1 Introduction

'When a person blesses you, that's how they add [to your wealth]'

Throughout the day in Tissana, almost every person's attention is trained, even if only from the corner of their eye, towards the ocean: waiting.

Although it has a population of around 5,000 people – enough to be considered a fairly substantial town by Sierra Leonean standards – Tissana's homes and thatched smokehouses (*bandas*) straggle along such a narrow, sandy strip by the shore that people are rarely more than a couple of minutes' walk from the sea. Together, a bundle of familiar stock images – coconut palms, mango trees, and bright wooden boats – lend Tissana a veneer of easy, tropical tranquillity. But this first impression belies the anxious, youthful energy of life in this impoverished fishing town. Moving back and forth along the two-mile beach that doubles as the town's wharf and its main pedestrian artery, Tissana's residents keep a vigilant eye on the horizon, scanning it for the appearance of a familiar patchwork sail, or the recognisable silhouette of a canoe, heading back to land. Even as women and men go about their work in gardens, kitchens, and smokehouses further inland, their conversations are consistently drawn back out to sea, across the watery skyline: expressing sympathy for the fishermen exposed to the oppressive sun or to the torrential downpours of the rainy season; speculating where the fish might be shoaling; worrying aloud which boats, if any, will return to town with a decent catch.

By dusk, around a hundred boats will have been dragged out of the water, to rest in single file under the trees that line the long wharf. Some are tiny dugout canoes of the kind Sherbro men have used to navigate this coast for generations. Nowadays, however, these traditional vessels are far outnumbered by heavier, plank-built boats, the most impressive of which require a crew of 20 strong men just to drag their heavy kilometre-long fishing net from the sea.

A slight and softly spoken young man, Tito bore no outward resemblance to the bombastic 'big man' of West African cliché (Bayart 1993 [1989]; Strother 2000). Yet, as the owner of the longest fishing net in

Tissana, he was a prominent figure in the local economy. On a day-to-day basis, the crew of Tito's boat were as likely as any other to return from the sea disappointed. Occasionally, though, they succeeded in filling the long net to its capacity and, when they did, the catch would be spectacular enough to generate considerable commotion in town. Here, Tito is describing one such day. Long before his crew reached land, women up and down the two-mile beach had spotted the silhouette of his boat moving unusually heavily in the water, weighed down with the day's remarkable catch. By the time the fishermen finally drew up to their landing site, there were several hundred people awaiting them expectantly on the shore.

> The fish that we gave people passed ten *baffs*![1] More than 500,000 leones [£100], if I had sold them. That's what we gave away to people. Big fish – fine fish . . . to the mammies, the girlfriends, the brothers, to all those people who just came and begged, no more – we gave them all. (Tito, boat owner)

Half a million leones is a substantial amount of money in Tissana. At the time of my fieldwork in 2010–11, it would have been enough to buy a small canoe complete with fishing tackle. But Tito was not exaggerating. I was there on the wharf that morning, as crowds of hopeful women waded chest-deep into the sea to press around his boat, and witnessed when this 'scramble for fish' eventually dispersed: dozens of people drifting home, relieved, each wielding a fine fish or two for their household's cooking pot.

This scene allows us to glimpse some of the most distinctive material qualities of life in Tissana, the frontier town that forms the ethnographic focus of this book. It points to the powerful sense in which maritime space is gendered: whilst most of my male neighbours led highly mobile lives, for women, time and watery space take on altogether different properties. They may be equally dependent on the ocean and its resources, but for Tissana's women the sea is an inaccessible space: a horizon across which they watch their partners disappear each morning, and from where, they hope, they will see them return bearing fish. Further, what is revealed in the image of dozens of hopeful supplicants pressed around Tito's boat is the visceral material urgency driving people's everyday pursuit of fish on the wharf. Day-to-day life for many people in Tissana is permeated with a profound sense of material insecurity: that the fragile, unpredictable fishing economy may one day soon fail to meet their most basic livelihood needs. In a town where many are only just managing to survive at the edge of subsistence, land-based fisherfolk invest an enormous amount of their creative energies, working to build and sustain the webs of social relations (*subabu*) that might enable them to 'catch' fish on land.

[1] From the English word 'bath', these large rubber tubs – about 1 metre across and 50 centimetres deep – are the standard measure by which smaller fish are sold on the wharf.

On a less exceptional fishing day, Tito's crew would have been content to have caught even half of the amount of fish that they gave away on that day. Yet, when I asked if Tito ever grew tired of being so relentlessly begged by neighbours and strangers on the wharf, he seemed rather taken aback by the question:

> No! I don't get annoyed! If you do good, you yourself will get. When a person blesses you, tells you, 'Thank you, may God bless,' that's how they add [to your wealth]. But if you just hold [your catch] and say, 'This is only for me,' you never know what you will meet up with. This money, we find it now but we don't know how [long] it will last with us.

In Tissana, as in all places, economic transactions depend upon two people judging that, at that moment, the things they are exchanging are somehow 'equivalent' in value (Guyer 2004). The closer one examines this seemingly simple concept, its complexity multiplies, for nothing ever becomes 'valued' in a historical vacuum (Roitman 2007: 158). When we come across a surprising situation, such as a town in which poor fishermen routinely exchange the very substance of their subsistence for the spoken blessing of a stranger, it serves as a vivid reminder that, in any economic context, even the most routine daily act of valuation must inevitably connect to a much broader set of philosophical convictions about the substance of the material world they inhabit.

In this frontier town, fish are the substance through which relationships are nurtured, and are the subject of countless daily negotiations, both dramatic and mundane. Fish form the basis of almost every meal and the foundation of almost every person's livelihood: almost all men of working age are seagoing fishermen, and most women earn at least part of their living buying fish on the wharf and drying them to sell on at a marginal profit to the traders who gather here from across Sierra Leone. For many people, fish are also the source of profound, and deepening, anxiety. Fishing never was a predictable business, but it has become radically less so in recent decades. By the time I began fieldwork in 2010, a combination of local overfishing and damaging exploitation by internationally owned trawlers had left Sierra Leone's once-bountiful waters worryingly degraded (EJF 2012).

This juxtaposition of high levels of mobility and the urgent material need for close social networks generates a complex web of social tensions. So, as fish catches have become smaller and more erratic in recent decades, many fisherfolk reflect on their growing impoverishment through discourses that emphasise their *moral* ambivalence at being drawn into binding webs of interpersonal dependency. A tension animating many aspects of everyday life is how, through the strategic deployment of material gifts, people are able to nurture the *subabu* they depend upon for their survival, while simultaneously attempting to eschew other, less appealing social entanglements.

In common with many of Sierra Leone's fishing towns, Tissana has experienced rapid population growth in recent decades as a steady stream of marginalised young people, facing limited opportunities at home, have relocated to the coast hoping to find a new kind of life on the sea. As such, this frontier economy provides a window into broader patterns of youth 'navigation' (Vigh 2009) in contemporary Africa. Right across the continent, anthropologists have been describing the struggles young people face, as they attempt to come of age in precarious worlds shaped by extended periods of economic decline, political neglect, and violence. In many parts of Africa, youth have found themselves trapped in situations in which the 'possibilities of living decent lives are negligible' (Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006: 9). In the 1990s and early 2000s, Sierra Leone provided a tragically brutal case in point. As the country spiralled into 11 years of civil war, violence came to be understood as a viable form of migrant labour and a unique opportunity for social mobility by a generation of frustrated young people who saw no opportunities for themselves anywhere else (see e.g. Peters 2010; Utas 2008; Vigh 2006).

Unlike most ethnographic studies to emerge from Sierra Leone over the past two decades, this is not a book about violence; nor is it even, explicitly, a book about post-war 'reconciliation'. I arrived in Tissana eight years after peace had officially been declared, at a time when the scars of fear and violence were gradually becoming less raw. And yet, this immediate legacy of societal collapse continued to shape people's everyday lives in profound ways – people who were struggling to build viable livelihoods in a context in which the political, economic, and moral fabric remained brittle and threadbare. At a personal level, this violent history had implications for individuals' ability to establish the trusting relationships they depend upon for their survival. In a town of migrants, it is often impossible to know what stories might lurk in one's neighbour's past.

The Sierra Leonean state, which was already extremely fragile even before its infrastructure was shredded by civil war, has yet to recover from the violence of the 1990s. It is in places such as Kagboro, which lack the infrastructure and political connections to attract outside investment, that the grinding pace of post-war reconstruction is felt most acutely. One might imagine that the decade following the end of violence would have been characterised by a growing sense of reintegration into post-war national politics, coupled with a steady increase in material security and well-being. But the people I knew in Tissana inhabited a landscape in which basic institutions remained in tatters: the police were ineffective; the health clinic and schools were desperately under-resourced; the only access road was all but impassable. Here, as Lorenzo Bordanaro recently observed in Guinea-Bissau, most people experience the state as 'irrelevant' in shaping their everyday strategies of survival and resilience (Bordanaro 2009: 39).

And yet, despite its peripheral position in relation to the state, there are other respects in which Tissana is part of a highly interconnected, cosmopolitan world. For all its apparent remoteness, the town depends for its very existence on its position within wider flows of people, cash, and fish. Sierra Leone's population depends on fish for 64 per cent of its dietary protein (Laurenti 2008: 64). Extending for almost two miles along the southern shore of the Kagboro Peninsula, Tissana wharf is located at the heart of the country's most productive fishery. Each week, traders converge here from every major market town as far as Koidu near the eastern border. Fish dried in Kagboro's smokehouses eventually find their way to household cooking pots in every corner of the country, from Freetown's crowded slums to the remotest forest village. The town is one of a cluster of bustling multi-ethnic wharf towns (*alehns*) that surround the busy fisheries of the Yawri Bay and the Sherbro Estuary. Fishermen move easily back and forth between these neighbouring coastal settlements. Where captains take their boats, or land their catch, will vary from day to day depending on where they believe they are most likely to encounter shoaling fish, or fetch the best price for their catch on the wharf.

Set against this backdrop, this book traces the material strategies adopted by men and women as they struggle to survive at the intersection between a depleted ecology, a threadbare post-war state, and a social order in which the basic rules of authority, kinship, intimacy, and trust are all perceived to be in a state of flux.

Materiality and morality in Sierra Leone's fishing economy

All along Sierra Leone's coastline, wharf towns began to mushroom from the 1960s onwards as rural migrants were attracted by new economic opportunities on the coast. In some respects, the social history of these burgeoning fishing communities echoes that found in accounts of frontier boom towns all across Africa. When large numbers of young people converge in an unfamiliar landscape, a space opens up in which new patterns of moral economy emerge (Mitchell 1956; Boswell 1969; De Boeck 2001; Walsh 2003). In a region in which we have come to correlate 'memory' with the collective scars of slavery (Shaw 2002) and civil war, Tissana's older residents look back with nostalgia to the youthful energy, conspicuous consumption, and seemingly easy 'freedom' of their town's brief boom years.

Nowadays, however, this boom-time narrative is wearing thin. The stagnation and marginalisation, experienced in most parts of post-war Sierra Leone, have been exacerbated in coastal communities by an ecological crisis with roots in the global political economy of fuel and fish. Climate change (Lam et al. 2012) and destructive over-exploitation by trawlers serving European fish markets (Lucht 2011; EJF 2012) have

led to a collapse in fish stocks across West Africa. As is too often the case, an environmental crisis caused by over-consumption in some the world's wealthiest places is being felt most strongly by its poorest and most vulnerable populations. Tissana's fisherfolk are well aware that their impoverishment is shaped by broader structures of global economic injustice. But, operating from a position of powerlessness, they are more likely to focus their resentment and frustrations much closer to home. As catches become ever smaller and less predictable, this unrelenting material insecurity creates tensions that are ricocheting through the fabric of households and communities, putting new pressures on families, friendships, and gender relations.

What interests me in particular are the ways in which social and economic relationships are shaped by the material – and immaterial – fabric of this maritime world. Within this broad category, I include the physical contours of the coastal topography, as well as the specific substance of fish and other valuable livelihood resources, but I also include the particular social construction of space, value, and materiality.

At its core, then, this is a work about the substance of human relationships: of social bonds formed and lived under conditions of such stark economic uncertainty that, very often, 'love' and 'livelihood' are difficult to disaggregate – and even more difficult to trust. Relationships in Tissana often have a peculiarly concrete, ethnographically observable aspect: one can trace much of the town's fluctuating network of love, friendship, debt, and obligation simply by watching the flows of fish and rice weaving their shifting patterns through Tissana's social fabric. However, this region of West Africa also raises a particular set of problems for any ethnographer interested in the materiality of economic life.

Throughout the Upper Guinea Coast, a rich ethnographic literature attests to the importance of strategies of 'secrecy' at every level of social and political life (Bellman 1979; 1984). In the maritime economy, this diffuse regional aesthetic of secrecy intersects with a coastal topography that provides ample opportunity for people to move in and out of view, across the watery horizon. Within the contours of this physical and economic landscape, Sierra Leone's famed 'hermeneutic of suspicion' (Ferme 2001) finds palpable expression, and the weight of material urgency, in everyday gendered transactions between fishermen and their patrons, customers, and relatives on land.

Running as a thread throughout my ethnography is an examination of the ways in which pragmatic livelihood strategies are interwoven with material strategies that might appear to belong to the sphere of 'ritual' or 'esoteric' practice. Anthropologists working across West Africa have often pointed to the ways in which spiritual agencies are seen to inhabit material substances (Tonkin 1979; Soares 2005), in a context in which hidden, sequestered realms of knowledge and action play a central role

in political life (Shaw 1996; Murphy 1980; 1998). This interweaving of material substances with immaterial agencies has been discussed both for its intrinsic interest as one facet of a complex regional cosmology (see e.g. Jędrej 1974; 1976; MacGaffey 1988; Tonkin 2000) and also for the ways in which it supports a regional model of charismatic power (Strother 2000).

What I trace through my ethnographic discussion is how these particular constructions of (im)materiality are both revealed and produced through the mundane practices of artisanal fishing, gift exchange, and relatedness. My approach is to treat the material value of fetish medicines, curses, and blessings not so much as a matter of 'belief', but rather as an economic fact with direct consequences for the ways in which people seek to balance their meagre livelihoods. The blessings Tito accepted in exchange for his precious fish encapsulate this problematic. Despite their communication through such an apparently ephemeral medium as speech, the people I knew in Tissana insisted that blessings carry a value far beyond that of mere expressions of gratitude or goodwill. Indeed (as I discuss in Chapter 7), fisherfolk describe spoken blessings, and exchange them, as though they were a material element of the economy.

But why does it really matter if a blessing is treated as being materially valuable, just as fish are? In an economy as impoverished as Tissana's, this surprising valuation has powerful consequences for people's livelihoods. It enables somebody with nothing to survive. By adopting an economic perspective, grounded in a detailed description of people's everyday livelihood strategies, we can begin to see how seemingly esoteric realms of knowledge – about the relationship between 'agencies, and their material forms' (Ferme 2001: 4) – become relevant in people's lives through their economic practices: through the decisions they make about how to invest their meagre resources, in fishing, trading, and building relationships.

The remainder of this chapter seeks to position the book within the anthropological literature on economic morality, both in West Africa and more broadly. In the first section, I introduce some key themes that emerge in existing accounts of Sierra Leone's rural economy. I consider how the autopsy of Sierra Leone's civil war revealed a seam of resentment among vulnerable young farmers, the depth of which appears to have been underestimated in earlier ethnographic accounts, and I discuss how these patterns of marginalisation were entangled in broader structures of neglect and economic exploitation.

In the second section, I contemplate where 'morality' resides in the economic order. I argue that people's sense of what is permissible or possible in economic life is usually taken for granted and that the 'morality' of economic behaviour is most likely to become the subject of explicit public reflection, available to ethnographic observation, at moments of

important social rupture. As I begin to sketch in this chapter, certain characteristics of agrarian culture either have been undermined or have taken on new forms within the Yawri Bay's marine topography. A core proposition running through the book is that the anxieties preoccupying people in Tissana often gain salience through the juxtaposition of fishing life with memories of the agricultural world many fisherfolk left behind when they migrated to the coast. The chapter ends by returning to reflect in a more general way on how people's pragmatic judgements of exchange value may offer a window into their taken-for-granted knowledge of the material order.

A moral economy of rural Sierra Leone

While little research has been published on Sierra Leone's vibrant commercial maritime world,[2] my focus on the mundane contestations of economic life places this monograph within a well-established genre of regional ethnography. Some of the richest work to emerge from Sierra Leone in the pre-war period explored the everyday material tensions that ran half-hidden through agrarian households and villages (Richards 1986; Ferme 2001; Leach 1994). Across the broader West African region, anthropologists have highlighted the legacy of slavery in shaping the complexity and ambivalence of contemporary family relationships (Argenti 2010). There is a long-standing intellectual precedent, too, to my own interest in the ways in which people conceptualise and 'use' wealth, with ethnographers of Sierra Leone often describing the wealth of 'big' people as being measured in terms of their mastery of valuable 'secret' knowledge, and their ability to protect, provide for, and patronise a large number of dependants (d'Azevedo 1962b; Murphy 1980).

Rice farming in the forested regions of the Upper Guinea Coast is labour-intensive. Land itself is rarely in short supply and, in principle at least, anyone who begs permission from the head of a landholding lineage can expect to be granted access to an area of land to cultivate. Far more challenging is mobilising the labour required to clear the dense foliage and coax a harvest from the land's unforgiving soils. Against this ecological context, a constant preoccupation for the head of any farming household is how to cultivate relationships of dependency, through marriage, fostering, moneylending, and other forms of patronage (Leach 1994), with people who will then be obliged to provide labour on their farm. The flip side of this relationship is that, for most people in farming communities, their identity, safety, and well-being – even their most basic food security – are all contingent upon being able to rely on the

[2] Carol MacCormack's (1982) household survey of Katta village, conducted in the late 1970s, is one exception.

protection of some more powerful patron (d'Azevedo 1962a; Richards 1986).

It is difficult to understand the resonance of these power relations without some awareness of a not-so-distant history in which domestic 'slavery' (*wono*) was one of the region's most important institutions. Estimates vary but by some reckonings as many as three-quarters of the population of the Upper Guinea Coast were 'slaves' in the early part of the nineteenth century (Holsoe 1977: 294). They 'provided the basis, in fact, of the social system, and upon their labours as domestics depended, very largely, whatever agricultural culture [Sierra Leone] possessed' (Little 1967 [1951]: 37).

In 1928, domestic slavery was outlawed by the colonial regime, although it was not immediately clear to the British administrators what exactly it meant to be a 'slave' in Sierra Leone. Certainly, the institution bore little resemblance to the shackle-and-chains models of slavery familiar from colonial plantation economies (Rodney 1966; MacCormack 1977b). Precolonial European visitors knew very well that it was common for people to be bought, captured, or tricked into dependency, but they often had difficulty distinguishing these individuals from their 'free' neighbours by any visible measure of material wealth or lifestyle (Kopytoff and Miers 1977: 5). In a region in which social personhood is typically described as depending upon 'belonging' to a group 'in the double sense of the word in English – that is, they are members of the group and also part of its wealth, to be disposed of in its best interests' (ibid.: 9) – to be owned as a 'slave' was to occupy one position, albeit a particularly powerless and stigmatised one, within a social structure in which *all* persons were 'owned'. So, for example, migrants would sometimes voluntarily place themselves in a position of absolute dependency very similar to that of a 'slave' after fleeing their home following war or a personal dispute (ibid.).

Over 90 years have passed since slavery officially became illegal in Sierra Leone, but the legacy of these historical power structures continues to be strongly felt in rural areas today. It remains the case, for example, that the most powerful individuals in any village are invariably those able to demonstrate the longest genealogical roots in the land. More vulnerable people – the ones most likely to end up working as labourers on another person's farm – typically trace their descent from people who arrived in the village more recently, as client strangers or captured slaves (d'Azevedo 1962a; Sarró 2010; Berliner 2010).

Behind this apparently simple model of inherited power, commentators have repeatedly emphasised the subtlety of the ways in which people attempt to manipulate the labour of their weaker neighbours. So, while a person's high status is typically legitimised in terms of their direct descent from the village's original founding figure, it is apparently fairly common

for elders to reinvent the public version of descent accounts to more closely mirror the lived reality of village politics, extending the ancestral roots of successful people deeper into their village's genealogical history (d'Azevedo 1962b: 510). Meanwhile, Caroline Bledsoe (1980; 1990a; 1995), Mariane Ferme (2001), and Melissa Leach (1994) all emphasise the range of covert strategies that enabled women (in particular) to manoeuvre successfully through this economic environment, even from a position of apparent weakness. Taken together, this body of literature has produced a highly nuanced image of how men and women in hunter-farmer villages worked to navigate a complex web of overt and covert relationships in order to balance fragile livelihoods in an unpredictable ecology.

Until the 1990s, ethnographers tended to emphasise the fact that, for all the evident stratification of village-level economics, 'differentials [of wealth] are fluid, even reversible' (Leach 1994: 185). However, examined retrospectively through the dark lens of civil war, the patronage system has come to be viewed by many with heightened misgivings, as a key source of the frustrations that eventually erupted so destructively in rural communities (Richards 2004; 2005; Murphy 2010; Knörr and Filho 2010; Peters 2010).

Civil war and economic life

Over the past two decades, much of the discussion of Sierra Leone's economic life has been preoccupied with making sense of the violence that ravaged the country during the 1990s. The conflict initially perplexed outside observers: Sierra Leone was not divided by any obvious ethnic or religious tensions, nor did the combatants seem able to articulate any coherent political motives for fighting. In any case, the violence was far more often directed against civilians than enemy soldiers. Nothing about this war made sense within traditional models of war as nation state politics. Then, towards the end of the 1990s, a new theoretical framework came to the fore, which appeared to render the conflict legible to Western observers: the violence, we were told, was driven not by political grievance but by the simple logic of economic 'greed' (cf. Collier 2000).

Starting from the common observation that all factions relied heavily on cash from the sale of alluvial diamonds, many commentators reasoned that the war had been, at heart, *about* diamond wealth (Douglas 1999; Gberie, Hazleton, and Smillie 2000); that everyone, from warlords to impoverished young fighters, had been drawn into the conflict by the promise that fortunes were to be made on the violent fringes of an illicit global trade. This explanation resonated powerfully in the international media, where, alongside emotive images of amputees and Kalashnikov-toting children, 'blood diamonds' have come to be seen as one of the key icons of the Sierra Leone war.