

# Elders and transactional relationships in Sierra Leone: rethinking synchronic approaches

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## Introduction

I am sitting under the canopy that connects the two huts that serve as kitchen and parlour for the staff of King George's home for the elderly in Freetown, Sierra Leone. Auntie Kadie, one of the home's staff, cleans fish with quick and routinized movements. A group of residents gather in the shade. They have come to teach me – the anthropologist who is interested in relationship forms – about agreements (transactional relationships). The elders explain that, while the importance of marriages is undisputed, agreements are too often ignored, even though such relationships are key for forging and maintaining social connections, experiencing intimacy and bypassing loneliness. Their knowledge about how to navigate agreement relationships, they say, makes them invaluable teachers for younger generations, who, like them, depend on agreements for success. After listening for a while, Auntie Kadie bursts into laughter and then goes on to say: 'You talk about company but don't forget that these agreements you have, you have them just as much to get a full stomach. Look at that fish I am cleaning here, that fish was brought by Pa Jones' "agreement". He is in it for the fish.' With a smile, Pa Boima (aged sixty-three) responds by saying: 'One does not oppose the other. They are for both – for income and for relations. The world is changing fast. Sometimes, families are broken up. People move all over. Much is needed to survive and provide. Many people cannot take care of their parents when they are old. When we are widowed, we are on our own or sent to places like this [King George's home for the elderly]. But a man is no good on his own. Agreements are like glue between different shreds of life. As youth, they give you opportunities; when you are grown, they give you status; and when you are old, they give you company. You can earn through them and be somebody.' Mm Jebeh (seventy-nine) nods and then turns to me to confirm: 'It is like he says – agreements, my young friend, are for desire, company, connections and resources.'<sup>1</sup>

Scholars have long been interested in the ways in which exchanges of goods or money can strengthen interpersonal relationships and social cohesion. In most societies this motivates transactions between households and social units during rites of passage. But it also rings true for individuals engaged in various relationship forms. Indeed, perceptive studies have reiterated the entanglement of economy and emotion in intimate relationships (see, for example, Bloch 1989;

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<sup>1</sup>Certain identifying characteristics have been changed and biographical details omitted to protect the identity of those who wished to remain anonymous. Research participants chose their names/pseudonyms.

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Cornwall 2002; Illouz 1997; Zelizer 2000), a liaison that is at the core of the conversation above between residents and staff of King George's home for the elderly. Researchers now study transactional relationships to normalize sex for money exchanges and to counter reductive views of prostitution (Hunter 2002) – that transactional relationships are more than a simple exchange of sex for gifts, goods or money between individuals, but that they can foster complex and often lasting engagements. Indeed, scholars agree with Mm Jebeh and Pa Boima that transactional relationships are incorporated in 'broader moralities of exchange' and redistribution between individuals, generations and kin (Groes-Green 2014: 237; Cole 2004). Yet, due to a focus on young people (Stasik 2016), there has been a tendency to overlook the enduring nature of such transactions and their ability to coincide with marriages. That is not to say that elders have been ignored altogether. Christian Groes-Green (2013), for instance, analyses the role of female elders as facilitators of transactions between young women (donors of sex) and older men (donors of goods and money). However, research tends to focus on one side of the dyad and to provide a nuanced but timely analysis of the workings of these relationships at a specific point in time. This article adds another layer to this rich body of literature by affirming that transactional relationships are as important *among* elders – not solely *between* elders and youth – as they are among youth. Such relationships have a life course dimension in that elders, who have engaged in them throughout their lives, remember the past and navigate the present through them. In Sierra Leone, agreement relationships are mutually favourable and pleasurable bonds that play a pivotal role throughout people's lives. They are transactional relationships fostered through exchanges of goods and services, where sex and companionship are important and romantic emotions are commonplace. While they are not permanent, they last longer than a single encounter and vary considerably in form, duration and level of commitment. Far from following a singular model, their texture differs as they serve particular purposes at different stages of a person's life and thus can shed light on evolving social, emotional and economic needs. If money changes ownership, this is based on a transparent negotiation over its purpose and use. The money is a symbolic placeholder for the 'thing' – e.g. fees, information, food or clothes – that is exchanged (Zelizer 2000). Such relationships can be both intragenerational and intergenerational. The intergenerational dimension also shines through the ways in which elders teach younger generations how to engage in and manage such relations.

At King George's home for the elderly, where this study is based, agreement relationships are lived as passionately and openly as among my younger research collaborators. The home is run by the Sierra Leone Society for the Welfare of the Aged and supported by various donors with varying degrees of reliability. Located on the Grafton/New Regent Road at the east end of Freetown, it provides housing and basic care to the elderly. The average age of residents is sixty-five years, and, while I was conducting research there, forty-eight beds were available. King George's is the last stop on the life journey of most inhabitants. During the six years when I was visiting the home, only one resident relocated; all the others spent their twilight years there.

This article builds on participant observation conducted at the home on frequent occasions between July 2012 and June 2017. Additionally, I gathered detailed life and love histories of twenty-three residents – fifteen men and eight

women – from May 2016 to June 2017. The elders, who were born between the 1930s and 1960s, grew up across the country. They bore witness to Sierra Leone's independence, the upsurge of hope at a new direction away from patronage and gerontocracy, and the subsequent downwards spiral when aspirations rubbed against long-trodden routines, mounting precarity and increasing corruption. They saw long-established rifts widening and experienced their country's descent into civil war. They were part of the country's attempts at refashioning itself and moving forward in the post-war watershed, and now they are here at a time when catastrophe and blessing, adversity and success follow hard on each other. Their diverse lived experiences revealed a common thread in that they migrated from village settings to the capital, hoping to exit enduring structures of patronage and live self-directed lives through agreement relationships. Their objective – to avoid getting absorbed in webs of dependency and obligation – produced shifting personal and professional circumstances, which included formal and informal labour and diverse relationship forms. All had used, and continued to use, agreement relationships strategically to increase social and economic wealth and to satisfy the desire for company while honouring the lifelong struggle for self-sufficiency and independence.

Due to this engagement in agreement relationships throughout their lives, the elders' narratives offer a lens to examine shifting social relations over the course of over eighty years. They point to increasing migration to the urban centre and to a conversion from rural, kin-based relations to more complex, wide-reaching urban networks. In their current, public form, agreement relationships are urban phenomena. In the capital, they are negotiated openly and are lived in parallel to other forms of relationships with spouses, main partners, one-night stands or providers (Schneider 2018). In rural areas, however, they need to be carefully concealed. There, kin groups still exert considerable power over intimate relationships. Up until the civil war, wealthy elders married so extensively that they monopolized access to women (Richards 2005: 582–8). For younger and less wealthy men, high bride price payments were often converted into years of unpaid labour, which increased the 'wealth in people' (Bledsoe 1980) of the rich. Because transactions officially take place between households and are a fundamental part of kinship and alliance building, exchanges of intimacy for goods or money between individuals need to be camouflaged so as not to openly challenge existing hierarchies. Women's acquisition of resources from lovers, husbands and male kin through such transactions takes the form of 'covert strategies' (Leach 1994: 198). Their role as public secrets already shone through Melissa Leach's anecdote in which one of her male interlocutors scolded her for potentially exposing the fact that women 'get money from their boyfriends' (*ibid.*: 200) when she asked how women acquire resources among the Mende of the Gola rainforest. Among the Kpelle, such covert transactional relationships were popular enough to merit their own terminologies, ranging from 'trial marriages' to 'hidden' or 'night loving' (Bledsoe 1980: 92).<sup>2</sup> But still, they could never be recognized officially.

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<sup>2</sup>In Guinea-Bissau, such transactions were moved outside the village setting as designated love spaces were created where women had affairs with other men before returning to their marriage home (Temudo 2019).

Men and boys who got caught having relations with women and girls outside marriage received hefty fines that effectively forced them into indentured labour while sustaining the dominance of powerful lineages (Richards 2005). This outcome is so popular that it coined the terms 'women trouble' and 'women damage', which run through many regional ethnographies (see, for example, Richards 2005: 578; Bledsoe 1980; Diggins 2018; Ferme 2001; Leach 1994). In West Africa's rural farming economies, 'women trouble' is thus one consequence of the uneasy historical relationship between kinship and domestic slavery (Diggins 2017: 495; Argenti 2010).

The diverse ways in which those confined in this exploitative system sought to escape the villages and seek alternative livelihoods is well documented. Some headed to the mining regions for a new start (Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962). Some were driven into the hands of fighting factions and became 'protagonists of war' (Richards 2005: 585). Others went to the coast and became fisherfolk instead (Diggins 2018). While agreement relationships, if exposed, bore the possibility of hardship, they also offered potential exit opportunities for both sexes. Although she did not follow their journeys, during her research in the 1980s, Mariane Ferme (2001) noted that, among the Mende, women would use such relations to (temporarily) migrate from their rural homes. Similarly, the elders of King George's relied on such relationships to negotiate a move to the capital, where they hoped for the chance of a self-directed life. The oldest residents at King George's, who came to the city to escape patronage and gerontocracy, were joined by a second wave of newcomers who used agreements to move before the civil war commenced.

But such relationships not only facilitated migration. They allowed newcomers to find their feet in the city and to be incorporated into urban networks of reciprocity. Yet, unlike in other places, in Freetown kin-like patterns were not resurrected. In her study of fisherfolk, Diggins shows how, along Sierra Leone's maritime coast, runaways quickly forged 'rhizomorphic' networks of family relatedness. These 'potato-rope families' incorporated newcomers, but they also produced webs of hierarchical reliance (Diggins 2017: 493). By contrast, agreement relationships offer an alternative to both aspirational or fictive kin strategies (McGovern 2012) and fosterage (Bledsoe 1990). Through agreement relationships, the elders at King George's lived desire and negotiated social and economic mobility while maintaining their autonomy and seeking to avoid the underbelly of dependency and the power imbalances of more hierarchical, kin-like systems. Furthermore, such relations allowed them to stay connected to wider networks even when they eventually married. Crucially, these relations continued until old age, providing connections, income and antidotes to grief and loneliness.

What we have here, then, is a move from tight-knit rural kinship patterns to diverse urban intimate economies, a move that was facilitated and continues to be nourished by agreement relationships which moved from concealment to revelation and from stigma to celebration. Transactional relationships are therefore creative attempts at self-determination through exchanges of intimacy, economy and emotion between elders, among elders and youth, and between youth. A key rationale behind the pursuit of agreements is grounded in the idea that a meaningful life is a connected life. In Sierra Leone, people are not seen as bounded entities or lone actors, but as links in a pattern of relationships. A rich life is therefore characterized by connections that give life its pulse and situate a

person within a web of want and need, give and take. Through agreements, connections can be extended, positionality can be transformed, and solitude can be evaded. But because a person is embedded in a web of specific relations, agency is domesticated (see Nyamnjoh 2001 for Cameroon) and sociocentric and egocentric demands constantly compete (Jackson 2012: 7). A person's unique social and geographical positionality thereby shapes the forms of connections that are tolerated and within reach. Agreements are therefore a balancing act between individual and collective needs, and their changing role reflects transformations in the relationship between personal desire and collective responsibility. Their popularity among elders and youth alike tells a story about forms of resistance to and negotiations of freedom from clearly assigned social positionings and relationship patterns. Through agreements with people who serve as guarantors offering entry to new geographical locations, social circles and employment opportunities and who are important companions throughout life's ups and downs, Sierra Leoneans forge alternative self-directed life journeys.

## Remembering the past through agreement relationships

### *Rural concealed agreements*

The elders' agreement relationships formed a bridge over their diverse life trajectories. The oldest residents were born in the early 1930s and came of age during a time when domestic slavery had just been abolished (1928) and many village economies depended on free labour. During an afternoon at King George's, some elders thought back to their first agreements. 'Well,' said Pa Mohmo (aged eighty-eight), carefully:

desire was always there, but back then you had to marry women to be with them. But bride price was impossible for most of us poor youth. The elders married most of the young girls who then worked on their farms. They had countless wives. So, either you worked for free for an elder whose daughter you wanted to earn eventually. Or, you met her anyways and worked for the elder to pay the fine they gave you when you got caught. Either way, you worked for the rich men.

To the encouraging laughter of his audience, he continued: 'Now there was desire. But there was also tactic. Most of these girls, they liked men their ages. Young men like us. So, we traded. At night, they brought us certain things we needed, and we brought them satisfaction.' Many examples followed Pa Mohmo's explanation of how young men and women had exchanged sexual pleasure for goods and items, for information about harvests and village affairs, for rumours about big men, for labour and for connections, among other things.

Surprisingly, though, such relations were not merely youthful resistance. Alima (fifty-five) reiterated: 'We learned how to get agreements from the old mummies and the boys from Pa's. They had many agreements themselves and showed us how to attract them and how to hide.' Through the tone of the elders' various stories, a complex undercover economy was revealed to me whereby novices – that is, adolescents – learned from skilled elders how to read the potential connections in the village, and, by navigating them, how to live out their desires and further their personal goals and kin-related affairs. Knowledge was passed along gendered

(women taught women, men taught men) and generational lines (the elders taught younger generations) but remained restricted to kin and close friends. Many of these 'agreement seekers' occupied marginal positions in their respective settings because they were descendants of slaves, impoverished farmers, adopted strangers (d'Azevedo 1962) or had come to the village as foster children (Isaac and Conrad 1982). To small, impoverished households, these relations provided the chance to surreptitiously boost social and economic resources.

Agreements were carefully guarded by people of the same sex and overlooked by kin of the opposite sex. While, to the outside observer, village intimacy seemed like a blanket laid out neatly according to hierarchy and privilege, underneath the covers a variety of tactics obfuscated clear boundaries and assigned places within a social order, all the while leaving the surface image intact. Indeed, only wealthy husbands and parents, senior wives and chiefs who felt undermined or threatened by such relations were keen to expose and banish them.

### *Escaping the village*

In the post-independence era, agreement relationships were increasingly motivated by the possibility of escaping the village altogether. The residents at King George's explained how the elders in their village tried to better themselves *within* the village, but how they themselves looked for ways to leave – as Ma Yenneh (eighty-five) stated: 'Connections were limited for us poor people. But some of the big farmers, because of their many wives and children, they had connections all over Sierra Leone. If you had an agreement with one of these people, they could create a connection to the city.' Mabinti (sixty-eight) agreed and, after a nod to Ma Yenneh, she shared her own story:

I was twelve when independence came. At first, people were celebrating. The poor people wanted equality. But things did not change. One big man wanted me as his eighth wife. I was fifteen then. I knew I needed to leave. I had no desire to work hard for nothing all my life. I needed an agreement to help me out and I found one in one of the chief's sons.

Under the cover of night and with the support of Mabinti's mother and grandmother, the chief's son, who spent most of his time studying in Freetown, facilitated Mabinti's escape from the village and arranged her stay in the capital, where he visited her frequently.

For others, it was the possibility of such agreements that pulled them from the villages. Pa Jones (eighty-seven), for instance, who was given into fosterage and raised by distant kin in a village near Bo, explained that:

my aunts were wicked because I was not their child. They beat me without mercy, and I did all the work while their children relaxed. There was no schooling for me. Few old men felt sorry for me. They whispered to me that if only I could make it to Bo and find an agreement then maybe there would be the option for me to go to Freetown and be somebody. There was no future for me in that village, so I went.

In Bo, Pa Jones started working at a repair garage for vehicles. The mechanic in charge allowed him to make one of the cars his temporary home, but in turn withheld most of his salary. Accordingly, Pa Jones continued to be in a marginal position, until, aged fourteen, he entered his first agreement relationship.

There was a mammie next to us – she sold fufu, you know, and I very much like fufu. She was somewhat older, but very lonely and she liked young boys like me. And these days I was very hungry. She gave me fufu for free every day and at night I would keep her company. Because I was very good to her, she always prepared additional treats for me and I could have become very fat by then [laughs]. I was eating well and had a place to sleep and wash and she was happy in my company.

Pa Jones learned that this mammie had extensive networks in Freetown, and she eventually agreed to facilitate his move to the capital and arranged his stay with one of her older female relatives.

Hence, for these elders, who describe themselves as the ‘independence generation’, agreement relationships built a bridge of possibility between limited rural livelihoods and imaginations of the endless possibilities of urban living. Due to the careful teaching of elders, transactional intimate relations provided, and continue to provide, a way for young people – both men and women – to escape confining hierarchies of fosterage, rural patronage, indentured labour or simply too little freedom to live relationships and relocate. In the post-independence era, agreements between people who knew both worlds shrunk the previously insurmountable distance between village and city and made a new start possible.

### *Navigating the go-slow and fleeing the civil war*

In provincial towns, agreement relationships allowed for alternative livelihoods in an economy that was in a downward spiral. Ma Conteh (fifty-six), who lived in Koidu, the capital of Kono District in eastern Sierra Leone, summarized:

after independence there was hope. We thought, now power will be in our hands. But no. Power stayed within the hands of those big men who ate our share during colonialism and were now mismanaging [our money] worse than ever. Corruption was skyrocketing. Then we entered go-slow and work stopped. I am telling you as a teacher, without my agreements I would have stayed a beggar before these powerful disgraceful men.

The ‘go-slow’, which started in the mid-1980s, constituted a horrible shared reference point in divergent life histories. It was a period that characterized the growing vacuum that opened up after the first decades of independence, a vacuum that swallowed the Sierra Leonean economy. During the go-slow, people were asked to go to work but remain unproductive because the resources and structures of labour had been mismanaged to such an extent that they collapsed. The go-slow stimulated people’s thoughts about radical alternatives, and, as Mr Kabah (sixty-six), put it:

there was a breakdown in many social structures, many Sierra Leoneans were saying, ‘If there will be no war, it will not be nice here.’ ‘If no blood will flow, it will not be nice here.’ Things began moving from bad to worse. Schools and institutions of learning and working were not working properly. People were going through hard times in their daily lives. They were particularly angry because there was no democratic means to change the despotic one-party regime of the APC [All People’s Congress].

Many elders explained how agreement relationships helped them to trade goods and items in a crippled economy.

Returning to the villages, agreements offered the possibility of moving further away from imminent violence. One evening when I was sitting with about twenty of the home's residents in the yard listening to their descriptions of how villages prepared to join one or other fighting faction or defend themselves against potential attacks, Pa Boima leaned forward in his chair, his warm smile fleetingly touching everyone's face before he said:

My brothers and sisters, times were bad. We thought they [politicians] cannot be removed from power by ballot but by bullet, we were hungry, and we were angry, but is it not true for many of us, it was our agreements that allowed us to leave our villages before they started burning? Don't you see the faces of these agreements when you remember? Me, for one, when my agreement, Adama, said she had arranged a place for me in the city, I left my farm and my responsibilities. She saved my life, that agreement, and others saved my finances in the city.

Tamba (sixty-five) murmured in agreement and said:

In our village they said each family should contribute one [fighter]. It was me they chose. I had no interest to be part of this war, so I plotted my escape. I made an agreement with Kumba, who promised to send me to Freetown if I *ansa belle* [accept responsibility for causing a pregnancy] for her sister's baby. I had to leave my wife, my children, everyone. Only later I could call for them. That is how I escaped fighting.

Many similar experiences were shared during that evening. While the oldest residents had left the villages through agreements, mostly to escape debt, stagnation and 'women trouble' long before the onset of the conflict, and had navigated the go-slow through the connections they had built in the city, younger residents used agreements to flee shortly before the conflict commenced. Salieu (fifty-one), who was twenty-nine years old when his village started to see the war as inevitable, said:

I went with the war on my heels. Without my agreement, either, I would have been forced to take up arms, I would have drowned in the hurt of the struggling villages, or I would have had a poor and fearful life. Through her, I got a second chance and I could become somebody.

### ***Becoming somebody in the city***

The second key chapter in the life story of agreement relationships included just that: attempts to 'become somebody' away from predetermined pathways. For most elders, this pursuit brought them to Freetown and lasted until they moved into the home for the elderly. In Freetown, social standing was no longer pre-ordained by a person's position within their lineage and by the position of their lineage within the social fabric of the village. Gerontocracy and patronage lost their effectiveness in this wider, more fluid and relational social composition where social standing was not assigned or fixed but must be achieved and was subject to change. Now, success depended on the ability to forge connections beyond the family. Freetown is firmly based on social networks, and a person's self-interest is thus in a complicated relationship with the interests of others, just as it is both enhanced and limited by prospects that arise from interactions.

Agreements produce ‘durable networks of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 119), and these networks make up the fabric of Freetown’s social matrix. After arriving in the capital, each newcomer began to set the foundations for such connections.

Pa Jones did the heavy lifting of firewood and water and carried out repairs around the house in exchange for a place to sleep. He bypassed the fate of remaining a ‘stranger from the interior’ because his new agreement introduced him to some of her social circle. Through them, he found work in a shop and was able to set out to find his place within Freetown’s social matrix. Pa Jones eventually attended college. Throughout his studies, he had an agreement with Kadiatu, a woman selling rice from a small stall located on his way to the college. She gave him his daily lunch and he took her to all the university social events. Their relationship started and ended on the first and last day respectively of each academic year. Pa Jones went on to become a teacher. He married Eleanor, a woman he met in college, and they had four children. Yet, he and his wife continued engaging openly in agreement relationships alongside their marriage for various purposes.

While Pa Jones’ earlier agreement relationships tended to focus on satisfying immediate needs, such as food and a place to sleep as well as access to a specific place or group, Mabinti sought out agreements who brought her one step closer to realizing her independence and professional success. She used the money the chief’s son left with her after his visits to ‘get out from under his wing’ and rented a small self-contained apartment. One of her new neighbours owned a hair salon, where she became an apprentice. She soon began to do house calls to cut and style hair, a business that, as she put it, ‘means you know everybody. One head sends you to another and another and another. In every place you hear all what goes on in that neighbourhood and you can trade that information for anything you want.’ Hence, Mabinti embodied the popular axiom that the key to success in all areas of life is mastery of a wide network of social connections (*subabus*) that are so well maintained that they can be mobilized at a moment’s notice (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Mabinti strategically entered agreement relationships in different parts of the city:

I had agreements with men who were very well connected and made them bring me customers from that crowd. So, I had an agreement with a policeman and then I did the hair of the police force, then with a lawyer and then with someone at Aberdeen and Central and Kissy and Goderich [neighbourhoods in Freetown] and so on. This is how I expanded my business.

In most cases, Mabinti’s social and economic wealth – and with it her agency – was multiplied through her agreement relationships and the connections she forged through them (Piot 1999: 120; Nyamnjoh 2001: 29). Her customer base grew dramatically and soon she began teaching ‘other ladies the hairdressing business’.

About a decade later, Mabinti had an agreement with a salon owner who left her the shop after he retired. Mabinti never married but preferred ‘good company, freedom and loving’. Her sisters who had remained in the village and had married there sent their children to stay with her to attend school in Freetown. ‘I raised many children, I made good money, I had many friends ...

I was never bossed around by nobody' was how she summarized her life. Mabinti came to King George's in 2012, when it became too difficult to conduct household chores on her own. Two young women she had trained are now continuing her business. They often visit her at King George's, as do customers and former agreements. The networks she accumulated are now providing an antidote against isolation at the home for the elderly.

While Mabinti ended up as a hairdresser by chance, Mammie Kaindaneh (MK, aged seventy-two) set out to Freetown with the specific goal of working as a chef at one of the big hotels. She was born in a small village near Kono as the youngest of eight siblings. When only twelve, she convinced one of her uncles to send her to Freetown to stay with relatives and attend school there. But, like Pa Jones, MK was not appreciated in her new home and started to look for other opportunities. 'I learned how to dress properly and quickly the men went all crazy for me,' she told me with a smile. At the age of sixteen, she met an older man at a popular nightclub who showed an interest in her. She soon moved in with him and he started paying her school fees. They parted ways after she graduated, and she commenced an agreement with the chef of one of the catering schools in the Central 2 area in Freetown who allowed her to attend classes for free. In exchange, she introduced him to the networks she had created over the years and was his matchmaker on numerous occasions. 'I even introduced this man to his wife. I was very popular by then and people trusted my opinion,' she said proudly. When MK accidentally got pregnant, the chef rejected the pregnancy. MK explained that she needed a man to claim the pregnancy, 'show face' to her family and give the child his last name so that her and the child's reputation would not be damaged.<sup>3</sup> Josephus, an old schoolfriend, agreed to state that he was the father, as long as he had no further responsibilities for the child, and MK cooked for him daily and slept at his place for at least two nights a week.

MK eventually married a man she met at one of the hotels where she worked and spent more than twenty years with him until he passed away and she came to King George's. Her narrative is filled with appreciation for the various men with whom she entered into agreement relationships, because, as she says, it is due to them that her dream of becoming a chef was possible, as they allowed her to maintain independence and control over her own destiny, decisions and life choices.

I was not only someone's wife. I was a chef, all my life. I provided for all my family. I found love and raised seven children and I did it all with the help of my agreements, but it was not their doing, it was mine and I was as important to them as they were to me. This is a very patriarchal society. Mostly we women have to hide our desires, our success and our power. But in agreements, you can show openly what you have to offer, and the person will appreciate you for it because this is the reason you were chosen in the first place and there is no stigma in that.

Through their agreement relationships, MK and Mabinti forged alternative paths in the spaces between a priori set gender roles that allowed the realization of professional aspirations and independent livelihoods. Both in their rural and

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<sup>3</sup>Even though children out of wedlock are fairly well accepted in Sierra Leone, it is often their last name that signals whether both parents accept the child (if the child has the father's last name) or whether the child has 'no father' (and has the mother's last name).

urban forms, agreement relationships complicate notions of neat gender parallelism for which Sierra Leone is a central locus (see, for example, Ferme 2001; Bledsoe 1980; Coulter 2009; Leach 1994). Agreement relationships are as much a way for young women to move to the city, study or find employment as they are for older women to enjoy the company of men and offer them access to the professional or social circles they have created during their lives. The elders at King George's and my younger research collaborators shared numerous stories of older women who were engaged in relationships for sexual pleasures with young men who hoped to gain financial or social support from them. So-called 'sugar mamas' were as popular as 'sugar daddies'. In Freetown today, women as well as men can clearly be the facilitators of entry into job markets and providers of economic resources (Pessima *et al.* 2009) as well as the recipients of sexual pleasure.

### Navigating the present through agreement relationships

Agreement relationships continue to play a pivotal role at the home for the elderly. I vividly remember how surprised I was when I learned about the elders' current agreements – an astonishment I did not hide well. I was teased about this on several occasions, as it revealed – as Tamba (seventy-one) put it – my 'white woman's' assumptions about desire and desirability and about the value of elders. Indeed, I had assumed that offering intimacy in exchange for goods and services predominantly constitutes a phase in a young person's life and that it is then superseded by other forms of relationships. This was based on two unverified presuppositions. One was that such relations cannot coexist with other intimate relationships and are therefore only acceptable at a time when a person has no permanent relationships yet or is secretly transgressing acceptable limits. The other was that sexual desire and desirability are something finite that stop at a certain point in a person's life. At the home for the elderly, I was reminded that 'for agreements you need somebody who has that specific thing that you want. Older people have more experience, more connections. Mostly they are more valuable.' To elders, it was 'obvious' that transactional relationships are now more important to their lives than ever before. Since they rely on exchanges between persons over time, agreement relationships create multifaceted moral bonds between the exchanging parties that produce growing chains of connections. Hence, looking back on a life of agreements means depending on a wide web of connections. Pa Boima made the following comparison:

You are an anthropologist and with every research you learn more. Would it be reasonable to stop when you are very good? No, you will keep going as long as you can, and the more time you have been doing it, the easier it will get and the more you will already know. And also, you will like it even more with time.

And, indeed, if transactional relationships provide significant human connections aimed at mutually benefiting, furthering and sometimes realizing personal aspirations without threatening successful masculinity or femininity, why would they be reserved for young people? Since agreements depend on successfully navigating social relations and building social capital through time, the elders' networks

were at their peak, and ceasing to care for them would have meant a radical decrease in living standards and level of connectedness. Mrs Finda (seventy-seven) once explained to me:

For many of us our spouses have passed over and our children are far. But we still like to have others close. Our desire has not passed yet. We had such relationships all our life; why should we stop before our brains fade or we ourselves pass over? Stopping now would break all our connections and leave us all alone and poor.

Crucially, such relations remained important due to the relational conception of a meaningful life. Not being needed and not needing others, being without meaningful interactions, company or attachments, was understood as an unbearable condition that renders a person's existence meaningless. Importantly, in this context, need does not mean dependency, but rather added value. Meaning then arises from mutually advantageous relationality, from positioning oneself in such a way that one can add meaning to others and others can add meaning to one's own life. At King George's, agreements build a bridge between life before the home and life today, and are paramount to the residents' efforts to continue leading a meaningful life. As Mr Dumbuya (eighty-six) reiterated:

Maybe we are old, but we are still not dead. Elders are supposed to sit on a busy street and watch over the happenings. They should be consulted about politics and family affairs. We are in this nice place, but we are removed. It is our agreements which bring the city close, make us feel like we are still part of something. Otherwise we could be on an island far away.

Mm Jebeh (seventy-nine) agreed and said:

The wealth of today are agreements. They are for the romance, they are for the health, they keep your mind sharp. Nowadays, families are scattered. They are all over. I don't even know where my children are exactly at this very moment. But through your agreements you keep the connections that put you on top of news, of connections, of life.

Agreements allowed elders to stay connected to political and social affairs and to have relations that transcended the home's walls, which otherwise feel confining. The home for the elderly is technically in Freetown, but practically its location is remote and only a few residents are mobile. The two transport hubs of Jui and Regent are a drive away and reaching the closest market requires a long walk along the side of the road. In no way is the home connected to the vibrant and lively city. When looking outward, one's view rests on an empty road interrupted momentarily by speedily passing cars, buses and bikes. On good days, the adjacent hills stretch out from behind the road, littered with unfinished and seemingly abandoned houses. Behind the home, the hill at the foot of which it is built rises up and the trees close by form an opaque barrier.

Without agreements that connect them to the world outside the home, the residents would be left mostly in each other's company. Luckily Haja (seventy-one) has an agreement with a shop owner from Jui – the closest transport hub – who visits weekly and supplies her with the newest Nigerian movies in exchange for her company and a plate of the home's fufu. One of Mabinti's agreements is

from central Freetown and arrives equipped with news of events ranging from parades to demonstrations and arrests. Pa Mohmo's agreement lives in one of the resorts close to Lumley Beach and knows stories about delegations, politicians' meetings and parties.

When a vehicle stops down by the road, the news of the arrival of a guest spreads quickly, and any visitors are usually met by a crowd of residents eager to greet them. A plate of the day's dish is always kept aside for potential visitors and an agreement can be sure to meet with many residents keen to learn about the latest news from Freetown. But intimate togetherness is equally valued. Agreements often sit in pairs to watch movies – if the electricity supply allows it – listen to the radio in the shade of a mango tree or disappear into one of the adjacent rooms. Another agreement of Mabinti, a man from Piset, usually massages her feet, while Ma Yenneh and her agreement enjoy playing ludo together.

### *Managing grief and avoiding loneliness*

Agreements also have another therapeutic function in that they provide support as elders navigate the loss of independent livelihoods that necessarily accompanies moving to a home for the elderly and that often results from losing one's spouse. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes captures this:

Whenever I came to the home, I met Pa Jones sitting under his favourite mango tree, his gaze resting on the hills, which stretch out in front of us. Usually his lively voice carried me through the trajectories of his life, invoking pictures of love and loss, of struggle, failure and success and of a life so full of efforts to make a living. But sometimes Pa Jones' narrative suddenly broke and, staring into the green leafy nowhere which lay in front of us, he seemed so deeply immersed in his own thoughts that my presence was no longer noticed. I often took this as a sign that our session was over and retreated. On one occasion, however, I attempted to penetrate the thought-cloud around him, asking whether he is alright. 'Yes,' he eventually responded with a deep sigh and, with clouded eyes, he continued. 'Yes, I am hanging on, just hanging on because of my agreement. I don't know what I would do without her company. She is the one who helps me through the grief [of losing his wife] and prevents me from being too lonely.'

Pa Jones' children had brought him to King George's after Eleanor passed away in 2007. From one of the nurses at the home I learned that his late wife and his children had visited King George's and had chosen to bring him here specifically so that he could be closer to Hawanatu, a woman selling fish in a nearby market with whom he had an agreement. This was one of many examples where a spouse had encouraged such relations. When I voiced my surprise over this and asked if such relations might ever produce insecurity and jealousy between spouses, Pa Boima was quick to assure me:

That is a completely different thing. You don't confuse *yebe* [a stew] with rice. Rice is the meal for every day. We Sierra Leoneans say we have not eaten if we had no rice. Well, that is your husband or wife. But sharing *yebe* with others is very important during a specific time [Ramadan]. That is agreements. It makes social bonds stronger, but it is not the same as rice.

Seeing me process this comparison between essential relations and those that add value, Ma Kema (sixty-seven) contributed her experience:

My husband and I actually separated because he had an affair with another woman without telling me. It hurt. How can you cheat? But agreements are different. They are not hidden. They are not love affairs. You specifically chose to enter a relationship with that person; you don't fall in love with someone and cannot help it. It is not accidental, it is conscious.

This differentiation between accidental and deliberate relationships, between those driven by desire and/or emotion and those strategically and rationally chosen was repeated many times during my fieldwork. Jealousy is an emotion that grapples with potential loss. It entwines relations driven by love or lust but is of marginal importance in openly discussed and tactically chosen agreements. However, the elders categorized their experience of agreement relationships amidst marriages and romantic relations as potentially very different to that of younger generations. 'We are all jealous people,' said Ma Yenneh, 'but agreements and marriage are very different. You cannot compare, so why be jealous? Young people's relationships may be different because things are changing ... who knows what they are doing? But for us, we know the difference very well.'

Returning to Pa Jones, we can now appreciate why his late spouse and children supported his agreement. Since Hawanatu had known his wife and had been part of Pa Jones' life for many years, she connects the life before to the life now. She made living in the home seem less remote and helped him keep the memories of his wife close. But she also facilitated Pa Jones' resocialization within the home and helped him make new contacts with people living close by. Agreements provide continuity in life histories characterized by rupture and instability in a world in flux. On another day, Pa Jones, who had just finished a big plate of fish balls that Hawanatu had brought for him, stated:

In Africa appreciation goes straight through the stomach [laughs and rubs his belly]. Today, it is the fish woman [Hawanatu] that gets my heart. She reserves the best fish for me and in turn I provide her with all the stories I collected during my life. We have an agreement, you know [laughs].

### **Conclusions: from rural kinship alliances to urban networks**

If we examine agreement relations through time, rupture and continuity appear both in individual biographies and in Sierra Leone's social trajectory. First learned from elders in the rural areas, agreements end up pulling people from the villages, transform in the urban field and rekindle relations with the villages later on. Transactional relationships do different things for people at different stages of their lives. Overall, they facilitate forms of interactive becoming in which others help personal attempts to become somebody and stay somebody. They offer youth the possibility to leave their (rural) homes and develop an idea of who they want to be and how they want to live independently of the expectations or the carved-out paths of their kin.

Agreement relationships facilitate migration to places where migrants do not have established ties and help kickstart their attempts to seek new beginnings there. Because both men and women engage in agreements to relocate, the Sierra Leonean case complements work on the reliance on intimate relationships

to facilitate migration (e.g. Neveu Kringelbach 2016) and adds gendered texture to research exploring how transactional relationships foster women's rural–urban migration (Groes-Green 2013) as well as the cross-border migration of both women (e.g. Groes-Green 2014; Venables 2008) and men (Ebron 1997; Meiu 2009). In the structures of informality and networking that are the pulse of many cities in the postcolonial world, those who are without social webs that can be tapped can experience difficulties navigating social and economic terrains. Agreements can serve as first points of contact and as guarantors who facilitate entry to specific and restricted circles and allow those engaged in them to learn how to steer through complex socio-economic landscapes. In so doing, they provide an option besides forging 'fictive' kin relations (McGovern 2012) or relying on fosterage, which has often been a source of hardship and inequality (Bledsoe 1990).

As consumption and production intersected in their various entanglements, the elders at King George's first prioritized their individual choices, against those of their kin, but through the 'things' they offered they simultaneously contributed to the satisfaction of the material, emotional and sexual needs of companions beyond the family. Urban life allows transactional relationships that had to be carefully concealed in rural areas to be lived openly and amplifies the way in which the exchange of goods and services fosters social alliances and contributes to a reciprocal economy of desire. In the capital, the overt practice of such relationships is an outcome of a system of sociality in which relations equal social capital, and where the wider one's networks the greater one's possibilities. Today, agreement relationships are intrinsic to city living. In the gap that opened between previous rural models and possible futures, desire can be experimented with more freely since access to women is no longer restricted to marriage.

Once runaways, adults who 'became somebody' in the city provide an invaluable resource for rural kin and formally severed ties are often revitalized. Adults' and elders' stable urban networks nourish both rural and urban kin, and, as people and resources are sent back and forth, durable bonds are forged across the country.

If properly cared for, connections deepen with the passage of time, and the older a person the wider their networks. After retirement and in old age, transactional relationships offer a safety net through which elders continue to 'earn'. Less than 1 per cent of Sierra Leoneans receive a pension (Pension Watch 2019) and, as we learned, kin may be scattered and unwilling or unable to offer support. In the autumn of life, transactional relations allow a person to stay connected to everyday urban affairs and maintain established interpersonal relations. They provide solace when spouses pass away, children are distant and physical limitations lead to increasing dependency on others. In so doing, they allow an escape from, or at least lessen, the loneliness that is an uneasy companion of old age for many, and that is particularly starkly felt in homes for the elderly.

Before they pass away, elders share their knowledge about the subtle art of navigating life with agreement relationships, just as they themselves once learned from their elders, and, as networks, employment opportunities and strategies are passed down to younger companions, oral history remains central to urban sociality and intergenerational knowledge transfers.

The elders' narratives reveal the ebbs and flows of a complex nexus of exchanges that intermesh with sexual, emotional and affective encounters around notions of

reciprocity, ambition and the mutual enrichment of two or more parties in individual lives. The beginnings and endings of agreement relationships at turning points in various life histories build a thread that connects different areas (village, provincial towns, capital), different occupations (students, assistants, professionals) and various social statuses (single, engaged, married, separated, widowed, as well as child, adult, parent, grandparent, elder).

Taken together, the social webs spun through agreement relationships are 'accumulated history' spanning from independence to the present moment (Bourdieu 1986: 241). Individually, they lay bare a person's social trajectory and the connections that enabled them to move through life in the way that they did; examined together, they teach us about general transformations in the Sierra Leonean social landscape. Through agreement relations, Sierra Leoneans negotiated a shift from rural, kin-based units that are hierarchical and involuntary (see Boissevain 1966 for Sicily) to deliberate and reciprocal networks that establish bonds between previous strangers in the urban field and that increase social capital, economic opportunities, mobility and attempts at self-making.

Crucially, the 'independence generation' created such departures from pre-ordained relationship patterns and lifestyles with the support of their elderly kin, not their opposition. Hence, rural concealment and urban revelation are not dichotomies, but relational and interdependent realities that affect one another (Banton 1957: 9). The elders' narratives revealed their own migration patterns but they also showed how, during the civil war, internally displaced people sought out agreements to move to the capital city. Later, ex-combatants followed suit, looking for a fresh start and often new identities (Lynch *et al.* 2013; Maconachie *et al.* 2012). Sometimes they were joined by their wartime partners, who had once been abducted but now decided to stay in an agreement (Coulter 2009). In the post-war era, young people who seek education or employment and alternative pathways to social adulthood increasingly forge agreements that can facilitate a move to the capital through social media. These migratory patterns and the relations that are then established through networks reintegrate kin and merge rural and urban areas into a 'single field of relations' (Parkin 1975: 3–9; Piot 1999; Vigh 2006: 51).

In Freetown today, agreement relationships are the outcome of a creative multi-vectored appropriation, reconfiguration and re-signification of rural agreement relationships. Therefore, today's agreement relationships are based both on a long history of love, reliance and mobility and on new ideas of loving and living.

This article has shown what we can gain from studying the perspective of elders on transactional relationships. Using a processual approach and investigating transactional relationships at all stages of life can shed light not only on individual biographies but also on a country's social trajectory and on the ruptures and continuities that mark it. In so doing, a life-course approach can serve as a lens to conceptualize larger social shifts within and across societies.

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### Abstract

In Sierra Leone, transactional relationships – so-called agreement relationships – have a life-course dimension. Not only are they employed by young people but they are equally important among elders, and they serve different purposes as people age. Long-term ethnographic research with the elderly uncovers that they remember the past and engage with the present through agreement relationships. The elders' love and life histories from the 1930s to today form 'accumulated history'. They reveal a shift from kin-based rural hierarchies, where agreement relationships were carefully concealed, to larger, more dynamic urban networks that are openly held together through such relations. Leaving the former and finding one's feet in the latter become possible through transactional relationships that provide alternatives to fosterage and strategies of fictive or aspirational kin. The case of Sierra Leone invites us to rethink the focus on transactional relationships at a specific point in time for a life-course perspective that reveals the enduring nature of the phenomenon and sheds light on its changing texture in individual biographies, with the potential for capturing large-scale social trajectories within and across countries.

### Résumé

En Sierra Leone, les relations transactionnelles (encore appelées relations d'accord) ont une dimension de parcours de vie. Non seulement employées par les jeunes, elles sont tout aussi importantes pour les anciens et ont des finalités différentes au fur et à mesure que l'âge avance. Des études ethnographiques à long terme menées auprès des anciens révèlent qu'ils se souviennent du passé et s'impliquent dans le présent à travers des relations d'accord. Les histoires d'amour et de vie des anciens, des années 1930 à aujourd'hui, forment une « histoire cumulée ». Elles révèlent une transition, en rupture avec les hiérarchies rurales basées sur la parenté dans lesquelles les relations d'accord étaient soigneusement dissimulées, vers des réseaux urbains dynamiques plus étendus dont le ciment est clairement ces relations. Cette transition active devient possible par le biais de relations transactionnelles qui offrent des alternatives au fosterage et aux stratégies de parenté fictive ou aspirationnelle. Le cas de la Sierra Leone

nous invite à repenser l'accent mis sur les relations transactionnelles à un moment donné, avec une perspective de parcours de vie qui révèle la nature durable du phénomène et nous éclaire sur sa texture changeante dans les biographies individuelles, avec la possibilité de capturer des trajectoires sociales à grande échelle au niveau national et régional.