5 The Language of Violence

Language, says Lynn Tirell, is

> a structure of significances that governs our lives. It contains and conveys the categories through which we understand ourselves and others, and through which we become who and what we are. Our linguistic practices are constituted largely by inferences which in turn constitute or contribute to our understanding of the connections (causal and otherwise) between things. These inferential roles and patterns, which are normatively inscribed, give order and significance to the categories. Once we realize that our linguistic categories reflect and are reflected by our social categories, and once we see that our discursive practices are normative, it is a short step to see language as an arena of political struggle. (Tirrell 2017: 137)

Language is a powerful and multi-layered symbolic system that articulates, forms, and reproduces normativity. What matters, however, is not just what is said, but who says it, who listens, and to what effect. The way we listen, how we listen, and to whom we listen is as important for understanding phenomena as language itself (Boyce-Davies 1994; Gibbon 1999; Spivak 2003). Language holds the key to understanding how violence and oppression are forged, how they operate, and how they are reinforced. But it also offers a road map for deconstructing harmful logics. Analysing language, as I do in this chapter, is therefore crucial for understanding the role and place of love and violence as well as their relations to each other in a given context.

The moral economy of relationships is erected on linguistic foundations. The terms describing acts of violence in development policies and in Sierra Leonean legal documents are either very broad or their meaning differs significantly from local interpretations. In Freetown, irrespective of age, class, gender, or socioeconomic background, research collaborators used the term 'violence' or 'violence in relationships'. This includes all forms of violence inflicted, endured, or regulated between sexual partners, irrespective of the nature of their relationship – be it married, dating, or cohabiting.[1] This umbrella term is a floating signifier,

[1] They thereby include forms of violence that are referred to as intimate partner violence (IPV), domestic violence (DV), and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the

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however, in that it reveals no information about specific acts or their context. It is therefore of little use in everyday interactions. Instead, Sierra Leoneans carefully differentiate, through terminology, between expected and 'normal' acts and those which are deemed unacceptable and which demand correction. They assign meanings and messages to a broad range of violent acts. The term used to describe an act thereby offers the code to unlock its underlying meaning and the level of its social acceptability. Taken together, these terms produce a language of violence that communicates three layers of meaning: the description of the act, the meaning of the act, and the judgement of the act. This terminological assessment of a broad variety of acts reveals how Sierra Leoneans judge violence in a setting where global dynamics, national politics, and daily local lived experiences intersect.

The use of as well as the need for these terminologies is at least partially inspired by historical forces, public discourse, and legal reform. Many research collaborators explained that discussion of forms of violence within relationships and their acceptability is a post-war phenomenon. Consider this explanation by Umu (64), a market woman from Abacha Street:

> Well before the war, what went on inside a relationship or house was personal. If someone complained, then they would call members of the family or elders and then they would describe the activity like 'he beat me with a belt' or 'she was having a relation [an affair]'. A word was not necessary. But after the war, with the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] and now with the laws and civil society – since it goes outside, we need to classify somehow – so this is how the word[s] 'violence in relationships' came in.

Umu sheds light on how post-war reconciliation processes and subsequent legal changes impacted on the way relationships are spoken about and to whom. To understand the effects of law and policy on concrete behaviour, one needs to analyse how terminologies change over time. Such ethnography becomes relevant for development workers and policy-makers, and for those who are themselves not in a position to explore how laws affect relationship dynamics.

As Umu claims, relationships used to be private matters. Today, in contrast, violence in relationships is the subject of a multi-layered public discourse influenced by state institutions and non-state actors alike (e.g. IOs, NGOs, civil society, and faith-based institutions). Actions deemed

literature. SGBV focusses on gender dynamics in the execution of violence, DV on violence between people who are in a familial relationship – in Sierra Leone this includes persons living in the same house, sharing meals in common, or being engaged in intimate relationships – and it pays attention to forms of violence that are often considered to be private and only seldom punished. IPV is confined to sexual partners.

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illegal are no longer considered private even if they occur between spouses within the confines of their home. Since the introduction of the Gender Acts in 2007 and the Sexual Offences Act (SOA) of 2012 as well as the Sexual Offences Amendment Act (SOAA) of 2019, any behaviour within such a relationship that causes physical, psychological, economic, social, or sexual harm to those involved constitutes violence. Hence, Sierra Leonean state institutions, the criminal justice system, state laws and IOs, as well as NGOs apply the concept of rights and ideas of risk (Abrahams, Jewkes, and Laubscher 1999; García Moreno, Jewkes, and Sen 2002; also Chapters 7 and 8). In this official discourse, violence within relationships is analysed in relation to '(a) contextual characteristics of partners (demographic, neighbourhood, community and school factors), (b) developmental characteristics and behaviours of the partners (e.g. family, peer, psychological/behavioural, and cognitive factors), and (c) relationship influences and interactional patterns' (Capaldi et al. 2012).

But the official views on gender and violence often differ from local perceptions. As we have seen, within the overarching framework of the moral economy, research collaborators distinguish between 'normal and acceptable' and 'unacceptable' types of violence by evaluating intent, outcome, and the possibility of restoring the relationship. Moreover, through elaborate linguistic differentiations, the popular language of violence gives nuance to the understanding of various acts of both accepted and unaccepted violence. In addition, specific terms are assigned to acts that make classification and comparison possible. While the extensive local use of the terms 'normal', 'acceptable', and 'unacceptable', which are the meta-categories within which forms and acts of violence are clustered, points to the influence of ideas of risk and legal language on household and community perceptions, it also indicates how these are locally transformed and appropriated.

The most important differentiation is made between male and female violence. During my research, I never came across a research collaborator who would describe violence as a purely male or, for that matter, a purely female phenomenon. It was always said that men and women both use violence against each other, though not in the same way. But, as I show below, there is a distinction arising from the data between the acts of violence predominantly committed by men and those by women: men use violence mainly against bodies and women use violence mainly against minds.

(Male) Violence against Bodies

There is a whole vocabulary of terms used to describe (male) violence against bodies. Whereas *wahala* and 'palaver' are used to refer to conflict

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overall, other, more specific terms are used to describe the actions that occur. When somebody says 'they are having an argument', it means that after a scene was caused those involved have not resolved their issues (have not 'aired their grievances') but have resorted instead to avoiding each other. Yet they maintain the basic niceties such as general greetings. While arguments are largely tolerated so long as they do not last for too long, 'malicing' is usually unacceptable. Malicing involves avoiding somebody to the extent of refusing to be in the same room, refusing to greet them, and refusing to prepare food (women) or accept and eat food (men). In a society where love travels through the stomach (see Diggins 2014), rejecting food makes a strong statement. Malicing involves punishment through withdrawal. Prolonged malicing can turn into 'insulting', when malicing practices of avoidance or disciplining become visible to others. 'Quarrelling' is restricted to vocal arguments and includes shouting, insulting, screaming, and sometimes even cursing others.

While quarrelling is limited to non-physical confrontations, 'fighting' is the umbrella term for all physical acts, which, apart from 'slapping', are mainly carried out by men. Research collaborators distinguish carefully between these various acts. Take, for instance, Said's response to my question about the status of his relationship.

SAID: Well, mostly we are ok, sometimes we can quarrel, and then I can malice her or she can malice me. Only *sometimes* we fight.
ME: Do both of you fight, or does one fight the other?
SAID: Oh, we can both fight (*laughs*). Well, let me say, she is better at slapping, and me, I am better at beating (*laughs*).

A market woman from Abacha Street (in her fifties) explained her relationship like this:

ME: Are you in a relationship?
HER: Oh yes, I have a man.
ME: How is it?
HER: I tap to him [I live with him]. He likes me because I am a market woman. I bring home the money. But it is like they say: 'if you are with an Abacha woman you must bear the noise' (*laughs*). I like shouting. Sometimes fighting can come inside.
ME: Who can fight?
HER: We both can fight (*laughs*), but that is how we keep the love going.

Beating means repeated and forceful punishment with the fist or with objects. Here sticks, belts, and the like can be used. Beating, I was told, is most commonly used by men. However, if a man tells his partner that he will beat her, and she does not object or try to resist, it is referred to as a 'joint beating'. Then violence is not only carried out by one partner

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against the other, but the person who is beaten acknowledges the possibility of being beaten and accepts it. The level of acceptability further depends on where the beating takes place, the object that is used, the severity of the injuries, and the part of the body that is beaten. So-called private beatings in secluded rooms were considered less harmful than public ones in front of family or community. Beating a partner on the street was described as the most severe form of violence. The longer that injuries took to heal, the less acceptable was the beating. Moreover, beating parts of the body that are usually hidden, such as the back, was more acceptable than beating the face. Beating particularly sensitive parts, such as the soles of the feet, the hands, the inner elbow, or the thighs, was condemned unless it followed serious wrongdoing.

What these levels of acceptability show is that, whenever violence becomes visible to others, its acceptability decreases. A relationship is a bond between two partners, and its inner nature or quality is mostly invisible to others. Hence, public displays of violence or lasting injuries expose imbalances within the relationship to the scrutiny of households and communities. These public acts of physical violence often attract shame and are accompanied by symbolic violence because they tacitly invite others to judge the relationship. The beating of the face, for instance, is an act that displays a sense of ownership and also fear of losing a partner. Men who were sure their girlfriend had a lover told me that they 'beat in her face' to make her unattractive for the other man. In response to having beaten his girlfriend after he caught her cheating, Twin (45), a businessman from Naimbana Street, said: 'Loving is so many feelings you know, and they are very, very stressful. When you catch your person with somebody, you beat her because she is yours and you need to prove that you want her. At the same time, you realise that others want her, which means that you mean more because she is with you'.

A woman's beaten face can thus be read as a public code for her relationship status and for the insecurity of her partner. And yet it is also often interpreted as symbolising a desire to continue the relationship. When I asked a group of young women, all students of law or social work at Fourah Bay College in Freetown, about the beating of the face, Darina (23), a mother from Coal Farm, said: 'Yes, beating can hurt, but it shows his effort. Ask yourself, sister, is it this short pain that you want or the long one when he is gone?'

While beating in a relationship is almost exclusively a male form of violence, 'slapping' is female. The term 'slapping' refers to hitting or striking a person with the palm of the bare hand, never with the fist. Slapping is usually aimed at someone's face and is described as an act mainly carried out by women. Unlike beating, slapping rarely follows a

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threat to slap. Slapping does not cause lasting injuries and only occasionally does it involve severe pain. However, many men describe slapping, which is usually executed in public, as a form of violence aimed at undermining their masculine selves. Hassan (23), from Kroo Bay, explained that

> slapping is something you do with a misbehaving child without beating it. It comes quickly when somebody acts out of their character, so when a child is very rude to elders, for example. A woman slapping a man is like … you do that in public to shame him because he did something that a real man won't do. People won't know what he did, but the slapping will tell everyone that he misbehaved.

If done publicly, slapping therefore negates the authority of a person. It is children who are slapped, not adults. Bonnie Mann analyses the ways in which a masculine self can be undone 'by an experience of "feeling like a woman"' (Mann 2014: 85). Such instances, Mann says, 'are structured around disruptions of the "I can" body, which is at the center of perceptual and kinesthetic experience. These disruptions … have the power to terrorize as well as to mobilize the subject' (Mann 2014: 86). Similarly, being treated like a child can be seen as an attack on masculinity.

And yet slapping, if executed by men, was interpreted by my research collaborators as reinforcing affection and demonstrating love. Meadow (23), from EAUC, comments that 'slapping is something you do without thinking when you really, really love somebody and then that somebody becomes a question, like when they lie to you or ignore you or hide something'. Furthermore, slapping by men was described with words such as 'quick' and 'irrational', and was said to be done out of 'jealousy' or 'hurt'. Here slapping occurs on the spur of the moment as an irrational and affective reaction to jealousy, protectiveness, and the fear of loss. Female research collaborators in particular often shared strategies to 'provoke men to slap them' if they feared that the men would lose interest. Mariama (19), trying to educate me on how to act this way, said:

> OK, it is simple really. If you suspect him, maybe if you're lucky you can get his phone and do checks, but if you can't, you need to test, always test, if he has not been calling you in the morning and in the evening and he is not sexing you. So where does it go, ha? Surely someone must get it. So, you must find out. The best way is for you to totally ignore him and go out and start amusing with someone. If this does not become a case, if there is no beating or slapping or force, my sister, I am telling you, you are wasting your time.

The presence or absence of male slapping can be used to determine the level of 'heated' emotions between partners: if present, it is a sign of the health of the relationship and of a high level of affection between partners. Slapping is also used to draw boundaries or to punish overstepping

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without causing further problems. It can be an act of jealousy, a demand for attention, or a statement that there is a problem that needs to be dealt with.

These different interpretations of male and female slapping pose an interesting puzzle. Is it the specific act that is supposedly reserved for children that causes men to feel threatened? Might it be possible, as Mann argues, that women implicitly accept their 'abject social status' (Mann 2014: 84)? Put differently, experiences of physical violence committed by the opposite sex may perhaps be perceived as a potential part of a woman's world, while on the other hand they are excluded from the masculine imaginary. From my experience in Freetown, I get a different sense, namely that women do not question their femininity as easily as men imagine their masculinity to be under attack. This may also be the reason why female violence is mostly unseen, while men rely on acts of visible physical force.

Men's hands-on approach can also be seen in 'grabbing', which involves a firm grip, usually around the upper arm or waist, with the intention of dragging or pulling someone away or preventing them from leaving. Grabbing a woman's bottom was common but was conceived as a compliment rather than a form of violence. Grabbing was also often described as a form of 'foreplay' (see also Porter 2017 on Uganda). Grabbing a partner, throwing her over the shoulder, and carrying her off was sometimes described as 'manly' and 'admirable'. Consider Kiss Daniel's 2015 single 'Woju', which was a huge hit in Sierra Leone. In this love song, the text begins: *na you I wan for carry you go* [It is you that I want to carry to go]. Kiss Daniel's words not only imply as was explained to me by Eugene, an IT specialist in his thirties, that his protagonist is leaving with a girl he did not arrive with: 'Say for instance, I went to a party with my girlfriend, but meet this other girl that sweeps me off my feet so much that I don't mind leaving my girlfriend for her'. It also suggests the physical practice of carrying her away. However, if it occurs as a punishment, grabbing can precede a beating or coerced sex. It is often accompanied by a vocal threat or conditional statement: 'If you do not do that, I will not let you go'. It can often bring an end to quarrelling. Albert (32) explained to me: 'When she is arguing with me and I get tired and need this to be finished, I just grab her, throw her in the other room, and close the door. It is like a warning. She will know that if she continues, I will come back and beat her'.

Besides these physical acts between partners, there are acts that the law considers to be violence but that are interpreted differently by research collaborators. Whether or not such an act constitutes a wrong depends on the perception of the person it is done to and the relationship between

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the person who carries out and the person who endures the act. For instance, 'harassment' was described, almost jokingly, as touching the clothed breast, waist, or genitals of a woman. This can be done to a friend, co-worker, or a woman one knows, and was described as a compliment about her sexual attractiveness, a 'play', or a 'norm'. Foday (47), a businessman, states that 'there is a common play, a joke like a friendship thing, like touching the boobs or waist of a woman who is not connected to me or with me, that is a common sexual harassment'.

Statements like Foday's were common among the men with whom I conducted research. When I asked how they thought women felt if they were touched in this way, I was told that it makes them feel good. Collaborators qualified this statement by explaining that they only touched women whose implicit consent they had, that such touching constitutes a compliment, that it is fleeting and that, given its joking nature, it does not contain a sexual element. Women, on the other hand, stated that only men they trusted were allowed to harass them in this way. If harassment was intended as a friendly compliment, I was told, it takes the form of a short touch with an open hand, never a grab or a hold. A lasting touch is considered sexual and therefore disrespectful and inappropriate. While some described taking issue with a friend's and co-worker's touching, they denied that all harassment is off limits or that harassment always constitutes sexism. 'Friendships', Mariama said, 'are also physical but not physical like sexual relationships'. And Amina further explained that 'it is this idea people have about Africa where they say the women are oppressed and the men are sexist. Many men are sexist, not just the ones here, but many of the men here would not dare harass us if we would not somehow tolerate it. We have power too, and men do fear us'.

Harassing one's sexual partner is always acceptable. It usually means signalling arousal and wanting to have sex. I often witnessed this at 24 (see Figure 5.1). After one of the members touched his girlfriend or lover in that way, they would usually go next door to have sex. If she ignored him, turned away, or even slapped his hand, this would usually result in grabbing. Slapping one's partner after harassment is unacceptable but doing so after 'reaching' (described below) is commonly accepted and then leads to negotiating about whether the couple will have sex.

'Reaching' means moving one's hand down under the skirt or pants of one's partner in front of other people. Though often tried, reaching is unacceptable if unwanted by a woman. Such transgressions would lead to the slapping of a man's hand and to its withdrawal. Often, men and boys then start to beg by saying 'Please, baby, I want you now' or something similar. I often witnessed how women and girls would savour

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Figure 5.1 Sharing food near 24.

these situations and hold a man back for some time before giving in to his request. If he does not stop reaching, however, his partner may start arguing and often others then step in and chide him.

Hence, violence perpetrated by men is characterised by physical manifestations of power and possessiveness, or at least attempts at (re-) creating such positions of power and possession. Furthermore, the various types of male violence carry specific meanings, which in turn complicate the way we are to understand physical violence within Sierra Leonean relationships. However, it is not only physical violence that plays a role within the moral economy of relationships. The next section reveals how female agency, in terms of violence, is equally acknowledged, albeit within a different realm: that of social reputation.

(Female) Immaterial Violence

According to the metaphor of the teeth and tongue, women are more talkative and are embedded in wider social networks than men. Men often cite women's 'tongues' (gossip) as a feared instrument of violence. Gossip involves 'sharing other people's secrets' to gain attention, create

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unnecessary 'heat', spread information that was shared in confidence, or make false claims. Women are often referred to as having 'loose tongues'. 'Women's talk' and its ability to completely ruin a man's reputation – to punish him with the mouth – was presented as a powerful way to keep men in check. That 'words move fast' was one of the most common phrases used when men explained why they would not dare to abandon a girlfriend or decided against engaging in other romances without their main girlfriend's consent.

However, whether men and boys fear that a woman may use her tongue to punish transgressions depends on the woman in question. As we have seen in a previous chapter, Suge is not worried that Amina will use revenge. As a born-again Christian, Amina is a 'God-fearing woman' for whom revenge is out of the question. Suge comments on women's violence as 'revenge' or 'sweet revenge' in the following way:

> The women have killed so many men in Sierra Leone. At times, we are very afraid, very afraid. Because some women when you are with them and then you want to move on, they say 'don't leave me like this' [*nɔr lɛf mi so*] and then you have to fear for your life. They will put a spell on you or give you a sickness. And if you don't find a traditional doctor to heal you, you will die. Then you can try to find her and beg her, but many times you will not see her until you are dead. She will just disappear, fade away.

When Suge explained this at 24, the others murmured approvingly. *Nɔr lɛf mi so* was a strong concern among EAUC members when they weighed the possible repercussions of leaving a girlfriend. 'It means', as Anna (17), one of the sex workers from Naimbana Street, readily explained, 'that they cannot just break off the relationship before fulfilling at least some of their promises'. Said quickly added:

> The problem for us here is that when we want a woman we will tell her whatever she wants to hear. We will promise her that at the end we will give something like marriage or children. Then when we try to move on they don't let us go, but they make us remember the promise. This is how they trap us.

Revenge is thus a corrective measure when male promises are not kept. Referring to the reasons why he remains faithful to his long-term girlfriend, Gas said:

> The reason why I do not cheat is simple. I have been having this girlfriend for many years. Now I am slowly making my way through university. Almost every day, there are women who want to get with me because they know that one day I will be a successful somebody. But it is not worth risking my health and my life for that because now, if I go with another one, the first one who has been by my side patiently for all the years when I could offer her nothing … will get really angry. It is too risky.

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Hence, the possibility of revenge leads men to consider the long-term repercussions of giving into momentary desire. Albert, who himself uses this tactic of empty promises – he is currently dating two market women – explained:

> Also, many men who do not have money will seek to enter a relationship with market women or women who are otherwise engaged in businesses. These women will support the men, hoping that later they will take care of them. But often men leave the women when they are successful or move on to other women. There is not much women can do formally, but they can seek revenge by using traditional medicines. Several love potions are used, and there is also a medicine to harm the bowel movement of the men by collecting the semen and taking it to a traditional doctor. If it is buried, the man will get sick but can be cured … if it is thrown in the water, the man will die. This is how women can seek redress.

What Albert was talking about here is *gbagba*, a spell that is mostly used against 'passers-by', which will block the bowel movement of the men, leading to a slow and painful death. *Gbagba* can be purchased from traditional doctors for as little as SLL 25,000–50,000 (GBP 2.40–4.80). The explanation of Oki, that women in Sierra Leone are dangerous and that they will kill you 'fast fast' if they think you have treated them wrongly, was echoed in many conversations. Some men, such as Oki, cited this as the main reason why they do not enter long-term relationships with women before they feel ready to keep their promises and are able to support a partner financially. When I first asked Oki whether he was in a relationship, he replied quickly: 'Me? Ah no, I stay away from that risk. It is dangerous for men like me. I am not crazy'. Instead, Oki, who goes to nightclubs almost daily, lives his sexuality with sex workers whom he knows well. Referring to these women, he said:

> I know them well because I am popular on the streets, but most of them I never meet [for sex] more than once because I don't want any relationship to develop that could potentially result in the women expecting something, getting disappointments, and harming me … today we come together, today we leave each other [*wi mit tide wi lɛf tide*].

This 'cut and play' tactic is easier for him in view of his low income. Michael Jackson recorded similar attitudes. Many years after conducting his first stretch of fieldwork, Jackson returned to Sierra Leone with his son. There, he reconnected with Kaimah, a man in his late thirties whom he had known for many years. When asked about his relationship, Kaimah replied bluntly: 'You can't expect love when you have nothing to give but love' (Jackson 2011: 10). Kaimah's former partner Aisetta had left him for another man because he was unable to provide her with security, income, and prospects. In my research, men not only feared

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being left, but also being punished, as Albert's response to Oki's statement confirms: 'Exactly! There is a social mechanism that connects expectations and actions to deliveries. If you do not deliver, women might sanction you'.

Another form of violence women can use against men is that of 'trapping'. Ousman (32), a labourer from Kroo Bay, explained trapping in the following way: 'When they [women] get pregnant, they will not tell you until maybe four or five months in until it is too late to pull the pregnancy [get an abortion] and then men have to fear. They hate her, but sometimes they cannot run because otherwise the woman will use her power and the man can easily die'. Ousman's gloomy depiction is underscored by Mabinty (27), a mother from Kroo Bay, who said that 'women have much more power than the men here. For a man he will never use this traditional stuff, never. Only they, the women. They do that. Pregnancy or spell'. Jenneh (19), a hairdresser from Kroo Bay, added: 'The women, they know everything about protection methods now, so they will only get pregnant if they want to trap these men'. Indeed, women and girls who want to get an abortion usually ask their partners to pay. For EAUC members, abortion fees constituted a huge problem. Amadu explained:

> Sometimes we only sleep with one once and then they come and say that they are pregnant, and we need to pay for the abortion. It can be two or even more women per month. But if we don't find that money, then they will make us responsible for all the costs with the child. It is the most wicked violence right now. How can we know if she is even pregnant? Maybe she just wants that money. But it is too risky not to give her [the money], and they know that.

When confronted, men may accept (*ansa bɛlɛ*) or reject a pregnancy (*I nɔr ansa di bɛlɛ*). If they refuse to acknowledge that they have caused the pregnancy, they may be asked to take an oath. This practice is informed by the Mende *hale*, which, as Charles Jedrej describes, 'is used to represent the relationship between the world of humans and the world of spirits. The relationships are manipulated by the people for their benefit by a variety of ritual techniques and objects, notably those commonly referred to as medicines, fetishes, masks, and institutions such as secret societies' (Jedrej 1986: 513).

Taking an oath can involve 'scratching matches during daylight', which means that a woman or girl points to the man who impregnated her. In these scenarios, men and boys are called and asked to swear an oath, not as to whether they are responsible for a pregnancy, but whether they ever had sex with the woman or girl in question. If they did, they are subsequently forced to accept responsibility for the pregnancy. This is a common practice in Freetown today in cases of pregnancy out of

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wedlock or infidelity within marriages. In the latter case, the practice is called 'call name', which means that a woman must call the name of her lover in front of her family and her husband. The lover is subsequently made to take an oath that he never had sex with her. Unmarried girls often choose a man, whom the family then asks to take an oath, on the basis of his likeability or his ability to provide. In the case of married women, a husband is thereby forced to accept other children as his own and take over the full financial responsibility of raising them. Mr Mohamed explained this process in the following way:

> So, the man might know that he cannot be the father because he has had sex with her two months ago, but you have been found to be two weeks pregnant, so how will that be possible? It can be as far as three or four years back. But because the man has gone with her at some point or is married to her, he is now trapped. If the parents take an oath on them [the men] and they lie, they will die. That will force the men to take the responsibility of accepting the child of another. If they are in a relationship, this is how violence enters the relationship because they [the men] will know that it is not their child and they will always be angry and frustrated with the woman. Some they will not even touch her or have sex with her ever and will always quarrel and fight with her. When the man knows it is his child *and* if he wants the pregnancy, then he will appreciate and cherish her, but when he does not want it, it will be very hard for the woman and she will be exposed to so much violence.

In her work on Kpelle fatherhood, Caroline Bledsoe highlighted how 'claiming fatherhood adds expenses that might be spared by leaving paternity ambiguous until children reach an age at which they may be useful' (Bledsoe 1980b: 40). My data confirm this in that children under the age of 7 are legally assigned to their mothers. However, oath-taking and the resulting responsibilities make such postponements impossible. 'Scratching matches on the face' means that a woman or girl really does not know, or claims not to know, who impregnated her. In that case, all the lovers she calls are asked to assemble and to either agree on the 'one who must accept the pregnancy' or take an oath one after another. Then the family chooses the person who is to be held responsible for the pregnancy.

In both cases, men and boys swear an oath on the Qur'an or the Bible (depending on their faith), on some money, usually SLL 2,000 (GBP 0.18) or SLL 5,000 (GBP 0.45), and on a bowl of water. They take an oath that says: 'I swear to the Holy Bible/the Qur'an and the ancestors that I never lay with that girl'. After taking the oath, they are asked to drink the water and give the money to their father or mother. Through the oath, the power of religious deities and that of the ancestors are invoked simultaneously. Much as Elizabeth Tonkin described for Liberia, 'they [the gods and ancestors] are trusted as autonomous, unlike

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fallible human judgments' (Tonkin 2000: 366).[2] Annang concepts of oaths (*mbiam*) and ordeals (*ukang*) in Nigeria – which are very similar to the Mende *hale* in Freetown – have been described by David Pratten as 'truth-determining performative devices' (Pratten 2006: 726). This has also been observed in the Sierra Leonean fishing town of Tissana by Jennifer Diggins, who described the use of *ifohn*, or 'swear medicines', as truth-determining devices in theft cases (Diggins 2014: 218–27).

In Freetown, if the man or boy never had sex with the girl in question, he has nothing to fear and he remains unharmed (see Tonkin 2000). If he did, he must fear that the '*swear* catches him', which may result in illness or even death because, after taking the oath, he drinks the water, which now carries the oath. By giving the money to one of his parents, he further implicates them, and the oath may also 'catch them', leading to their sickness and possible death. If a man or boy has had intercourse with the woman or girl whose parents are initiating the oath, he usually admits to it in order to avoid the oath. If he admits to having had intercourse, he simultaneously accepts responsibility for the pregnancy. Usually, *ansa bɛlɛ* is initiated thereafter.

Another powerful form of violence women may use is temptation. Temptation is the manipulation of the 'power of female eroticism' (Groes-Green 2013: 103). It can be invoked with the use of love potions like *fala-fala*, *tay-tay*, *rɔb-rɔb*, or the *lɛk-lɛk*. Popular songs, like Emmerson's 2016 song 'Love Potion', describe how a man falls madly in love with a woman he never noticed before after she mixes a love potion in his food. Small portions of *fala-fala* or *lɛk-lɛk* can be purchased from apprentices of traditional doctors on Freetown's public transport. For strong potions and lasting spells, a traditional doctor must be consulted in person. *Fala-fala* and *lɛk-lɛk* can be absorbed by a man via his digestive tract or through his sperm. One evening, when members of EAUC explained the dangers of women to me, Lamin (20) summarised the preceding conversation:

> It is because of *lɛk-lɛk* and *fala-fala* that many men have started using condoms or why they do not let women leave the room straight after sex or want to watch her clean herself in front of them rather than in a bathroom because they are afraid that she might capture the sperm in a bottle and take it to a traditional doctor to possess him and make him fall madly in love with her and do anything she says. With *fala-fala*, a man will follow a woman wherever she goes, and she can send him to do whatever she needs. With *lɛk-lɛk*, he likes her so much that nothing else matters besides her.

[2] For a discussion of sasswood poison ordeals in south-eastern Liberia, see Tonkin (2000), who compares these to practices in medieval Europe, explores changes over time, and analyses their dramaturgy and political significance.

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That such spells can be transferred through food can make difficult demands on people. 'Eating together is a sign of love and trust. If you refuse someone's food, not only are you showing that you are malicing that person, but you are also suspicious of their activity and afraid that they may cause you harm', Mammie Zainab explained (see Figure 5.1).

Understanding Male and Female Forms of Violence

How can the differences between female and male forms of violence be understood? Men's descriptions of female violence as 'worse' than male violence could be interpreted as an attempt to justify the violence they exert against women. But if we take seriously men's fear of temptation, revenge, and trapping, another interpretation arises. In this case, men fully recognise and fear female power. In Sierra Leone, it is women rather than men that are the pillars of society. Consider women's positions within households, where they form the nucleus, and their socioeconomic position often as the main breadwinner. They are the ones who nourish relationships within their families and maintain social relations. Furthermore, women can bring life into this world (Scubla 2016). This is paramount in a country where forming a household and having 'wealth in people' (Bledsoe 1980a) determine social status. Male violence may therefore be understood as an attempt to control this gift over life, to diminish women's superiority, and to 'put women in their place', as Rafieu and many others said. Thus, women and girls may be exposed to unacceptable male violence, not because they are marginalised, but rather because they are strong and powerful. Accordingly, accusing women of temptation may be an attempt to turn on its head the power that women exert over men. Rather than accepting that they are attracted to women or submit to the female power of seduction (see Groes-Green 2013 for Mozambique), men depict this attraction not as a natural emotion, but as a female construction to control them. These trends are captured by the literature on changing economies and the crisis of masculinity (see, e.g. Morrell 2001). It speaks about the specific struggles men face as household, marriage, and employment systems change. It analyses male violence to regain control over their livelihoods, families, and partners, and sees it as an attempt to regain and renegotiate the 'upper hand'. My research, too, suggests that the construction of female 'powerlessness' is a response to women's actual power and not to its absence.

Another interpretation is that women hold the power over life but are subjected to patriarchal authority and thus live within its bounds. The violence they execute ensures that, while men are officially and politically

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in power, women remain socially so. Their violence is both unacceptable and necessary. It is unacceptable because it scares men as a possibility and a threat; even the most extreme forms of protection, such as not leaving sperm behind or never accepting food, do not guarantee one will be completely safe from it. At the same time, it is necessary as it keeps men's behaviour in check and ensures that women remain in control over the gift of life and the direction of households.

If we take male and female forms of violence seriously and accept them as real, we can see that within a dynamic moral economy of relationships there are different forms of power and different forms of violence, which are enacted in constant negotiations between individuals involved in intimate relations and communities at large. The lines between them are blurred as positions are constantly negotiated and renegotiated. But, overall, men exert violence to punish, while women attempt to hold on to relationships. In a society where men are said to 'be for themselves' (Gas) and to 'easily break away', women try to bind partners to themselves. Whether it is temptation, trapping, or revenge, the main aim seems to be to show partners, who usually have a lot of power over relationships, that they should not try to just leave. A popular adage, that 'women are the honey and men are the bees', captures this sentiment. 'It means', explained Mammie Fatu (73), who lives at King George's old age home,

> that women are the sweetest and most irresistible juice. So, men, who are the bees, want to do nothing more but taste, or even better bathe in that honey. But they underestimate the binding power behind the sweetness. No sooner they touch the honey, the honey sticks to them, and in their attempt to free themselves, they may sting, but once they exhaust stinging, they may well die. That is why men need to be wary of what they taste.

While the binding power of honey, however, is difficult to detect, the violence predominantly executed by men is traceable and provable. Showing marks or injuries and calling witnesses is enough. Darren commented:

> Our compounds here are very small, and almost every activity is seen out in the open. Almost nobody has a private room, and usually we only have curtains not doors, and the children sleep with the parents in the room. When you lie in a room, you hear every word the neighbours say. No, we all know everything that goes on as long as it is spoken out loud.

At the compounds where I stayed, every conversation, even if spoken in hushed voices, was heard and commented upon. Whether desired or not residents became involved in all the ups and downs, the fights and reconciliations, the expressions of friendship, love, desire, anger, pain, and hate of others. I was in everyone's relationships, and they were in mine.

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In my fieldwork, I have never encountered a household or community case in which it was impossible to find a witness to testify about the conversations or quarrels that took place between those implicated. In contrast, female violence happens in the invisible realm and only its effects are visible. Unless a woman acknowledges that she executed such violence or agrees to see a traditional healer, her involvement cannot be proven. Furthermore, it is mostly men who speak about and exchange stories regarding unacceptable female violence. Women usually make general comments such as 'Yes, we are very powerful, you will not see it coming'. This nourishes the power that is said to underlie such violence. Therefore, while household and community can, in theory, mediate male and female forms of violence (apart from temptation), it is predominantly visible forms of violence that are reported to households and community, as we will see in the next chapter.

Languages of Past and Present Structure Assessments of Violence

Moral economies develop between partners and build a framework for the ways in which partners behave towards each other. The terminology used to describe forms of violence and acts of violence shows how the moral economy bridges long-standing local perceptions and new influences by linguistic means. Anthropologists such as Mariane Ferme (2001) and Michael Jackson (2017) have revealed how speech is used to cloud or withhold information in Sierra Leone. Ferme notes that 'ambivalence is prized' (Ferme 2001: 7) among the Mende of Sierra Leone. 'Great value is attached to verbal artistry that couches meaning in puns, riddles, and cautionary tales and to unusual powers of understanding that enable people to both produce and unmask highly ambiguous meanings' (Ferme 2001: 7). Indeed, fine terminological differences between relationship forms and between different acts of violence carry worlds of meaning that are 'provided in encoded form, rather than withheld' (Ferme 2001: 230). In contemporary Freetown, this clouded, metaphorical communication, which seems elusive to outsiders but which is full of meaning for those it addresses, can be found in descriptions of violence. Ferme underlines the local importance of such clouded communication by showing that people who use direct speech and committed statements are 'considered idiotic or no better than children' (Ferme 2001: 7). If this insight is applied to the different ways women speak about and practise violence, it strengthens the perception of women as subtle yet self-controlled leaders. In contrast, legal language is direct and unambiguous.

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When we compare how Sierra Leoneans themselves use the languages of love and violence with the language of law and justice instruments (including the risk-oriented language in which development discourses and practical interventions are phrased), we can see the potential for misunderstanding. This can have consequences for how laws and interventions are received and how effective they are. Moreover, local practices can be misunderstood if meaning is not carefully translated between these different systems of communication. As we have seen, the term 'violence', on its own, is meaningless. It tells no story and consequently allows no judgement. Hence, statements such as 'violence against women is wrong' or, as former President Koroma stated, 'violence against women is violence against the state' (see Chapter 8) find their way into local parlance as floating signifiers. They 'represent an undetermined quantity of signification, in itself void of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning' (Mehlman 1972: 23; see Lévi-Strauss 1950: 63–4). Social campaigns consequently miss their goals if they use these unstable concepts to address social issues. As they travel down, they attract meanings and interpretations but fail to capture and communicate any specific message. Indeed, only a few Sierra Leoneans feel addressed by such campaigns at all. Apart from sweeping generalisations, people tend to avoid the word 'violence', except to make a broad, undifferentiated claim. When research collaborators explained their love histories to me, often within the first minutes they would issue a statement like 'Men are violent too much', or 'Women are very, very wicked; that is their violence'. Immediately thereafter, however, they would contextualise this statement by describing how and in which ways they experienced violence in their relationships. Hence, they relied not on overall claims but instead on specific terminologies. These form a language of violence that carries a message that can be read and decoded by others. What this shows is that, besides love, violence is an analytical problem, rather than a universal category, which must be solved by understanding its emotional embeddedness in 'historically situated words, cultural practices, and material conditions' (Cole and Thomas 2009: 3).

In Freetown today, people draw on all three influences: metaphors, specific acts, and legal language. Indeed, direct speech and metaphorical speech exist side by side and must be used and combined in specific ways. When violence is described or adjudged, the evaluation of individuals and of the relationship they have with each other follows the language of metaphors, while the specific acts of violence are described by referring directly to the act that occurred. However, as we have seen, specific terms for acts are firmly tied to their social evaluation. To understand how violence is spoken about, understood, practised,

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and perceived at different levels of society and to unravel misunderstandings, we must consider 'not what words mean in essence, but what they are made to mean in the contexts of everyday life' (Jackson 2019: 60). These nuances in language and performance render intelligible complex sets of emotions and help us understand how the same act can change from a desired moment of communicated affection to an instance of hurtful violent expression. Giving someone the cold shoulder, for instance, can turn to neglect when performed openly and then becomes a form of unacceptable violence. However, if it occurs in private or is not noticed by a partner, it constitutes a common form of moving on. What is perceived as violence is therefore dynamic, constantly evolving, and influenced by the presence of others. Hence, while teeth and tongue unquestionably need each other, the way in which they relate to each other, engage with each other, and may hurt each other is a point of ongoing contestation. It is through the language of violence and careful analysis of social relations that we are able to capture a phenomenon as complex as interpersonal violence in its context.

Within the moral economy, the overall situation – including the persons involved and the acts committed – is evaluated by recourse to the words 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable'. While acceptable violence is mediated interpersonally and almost never openly discussed with others, occurrences of unacceptable violence break the bonds of the moral economy and thus the confidentiality of the partnership. Hence, revelation and disguise play an important role in negotiations over acceptability. Burrill, Roberts, and Thornberry observed that, if the limits of the moral economy are transgressed, those who were harmed report to 'various forums for dispute resolution, whether informal kinship meetings or formal courts, often invoking this very idea of inappropriate violence' (Burrill, Roberts, and Thornberry 2010: 66). Similarly, the reporting that follows acts of unacceptable violence in Sierra Leone is built on the involvement of others, who then become the judges of persons, forms, and acts, as we will see in the next chapters.

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