indeed, Sherbro ethnic identity is itself built up around the history of such individuals. Nevertheless, Mr Nicol is an especially fascinating example of how individuals who define themselves as Sherbro can employ several ethnic affiliations and maintain connections to various ethnic groups, in this case Mende, Temne and Krio. Those affiliations reveal two social processes: one is ethnic 'transformation', that is, the process through which somebody can 'become' Sherbro; and another is kriolization, that is, the way by which an individual can acquire the attributes of Krio identity. Both are important aspects of individual identities among Sherbro populations. Those two social dynamics have deep



**Figure 0.1.** George Pieh Charles Nicol (1956–2020), 2011. © Anaïs Ménard

historical roots that relate to population movements and political changes in the region. While kriolization is the result of power relations that emerged with the imposition of the colonial rule, the ‘transformative idiom’ (Sarró 2010: 237) is the outcome of a specific mode of dealing with strangers in societies of the Upper Guinea Coast that have been shaped by intraregional and transnational mobility.

As sketched out above in the historical background, the existence of multiple migration routes, and maritime routes used by fishermen in particular, can explain that people who define themselves as Sherbro can trace links to both Temne and Mende-speaking groups. The family story of Mr Nicol reveals the way in which members of other groups assimilate into Sherbro communities and acquire rights rapidly. Mr Nicol’s paternal grandfather, whom he defined as Mende, married a Sherbro woman, Mrs Leigh, and Mr Nicol’s father was born in her village, Kissi Town. His father married a Sherbro woman from Mokemba and Mr Nicol was born in Kissi Town. His father sent him to be initiated in Mama Beach, a neighbouring Sherbro village, which sealed the matrimonial alliance of his grandfather and marked Mr Nicol’s belonging to his grandmother’s lineage. Mr Nicol stressed the importance of matrilineage in defining his Sherbro identity: he claimed it on his mother’s side (in Mokemba) and on his paternal grandmother’s side, the branch that had allowed him to inherit land in Kissi Town.

Mr Nicol’s story expresses an identity ‘thought and formulated through idioms of transformation’ as described in other societies of the Upper Guinea Coast (Sarró 2010: 237). Strangers can become part of the host group through a specific sociocultural process, which may involve the acquisition of language, customs, livelihood or participation to ritual practices (Shack 1979a: 9). Ethnic identity is mutable and can be achieved over time. Thus, some strangers ‘became’ Sherbro in the sense that they abandoned previous ethnic affiliations in favour of Sherbro identity. Nevertheless, this does not always imply that ‘all traces of strangeness’ are lost eventually (*ibid.*). In Bulongic society in Guinea, Berliner (2010: 264) shows that local discourses describe the process by which people of diverse ethnic origins came to form Bulongic society and invent a new identity. Similarly, in Sherbro society, people acknowledge (and use) their multiple origins and discuss how their ancestors ‘became’ Sherbro. The cognatic descent system and dominance of matrilineage, which is at odds with the patrilineal norms of other groups such as the Mende and the Temne, allow people to claim more than one ethnic identity. This specific feature also explains the many nuances by which one can claim Sherbro identity depending on one’s biography and origins. In the case of Mr Nicol, his paternal Mende origins, along with his long political career as headman in Kissi Town, even gave him enough credibility for Mende-speaking groups to consider him as a potential Mende tribal head.

Marriage and initiation continue to be the main avenues for ethnic ‘transformation’ in Sherbro communities. This is congruent with Shack’s argument

(1979a: 9) that ‘the cultural rather than the political process, including the adoption of language, customs, dress, mode of livelihood, fictive kinship, and religious practices, has been the most common and widespread method by which strangers have been completely incorporated into host societies’. Other anthropologists working in the region point to the relevance of the initiation process in changing one’s ethnic affiliation. Sarró (2010: 239) shows that belonging to the Baga Sitem society in Guinea involved ‘transformation, performance, and assimilation’. Becoming Baga involved a lengthy ritual process that included initiation (see Sarró 2009: 41–48). In the Guinean hinterland, McGovern (2013) demonstrates that the cultural and social assimilation of Many speakers into Loma society involved learning the Lomagi language and initiating into local societies. Yet, as those two identities have become less flexible over time, those shifts in identity became less frequent throughout the twentieth century. My own observations in Sierra Leone show that those processes continue to be very much alive in the Peninsula region.

In Sherbro society, the ritual process by which strangers can change ethnic and social status continues to be at work. Shack (1979b), following Victor Turner (1969), argues that ‘the ritual process’ allows strangers to move from a liminal position to be part of *communitas* and become members of the host society. This process marks the stranger’s belonging to the local community and opens up the possibility of acquiring local citizenship, which grants access to land and political rights. Mr Nicol’s Poro initiation marks his belonging to his paternal grandmother’s lineage and the rights that he derives from it, as the descendant of a Mende man who was affiliated to a Sherbro lineage. At the same time, he could take part in Poro rituals in his mother’s village – a place in which Sherbro and Temne cultural and linguistic practices were mixed. By defining himself as ‘Sherbro’, he could bridge the gap between Mende and Temne ethnic categories easily, although he denied Temne connections. The political context that stirred issues of autochthony clearly made the acknowledgement of Temne-Sherbro mixed origins a sensitive issue. I will examine in Chapter 1 the political reasons that underlie Mr Nicol’s (and others’) public rejection of his Temne origins and the emphasis on his Mende roots. For now, suffice it to say that Mr Nicol could call on a plural cultural and linguistic heritage, based on different kinds of kin connections, all of which supported the intergenerational process of his acquisition of Sherbro identity.

### **Creolization Processes and Hybridity**

Mr Nicol’s narrative also foregrounds the Krio dimension of Sherbro identity. He evoked two distinct processes: (1) the kriolization of members of local groups (in this instance, Mende), who acquired the attributes of Krio identity through fosterage in a Krio family; and (2) the equivalence that people



commonly establish between Krio and ‘educated Sherbro’ – a process that does not imply the assimilation of Sherbro individuals to the Krio group. Sherbros are not ‘fully’ Krio, but are Krio nonetheless. Both identities can coexist to define an individual. As an explanation to the proximity between the two groups, I was often told matter-of-factly that ‘the Krio are Sherbro’ and ‘the Sherbro are Krio’.

Krio identity emerged gradually from processes of creolization among local populations and various groups of settlers. Creolization refers to a process of social mixing, by which uprooted people – originally people born in the colonial plantations – fashion out original social and cultural forms out of heterogeneous influences. This process generates a new common identity that is ‘referred to in terms of common historical experience and roots and a (new) common home’ (Knörr 2010b: 733). The black settlers and their descendants who populated the Sierra Leone Colony from the end of the eighteenth century onwards were first referred to as ‘creoles’. However, by the mid-twentieth century, the name ‘Krio’ became used to designate a distinct (ethnic) group of mixed ancestry resulting from the settlement of various populations in the Colony.<sup>14</sup>

Sierra Leone received various groups of settlers between the late 1700s and the mid-1800s. In 1787, a group of British abolitionists led by Granville Sharp founded the Province of Freedom on the territory of present-day Freetown to resettle some of the ‘Black Poor’ who had been freed from slavery. The settlers secured the land of Freetown by signing treaties with local rulers of the Koya Temne region, King Tom and King Naimbana (Fyfe 1962: 19–21). However, their early settlement was burnt down by another local ruler, King Jimmy, in 1789. In 1790, English benefactors revived the project of the colony and King Naimbana agreed to the arrival of new settlers with the signing of another commercial agreement.

In 1792, the Nova Scotians, who had gained their freedom by fighting on the British side during the American War of Independence, reached the colony. They rebuilt the settlement and named it Freetown. They were followed by the Maroons in 1800. Finally, when the slave trade was abolished in the British Empire in 1807, British patrols stopped slave ships on the West African coast and released slaves in Sierra Leone to start a ‘free’ life. The resettled slaves came to be known as Liberated Africans. They soon constituted the largest group of settlers in the Sierra Leone Colony. By 1848, Liberated Africans and their descendants numbered 40,243. Liberated Africans populated Freetown and settlements along the Peninsula, where they came in close contact with local Bullom populations.

Krio identity resulted from processes of sociocultural mixing among those populations with diverse origins. By the mid-nineteenth century, the settlers and their descendants formed a heterogeneous group with regard to their occupation, social background or religious affiliation.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Krio identity,

in the historiography of Sierra Leone, is more closely associated with Freetown's social elite and its specific value in colonial society. Many members of this group were educated in Christian schools. Some of them had studied abroad and had intellectual professions. Similar to the Creoles in Guinea Bissau, Christian-educated settlers in Freetown formed a higher (urban) social class that cultivated cultural distinctiveness by adopting a European lifestyle and a set of values and habits judged as 'superior' or 'civilized' (Kohl 2018). Colonial authorities placed the black settlers and local populations at the two ends of the social ladder. Members of the Freetonian elite desired to mark their difference from upcountry people, whom they saw as 'primitive' (Cohen 1981). In this sense, this group forged a relatively exclusive identity.

Under colonial rule, the civilized/native<sup>16</sup> dichotomy was spatially situated. The settlers lived in the Sierra Leone Colony, that is, Freetown and its Peninsula. They had little contact with the population of the interior, except for traders who travelled inland. In 1896, British authorities established a Protectorate over the interior of the country, which created an official political distinction between citizens of the Colony and the mass of British-protected subjects, who were nonetheless considered autochthones when compared to the non-native 'Creoles' (Caulker 1976). This administrative division precipitated political divergence between the populations of the Colony and the Protectorate. Progressively, the British transferred political power to populations of the Protectorate. The process that led the path to independence, which implied the reunification of the two political entities in one country, effectively marginalized the Krio elite in national politics.

Krio identity, like other creole identities, was integrative and open to newcomers of various ethnic origins (Eriksen 2007; Knörr 2010b). Yet, individuals who were incorporated into the Krio 'elite culture' had to adopt distinct cultural attributes and social standards that set them apart from indigenous groups. Consequently, the literature has described social relations between Krios and local ethnic groups as one of unidirectional assimilation (see Cohen 1981; Porter 1963). In the Krio language, the process of 'becoming Krio' is commonly referred to as *kriónayzeshon*: as in Mr Nicol's narrative, individuals bearing other ethnic identities can assimilate into Krio society through education and adoption. In doing so, they also bring in various sociocultural features in the definition of (their) Krio identity. Yet, the influence of local groups on contemporary Krio culture has remained unexplored. Following Wyse (1989), Dixon-Fyle and Cole (2006: 6–7) stress that scholars have had little consideration for the fact that the Krios did not form a homogeneous 'upper class entity' shaped solely by foreign influences. Krios themselves have tended to downplay local cultural influences and to emphasize their non-Sierra Leonean origins, particularly Yoruba (as many Liberated Africans had Yoruba origins). Yet, local groups' cultural and social features also contributed in the making of Krio society.

Nowadays on the Peninsula, the local relationship between Sherbro and Krio does not follow the described pattern. Moreover, the historical data on Sherbro/Krio relations presented in Chapters 2 and 3 suggest that they never did follow a pattern of unidirectional assimilation. Sherbro and Krio identities remained distinct, while both groups related to the other through kinship, friendship, sponsorship and ritual practices. Inter marriages have been common between the two groups, even at times when Krios disapproved of marriages with local groups (Knörr 2010b: 746). Nowadays, Sherbros can present themselves as Sherbro/Krio or Krio/Sherbro with regard to family names, kinship, education and Christian values. They easily navigate Krio culture. Krios, for their part, readily acknowledge that Sherbros and Krios 'are the same people'. They can easily emphasize their Sherbro origins when they want to appear as authentic Sierra Leoneans (Knörr 2010a: 215).

Sherbros combine an identity as *kontri* (indigenous) with one as Krio. In this sense, they stand at the margin of the creolization process by their ability to navigate both social worlds. The construction of Sherbro ethnicity corresponds to Bakhtin's linguistic concept of 'hybridity' that defines the ability of speakers to use 'two social languages, within the limits of a single utterance' (1981: 358). Its social practice brings it close to intentional hybridity, by which speakers set two discourses against each other as part of a social or a political strategy (*ibid.*: 360; Young 1995: 20–21). Applications of hybridity in the social sciences have emerged as a critique of essentialism and have described the ability of actors to transcend racial and ethnic boundaries, particularly in contexts of uprootedness and migration (see e.g. Bhabha 1994; Gilroy 1993). However, following Ahmad's critique (1995), I consider hybrid identities to be the product of specific material and historical conditions. Agencies, Ahmad (*ibid.*: 16) states, 'are constituted not in flux and displacement but in given historical locations' (see also Werbner 2015: 21). It is because they are the result of long-term historicity that they appear as both 'transgressive and normal' (Werbner 2015: 4).

Historically, the construction of Sherbro identity points to the incorporation of mixed influences, which transgressed categories that were presented as definitive in the early European encounters of contact, and as 'fixed' and 'pure' by later colonial authorities. Under colonial policies and structures, individuals came to think of themselves as belonging to specific groups, whose reproduction was tied to colonial social dynamics. Yet as Bhabha (1994: 111–14) argues, the colonial powers also created the conditions for the production of hybridity because they could not eliminate (and also produced) transcultural forms and ethnic mixing. These processes subverted the colonial myths of cultural and ethnic purity, and challenged the binary structures that opposed colonized/colonizers and native/civilized. The emergence of hybrid cultural and ethnic forms was disruptive in that the colonizer was never wholly in control of its own discourse, which was appropriated and modified. To invoke the hybridity of Sherbro identity is thus

to remind the reader that the colonial period (and subsequent structures of governance) shaped expectations and expressions of ethnic identity.

However, hybridity has played out differently in the dynamics of Sherbro and Krio identities. In the Sierra Leone Colony, it is Krio identity that became more clearly the product of cultural creolization induced by colonialism. The Sherbros, by contrast, became a category of ‘cultural brokers who turn[ed] the classificatory ambiguities to their own advantage’ (Eriksen 2002: 65). Sherbro identity illustrates the agency of the colonized, for whom being ‘in between’ became not only a strategy, but also a way of fully occupying the interstices of the colonial world. This specificity allows us to think more globally about the relationship between hybridity and purity in relation to ethnic identities.

Hybridity is principally invoked in relation to multiculturalism, as a modernist/cosmopolitan version of ‘creole’ or ‘mixed’. Its use does not disrupt the general assumptions that ‘normal’ ethnic identities are ‘purer’ and that mixed identities, whether viewed positively or negatively, are unusual cases that defy the normal theoretical parameters for understanding ethnicity.<sup>17</sup> Like the concept of diaspora, hybridity evokes ‘the subversion of naturalized forms of identity centred on the nation’ (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk 2021: 2).

However, when looking at the social practices of people who self-identify as Sherbro, hybridity does not mean ‘mixed’ (in the sense, for instance, that the Krios are), but rather a juxtaposition of identifications that neither blend nor collide. Performances of hybridity do not threaten existing sociocultural boundaries, but instead compose with them in a creative way. As a result, I approach the concept of hybridity in a broader perspective: it includes the dual nature of Sherbro identity in the postcolony (being Krio and *kɔntri* at the same time), as well as its ability to include a large spectrum of other ethnic categories through past and present processes of assimilation – categories that Sherbro individuals can mobilize in specific ways. In other words, I see hybridity as the fact of having a pivotal position between various types of identities that remain distinct and separated.<sup>18</sup> Hybridity itself has acquired high status and keeps on reproducing itself in discourse and practice. The Sherbros may not be a unique case of hybridity (practices of code-switching between *kɔntri* and Krio, for instance, may be widespread), but the concept comes to illustrate the diverse composition of ethnic identities themselves, whose social understanding and practice rarely match definitions made either on the basis of ‘purity’ or on the basis of ‘mixing’ (or blending).

## **Ethnic Registers and the Performativity of Language**

Drawing on Bhabha’s semiotic approach to hybridity, I look at its transposition in local performances of identity. Performances are part of the discursive field – they become texts that underscore the relation between language and identity.

Mr Nicol's narrative, by playing on many identities for different purposes and contexts, points to ethnic identity as a linguistic performance. The focus on performance has allowed anthropologists to analyse ethnic identity as the product of situated social practices (Brubaker 2004; Eriksen 2002; Hutchinson and Smith 1996; Jenkins 2008). Those approaches emphasize the role of agents in assuming various identities and using them according to situations, contexts and needs. In order to clarify the multiple uses of Sherbro identity, I combine this processual approach with a linguistic perspective on identity, which provides useful theoretical tools to account for the historical phenomena at the heart of the processes of identity production.

Contemporary performances of Sherbro identity continue to transgress the dominant inherited narrative of distinct, binary categories (native/Krio, Mende/Temne). However, its social practice is neither liminal nor ambiguous; rather, Sherbro identity has encoded various ethnic registers as its own. Following Agha (2006: 24), a register is 'a linguistic *repertoire* that is associated, culture-internally, with particular social practices and with persons who engage in such practices' (emphasis in original). It is attached to a system of speech style, which includes both linguistic and nonlinguistic signs (for instance, gestures, physical attitude and clothes). Language users routinely engage in metapragmatic evaluations by reading those signs as indexes of registers and by linking those registers to specific identities.

Ethnic registers are '*historical formations*' (Agha 2005: 25). They acquire social value through a dynamic sociohistorical process of 'enregisterment', by which 'diverse behavioral signs ... are functionally reanalyzed as cultural models of action' (Agha 2007: 55). The social value of a register changes over time, as users change, adapt the register to the context, employ signs in innovative ways or compete over how these should be used. A register is made up of a collection of social values and meanings constituted at various times and locations. Sherbro identity 'enregistered' varying linguistic repertoires as part of its social practice, including the *kɔntri* and Krio registers, and the registers of other ethnic groups (i.e. language and customs), which resulted from close and multiple interactions at different periods in history. Enregisterment is the channel that allows for contemporary practices of cross-ethnic identification. Depending on the social interactions at work in specific places and on the speakers' skills, these repertoires of signs may play a stronger or weaker role in identity performances (for instance, the Krio dimension may be less important in certain regions).

Sherbro identity has integrated a large set of semiotic markers that point to various registers. People who self-identify as Sherbro can draw on different sets of linguistic and behavioural signs to emphasize one identity or another, when those become situationally relevant. This type of performance also depends on a speaker's skills. For instance, not everybody is able to display signs indicating social prestige, as in the case of the Krio category. This ability, or lack thereof, is

the outcome of an individual's social position in contemporary society and can be evidence of social inequalities.

Thus, I view ethnic identity as the product of both external and internal discursive processes. The former refers to the use of specific registers for external audiences in an interactional process, while the latter concerns the internal (re) definition of the social significance of indexical signs with regard to the context (decisions over which signs should be used and why, and for which audiences). For instance, conflicts with Temne strangers may encourage individuals to abandon indexical signs that link them to this register: many people, like Mr Nicol, choose not to disclose their knowledge of the Temne language.

From this perspective, the uses that people make of registers also reproduce power relations between language users, thereby sustaining asymmetrical interactions between hosts and strangers. They point to the dialectical relationship between hybridity and the legacy of colonial violence, and to the enduring weight of hierarchies of power in shaping practices of identification (also see Brah and Coombes 2000; Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk 2021). The historical construction of registers is tied to the production of ethnic 'categories' by colonial institutions in regimes of social inequality (Lentz 1995: 320). In Sierra Leone, colonial powers positioned Krios and natives in opposition, which produced stereotypical effects that continue to mould social action (see Agha 2007: 55). By including the Krio repertoire, Sherbro identity also incorporated power relations that were at the heart of colonial dynamics. Hybridity encoded 'the profound inequalities engendered by colonialism itself' (Ahmad 1995: 17). In this respect, it could not be separated from processes of cultural differentiation. Sherbro populations both subverted colonial hierarchies and reasserted their importance by building social strategies, such as education, child-fostering and marriage, in order to mark their belonging to a higher social group. In the present context, people continue to use Krio identity as a way to indicate social distinctiveness. Krio, like in Mr Nicol's narrative, defines a person as socially superior *because of* (Western) education. Thus, the ability to *krionayz* – i.e. to display signs associated with the Krio register, such as speaking Krio with a rich vocabulary – legitimates the reproduction of social hierarchies vis-à-vis other groups of strangers.

It should be noted that the performances of Sherbro identity may vary with the social and historical patterns of each region. We may talk about *identities* to define those variations, which are related to distinct (regional) 'enregimentment' processes depending on the ethnic and linguistic groups with which Sherbro populations coexisted. Nevertheless, the ease with which Sherbro people use cross-ethnic identification and substantiate this practice by referring to the trope of 'decline' is in itself a common denominator to all.

In other provinces of Sierra Leone, Sherbro identity is more closely defined vis-à-vis Mende and Temne-speaking populations than the Krio.<sup>19</sup> According to the census of 2015, people who self-identify as Sherbro represent 1.9% of Sierra

Leone's total population. By contrast, the Mende and Temne-speaking groups make up for a third of the population each. Even in the southern region, where the overall proportion of Sherbro people is relatively higher (6.2%), they coexist with a majority of Mende speakers (Weekes and Bah 2017: 25–26). In most regions, the tendency seems to be towards a Sherbro assimilation to the other groups and certainly a diminution in the active use of the Sherbro language (Childs 2010; Childs and Bendu 2018).

Yet, not all people who define themselves as Sherbro speak Sherbro. Corcoran (2014: 9) mentions that 65,736 Sherbro speakers were listed in the 2004 population census (1.3% of the population), while 111,652 identified as Sherbro (2.3% of the population). Similarly, language is not a necessary attribute of Sherbro identity on the Peninsula (see Chapter 5). Sherbro speakers are rare and the Sherbro language is mostly used for rituals.<sup>20</sup> Despite the fact that Sherbro had clearly 'died out' in the region, 3.2% of the population of the Western Area Rural District identified as Sherbro in 2015 (Weekes and Bah 2017: 26). As Corcoran points out (2014: 8), Sherbro people are well known for mastering neighbouring languages 'with native competence'. I illustrate their ability to move between ethnic groups in Chapters 4 and 5.

The trope of 'decline' of the Sherbro language and customs has become an inherent part of the performance and definition of identity itself. As a result of various strategies of assimilation, this trope allows people who define themselves as Sherbro to substantiate their multicultural background and claim other identities ('I am Sherbro, but I speak Mende/Temne/Krio' or 'I have been raised in a Mende/Temne region'), while processes of enregistrement, in Agha's sense, have rendered those 'other' identities socially acceptable in the eyes of other speakers. Being Sherbro represents an inherent possibility of being 'someone else' according to situational needs and somebody's performative skills. Sherbro (group) identity thus appears as the sum of individual discursive actions, a 'discursive formation' (Ammann and Kaufmann 2012) or 'discursive fiction' (Chun 2009), neither homogeneous nor stable in time, but rooted in distinct sociohistorical processes.

## **The Structure of This Book**

Chapter 1 sets the ethnographic scene by presenting the specificity of the Peninsula as a 'rurban' space and by analysing the historical conditions – in particular, land tenure – that have contributed to building tensions between local populations and newly settled groups. Accordingly, I also discuss more recent phenomena, such as migration, the economic and ecologic challenges of the fishing industry, and the postwar processes of democratization. Postwar democratization is especially important because it has produced legal changes that contribute directly to the politicization of ethnic identities in the region and to urgency in the discourses of autochthony. Finally, I present my methodology

based on multisited fieldwork, as well as epistemological reflections on secrecy in an urbanizing environment.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore the role of oral traditions in framing Sherbro imagination about ethnic boundary-making. These traditions include narratives about colonial encounters with the black settlers of the Colony and about the assimilation of members of other local ethnic groups in Sherbro communities. In Chapter 2, I focus on the way in which Sherbros and Krios narrate their early interactions, while in Chapter 3, I show how the reciprocal arrangements that Sherbro communities established with the black settlers differed from those that they established with other groups. Oral traditions, coupled with historical sources, allow us to understand the historical processes by which Sherbro identity acquired its hybrid meaning, as people both reaffirmed their sociocultural distinction and adopted other ethnic categories as their own. Moreover, the use of kinship idioms (based on wife-exchange) in oral traditions produces a discourse about political alliances. These narratives allow Sherbro stakeholders to present a version of history that becomes, at the same time, a discourse about *expectations* of reciprocity, by telling the audience about which other groups can or cannot be trusted in the present. This pattern also appears in stories about initiation presented in Chapter 7. Telling history both reflects and substantiates contemporary intergroup relations, from cooperation to open conflict, and in this way constitutes a collective performance of identity because the narratives follow common patterns and their implications are collectively agreed.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I discuss local performances of ethnic hybridity. Chapter 4 provides an account of the way(s) in which Krio identity became part of Sherbro collective and individual performances of identity on the Peninsula. Sherbros define themselves as *civilayzd* (civilized), by which they mean that they are both *kɔntri* and Krio. I also detail the various aspects of being *civilayzd* in contemporary local discourses and practices. Chapter 5 explores more specifically the tactics of concealment and disclosure at the heart of identity practices. Ethnic hybridity contains the inherent possibility to mark social differentiations and bridge them at the same time.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I explore the use of ritual initiation as a factor of interethnic integration situated in wider logics of reciprocity between Sherbro and groups of strangers. I show that the initiation of strangers is a strategy by which Sherbro communities maintain relations of indebtedness, which include ambivalent feelings of friendship and authority. Membership in local societies appears as a powerful tool to create interpersonal trust and produce relatedness between people from various origins. At the same time, it allows Sherbro communities to mark their position as hosts to other groups. Chapter 6 focuses on practices of ‘double membership’ between Sherbros and Krios, meaning that people can be both members of Poro or Bondo (in Sherbro settlements) and of Hunting (in Krio settlements). These practices are an illustration of rather ‘horizontal’



relationships between the two groups bound by mutual debt. In Chapter 7, by contrast, I show that initiation into Poro of strangers of other ethnic origins is part of a ‘ritual process’ that requires their full assimilation – namely, the type of ethnic transformation described above. Nevertheless, this system, by which Sherbro communities maintained political authority in the past, is now challenged by new populations, who reject both the monopoly of Poro members over leadership and initiation as a mode of integration. The gradual emancipation of strangers explain that Poro rituals have become sites of ethnic assertion and symbols of autochthony. In this way, the chapter opens up the analysis on current dimensions of conflict between hosts and strangers.

In Chapter 8, I explore in more detail the process of ‘autochthonization’ in Sherbro communities and the reinforcement of ethnic boundaries in a new political and economic context. I examine the role of recent changes, such as democratization and decentralization reforms, but also land speculation, in fueling local feelings of injustice of firstcomers (who claim land ownership based on autochthony) against latecomers (who were allocated land). Yet, local negotiations about land and politics continue to be framed within the discourse of reciprocity. Taken together, Chapters 7 and 8 reveal the ambiguity of reciprocity, which works towards social integration, but also constitutes a fluctuant arrangement that serves to renegotiate power relations, sometimes through the exclusion and stigmatization of strangers.

## Notes

1. See e.g. Amselle 1998, 1999; Lentz 1995; Lentz and Nugent 1999; Nugent 2008; Spear 2003; Vail 1989.
2. See e.g. Berman, Eyoh and Kymlicka 2004; Bøås and Dunn 2013; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Chauveau 2000; Dorman, Hammett and Nugent 2007; Geschiere 2009.
3. See e.g. Brah and Coombes 2000; Clifford 1997; Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk 2021; Papatsergiadis 2000; Pieterse 2001; Werbner 2015.
4. Bellagamba (2004: 403–4) also refers to the practice of entrustment in the Gambia, by which strangers sought protection of local patrons, as a local model of ‘moral ethnicity’.
5. The labels ‘Temne’ and ‘Sherbro’ are also used as contemporary ethnonyms, whereas ‘Bullom’ does not figure as an ethnic group in recent censuses, probably due to the gradual assimilation of speakers of Bullom So into Temne populations in the northern region of Sierra Leone. Speakers of Bullom So were estimated to be several hundred in 2003 (Childs 2008).
6. The term ‘Sapi’ appears in Valentim Fernandes’ account *Description de la Côte Occidentale d’Afrique* (French translation), written between 1506 and 1510. Fernandes describes the ivory carvings of Sapi (or Sapes) populations of the ‘Serra Leoa’ region (Mark 2015).
7. Famous Afro-British lineages included the Corker, the Rogers and the Tucker families. For detailed accounts of those families, see Brooks (2003) and Jones (1983).
8. Historical narratives in coastal villages often mentioned the migration of experienced Temne-speaking fishermen from the northern coast. Often, people could not recall whether they were Bullom (i.e. speakers of Bullom So, the northern branch of Bullom) or

Temne, which is consistent with the long-term coexistence of both sets of fisherfolk along the northern coast.

9. In many instances, the host/stranger relationship takes place in agricultural societies that require additional labour during the farming season. Nevertheless, other cases may concern the relation between farmers and herders, or farmers and traders (see e.g. Bedert 2017). These movements often produce complex socioeconomic organization. In Mali, for instance, Deridder (2021) analyses the structuring of ‘ethno-occupational’ groups (‘groupes ethnico-professionels’) based on the control of differentiated resources in the Niger Delta (water, pasture and agricultural land), and the political imaginary that supports this arrangement.
10. I use reciprocity instead of dependency because it encompasses the variety of relations that unfold between members of social groups, from vertical relations of subordination and power to horizontal relations of friendship and economic interdependence. However, reciprocity is not necessarily a relation between equals and may involve relations of domination and exploitation, as the dominant group imposes the terms of the relationship.
11. See e.g. Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005; Chauveau 2000; Geschiere 2009; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000; Socpa 2006.
12. Although the meaning of the song was not spelled out, it refers to the ritual interactions between Poro and Bondo members (see Chapters 6 and 7). During Bondo initiation, Poro members receive money to carry out certain tasks. For instance, during fieldwork in Baw-Baw, they helped to build the fence that served as a closed space for Bondo initiates.
13. On the Peninsula, ‘tribal head’ refers to a local representative who defends the ethnic group’s interests in various political arenas and solves local disputes.
14. The linguistic origin of the ethnonym ‘Krio’ is debated. One suggestion is that it derives from the word ‘creole’ (English) or ‘crioulo’ (Portuguese) (see Hair 1992: 112). Yet, the Sierra Leonean scholar Akintola Wyse (1989), whose work largely contributed to giving historical legitimacy to the ethnonym ‘Krio’, privileged a non-European origin to the word. He argued that ‘Krio’ derived from the Yoruba word *akiriyo*, meaning ‘those who go about paying visits after church service’. The sociolinguist Ian Hancock (2016) rejects this explanation, arguing that the analysis of Yoruba linguistic rules does not support it.
15. For instance, see Cole (2013) for an analysis of the Muslim Krio.
16. I use civilized and native without quotation marks when referring to the colonial hierarchy.
17. The debates about purity and mixing arise from the analyses of the biological roots of the concept of hybridity. In his compelling study *Colonial Desire* (1995), Young traced the concept’s origin in nineteenth-century racial evolutionism and evidenced its use in structuring colonial theories of racial purity and ‘miscegenation’. The concepts that indicated interracial mixing, such as métis(sage)/mulatto/mixed-race precisely resulted from a racial construction based on binary oppositions (Phoenix and Owen 2000: 74). In the 1990s, postcolonial thinkers such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy appropriated the concept of (cultural) hybridity to describe processes of cultural mixing and the construction of identity through cultural contacts, such as diasporic (and/or deterritorialized) identities. Yet, they were also criticized for reproducing the very idea that they were trying to challenge – namely, the pre-existence of ‘pure’ essentialized entities (on this debate, see Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk (2021: 72–73)).
18. In this respect, not all Sherbro groups may claim a close link with the Krio or Krio-ness as part of their identity. The distinction between the control that each group has over the definition of its identity holds for the Peninsula region and to its intimate connection with the process of creolization. Still, Peninsula Sherbro are not exceptional in the historical imagination of the Sherbros themselves. On the one hand, when reflecting on Sherbro

identity, people often called upon past connections between the Colony and areas of the southern coast. Bonthe Island became part of the Colony in 1861 and was one of the most competitive bases for export trade throughout the nineteenth century. The island accommodated diverse populations, including a high proportion of British and Creole traders. White (1981; 1987: 45–46) shows that, from the late 1940s onwards, Creole women established intense trading networks between Freetown and Bonthe. On the other hand, the claim to Krio identity was not only legitimated by links with Freetown, but by wider historical relations with the British. People originating from Bonthe, Shenge or Rotifunk invoked family names, and prestigious (chiefly) ones in particular (Caulker, Tucker, Macauley etc.), to highlight the transnational connections that Sherbro people had established with the foreign merchants. The history of the coast substantiated the claim to *krionyazeshon* as a self-evident process. These claims may have indicated a class distinction, since people whom I interviewed in Freetown were more likely to ‘become Krio’ than people who had stayed in their region of origin.

19. Likewise, the proportion of Christians among Sherbro populations of the Peninsula is high, and Christianity is performed as an attribute of Sherbro identity. In other regions, Islam may be the relevant reference that informs individual and collective performances of identity.
20. The native language of most Sherbros living on the Freetown Peninsula is Krio. This is the reason why most emic terms used here are Krio and not Sherbro. The process by which Krio becomes a native language also concerns people of other ethnic groups who settle in Freetown and whose children progressively abandon the use of (but not necessarily the knowledge of) languages from ‘home’. Yet, beyond individual choices, group identity often remains coterminous with the permanence of language, since languages such as Mende and Temne remain widely spoken, including in the Western Area. For Peninsula Sherbros, the continuity of group identity as Sherbro is not grounded in the maintenance of the Sherbro language, which is seldom spoken or heard. On the contrary, the adoption of Krio as a native language reinforces the claim to Krio identity as constitutive of Sherbro-ness.