

### 3 Loving and Living Relationships in Freetown Today

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To understand love and violence, we need to analyse the various influences weighing on people as they enter into, live, and leave relationships. Relationships occur between two people (teeth and tongue), but they are embedded in kin and social relations (the mouth) and take place in sociocultural settings with their own rules and regulations (the body). The last-mentioned are in turn influenced by systems far beyond the borders of a relationship and by histories that long outlive its duration. To successfully negotiate various relationships, careful distinctions are drawn between diverse relationship forms and the respective roles and responsibilities of partners. Based on a careful analysis of 464 interviews and numerous additional conversations, I was able to tease out the fine terminological differences of local vocabularies of pleasure and relationship forms. Understanding these terms is like knowing the code that allows access to diverse rooms within a vast building. Here, the building stands for sex or for relationships, but understanding the individual terms enables one to appreciate not only the structure but the interior design, thereby giving meaning to diverse scenarios and arrangements.

#### **Relationships, Reputation, and ‘the Gamble’**

Research collaborators differentiate between *mamas* and *papas*, who are partners that are significantly older, and *cober lappas* (girl lovers) or lover boys, who are partners that, according to numerical understandings of age, are often minors and always much younger than oneself. Age mates have no distinctive term. A ‘side-chick’ or a ‘fine boy’ is a person who is very attractive or sexually skilled, but who does not have either the resources (men) or the qualities (women) desired of a main partner. Side-chicks and fine boys are aware of their status and know that somebody else takes the position of main partner. ‘Affairs’, on the other hand, are sexual partners who may not know that their partner has other partners as well. Then there are ‘contract relationships’ for partners who live under the same roof or near each other. Having a contract

means that both partners may see other people so long as they do not bring them to the shared space (see Chapter 6). Affairs, side-chicks, and fine boys all fall under the category of lovers. Main girlfriends and main boyfriends are the primary partners of a romantic relationship. They are the ones predominantly responsible for caring for each other. This includes providing money (for men) and chores, such as cooking and doing the laundry (for women). The research collaborator Darren explains: 'It also means being the partner your friends know for you and sometimes also the one your family knows for you. As a man, you must always be available, and you must care about the family, all the difficulties the other person is facing. As a fine boy or side-chick you just enjoy together'.

While fluidity within relationships has increased and the terminologies used to differentiate between partners have changed, older ethnographies are useful in shedding light on complex relationship dynamics as well. Mariane Ferme's ethnography, for instance, reveals careful distinctions between favourite wives, co-wives, first wives, separated wives, and jealous wives (Ferme 2001: 93, 157). Additionally, women often had children from various men, and distinguished husbands from lovers (Ferme 2001: 92–3, 104, 215). More recently, Jennifer Diggins differentiated between 'casual love affairs' (Diggins 2014: 91), (in)formal marriages (Diggins 2014: 105, 131), difficult marriages (Diggins 2014: 131), and various agreements held together through the exchange of raw (men) and cooked (women) fish. It becomes clear in these studies of rural areas that marriage is the main relationship, whereas other secondary relationships are based on careful camouflaging strategies. Ferme's study depicts the situation prior to the civil war, while Diggins's analysis in post-war Tissana shows that, although adulthood and marriage are increasingly difficult to achieve, people still view their various relationships in the light of that ideal. Drawing on my ethnographic material as well, it seems that, while marriage remains the main relationship in rural Sierra Leone, other relationships have gained the upper hand in Freetown today. There is no longer one relationship form against which all others are measured: there are instead many.

Life history interviews taught me that many EAUC members see relationships as ways to survive and gain status and temporary pleasure rather than to achieve long-term stability and what Mark Hunter termed 'provider love' (Hunter 2010). As it is no longer possible to follow predetermined pathways, the foundation of loving, much like living, has become strategy. Oki explains: 'For us here, love is something like a gamble. You win and lose, win and lose, win and lose. You get something, give something, and lose it. Maybe you win once, but next

time surely you will lose'. When speaking of this 'gamble', Oki refers to the number of lovers a person is able to attract. Mariama (18), a student at Fourah Bay College, explains:

The more lovers you have, the higher your status. But not any lovers. Some of these men, they get one-night stands, but almost never side-chicks. The ones who have main girlfriends and then others, they are respected most because they have much to offer and plus they are honest (*laughs*). Affairs count least because they are the ones that are lied to. They think they are main lovers. For us, the women, it is much easier. We usually have many different partners. We don't need to lie, except maybe if we want to have more than one main man (*laughs*).

As Mariama's description shows, young people create reputations through relationships. Such engagements are no longer concealed, as they were in Ferme's (2001) or Diggins's (2014) ethnographies. Instead, (changing) partners, sex, love, and friendship occupy a central place in the daily routines of Freetonians. Many men and women spend hours daily strategising about how to win partners and how to keep them. They search for the balance between enjoying themselves and gaining something without making themselves vulnerable.

At the centre of these negotiations are friends. They take the lead in defining what and who is desired, comfort those who get hurt, and put them back on their feet. Friends punish deviations from expected norms, celebrate winners, and mock attempts that have gone wrong. Relationships come and go at quite a rapid pace. Friendships, on the other hand, are lasting pillars.

The role of friendships can be seen in EAUC. Here members jointly plan their social activities.<sup>1</sup> Like their peers in Côte d'Ivoire, as Sasha Newell (2012) has described, EAUC members go out on the streets, attend clubs and shows, and go on outings together. These are well-planned activities. Beforehand, members distribute clothes, accessories, and body-spray among themselves to make everyone look fashionable and smell good. This gives each an individual aura of popularity, which helps them to attract the interest of women. To court a woman, one needs a 'friend', who can be male or female. Women and girls may be approached either directly, on the street, or at parties, or even virtually via the phone (see Archambault 2013; 2018). In both instances, the 'friend' acts as the matchmaker. In the first instance, they introduce the

<sup>1</sup> This study thus continues a scholarly tradition of analysing social interest groups and societies in Freetown. See Abner Cohen's analysis of the Freemasons (Cohen 1981), John Nunley's study of Odelay masquerades (Nunley 1987), and Michael Banton's work on savings clubs and burial associations established by Temne migrants in Freetown (Banton 1956; 1957).

man or boy to the desired partner by approaching her independently and singing his praises. Issa explains the process:

The quality of a man can be discerned from his friends. A man who comes to you on his own has nothing to offer. He must be disregarded immediately.

Now, a man must send his best friend or at least a good friend who vouches for him. That man will then tell you about the guy, saying things like ‘You see my friend over there? He is falling deeply in love with you! Let me tell you he is the most passionate lover, and he takes care of his girlfriends’.

He then becomes the negotiating party. Then you can ask the friend whether the guy has a main girl. If you just want to be a side-chick, a main girl is OK. But if you want to become the main, you then should do some investigations into the guy with your girlfriends. Like is he a passer-by [see below], is he poor, is he a liar? Like that.

Only once you [have] decided that either maybe he is poor, but he is too fine [pretty] or maybe he has some finances or maybe you are interested in being the main, then you allow the friend to introduce you.

Also, very important[ly] that friend will always be the one you go to when any problem arises in the relationship. He is your advocate. And, in turn, you know that he will only praise his friend if he is serious. Otherwise, it is too much hassle.

If potential partners are approached via social media or on the phone, the matchmaker shares the picture and contact details of the woman and starts chatting with her to introduce his friend in ways very similar to those described above. Hence, before entering any relationship, people typically start an investigation into the relationship history of the man or boy in question. Just as kin groups used to investigate a potential spouse’s history, people in Freetown today research a person’s ‘social CV’ by asking a candidate’s social network about his character, reliability, history, and prospects. Here, sexual behaviour is an important part of courtship.

During my fieldwork, conversations around sex took place daily. In the course of the discussions, people used exact terms to define practices and offer a picture of the situations under discussion and of the persons whose actions were being evaluated. Deflowering a woman is called ‘virginating’, and, if it was initiated and dominated by the man or boy, he may say *na mi bos am* (I am the one who deflowered her). Sex was understood in a myriad ways. ‘Sexing’ involves mutual agreement to the sexual act. Here both partners are equally engaged in pleasing each other, and foreplay is an important aspect. ‘Bossing’ means that a man dominates, while *bambrusing* is the term used to describe the situation where the man is not only dominant but rough and sex is limited to penetration. *Mas am*, *cher am* (describing a man thrusting his hips between a woman’s widely opened legs) and *scatter am* (scatter her) are terms denoting men’s sexual conquest of attractive women and the male penetration of women

and girls (such as in the Sierra Leonean trio LXG's 2017 song 'Cher Am'). These terms are usually used by younger people. Older people tend to use more traditional terms such as *mek* or *yu de mek* (to make) or *tabulay*, which refers to a drum or to drumming but can also mean having sex (do you want to have sex?). Hence the terms with which sex is described reflect the age of the speaker. Popular songs marry traditional descriptions with contemporary definitions. Take, for example, Rich Blink's 2018 song 'Tabulay'. He sings: 'If you give me the *tabulay ... na for let me tamper de*. Give me, I want, I want for *nak am* [If you give me the drum, I want to play around with it. Give it to me, I want to beat it/hit it. *Tabulay- alaw mi mek ar tɔch am* means "allow me to touch or play with your genitals"]'. For people who are in casual relationships or who have a one-night stand, two main terms describe the encounter: 'cut and pass' and 'cut and play'. Overall, 'cut' refers to the man's orgasm and 'play' to the female orgasm. Albert (32) from EAUC sheds light on this terminology in the following way:

For we the men, it is just penetration, penetration and then, *pam*, we come in an explosion and then we have enough and move on. That's why we say cut. Before it is pleasure and with the orgasm, it cuts and then we are done.

For women it is play because you need to properly play with her entire body for her to come into the mood and for her to have an orgasm, and then after the orgasm she is really wet and hot, so then she is better ready for sex.

But cut and pass now means that you go, you penetrate her, and then you pull your pants up and go, leaving her high and dry.

Cut and play, that requires a patient professional.

'Cut and pass' means that a person engages in a sexual encounter predominantly to please himself, while 'cut and play' includes mutual pleasure, usually progressing from pleasing the woman to penetration, which is said to be mostly for a man's pleasure. Oki, who mainly sleeps with sex workers, has this to say: 'I try to cut and pass, but nowadays with most women you will not be allowed anywhere near cutting. Before they allow you to penetrate them, you must play around her garden, so you must suck their bobbies and you must suck them [oral pleasure]. If you do that well, then they allow you; if not, they just kick you off'. 'Playing around her garden' or 'in her garden' was usually used when men discussed strategies to please and pleasure women. If a person only 'cuts', but does not play, he quickly becomes a 'passer-by'. A passer-by is a man who selfishly follows his own desires and needs and who tricks women into giving him what he desires without giving anything in return. Passers-by can be men who promise a woman a lasting relationship, marriage, and children if she sleeps with them, but then try to abandon her after they have had sex, or who 'think only of themselves during sex',

as I was told by Kadi (31), a hairdresser. Such men not only open themselves to female revenge, but they also ruin their social position. Sexual activities are talked about openly, and egoism can quickly ruin one's reputation as a good and generous lover. Consequently, over time passers-by find it harder and harder to interest new sexual partners. Sabrina (19) from Allentown says: 'Nobody likes a selfish lover. A selfish lover is a selfish man. Now we women, we talk. Everybody knows that. So, you cannot expect not to please one of us and then go on like that to another one. With our mouths, we will punish you'.

In a similar vein, Amina (27), a journalist from Naimbana Street, said: 'As women, we want to be pampered'. 'To pamper someone', she explains, 'means making them comfortable by doing things for them or giving them expensive or luxurious things. It is spoiling someone but in a good, caring way, also sexually like spoiling with pleasure'. This has a bearing on Megan Vaughan's observation in her analysis of histories of love in Africa that 'women's complaints about marriage largely revolved around the lack of generosity of their husbands' (Vaughan 2011: 22). 'Love', she explains, drawing on Epstein (1981: 118), 'meant being cared for and provided for materially, shown respect and being endowed with children' (Epstein 1981: 118). My research collaborator Suge added that 'men want to be good lovers. We want that image. So, we will be extra careful to try to cut and play so that the woman is pleased and will talk highly about our performance to our friends'.

Women are protected in uncommitted relationships in two ways. One is the fear of retaliation in case of abuse, especially from women in the form of magic (Groes-Green 2013; Chapter 4). The other is the power of gossip, the fact that 'words move fast' – they are, as Mark Schindler called it, the 'black market of information' (Schindler 2007: 6; White 2008). This notion of 'punishing with one's mouth' (see Chapter 4) was often talked about as a powerful form of female violence. One can therefore not expect to enter further advantageous unions if one has exploited former partners. Moreover, people who cut and pass, just like people who withhold sex, may lose their relationship or may be accused in front of the household or community (Chapter 6).

### **How Not to Break Up**

With EAUC, I witnessed triumphant success, but also pain and failure, in the game of love. Whenever I sat with them, I heard that someone had just 'snatched a girlfriend' from another man, had lost a lover to another man, had been caught lying or caught someone in a lie, and was now strategising with his friends about what to do next in order not to lose

face and to 'own the story'. Snatching girlfriends may take place between friends. It was not uncommon for EAUC members to try to snatch each other's lovers. However, snatching is restricted to side-chicks and affairs; main partners are 'off limits'. Snatching is a skill that requires a network of friends who are willing to advocate on one's behalf and attract the desired woman. In this way, it is related to the accumulation of debts and favours I have described above (Chapter 2) in that it requires money or a large credit in one's social debt bank to 'buy things and take the woman out like a queen', as Albert stated. For women and girls, the 'snatching strategy' depends on the desired goal. If a woman wants to become a side-chick, then signalling availability through a female friend is often enough. The friend then goes to the man and introduces the woman and explains her intentions while she waits 'in a nice dress, somewhere close by, but not looking desperate, looking too sweet and nice', according to Fatu (23), a baker from central Freetown. 'Men', Alima says, 'are too easily convinced. You shake your bum like that and immediately he will follow you. For the sexing, they almost never need much convincing. Only if you want some commitment'. If the desired goal is to become the main girlfriend, a woman – and here there was general consensus among the people I spoke to – needs to do the following in Darren's words: 'Become close to his friends. Be modest and caring. Cook for him and be available always'.

But it is not only attracting lovers that requires tactics and manoeuvring. Preserving one's image after having lost a lover is equally important. 'Owning the story' or 'keeping face' means finding a way of not appearing to have lost a lover to a friend or to another man or woman, but rather of having decided not to want that partner anymore. 'The trick', elucidates Mamadu (19) from EAUC,

is to be very, very sensitive to what is happening. When you realise your partner is about to run away to someone else, then you must win her over so that she stays, even if you maybe don't really want her. If you know that you lost, you have to make it seem like this was all your idea from the beginning and like you just did not want to hurt the person's feeling[s] but actually want that person to be someone else's responsibility. Then everybody will think you are the real champion of the story.

Uncommitted couples seldom break up. When I asked how relationships end, I usually received answers such as 'they don't' or 'what do you mean?' At one point, I sat down with EAUC and voiced my confusion. 'It is simple', explained Gas willingly: 'We do not break up because we never know what will happen in the future. Maybe you are tired of somebody now, but who knows? Maybe you want to see them again in the future. And also breaking up is very strain-ful. Maybe you have to tell

someone you don't want them anymore. Who would want to hear that?' This recalls Susan Reynolds Whyte's analysis of how people in contemporary East Africa negotiate social experience in the 'subjunctive mode' (Whyte 1997: 24). Relationships, as Gas's explanation shows, are not terminated because of what *is*; rather, they are kept in flux to accommodate what *may be*. The relationship between uncertainty, hope, and people's navigational strategies has been explored by various scholars (e.g. Whyte 1997; Crapanzano 2004; Jenkins, Jessen, and Steffen 2005; Zigon 2009; Parish 2010; Berthomé, Bonhomme and Delaplace 2012; Niehaus 2013; Cooper and Pratten 2015; Enria 2015). These writers have shown that a key element of managing uncertainty is mobility. Mobility requires one to be constantly on the move both spatially and socially. It depends upon a readiness to embrace new possibilities and to experiment, but also on a refusal to lock the door to opportunities. Through this, a space is created that might make what is impossible today possible tomorrow. This also requires one not to hurt or reject people, as they may be a lifeline in the future. When I asked how couples then know when a relationship is over, I was met with laughter:

Ah, you. You always have to know everything. For us, we don't. It is just open. When somebody does not call or see you anymore, you know they lost interest, but they never tell you that they don't want you anymore. Out of respect, you know. Maybe you would ask and cause palaver (*laughs*), but for us, after some days' silence, we are free. We can go with another one or do what we like. And if the person calls again, we can decide if we are interested or not.

However, there is a difference between ceasing to prolong the relationship (passive, personal), as illustrated by Darren in the quote above, and practising neglect (active, social) (see Chapter 4). The latter can lead to an immediate and public break-up. This often involves a declaration by the person who initiated the break-up that they were wronged. Moreover, it may involve a call for others to get involved to fix the relationship. Nevertheless, threatening to terminate a relationship occurs frequently and is a common part of lovers' arguments (Chapter 4). Memunatu (24), a Fourah Bay College student, explains:

If you say you don't want somebody anymore in front of everybody, it is a huge embarrassment for that person. So, either you do it as a threat when that person is maltreating you, [or], if you are serious, you do it either because you want to punish that person or because you actually do not want to break up, so you are looking for his friends to come and beg you to take him back.

With married couples, separations without divorce occur frequently. This means that spouses live separately and have new partners while remaining married to each other. Divorce for a 'registered marriage' is



the formal process by which a marriage is dissolved and assets divided. In traditional marriages, a declaration by both partners that they do not want to continue their marriage suffices to terminate it. With registered marriages, both partners need to undergo a period of counselling before they can divorce, while traditional and religious marriages may be terminated immediately as long as the community consents.

### Trading Sex and Shaping the Economy of Desire

Transactional relationships are often lived in parallel with other relationships, sometimes openly and sometimes in disguise. While many transactional relationships foreground social rather than economic connections at the heart of the encounter, those more strongly focussed on monetary exchange are typically one-night stands, sexual relationships with sex workers, and relationships with ‘financiers’ and ‘sugar daddies’. These relationships usually occur between youth and big men or big women. Research collaborators distinguish between two types of sex workers: ‘scholars’ and *rare gals*. A scholar is a sex worker who is said to be ‘educated’, ‘well-behaved’, and often ‘shy’. These may be single mothers or daughters who engage in sex work to support their families. Others are without family or social networks and use sex as a means of getting by. A *rare gal* is somebody who is deeply embedded in street life.<sup>2</sup> As Michael Stasik noted: ‘Freetown’s rarray girls [*sic*] are reputed to be sexually promiscuous, to ignore social norms and to “use” men to pay for what is seen as a dissolute lifestyle. The term ... is used frequently in reference to “troublesome girls” who are said to engage in relationships only for the “love of money”’ (Stasik 2016: 226–7).

*Rare gals* often smoke and drink. They are frequently said to cause palaver (conflict) and to curse when arguing. *Rare gals* sometimes fight (*beat*). While scholars usually work alone, *rare gals* are attached either to a brothel and a *kedi masta*, which is usually an older woman who runs a brothel, or to a *tedi boi*. *Tedi bois* are gang members or young men engaged in the illicit economy who send their girlfriends out to do sex work. *Rare gals* then live with these *tedi bois*, handing over most of – if not all – their money to them. The *rare gal–tedi boi* tie-up has become more common because, when *rare gals* are taken to a customer’s place to have

<sup>2</sup> They are called girls irrespective of their age or social status (e.g. mother, wife, widow), simply because they are said to behave irresponsibly and to have the characteristics of girls rather than women or big women. A woman who is embedded in street life but not engaged in sex work is called *faray*. *Rare gals* bear a similarity to the *godrap girls* that Newell (2012) wrote about in Abidjan or the *ashawos* in Accra discussed in John Chernoff’s (2003) work.

sex, they wait until their customer falls asleep and then steal his possessions. Alternatively, they spy out the lie of the land and possible alarm systems so that their *tedi bois* can later rob the place with their gang. This has been done so often that many men and boys now prefer to pay the extra SLL 30,000 (GBP 2.76) to go with a *rare gal* to a brothel or have sex with her in public rather than take her home.

*Rare gals* always ask for payment before having sex, while scholars may agree to be paid after. Scholars are frequently taken home. Sometimes customers refuse to pay them. In these instances, there is very little a scholar can do. If she calls the police, she will be arrested for loitering and will have to pay a fine or, occasionally, sleep with an officer in exchange for her freedom (Mahtani and O’Gorman 2018).

‘Financiers/providers’ and ‘sugar daddies’ are middle-aged men, sometimes elders, who enjoy the (sexual) company of girls and young women in exchange for financial support. With sugar daddies, the relationship is clearly sexual, while financiers may also give financial support in exchange for company. Furthermore, sugar daddies usually give women and girls money, or buy things for them, such as top-up (mobile phone credit), clothes, or hair. Financiers/providers, on the other hand, are frequently involved in paying school or university fees as well as rent.

### *Agreement Relationships*

In Freetown, one form of transactional relationship is the so-called agreement relationship.<sup>3</sup> These are partnerships aimed at gaining economic or social acceptance and mobility. Sex and keeping company are important for the partners, and romantic emotions are commonplace, but a permanent relationship or marriage is excluded. These agreements are understood as such by both partners and are often negotiated openly.

Agreement relationships coexist with other relationship types with spouses, main partners, one-night stands, and providers, and they demonstrate a pragmatic approach to dealing with want and scarcity. As I discussed elsewhere (Schneider 2020b), agreement relationships are not only employed by young people in their struggles to make a living in uprooted and constantly shifting social landscapes, but are equally important among elders. Most of my data on agreement relationships were gathered at King George’s old age home, where I met many residents who had navigated and are navigating their social and economic lives in this way. Such relationships are the kind that brought men and

<sup>3</sup> This section is taken from Schneider (2020b).

women fleeing from ‘women trouble’ in the rural areas to the city. The exchange may involve food in return for access to education, accommodation in Freetown for household chores, and so on. Far from being a new phenomenon, such relationships are marked by historical, social, and cultural continuations that draw on notions of personhood, gift economies, and social and economic mobility.

Agreement relationships entail much more than a transaction of sex in exchange for gifts, goods, or money. Rather, they cultivate intricate and often lasting emotional engagements. Agreement relationships are based upon social navigation by means of favours and debts, as I have described above. The fabric of society is not made up of individuals who interact at random, but of engagements between people who get to know one another and then make choices based on that knowledge. The parties to agreement relationships are not interchangeable, as it is their unique subjectivity and the individual ‘thing’ – such as education, access, skills, or networks – they have to offer that allows two people to be matched together at a particular time. The transaction at its core helps develop social capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) while sustaining the very notion of such capital by keeping social and professional networks alive, and at the same time ensuring that they are restrictive and specific.

Agreement relationships are entered into by women and men alike throughout their lives, and continue well into old age. Particularly for women, such agreements provide a powerful means to turn gendered ideologies on their head and enjoy a certain freedom in the spaces between set gender roles. Women prioritise their individual choices and desires for mobility, economic security, specific career choices, or financial independence from kin and husbands above those of their kin, who often expect them to stay close by, marry, and raise children. Through the ‘things’ partners in agreements offer each other, they simultaneously contribute to a shared economy of desire and enable others to satisfy their material, emotional, and sexual needs. In this way, agreement relationships speak to Zygmunt Bauman’s notion that the desires for both freedom – autonomously directing one’s life – and security – living in a community – are essential, simultaneous, and irreconcilable parts of personhood, which influence relationship practices (Bauman 2001: 5; see Piot 1999; Jackson 2012: 3).

### **Committed Relationships and Their Marriage to Expectations**

Notwithstanding the temporary freedom that youth – and certain big women and big men – negotiate for themselves in contemporary

Freetown, relationships are still married to expectations. Social status continues to be a crucial factor in Sierra Leonean society, where a hierarchical organisation privileges elders over younger individuals, married people over those who are unmarried, and employed individuals over those who are unemployed (Oyèwùmí 2005; Jackson 2017). The lives of women and men are still organised into distinct stages, with varying degrees of respect accorded to each; and it is to committed relationships between adults that the respect, assistance, and social protection of family and community are tied. Consequently, people cannot remain in the youth stage forever. Pregnancy – described as *get bele*, which literally means ‘to have a stomach’ – or growing in age increase the pressure on people to make the transition from youth to full-fledged adults. If a pregnancy is carried to term, the stage of youth must be left and youths must become big men and big women.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, economic precarity does not affect only young people. Parents and grandparents still expect to be taken care of in old age and wish for their lineages to continue. Moreover, children are said to need more than their parents to be properly socialised. Contemporary demands thus require one to provide for one’s family in old age, to bring children into the world, and to establish a household. Although the relationship forms I have discussed can be lived openly and are acceptable for youth, living them and at the same time becoming big men and big women is impossible. And yet marriage remains financially unachievable for many.

To reach adulthood, relationship forms have been established that enable young men and women to commit publicly and bindingly to another person and their family, and to legitimise children. In this way, attempts are made to weave two families together in webs of mutual dependence. Hence, there is a great amount of investment in bridging the different demands and aspirations presented by social pressures, changing relationship forms, and economic realities. Three practices highlight these tendencies particularly well: ‘show face’, *ansa bele*, and ‘engagements’.

Show face is the process by which the father of a baby introduces himself to the family of the woman he impregnated, to confirm that the baby has a father. Often the father agrees to have the child take his last name to clearly show that it is not illegitimate. However, the father takes no definite social or economic responsibility for the child or the mother. Furthermore, the man or boy does not have to be in a current relationship with the woman

<sup>4</sup> Abortions, called *pul di bele* (to pull the stomach) or *puwel di bele* (to spoil the stomach), are either conducted at hospitals in exchange for a fee (usually SLL 200,000 or GBP 20.34) or traditionally. In the latter instance, women and girls are given strong herbs to drink.

or girl in question. If no pregnancy exists, show face can also simply mean the first official visit a person makes to the family of their partner.

*Ansa bele* is a practice that has become influential in recent years. It aims to destigmatise and legitimise pregnancies out of wedlock. It literally means ‘answering to the stomach’ and openly declaring that ‘I have impregnated that woman and fathered that child’, as Chernor (34), a carpenter from Allentown, explains. Through the process, a boy or man accepts the pregnancy and takes full financial responsibility for the child born out of wedlock. The family of the woman or girl will customarily visit the family of the man or boy and explain that their daughter is expecting a child. Then, the family of the man will agree to answer to the pregnancy and take over the responsibilities of fatherhood. He and his family financially compensate the family of the woman or girl through processes that bear a strong resemblance to exchanges of bride price. As a result, the child becomes part of the lineage of the father and adopts his surname. While *ansa bele* requires a father to provide financially for the child, he is not made to do the same for the mother. Consequently, pregnant women and girls or their families might restrict access to the child pending an engagement or marriage. If couples undergo *ansa bele* but do not continue their relationship, the man may describe the woman as ‘born for me’.

*Ansa bele* can take place between the families of couples who love each other and are in consenting relationships. In recent years, however, it has been used by kin and elders as a process that follows an unwanted pregnancy or an assault. Many research collaborators stated further that marriages resulting from an *ansa bele* procedure, where those involved did not consciously choose the union, led to maltreatment and violence. Such marriages may be perceived as traps.<sup>5</sup> *Ansa bele* also comes with the full financial responsibility for *pul na do*, which is the naming ceremony for Muslims, or the Christian ‘christening ceremony’ or baptism. Moreover, children are not automatically assigned to the biological parents. Indeed, when the biological parents are seen as too young or unfit to take care of a child by their families, a grandparent of the child may symbolically marry the child. Here a ceremony is held, and the child is given a ring. It then belongs to the grandparent, who raises and provides for the child. This form of committed relationship focusses mainly on children and elders. It weaves together at least three generations: the partners, their children, and their (grand)parents.

<sup>5</sup> This is especially true if they follow the forced acceptance of a pregnancy through swearing; see Chapter 4.

The third type of commitment is the one that is closest to marriage, namely engagement. Engagement is the ceremony in which two partners publicly formalise their intention to marry. Often engagement rings are exchanged. The family of the man or boy gives donations of money to the family of the woman or girl. These donations are often confined to the nuclear family and not extended to the entire household, as in marriages. They are furthermore less expensive than marriage donations. Male research collaborators describe engagement as a way to 'close the door' to any other suitor (*lok di do*). Foday (36) explains: 'If I am loving that girl and I want to marry that girl, I will call the engagement, pay, and ensure her for me. This means that I reserved her for me forever'. For women and girls, engagement was usually seen as proof that a partner is serious and will support them. However, engagements often do not lead to marriage, but are in themselves accepted as a serious commitment, albeit not one on equal terms with marriage.

Another way through which people try to formalise a relationship is through cohabitation. *Tap to mi* means cohabitation without being engaged or married. Today, according to law, after five years of cohabiting, partners have equal rights to the joint property in case of separation or death. After concluding such rituals of commitment, a couple who are unable to build their own home usually move in with the family of the man, where they live patrilocally. If a man stays with the family of his wife, he is never considered head of the house and risks never achieving a position of great authority. Nevertheless, many such couples do not live together but continue to stay with their kin. Often, one partner's job leads them to travel frequently or to live in another part of Freetown or another town altogether, and to come and visit occasionally. Lovers and people in agreement or contract relationships, on the other hand, frequently cohabit. However, such habitation patterns are fluid and not accepted as a sign of commitment.

### **Marriage to 'Be for Somebody' and Lovers to 'Feel with Somebody'**

As we have seen, in Freetown relationships extend beyond the two people involved and include additional actors such as kin, community, or religious groups (Jackson 2012; 2017). Most research collaborators have several relationships that are governed by underlying principles with different roles and responsibilities for each relationship form. Partners are categorised as lovers, side-chicks, people in agreement relationships, main girlfriends, spouses, and so on. These structures dictate the relationship – while a side-chick is for sex, and a lover for sex and company, a

main girlfriend is expected to also attend to social and organisational needs, such as public engagements, the maintenance of familial relationships, and household chores. But, in addition, they give form to the interaction with (or restriction of access to) a partner's friends and family through procedures, such as show face, *ansa bele*, engagement, and marriage, that come with different economic and social responsibilities.

The dynamics developed to build these kinds of bridges between aspirations, economic constraints, and expectations are creative forms of present and future making. However, their shiny upside has a dark underbelly. Seeking to satisfy the demands of one's family and live one's own aspirations may create dynamics that enable violence, such as when couples who do not want to be together are made to commit to each other because of a pregnancy.<sup>6</sup> According to Mr Saidu, a teacher from Western Freetown (in his forties), one of the main causes of violence within committed relationships is that many people do not enter them because they love each other but because the woman got pregnant and her family asked for *ansa bele*. 'Most of these relations are built on this foundation, which can then lead to the men being absent most of the time or living somewhere else and cause frequent quarrels and problems within the family', he says. Many men explain their reasons for doing *ansa bele*, getting engaged, or attempting to marry in exactly this way. Said (46), a social worker, explained to me that

to be a big man, you must be committed. I am a married man and thereby more valuable than a non-married man. I have reproduced. That's why we get engaged because society expects us to settle and reproduce to be 'somebody'. So, we choose who would make a good wife. But mostly love is not there. Love is with our girlfriends. Now, violence comes to both, the girlfriend because of jealousy, the fiancé because we don't communicate, don't 'fit'.

This statement, that violence comes to both, is one I often heard. It relates to Viviana Zelizer's observation that the very condition of intimacy is a convergence of vulnerabilities, a web of information about each other that could be harmful if revealed (Zelizer 2000). In view of their elaborate structures, it might seem as if the various relationships young people are engaged in are less tainted by inequality and exploitation than some rural marriages. But just as marriage in rural areas was often accompanied by patriarchal, gerontocratic structures of inequality (Richards 1998), and collided with other desire-based relations, the manifold relationships forming Freetown's emotional economy today are not without their problems. Indeed, fluid relationship forms are

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of these difficulties, see Chapters 4 and 6.

not built on reliable bases and may collapse at any point, leaving individuals without the support of family or community. Additionally, problems and violence in such relationships must be dealt with interpersonally. Friends or peers can be called upon to mediate, but they do not have the same power to punish and enforce regulations as family or community. Hence, the freedom of such relationships goes hand in hand with the absence of elaborate social protection. Moreover, as Mauss (1970) shows, indebtedness and manipulation are the underbelly of benign relationships within gift economies. The economy of favours and debts involves a complex nexus of power relations with regard to how much is given and how much accumulated. This also relates to the debt bank that my research collaborators have created and to the strategies of 'snatching', 'owning the story', and 'keeping face'. By giving more than they receive, a giver establishes a power imbalance and ensures that the receiver stays in their debt. This is why people told me that it is of the utmost importance to stay free. How? Papani answered: 'You ... never take more than was agreed. Otherwise, you can be owned'.

In love histories, young people often differentiated between the person they loved and the person they decided to marry. Among EAUC members, it was very common for them to describe being madly in love with a woman but regard an eventual break-up as unavoidable. For those who come from families who can afford to pay for a marriage, such as Gas, this is even more the case. At the outset of my fieldwork, Gas explained: 'I love Isatu more than anything. It has been almost five years now, but I will never marry her. I must marry who my family is happy with'. About two months ago, Gas got married to a woman he hardly knew. As we have seen, in a marriage the relationship between spouses does not have a higher importance than the status reached through the marriage, and the approval or disapproval of family and community matters greatly. Many men do not marry women they love or had relationships with before. They often have many rapidly changing and overlapping relationships until they decide that it is time to marry. Women one could potentially 'place down' are not the same as the women one has relationships with. Such women need to be accepted by one's family and community. And often love is outsourced to other partnerships. This creates a dualism in which marriages and committed relationships are largely lived for the outside world, while extramarital affairs involve the more private feelings and negotiations between individuals. When my research collaborators describe with nostalgia how many love marriages were characterised by genuine affection before the civil war (see also Stasik 2016: 22), they yearn for an invented past. But they also highlight the importance placed on loving marriages and the



remorse felt over how the affective aspect of marriage seems to have lost much of its power in Freetown today.

In a marriage, partners may have very little to share and to discuss. They talk to friends and family about their issues but rarely to their partners. At the same time, the new relationship forms do not offer the same stability as marriage. In marriages, spouses choose a patron from their consanguine family members, usually an elder woman. If problems arise, this patron then negotiates with both spouse and family to reach the most favourable solution (Chapters 6 and 7). If a person does not get married or enters a relationship that is based on economic exchanges between the families of the partners (e.g. *ansa bele* or engagement), the family members are almost never invited to mediate if issues arise. Consequently, separations are much more difficult because those involved are not in a position to lean on a strong social network or fall back on an alternative living space.

In today's complicated landscape, where different gendered perceptions and ideals are in constant competition, people therefore juggle diverse roles, balancing those relationships that are driven by emotion with those that help them achieve a different position within society and those that ensure security. It is difficult to know whether people's relationship practices are defined by emotions or largely by society's approval or disapproval of the union. How people feel personally is just as important as the views of their family, community, or society overall. Partners are chosen because of emotional factors such as attachment or love. Equally, relationships are entered into for practical reasons, such as availability of sex, access to a certain social circle, or the inducement of an exchange. And partners are chosen because of suitability in the long run, respectability, social standing, and so on. In relationships, sociocentric and egocentric notions of personhood are continuously weighed against each other (Bauman 2001; Jackson 2012). The dynamic in relationships between the private and the public is constantly and awkwardly entangled. In these complex dynamics, acts of violence can be executed as a result of a sense of ownership or entitlement but also out of fear of losing somebody, or for the desire to maintain or regain emotions, authority, or status. Often enough, affection and violence are entangled, as the next chapter shows.