

# Chapter 1

## Anatomy of a Rurban Space

The territorial and administrative specificity of the Peninsula played a key role in framing the context in which the relations between hosts and strangers unfolded. In this chapter, I am concerned with colonial and postcolonial developments that have affected the production of the Peninsula as a specific ‘rurban’ area. The Peninsula is profoundly rural in many of its economic and sociopolitical structures. Yet because it is situated at the edge of the capital city, rural livelihoods coincide with the city’s administration, services, employment opportunities and patronage networks of ‘big men’. This blend of rural and urban characteristics has had lasting outcomes on identity dynamics, both regarding the construction of Sherbro identity in the region and the way in which local people have received postwar migrants since the 2000s. Moreover, fieldwork in this rurban space requires a specific methodology based on mobility, which I will detail in the second half of this chapter.

The Peninsula is a stretch of narrow hills south of Freetown that is about 50 kilometres long and 10 kilometres wide. Most of the land is part of the Western Area Peninsula Forest Reserve – a thick forest intended to be protected from land sales and encroachments. Down the hills, the Peninsula Road runs parallel to the Atlantic coast, along a collection of fishing villages and towns, forming a loop around the Western Area (see Map 1.1). Freetown and its Peninsula form the Western Area, one of the four administrative regions of the country. The Western Area is further divided into the Western Area Urban District (Freetown) and the Western Area Rural District (the Peninsula). This urban/rural distinction disappears when people outside of the Western Area talk about *ɔng* (town in Krio), which refers here to Freetown, to qualify the whole region. On the Peninsula, by contrast, *ɔng* only refers to the urbanized space of the capital.

The rural space is the product of an intermediary position between Freetown and the Provinces established during colonial times. The region became part of the British Crown Colony in 1808. Nevertheless, throughout the nineteenth century, early processes of urbanization were limited to Freetown itself. Coastal populations of the Peninsula remained relatively isolated until the construction of the first Peninsula Road at the end of the 1930s. This created several ambiguities concerning the status of local populations living along the coast. They were part of the colonial system of direct administration and lived under a regime of state property, and yet maintained customary tenure and political structures that were not officially recognized. This ‘inbetween’ status not only shaped Sherbro identity making, but also had enduring impacts on negotiations between hosts and strangers regarding land, as the region that has attracted increasing migration flows from rural areas since the 1950s.

### **Communities in Flux**

The Peninsula region has gone through major demographic changes since the second half of the twentieth century. The development of the fishing economy caused several waves of migration to the coast between the 1920s and 1960s. In the late 1950s, Temne-speaking fisherfolk developed a capital-oriented model of fishing that reinforced their position in the local economy. Between the two censuses of 1963 and 1985, the population of the Western Area increased by 184.2%, rural and urban areas included (Statistics Sierra Leone 2017: 99). Digins (2018: 47) reports that, along the Sherbro coast, the acceleration of Temne migration in the 1970s and the 1980s resulted in political and economic conflicts with local fishermen. On the Peninsula today, Sherbro fishermen identify the 1960s as the period during which relationships between hosts and strangers started to change due to a boom in the fishing economy, which resulted in a new influx of people to the coast (see Chapter 3).

Nevertheless, the 1970s and 1980s are also remembered as a period of relative abundance, hope in economic development and reasonably good relations between groups. People emphasized that despite the conflicts of the period, strangers were still accommodated. Family stories, like Mr Nicol’s as given in the Introduction, reveal longlasting Sherbro/Temne relations during these decades, and many people mention how from Temne origins, they (or their parents) ‘became Sherbro’ and settled in existing communities.

Throughout the 1990s, the Civil War caused massive population displacements from the inland regions to the coast. Rural populations fled towards urban centres as rebel troops of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) advanced from the eastern border. In March 1991, the RUF led its first offensive in the east of Sierra Leone. The regime of President Momoh, destabilized by this armed incursion, was soon overthrown by a group of officers, who established

the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), headed by Valentine Strasser, in April 1992. The NPRC promised to fight the RUF and bring peace to Sierra Leone. Troops of the regional armed force, the ECOMOG (Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group), were deployed in the interior. In March 1996, a civilian government headed by President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah was elected. Another military coup followed in May 1997, which put the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) into power. The AFRC allied with the RUF and entered negotiations with the President in exile. Nigerian-led troops of the ECOMOG intervened more extensively in the country and flushed the military junta out of Freetown in February 1998, following which they reinstated the Kabbah government. By then, ECOMOG troops were 'in full control of the Freetown peninsula' (Dumbuya 2008: 96). The rebels posed a direct threat to Freetown and the peacekeeping soldiers' presence aimed at 'preventing rebel access to the Peninsula road' (Osakwe and Audu 2017: 113).

Peninsula settlements were said to be relatively safe until December 1998, when the AFRC/RUF fighters attempted to use the Peninsula Road to enter Freetown. In the Tombo area, many people fled to the Banana Islands, where they knew they would be safe. The rebels were pushed back at York by the ECOMOG, with the help of local defence groups, and entered Freetown from the opposite side, the East End, during the bloody attack of 6 January 1999. Militias burned homes and buildings, and killed over 6,000 civilians. They were forced out by ECOMOG soldiers within three weeks. The ECOMOG troops then retreated. The United Nations (UN) Mission for Sierra Leone was sent as a peacekeeping force in October 1999, and a British intervention under a UN mandate finally put an end to the war in January 2002.

Throughout the war, harbours of the Peninsula hosted thousands of displaced people. The population growth was particularly high in Tombo, Goderich and Tokeh – three towns that each now have over 20,000 inhabitants. The war severely destabilized the local economy: owners of tourism facilities left and many people went unemployed, fishing was forbidden in certain areas, and food supplies were difficult to obtain. In many places, people also evoked their fear of peacekeeping forces, which were known for their harsh treatment of local populations.

In the aftermath of the conflict, the Peninsula has accommodated an accelerating flow of new residents. The precariousness of livelihoods in rural areas has pushed a large number of people to the capital region. Economic migrants engage in fishing or fishing-related activities, such as charcoal-burning and wood-cutting, small-scale farming and construction-related activities, like quarrying or sand mining (the extraction of sand from beaches).

Moreover, living in Freetown has become increasingly difficult, due to population density and pricey city rents. Freetown and its periphery, which contain close to two million people, have few real options for housing the fast-growing

population. The building of informal housing in risk-prone areas results in regular flooding, mudslides and other disasters during rainy seasons. In this context, relocating on the Peninsula allows people to build dwellings in less crowded and pricey areas. Many of the new (poorer) residents also act as property caretakers for wealthy Sierra Leoneans who invest in real estate. In recent years, land speculation has radically changed the landscape of the region. By 2018–19, to the north of the Peninsula, large constructions had mushroomed everywhere along the Peninsula Road and deforestation was advancing rapidly. In this environment, local populations were increasingly restricted from accessing land that they considered ‘community land’.

### **Land Rights and Indigeneity**

Since the 1990s, land-related conflicts between Sherbro customary landowners and migrants have intensified due to demographic pressure. The major point of contention concerns the recognition of communal land tenure in the region. The specifics of the land tenure system in the Western Area result from the historical distinction between Colony and Protectorate. In the Sierra Leone Colony – i.e. today’s Western Area, including Freetown and the Peninsula – the enforcement of British law meant that customary land rights were not officially recognized and were suppressed in favour of state and private tenure. However, in the Protectorate, customary tenure remained in the hands of local authorities.

The dualism of the land tenure system was in line with the geographical and social distinction that colonial authorities operated between native and non-native populations. In rural areas, native groups were defined by their practice of customary laws, while British laws were enforced in the Colony. However, the imperfect alignment of the categories native/rural and non-native/urban meant that native populations in the rural areas of the Peninsula had no defined rights. They were considered ‘urban-based natives’; their native status kept them from being ‘citizens’ like urban dwellers (Mamdani 1996: 19), but because they lived in the Colony, they did not officially depend on customary law: ‘Neither subject to custom nor exalted as rights-bearing citizens, they languished in a juridical limbo’ (ibid.).

Sherbro identity, along with their legal status, was positioned at this juncture of rural (native) and urban (non-native) identities. The colonial distinction between natives and non-natives created a further distinction between them before the law (Mamdani 1996: 5). Natives were assigned a ‘subject ethnicity’ dependent on ethnic-based customs and culture. However, non-natives were assigned a ‘subject race’ and were denied an ethnic identity. The category of non-natives, in Sierra Leone, corresponded to the black settlers, the Liberated Africans and their descendants, who (supposedly) had no roots in the country. Because of their close affiliation with Krios, which will become apparent in

colonial censuses discussed in Chapter 2, Sherbro identity on the Peninsula became more recognized as that of a ‘subject race’ than that of a ‘subject ethnicity’. Local populations of the Colony were rarely defined with respect to distinct native customs and culture. Furthermore, because the barrier separating citizens from subjects was also framed in civilizational terms, in which groups were arranged in a hierarchy according to Western standards that evaluated language, education, comportment and religious beliefs (see Chapter 4), Sherbro identity also sat in this juncture. However, it should be noted that the situation was different for Sherbro populations who lived on the southern coast of Sierra Leone, which – with the exception of Bonthe – was part of the Protectorate.

The ‘non-native’ status may not have affected the lives of Peninsula residents until the mid-twentieth century, as rural areas of the Colony were isolated, sparsely populated and loosely supervised by colonial authorities. Whether and how local authorities in the rural areas of the Peninsula may have continued to observe customary tenure, especially in the resolution of any land disputes, is little documented. However, in the current context of demographic pressure and land-related conflicts, this issue has gained a new salience. Long denied a status as ‘natives’ on the Peninsula, Sherbro populations now emphasize their autochthony and indigeneity in the region. They seek the right to be considered an indigenous group in relation to land entitlements acquired on the basis of customary tenure.

In ordinary usage, the terms ‘indigeneity’ and ‘autochthony’ are closely related. Both refer to the original occupancy of a given land, and become important when legal rights or status is supposed to derive from such occupancy. Within the anthropological literature, ‘indigeneity’ tends to be used to describe groups whose livelihood and culture are threatened due to ‘a historic or present experience in subjugation, marginalization, dispossession’ within nation-states (Pelican 2009: 56). ‘Autochthony’, by contrast, is used to describe and analyse situations in which the ‘original occupants’ seek exclusive control of local resources (Gausset, Kenrick and Gibb 2011: 139). In the West African context, ‘firstcomers’ are likely to advocate for the exclusion of ‘strangers’ through claims of autochthony (*ibid.*).

On the Peninsula, claims of autochthony and indigeneity coincide and are mutually supportive. Both aim at securing privileged access to local leadership and land. Claims to indigeneity are raised, in part, because autochthony is not recognized as a basis for legal claims in the Western Area. As in other African states, Sierra Leone’s postcolonial governments have failed to address many of the institutional legacies of colonialism – among these, that indigeneity remains the sole legal basis for entitlement to customary land. This situation has increased the political use of specific ethnic identities (see Mamdani 2005). In articulating a collective identity as an indigenous group, Sherbro local authorities demand the right to have this identity recognized as the premise for land ownership, like groups living in the Provinces – i.e. the administrative territories

outside of the Western Area – including Sherbro groups living in chiefdoms of the south of Sierra Leone. The discourse of indigeneity therefore articulates feelings of injustice for groups that were not included in earlier phases of the postcolonial politics of entitlements.

The discourse of indigeneity is also grounded in a global movement for the protection of disappearing cultures and regimes of knowledge (Li 2000). Sherbros play on the positive connotations of indigeneity – such as their knowledge of coastal ecosystems and artisanal fishing – to rehabilitate their customs as authentically local and to develop ecotourism (see Chapter 8). Such an embrace of indigeneity opens a direct link to global institutions and actors, such as the UN, international NGOs and tourists. Despite the Ebola crisis in 2014–15, followed by COVID-19 a few years later, both of which halted foreign entries into the country, local populations continue to believe in tourism as the sector that could bring potentially the highest economic benefits, as the region undoubtedly qualifies as one of the most beautiful places of the country. The various crises, it seems, did not slow down investments, land speculation or construction along the beaches. Meanwhile, the promotion of indigenous Sherbro culture targeted at external actors supports autochthonous claims on the national political scene: for instance, it has helped local people in some areas to secure the economic exploitation of the beach in the face of competing claims. Thus, the performance of indigeneity offers a new avenue for social recognition and provides legitimacy to firstcomer claims in the context of competition over local rights.

### **State Politics and the Discourse of Autochthony**

The construction of Sherbro autochthony on the Peninsula, as in other regions of Africa, is the outcome of both a process of democratization that restructured national politics more tightly along ethnic and regional lines, and of a reconfiguration of local political dynamics following demographic and economic changes. The success of Temne-speaking populations in fishing and fish trading since the 1960s has contributed to structuring contemporary autochthonous discourses around a supposed Sherbro/Temne opposition set in irreconcilable cultural differences, which also reflects ethnic polarization in national politics.

The mobilization of ethnicity by political parties for the purpose of capturing state resources has been studied widely since the 1990s. In many African countries, this mobilization of ethnicity has followed a progressive shift to multiparty politics, which forces political elites to compete for ethno-regional voting bases. The democratic process continues to be rooted in a neopatrimonial system, in which political parties act as patrons to the ‘clients’ of their electorate (see Berman, Eyoh and Kymlicka 2004; Chabal and Daloz 1999; van de Walle 2003). Because the parties fail to offer their electorate substantial programmes and ideologies, ethnicity remains the main line of differentiation between

political parties (Ottaway 1999: 311, cited by Randall 2007: 89). Thus, the process of democratization has been increasingly defined by patterns of ethnic voting (Young 2007: 258). Eifert, Miguel and Posner (2010), for instance, have evidenced the salience of ethnic identification prior to and during electoral processes, when political power is at stake. Incumbency generates a huge patronage capacity (Guiymah-Boadi 2007: 30): access to the state guarantees material gains both in the public and private spheres, although redistribution often remains limited to the political elite and rarely reaches the actual electoral base (van de Walle 2003).

In Sierra Leone, whether national politics have been dominated by one party or two, the fragility of institutions, since independence, has fuelled ethnic conflicts and polarization (Kandeh 1992). Following independence, Sir Milton Margai, leader of the Sierra Leone's People Party (SLPP) and first Prime Minister of Sierra Leone, was in charge between 1961 and 1964. After his death, dissenting members of the SLPP joined the opposition party the All People's Congress (APC), which gathered members from the Northern Province. Despite the APC's victory during the 1967 general elections, the SLPP maintained military power for a year. The APC gained control of the country in 1968. Siaka Stevens, who stayed in power between 1967 and 1985, installed a one-party system in 1978. Hayward and Kandeh (1987: 47–48) note that the shift to a one-party system, by concentrating power and silencing any opposition to the ruling party, increased reliance on patronage networks and ethnic-based violence. This system contributed to the collapse of the state at the beginning of the 1990s.

The restoration of multiparty politics after the war consolidated a two-party political system that pitted the SLPP against the APC. The SLPP has its voting base in Mende-speaking areas of the south and east, while the APC is closely associated with northern Limba and Temne identities.

The electoral process for the 2002 general elections, which saw the victory of the former President-in-exile Ahmad Tejan Kabbah for the SLPP, was relatively fair and peaceful given the difficulties of the postwar context (Kandeh 2003). Nevertheless, the SLPP and the APC, which garnered most of the votes, 'continued to be separated not by ideology but by competing ethno-regional ties and loyalties' (*ibid.*: 196). The APC candidate, Ernest Bai Koroma, won more than 50% of the votes in the northern region, while Kabbah scored above 90% in the southern and eastern regions, which are more ethnically homogeneous.

The restructuring of parties along ethno-regional lines was even stronger in the presidential elections of 2007 and 2012, which brought Ernest Bai Koroma to power for two mandates. In both elections, Koroma scored above 80% in the northern region. In 2018, the SLPP candidate Julius Maada Bio won the presidential elections, supported by southern and eastern electors. Since 2002, thus, Mende (SLPP) and Temne (APC) identities have been increasingly opposed in the struggle for state power and resources.

From the local political arena to the national scene, political affiliations are conflated with ethnic identities, which allows for their political manipulation and the use of ethnic networks for competition over power. Politically, Sherbro populations have been more aligned with Mendes, particularly in the Southern Province. Historically, Freetown and the Peninsula region have been ‘swing’ constituencies. The population of the Western Area is particularly heterogeneous, which makes the creation of structures of patronage less obvious. Nonetheless, in 2007 and 2012, the APC gained about 70% of the votes in the region. This score decreased to 60% in 2018, but the party still enjoyed a solid voting base. By contrast, Sherbro populations who live in the area stress their political affiliation to the SLPP. In the southern region, the Sherbro/Mende alliance in politics has existed for a long time and strengthened in 2018 following the election of Julius Maada Bio, who claims both identity affiliations.

On the Peninsula, since the war ended, Sherbro populations have viewed national politics through the lens of recent migration. The Western Area Rural District was the district of Sierra Leone with the highest population growth between 2004 and 2015, particularly in the wards of York and Waterloo, which cover the main fishing areas and account for 77.3% of the total population of the district (Weekes and Bah 2017: 17). Temne speakers constitute the majority group of the Western Area Rural District with 40.3% of the population, followed by people of Mende origin (14.1%) (ibid.: 26). This demographic shift accounts more prominently for Sherbro votes along the lines of politicized (Mende) ethnicity. Sherbros have held the successive postwar APC governments responsible for encouraging migration (of Temne-speaking populations) to the region in order to secure a voting base. Migrants more often support the APC, as evidenced during the local and councillor elections of 2012.

Furthermore, the Local Government Act of 2004 changed the rules of village head elections in terms of allowing any person who has lived for five years in a settlement to stand as a candidate. In large fishing settlements, migrant groups are proportionally high and were able to win local headmanship elections in 2008, 2012 and 2018. Even with the victory of the SLPP presidential candidate in 2018, more APC candidates were elected at councillor positions in the district. The election of these officials – village heads and councillors – is a key step to accessing wider political networks because district councillors link local communities with high-ranked state officials in Freetown. As these links normally proceed along party lines, this meant that local Sherbro authorities would benefit less easily from relations of patronage with APC-elected village heads and councillors.<sup>1</sup>

In a context of increasing political tensions, Sherbros have tied their autochthonous rights to an essentialist definition of ethnicity that excludes Temne-speaking strangers from ‘local citizenship’ – that is, the political and land rights derived from one’s belonging to a local community. Sherbros have



emphasized social and political connections with Mende-speaking groups, and have downplayed those with Temne-speaking populations. That a Mende group asked Mr Nicol to become their tribal head should be understood as a move towards Mende/Sherbro political unity in the face of the dominant APC in the region, even if it is described as the natural outcome of common cultural identities. Mr Nicol's political allegiance, like that of many Sherbro political leaders in the region, was clear; following his death in August 2020, his coffin was covered with an SLPP flag.

In the local political arena, the reification of the Mende/Sherbro political alliance trumps discourses of Sherbro/Temne integration. People often concealed or mitigated their Temne origins in order to dissociate themselves from migrants. They made a distinction between their relations with Temne-speaking populations who were in the region prior to the war – in other words, strangers who associated with Sherbro communities on the basis of reciprocal arrangements, which usually involved marriage and initiation – and political conflicts that characterized their current relations with newly settled populations.

### **From Postwar to Post-Ebola: Whither Identity?**

This book departs from recent literature on Sierra Leone, which, during the past two decades, has been dominated by explanatory models of the Civil War and accounts of the 'postconflict' phase. During this time, concern for understanding the dynamics of identity making has been pushed into the background of the academic agenda for two reasons. One reason is empirical: Sierra Leone's conflict did not play out along ethnic lines. Patronage politics and the escalating politicization of ethnicity contributed to state collapse in the decades preceding the Civil War, but the war itself did not draw on '*pre-existing* ethnic loyalties' (Richards 2009: 9, emphasis in original). A second reason is more related to a consideration of academic ethics: authors evaded questions of identities because the spectre of 'primordialism' loomed over any attempt to debate whether and how ethnicity was an important factor in social life.

The two reasons are tied to the dominant concern for explaining the war more generally. Initially, most analytical models of the war discussed its rational logic in an attempt to counter the 'new barbarism' thesis that was articulated by Kaplan (1994), who argued that tribalism was a primary driver of conflict. These early analyses focused on state failure and on processes of social exclusion that could explain political 'grievances' at the origins of the insurgency (see e.g. Abdullah 1998; Peters and Richards 1998; Richards 1996). Other authors focused on the logic of 'greed' and on the economic rationality of fighters (Collier 2000; Collier and Hoeffler 1998). Their models provided an intelligibility for African conflicts that were otherwise presented as identitarian and unsolvable (Cramer 2002: 1848). However, this meant that discussions about identity could

no longer be separated from the cultural irrationality described by Kaplan. Ethnic identity, as a social phenomenon structuring the life of many Sierra Leoneans, was seen as a trivial aspect of social life, no more than an ‘epiphenomenon’ (Richards 2009), against economic greed and social tensions that generated conflict.

In the immediate postwar phase, concerns for identity remained absent from academic studies, as scholars tended to focus on the international agenda for reconstruction. Sierra Leone emerged from the war with a bankrupt economy, collapsing infrastructures and pressing social issues, such as the necessity to reintegrate former fighters into society. Postwar interventions posited that the country suffered from socioeconomic and administrative problems that could be fixed through democratization and liberalization. They defined Sierra Leone by a ‘lack of’ – i.e. proper administration system, economic transparency and democratic institutions – supposedly associated with insecurity (Wai 2012). Reconstruction appeared as an aggregate of technical solutions. For instance, ‘youth empowerment’ and decentralization were thought to be part of the remedy for the patrimonial state crisis. The literature of the postconflict moment reflected concerns about instability, (in)security and the restructuring of the state as authors focused mainly on civil society, reform and governance (Fanthorpe 2005; Jackson 2006; Richards 2005), but also on transitional justice (Shaw 2007), on the demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants and on the ‘crisis of youth’ that had been a trigger for violence (see e.g. Hoffman 2011; Menzel 2015; Peters 2011).

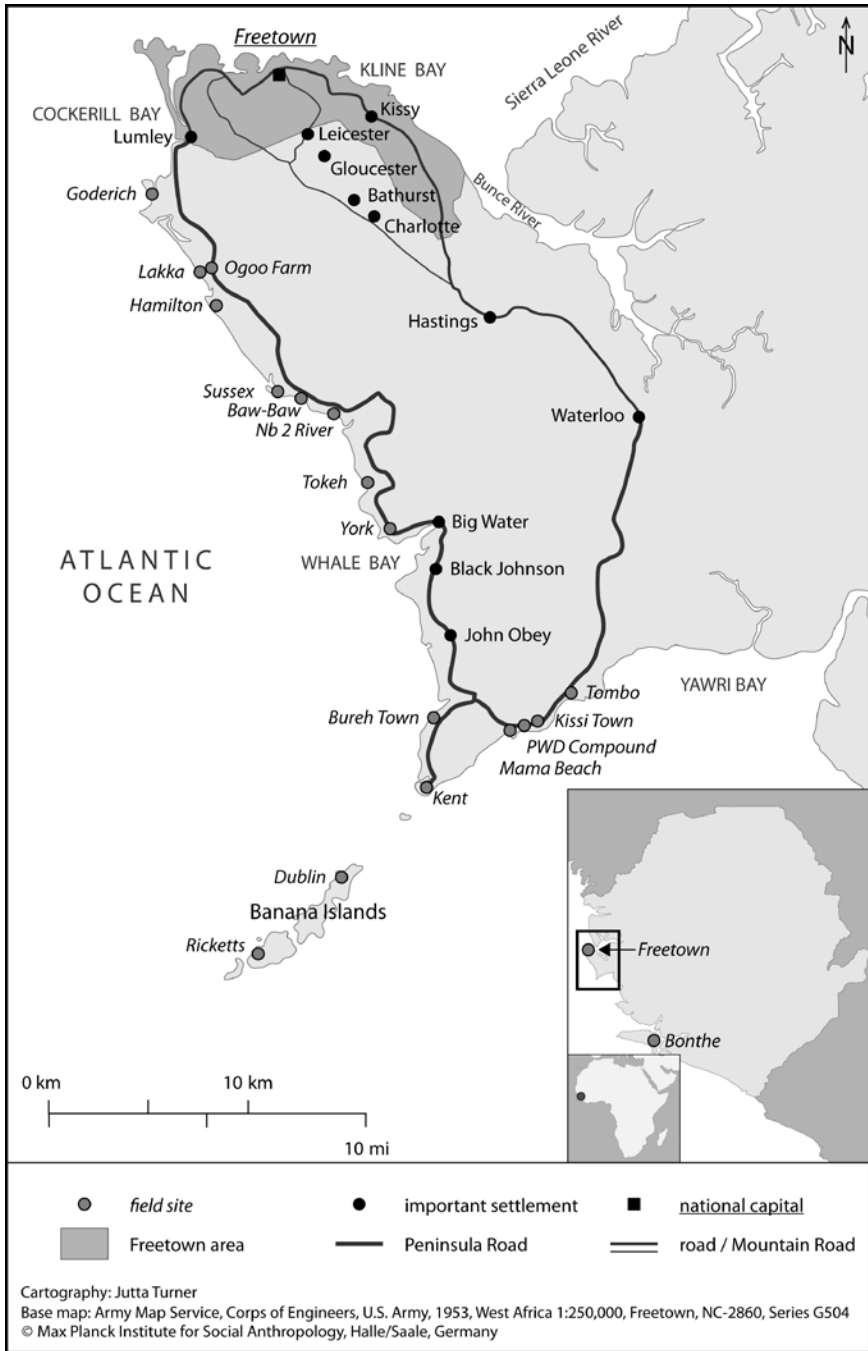
Indeed, almost two decades after the end of the Civil War, its consequences are still deeply felt. The war left a grim legacy of socioeconomic insecurity and ruined infrastructures that has not yet been overcome fully, despite international intervention. The long-term neglect of health infrastructure became starkly apparent during the Ebola crisis of 2014–15, which hit Sierra Leone to a terrifying degree, killing 14,000 people. The rapid spread of Ebola in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia revealed regional histories of injustice and economic extraction, from the transatlantic slave trade to structural adjustments reforms, which resulted in ‘political economies of neglect’ and the withdrawal of states from social sectors (Leach 2015: 823). In the wake of the crisis, social and economic inequalities, fuelled by rampant inflation, became more pronounced. High rates of unemployment and precarious job opportunities not only constrain life choices, but also maintain many youths in a state of economic dependence (see Enria 2018).

Even as the postwar years pass, academic attention has followed the path of economic, health and social crises without asking much about identity. However, as people and resources move around, it seems inevitable that identity should come to the fore. In the postwar context, rural-urban migration has become a common strategy to mitigate precarious livelihoods. The continued neglect of rural areas has durably undermined local economies. Migration contributes to urban overcrowding and the saturation of existing facilities. The result of

population pressure in Freetown, as Shepler and Ibrahim (2011: viii) accurately describe, 'is a city of two million people bursting at the seams, with inadequate housing, incessant traffic jams, constant power outages, water shortages, and poor environmental sanitation'. As Freetown residents move to the Peninsula in search of labour, cheap housing and available land, similar effects are observed in large fishing towns. Moreover, on the coast, issues of environmental degradation have become a significant threat to maritime economies (Diggins 2018). Overfishing by local fleets and international trawlers depletes fishing grounds on a large scale. Between 2012 and 2018, local Sherbro fishermen mentioned a radical depletion of fish stocks, and artisanal fishing had become strenuous.

Life on the Peninsula is therefore undertaken in a context of 'insecure modernity' (Laurent 2013), in which state institutions create economic deregulation and vulnerability across the national territory. As people migrate from impoverished areas, increased competition for resources occurs in areas of in-migration. On the Peninsula, postwar governments neither led coherent policies of urban development nor regulated processes of land speculation and privatization. Many settlements lack health centres, school infrastructures, electricity and other basic services. The lack of nearby police stations is also mentioned as a key problem, as serious disputes (especially over land) are frequent. The building of facilities largely depends on a headman's connections with central authorities and his ability to bring in investors. As a result, 'development' remains precarious, as it relies either on foreign investment (which calls for more privatization) or on political patronage (which reverses with political switches).

Rural-urban movements have also built up Freetown and its Peninsula as a multiethnic and multicultural region. Each migratory movement – from rural workers of the Sierra Leone Colony to those who tried their luck on the coast in the 1960s – played a key role in constructing the Western Area as a culturally diverse environment. Those movements resulted in the production of distinct cultural forms, such as new masquerades (King 2011; Nunley 1987). Postwar migration has promoted further cultural contact, mixing and the reformulation of ethnic beliefs, customs and lifeways that are considered important for those who claim the relevant identities. As Shepler and Ibrahim (2011: viii) have illustrated, everyday life in urban areas offers insights on how identities, cultures and social ties are recomposed in creative ways. The Peninsula is a bustling area. Its human geography changes daily with its landscape as a result of land sales, building sites and population mobility. Questions of identity become salient here as populations are settled, dispersed and resettled. The politics of reciprocity, which mark the tension and oscillation between autochthony as a discourse on the one hand, and the necessity of integration on the other, were not abandoned altogether in the ravages of war or reconstruction and inform the new debates about identity.



Map 1.1. The Western Area, with field sites. © Jutta Turner

## Multiple Landscapes

During the last decade, the Peninsula area has experienced rapid urban expansion. From Goderich to Baw-Baw, the northern part has been absorbed into the urban fabric as the construction of the Lumley-Tokeh Road has progressed. In 2011–12, privately operated minibuses (*poda-poda*) would take passengers in Lumley to drive them south via Goderich, one of the biggest fishing harbours. Their final destination was Ogoo Farm Junction, where the tarred road stopped. By then, the construction boom had begun to hit the Peninsula. Between Goderich and Ogoo Farm, the landscape was a continuum of bare hillsides, large residences and *pan bodis*, the iron structures that mark land occupation and usually shelter a low-paid caretaker. This part was becoming a residential area, where wealthy Sierra Leoneans built residences away from the noise and heat of the overcrowded city. After Ogoo Farm, motorbike taxis (*okadas*) drove passengers south on the dust road. Given its decrepit condition, the road was often empty, except for the large trucks carrying sand, and it was often difficult and expensive for locals of those areas to get an *okada*.

In 2018, the tarred road had been completed from Lumley up to Baw-Baw (but the 7.7 kilometres between Baw-Baw and Tokeh were yet to be constructed) and the urbanized landscape had extended. The road construction had brought new houses and shops along the way, and fresh hills were being deforested at a high rate. Many local residents were complaining that the population growth was such that they could not identify many of the people who had settled along the new road. *Poda-podas* and *kekes* (motorized tricycles) regularly circulated up to Baw-Baw Junction for an affordable price, which had encouraged more people (from Freetown and elsewhere) to choose the Peninsula as their place of residence. Changes in the south were less dramatic between 2012 and 2018, but were already significant.

Already by 2011–12, the intensifying migration of the preceding decade during and just after the war was shifting power relations between ‘old’ historical towns and newer settlements. Settlements that had recently welcomed many new residents, such as Ogoo Farm and Mile 13, often counted more inhabitants than places populated by Sherbro and Krio landowners. Migration also accentuated a territorial distinction within settlements, like in Baw-Baw and Number Two River, between local populations who lived down near the sea, and later immigrants who lived up near the road and engaged in activities such as quarrying and land caretaking. On the beach sides (in Lakka, Baw-Baw, Sussex and Number Two River), Sherbro populations abandoned fishing and turned hopefully to the development of tourism as their main activity (see Chapter 8).

After Baw-Baw Junction, the old dust road continued to Number Two River and Tokeh. Between Number Two River and Tokeh, the road was in extremely poor condition. It demarcated a north/south boundary and cut the Peninsula



**Figure 1.1.** The Peninsula Road near Sussex, 2012. © Anaïs Ménard

into two (almost) separated halves. There were two options to reach Tokeh: by bike along the road or by crossing the estuary by boat at Number Two River and then walking about a mile on bush paths.

On the southern half of the Peninsula, the tarred road completed in 2005 connected Tokeh and other fishing towns to Waterloo and Freetown. This had propelled the development of a pronounced economic specialization in fishing, and many settlements, such as Kent, Kissi Town, Mama Beach and Tombo, had grown exponentially with the settlement of new populations. By 2011–12, Mama Beach had about 8,000 inhabitants according to local estimates. Kent and Kissi Town counted about 1,800 and 1,000 inhabitants, respectively. As for PWD Compound, its population size was difficult to estimate because it was a newly formed settlement that had grown very rapidly around fishing. It was probably home to a few thousand inhabitants in 2011–12. Many villages, like York, Bureh Town, John Obey and Black Johnson, counted only a few hundred inhabitants. Bureh Town in particular was appreciated by tourists for its stunning beach landscape.

Between Tokeh and Mama Beach, the forest landscape was still preserved and the large hills loomed impressively over the visitor. This part of the Peninsula is further from Freetown's centre and was perceived by many living in Freetown as less accessible, as it was necessary to drive around via the east road (via Waterloo and Tombo) to reach those settlements. Thus, urban encroachment was not yet visible, but in many places, pillars, fences and signboards signalled private



**Figure 1.2.** The Peninsula Road near York, 2012. © Anaïs Ménard

properties. It is certain that the completion of the Lumley-Tokeh Road in the near future will prompt the sudden erection of new houses and buildings. Finally, from Kissi Town to Tombo, people have specialized in the fishing industry. This brief description reveals the variety of rural communities in which I conducted my fieldwork. Roughly speaking, the Peninsula may be divided into three different ‘landscapes’ with reference to the social and economic dynamics of its settlements. The south (Tombo, Kissi Town, PWD Compound, Mama Beach and Kent) is characterized by intense fishing activities; in the middle (Bureh Town, York, Tokeh, Number Two River, Baw-Baw and Sussex), fishing remains mostly smaller scale and artisanal (except for Tokeh), and populations expect tourism to replace fishing as the main economic activity; in the north (Hamilton, Lakka, Ogoo Farm and Goderich), the construction boom is at its height and economic activities are more diversified – agriculture, quarrying, building etc.

While fishing constitutes the common economic denominator linking all of these settlements, three towns in particular – Goderich, Tombo and Tokeh – were fishing hubs. Their social dynamics were clearly shaped by seasonal and permanent migration. Alongside fishing, other activities were increasingly visible across the landscape, such as quarrying (Number Two River and PWD Compound) and sand mining (Hamilton and John Obey). Sand mining, although illegal, had intensified in 2018–19. It was tolerated by the higher authorities for the financial benefits it brought, and those interests clashed with those of local populations, who aimed at taking advantage of the fabulous landscape to develop tourism (see Chapter 8).

Nevertheless, despite a visible economic boom, socioeconomic inequalities persisted alongside a sense of remoteness, in particular due to the lack of local infrastructures. Public transportation was scarce in remote places like Bureh Town and Kent. Daily commuting was common, especially for people who sold fish products in Freetown or Waterloo, or for schoolchildren enrolled in other communities, but it remained tiring, time-consuming and expensive, particularly in the context of economic inflation. For local people, ‘development’ was visible and coterminous with building: for instance, in 2018–19, Sussex was supplied with electricity. Yet the people living there barely saw any improvement regarding their own livelihood. With the exception of minimal service provision, there were few urban planning or employment policies aimed at absorbing the demographic increase.

Despite the Peninsula’s progressive inclusion within urban networks, the distinction between ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ remained part of local representations. When I stated my wish to do fieldwork on the Peninsula, most of my Freetown acquaintances sought to discourage me: Peninsula settlements were ‘too far away’ and I would need a 4x4 because no taxi would be willing to take me there; the trip was too long and too tiring; the settlements had neither electricity nor water; and, apart from the beach, it would be extremely boring. Interestingly,



they did not have a similar reaction when other researchers planned to go ‘up-line’ – that is, into the Provinces – for their research. My friends living in Freetown understood the ethnographic impulse and thought it was fine to ‘go native’, but the Peninsula was definitely not the right place to do so. They said that I would not learn much of value about typical Sierra Leonean lifestyles and cultures, while at the same time experiencing all of the disadvantages of living in a rural place. For them, the Peninsula did not appear ‘culturally authentic’. It was seen either as a place of real estate investment or as a place of recreation famous for its beach parties. Local inhabitants were rendered invisible, which tended to create the pervasive representation of a virgin land. This, in itself, was enough to drive the curiosity of an anthropologist who did not enjoy sea-swimming, but did not mind sitting on *okadas*.

### Multisited Ethnography and Issues of Mobility

The material presented in this book is the product of three fieldwork phases. During the first phase, between March and July 2011, I spent time in Freetown learning Krio and Sherbro with the idea of exploring interethnic relations in Bonthe, on the southern coast of Sierra Leone. During that period, I attended meetings of an organization called the Bonthe Family, founded by Freetown residents of Sherbro origin. I forged a close relationship with them and it was expected that I would start my research in Bonthe when I finished my initial language training. However, during this time, a Sierra Leonean colleague directed my attention towards changing intergroup relations on the Peninsula. Thus, in July and August 2011, I paid several visits to settlements on the north of the Peninsula and conducted a few interviews with headmen and other local stakeholders. My language teacher accompanied me, providing introductions and mentioning that I would return for longer stays in the future. Repeated visits allowed me to forge my first contacts on the Peninsula. Meanwhile, I undertook some preliminary work among the *kriionayzd* (kriolized) Sherbro in Freetown. I also organized a longer stay in Kissi Town to be able to visit the south of the Peninsula up to Tokeh.

Eventually, I decided to set off for the Peninsula in September 2011 for a second fieldwork phase that lasted until July 2012. I chose seven settlements (Sussex, York, Baw-Baw, Bureh Town, Kissi Town, Tokeh and Lakka) as bases from which I would conduct research. This choice reflected my interest in comparing diverging (and localized) social and cultural arrangements, and understanding how migration impacted (or not) local strategies of integration. I conducted fieldwork in Sherbro settlements and Krio settlements, as well as in places populated by recent migrants, especially in the south of the Peninsula, where conflicts with Sherbro populations over political and cultural matters were salient.

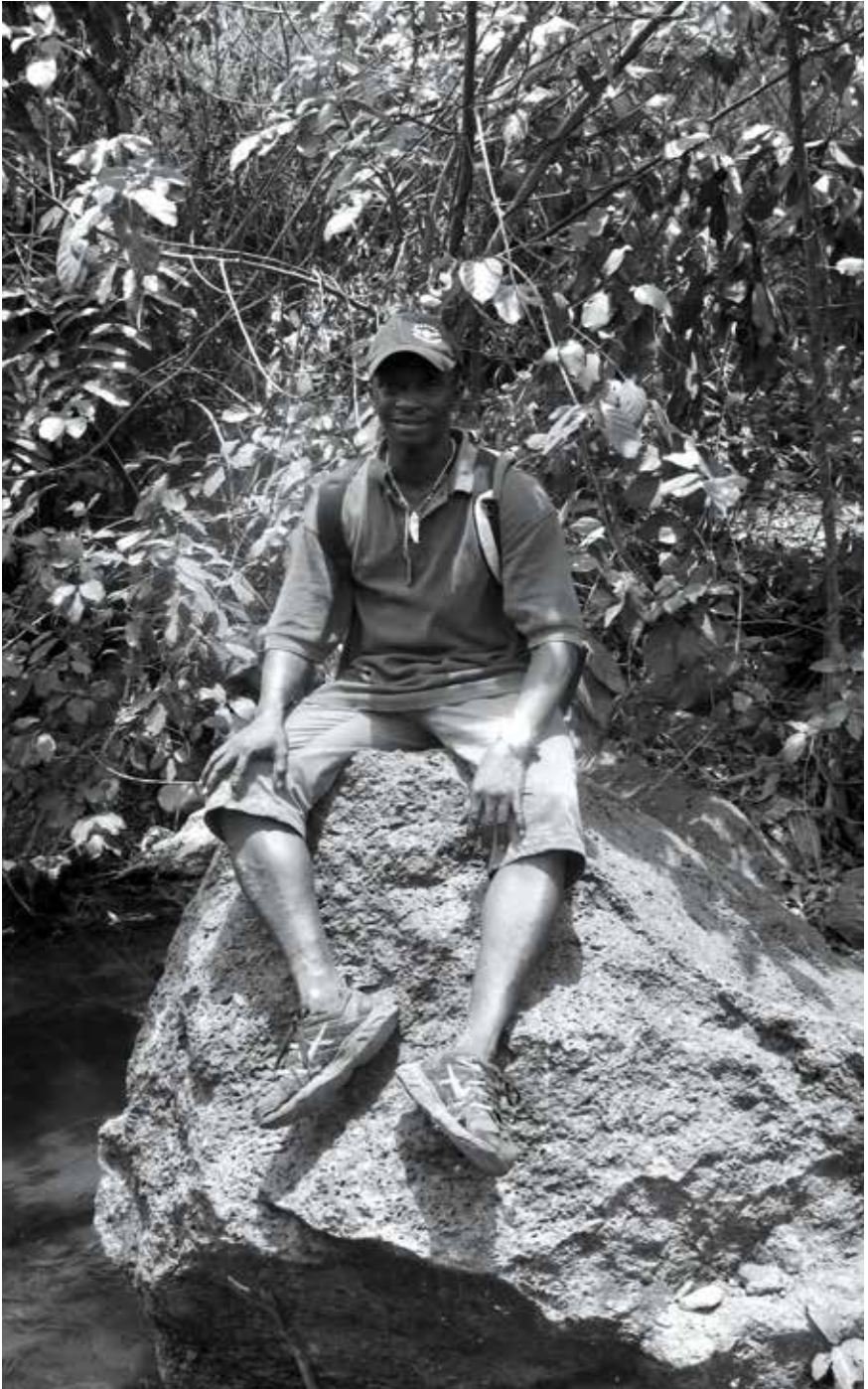
I came to realize during my stay that coastal settlements of the Peninsula formed a coherent social unit defined by common family networks and high inter-settlement mobility. People can trace family links to many settlements. They invite each other for naming ceremonies, weddings, funerals and cultural events. These types of interaction cut across cultural differentiation between Krio and Sherbro settlements. Moreover, these are connected through participation in common ritual practices related to initiation societies.

Fieldwork, in this context, required mobility. Settlements where I chose to live were bases from which my research partner and I travelled to neighbouring towns. Furthermore, we travelled for the day, or sometimes a few days, when invited to family events, meetings or rituals in more distant settlements. This mobile type of fieldwork had two advantages: it connected me more intimately with local practices of mobility and allowed me to maintain contacts with people in the long run. Even after I was no longer living in a particular settlement, I was often able to stay informed of individual situations and ongoing issues.

Yet, mobility also presented a challenge in terms of ethnographic methods. Arriving in a new settlement was not an easy task. Each was different and had its own array of disputes and tensions. In this regard, I need to acknowledge the specific role that my research partner Jonathan Charma played in my various 'integrations'. I met Jonathan as I started my fieldwork in Sussex. He was born in Number Two and lived in nearby Baw-Baw as a fisherman, but due to his involvement in community-based development projects and his position as a Poro member, he was particularly well known amongst fisherfolk along the Peninsula. In smaller Sherbro settlements, he could give me an initial idea of the various families and their links to other communities. He also informed me about unresolved issues and potentially controversial topics. He also had a decisive mediating role in laying the groundwork for interviews, particularly when they concerned Poro or Bondo membership.

My first steps in a new settlement involved mapping – through which I gained an idea of the different neighbourhoods, the location of sacred groves and cemeteries, and the types of fishing practised – and collecting the official oral history from local elders. Both mapping and collecting oral history made me visible and facilitated later interviews. Furthermore, both exercises opened up debates about relations between firstcomer and latecomer populations. Disputes often focused on issues of identity with regard to symbolic places such as land, sacred groves and cemeteries, and these disputes quickly surfaced when the conversation turned to relations with strangers. As a result, these two exercises helped me to adapt my research very early on to the specific circumstances of each settlement. This led me, for instance, to explore issues related to land and initiation societies, which had not I planned for initially.

Informal discussions, semi-structured interviews and participant observation were all part of my fieldwork experience. Longer stays in some settlements



**Figure 1.3.** Jonathan Charma (1972–2020), 2012. © Anaïs Ménard

allowed me to conduct in-depth interviews and build solid relationships with some families. Within settlements, I was present during community meetings concerning land disputes or development projects. I followed land cases and accompanied people to the justice court in Freetown to attend hearings. I also participated in the weekly meetings of volunteers engaged in the ecotourism project led by the NGO Welt Hunger Hilfe. Finally, I attended many family celebrations, church services and ritual events. Since Jonathan was from Baw-Baw, I was invited by the heads of the Poro society to public ceremonies of the Poro initiation. Moreover, I witnessed public ceremonies of the Bondo initiation both in Baw-Baw and Lakka.<sup>2</sup>

The third phase of fieldwork was one of restitution. Life kept me away from Sierra Leone for quite a while, yet I did not want to engage in writing the final version of this book before I had a chance to present the content of the Ph.D. dissertation to people with whom I had worked. This happened in 2018–19 when I returned for a month of fieldwork that allowed me to see the changes the Peninsula was undergoing. This phase of fieldwork was particularly reflective. It was painful. I visited the graves of deceased friends and measured the sufferings that people were still experiencing year after year, crisis after crisis. In the name of ‘development’, the environment of the Peninsula had been continuously degraded. Livelihoods were threatened and fish was scarce. I collected and amended most of the material from Chapter 8 on land issues following this last fieldwork. It was a fruitful experience in other regards too. As I read out sections of analysed data, painstakingly cross-checking the details of each person’s story I had included, I collected discreet smiles, nods and concrete amendments. Senior members of initiation societies agreed on the publication of the most sensitive data (see the next section on issues of secrecy). They were both puzzled by the details of my descriptions and satisfied by my findings. Many people told me that the book was ‘history’ inasmuch as their own lives and presence of the Peninsula would be documented and continue via the text.

## **About Secrecy**

As a coda, I would like to raise a few methodological points on secrecy in the ethnographic enterprise, particularly concerning my engagement as a female anthropologist with initiation societies. In West African societies, secrecy is powerfully entrenched in the production of culture. Aesthetics of concealment and disclosure have constituted a common line of enquiry for anthropologists working in the region since the 1960s, and initiation societies have provided the focal point for this enquiry. Even in the context of a much wider disciplinary discussion of the ethics and politics of ethnography, Poro, the male institution widespread along the Upper Guinea Coast, continues to have a fascinating aura for many scholars –not least because it is strongly associated with politics. In

a feminist perspective, entering Poro – literally or symbolically – may qualify as the epitome of anthropology’s ‘masculine preoccupation with penetration, domination and objectification’ (Moore 2010: 31).

However, the study of initiation societies was not part of my initial research agenda. If I broached the topic at all, I was discouraged by other anthropologists from asking questions about Poro once in the field, especially as a woman. Many scholars around me reproduced the unspoken rule of West African anthropological literature that assigns female researchers to the study of female societies like Bondo, while the Poro society continues to be the prerogative of male researchers. These opinions also replicated the local idea that Poro is ‘dangerous’ for women, notwithstanding the fact that male researchers are also (often) non-initiates and that asking unwelcomed questions may be risky for them too.

However, soon after I started my fieldwork, it became clear that the political issues around Poro would become central to my research. Conflicts with strangers around ritual symbols were relevant for local people to articulate and assert their identity as autochthones. The issue of initiation societies had become emotionally loaded, and provided a way for people to express their anger and frustration in the face of change. For instance, people would discuss open conflicts around sacred groves (see Chapter 7) to clarify identity disputes. At the same time, engaging with ‘secrets’ required building relations of trust.

Recently, anthropologists working in the region have pointed out that the ethos of concealment and disclosure is contingent upon the nature of social relationships built in a changing environment.<sup>3</sup> Initiates do not repeat immemorial traditions, but rather perform ritual practices ‘critically and reflexively, giving them new meaning and pragmatic use’ (de Jong 2007: 5). Likewise, initiates and non-initiates alike may adapt the ethics of disclosure to emerging preoccupations, such as a new context of social and cultural exposure (Sarró 2020). What should be kept secret, by whom, from whom, how and why is part of the social fabric, and changes with new power relations and challenges within local communities. Ritual performances linked to initiation societies now appear to be a mechanism that allows people to absorb external forces and negotiate ‘modernity’ – including rapid urbanization and its deregulatory effects on community life – in local terms (de Jong 2007; Ferme 1994).<sup>4</sup> In line with those authors, my research demonstrates the plasticity of initiation societies that, despite the local trope of decline, find social interstices in which to deploy their ritual force.

At the time of my research, the conditions for leading Poro initiation and rituals had transformed dramatically since the Civil War. The remoteness necessary for secrecy was disappearing: the encroachment of the urban landscape and the presence of many new populations, for whom Poro masquerades constituted a nuisance, had restricted not only members’ ritual practice, but also their ability to control local politics. In such a context, some ‘secrets’ – such as the role of Poro in local politics (see Chapter 7) – were increasingly discussed, albeit cryptically,

among members in the public space. These discussions created a sense of mobilization and constituted a possibility to reassert a collective identity.

Poró members observed that the secretive nature of their society could be upheld only with difficulty. This situation contrasted with their recollections of the 1980s, when communities were distant and remote, separated by long swaths of inhabited forest. By then, Sherbro populations had built an image of themselves as possessing powerful esoteric knowledge related to the vitality of the Poró institution. Several cases (or rumours) of ritual murders had made a lasting impact on local minds. Yet in 2011–12, local communities were no longer places of seclusion. Expressions such as ‘now the place has opened’ defined the recent shift from a bushy area to domesticated land, increasingly connected to the capital and monitored by the state.<sup>5</sup> The ethos of power built on closure had vanished, which also reconfigured the boundaries between secrecy and publicity (see Sarró 2020: 468).

Yet the renewed interest for initiation and ritual practice that I witnessed in 2012 and 2018–19 demonstrated that the power of the Poró had not really disappeared. Perhaps Poró members no longer held control over local politics, but public rituals aimed at social cohesion were acquiring a new relevance. In 2012, nascent opportunities for tourism allowed Poró members to operate a process of commodification and reification of culture (cf. de Jong 2007: 170) that reinforced identity boundaries between autochthones and strangers. In this environment, the presence of a researcher certainly appeared as a resource with which senior members hoped to solidify local strategies of identity assertion. Sharing some of the Poró decisions with me was not only a matter of trust, but also a strategy to advertise the importance of local cultural practices to the outside world.

It was a strategy of cultural outreach that was well managed by senior Poró members. I was not meant to help them, like an anthropologist of yore, by recording their ‘disappearing tradition’.<sup>6</sup> Instead, I was meant to learn about the importance of the Poró, from a variety of angles, but not to be empowered to transmit any of their secrets kept from non-initiates and especially from females. My access to information was mediated by the possibility of entering relations of trust with senior members. My research partner played a key role in introducing me to Poró members in several places; the trust they had in him as well as the potential benefits of his networks and activities were extended to me. In this context, I was careful to display my interest for individual experiences of membership (through individual interviews), but not to focus on cultural performances as such. I very rarely recorded or took photographs of masquerades, although I was often invited to do so as a ‘privileged’ observer.

Still, there were limits to what I could record, what I would be told and what I would be allowed to see. Senior members controlled the kind of information I gathered through their own practices of disclosure and in making their

expectations of my own behaviour clear. During her doctoral research, Shelby Carpenter, who became a member of Hunting, a gender-mixed society, emphasizes the role of networks of patronage in directing her research. She writes (2011: 32): 'I quickly learned that the more knowledgeable informants did not fear meeting with me because they were confident that they could control their sharing of knowledge.' Similarly, senior members of Poro played a critical role in providing information to me. It was the younger initiates who were more careful when discussing any topic related to initiation societies with me by fear of 'making a mistake' – that is, disclosing something that they should not have disclosed in my presence.

Furthermore, my engagement as a female anthropologist with Poro was considered quite positively among senior members. While some joked that I would become a *mabole* – i.e. the only female ritual figure of Poro – they also knew that I would not actually initiate.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, as a female, I was perceived as much less threatening than a man: I could neither enter the local society nor any other Poro (which would have been very risky, as I could have leaked information to other groups). Therefore, I could not *make use* of the 'content' of secrets – namely, esoteric and symbolic knowledge held by senior members – against initiates in a ritual space. As the preservation of 'secrets' is very much viewed in terms of a power struggle between various forms of Poro and ritual leadership (see Chapter 7), my gender identity explains that relations of trust were somewhat easier to establish.

The mutual dynamics of selective management by Poro members and the researcher's complicity in achieving secret knowledge without its attendant powers has been recognized for a long time. Senior members' disclosure of 'secrets' largely depended on the context of enunciation (Bellman 1984). Secrecy, as de Jong observes (2007: 186–87), is a 'cultural mode of performance' that involves initiates and non-initiates, including the researcher herself. Many secrets are, in reality, 'public secrets'<sup>8</sup> known to non-initiates, who perform secrecy as part of their social role (Højbjerg 2007: 41). The utterance of secrets arises in the interstices of the social interaction, making the boundary between knowledge and secrecy highly porous. In general, this creates a paradoxical situation for the researcher, who does not know but knows nonetheless – and this knowledge is performed as part of the complicity created between initiates and her. In my case, it was expected that as a non-initiate, I would run away and hide indoors when the Poro mask performed. But on other occasions, I shared the laughter of senior members when they described how the Poro *debul* (masked spirit, or 'devil') had captured one of the initiates. They did not mind if I heard such stories, even though I gleaned allusions on the process (and therefore on the performance of the Poro spirit) from them. The sharing of such moments with Poro members set me apart from other women, with whom it was expected that I would not discuss what I had heard.

Nevertheless, my complicity was not wholly voluntary. I did limit my data collection to not contain any knowledge that might be considered as the property of initiates – for instance, the content of initiation, secret formulas and herbal remedies, forms of secret language such as the Poro spirit's language etc. But my position as a non-initiate would have prevented me from going beyond those boundaries had it been my purpose to do so. I was reminded of this once by Jonathan, who noticed that after I had recorded some translations of songs during a funeral ceremony, I had left my recorder on. Unintentionally, I had also recorded the part of the ceremony that involved the Poro speaker, who translated the spirit's language to the community. Jonathan asked me to delete it immediately, which I did. I was surprised at his strong reaction, but it confirmed that the boundaries with which I had voluntarily complied had been set for me by the Poro members too. The only time when Poro members did accept to tell me stories and songs that were considered Poro tradition was when they narrated the accounts of people who had 'betrayed' the society. For this reason, I have switched to using letters for person and village names in the section entitled 'The "Ritual Process" Revisited' in Chapter 7.

The changes within Poro, as well as the management of its secrets vis-à-vis various outsiders, were deeply connected to changes in the rurban context of the Peninsula at the time of my fieldwork. Poro members in the rurban space maintained the aesthetics of concealment, while using their cultural resources for appropriating urbanization in their own way. The Poro society was progressively incorporated into a narrative of modernity that stressed the importance of economic development, tourism, cultural protection and cosmopolitanism. My ethnography reflected this apparent paradox: people talked about both recent changes and deeply grounded beliefs and practices that, to them, were key components of their identity.

However, this paradox lies at the very core of the performance of secrecy. Managing the tension between closure and revelation is part of the society's ethos and a well-known exercise for senior members. Strategies of disclosure are anything but new: in the region, they appear as a historical trope that marks periods of interaction and geographical openness. Initiation into Poro has been extended to strangers, and white strangers in particular, since colonial times in order to strengthen economic and politics networks (see the Introduction). In the 1980s on the Peninsula, there were examples of foreign hotel owners who underwent initiation when they aimed at buying part of the Poro grove. Changes in the postwar period may be perceived as more brutal, more rapid, and yet as nothing that may appear unsolvable in the eyes of Poro members. In this respect, my ethnographic endeavour became a small element of a wider strategy to inscribe Poro, and ritual practice more generally, within new developments of the rurban environment.



## Notes

1. The policy of decentralization implemented during the postwar period has strengthened the importance of intermediary political positions between the local level and the national level (MPs and ministers) as a critical link with wider structures of patronage.
2. The name given to the female initiation societies varies, but I use the Sherbro term *Bondo* (Hoffer 1975: 155), which is consistent with local use.
3. See, for instance, Berliner (2008) on intergenerational relations among the Bulongic.
4. Certainly, the context of the Peninsula differs from the one encountered by scholars working in forest societies, and in which data may be more difficult to collect, like in the case of Poro in Loma society (Højbjerg 2007) or Bondo in Mende society (Boone 1986). However, comparing the postwar manifestations of Poro in coastal Sierra Leone and Poro in forest societies seems hazardous since the conditions of its deployment, including its social and symbolic value in a precarious urbanizing environment, are diametrically different. In doing so, I would run the risk of further mystifying this institution in regions where it may appear, at first glance, more 'authentic' or less 'impacted' by modernity.
5. One of the most striking examples of penetration of state law in ritual life was the necessity, for members, to ask for clearance from the Ministry of Tourism and Culture (under former President Ernest Bai Koroma) in order to organize Poro initiation legally.
6. I was never asked to write down ritual sequences to fix a disappearing tradition. On the contrary, these issues were open to contestation: members had lengthy discussions about how (or whether) to revive rituals that had not been practised during the Civil War and competed between themselves about the 'proper' ritual sequences and 'the right way' to do things. In one place, I observed a member who decided to write down the ritual sequence of a Poro public ritual so that younger generations would not forget how to perform it.
7. The *mabole* is part of both Bondo and Poro and her position blends male and female attributes. The position is usually occupied by a ritual leader of Bondo. In Mende society, she holds a ritual role as a mediator, as she oversees Poro initiation, cares for the initiates and allows their symbolic transition into adulthood (Bosire 2012: 70; Ferme 2001: 178). In the context of the joke, mention of the *mabole* referred to my transgressive position, at the juncture of the women's and men's realms.
8. I am referring here not to esoteric knowledge, but, for instance, to the past and present role of Poro members in politics, or to the ranks and hierarchies within the Poro society. For instance, titles, ranks and hierarchies are public secrets to the extent that Poro names on the Peninsula are used in public and the final procession by which initiates are led out of the sacred grove follows a strict order by society rank, which non-initiates are able to recognize.