Introduction

One Metaphor, Many Faces

Papani (55) leans back on his bench, so that his back rests against the coarse yellow stone wall of the two-room-house which we share with nine others in the hillside community of Allentown in the eastern part of Freetown. He closes his eyes to let the sun kiss his face or maybe to block out my anxious expression. He takes time to answer, and, while I observe him, I feel like one massive bundle of nerves.

After many years of research and countless conversations on this very bench, I had just explained to Papani once again how I aimed to write this ethnography of violence in relationships. This was the ninth time I offered a framing, and, at last, the sun seems to have penetrated the skin as his features turned to one big smile:

Madam Schneider, finally you have understood that all rests not within one interpretation against the other but in their simultaneous presence with all the hardship this entails. Mind you that this insight was always with you in the metaphor of the teeth and the tongue. You just needed time to see that all these different interpretations are like a microcosm for our world.

The metaphor of the teeth and tongue jammed together (*Tit ɛn tɔŋ mɔs jam*), which Papani refers to, says something valuable about the relationship between men (teeth) and women (tongue). During my research in Freetown, the teeth and the tongue were my constant companions. This notion was invoked again and again to express widely contrasting attitudes towards love and violence in Sierra Leone. These differing interpretations can also be found in development discourses, anthropological literature, and oral history. Gender studies read the teeth and the tongue as a metaphor for sex and for the female reproductive organs (Bledsoe 1980a). Development discourses tend to see in it a critique of physical violence against women, of men's sense of entitlement, and of gender inequality. Indeed, it was often referred to when I spoke with employees of international organisations (IOs) or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), development practitioners, policy-makers, and expats working

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in and on Sierra Leone. I was told that the tongue represents the woman, who is locked in and controlled by the teeth without the possibility of escape or independent existence, getting bitten whenever she makes a questionable move. The teeth stand for violent men ready to crush and grind anything that gets in their way. Many of my interlocutors invoked an individualistic, rights-, and empowerment-based narrative (see Abdullah and Fofana-Ibrahim 2010) when proposing their solution to this scenario of patriarchal oppression. In their view, women's empowerment should be achieved through awareness raising, education, a well-functioning legal and political system, and the implementation of universal human rights. These would ideally allow women to leave those men who maltreat them and, though this is hardly ever mentioned, men to leave those women who hurt them.

In contrast, local understandings hold that the metaphor of the teeth and the tongue highlights the complementarity of men and women. Without teeth and tongue, it becomes impossible to digest food and people will starve and eventually die. The teeth chew the food, while the tongue helps to move it around. Before swallowing, the tongue must move some of the chewed food towards the back of the throat and into the opening of the oesophagus. The teeth are responsible for the manual labour, while the tongue organises the processing and distribution of food and is also the organ of taste. Between themselves, teeth and tongue divide the labour necessary to nourish the body, but, while they agree on the overall goal and the need to cooperate, their relationship is not inherently harmonious. In relationships between men and women, teeth and tongue may collide or hurt each other. But the bottom line is that no matter their disputes, neither can nourish the body without the other. Hence, they are jammed together, not in the sense of something blocked or unworkable, but in the sense of codependency and reliance. I was often told that 'no matter how often the one hurts the other, they still stay together in one mouth. They need each other'. The men (the teeth) do the rough, independent work, while the women (the tongue) are the soft organs, the social connectors to family and community, and thus those who give taste and meaning to a relationship.[1]

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[1] These are but two well-known interpretations. Metaphors are of course open to many readings and constantly reinterpreted. See, for example, the birdcage metaphor in feminist discourses or Ramon Sarró's (2005) work on differing notions of 'the throat and the belly' among the Baga. Sarró argues that teeth and throat open two different symbolic domains. Swallowing is constructive of personhood and community, while chewing is destructive. In many African languages, eating something that implies chewing with the teeth (such as meat) is expressed with a different verb from eating something for which the throat alone is necessary (such as rice).

These contrasting interpretations of the same metaphor show how different outlooks, experiences, and dispositions can give rise to a broad variety of understandings of the same process. This is true, too, of the function and significance of violence in relationships and of appropriate forms of mediation and punishment. Such variance in interpretation, which is based on the social positions of various actors, is crucial for the analysis to come in this book.

Indeed, love and violence are strong concepts, which have come to form doxa, in that many believe they know precisely what love and violence entail. Yet, these popular opinions are not necessarily epistemes, and people's beliefs often contradict not only each other but accepted practices, rules, and laws as well. This makes them particular analytical problems. The two seem to occupy polar opposites that are connected along lines of intention, purpose, and consequence. They are affective and emotional concepts and are seen as both intensely individual and at the same time connected to the making and breaking of personal, social, and societal bonds. Love and violence lie at the heart of social, economic, political, and legal fabrics. And they also trigger interventions. However, while policy-makers need simple narratives to frame social problems and justify intervention, just as lawmakers rely on them to defend legal prescriptions and sanctions, these narratives tend to collapse when they come up against lived experiences (for an analysis of such narratives, see Autesserre 2012). The resulting 'social struggles' around power, justice, rights, and violence – and the social, political, and institutional responses to them – reveal discrepancies between global (rights) epistemes and local lived experience (Cowan, Dembour, and Wilson 2001; Cowan 2006). They challenge us to find ways to reconcile competing claims and justifications, but also to accept the idea of incommensurability (Cowan, Dembour, and Wilson 2001; Cowan 2006). Uncovering the difficulty of imposing single words charged with strong connotations – like 'love' or 'violence' – to capture phenomena that are empirically diverse and complexly related, this phenomenological and critically feminist book deconstructs singular meanings and foregrounds the ways in which both love and violence are locally experienced and conceived.

Ethnographies that illuminate such discrepancies between local meanings and political, legal, or policy conceptions can help enhance the knowledge of policy-makers and improve social interventions. In particular, the anthropologist can penetrate below the surface to uncover those underlying nuances that otherwise remain invisible. During the two decades following the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991–2002), the country experienced rapid and fundamental legal changes. Laws were passed to rebuild the state and in particular to

prevent rape and teenage pregnancy. These laws ended up severely impacting on relationship dynamics, triggering fundamental changes in the politics of intimacy and throwing the respective jurisdictions of households, communities, and criminal justice institutions into question. Yet we lack an analysis of the deeper context that goes beyond the current political moment. *Love and Violence* seeks to remedy this by providing a thorough analysis of the role and place of violence within intimate relationships and its mediation. In this way, I hope to unravel the changing role of the state and its component organisations and illuminate the relationships between the state, individuals, communities, and households.

In the course of this study, the metaphor of the teeth and the tongue offers a framework for understanding how my research collaborators,[2] the Sierra Leoneans with whom and alongside whom I conducted my research, execute, witness, or endure violence; how they make sense of their experiences; and how they navigate between household, community, and state systems to mediate violence. The metaphor furthermore helps us understand how these different systems conceptualise and mediate violence in terms of their respective ideals of gender relations, and how partnerships and individuals often become 'jammed' between these opposing ideals.

The Relationship between Love and Violence

This book is an ethnographic study of violence in intimate relationships in Sierra Leone. It explores how such violence is experienced, negotiated, and regulated in the context of often colliding domestic, local, international, and global forces. In this sense, it addresses two core concerns of our time: (1) the understanding and control of intimacy and sexual practices; and (2) the meaning and role of violence in relationships and the appropriate forms of its regulation. Violence and intimacy are becoming increasingly pressing issues in our contemporary world, shaping relations between states, institutions, and people. This is especially the case in sub-Saharan Africa, where a politico-legal discourse about the control of intimacy and sexual practices seeks to legitimise the expansion of state jurisdiction into spheres that are otherwise reserved for communities or households (see, for instance, Thomas 2003; Parikh 2004b; 2012; Lorway 2008; Tamale 2011; Steinberg 2013). A complicated history of international influence and exploitation weighs down on these states, which

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[2] In this book, I use the term 'research collaborator' to refer to the people who let me into their lives and with and alongside whom I conducted research.

are being pressured to further international development agendas. In this book, I explore this trend in Freetown, focussing on what happens when state institutions and local communities fundamentally disagree on how to approach issues of intimacy and violence.

This ethnography first introduces the reader to contemporary relationship dynamics in Freetown and the diverse forms of violence within them. I examine the social significance of violence in intimate relationships and the gendered dimension of such violence. I show in which circumstances specific violent acts are tolerated or even expected, and when they are seen to cross a line. I then analyse how violence regarded as illegitimate is mediated and punished within a complex plural legal system by households, communities, and criminal justice institutions. The book combines a detailed examination of laws and policies around violence prevention and response with grassroots conceptions of violence in relationships in Sierra Leone. In this way, it contributes to the anthropological literature on the multiple, often contradictory pressures and influences exerted on persons and institutions as they enact, experience, and respond to violence.

An important precondition for a fuller and deeper understanding of this phenomenon, which is essential for developing social policies that actually work, is analysing what is considered to be violence and what is not and questioning prevailing interpretations and responses to violence. Scholarship that only localises or individualises violence neglects larger structural factors. Studies that shy away from including perspectives that complicate one-dimensional interpretations of violence and treat violence not as unequivocally negative prevent the development of a systematic analysis. Understanding violence requires an analysis that is both theoretically and empirically rigorous. It should also account not only for the way in which histories of oppression, global power, and the dynamics and structures of violence impact local lived experience, but also for how people themselves shape their conditions.

Knowledge production is political in nature. To be committed to emancipation and liberation, it must value and take seriously research collaborators' perspectives, consider a plurality of stories, engage with uncomfortable aspects when they appear, and allow them space within published work too. Forcing my data into a unifying narrative that describes violence as always bad would not do justice to the complexity and breadth of the phenomenon. This would only have served to elevate myself above my research collaborators and interpret or explain their narratives and experiences in ways other than their own framing ('this is what they really mean'). However, treating violence as multifaceted is not the same as condoning it. This book attempts to explain how violence is

executed, perceived, and responded to. I consider how these perceptions came into being in the first place and which mechanisms strengthen them. In sum, the book moves beyond studying either structural factors or individual experiences in order to provide an encompassing, multi-layered perspective on violence.

The starting point for this analysis lies in rethinking pervasive assumptions about love and violence. This is a necessary first step if we are to engage with the subtleties of violence in intimate and familial contexts. It is already well known that the forms violence takes are historically contingent and that perceptions of violence are context-specific, but the assumption that love and violence are two opposite ends of a continuum remains widely held. In many of the love stories depicted in this book, these certainties become unsettled. I demonstrate that in some contexts, such as in post-war Sierra Leone, many forms of violence between partners are perceived as signs of an active struggle to maintain relationships and sustain genuine emotions. In the understanding of my research collaborators, violence, the fear of violence, the diverse messages it communicates, and the pain it can cause are valorised as necessary for a functional relationship. Within relationships, violence thereby becomes constitutive of the experience of affection and love – although careful distinctions are drawn between so-called acceptable violence and transgressive or unacceptable violence.

An important part in this negotiation between the accepted and the unaccepted is played by generational tensions and by people's social position within the urban community. Thus, different life stages allow for distinctive relationships and generate specific expectations and tolerances regarding violence. In fact, what forms of violence are accepted in a particular context and by whom has as much to do with life stage, seniority, and social capital as with gender. This effectively challenges a second widespread assumption that where intimate violence exists, women tend to be on the receiving end of it. The ethnographic account of love and violence that I present here disrupts common victim–perpetrator narratives. It nuances these fixed positions into relational ones and shows how the acceptability of a practice can change over the course of people's lives and depends on the relationship between the partners. In contemporary Sierra Leone, there is often an expectation on the part of younger women that love and care will be manifested through physical violence. Here, women are not simply passive victims. What is more, men can in fact feel under pressure to execute violence.

In addition, I show that violent practices are perceived to be gendered – but not with women as victims and men as perpetrators; rather, it is with men using violence mostly against bodies and women infiltrating and

controlling minds. With these uncomfortable but important insights, I highlight the tension between the assumptions of global rights and local experiences and between simple narratives and messy day-to-day intimacy. This is necessary if we are to grasp the role and place of violence in intimate relationships and to comprehend why interventions fail if they simplify the intricacies of the contexts in which they operate.

These insights allow me to continue a strand of regional anthropology that started during the civil war and that has shaped the scholarly understanding of violence in conflict globally. Catherine Bolten's (2012) ethnography illustrates how Sierra Leoneans survived wartime violence by invoking love, a deeply compassionate relationship rooted in exchange and nurturing. At the time of the conflict, anthropologists working on gender and sexual violence sensitively moved analyses past simplistic male/perpetrator, female/victim dynamics by showing the various roles women and girls played during the war. Illustrative of this trend is Chris Coulter's (2005; 2009) work on bush wives and girl soldiers and Dara Kay Cohen's (2013) study of female fighters and women's perpetration of war-time violence. In this book, I attempt to move this work beyond the sphere of violent conflict and into that of everyday intimacy. By examining both male and female agency in respect of issues of everyday violence in sub-Saharan Africa, I seek to build a bridge over the perceived gendered gap between violent men and violated women.

What Laws Do: Community Continuity and State Rupture

This book also contributes to the anthropological study of policy, laws, and their impact at all levels of people's lives. While violence is not summarily condemned or even rejected in Freetown, its acceptability has clear limits. According to a moral economy of relationships, violence is accepted in these dynamics as a form of give and take so long as it does not cause excessive harm that cannot be undone (Burrill, Roberts, and Thornberry 2010). If it does, people turn to their family, their community, or the state to report it. In Chapters 4 to 8, I examine how transgressive violence is regulated by different institutions, ranging from households to state courts. I show that for both households and communities, violence constitutes a relationship between people that must be cooperatively mediated. Building on a rich history of female political leadership in the region, such mediations are female-led and can adjudicate both male and female forms of violence. The criminal justice system, on the other hand, is restricted to judging visible or traceable violence and thus to violence predominantly attributed to men. This means that,

if only the data from criminal justice institutions are considered, they support the gendered dualism of victim–perpetrator. But if non-state cases are included, a whole other set of violent practices emerges that state institutions cannot consider and that collapses this neat dichotomy. This finding raises questions about the ways in which violence tends to be conceptualised globally.

During household and community mediations, violent acts are re-embedded in the larger social context in which they occur, and what is put on trial is a person's overall comportment, not specific acts. Mediation follows a processual format that has been observed for other forms of disputes (especially concerning murder and land conflicts) in various parts of Africa (see particularly Gibbs 1963). Sessions can be lengthy, as room is given to all those who wish to air their grievances before they are asked to 'swallow' them and move on. Because holding grudges is seen as an ineradicable part of the human condition, such mediations do not seek to overcome discord to achieve harmony (*pace* Gibbs 1963; Porter 2017). Instead, they attempt to reduce anger to a bearable limit and, through various closing rituals, trap grievances within individual bodies so as to maintain those social bonds that keep a house-hold or community functioning. Given the relational perception of harm and the need to ensure continuity, no single wrongdoer is identified. Instead, punishment is apportioned between the parties involved in a dispute. This can mean, however, that the needs of individuals are subsumed under those of the social group.

By contrast, the criminal justice system presides over specific acts, not personhood. Passing definitive judgements on acts requires constructing specific types of subjects, such as victims and perpetrators, thereby narrowing down the 'complex range of perspectives involved in rights processes' to a bare minimum and 'eliding the inherent ambiguity of social life' (Hall 1996; Wilson and Mitchell 2003; Hunter 2010: 8–9; Richter 2016). Here, no intrinsic value is placed on continuity. Since, according to rights discourses, rights are inherent in everyone, they cannot be given partially or divided between persons so as to appease a particular social group. In a court setting, the person identified as the harmed party is therefore encouraged to leave the relationship so as to end the violence and claim their rights. Here, punishment and imprison-ment have the aim and outcome of rupturing relationships and dissolving social bonds.

As I show, the intrinsic unshakeable value communities place on continuity must be understood not as a conscious attempt to limit the individual but as a defence mechanism that developed in response to a long history of rupture – through colonialism, slavery, violent

interventions, and conflict – that sought to undermine and override community mechanisms. In this book, I examine how household and community processes seeking to maintain relationships collide with state practices that rupture them. These different approaches towards mediation and punishment mean that for individuals confronted with unbearable violence, reporting such violence involves choosing one's allegiances and cutting one's losses. Reporting to state institutions leads to the withdrawal of community and familial support – sometimes even to fines and punishment – while reporting to the household or community results in the prioritisation of the needs of the group over personal exigencies. These insights help us understand why despite campaigning, legal reforms, destigmatising efforts, and institutional support, only certain individuals will consider reporting violence to the police. These are usually minors – or adults on behalf of minors – who do so as a result of the intense political focus placed on them or adult women who have enough resources to leave their communities and start over if their lives collapse after reporting. These findings should make practitioners and policy-makers aware that only some facets of a phenomenon can be derived from reporting statistics so long as many people continue not to report instances of such a phenomenon in the first place.

The book is set in the aftermath of the civil war and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC),[3] when efforts were undertaken to address sexual and gender-based violence. This resulted in the 'gender justice laws', which include the Domestic Violence Act (Government of Sierra Leone 2007c) and the Devolution of Estates Act (Government of Sierra Leone 2007b), which were enacted on 26 July 2007, and the Registration of Customary Marriage and Divorce Act (Government of Sierra Leone 2009), which entered into force on 22 January 2009. Any conduct within an intimate relationship that brings about physical, psychological, economic, or sexual harm to either partner is rendered unlawful and liable to conviction and imprisonment by these laws (Mills et al. 2015). The laws also animate women to formally register religious and traditional matrimony, and they accord equal rights to both spouses over all assets, including land and property should they divorce. A particular focus of these laws was the protection of young girls from sexual harassment and grooming and the prevention of teenage pregnancy. One means involved raising the age of sexual consent for girls and boys from 14 to 18. This was formalised in the Sexual Offences

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[3] The TRC was a product of the Lomé Peace Accord between the Government of Sierra Leone and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). After the civil war, the TRC analysed the causes of the war, human rights violations, and the influence of foreign actors.

Act (SOA) of 2012, which rendered sexual relations with – and among – minors illegal and provided sentences for up to fifteen years. Consent is no longer a defence.

After political power changed hands in 2018, sexual violence, particularly against young girls, and teenage pregnancy continued to loom large on the national agenda. Grassroots organisations and activists campaigned untiringly for increased protection for girls. Early in 2019, President Maada Bio gave in to their demands. He declared a national emergency on rape and sexual violence with the intention of making sexual penetration of minors punishable by lengthy terms of imprisonment, including life. Though the emergency was later revoked, this goal was still achieved by the Sexual Offences Amendment Act, passed in September 2019. This provided for the possibility of life imprisonment for offenders and of sentencing twelve-year-old boys for sexual penetration (including sleeping with girlfriends). These legal changes became the subject of a global debate about consent and protection against violence. Sierra Leone emerged as the development movement's poster child – a place where the tireless efforts of grassroots activists and vernacular voices finally impacted on national politics and where effective steps were taken to establish zero tolerance for rape and sexual violence. However, while celebrated internationally as a milestone in the struggle against violence, from the outset these laws were ambiguous in their effects.

By documenting their impact in great ethnographic detail, this book provides an analysis of the unexpected effects of well-intentioned laws. While international organisations and transitional justice instruments have pushed for these laws to combat sexual violence, in practice these laws have often resulted in girls being forced to abandon their education and in boys and young men being incarcerated for up to fifteen years for having sexual intercourse in consensual relationships: 'Age-of-consent law is complex. If it is set too high, there's a risk that it will undercut young people's agency. If it is set too low, it does not offer enough protection for vulnerable young people' (Schneider 2019c). This is the quandary with which Sierra Leone has wrestled in the last decade. Sierra Leonean lawmakers have created some positive change: the Act protects children, particularly girls, who are abused by adults. Conjointly, however, it limits young people's liberty and criminalises not only violence but desire. Strangers are encouraged to report on each other, and stigmatisation and exclusion are common. For instance, a school ban carried out by invasive physical searches and tests has formalised a practice that had long been underway, namely barring visibly pregnant girls from going to regular schools and taking exams.

The outcome of these rape prevention efforts, which made worldwide headlines, is therefore far-reaching. They go far beyond the prevention of