

FOOD, PEACE, AND ORGANIZING: LIBERIAN MARKET WOMEN IN  
PEACETIME

A Dissertation

by

JOELLE MARIE CRUZ

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2012

Major Subject: Communication

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Co-Chairs of Committee, Charles R. Conrad  
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## ABSTRACT

Food, Peace and Organizing: Liberian Market Women in Peacetime.

(August 2012)

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This dissertation explores Liberian market women's food distribution activities and specifically focuses on their organizations and practices in postconflict times. During the last few years, Liberian market women have received considerable national and international attention. They have been hailed as heroines because of the significance they played in supplying food to Liberians during the civil war. However, little is known of their micro-world. This paradox constitutes the starting point of my dissertation, which explored market women's micro-level understandings and practices as related to peacebuilding.

I used African feminist ethnography as a theoretical and methodological lens to investigate market women's organizations and practices surrounding food distribution in the capital city of Monrovia. African feminist ethnography incorporates insights from African feminist theory and feminist ethnography. It gives attention to issues of importance in West Africa like food and violent conflict. It also rejects the framing of African women as victims of war and recognizes their full agency. I conducted 40 in-

depth semi-structured interviews with market women as well as observations in Fiamah, a daily food market located in central Monrovia.

I examined market women's grassroots organizations called susu groups. Susu groups are informal credit unions that provide money to market women, necessary to purchase food items and maintain the market business. Findings illuminated the significance of wartime memories on postconflict susu group organizing practices. In this sense, memories of disruption and distrust engendered susu groups that were different from their prewar counterparts. Results also pointed at the invisible nature of susu groups, which had to balance their tendency towards secrecy with the pressure to become visible in a postconflict context where questions of organizational transparency dominated.

I also investigated how market women made sense of their food distribution position in the peacebuilding era. Findings revealed that the women framed their role as one of community keeping. They emphasized the physical nature of food distribution which also necessitated maneuvering. Ultimately, food distribution gave them a sense of empowerment in postconflict times. These understandings reified class distinctions between market women and Liberian elites.

## DEDICATION

*In loving memory of my dear grandmother, Marie Diallo.*

Thank you for teaching me a thing or two about compassion, kindness, and grace.

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stranger coming from “America.” Thank you to Fiamah superintendent and assistant superintendent as well for granting me access to the research site.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Rationale**

Liberian market women have received considerable national and international attention during the last few years. This focus coincides with the 2005 election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as the first Liberian female president. If Sirleaf's election marked the end of a fourteen-year civil war (1989-2003), it also signaled a new style of governance that integrated women and gender issues. Sirleaf has focused on fully including women in the peacebuilding process, a commitment shared during her first term in office (2005-2011) and at the start of her second term (2011-2017).

Her administration has carved a special role for market women, who are situated at the forefront of economic development in postconflict times. Sirleaf's administration recognizes the significant role that market women played in food distribution during the war and has created literacy and business skills programs intended to empower market women. Hailed for her bravery, the market woman figure of the Sirleaf era differs from her pre-war counterpart. The latter was an uneducated and brash individual, at the margins of Liberian society. By contrast, the new market woman figure embodies desirable traits of courage and perseverance and is a full part of Liberian society.

Although the postconflict figure of market women constitutes a welcome change from the past, it remains problematic. Both pre-war and postconflict representations

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This dissertation follows the style of *Management Communication Quarterly*.

have externally imposed meanings upon market women, giving them no space to define themselves. Amidst images of market women as heroines and agents of economic development in the Sirleaf era, little is known of how actual market women understand their roles in postconflict Liberia. The current macro-level discourse on market women does not seem to incorporate their lived experiences. In this sense, there is a disconnect between macro-level discourse and micro-level understandings. This idea is echoed in a study of women in the Biafra war (Harneit-Sievers & Emezue, 2000). The authors (2000) interviewed women who dispelled myths about women's experiences in the wartime. As indicated, "female accounts of the war experience generally lay less weight on the strength women gained, but rather emphasize the stress put on them by the war situation, especially the need to cope with the food crisis" (p. 117). Ideas of female empowerment at the macro level differ from micro-level understandings, which emphasize survival.

Moving away from the dominant discourse, I investigate the micro-level reality of market women and how they understand their roles in postconflict Liberia. Although I recognize that market women may be cognizant of the dominant discourse, I center my analysis on market women's voices, which have been overlooked in both pre-war and postconflict contexts. I specifically explore connections between food, peace, and organizing from the vantage point of market women.

During the fourteen-year civil war (1989-2003), market women were essential in providing a constant supply of food in the capital city of Monrovia. This was particularly



important and challenging given the influx of internally displaced persons (IDP) who fled to Monrovia (Market Review, 2007). In the postconflict period, market women continue to play a vital role in food distribution. They receive assistance from their grassroots organizations called susu groups. These groups, usually known as rotating credit associations (Ardener, 1964; Geertz, 1962), provide capital to market women, helping them purchase food commodities necessary for market trade. Susu groups pool money on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis by collecting membership dues from each susu member, putting all the money together, and distributing the lump sum to one person at a time on a rotating schedule. Susu groups typically have a leader called the susu mother, or susu ma, and several members. The groups perform complex financial operations by enabling members to double, triple, quadruple, or quintuple their dues, allowing them to receive a proportional return on investment.

I argue that market women's food distribution practices and susu groups hold together a fragile society and sustain peacebuilding in postconflict Liberia. Using an African feminist theoretical and methodological lens, I explore market women's food practices and susu groups in Fiamah market, central Monrovia. A daily food market, Fiamah is affiliated with the Liberian Marketing Association (LMA), an umbrella organization overseeing most Liberian markets. It encompasses 250 to 300 vendors, a majority of whom are women, with the exception of eight male vendors.

This dissertation contributes to organizational communication scholarship and peace and conflict studies. The first contribution is connected to the addition of susu groups to literature on forms of organizing. Feminist and postcolonial scholars have

pushed for the study of alternative organizations to counter a bias towards masculinist and Euro-American forms in the field. However, analyses of alternative organizations still privilege forms of organizing embedded in Western ontologies. Using postcolonial imagery of the margins, I travel “beyond the margins” or “at the margins of the margins” to examine susu groups, which do not resemble acknowledged organizational forms in the literature. I show how susu groups constitute organizational forms stemming from African ontologies. I also conceptualize the groups as resilient structures that thrive on trust as opposed to material resources to function.

Ultimately, I contend that susu groups are adapted to contexts where issues of survival dominate. In doing so, I align myself with the radical postcolonial stance of Imas and Weston (2012) who introduce the notion of the Kukiya-Favela organization. The Kukiya-Favela is the organization of the poor and excluded of the Third world. This form can be found in slums called “Kukiya” in Zimbabwe and “Favela” in Brazil. Instead of focusing on lack of resources and poverty, Imas and Weston (2012) emphasize the creativity and resilience of the Kukiya-Favela organization. In a similar vein, my dissertation explores the organizational forms of market women; a marginalized group in Liberian society. Ultimately, it unveils the organizational resourcefulness of this group and therefore resists definitions of poor people as helpless individuals.

The dissertation also contributes to research on peacebuilding. Existing scholarship on gender and peacebuilding presents conceptual and empirical problems. Conceptually, peacebuilding has been framed as an institutional process involving

discrete steps state and social actors must follow (Hudson, 2009). Conventional uses of peacebuilding favor state-oriented peacebuilding activities and overlook local understandings of peace and peacebuilding. Such a lens obscures the study of social, cultural, economic, and political structures that do not have an overt and recognized goal of peace.

I conceptualize the possibilities of unofficial peacebuilding that occurs in informal market settings. Instead of replicating prior studies that have researched international and grassroots peacebuilding agencies (Abdullah & Fofana-Ibrahim, 2010), peace activists and leaders (de la Rey & McKay, 2006) and women and girl soldiers (Fuest, 2008), I focus on how market women and their grassroots organization manage to sustain peace in daily life. I recognize that individuals and organizations may not always identify what they are doing as peacebuilding. They also may not use “official” language to talk about peacebuilding. In turn, this renders their roles and activities in peacebuilding invisible to scholars, politicians, policymakers, and themselves.

### **Market Women in Context**

**Background on Liberia.** Liberia is a West African nation that shares borders with Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d’Ivoire. Its total population is 3,786,764, with 882,000 people living in the capital city of Monrovia (CIA, 2011). With the support of the American Colonization Society (ACS), freed American slaves established Liberia or “the land of the free” as the first African republic in 1847 (Sessay, Ukeje, Gbla, & Ismail, 2009). The first settlement established itself in a coastal location that would be named Monrovia, after American president James Monroe (Shick, 1980). Settlers

formed an elite class by cutting themselves from the majoritarian indigenous population (Jaye, 2003). As a ruling class, Americo-Liberians discriminated against indigenes and adopted Americo-Liberian national symbols that reinforced their control over the nation (Jaye, 2003). Some of their measures included the exclusion of autochthons from administrative positions in the government (1995). Americo-Liberians collaborated with the American Firestone Rubber Plantation Company, which led to the unfair exploitation of national resources and indigenous Liberians who worked on rubber plantations. These agreements economically benefited Americo-Liberians as a group.

This historical period is marked by the presidencies of William Tubman from 1944 to 1971 and William Tolbert from 1971 to 1981. Tubman was notorious for introducing a tight system of patronage, which would further concentrate political and economic opportunities in the hands of a few Americo-Liberians, close to presidential circles. The system of patronage would also contribute to institutionalizing corruption. Tubman made a few attempts towards the integration of autochthons through the Unification Policy of 1964. However, a majority of indigenous Liberians “remained outside of the country’s elaborate political patronage system and mired in deep poverty” (Sessay et al., 2009, p. 22).

The Tolbert’s administration was beset by the economic crisis of the 1970s, increases in rice prices, and rice riots. Tolbert faced a growing internal opposition and was unable to correct a system which thrived on inequality from its inception. The violent crushing of the rice riots as well as the perception that the president’s family was involved in the rice business precipitated Samuel Doe’s military coup of 1980 (Sessay et

al., 2009). Prior to this date, Americo-Liberians had continuously dominated the country through their True Wig Party (Sessay et al., 2009).

An indigenous Liberian, Samuel Doe retaliated against Americo-Liberian rule by executing Tolbert as well as members of his cabinet. Doe also assassinated other Americo-Liberian elites. Doe's coup signaled the accession of indigenous Liberians to power and was received in a positive light by a majority of the population (Johnson Sirleaf, 2009). Doe was subsequently elected as president in 1985 (Jaye, 2003). His rule was marked by corruption, silencing the opposition and press, and ethnic violence in the form of mass killings and torture (Jaye, 2003). For instance, in reaction to a failed military coup, Doe ordered mass killings of the author of the coup's tribe. 3000 innocents were assassinated in reprisal. Doe also promoted members of his Krahn tribe to power, further accentuating ethnic tensions.

These issues led to a coup by Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in 1989. Political turmoil in the form of two civil wars wracked Liberia: the first one lasted from 1989 to 1996, and the second from 1999 to 2003. Prince Johnson split from the NPFL to form the independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), a group that captured and killed Samuel Doe in 1990. Johnson and Taylor fought for control of Monrovia. The United Liberation Movement for Liberia (ULIMO), a third faction of Samuel Doe's supporters, as well as other groups joined the war (Olukoju, 2006).

War continued until 1996, when a first successful peace agreement was reached after several failed attempts. Liberia held democratic elections in 1997, marked by the

victory of Charles Taylor, whose presidency did not end the violence. Taylor's support for violent guerrilla groups in Sierra Leone made him unpopular, and he failed to improve the socioeconomic situation of the country (Olukuju, 2006). From 1999 to 2003, the image of the Taylor administration worsened in Liberia and abroad.

The second Liberian war started with the emergence of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) in 1999 and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) in 2003. Scholars point at the inevitability of the second war because of "the haphazard and incomplete liquidation of the first war, a half-baked disarmament and demobilization, the refusal of Taylor to form an army and other things." (Sessay et al., 2009, p. 38). One of the most notorious episodes of the second war was the "Siege of Monrovia" when LURD forces attacked the capital in 2003, causing massive civilian deaths as well as food and water shortages (Hetherington, 2009). The warring factions eventually agreed to peace talks at the Accra Conference and to 2003 peace agreements. Charles Taylor went into exile in Nigeria, and LURD and MODEL forces created a transitional government (Disney and Reticker, 2008). Liberia held democratic elections in 2005, marked by the victory of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Since then, the economic situation of the country and its relationships at the international level have improved. Sirleaf was elected for a second mandate in the fall of 2011 and won the Nobel Peace Prize the same year.

**Liberian women in war and postconflict times.** Accounts of the civil war often focus on the abuse endured by girls and women. War took a particular toll on Liberian girls and women as evidenced by the widespread nature of sexual violence and use of

rape as a weapon of war. It is estimated that more than 70% of the female population was raped during the conflict (World Health Organization, 2005), which has left deep physical and psychological scars (Disney & Reticker, 2008). In addition to concerns about their safety, women were also worried about their children's wellbeing due to food and water shortages and the common child soldier practice (Disney & Reticker, 2008).

In response to this distress, Liberian women regrouped under the Liberian women's peace movement or Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET) in 2001. Although women had previously organized for peace with the Liberian Women's initiative (LWI) in the nineties and the Mano River Union Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET) in 2000 (African women and Peace support group, 2004), WIPNET was decisive in ending the war. The movement connected Muslim and Christian women in 2003 and pressured religious leaders to affect political leaders (Disney & Reticker, 2008). The women progressively gained influence by increasing their national and international visibility. They became identifiable by wearing white tee-shirts, staging mass peaceful protests, and praying and singing in public (Disney & Reticker, 2008). They also traveled to Sierra Leone to ask warlords to engage in peace talks with Charles Taylor (Disney & Reticker, 2008).

During the Accra conference, WIPNET faced all-powerful warlords who would call the frontline to order more violence in Monrovia, if unsatisfied by the peace talks (Ackerman, 2009). The women's strategy was to block the negotiation room by locking arms with one another. They "took the men hostage" by stating that nobody would come out of the room until peace agreements were reached (Ackerman, 2009, p. 85). After the

peace agreement, the women helped the United Nations with disarmament, by issuing messages on the local radio to encourage fighters to turn in their weapons (Disney & Reticker, 2008). Besides from securing peace, Liberian women also largely contributed to the 2005 and 2011 elections of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. After having provided an historical overview of civil war and women's place and role, I discuss their significance as connected to food.

**Women and food in historical and cultural perspective.** In postconflict times, women account for more than 60% of agricultural production, making up more than 40% of the labor force in food crop production as opposed to 35.3% for men (Ministry of Agriculture, 2007). Historical and cultural factors can account for these statistics.

**Women and food crops.** Liberian women have traditionally occupied essential positions in food production, processing, and marketing. One reason contributing to this reality is the gendered division of labor, salient in both northwest and southeast Liberia (Bledsoe, 1980; Moran, 1990). This division of labor which distinguished between women's work and men's work in rural areas (Bledsoe, 1980) is particularly visible in rice cultivation patterns. Rice is the most important staple in the Liberian diet as evidenced by the strongly-held belief that one has not eaten if he/she has not consumed rice in the day (Carter, 1982). Whereas women perform ongoing tasks related to rice cultivation such as planting and harvesting, men are in charge of punctual tasks such as burning and clearing rice fields. Women's tending of rice fields constitutes a year-round endeavor.



A significant portion of the rice produced is destined for household consumption and many women farmers have a tendency to keep the rice surplus instead of selling it (Carter, 1982). This allows them to use rice as a bank, selling it for cash when needed. The centrality of women's role in rice production can account for the dependence of the household on them for sustenance (Carter, 1982). This gives women significant leeway to control rice allocation in the household. They are also free to cultivate rice on their personal farms in addition to the household farm.

In addition to rice, women cultivate other food crops, including cassava, okra, and greens used for household subsistence. Cassava is a typical woman's crop, meaning that women have entire control over it from planting to harvesting and selling (Carter, 1982). Women typically combine food crop production, with food processing and distribution in rural areas. In this sense, they process and sell surplus (Carter, 1982). For instance, Kpelle women processed oil from the palm kernels and sold it to mine workers in the area (Bledsoe, 1980). Similarly, women transform cassava into a variety of byproducts like farina, fufu, and cassava chips.

***Modernization and the emergence of market women.*** Modernization solidified the position of Liberian women in food production, processing and marketing. In the 1930s, the arrival of the American rubber company Firestone encouraged the migration of male subsistence farmers from rural areas. A similar phenomenon occurred with the establishment of the Bong Mines in the 1950s and the subsequent mining of iron ore in Bong County. Men also hardened their position in the logging industry as well as the cultivation of cash crops, such as palm oil, coffee, and cocoa.

The development of urban centers, such as Monrovia, Buchanan, and Harper, and the subsequent increase in the demand of food items occurred alongside these economic changes (Market Review, 2007). In the 1950s and 1960s, women turned to foodstuff marketing because they could not find employment in urban environments (Fraenkel, 1965; Market Review, 2007). This particularly applied to women who migrated to urban centers with no formal education. With no prospect of finding employment in the formal economy, they resorted to the informal economy and specifically to marketing (Carter, 1982). This phenomenon was compounded by the cash economy and the necessity for women to acquire cash by producing or selling food items.

At the same time, the development of a road network allowed market women to establish circuits between rural and urban worlds. Rural markets sprouted, thanks to the urban demands for food items (Carter, 1982). A similar pattern occurred with urban markets. In order to control this sprawling, the Tolbert administration built and encouraged the development of several markets in the 1970s. This constituted one of the last developmental stages in market institutionalization (Liberian Markets and Marketers Survey, 2007). Markets and market activity experienced growth until the first Liberian war in 1990.

**Market women in postconflict times.** Despite the damaged infrastructure caused by the war as well as dangerous conditions, market women continued to sell throughout wartime, joined by other women who resorted to marketing for survival (Market Review, 2007). In postconflict times, market activity remains a typically female

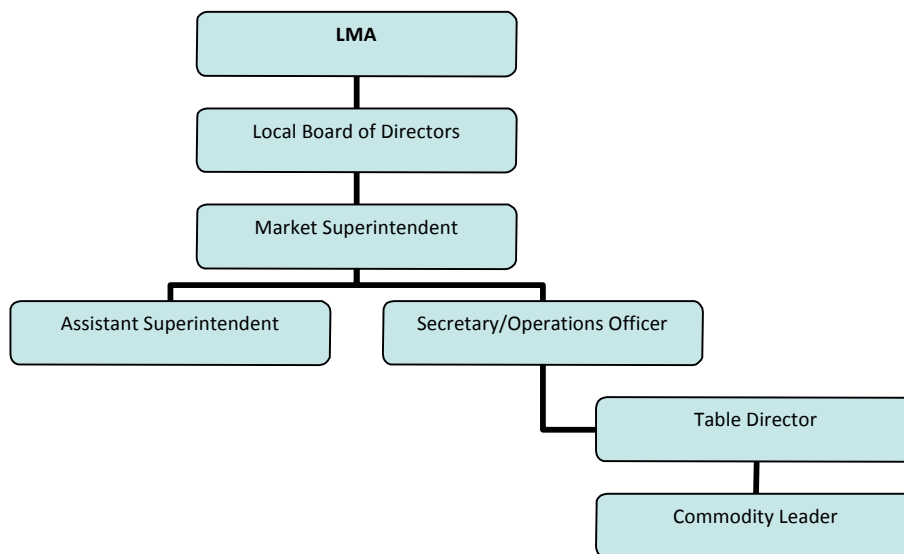
one, as 85% of Liberian marketers are women, with certain markets being exclusively female (Liberian Markets and Marketers' Survey, 2007).

Fuest (2008) contends that Liberian women perform a wider set of roles in society in postconflict times than in the pre-war context. She notes that market women developed a culture of solidarity with one another during wartime. They expanded their repertoire of business skills and realized significant profits despite dire conditions. This has allowed them to broaden their scope of economic agency in postconflict times. However, new opportunities need to be nuanced in light of constraints (Fuest, 2008). Such constraints often come in the form of entrenched patriarchal discourses and structures. Taking the form of an antiwoman backlash, some groups of powerful men oppose women's gains in postconflict times. In the following sections, I identify and explain both enabling and constraining forces to market women's economic agency. These forces unfold at both structural and discursive levels and illuminate market women's positioning in postconflict Liberia.

***Structures.*** As the postwar government reformed Liberian institutions that collapsed during wartime, market women have to negotiate the reconstitution of the Liberian Marketing Association (LMA). This association, which is an umbrella structure in charge of overseeing Liberian markets was established during the seventies. Its disintegration during wartime resulted in limited administrative control of market women. During the war, market women adapted to the geography of fighting as "front lines" and "behind the lines" markets sprouted (Market Review, 2007, p. 16). Women had relative freedom over the type and price of the commodities sold as well as on the

choice of selling location. They relied on horizontal networks of trust to locate information and goods (Fuest, 2008). However, the LMA's reinstatement after the war signaled a return to a top-down organizational structure in which market women occupy the lowest hierarchical rung (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Official Organizational Structure of the LMA**



A national board of directors, formed by marketers elected at the county level who represent the 15 Liberian counties, oversee the LMA. Over the last few years, managerial problems have resulted in the modification of this rule, and the Liberian government has appointed successive boards of directors (Liberian Markets and Marketers Survey, 2007). Members of the boards of directors are called county

superintendents. There are local boards of directors at the county level, upon which market superintendents and assistant superintendents depend. Local boards of directors are governed by a chairperson and include “marketers, tribal representatives, and other prominent citizens or opinion leaders in the community” (Liberian Markets and Marketers Survey, 2007, p. 14).

The leadership of each LMA-affiliated market is shared between the superintendent, the assistant superintendent, and the secretary or operations officer appointed by the local boards. The superintendent is the acting representative of the LMA in the market. He/she holds an executive function and is in charge of daily affairs in the market. The assistant superintendent helps the superintendent in his tasks. He/she acts as superintendent in the absence of the superintendent. The secretary/operations officer is responsible for record management and keeping.

The table director is usually a market vendor, who assists the secretary/operations officer. He/she is responsible for the assignment of market stalls. The table director receives help from commodity leaders. Each commodity leader supervises vendors selling one type of commodity. Market vendors are not featured on the official organizational chart of the LMA. They pay an initial flat fee of L\$750<sup>1</sup> to secure a stall in the market. They also pay annual registration fees as well as tri-weekly fees, collected on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. In addition to collecting monies, the LMA issues rules that vendors have to follow in the market. Such rules include hygiene and conduct. For instance, market women are not allowed to loosen and braid

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<sup>1</sup> About US\$10.

their hair in the market. Women selling oil have to seal it in closed containers. Finally, cursing and fighting are prohibited inside the market (LMA Handbook, 2010).

The Sirleaf Market Women's Fund (SMWF) emerged as a new postconflict structure in 2005. This nonprofit organization is independent from the Liberian Marketing Association (LMA) and aims to empower market women in postconflict times. The SMWF fully incorporates gender in its work, as indicated in the following excerpt featured on the organization's website:

SMWF is unique among women's funds because it embraces women's total work environment, including engineering the construction or reconstruction of markets, sanitary facilities, crèches, storage, etc while promoting their empowerment through education, training and access to capital.

The SMWF focuses on three elements. It works on rebuilding market facilities. It also educates market women and allows them to access capital through credit. The provision of "crèches" shows that the organization recognizes the presence of children in markets. The SMWF constitutes an enabling force, working to address gender-specific needs for market women. However, its promise of empowerment presently concerns a minority of markets and market women, which limits its impact nationwide.

***Discourses.*** Market women have long been part of the civilized/native dichotomy, which can be traced back to the nation's inception. After arriving in Liberia, settlers established attributes of civilization to distinguish themselves from autochthonous populations (Fraenkel, 1965). Because they could not assert superiority based on race, they emphasized education, Christianity, and manners (Moran, 1990). As

stated by Shick (1980), “the settler intention was always to convince Africans to give up their traditional beliefs and values in favor of ‘Civilization and Christianity’” (p. 60). A cultural practice exemplifying the emphasis on civilization was wardship, where settlers usually took in and raised children of indigenous families in the hope to pass on their ideals (Shick, 1980).

The civilized/native dichotomy is salient in contemporary times as evidenced in a study on Glebo women of southeastern Liberia (Moran, 1990). Moran (1990) indicates that among this group “personal dress and comportment, etiquette, formal education, and religious instruction, all designed to produce a civilized person” (p. 65). In this sense, a civilized woman was not supposed to work and would be taken care of by a man. This translated into a focus on domesticity. By contrast, a native woman often worked in farming or marketing and was economically independent. Market women often experienced satisfaction in being able to take care of themselves and large households.

In the civilized/native system, degradation for a civilized woman occurred when she was forced to sell in the market due to economic hardship. This process was more demeaning if the woman started to wear the lappa or traditional garb, conventionally perceived as a market woman’s attire. Market women lacked the attributes of civilization because they had not received a formal education, wore the lappa, and most importantly, were economically self-sufficient (Moran, 1990). The civilized/native text that dominated during the pre-war context seems to have been subverted by a new discourse in postconflict times.

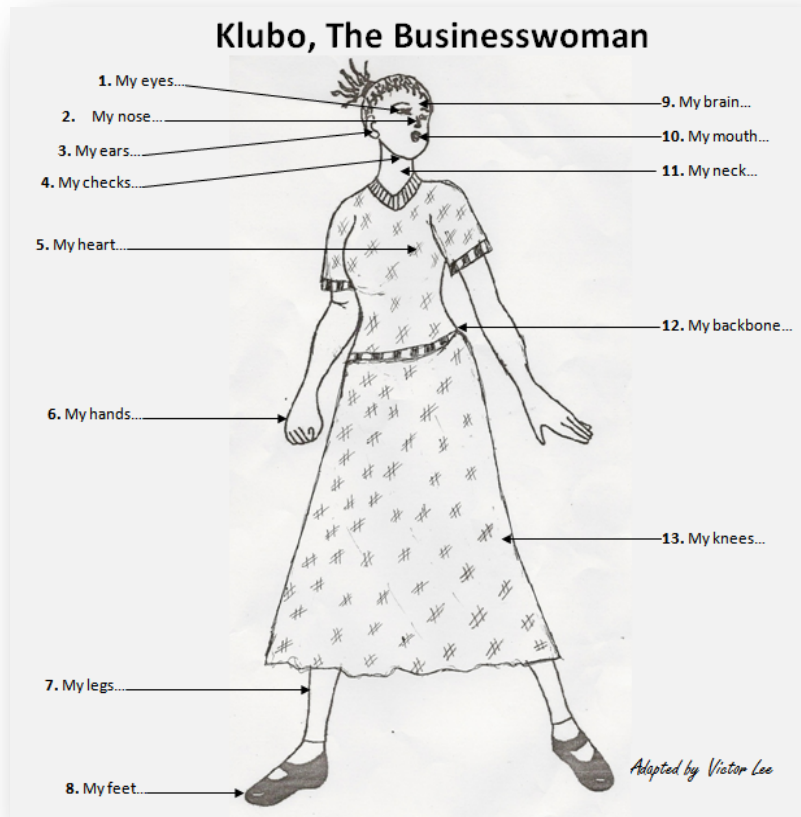
Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has emphasized her closeness to market women by drawing on her biography, in particular the fact that her grandmother was a rural market woman (Sirleaf, 2009). Affectionately called “Ma Ellen” by market women, the president often wears lappa ensembles and visits markets in Liberia. Her administration has focused on encouraging self-confidence and empowerment in market women. This new discourse is also fostered by foreign entities, which have pursued an aggressive gender-mainstreaming agenda in postconflict Liberia. Fuest (2008) provides the following explanation for this strategy:

The significant level of external intervention in gender-related policies in Liberia is perhaps indicative of recent approaches to war-torn societies by the ‘international community’, whose concerns with international security have entailed a ‘radicalisation of development. . . amounting to a commitment to transform societies as a whole’. (p. 218)

Illustrative of this discourse is the NEXT level program, which was initiated in Monrovia for the first time in 2011. As the term “NEXT” indicates, the purpose of the program was to “take market women to the next level” through education and more specifically basic business skills. The program redefined market women as “business women” (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Klubo the Business Woman**



The first module of the program was designed to teach market women self-confidence, as visible in the trainers' manual (Figure 3). Figure 3 was accompanied by the following caption targeted at market women: "Look at these two people: according to your definition of self-confidence, who would you say has self-confidence and why?"

Self-confidence encompassed several elements such as “positive self-talk,” “learning from past failures,” and “grooming.” (NEXT Trainers’ Guide, 2011, p. 18).

**Figure 3. Market Woman Before and After Self-Confidence**



The importance of grooming was conveyed in the following excerpt:

When you are smart and clean you tend to feel good about yourself. This good-feelings helps you be confident. You feel amazingly confident with a clean body, teeth, hair and clothes. You may even have one dress to go out but people will overlook that, if it is always clean. (p. 18)

The new discourse challenges previous classist perspectives on market women stemming from the foundational civilized/native discourse. Put at the forefront of economic change, market women have a new role to play in Liberian society.

### **Chapter Outline**

This dissertation encompasses seven chapters. In Chapter II, I introduce African feminist ethnography as my theoretical and methodological lens. I explain how this framework draws from African feminist theory and feminist ethnographic praxis. I also highlight the contributions of African feminism in general and African feminist ethnography in particular to the subfield of feminist organizational communication. In Chapter III, I provide an account of my fieldwork experiences. I present the research setting, people encountered, and data collection and analysis procedures. In the process, I reflect on my positionality.

In Chapter IV, I show how war memories shape susu group practices in postconflict times. I specifically draw on critical and cultural scholarship on the impact of war on daily practices as well as literature from organizational memory studies (OMS). I uncover the three following postconflict practices: legitimization, amplification, and contraction.

In Chapter V, I provide insight on how susu groups negotiate invisibility and visibility in postconflict times. Providing a historical and contextual account of African women's organizational structures, I explain how the study draws from postcolonial organizational approaches and research on invisible organizing. I then present my three main themes: the temporal, the relational, and the structural.

In Chapter VI, I examine how market women frame their food distribution role in the peacebuilding era. I draw on literature on women and peacebuilding and food and politics to investigate market women's positioning. I present four themes: community keeping, physical work, maneuvering, and empowerment. In Chapter VII, I feature a conclusion that summarizes my findings and features implications and future research avenues.

## CHAPTER II

### AFRICAN FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY

This chapter reads as a theoretical essay on African feminist ethnography and communication studies. Using African feminisms and feminist ethnography, I designed African feminist ethnography. This theoretical and methodological lens helps to make sense of African women and their organizations in contemporary times. It also reengages feminist approaches to organizational communication in connection to three topical areas: forms, values, and subjectivities.

#### **African Feminist Ethnography**

**African feminisms.** Although it makes more sense to talk about African feminisms (Nnaemeka, 1998) a few concerns cut across the literature and differentiate an African feminist perspective from Western feminisms. As Mikell (1997) contends “the slowly emerging African feminism is distinctly heterosexual, pro-natal, and concerned with many ‘bread, butter, culture, and power issues’” (p. 4). These characteristics make for a perspective that is specific to African contexts. In what follows, I provide an overview of the following issues: gender, family, society, and participation. In doing so, I show how an African feminist treatment of these topics departs from Western feminist understandings.

Some African feminists argue that Western feminists have given too much emphasis to gender (Oyewùmí, 1997). This is connected to the significance and permanence of this dimension throughout Western histories. In Western feminist

thought, many concepts like “sexual division of labor” and “private/public sphere” continue to focus the attention of scholars on gender and its social construction. African feminists contend that the overriding emphasis on gender has tended to overlook race, class, nation, and age as important features that structure Africans’ lives. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) argues for the consideration of these dimensions and their intersections because these aspects are sometimes more significant than gender in African contexts. For instance, Oyewùmí (1997) claims that seniority was a more important factor than gender in structuring precolonial Yoruba society. Gender gained momentum during European colonization, which read African societies through gendered lenses, and superimposed notions of female inferiority and male superiority on the colonized (Oyewùmí, 1997). Rather than assuming gender as a central organizing feature in African societies across time, an African feminist perspective argues for “flexible and situational” (Arnfred, 2007, p. 145) understandings of the notion.

Second is the place of women in the family. Some African feminists argue that Western feminists have demonized motherhood and the family, which are central to African societies. Instead, an African feminist approach adopts a pronatalist stance by explaining that motherhood has always been valued in African societies, citing examples of practices and rituals to support this claim (Amadiume, 1987). This significance is still relevant in contemporary times, given the family-oriented nature of African societies. In this sense, women’s lives need to be considered in light of the entire society, in a truly holistic fashion (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). This is because African feminists see different groups as being interconnected.

Third is the place of women in society. African feminists have criticized a white, Western middle-class agenda that puts career and empowerment through work at the center of their discussions. This agenda is incompatible with African feminism for three reasons: the historical significance of women in African economies, the existence of other empowerment venues, and pressing contemporary concerns. Some scholars contend that African women have always worked (Falola, 1995) and have not experienced a situation akin to Western women, who were prevented from gaining employment due to patriarchy. For example, Amadiume (1987) mentions the importance of women's work in Igbo society in precolonial Nigeria, where women used to sell oil from the palm tree. Selling palm oil benefited both men and women. However, "proceeds from the sale of the kernel were, however, exclusively owned by women" (p. 37). Amadiume (1987) states:

Following the principle of the sexual division of labour and gender division of crops, women kept their own profit and what was considered theirs; nothing considered as female and nothing belonging to women was sold by men. But women marketed most of what was considered to be male and as belonging to men, and kept some of the profit. (p. 39)

This reality translates into a focus on economic agency and autonomy in African feminisms (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). Second, work was not the only venue through which African women had agency. They also exerted power through their own organizations, which paralleled men's organizations (Moran, 1989). Third, some African feminists claim that African women have more pressing concerns to address than career

fulfillment (Nnaemeka, 1998). These issues include endemic poverty, disease, conflict, and globalization (Mikell, 1997). Finally, African feminists question who can be a part of the feminist movement. One argument is that Western feminism is an endeavor for and by white women (Hudson-Weems, 1998). By contrast, some African feminists argue that men should be included in the movement. As Ogunjipe-Leslie (1994) reminds us, an African feminist perspective “need not be oppositional to men” and “is not about adversarial gender politics” (p. 226). Nnaemeka (2003) coined the term “nego-feminism” to show how African feminism is concerned with compromise and negotiation.

In conclusion, an African feminist perspective recognizes that women have always played an important economic role in different African societies by working. African feminists also express concerns about problems of the everyday in Africa, such as food, conflict, and peace. This particular theoretical lens informs my use of ethnography as a method.

**Feminist ethnography.** I locate myself in the tradition of feminist ethnography, a genre that has departed from conventional ethnography. Ethnography encompasses participant observation, interviews, and the study of cultural artifacts. Feminist ethnographers emphasize self-reflexivity (Lengel, 1998; Pillow & Mayo, 2007). This aspect needs to be contextualized in regards to the critical turn taken in ethnography, which gave greater attention to power issues. In this sense, many critical ethnographers understand culture as a terrain fraught with tensions, visible through everyday behaviors and interactions. This microlevel needs to be connected to the macrolevel and more



specifically to “broader social processes of control, taming, power imbalance [...]” (Thomas, 1993, p. 9). While considering these dynamics, feminist ethnographers focus specifically on gender, a dimension that was previously overlooked or used as an “add-on to a list of other social indicators” (Pillow & Mayo, 2007, p. 159). Given the nature of my dissertation, I focus on third world feminist perspectives.

A key idea in feminist ethnography is that the field of ethnography often operated under elitist and colonialist assumptions and produced stereotypical representations of the cultures studied (Lengel, 1998). Mohanty (2003) argues that Western feminist ethnographers have applied oppressive categories of analysis to women of developing countries in their studies. Some of these categories include women as victims of male violence, women as universal dependents, and married women as victims of the colonial process. These three examples share a common thread: the victimization of third world women who are collapsed into a monolithic group of powerless women. This tendency is problematic because it overlooks the diversity among women of developing countries and negates their agency. It also deepens the distance between the ethnographer and the research participants cast as unbridgeable others (Abu-Lughod, 1990).

Third world feminist ethnographers still focus on gender by recasting women’s voices at the center of ethnographic work. They emphasize their lives, experiences, and agency (Abu-Lughod, 1993; Borland, 2007). Feminist ethnographers consider other social dimensions, such as race, nation, and culture and how they overlap, in their analyses (Pillow & Mayo, 2007). Second, egalitarian rapport between the ethnographer and the research participants is essential and often fulfill a broader social-change agenda.

Third, feminist ethnographers carefully consider power imbalances in modes of writing, as they determine how to respect the integrity of participants' voices. Finally, the ethnographer reflects on her field experiences and contact with social actors.

Understanding this connection has the potential to move ethnographic practice away from the self/other dualism (Abu-Lughod, 1990).

**African feminist ethnography.** I juxtapose African feminism and feminist ethnography to articulate an African feminist ethnography. I flesh out its ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological commitments and then explain its appropriateness for this dissertation. Ontologically, an African feminist ethnography moves away from dualisms and binaries, which is characteristic of Western thinking according to some scholars (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). Rather, it understands the world holistically by encouraging us to make sense of African women's experiences in relation to that of men and children. Similarly, it sees the economic realm as being intrinsically connected to the political, social, cultural, and spiritual.

Second, is epistemology, connected to how we gain and produce knowledge. An African feminist ethnography gives primacy to African women's voices. It also focuses on the fact that sight, a sense heavily relied on in much conventional ethnographic research, is insufficient (Oyewùmí, 1997). If observing is important, an African feminist ethnography also advocates for the use of smell, taste, touch, and hearing when accessing knowledge. Third, is axiology, related to the place of values in research. An African feminist ethnography works against victimization (Kolawole, 2004). It is political in the sense that it strongly acknowledges the role of African women as agents

of social change and studies issues of prime concern to them, such as modes of survival in uncertain contexts. Finally, in terms of methodology, an African feminist ethnography uses participant observation, interviews, and artifacts with an added concern for the integrity of African women's voices, which have often been erased, misrepresented, and distorted. In this regard, it is important to give attention to word choice and colloquialisms that can inform us on the position of women in culture (Kolawole, 2004). African feminist ethnography can help us reengage feminist organizational communication.

### **Reengaging Feminist Organizational Communication**

I argue that this perspective can add to three topical areas: forms, values, and subjectivities (Table 1). In order to illustrate my point, I draw on the example of Liberian market women and their organizations called susu groups. Market women were essential in supplying food to Liberians during a fourteen-year civil war (1989-2003). After the war, they continue to play a vital role as connected to food security. Their grassroots organizations, susu groups, provide women access to capital so that they may purchase goods to sell. Susu groups are commonly known as "rotating credit associations." Susu members pool money on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis by collecting set amounts from each individual, putting it together, and handing it to one person. Susu groups typically have a leader called the susu mother or susu ma and several members.

**Table 1. Organizational Feminist Orientations**

<b>Feminist Orientation</b>	<b>Form</b>	<b>Values (enactment)</b>	<b>Subjectivities</b>
Western Feminist org communication	Resource-based	Cooperation as talk	Fragmented
African feminist org communication	Trust-based	Cooperation as silence	Integrated

**Organizational forms.** Feminist organizational communication scholars have added feminist organizations to the range of acknowledged organizational forms. Scholars have broadened our scope by exploring alternatives to traditional bureaucracies. Where bureaucratic forms follow a top-down, decision-making model with a rigid hierarchy, feminist forms are deemed participatory and flexible (Buzzanell, 1994; Harter, Edwards, McClanahan, Hopson, & Carson-Stern, 2004). Over the years, various feminist traditions have provided sophisticated insights on the topic. Postmodern and poststructural scholars have studied tensions between feminist and bureaucratic forms (Ashcraft, 2000, 2005; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). For example, Ashcraft (2001, 2006) coined the concept of *organized dissonance* to describe organizations that are simultaneously feminist and bureaucratic.

Global and postcolonial feminist orientations have considered this form in the

context of globalization (Dempsey, Parker & Krone, 2011; D'Enbeau, 2011; Norander & Harter, 2012). For instance, D'Enbeau (2011) examines transnational feminist networks (TFNs) that cut across space, culture, and politics to advocate for women. TFNs “exemplify the interdependence and flexible forms of cooperation that result when organizing occurs beyond national borders” (pp. 65-66). While feminist organizational scholarship examines more egalitarian ways of organizing in for-profits (Ashcraft, 2000; Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996; D'Enbeau & Buzzanell, 2011; Edley, 2000), feminist non-profits (Norander & Harter, 2012), and cooperatives (Harter & al., 2004) and networks (D'Enbeau, 2011), the organizations studied remain embedded in white American middle class women's rationalities.

These rationalities express themselves in two ways. First, there is a focus on organizational forms requiring staff, infrastructures, technology, and money to function. Ontologically, an organization is an organization if the resources listed above are present. Many organizational forms that function with few resources are excluded from consideration. This bias proceeds from a position of privilege that assumes that (a) organizational members are trained to use resources and (b) resources are available to organize. For example, oppressed constituencies may not have received training in computer literacy and other taken-for-granted skills. This situation is accentuated by the unavailability or scarcity of resources, such as books and computers in some communities or parts of the world. Members of these communities wishing to organize have to bypass resources. Second, an organization exists when it is labeled as such by its members and/or by outsiders. A Western meaning-making process that apprehends the

world through naming underlies this process. Oppressed groups don't always have the privilege to designate their organizations as such. This may be because they seek to shield themselves from official power holders or other entities perceived as predatory. In addition, they may name their organizations using terms meaningful to them but that digress from dominant terminology.

African feminist ethnography addresses these issues by examining forms that function with few resources and exist under alternative appellations. I contend that many African organizations rely primarily on trust. Faced with survival imperatives in contexts where resources are scarce, individuals have no choice but to maximize their relationships. In the case of Liberia, the destruction caused by the conflict continues to shape organizing in the postconflict era. A discussion with a woman entrepreneur in Monrovia shed light on people as organizational resources. She described the difficulties of finding qualified staff to employ in her various businesses. This was due to the interruption of education and training during the war years. It meant that she had to spend tremendous time training her staff.

Susu groups functioned with few resources. Susu mas essentially used a notebook and a pen to keep track of transactions. Susu mas and susu members cultivated trust within and across transactions. Susu mas had often operated their susu groups for years and were known as trustworthy and fair individuals. Similarly, in order to access a susu group, potential members needed to be reputable. Finally, both susu mas and susu members often told me that they considered one another friends. Susu groups are evidence of the resilience of trust-based organizational forms. Susu groups ceased

activity when the war intensified and resumed functioning during calmer periods. They displayed remarkable continuity over time, often reforming with the same members after interruption. These groups flourished in a postconflict era marked by extensive material destruction. Next, I turn to the question of naming the susu groups.

The term susu is commonly used in Liberian English to refer to credit. For many Liberians, including market women, the word applies to the process of saving and lending money as well as to the actual sum of money received. For instance, the women talk about “putting susu down” when making deposits and of “getting susu” and “eating susu” when receiving and using their money. By extension, groups that transact susu are susu groups. These meanings carry implications for how the market women understand and name the groups. The women tend to collapse susu as process and susu as money with susu as organization. Susu groups are deeply woven in the tapestry of economic and market life and are a continuation of daily efforts to build capital. In this regard, market women don’t perceive the groups as organizations or what they do as organizing per se. They tend to relegate susu groups to the realm of the unremarkable and ordinary. I argue that this also stems from a conscious effort to deflect attention from susu activity. For instance, in postconflict times, the Liberian Marketing Association (LMA) has reemerged as an umbrella structure for Liberian markets. Market women sometimes voiced their frustration towards this association that had, in their view, progressively encroached on market activity by collecting fees from the vendors and enacting rules.

Although African feminist ethnography specifically sheds light on African organizational forms, it also invites us to examine forms previously overlooked in the

West. In the United States in particular, poor communities organize with few material resources. Organizing occurs through the deployment of networks of support and solidarity. Such organizing is not always labeled as such by organizational stakeholders.

**Values.** A discussion of form would be incomplete without a consideration of feminist values that impact structural features of both feminist and bureaucratic organizations. Buzzanell (1994) acknowledges the importance of three values in a foundational piece: *cooperative enactment* (cooperation), *integrative thinking*, and *connectedness*. I focus specifically on cooperation as a feminist value and demonstrate how African feminist ethnography contributes to explorations of the topic. Buzzanell (1994) points at the importance of cooperation as praxis, encouraging scholars to research this topic.

Buzzanell's injunction has generated studies exploring cooperation as constitutive of feminist organizations (Harter et al., 2004), manifestations of cooperation in organizational settings (Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996), and tensions between cooperation as a feminist value and masculinist values (Ashcraft, 2005). A running trend across this body of work lies at the definitional level of analysis. Scholars have tended to locate cooperation in the realm of verbal and written communication, focusing on direct and open expression. In this vein, individuals display a cooperative ethic when they share information freely with one another. For instance, Norander and Harter (2012) contend that a feminist NGO cooperates with partner organizations by displaying open communication. I argue that understandings of cooperation are connected to ideas of free expression and deliberative democracy in Euro-American systems. These meanings



overlap with a focus on the study of voice in feminist communication studies and produce studies that emphasize talk. Cooperation does not always take the form of open, democratic deliberation. In some cultural contexts, open, sustained deliberation undercuts economic profits, which are essential to African women's livelihoods and maintenance of their families.

African feminist ethnography adds a layer to our understanding of cooperation. I do not contest the relevance of cooperation as a feminist value in African contexts. Given the centrality of trust in African women's indigenous organizations, it makes sense that cooperation would be essential. Rather, I show that cooperation takes different forms in Liberian susu groups. In susu groups, both susu mas and susu members enacted cooperation in silence that seems counterintuitive to many findings in Western literature. For susu members, cooperation was manifest in the willingness to scrupulously follow the rules and to defer to the susu mas. For susu mas, cooperation translated into collecting and distributing the susu money efficiently, which meant little time for talking. During interviews, susu mas and susu members told me that the susus did not hold meetings. Declining to hold discussions was a deliberate choice enacted by women that enabled the susus to work swiftly in a busy environment.

In this context, susus in which there was "plenty talking" were viewed negatively. Similarly, argumentative susu members seeking explanations when everything had already been explained, were cast as problematic. This doesn't mean that susu members blindly gave allegiance to susu mas and never questioned their authority. Rather, this system of quiet cooperation functioned as long as the susu mas and their

susus were perceived to be fair. Talking was reserved for exceptional situations. Susu members felt that there were benefits associated with limiting the exertion of voice. This idea is congruent with Dempsey's (2007) concept of bounded voice. Dempsey (2007) demonstrates how grassroots organizations were kept away from funding decisions that protected them from staff, donors, and other constituencies. This concept is particularly useful in the case of Fiamah market women in which silent cooperation constituted an attempt by women to shield themselves from the LMA and market authorities. Next, I turn to the question of subjectivities.

**Subjectivities.** Feminist organizational communication scholars have examined subjectivity as ongoing and shifting rather than fixed. Following discursive and postmodern incursions in organizational communication, feminists show how organizational subjects make sense of themselves in multiple and contradictory ways. This work, nourished by traditions as diverse as postmodern (Ashcraft, 1998; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Mumby, 1996) and standpoint feminisms (Allen, 1998; Edley, 2000) has provided complex insights into selves under tension. For instance, Allen (1998) narrated conflicting raced and gendered loyalties as a Black woman in the U.S. academy. Tensions experienced by organizational subjects have coalesced around two pairs: public/private and women/men.

Scholars who use the notion of public and private spheres illuminate connections between these realms. For example, Medved and Kirby (2005) showed how discourses targeting stay-at-home mothers borrowed subject positions from the workplace. These positions were: professionals, managers, productive citizens, and irreplaceable workers.

Much of the literature has highlighted the collision of public and private spheres resulting in identity conflict for women (Ashcraft, 1999, 2000; Jorgenson, 2000; Medved & Kirby, 2005). For instance, a study (Ashcraft, 2000) followed the emotional turmoil of members of a feminist organization, after the inclusion of personal matters at work.

Assumptions of irreconcilability between the public and the private spheres affect research designs. Studies delve into fractures, interpreting research participants' experiences in dichotomous ways. For example, in a study of a woman-owned design firm (Edley, 2000); organizational members framed Nan, their supervisor as such: "[...] Nan's identity was composed of both the private personas of mother, wife, and caretaker and the public personas of the CEO, the tough businesswoman, the smart businesswoman, and the "iron maiden." (p. 290). This quotation grounded in dualistic thinking, evokes dislocation.

Tensions around subjectivity are informed not only by the public/private pair, but also by the women/men pair. Women's subjectivities in organizations have often been framed in opposition to men's subjectivities. Ashcraft (1998) urges scholars to move away from this divide in their explorations of organizational life. As indicated (1998), "naming everyday encounters with subordination becomes complicated by experiences of men not always as enemy but as father, brother, friend, coworker, partner, or lover." (p. 593). Instead, Ashcraft (1998) invites us to use gender as a broader analytical lens that includes men. Yet, the propensity to define men in inimical terms persists. This is illustrated by one study that explored women's sexuality at work and framed men as the perpetrators of sexual violence against women (Forbes, 2009). The

onus of sexual aggression was placed exclusively on men as individuals without consideration of broader systemic elements.

In summary, women's subjectivities in organizations are fragmented as we consider the public/private pair and the women/men pair. Studies document the existence of various subject positions without sufficiently exploring how women integrate them. If this focus on multiplicity can account for complexity, it is also problematic. Scholars examine how women negotiate conflicted subjectivities on an individual basis. In this quest, women are atomized from one another and from men in the organization. They are literally left on their own to "pick up" pieces of themselves. Such an emphasis limits explorations of subjectivity as connected to collectivity. Acts of resistance are theorized in this light, as they stem from an individual subject position.

African feminist ethnography offers possibilities for integration. Because this perspective draws from a holistic worldview, it encourages us to design studies in which women and men reconcile the conflicting demands of contemporary life. The public/private pair is not as relevant to African contexts as it is to Western contexts, because of different histories. Market women frequently blurred this distinction. Being a market woman and a mother were not contradictory as home life was an integral part of market life. When school was not in session, children often assisted their mothers at the stalls. They also played in proximity of the market, always in sight, in case their mothers needed them to run errands. Similarly, the susu groups exemplified the merging of work and life. When a woman received her susu money, she used it both towards her business and towards clothing her family, buying food, and paying children's school fees. This

resulted into an organizational subjectivity that was deeply embedded into everyday business and life concerns.

Women set themselves apart from men, particularly in connection to their susu groups. Whereas feminist organizational communication scholarship sees the relationship between men and women as antagonistic and oppositional, this relationship is different in African contexts. African feminist scholars have talked about women's organizations as parallel to that of men, and I apply the same term to the notion of subjectivity. Having a parallel subjectivity implied the existence of both specific and distinct sets of concerns.

### CHAPTER III

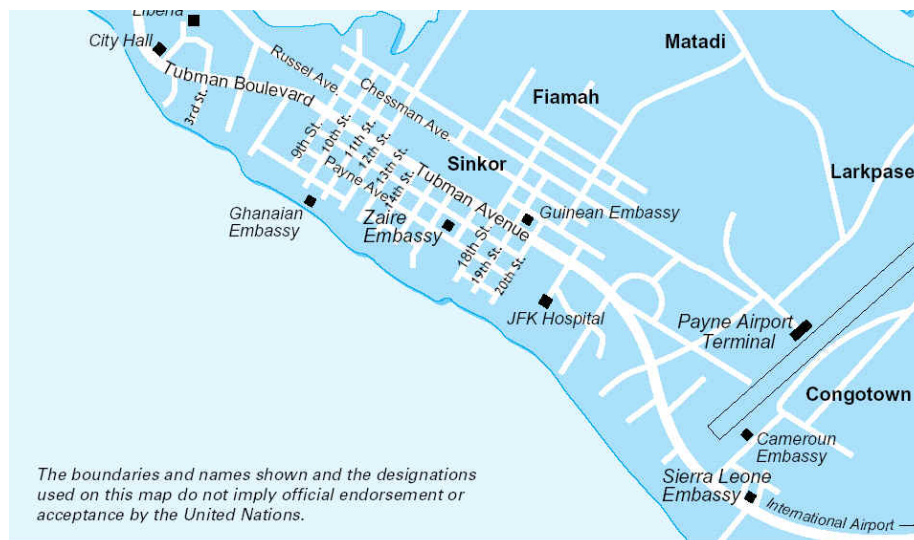
#### FIELDWORK IN FIAMAH

This chapter narrates my fieldwork experiences in Fiamah market and constitutes a lived account of my ethnographic work. I present the research setting as well as the people encountered during the three months spent in Fiamah market, central Monrovia. I also describe data collection procedures as well as the process of analyzing and writing texts.

#### **Research Setting**

Fiamah market is located in Fiamah, central Monrovia and has 250 to 300 vendors (Figure 4). This population varies because of what Fiamah market authorities call floaters, individuals who sell for brief periods of time and leave. Fiamah is affiliated with the Liberian Marketing Association (LMA). It is a daily retailer food market, meaning that vendors directly sell food items to customers everyday of the week, including Saturdays and Sundays. In this sense, it differs from a distributors' market where vendors purchase items in bulk and sell them for retail afterwards. A typical community market, it serves the needs of individuals living in Fiamah. This detail is important as I came to find out that Monroviaans tend to go to the market that is immediately located in their community. Although there were markets in the neighborhoods of Larkpase and Matadi that were only a few miles away, people in the community still preferred to purchase food in Fiamah market. In this sense, market customers were often regulars who walked to the market on a daily basis.

**Figure 4. Map of Central Monrovia**



**On the way.** Like many West African markets, Fiamah is the center of a bustling community life. Upon entering the main mud road leading to the market, several young men perched on motorcycles bearing American insignia, haggled passers, offering their taxi services. Nearby, stood a money changing booth, or wooden shadow box with barbed wire to protect neat stacks of Liberian and American dollars. The booth also doubled as a scratch card selling point for Lonestar and Cell-com cellphone carriers. Further down, stores across both sides of the road reflected a lively economic and cultural activity. Dimly-lit and damp convenience stores run by families of the Mandingo tribe, known for their trading activities, sold bulk items like rice bags, pens, and stock cubes by the box. Although the stores constituted a steady feature of community life, there existed more occasional and unregulated activity. An improvised

cinema, housed in a small straw hut advertised the latest Nigerian movies by displaying posters of light-skinned, plump-reared, lingerie-clad heroines and villains donning string mustaches and white undershirts. Flamboyant red and more conservative black and brown hair extensions, pinned to the woven straw wall of a hairdresser hut, competed for customer attention. Piles of goods like tie-dye buckets made in Guinea, nested plastic ware sets and flip flops brawled in front of stores, threatening to take over the road. In the afternoons, women roasted cassava and plantains for sale on small coal ovens. Amidst all this activity, children of various ages played together.

**The market.** During the period of my fieldwork, Fiamah vendors were awaiting the reconstruction of an open-shed market building. They had been relocated to an open field, adjacent to the former market site. Vendors moved to the new market at the end of July and often referred to the period prior to the move as “outside the building” and the period after the move as “inside the building.” My fieldwork span from May to August and mostly occurred during the “outside the building” period. I spent the last month of fieldwork “inside the building.” In what follows, I describe both “outside the building” and “inside the building” research sites.

***Outside the building.*** Vendors were selling outside, on stalls and benches made of racked-up wooden planks. Being outside was challenging during the May to October Liberian wet season, notorious for its torrential rains. The rain was an almost daily occurrence during my fieldwork, and it was not unusual for the water to reach several inches on occasions. Fortunate vendors had beach umbrellas to protect their goods from both rain and heat. But most often, the women devised ingenious ways to create a



rooftop within the market by tying together pieces of lappa<sup>2</sup> and heavy-duty plastic.

Market women would sometimes say, “See, we sellin under the rain, under the sun” to describe the difficulties of these conditions.

Market stalls stood close to one another and circulation in the market happened through a narrow passage. The market was organized by section. Upon entry, was a first group of dry goods vendors who sell items like rice, beans, red oil, seasoning mixes and spices, and peanut butter in small plastic pouches. Next were the fresh meat and fresh fish sellers and the dry fish and dry meat sellers. Further down, were more dry goods sellers. Fresh vegetable sellers occupied the back section of the market. This group included vendors specializing in different types of greens such as potato, palava, and cassava greens. Other vendors sold fresh palm nuts, bitter balls, and peppers.

Finally, a small section of the market was the domain of eight cassava grinders, who were the sole male vendors of Fiamah (Figure 5). The men occupied a small open shed and used mechanical grinders to transform cassava leaves into a green paste, used in the preparation of the staple Liberian cassava soup. The physical nature of cassava grinding explained the dominance of men over women in this activity. Being outside was difficult. There were no latrines in the market. In addition, dogs often roamed, in particular around the fresh meat stalls, waiting for a piece of meat to fall. They were tolerated by the market women as long as they stayed still. Often times, the women would get exasperated at a particular dog, saying “de dog too playful.”

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<sup>2</sup> Lappa is the traditional Liberian cotton cloth. It is often patterned and colored. Market women wear the lappa as a skirt, by tying it around their waist.

**Figure 5. Cassava Grinder at Work**



*Inside the building.* Market women went “inside the building” on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July, following multiple delays. The new market building had been commissioned by Ivan, I.F Tumbey, II, a young man in his twenties who was expecting to become district 9 representative (Figure 6). I was told that Ivan Tumbey had asked market women what

they wanted, to which they replied a new market to replace a decrepit building. He had then built the market, expecting political support from the women in return.

**Figure 6. Fiamah Market Banner**



During June and July, construction workers were busy building the market. There was a legal dispute, in which individuals claimed that the land on which the market was built belonged to them instead of the previous owners. Construction was halted after a court order. This situation had generated the frustration of market women who had taken upon protecting the construction workers and making sure that the construction went on.

The women threatened to occupy the main road leading to the market in protest, defiantly saying that “we market women.” This phrase resonated deeply in a Liberian context, where market women had a reputation for being brash and causing trouble on occasions. After several court sessions, the situation settled down and construction workers finished building the new market (Figure 7).

**Figure 7. Dry Fish Seller in New Market**



There was an inauguration ceremony, during which several officials came to deliver speeches. For this special occasion, market women were wearing matching blue lappas as well as white political tee-shirts in support of Ivan Tumbey. The women moved into the new building the next morning, following a religious blessing and lighting of candles to “consecrate the building.” The new market had been equipped with custom-made wooden tables, which met LMA length and width requirements. It was painted in red and yellow as a courtesy of *Maggi*, the stock cubes distributor. Maggi also sent representatives to hang Maggi posters inside the market, including under the roof and on some of the stalls, “making the tables fine” for the women. In terms of organization, there were eight rows of tables and a central aisle in the middle of the market. Upon entrance from the mud road, were dry goods sellers who occupied the first half of the building. There were more dry goods sellers in the second half of the building as well as fresh and dry meat sellers. Greens sellers were still outside of the building, awaiting the allocation of tables from market authorities (Figure 8).

**Figure 8. Greens Seller Selling Outside**



*The hut.* A straw hut served as the office of the superintendent and the assistant superintendent. The hut which was the only closed-door and roofed structure of the market was built on an elevated concrete foundation. In front of the hut, was a small porch area with a wooden bench where visitors of the market sat. Market women also occasionally occupied this area, which served as an eating or a sleeping space for toddlers and children. The hut comprised two rooms. The first one was a small storing facility for the usage of vendors. The second larger one was the office, in the middle of which were the superintendent and the assistant superintendent's desks (Figure 9).

**Figure 9. Fiamah Superintendent in his Office**



Against the wall, were two long wooden benches used for meetings or when extra-seating was required for visitors. Several posters and artifacts decorated the walls. These included a picture of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, a clock, a HIV/aids prevention poster, an organizational chart of Fiamah market, and a hand-drawn map of Liberia.

### **People**

**Three market women.** Fiamah is a microcosm of Liberian society, thanks to the diverse backgrounds of the market women. Most Liberian tribes were represented from





donning tee-shirts and jeans (Figure 11). The women also had their own version of what I recognized as a business casual outfit. For example, one of the market woman sometimes wore khaki pants, with a tank top, and a beanie bag that contained her money. In order to illustrate this diversity amongst market women, I present the following portraits of three market women .

***Sia.*** Sia was the 37-year-old mother of three boys. She was Kissi and hailed from Lofa, the northernmost Liberian county, bordering Sierra Leone and Guinea. We shared many conversations, as I sat at her dry goods stall. A stout woman of short stature, with a hearty laugh, she was taking night classes, motivated by a desire to learn. She had left the “bush” of Lofa as a child and been placed under the care of an aunt in Monrovia. She was subsequently pulled out of school and forced to sell for her “auntie.” Although Sia hadn’t received a formal education, she talked about having attended the “bush school.” As she said in her raspy voice, “ah know how to walk in the bush, ah know about bush, ah study about bush.” This knowledge proved crucial during the war, as she made multiple trips to the rural areas, buying and selling food. Sia narrated how she could identify species of wild rice because she had grown up in Lofa. She also took “the bush road” during her trips, to hide from soldiers who used the main road. Sia’s resourcefulness was visible in the way she handled her trade. A shrewd business-person, she supplemented her income by selling “high-quality” buckets and dishes that she purchased in bulk at *Gobachop-Redlight* market. She supplemented her dry-goods trade with the more lucrative business of shoes or “slippers” at Christmas time. This astuteness had allowed Sia to become a home owner, a rarity among market women. Sia

had a partner, who was a construction worker. However, she was the sole household contributor, as her “man” could not find employment. This situation echoed that of many other market women, in a postconflict context where there were limited work opportunities for men.

**Figure 11. Market Woman in Western-Style Garb**



**Doris.** A thin and grave fish vendor, Doris seemed to be in her forties, although she was uncertain of her age. She was from Grand Bassa, a coastal county located 60 to 70 miles South of Monrovia. Doris had been a market woman in Monrovia since the mid-eighties. She relocated to her native Grand Bassa when the war broke out in 1990. There, she sold both fresh and dry fish, carrying the load on her head “because da wa not market. You get it, you put it on your head, because da war.”<sup>3</sup> My encounter with Doris proved to be an emotional one. As Doris narrated her story, she burst into tears. The intensity of the pain she experienced during the war surfaced as she described taking care of her 10 children on her own. She added, “They kill their pa during the war, I suffer, I suffer.” She quickly recomposed herself, explaining how she had funded her children’s education with the fish money. Four children had completed high school, and two of them were attending college. As I saw Doris again in the market, we would politely acknowledge one another but never make eye-contact again.

**Dekontee.** Dekontee was the 32-year-old mother of two girls and had been selling dry goods in Fiamah market for eight years. A tall and slender woman, who usually wore tank tops and skinny jeans, Dekontee was soft-spoken and affable. One of the civil wars broke out in 1996, the year she was supposed to graduate from high school. Since then, her goal had been to attend nursing school, and she had calculated that she would need six years of savings to afford it. Dekontee was selling fish in Monrovia during the war. This was a risky endeavor, as she belonged to the Krahn tribe, a group that was persecuted against at times. She recalled how her three brothers who

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<sup>3</sup> Because there was no market. You get fish, you put it on your head, because that was war.

were “huge, huge”<sup>4</sup> had to hide in the house, while she went out to make a livelihood. As she explained, men were at a higher risk of being killed or drafted as fighters during the war than women.

At the time of my fieldwork, Dekontee specialized in the sale of rice, a highly-valued staple, known to cause contention throughout Liberian history. Dekontee kept abreast of the topic and had read a magazine that explained how high rice prices were a global phenomenon. After this reading, she had done an Internet search to verify the information. As I got to know Dekontee, she talked about her daughters, whom she cherished. While she was caring for the youngest one, the eldest who was sixteen was being raised by her sister in “America.” She expressed the difficulties of having a daughter abroad, worrying about the effects of American culture on her child.

**The superintendent and the assistant superintendent.** Georges, the superintendent was in his fifties and played an executive role in the market. He was in charge of supervising the market and intervened “when something gets big.” Lami, the assistant superintendent, was in his forties. He held an administrative role, collecting fees from vendors three times a week and keeping records of the market. Both men had different personalities. Georges who was reserved, selflessly devoted his attention to the vendors, and was highly respected by the market women. Lami was outgoing and engaged in conversations with the women, sharing jokes with them on multiple occasions. Both men were typically impeccably dressed in business casual attire, favoring tucked-in polo shirts, jeans, and immaculate white sneakers, despite the mud in

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<sup>4</sup> Of impressive stature.

the market. Lami had an eye for detail, as I had noted that he matched the color of his socks to his wine-colored slacks.

Time spent in the market illuminated the power dynamics between the “office people” and the market women. If Georges and Lami were the ultimate authorities of the market based on LMA rules, reality was different. Their relationship with the market women was egalitarian in many ways. Georges and Lami frequently consulted vendors before making an important decision. Market women freely voiced their opinions and concerns in the market. One episode involved the move into the open-shed market, after its reconstruction.

The LMA had required all tables to be of the same standard length and width in the new market. Women had deemed the tables too small and loudly expressed their discontent. They went in small groups to inspect the tables, touching and pointing at them, clearly dissatisfied. Lami helplessly retreated to the porch, saying “no matter what, you people are not happy.” Finally, the office struck a compromise with the women, by adding a few inches to the new tables. Although both superintendent and assistant superintendent were males at Fiamah market, this was not necessarily typical of all markets. Several other markets had female superintendents. Additionally, Fiamah had had a female superintendent in the past.

**Market men.** The few other men in the market included the eight cassava grinders as well as the cleaning crew. Cassava grinders were confined to a small section of the market. Each grinder was assisted by a boy, who was his apprentice. Cassava grinders were seldom acknowledged by the market women and by the superintendent

and the assistant superintendent. They kept to themselves, rarely getting involved in market life and politics. There was also a market cleaning crew that included an old man, a man in his forties named Bob, and a few boys. Although the women displayed little respect for the old man, they acknowledged Bob on occasions, sometimes talking and joking with him.

**A first meeting at Fiamah market.** *This bit is a reconstruction based on the first day spent in the field. I narrate my encounter with Emma, my market woman contact as well as with other individuals from Fiamah market. I would come to form deep bonds with three women: Emma, Mierra, and Sia.*

Emma was a slender woman of short stature in her thirties. She led, as I followed her inside the market. She was wearing a shirt and pants made of an orange patterned lappa, and her short hair dangled in small spirals threaded with black string. I mentioned that someone from the Liberian Ministry of Gender and Development gave me her contact information and that I was hoping to conduct research on market women. Emma introduced me to Georges, the superintendent, who appeared to be in his fifties. She then presented me to Mierra, another woman who also sold dry goods. Mierra, whose real name was Mary, as I later found out, appeared to be in her thirties, and wore her hair in neat cornrows. Mierra's table was next to Sia's. Mierra wore an orange shirt with matching pants and a beanie bag around the waist.

I noticed how neatly organized the dry goods tables were. The first items placed on the tables were oil bottles. Next, were onions. Third, were condiments in individual

plastic pouches. Fourth, were stock cubes and small piles of fresh peppers, okras, and bitter balls (Figure 12).

**Figure 12. Dry Goods Stall**



Both Sia and Mierra exchanged few words with their customers. Customers often pointed at what they wanted. The two women would then get a piece of newspaper, wrap the goods in it and hand it to the customers.

One hour had elapsed, when I was called in the hut by the superintendent. I was introduced to the commodity leaders of the market. There was the dry goods leader, the dry fish leader, the meat leader, the cassava leaf leader, and the bitter ball leader among others. All the leaders were women, except for the cassava leaf leader. Some of the leaders were not present because they had left Fiamah to purchase goods at Gobachop-Redlight. I explained my project seemed to be silent approval of the individuals present. Jessica, a vocal woman, who had facilitated a program for the Ministry of Gender in the market said, "Welcome to Africa." She added that I would find that the people of Liberia were "very loving."

### **Doing Fieldwork**

**Observations.** My Observations in Fiamah market spanned over a period of three months, from May to August 2011. I observed between 10 to 15 hours weekly, spending 100 hours in total. I realized that I would not be able to take notes during observations, as it drew suspicious attention to me. For instance, a few women would sometimes say "she just watching us." This explains why I would conduct 2 to 3 hours of observation in the mornings, memorizing as many details as I could, and write headnotes at a nearby restaurant during lunch hour. I would resume my observations for the same length of time in the afternoons and write headnotes at my Liberian hosts'



house at the end of the day. I expanded my headnotes into fieldnotes in the evenings, by typing them on my computer.

I befriended women of the dry goods sections and spent much time seating at their stalls. I then became progressively involved in market life as the women got used to my presence. This translated into selling which some of the women taught me how to do. While they monitored me at first, I was progressively left alone at the stalls, when they ran errands. As I got more comfortable, I walked in the market. However, my movement was limited due to lack of space. Circulating freely was particularly difficult during peak hours of market activity, characterized by the important volume of market customers. I also sat on the porch of the hut, often occupied by both superintendent and assistant superintendent. This space was also reserved for visitors, including LMA-mandated individuals and the entourage of the man who was rebuilding the market.

As market women relocated to the new market at the end of July, the circulation within the market became much easier, and I alternated between different market women. Observations also included accompanying some of the dry goods sellers in their weekly and bimonthly trips to Gobachop-Redlight market, to purchase bulk items.

**Interviews.** I conducted a total of 40 individual interviews with Fiamah market vendors. This included 37 market women and three market men. Interviews lasted 40 to 45 minutes on average. Because of the particular nature of market work, which demands that women spend all day at their stall, interviews were conducted in the hut, after securing approval from the superintendent and the assistant superintendent. I asked that the interviews be private, and was left alone with the participants. I would use the hut at

intervals, when the superintendent and the assistant superintendent were outside on fieldtrips. Emma, Sia, and Mierra facilitated recruitment of participants for me. Emma, in particular, was highly respected in the market and advertised the study for me. Given the fact that the vendors could not afford to leave their stalls for an hour, I remunerated each of them US\$2 to make up for the loss in profit. This amount was decided upon after consultation with Emma. It was based on previous remuneration that Fiamah market women had received from participating in the educational program ran by the Ministry of Gender.

My interviews were divided into two parts. The first part was connected to women's economic activity both during war and peace times. I specifically asked women to talk about their experiences selling food during and after the war. I also set out to understand how they made sense of peace. The second part focused more specifically on susu groups. I was interested in finding out how susu members communicated about the susu, with whom they communicated, what type of information they chose to disclose, and when they chose to disclose it. This interview design was motivated by the fact that most market women selling food were also either susu mas or susu members.

Although interviewing was needed given the nature of the topic and the length of my fieldwork, it was not always culturally appropriate. Early on, I noticed a slight reluctance when asking questions during informal conversations. At a particular point, one market woman blatantly conveyed this point. As people in the market relaxed more around me, they started joking at the interview practice by asking me many questions and saying that they were also "interviewing" me. Being West African, I understood that

questioning people directly was not a common cultural practice. Rather, one has to learn and find out information by patiently observing and listening. The fact that the women were not used to this direct form of questioning also led to a lot of prompting during the interviews. Their answers were sometimes brief and they looked at me with disbelief as I asked them several times to elaborate. In those moments, I felt like the proverbial inquisitive Western researcher.

**Organizational documents.** I received two organizational documents from Lami, the assistant superintendent. The documents were The Administrative & Operational Guidelines of the Liberian Marketing Association (Liberian Marketing Association, 1999) and the Handbook/Guideline for Operation of Markets (Liberian Marketing Association, 2010). Obtaining documents was not without difficulties. After a specific encounter during which the assistant superintendent asked for money in exchange of documents, I stopped asking for documents. Offering money in exchange of documents could have generated problems during my fieldwork. I did not want to confirm market women's already existing perception of me as wealthy. I also received documents on the NEXT level educational program, ran in Fiamah by the Ministry of Gender prior to my arrival. These documents included a trainers' manual and transcripts of speeches delivered during the NEXT program graduation ceremony.

### **Analyzing and Writing Texts**

I used a grounded theory approach to analyze my texts (Denzin & Lincoln, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Charmaz, 2004). I first engaged in open coding and in vivo coding. Using both paragraph and sentence as analytical units, I marked initial codes in

the margins of my transcripts. I typically coded five to seven interviews at a time, analyzing each new set in light of previously analyzed interviews. I followed in vivo coding conventions by labeling some of the codes using the language of research participants.

Using existing codes to examine new transcripts allowed me to move to a second coding stage known as focused coding. As Charmaz (2004) indicates, “By the time you engage in focused coding, you have decided which of your earlier codes make the most analytic sense and categorize your data most accurately and completely (p. 508). The process was facilitated by the constant comparative method requiring a continuous comparison of transcripts. This method enabled me to narrow down my codes and combine them under broader categories. In a last stage known as axial coding, I established connections between codes by fleshing out interrelations.

During the analysis process, I constantly looked back at already coded texts as well as fieldnotes that served as background to contextualize and clarify interviews. I also went back to several research memos that I had written during my data collection in Monrovia. I had recorded my impressions of the research site and participants in these memos and already analyzed certain data incidents.

**My positionality.** Qualitative researchers remind us of the need to consider one’s gender, race/ethnicity, class and education prior to and during fieldwork. These dimensions create “axes of difference and similarity with corresponding configurations in the group members being studied” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 142). Such axes inform power imbalances that develop during fieldwork. This injunction is necessary in feminist

work, given the centrality of self-reflectivity (Wolf, 1996). As Parameswaran (2001) states:

For feminist ethnographers especially, rigorous self-reflexivity has become an important channel to interrogate the research process and reveal power inequalities that arise in the field due to social constructions of gender, class, racial, sexual, and ethnic identities (p. 69).

Following this advice, I reflect on my positionality during fieldwork. I am an Ivorian-French woman, pursuing a Ph.D. in Communication at Texas A&M University. Born and raised in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire until the age of 15, I strongly identify with my West African heritage. I became aware of gaps standing between my research participants and me. These can be explained by citizenship, class, racial background, language, and age. In retrospect, gender allowed me to bridge these barriers.

In terms of citizenship, I am an Ivorian-French woman who conducted research in Liberia. Although this country borders Côte d'Ivoire, the cultural differences are significant. Côte d'Ivoire was shaped by a history of French colonization reflected in the use of French as official language, institutions mirroring that of the colonizer, and a hybrid culture combining local and French customs. Liberia is a unique case in West Africa because it was never colonized by European powers. Rather, it was founded by freed African American slaves in the 19th century. This constituency established itself as an elite distinct from the autochthons, a peculiarity that would later be one of the root causes of the civil war. This was reinforced by the fact that West Africans tend to identify on an ethnic basis rather than a regional one.

During fieldwork, most market women did not perceive me as Ivorian or African. Rather, they saw me as American and some referred to me as African American. This reading can be contextualized in light of the particular history of Liberia and the United States. Many Liberians share connections with the United States, which has the most Liberians outside of Liberia, as I was told. This trend was reinforced during the war, characterized by mass exile to neighboring African countries and the United States. For many Liberians, the referent country is “America,” and some Fiamah market women had a niece, daughter, sister, or brother in the United States.

Market women saw me as American in many ways. One of them involved fights in the markets. When a physical altercation broke out, the women would detect my slight anguish and ask, bemused, if I were “scary.”<sup>5</sup> They would insist that I retreat to the porch, to protect myself, justifying the fight with “we Africans” or “this is Africa.” With time spent in the field, I progressively became African, as market women started to acknowledge my Ivorian background. However, I could not shed away my “Americanness” and “whiteness” in my interactions with them. For instance, my punctuality was interpreted as a sign of being “white” as the following episode shows. I left the market telling Togar, a young market woman, that I was going to “get something small to eat” and would be back in 20 minutes. As I came back, Togar told her friend sitting nearby “see the woman, she said she was leaving for 20 minutes and she is back on time.” She added that white people were always on time as opposed to black people who were consistently late.

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<sup>5</sup> Scared.

In terms of class, I am living and studying in the United States, which gives me daily access to clean water, food, and shelter. These amenities are not available to many market women, a typically oppressed constituency. Although this group is diverse, as it includes prosperous vendors, a vast majority of market women struggle for survival. In the case of Liberia, this is accentuated by the experience of civil war, which further impoverished disenfranchised groups in general and market women in particular. Class was salient during fieldwork. Education in particular was a significant divider, visible both during observations and interviews.

During interviews, I became aware that some of my participants could not read or write and gave consent with an “X.” Some of the women were timid and I recognized that they deferred to my educational background. The digital recorder used as well as the consent forms marked me as an educated person. I had the alienating experience of straddling two worlds by going to the market in the day and returning to the comfortable home of my hosts at night. Even more alienating was sometimes spending US \$10 to \$15 eating at restaurants targeted at expatriates and upper class Liberians. This contrasted with market meals which cost LD \$30 Liberian dollars or less than US \$ 0.50.

In terms of language, I realized the difficulties of conducting research on market women upon arrival in Monrovia, and following a telephone conversation with a market woman. Faced with the inability to communicate, I asked an acquaintance to arrange a meeting with the woman on my behalf. Subsequent research in Fiamah market proved to be equally challenging as I struggled to understand the women. This motivated me to wait until I became fluent in Liberian English to conduct interviews.

Linguistic obstacles were visible in my daily interactions with the women. For instance, upon learning that I would be conducting interviews, one market woman asked amused “so you gonna interview them in American English?” Linguistic barriers were accentuated by the fact that market women speak a particular Liberian English lingo, influenced by their economic activity. As my Liberian host, who had grown up and studied in Liberia told me, “even I don’t understand when they talk.” I started progressively speaking Liberian English. However, on rare occasions, my intonations would revert back to American English, or at least what was perceived as such, and generate the amusement of some of the market women.

In terms of racial background, I am typically read as a *métisse* or a person of mixed race in Francophone West Africa. *Métis* constitute a privileged socioeconomic and racial group, who are the offspring of French colons and autochthons. Because of their ties with the colons, they were able to garner privileges during colonization such as education, French citizenship, and financial and material resources. This contributed to their status of elites, which is still relevant in the contemporary era and is reinforced by the practice of endogamy. Experiences in the market echoed larger experiences in Liberian society. I was regularly called “white woman” or “Chinese woman” in the streets of Monrovia. I quickly realized that the market women did not perceive me as black as they commented about my “bright”<sup>6</sup> complexion.

In terms of age, I am in my twenties and interviewed several middle-aged market women. Based on my experience growing up in Côte d'Ivoire, I was aware that great

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<sup>6</sup> Light.



respect should be given to older persons and displayed such an attitude. I made sure to use the epithet “Ma” in front of older women’s first name, which in Liberia is a mark of respect for older and more established women. The epithet “Sis” is used to address a woman of a similar age or status and some market women used it when talking to me, saying “Sis Joyce.”<sup>7</sup> Despite obstacles connected to class, ethnic background, and age, I expected gender to bring me closer to my participants (Figure 13).

This was the case, as Fiamah market women were reluctant to let men get involved in what they perceived as women’s activities and business. With time spent in the field, my bond with the women deepened. They let me sell for them while away, referring to me as their sister or daughter to other women and market customers. One woman in particular would say that I was the sister that they “carry to America”<sup>8</sup> as a baby. Towards the end of fieldwork, some regular market customers started believing that I was the biological daughter or sister of the market women. As I ventured outside of the market, community members would also occasionally recognize me, saying “that woman can sell in the market.”

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<sup>7</sup> Market women called me Joyce instead of Joelle.

<sup>8</sup> Took to America.

**Figure 13. Posing with a Market Woman Friend**



## CHAPTER IV

### WAR MEMORIES AND SUSU GROUPS

This chapter examines how war memories affect susu group practices in postconflict times. Cultural and critical scholars of war have explored the impact of violent conflict on daily practices and memory (Berliner; 2010; Ellis, 1999; Ferme, 2001; Højbjerg, 2010; Nordstrom, 2004). Of interest is the idea that war leaves deep imprints on our ways of living and therefore reshapes practices in postconflict times. In this sense, the return to “how things were” is illusory. This body of work has used the vantage point of memory to map traces of war in contemporary practices. However, despite a focus on various practices, it has generally overlooked organizing and more specifically women’s grassroots organizations. In this chapter, I remedy this gap by exploring war memories in connection to postconflict organizing practices. I specifically focus on market women’s susu groups in Liberia.

Market women were essential in supplying food to Liberians during a fourteen-year civil war (1989-2003). Today, they continue to play a vital role connected to food security, through their grassroots associations called susu groups. These groups, commonly known as rotating credit associations (Ardener, 1964; Geertz, 1962), guarantee access to capital to purchase food items. Susu groups pool money on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis by collecting set amounts from each susu member, putting all the money together, and distributing the lump sum to one person at a time. Susu groups typically have a leader called the *susu mother*, or *susu ma*, and several members. The

groups perform complex financial operations, allowing members to double, triple, quadruple, or quintuple their dues and receive a proportional return on their investments. In postconflict times, market women rely on their susu money to purchase goods necessary to maintain their food business.

I use literature stemming from organizational memory studies (OMS) as a conceptual starting point for my study. OMS is a subset of management studies that explores connections between memory and organizing (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). However, the discipline has circumscribed memory to the context of American corporations and has been overly concerned with organizational performance. I reframe this dominant approach by studying how war memories shape susu group organizing practices in postconflict Liberia. In what follows, I present a review of literature and a methodological section followed by analytic and discussion sections.

### **Review of Literature**

**War, daily practices, and memory in West Africa.** Cultural and critical scholarship on war has explored the topic by looking at daily practices and memory (Berliner; 2010; Ellis, 1999; Ferme, 2001; Højbjerg, 2010; Nordstrom, 2004). This body of work focuses on how war is “expressed and redressed in daily activities” (Knörr & Trajano Filho, 2010, p. 12). Of interest is the idea that war unravels people’s lives and that they have to reconstruct it afterwards (Das et. al, 2001; Nordstrom, 1997; Shaw, Waldford, & Hazan, 2010). The anticipated return to normalcy is in many cases illusory as ways of living are changed by conflict (Shaw, 2007).

As put by Nordstrom (2004):

[...] the habits of war die hard. They can carry beyond the frontlines and into the fragile pulse of peace. If peace starts in the midst of war, aspects of the war continue past peace accords to affect the daily life of a society until they are dismantled, habit by habit. (p. 141).

In this sense, postconflict daily practices carry within them traces of war. Such research has examined a variety of practices, spanning from the economic (Bürge, 2011) to the culinary (Shepler, 2011) and the religious (Shaw, 2007). Shepler (2011) examines food practices in postconflict Sierra Leone and shows how war histories were mapped onto food consumption and preparation. During wartime, people started consuming food items that they had never eaten out of necessity. This practice solidified in the postconflict era and became part of the everyday. In addition, many displaced people brought back new ways of preparing food after sojourning in neighboring countries. That is how bread was introduced to certain communities in which member had not consumed it previously.

Shaw (2007) studies Pentecostal religious practice in postconflict Sierra Leone. She shows how wartime memories of violence were incorporated into religious cult and reshaped it. As indicated, “insistent fears, bad dreams, and memories of violence that replay again and again are interpreted as deriving from an external, demonic force beyond the sufferer” (p. 87). In this sense, pastors prayed to exorcise this force in people. Shaw’s study highlights how daily practices and memory become intertwined. Memory plays a mediating role between war events and contemporary practices. It has the potential to accentuate certain ways of living and can also interrupt them through

“forgetting” (Shaw, 2007). Smith (2005) examines how memories of the Biafran war in Nigeria reinforced certain Igbo institutions including marriage practices. Igbos waged war in an attempt to secede from Nigeria and create their own state of Biafra, but the Nigerian military crushed the rebellion. He shows how individuals remembered war as a stressful time, during which Igbo kinship ties were diluted. This proved detrimental to the Igbo institution of marriage that thrived on a tight system of kin. War fostered relationships that disrupted this kinship system. These specific wartime memories accentuated the role of marriage as well as kin scrutiny in contemporary times.

Memory also plays an interpretative role by functioning as a lens through which individuals make sense of current practices. Smith (2005) illuminates how Igbos made sense of modern discriminatory practices in light of the Biafran war. Missing from this literature on war, daily practices, and memory is a focus on organizing practices. I address this gap by exploring war memories and susu group organizing in postconflict times. I now turn to literature that focuses on memory in connection to organizing.

**Memory and organizing.** Organizational memory studies (OMS), a subset of management studies, addresses the role of memory in organizing practices. Walsh and Ungson (1991) are credited for charting the path to OMS through the eponymous concept of “organizational memory” defined as “stored information from an organization's history that can be brought to bear on present decisions. This information is stored as a consequence of implementing decisions to which they refer, by individual recollections, and through shared interpretations” (p. 61). Walsh and Ungson theorize what they call “storage bins,” which help in the process of retaining information. These

bins include individuals, culture, transformations, structures, ecology, and external archives. Walsh and Ungson's model has subsequently been used in other studies (Fiedler & Welppe, 2010). However, deeming these understandings of memory mechanistic, some scholars have formulated an alternative perspective influenced by social-constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) that draws on sociology, anthropology, and history (Feldman & Feldman, 2006; Schatzki, 2006; Rowlinson et. al, 2010). This perspective integrates "the 'softer' qualities of organizational remembering," such as culture and tradition (Feldman & Feldman, 2006, p. 862). I align myself with this newer approach that studies memory and organizing from a cultural and critical orientation.

Although more theorizing is needed in the area, scholars have advanced a few propositions, one of them being the treatment of history and memory in relation to organizing. Of significance here is the idea that history is not an external force that acts on organizing. Rather, it is deeply entwined in organizing and is constitutive of it (Feldman & Feldman, 2008). Organizational memory is framed as a collective construction. For instance, Feldman and Feldman (2006) state:

When an individual remembers, s/he appeals (mostly unknowingly) to the "collective memory" of the groups/he is a member of. It is events of significant importance as defined by the group that are remembered and in turn reinforce the social order. (p. 872)

Rowlinson et al (2010) further claim that collective memory is more than the aggregation of individual memories removed from the broader context. Rather,

collective memory is a dynamic process, which constantly interacts with the social context to produce meanings in the present and future.

Another proposition is connected to the framing of organizational members who are agents rather than passive recipients of organizational memory. To convey this idea, Feldman and Feldman (2006) replace the term “organizational memory” with the term “remembering.” This change emphasizes not only the ongoing nature of memory, but also the centrality of organizational members in the process. As “agents of remembering,” organizational members draw on collective memory to construct present and future meanings (Feldman & Feldman, 2006, p. 872). They may unconsciously or consciously remember or forget elements of the past and subsequently continue or interrupt the organizational script.

This reorientation of OMS opens new research possibilities for the study of memory from a social-constructionist perspective. As highlighted by Rowlinson et al. (2010), “organizations can be seen as constituting memory through language and narratives, embodied in rituals and symbols, such as corporate anniversaries and buildings named after founders” (p. 70). Despite these possibilities, few empirical studies have been undertaken. A notable exception is Nissley and Casey’s (2002) exploration of corporate museums, which they see as a way to sustain organizational memory. The authors explain that organizations retain or silence past events. Ultimately, this process is enacted strategically to manage an organization’s image and identity.

The chapter addresses several gaps in the literature. I examine the topic of memory and organizing in a different organization and context. As noted by Rowlinson



et. al (2010) the cultural-critical reorientation of OMS has not yet broken away from its managerial bias towards American corporations. I propose an alternative by looking at African women's grassroots organizations in a postconflict context. I recognize that understandings of memories differ in countries that have experienced war. In such a context, memories may be difficult to access because suffering and trauma often stand in the way. Ultimately, I counter the dominant OMS perspective that conceptualizes memory as straightforward and easily accessible.

I also challenge the current androcentric slant of OMS. Scholars within this tradition have treated organizational members as an undifferentiated mass, with no consideration of gender. Using a feminist lens, I contend that memories are informed by one's social location. Feminists in general and standpoint feminists in particular, have long argued that gender influences women's experiences (Hartsock, 1983, 1997; Hill Collins, 1990). In this sense, Liberian market women's positions during the civil war and roles in food distribution significantly shape their memories.

Finally, in terms of methodology, I bring the importance of oral memories to light. As highlighted previously, empirical research on memory has focused on physical sites as well as reports and documents. This emphasis is characteristic of western logics that document visual products and landscapes (Oyewùmí, 1997). However, I cannot understate the importance of orality as I consider the West African context. In Liberia, orality that expresses itself through storytelling, narratives, songs, and proverbs is a traditional and cultural way of remembering. The significance of orality may be

compounded by the legacies of war or the destruction of material evidence and written records. I ask the following research question:

*RQ: How do wartime memories shape susu group's organizing practices in postconflict Liberia?*

## **Method**

**Liberia in context.** An exploration of wartime memories calls for a contextual understanding of Liberia in times of war and peace. Liberia is a West African nation with a total population of 3,786,764, and 882,000 people live in the capital city of Monrovia (CIA, 2011). Origins of the war are directly connected to the inception of the nation. Freed American slaves established Liberia as the first African republic in 1847 (Sessay et al., 2009). Settlers formed an elite class by cutting themselves from the majoritarian indigenous population (Jaye, 2003). As a ruling class, they discriminated against indigenes and adopted Americo-Liberian national symbols that reinforced their control over the nation (Jaye, 2003).

This historical period is marked by the presidencies of William Tubman from 1944 to 1971 and William Tolbert from 1971 to 1981. Tubman introduced a tight system of patronage, which further concentrated political and economic opportunities in the hands of a few Americo-Liberians. The Tolbert administration was beset by the economic crisis of the 1970s and an inability to correct a system that thrived on inequality from its inception. These issues precipitated Samuel Doe's military coup of 1980 (Sessay et al., 2009).

An indigenous Liberian, Samuel Doe retaliated against Americo-Liberian rule by executing Tolbert as well as members of his cabinet. Doe also assassinated other Americo-Liberian elites. Doe's coup signaled the accession of indigenous Liberians to power, a positive development in the eyes of most Liberians (Sirleaf, 2009). Doe was subsequently elected as president in 1985 (Jaye, 2003). His rule was marked by corruption, silencing the opposition and press, and ethnic violence in the form of mass killings and torture (Jaye, 2003). Doe also promoted members of his Krahn tribe to power, further accentuating ethnic tensions.

These problems led to a coup by Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in 1989. Political turmoil in the form of two civil wars wracked Liberia; the first one lasted from 1989 to 1996, and the second from 1999 to 2003. Prince Johnson split from the NPFL to form the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), a group that captured and killed Samuel Doe in 1990. Johnson and Taylor fought for control of Monrovia. The United Liberation Movement for Liberia (ULIMO), a third faction of Samuel Doe's supporters, and other groups joined the war (Olukaju, 2006).

War continued until 1996, when a successful peace agreement was reached after several failed attempts. Liberia held democratic elections in 1997, marked by the victory of Charles Taylor, whose presidency didn't end the violence. Taylor's support for violent guerrilla groups in Sierra Leone made him unpopular, and he failed to improve the socioeconomic situation of the country (Olukaju, 2006). From 1999 to 2003, the Taylor administration's image worsened in Liberia and abroad.

The second Liberian war started with the emergence of the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) in 1999 and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) in 2003. Warring factions eventually agreed to peace talks at the Accra Conference and to 2003 peace agreements. Charles Taylor went into exile in Nigeria, and LURD and MODEL forces created a transitional government (Disney and Reticker, 2008). Liberia held democratic elections in 2005, marked by the victory of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Since then, Johnson Sirleaf has been reelected for a second term (2011-2017) and has won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. Liberia's economic situation and relationships with other nations have also improved.

**African feminist ethnography.** Using African feminist theory (Amadiume, 1987; Mikell, 1997; Oyewùmi, 1997) I draw on *African feminist ethnography* as a method for studying susu groups. In terms of ontology, this method focuses on the flexible and resilient nature of African organizational forms in contexts of war and peace. In terms of epistemology, this approach accounts for the recovering of traces. I use the term “traces” to indicate how ethnography follows fragmentary pieces of knowledge in postconflict African contexts. This can be explained by the fact that war destroys material evidence. It also inflicts such suffering and trauma on individuals that they choose silence as a retreat. In this perspective, it is difficult to ask people to share their experiences. Faced with these constraints, ethnographers of traces have to improvise and to fully incorporate silence and absence into their texts. In terms of axiology, this method rejects victimization and recognizes African women as full organizational agents.

African feminist ethnography guided my fieldwork in Fiamah market, a food market in central Monrovia. Fiamah depends on the Liberian Marketing Association (LMA), an umbrella organization in charge of most Liberian markets. Fiamah vendors pay weekly fees to the LMA and abide by the organization's rules. The market is administered by a superintendent and an assistant superintendent who oversee 250 to 300 vendors. Most vendors are women, with the exception of eight men. I initially contacted a market woman from Fiamah, through my connections at the Ministry of Gender and Development. During an initial visit, I explained my project to the market superintendent, assistant superintendent, and each commodity leader in charge of supervising vendors selling one type of commodity. I received informal approval to conduct research, and the information was passed along to the entire market.

I conducted 100 hours of observation and 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Fiamah marketers from May to August 2011. Interviews included two parts. The first part featured questions on market women's economic activity in war and peace times. The second part specifically focused on susu groups during war and peace times. I also collected organizational documents, which included two LMA handbooks.

Delving into wartime memories posed methodological challenges. During interviews, I asked susu members to remember events that had happened fifteen to twenty years ago for the first war (1989-1996) and eight to thirteen years ago for the second war (1999-2003). Elapsed time complicated the task of recovering memories, which were already fragmentary and incomplete in nature. Despite this challenge, memories proved to be the best path to understanding the past. The civil war put a halt to

the functioning of institutions, including the national media. This means that there are few archival sources on the Liberian war period. In postconflict times, foreign NGOs produced reports on the state of the country. Although these are helpful, I found that the only individuals who truly knew what had happened during the war were Liberians who had stayed in the country.

However, there was a cultural tendency to silence war memories and to keep an appearance of normalcy. In this sense, market women were like other Liberians I had met because they kept war memories to themselves. One would have never known what they had experienced unless one asked. Given this context, interviewing market women yielded the most information about organizing during war and postconflict times. I inquired about susu group existence and functioning during war and peacetimes. I supplemented their memories with ethnographic observation. I used a technique I call “walking my way backwards” to trace susu groups from the postconflict present to wartime. This technique involved two steps. I first observed susu group practices in the market on a daily basis. I then asked market women if similar practices had existed during war.

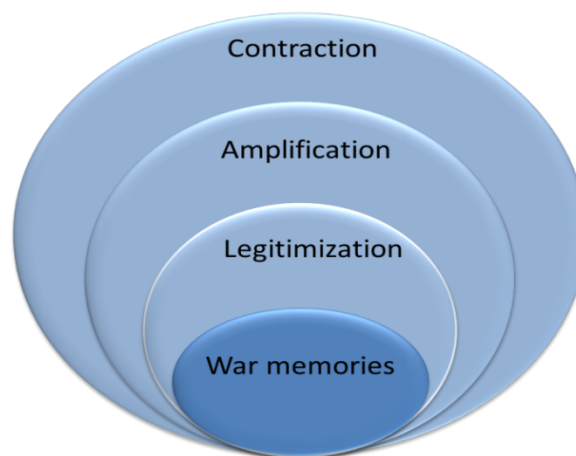
**Data analysis.** I used a grounded theory approach to analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Charmaz, 2004). I initially engaged in open coding and in vivo coding. In accordance with open coding techniques, I coded transcripts in an unrestricted manner by using sentences and words as units of analysis. I analyzed five to seven interviews at a time, by writing codes in the margins of transcripts. Following in vivo coding conventions, I labeled some of the codes using the language of research participants.

Research memos facilitated open coding and in vivo coding. The second step involved following focused coding conventions (Charmaz, 2004) by analyzing each new data set of five to seven interviews, in light of previous codes. Focused coding allowed me to progressively reduce the number of codes, thanks to the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Finally, I combined codes under broader categories, establishing connections between them using axial coding.

### **Analysis**

Three main organizing practices emerged from the texts: legitimization, amplification, and contraction. As visible in Figure 14 below, war memories constitute the basis of these practices and reverberate across them. I conceptualize memory practices as three nested circles in which each practice builds on the previous one(s). For instance, amplification builds on legitimization, and contraction builds on both amplification and contraction.

**Figure 14. Nested Model of Postconflict Organizing Practices**



**Legitimization.** Wartime memories provide legitimization for susu groups by justifying their existence in postconflict times. Memories locate susu emergence in times of peace. Market women carve ideal conditions of existence out of wartime accounts of disintegration. For a majority of susu mas and members, susu groups emerged in postconflict times corresponding to two periods of Liberian history: a brief one between the two civil wars (1996-1998) and a longer one after the second civil war (2003-2011). Women contrasted the existence of susu groups in peacetimes to their absence during war. They typically labeled these periods “when war fighting<sup>9</sup>” and “after the war.” “When war fighting” corresponded to susu group disappearance and “after the war” to susu group recreation. Dekontee,<sup>10</sup> a susu member, recalled, “Yeah, after the war, when

<sup>9</sup> When war is in process.

<sup>10</sup> Pseudonyms were used to insure confidentiality. English first names were replaced by English first names and Liberian first names were replaced by Liberian first names.



Taylor left. Things started coming together gradually. That was when we started making susu<sup>11</sup> in the market.” Referring to the second civil war that ended with the departure of President Charles Taylor, Dekontee connected the end of the war and the subsequent return of stability and order to the reemergence of susu groups in Fiamah market.

Similarly, Jane, another susu member, stated,

After the war, right away, we started putting the susu<sup>12</sup>. After the war, sometimes you know, little time passed, like one or two months. When we were free and we felt that things were fine, we started our susu again. Yeah, we started our susu.

Like Dekontee, Jane dated susu group recreation to the end of the war. This happened as market women felt that the situation was “fine” or normal again. Most susu mas and members provided accounts of susu existence in which the groups disintegrated during war and were recreated during postconflict times. They used clear temporal markers of “war” and “peace” and framed the two periods in opposition to one another.

However, the story of disintegration during wartime and recreation during postconflict times does not always reflect what happened. During interviews, some women shared that susu groups had continued their activity during calmer periods of the war. Wahde explained, “When the war is hard, then we leave it [the susu], when it cools down we start.” Michelle also recalled, “In the war, my mother was putting susu, she was the susu head, so she used to keep people’s money. They brought the money to me; I wrote down their names. When my mother came, I gave her the names.” Although Michelle was not a susu ma or member at the time, she kept records for her mother’s

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<sup>11</sup> Doing susu.

<sup>12</sup> Putting the susu means establishing the susu.

susu group. This anecdote counters the dominant story by showing that some groups still functioned during the war. However, market women silenced this reality because the war did not provide the ideal conditions to “make susu” and legitimize the groups. In such a perspective, war simply did not count.

These ideal conditions emerged out of war memories and played out at the individual and collective level. I use “ideal” not in the sense of perfection, but in reference to what is most desirable for susu mas and members. At the individual level, market women explained that people were focused on survival rather than saving money during war. Dekontee stated,

You don’t even know whether you would survive the war. So why would you make susu? You were only asking God, “God, let me just be.” But you didn’t know your own time. A bullet could pick on you anytime and you died. So we were not after susu business. We were just after food.

This quotation expresses the uncertainty and fragility of life in wartimes as one could die anytime. Survival and food needs, in particular, superseded saving money. In such a context, food was more significant than money, which had lost its value through inflation and was “floating around.” As a consequence, market women immediately funneled any money they acquired into food purchases. Anna echoed this sentiment:

I was not doing susu during the war because people were not together; we were not together, and we were only looking for money to eat. To eat, that is what people can do. If you give your money to somebody, they will eat it; they will buy their food. They will tell you, “Oh, because my child was sick, this that,”

[...] but after peace came, the peacekeeper came, and God bless us, people were free to go on their normal business.

As indicated in Anna's recollection, individuals could not be trusted with money because they would use it to buy food items. This situation made it problematic for susu groups to demand that individuals contribute a certain sum of money regularly, even a nominal amount. Anna acknowledged the return to "normal business" that constituted susu activity in the postconflict period.

At the collective level, market women talked about two conditions required for susu group existence: stability and trust. These conditions were implicitly defined through their wartime nemesis of displacement and distrust. Martha asserted, "We were not stable in one area and then nobody was trusted." War disrupted usual living conditions of people through displacement. A common story was that of people fleeing. Margaret stated,

There was no susu because anybody could run away anytime. So the first reason was: anybody could just run away. You live here today, when the fighting gets heavier tomorrow, you leave and go to a different area, so nobody were making susu. Everybody got their money right in their lappa.

Margaret's description captures the unpredictability that accompanied the civil war as individuals moved to a different location overnight to flee fights. This context impeded susu group activity, which depended on close geographic proximity of members to facilitate regular monetary deposits. The ability to organize was therefore interrupted by displacement, and susu groups ceased to exist during the war.

As market women talked about displacement, they acknowledged stability as an essential condition of susu group organizing. This was the case for Mapu.

Everybody was scattered. How will you do susu with somebody? Sometimes the person runs with your money. You will not know where that person went. But now everybody is sitting in one place. I know where you are and you know where I am. But during wartime, we don't have a set place to live. Sometimes your own house is not safe and you will move.

Mapu acknowledged the importance of market women "sitting together," which refers to the stability and routine of selling in the marketplace. War memories focused not only on displacement, but also on distrust that damaged the moral fabric of society. Lurpu, a susu member, stated, "Yeah, people can't do it [the susu], everybody got stuck<sup>13</sup> because war was fighting you know. Everytime the person that has the susu can steal your money." Like Lurpu, other market women framed war as a period of distrust, during which individuals would steal susu money. Evelyn asserted,

When it is time to eat during wartimes, you can't get it. People say, "I was walking to my house; they took all the money away from me, oh!" It used to be just like that. You couldn't take the person to court or to the police. You just left the situation like it was.

It was impossible to get one's money during wartime even if it were someone's turn in the susu cycle. Individuals took advantage of the collapse of the court and police systems to steal in impunity. Stability and trust are carved out of memories of displacement and

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<sup>13</sup> Everybody stopped activity.

distrust during the wartime. By highlighting the fact that these conditions existed in postconflict times, susu groups legitimized their current existence.

**Amplification.** Wartime memories also shape amplification, or the intensification of certain elements, which become the most important in the organizing process. Memories of distrust in particular define and amplify trust, pushed at the forefront of susu group organizing in postconflict times. The amplification of trust follows its definition by susu groups in postconflict times. Understandings of trust are influenced by war memories, which have infused new meanings into trust.

Emergent definitions of trust bring to the fore certain elements, one of them being “running away.” The simple evocation of the term seemed to generate angst from susu members. A constant fear of group members, running away had become synonymous with stealing susu money in wartime and was used to assess someone’s trustworthiness in postconflict times. Dekontee shared that her susu ma “had stayed long with us, for a very long time. We know her. She did not run away.” In this example, the susu ma was deemed trustworthy because she had not “run away” during war. Closely tied to “running away” is length of time spent in the market, which is a second element used to gauge trustworthiness. Market women often talked about the number of years that a given susu group had been in operation to attest to its reputation. Length of time directly affirmed a susu ma’s trustworthiness, implying that she had not run away with susu money during war.

Memories shape trust in a narrower way by favoring definitional elements stemming from the war period. These particular understandings of trust constitute the basis of amplification. Jane shared the following:

One time, one woman, I didn't know the woman, she used to put people's susu. A fat woman! She went, she put the susu, she collected plenty of money from people. She ran away, she went to America. [...] Yeah, she ran away with the people's susu money. People cried here, some people got heart pressure from it. Yeah oh. She ran away with people's susu. So many people went to her house. They were told, "Oh, but the woman went to America!" Yeah, oh, so when we don't know you; it is hard for us to put susu with you.

Jane's narrative is an all-too-common wartime story of a susu ma stealing money and fleeing to the United States. The use of "fat" calls for commentary. This adjective is not used to merely describe the woman's physique but connotes her moral qualities, one of them being greediness. "Fat" deeply resonates in postconflict Liberia and Sierra Leone and is part of a wider metaphor of "eating money."

As highlighted by Shepler (2011), men with big bellies in postconflict Sierra Leone were seen as greedy politicians who had taken advantage of the war to get richer. Additionally, the fact that the woman is "fat" constitutes an oddity in a war period, which was marked by scarcity. It possibly links her corpulence to the occult and marks her as a witch, a figure associated with greediness and selfishness in this part of West Africa (Shaw, 1997).

Of interest is the direct connection established between this episode of distrust and the need to “know” people before forming a susu group with them. The term “know” is used by market women to connote the deep understanding of a person’s character, allowing for the establishment of trust. At another point in the interview, Jane reiterated the importance of “knowing” other susu members, in light of bad wartime experiences:

You just heard these kind of news during that time [war]. People came and started eating people’s money.<sup>14</sup> Everything ceased and the money business went down like that. Yeah, so now, we can put susu with people that we really know. Like the woman who is putting the monthly susu.

The woman referred to in this excerpt is the susu ma, who is trusted because susu members “really know” her. In this sense, experiences of distrust amplified trust, now used as a prime criterion to establish and grant access to susu groups in postconflict times. Only the most trustworthy individuals had the privilege of establishing a susu group and becoming a susu ma, as evidenced by this exchange:

Edwina: [...] The susu is like the bank, yeah, because you first have to trust the person before they can lay the susu.

Interviewer: So not everybody can lay susu?

Edwina: No, not everybody. When you give money to some people, they eat it. So it is like when you trust the person, everybody trusts the person; then the person lays susu.

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<sup>14</sup> People started extorting people’s money.

In such a perspective, most sought-after susu mas were “fair” or reputable in the market. Trust was also used as a selection criterion, as only trustworthy individuals could access a group. Anna recruited her members on this basis. “I tell friends [about my susu] that I know. People that I trust, that are able to pay my susu.” Similarly, Jane explained how her susu ma mostly used trust to deny or grant admission to the group:

When you are a bad person in the community, you can’t hide. For that reason, when you come, and you are bad and she [the susu ma] knows, she can’t put you in the susu. She will say it is full, you know she will say the susu is full [...] Whether it not full, oh, she will just say it is full and she will start looking for people that can really put her susu.

“Bad” individuals were notorious in the market for having the habit of not paying debts and were casted as untrustworthy. Once one had established such a reputation, it was almost impossible to join a susu group.

**Contraction.** Wartime memories shape organizational contraction, defined as the propensity of susu groups to close off themselves from the outside world. This inward focus accentuates an already existing tendency towards secrecy. As highlighted by scholars (Bledsoe, 1980, 1984; Ellis, 1999), Liberia is characterized by the existence of multiple secret organizations like the *Poro* and *Sande* religious societies that initiate individuals into adulthood. The principle of secrecy seems to have extended beyond secret organizations to shape other organizations like susu groups. Organizational contraction expresses itself through gender, nationality, and relationships with official postconflict institutions.



First, gender and nationality intersect through memories of Nigerian susu men. Prior to the war, there were susu groups independent from market women's groups. Men commonly ran these groups known as "Nigerian susu" or "card susu." While circumstances through which the label "Nigerian" came to be applied to these susus are unclear, one explanation exists. It seems that both the men and the way they ran their susus were perceived as Nigerian or at least non-Liberian. The appellation "Nigerian" calls for brief commentary. During the last few years, it has connoted dubious business enterprises and increased the perception of Nigerian nationals as dishonest in West Africa and elsewhere on the continent.

Nigerian susu men were independent entrepreneurs providing susu services to business people in Monrovia. Although Nigerian susu men were not part of the market, they largely recruited among market women. Nigerian susus functioned as a mobile bank and were different than market women's groups because they were voluntary. They required no set amount as women could turn in any sum. In addition, there was no specific schedule to make deposits, leaving women the freedom to contribute to the group as wanted. Nigerian susu men came to the market everyday, carrying a bag containing stacks of index cards, each attributed to one individual. The men recorded deposits and withdrawals on the cards and charged a minimal fee for their services. Nigerian susus provided flexibility to market women but proved risky as the men took advantage of war to run away with susu money. A majority of market women reported bad experiences with Nigerian susu groups. This exchange I had with Evelyn illustrated her negative experience.

Evelyn: During the war, I was not a susu ma; but I was a susu member; then the person who had the susu ran away. They stole all our money, everything.

Interviewer: Can you talk about this experience? How many members were in this susu during the war?

Evelyn: It was the Nigerian susu, the card. Sometimes they bring the card. Every time you pay, they mark it, every time you pay, they mark it.

Evelyn added that this experience had happened to her on three separate occasions.

Similarly, Adelaine remembered a man who ran a Nigerian susu and stole the susu money.

One man did it in the market. Before the war would come, they ran with people's money. Some people have a good heart. After the war, they had money in the bank; they withdrew it and gave it back. But some of them, they were keeping the money for themselves. So during the war, they and their family, they ate all the money.<sup>15</sup> After the war, when you asked for the money, they said the war carried it [the money].<sup>16</sup>

Adelaine explained how the susu man used the war as an excuse for the loss of susu members' money by saying that "the war carried it." Susu members were not dupes and were aware that the man had indeed stolen the money.

Market women seemed to have given greater attention to gender and nationality after these negative experiences. Some explained that market women's susu groups were created as a reaction to the abuses committed by Nigerian susu men. Caroline recalled,

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<sup>15</sup> They finished all the money.

<sup>16</sup> The war took it.

The susu, we all started this susu during 1996, the April 6 war. After the war ceased. You have been in the market, you can see some men with a bag, with a susu card; we used to put susu with them. Yes, during the war, we used to put susu with them. Sometimes you put L\$25, L\$30, or L\$100.<sup>17</sup> But when the time to eat<sup>18</sup> came, they said, “Oh, rogue<sup>19</sup> came to my house; they stole all the money.” Then we became the victim. They said rogue busted their house, hijacked them, and stole the money. “They hijacked me, they took the whole money bag.” So we were the victims as the market women, so we decided that we should settle our own susu.

This reactionary moment accounts for the solidification of gender, which became a dominant feature of the groups. Caroline signaled this shift by mentioning that “our own susu” was established with the sole purpose of catering to women selling food in the market. Nigerian susus, which were “plenty” before and during the war, drastically reduced in number in postconflict times as women turned to their own groups to save money. Market women’s suspicion of men intensified after the war. This gendering also mirrored what I term a “nationalization” of the groups. Nationalization can be defined as the claiming of Liberian identity in everyday organizing practices. This phenomenon is evidenced by the fact that Liberian men have taken over the Nigerian susu practice in postconflict times.

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<sup>17</sup> A little bit more than US\$1.

<sup>18</sup> To get the money.

<sup>19</sup> Rogue refers to petty criminals.

Despite numerous bad experiences with Nigerian susus during war, many market women continued to contribute to these groups in postconflict times. They justified their membership by the fact that Nigerian men no longer ran the groups but had been replaced by Liberian men. During my fieldwork, a middle-aged Liberian man ran the sole Nigerian susu group of the market. The man who was usually dressed in business casual clothing carried a black leather attaché case to the market around 4 o'clock everyday and was highly popular with the women. In interviews, women further explained that Nigerian susu groups were now safe because “our own Liberian men” were in charge of them.

This belief signaled a return towards Liberian identity for market women in general and susu group practice in particular. The claiming of national identity was particularly noticeable during the period of my fieldwork, marked by the sojourning of several Ivorian refugees in Monrovia. These refugees had fled neighboring Côte d'Ivoire to escape a civil war, and their presence in Liberia was regarded with ambivalence at the time. In this sense, susu group contraction was an immediate response to Nigerian susu men and a broader reaction to the afflux of foreign refugees in Monrovia.

Finally, organizational contraction occurred in connection to official postconflict institutions and banks more specifically. Memories of a widespread banking collapse followed by the embezzlement of money still resonated deeply. For instance, Anna indicated:

During the war, people had money saved in the bank. When the war came, the bank couldn't refund their money. The various banks ate the people's money.

When you went to them [the banks], they said, “It is war!” So that fear, I still have it. Even though there is peace, I still have that fear within me. That is why I put my money in the club and I do the daily susu.

As highlighted by Anna, the fact that money vanished from banks during the war contributed to fear of these institutions in postconflict times. Of interest here is the mention of the “club,” which is an indigenous bank. Susu money is typically directed to the parallel financial circuit of clubs that are at-home banks in the community. In several cases, individuals in charge of a given club deposit money from all members into official banks. However, this is not typical. Many women considered susu groups and clubs safer than banks, despite the obvious threats associated with handling susu money in public and saving it at home. This perception isolated market women from official banks, limiting their access to financial benefits and their full integration into postconflict Liberian society.

### **Discussion**

This chapter explored how war memories shaped susu group organizing practices in postconflict times. I uncovered the three following practices: legitimization, amplification, and contraction. Wartime memories served to legitimize susu group existence in postconflict times by carving ideal conditions of existence out of accounts of disintegration. At the individual level, susu members talked about a wartime focus on survival rather than saving money. At the collective level, displacement and distrust hampered susu group functioning during wartime. In this sense, ideal conditions for susu group existence included a focus on saving money, stability, and trust.

Wartime memories also contributed to the practice of amplification, which pushed trust at the forefront of susu group organizing while other elements receded in the background. Susu groups reshaped trust by deploying definitional elements stemming from wartime. This definition served as the basis of amplification, which expressed itself both through the creation and sustenance of susu groups in postconflict times. Only trustworthy individuals could expect to establish a susu group and become susu mas. Similarly, susu members used trust as a criterion to grant access to the groups. Finally, war memories also engendered contraction or an inward focus of susu groups in postconflict times. Memories of money extortions entrenched the groups into rigid boundaries. Wartime experiences with Nigerian susu men solidified gender and nationality as dominant features of susu group organizing. The groups also isolated themselves from official banking institutions.

This chapter is a feminist addition to cultural-critical approaches to organizational memory studies (OMS). It illuminates the significance of gender in relation to memory and contemporary organizing practices. Findings show how war memories are directly informed by market women's positionality during wartimes. As the women remembered Nigerian susu men's extortion, they created their own groups that tended to admit women only. In this sense, the chapter conceptualizes the possibilities of a "gendered memory" and counters the idea that remembering is a neutral and mechanic process.

The chapter also adds war memories to the OMS literature. In doing so, it goes against generic and formulaic understandings that have conceptualized the workings of

memory as similar in all situations and contexts. I contend that war memories are so violent that they have the potential to dismantle organizational structures and annihilate the willingness of individuals to join organizations. War memories can also create organizations that set apart from the outside world. This is visible through the contraction of susu groups. In this sense, memory is more than a simple imprint on organizing as suggested by the OMS literature. Rather, it can have material consequences by destroying or engendering structure. Finally, this chapter poses legitimate methodological questions about the retrieval of memory after trauma and destruction. Researchers studying such contexts need to actively incorporate silence and absence in their work.

In terms of practical considerations, organizational contraction calls for commentary. As explained previously, susu has circumscribed membership to trustworthy market women selling inside Fiamah market. While it is undeniable that this practice generates a sense of safety for susu groups, it also poses problems. The main one is isolationism, which may undercut broader social change possibilities for market women. Such possibilities include access to advantages provided by official banks. A second problem is homogeneity of the groups that may foster exclusion and hamper creativity and innovation.

CHAPTER V  
INVISIBILITY AND VISIBILITY IN  
SUSU GROUPS

This chapter examines how susu groups negotiate invisibility and visibility in postconflict times. During the last few years, scholars have called for the decolonization of the field of organizational communication by considering alternative rationalities (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007). In the spirit of postcolonial theorizing, alternative rationalities invite us to make space for the margins in organizational research (Grimes & Parker, 2009). This involves considering organizational forms and logics that depart from conventionally studied Euro-American models. Despite this call for action, postcolonial organizational scholarship remains rare, with little empirical research to date. In addition, the few existing postcolonial studies are still embedded in Western assumptions (Hall, 2011; Norander & Harter, 2012). This chapter takes the call for recognizing postcoloniality further than previous analyses by examining structures stemming from a radically different organizational form. It focuses on market women's *susu groups* in postconflict Liberia.

Market women were essential in supplying food to Liberians during a fourteen-year civil war (1989-2003). Today, they continue to play a vital role connected to food security, through their grassroots associations called susu groups. These groups, commonly known as rotating credit associations (Ardener, 1964; Geertz, 1962), guarantee access to capital to purchase food items and are. Susu groups pool money on a



daily, weekly, or monthly basis by collecting set amounts from each susu member, putting all the money together, and distributing the lump sum to one person at a time. Susu groups typically have a leader called the susu mother or susu ma and several members. The groups perform complex financial operations, allowing members to double, triple, quadruple, or quintuple their dues and receiving a proportional return on investment. In postconflict times, market women rely on their susu money to purchase goods necessary to maintain their food business.

In this chapter, I address the invisible nature of susu groups in postconflict times. Susu groups typically operate in secrecy by steering away from market officials. Secrecy stems from traditional African modes of interaction and competes with a push towards organizational visibility in postconflict times. As this chapter explores this tension, I draw on a second body of work on secret organizations. Research in this area is nascent, with the exception of one study to date (Stohl & Stohl, 2011). Stohl and Stohl (2011) ask important ontological questions on clandestine organizations and provide key characteristics of these structures. However, they collapse invisibility with malevolence, due to the focus on terrorist organizations. My research on susu groups' invisibility, nuances the assumption of malevolence by showing how invisibility may contribute to social change efforts through economic empowerment. I begin by presenting a literature review followed by a methodological section. I then feature an analysis and a discussion sections.

## **Review of Literature**

**Postcoloniality and organizational communication.** The recent emergence of a postcolonial stance, informed by broader postcolonial incursions in critical communication studies (Shome, 1996, Shome & Hegde, 2002; Shome 2006) has generated several reflective pieces on organizational theory, method, and a researcher's positionality. In their foundational piece, Broadfoot and Munshi (2007) discuss the treatment of difference in the field by observing that people from the margins "speak in languages and practices that we don't ordinarily try to hear" (p. 255). This is enhanced by the fact that discussions of difference are circumscribed to specific "chapters and sections on non-Westerners such as Asians, Latinos, Africans, and so on, instead of such voices being heard on the main stage" (p. 259). In a subsequent article, Broadfoot, Munshi, and Nelson-Marsh (2010) identify ways for scholars to incorporate postcolonial voices into their research.

Grimes and Parker (2009) display similar concerns, as they talk about the need to develop methodologies close to the margins. They explore colonizing processes in organizational communication by examining who has definitional privileges, what types of issues are explored, and interactions between "decolonizing discourses and creative resistance" and "dominant discourses and institutionalized practices" (p. 503). They touch on the flawed nature of a reviewing process which tends to censor work from the margins on the basis of emotion. In conclusion, they don't ask for more research on the topic but for radically different research.

Yet, despite this lively conversation and as noted by Norander and Harter (2012) few empirical postcolonial studies exist, with two notable exceptions to date. One of them examines leadership in the postcolonial context of Jamaica (Hall, 2011). Using a postcolonial lens, Hall explores how leaders negotiate western and colonial discourses as related to indigenous modes of expression. In a second study, Norander and Harter (2012) deploy a feminist postcolonial lens to study Kvinna na Kvinna, a Swedish-based peacebuilding organization networking with local women's organizations in postconflict Balkan nations. Of interest to them is understanding how Kvinna na Kvinna and their local partners use "local culture and knowledge in their peace-building work" (p. 14). They found three main tensions: representation, space, and sustainability.

The treatment of postcoloniality in these studies still privileges the West in three areas: conceptual assumptions, study design, and voice. In terms of assumptions, leadership deployed by Hall (2011) is primarily embedded in an American locale. A leader is implicitly defined as an individual who is at the head of a large post-industrial organization and has received formal schooling in the United States. In this sense, Jamaican understandings of the term are understated. This influences a research design which focuses on leaders likely to be found in the following organizations:

The industries represented were shipping, airlines, secondary and tertiary education, corporate training and development, banking, investment management, the police force, the civil service (government-run organizations), trade unions, human resource management, and management consulting, all of

which represent the largest and most prominent organizations in Jamaica. (p. 620)

The study (2011) gives voice to upper-middle class and upper-class elites, whose take on leadership is shaped by their privileged socioeconomic status. With respect to Norander and Harter's study (2012), the organization as construct is still assumed to be a large and formal structure, with an identifiable leadership unit. It is embedded in western rationalities as there is a constant need to justify, report, and control organizational activity. This guides a study design which centers on a Northern European NGO. The majority of interviews were conducted with members of this NGO and only a few of them were conducted with partner organizations. In this sense, local partner organizations are treated in a peripheral manner. Despite the fact that both studies set out to examine how the western and local interact, the analyses remain asymmetrical because the West occupies the center of analysis.

Absent from this postcolonial literature is a focus on indigenous organizations or what has been termed "grassroots" (Dempsey, 2009). In this perspective, the study adds to the literature by looking at an organizational form which is African in ontology.

**Invisible organizing.** Stohl and Stohl (2011) offer important ontological insight for the study of invisible organizing. They (2011) extend the communication as constitutive of organizations (CCO) perspective to secret organizations. Their goal is to "address the constitution of covert organizing by focusing upon the foundational principles of secrecy and concealment embedded within clandestine organization" (p. 1202). CCO has focused on transparent organizations that can be easily tracked. Stohl

and Stohl feature secret organizations as a type of organization which has escaped CCO scrutiny. They list the three following characteristics of these organizations:

- (1) Members mutually agree upon keeping their own and others affiliations secret (for at least some period of time)
- (2) The internal activities and collective governance structures operate furtively, outside the public realm
- (3) External traces of the existence of the organization eventually become known (or at least rumored) outside the membership (although the organization may be completely unknown outside its own membership for long periods of time). (p. 1199)

Building on previous work they conducted on terrorism (Stohl & Stohl, 2007), they (2011) bolster their argument with the example of terrorist organizations. They explain how these structures pose additional issues to communication scholars because “the communicative context becomes even more complex and theoretically more challenging” (p. 1199). In addition, it is challenging for researchers to secure access to these structures. Finally, “issues of legitimacy and voice are under-theorized when organizations are transparent, but need to be brought to the fore when we consider clandestine organizations.” (p. 1207)

Stohl and Stohl (2011) provide a helpful argument to examine invisible organizing. However, invisibility is still shrouded in a western logic, meaning that it is collapsed with negativity and malevolence. This is evidenced by the dominance of terrorist types of organizations as examples to support the invisibility thesis. The

connection between secret organizations and negativity needs to be nuanced when considering African contexts. Secrecy has structured many organizations aiming for both individual and collective good, and in African contexts, invisibility did not connote nefarious activity. I propose a different way to understand the meaning and purpose of secrecy in economic organizations. My goal is to deepen scholarly understandings of how organizational members make sense of invisibility and visibility in postconflict times. I specifically deploy invisibility and visibility to examine market women's susu groups.

**Understanding susu groups.** Precolonial and postcolonial African women's organizations serve as a background to understand the susu groups. During precolonial times, an overarching organizing model was the dual-sex organization (Mikell, 1997; Moran, 1989; Nzegwu, 2006; Okonjo, 1976). Women and men had separate institutions, coexisting in a parallel fashion. Female institutions handled women's affairs, and male institutions dealt with men's affairs. Women wielded political power through their institutions (Amadiume, 1987; Oyewùmí, 1997). The dual-sex model trickled down to various realms and structured domestic, economic, religious, and political organizations. With colonization, the dual-sex organization was replaced by the single-sex organization, modeled on Western societies (Okonjo, 1976). Power was transferred to official structures in the public sphere and appropriated by men with European colonizers' support. This translated into a loss of power for women, whose institutions were no longer recognized (Van Allen, 1972).

In the postcolonial period, authoritarian regimes focused on building official state structures, thus further marginalizing women's organizations. Despite these challenges, women have retained their dual-sex organizations and draw on them for collective action in contemporary times (Fallon, 2008; Moran, 1989). These structures shared a certain degree of secrecy in precolonial times as shown in a study on the Nnobi women's council in Nigeria (Amadiume, 1987). According to Amadiume, "the women's council was held in private; great secrecy surrounded the meetings. Any representative who revealed what transpired there would be ostracized by the women" (p. 67). This quotation reveals that the inner functioning of the council was unknown to outsiders, including men. Colonization exacerbated this tendency towards secrecy, as colonizers made women's organizations illegal; members risked sanctions, including imprisonment (Amadiume, 1987).

Scholars have documented the existence of multiple dual-sex organizations in Liberia and neighboring Sierra Leone. One example is that of two religious secret societies: the sande for women and the poro for men (Bledsoe, 1980, 1984; Harley, 1941; Fallon, 2008; Fraenkel, 1965; Johnson Sirleaf, 2009; Rosen, 1983). Both societies initiate women and men into adulthood (Johnson Sirleaf, 2009). In the particular case of sande societies, "men have no access to the secret knowledge and are forbidden to enter the camp while in session" (Fallon, 2008, p. 96). Sande societies have political importance in war and peace times in Liberia and Sierra Leone (Fallon, 2008; Fuest, 2009). Fuest (2009) highlights the formative role of sande societies in the Liberian

women's peace movement, which pressured national and international constituencies for peace.

Besides the *sande*, which dominate in northwest Liberia, there are other types of dual-sex organizations in the southeast part of the country (Moran, 1989; Moran, 2006). These structures can help shed light on the *susu* groups known as rotating credit associations (Ardener, 1964; Geertz, 1962). The *susus* are a common organizational form in West Africa. Similar groups exist in Sierra Leone under the appellation of *osusu* clubs (Fallon, 2008). Like the *susus*, the *osusus* are often the only way for a majority of poor women to gain access to funds and credit. As Fallon (2008) states, "osusus provide an opportunity of raising capital without too much red tape" (p. 67). She concludes that *osusus* are likely to endure because many women are still excluded from formal financial venues. In Liberia, Seibel and Messing (1974) document the existence of *susu* groups in both rural and urban areas. The groups fall under a broader category of "indigenous cooperatives" they define as:

voluntary, open, and permanent association of equalitarian structure in which the members secure for themselves certain economic interests through communal self-help. It is open primarily in the sense that membership is not limited to kinship groups. (p. 45)

A key principle of these cooperatives is that "at regular or irregular intervals, goods, money, or labor services are pooled for the benefit of one member at a time in a rotating system" (p. 46). *Susu* groups are based on monetary exchanges. They vary in group size, amount contributed, and leadership mode. The only consistent element is that "the total



amount collected at each meeting is handed over to one member at a time” (Seibel & Messing, 1974, p. 63). Money savings cooperatives initially started as cooperatives in kind, with rice being transacted instead of money (Seibel & Messing, 1974). Money replaced rice and other commodities in the 1930s, thanks to the arrival of the American rubber company Firestone and the growth of the cash economy (Seibel & Messing, 1974).

Susu groups are reminiscent of dual-sex organizations in two respects. Some studies suggest an inclination towards secrecy in susu groups. This is visible in Fallon’s (2008) research on osusus, which shows that meetings happen in the privacy of members’ homes. Despite the existence of mixed-sex susus, there is a tendency towards single-sex susus (Seibel & Messing, 1974). This is the case of market women in Monrovia (Fraenkel, 1965). For this particular population, demographic and economic factors, namely the sheer dominance of women in market trade, may accentuate the prevalence of women-only susus.

If scholars have documented the existence of susu groups in preconflict Liberia, how should we make sense of them in postconflict times? Scholars studying dual-sex organizations in Liberia contend that such structures spontaneously reemerged after the war (Moran, 1989). In this regard, susu groups constitute a resilient organizational form, which copes with new challenges in postconflict times. Organizational transparency and accountability, as defined by both governmental structures and foreign NGOs, have emerged as important themes in postconflict Liberia. In the particular context of markets, the LMA (Liberian Marketing Organization) or official market organization has

prohibited secrecy in its handbook. In this vein, how do susus negotiate the tension between organizational transparency and a tendency towards secrecy? I ask the following research question:

*RQ: How do the susu groups negotiate invisibility and visibility in postconflict times?*

In order to answer this research question, I use invisibility and visibility as two analytical categories, defined below:

- Invisibility: subterranean political terrain or the realm of community members inside of a given susu group and of unofficial actors and structures
- Visibility: institutional political terrain or the realm of community members outside of a given susu group and of official actors and structures

## **Method**

**African feminist ethnography.** Using African feminist theory (Amadiume, 1987; Mikell, 1997; Oyewùmí, 1997) I designed African feminist ethnography as a new method to study the susu groups. In terms of ontology, this method recognizes the significance of both precolonial and postcolonial organizations in the shaping of contemporary organizations. It focuses on the flexible and resilient nature of African organizational forms, influenced by issues of urgency and survival. Finally, it acknowledges the culture of secrecy around African women's organizations. Secrecy accounts for epistemologies of the invisible, which require an examination of nonverbal communication. In terms of axiology, this method rejects victimization and recognizes African women as full organizational agents.

African feminist ethnography guided my fieldwork in Fiamah market, a food market in central Monrovia. Fiamah depends on the Liberian Marketing Association (LMA), an umbrella organization in charge of most Liberian markets since the seventies. The LMA disintegrated during peak periods of the war and reformed in the aftermath of the conflict. The organization plays a regulatory role over Fiamah vendors in postconflict times. They pay weekly fees to the LMA and abide by the rules of the organization. One such rule which addresses the question of secrecy in the market reads:

No marketer is/are allowed to incite/hold secret meetings against any of the market authorities; violators for first offense shall pay the amount of one thousand five hundred Liberian dollars (1.500.00LD) fine. Second offense is suspension from the market for three (3) months. (LMA Handbook, 2010).

The market is administered by a superintendent and an assistant superintendent who oversee 250 to 300 vendors. Most vendors are women, with the exception of eight men. I initially contacted a market woman from Fiamah, through my connections at the Ministry of Gender and Development. A first visit allowed me to explain my project to the market superintendent and assistant superintendent and to the commodity leaders who are each in charge of supervising vendors selling one type of commodity. I received informal approval to conduct research and the information was passed along to the entire market.

I conducted 100 hours of observation and 40 in depth semi-structured interviews with Fiamah vendors from May to August 2011. Interviews included two parts. The first one encompassed questions on market women's economic activity in connection to war

and peace times. The second part focused on the susu groups. I also collected organizational documents, which included two LMA handbooks.

Researching susu groups posed challenges, given their invisible nature. Susu interactions are woven in market life, and it is difficult for an outsider to notice them. Every afternoon around 4 o'clock, each susu leader called the *susu ma* walks from stall to stall to collect money from susu members. The susu ma retreats to her stall or to a private location where she discreetly counts the bills collected, arranging stacks by order of importance. She then hands the sum to the member scheduled to "eat" on that day. This process is swift and both susu ma and members rarely exchange words. Observations allowed me to document the functioning of this process. As I gained the trust of the women, they offered insight, often pointing at a specific susu ma and explaining what she was doing. The susu structured many market women's activities, including the periodic trips to Gobachop-Redlight, the biggest distributor market in Monrovia, in order to purchase goods in bulk.

I confirmed my impressions through interviews that provided me with the most information on susu groups. The market superintendent and his assistant allowed me to use their office in their absence. I often scheduled my interviews when they left for field trips or meetings at the LMA headquarters. My choice of interview location followed a conversation with a market woman. She explained that market women had no time to meet me at their homes as they worked all day, including Saturdays. Sundays were usually reserved for family and church. During interviews, I was interested in finding out how susu members communicated about the susu, with whom they communicated, what

type of information they chose to disclose, and when they chose to disclose it. The interviews shed light on the centrality of susu groups in market women's economic activities and lives.

**Data analysis.** I used a grounded theory approach to analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Charmaz, 2004). This process was facilitated by using visibility and invisibility as analytical lenses. I initially engaged in open coding and in vivo coding. In accordance with open coding techniques, I coded transcripts in unrestricted fashion by using sentences and words as units of analysis. I analyzed five to seven interviews at a time, by writing codes in the margins of transcripts. Following in vivo coding conventions, I labeled some of the codes using the language of research participants. Examples of in vivo codes included “know” “da de time<sup>20</sup>” and “plenty talking.” Research memos facilitated open coding and in vivo coding. The second step involved following focused coding conventions (Charmaz, 2004) by analyzing each new data set of five to seven interviews, in light of previous codes. As Charmaz (2004) indicated “By the time you engage in focused coding, you have decided which of your earlier codes make the most analytic sense and categorize your data most accurately and completely (p. 508). Focused coding allowed me to progressively reduce the number of codes, thanks to the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Finally, I combined codes under broader categories, establishing connections between them using axial coding. Throughout the analysis process, my fieldnotes served as background to contextualize meanings inferred from interviews.

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<sup>20</sup> That is the time

## Analysis

Susu groups negotiate visibility and invisibility at three levels: temporal, relational, and structural. These levels are organized under the two overarching categories of invisibility and visibility. As shown in Table 2 below, temporal, relational, and structural levels function as continuums, which express themselves in invisibility or visibility. A negotiation space facilitates the passage of the susu groups from invisibility to visibility.

**Table 2. Summary of Findings**

Invisibility	Negotiation Space	Visibility
Everyday	Temporal (Time) <i>Number of Days</i>	Exceptional
Secrecy “Knowing Someone”	Relational (Relationships) <i>Positive and Negative Talk</i>	Procedure
Market Women’s Organization	Structural (Structure) <i>Leadership and Membership</i>	Office

**Temporal.** The temporal pertains to time and stretches along a continuum, ranging from the everyday to the exceptional. Susu groups remain submerged in everyday interactions, characterized by daily and punctual occurrences. The quotidian finds expression through a susu rule and susu practices that align themselves with selling as an economic activity. A majority of market women talked about the “everyday one person eats” rule that governed susu groups. The rule stipulates that each person has to “eat” or receive their susu money on a set day in the cycle. This configuration occurs on a daily basis for daily susu groups. I asked Mustella, a fish vendor, what would happen if someone failed to contribute to the susu on a given day and she replied:

Yeah, you shouldn't do that because everyday, people got to eat. If the person is scheduled to eat today and doesn't eat, then when you come to the market, the next morning, you sell, you pay your susu, and they hand it to that person.

Everyday one person eats, everyday.

The “everyday” iteration in this quotation conveys the importance of paying the susu money daily. Failure to do so was unacceptable and the delinquent payer needed to remedy the situation the following day. Prompt payment of a debt illustrates how susu members understood time. The latter was segmented in daily units, which were each valuable. The need to take immediate action to pay a susu debt spoke to this compartmentalization. A susu member had to acquit for a missed payment before the next time unit began. If this were impossible, the member would hand over two payments during the next time unit. This framing of time was also expressed by Anna, a susu ma who indicated that “the money is not supposed to sleep with me, everyday I am

supposed to hand it out.” In this logic, the susu ma was not supposed to take the susu money at home and needed to distribute it to the susu member immediately after collection. This allowed the susu cycle to start anew the following day.

The “everyday one person eats” rule was enacted through the daily money collection practice occurring at 4 or 5 o’clock. Everyday around this time, susu mas walked from stall to stall to collect the money from susu members. The members expected the susu ma around this time, just as the susu ma expected the members to hand their money. Caroline, a respected susu ma who had run her susu in Fiamah market for 15 years, emphasized the significance of punctuality. She explained that women had to pay their dues on time everyday. If a woman were absent or sick, she was expected to send someone to hand her due to the susu ma. One episode I observed illuminated the importance of being on time. Caroline came to collect susu money from Emma, who was absent from her stall. Caroline inquired about Emma’s whereabouts and was told that she was in the market office. Without hesitation, she went inside the market office and reemerged shortly thereafter, followed by Emma. Emma fumbled in her belongings, retrieved the susu money from her cache, and handed it to Caroline. Emma seemed visibly embarrassed during the entire interaction. Caroline showed no hesitation going inside the market office to claim susu money. Her attitude highlighted the primacy of punctuality over official business dealt in the market office. Adelaine, a dry goods<sup>21</sup> vendor also illustrated the importance of punctuality:

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<sup>21</sup> Dry goods typically encompass rice, beans, stock cubes, and oil.



Have you seen our susu? Have you seen how we run it? She [the susu ma] collects the money at 4 o'clock sharp. Yes, I finish paying the susu at 4 o'clock sharp. The person who is supposed to eat, eats, it finishes. Then the next member in the susu eats.

Present in the "4 o'clock sharp" iteration is a subtext of pride. Adelaine expressed contentment with the timely nature of money collection in her susu group. In such a perspective, being timely benefited individual susu members and susu groups as a whole. Punctuality as susu practice served to distinguish good susu groups from bad susu groups in the market. This quotation also frames time as separate and daily units through the use of the term "finish." One time unit "finishes" when the susu member scheduled to eat on that specific day has done so. A new time unit can only start once the previous one is "finished."

The "everyday one person eats" rule and its enactment through daily and punctual collections are inextricably connected to "making market."<sup>22</sup> Susu money was used to purchase goods needed to maintain one's trade and accounted for the importance of paying one's due everyday. Margaret, a dry goods vendor explained,

When you get the susu money, you buy more goods. You have been here a few times and have seen some women going to Redlight. When you see them going to Redlight, then it means that they received their susu money to go and purchase goods.

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<sup>22</sup> Selling in the market.

As described by Margaret, women organized their trip to Redlight market, the morning following reception of the susu money. Reciprocally, selling allowed susu members to amass enough money to pay susu dues everyday. As a fish seller told me, “when you sell, you pay the susu, when you sell, you pay the susu, when you sell, you pay the susu.” As highlighted in this quotation, selling and paying susu money are inseparable from one another. In this perspective, the susu practice of collecting the money at 4 or 5 o’clock was understandable. These times were close to the end of the selling day for market women, who had been at their stalls since early hours of the morning. Both susu mas and susu members assumed that women had had enough time to sell and make a profit by the time the susu was collected.

Susu groups remained invisible as long as the rule was enacted and members made punctual money deposits, allowing selling to continue. However, the groups chose to become visible when the delicate balance between “putting susu down” and “making market” was threatened. This generally occurred when a member failed to pay on time, pushing the groups into the temporality of the exceptional. Exceptional times were associated with “trouble” or “confusion.” When this occurred, susu mas were most often in charge of “bringing the problem<sup>23</sup>” to the market office. As Jenelle, a fish seller indicated:

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<sup>23</sup> Reporting the problem.

If you lay<sup>24</sup> the susu, you lay the susu, I eat the money and I don't want to pay when it is other people's turn, I am late, and don't want to pay it, then you bring it [the problem] to the office.

Similarly, susu members could take a susu ma who had extorted or neglected to hand susu money on time to the office. As told by Korto:

When confusion breaks out, when the susu ma cheats you or if you want the money and she can't give it to you, that is when they report it to the office [susu members]. Then you all come here, explain it, and they settle it. That is what they can do.

Going to the market office was serious and constituted a last resort option used in the face of "confusion." Confusion stood for violation of susu rules and interrupted the temporality of the everyday. If going to the office existed as a possibility, in reality a majority of susu mas confessed that they had never done so. Similarly, most susu members frowned upon this possibility, mentioning that "we can't do it like that."<sup>25</sup> Reluctance to take a susu dispute to the office could be explained by the fact that it constituted a space of official power and potential scrutiny for market women. In this sense, the women did not entertain this possibility lightly.

In many cases, susu mas and susu members negotiated the passage from the everyday to the exceptional by counting how many days a member failed to pay. Susu mas and susu members generally tolerated a delay in payment. As market vendors, they understood that a member may have not sold enough goods on a set day, thus preventing

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<sup>24</sup> Create.

<sup>25</sup> We cannot resolve the problem in this way.

the payment of susu money. However, the more days of missed payments accumulated, the more serious the infraction to the “everyday one person eats” rule was. Each day of missed payment jeopardized the group as a whole, as it affected more and more individuals and threatened to “spoil the susu.”<sup>26</sup> In this case, susu groups came to the office because the money due was “past, past, past”<sup>27</sup> according to Jenelle. This situation was the more serious if the delinquent payer had stopped contributing to the susu group, after receiving her money in the cycle. In the latter circumstance, failure to pay transcended genuine financial incapacity to connote mischief and lack of consideration for other susu members.

**Relational.** The second level is the relational. It pertains to relationships and expands along the continuum of secrecy and procedure. The secrecy that binds relationships in a given susu group is based on “knowing” someone. Market women used this term to express their trust or distrust of an individual. In this sense, market women used the phrase “to know” expansively to signify a deep understanding of someone’s character. Jane, a susu member, explained how she “knew” her susu ma.

This woman here, we know her because she started her susu ever since, since Charles Taylor<sup>28</sup>’s time. That is what we are talking about here. She started her monthly susu in 1997. Yeah, so people know her.”

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<sup>26</sup> Ruin the susu cycle.

<sup>27</sup> Late, late, late.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Taylor was the president of Liberia from 1997 to 2003, a period overlapping with the second civil war (1998-2003). A warlord responsible for the onset of the first civil war (1989-1996), Taylor is a controversial figure, notorious for his use of child soldiers and his support to violent guerrillas in Sierra Leone.

Jane used “know” to acknowledge the integrity of the susu ma, who had established herself as a trustworthy individual. For Jane, the passage of time contributed to the development of trust. The susu ma had run her susu since 1997, an accomplishment in longevity, reinforced by the ability of the group to withstand the last Liberian war (1998-2003). The story of this susu ma contrasted with multiple anecdotes in which susu mas took advantage of the war to steal susu members’ money.

“Know” also acquired a negative meaning as Fortee, a susu ma explained. “When I sit down in the market here, I know people. I know the people who can’t pay debts and I know the people who can pay debts.” Adelaine echoed this sentiment when she stated, “You must know the type of person who gets in your susu.” Fortee’s mention of “sitting in the market” provides insight on how individuals get to “know” someone. Knowing someone occurred as market women sat down. This can be explained by the fact that selling is a static activity, which requires that women remain at their stalls for long hours. Market women sitting in a particular area observed each other’s behaviors to assess trustworthiness. In this sense, they got to determine the trustworthiness of individuals sitting next to them and formed susu groups with them. Adelaine explained that individuals sitting far away were not part of her susu because “they are sitting far, and we are not used to them. Yeah, we are not used to them.” Forming susu groups with individuals of the same commodity group also enabled surveillance of members. It was easier to notice that someone failed to pay their due if the person was in close proximity. While susu members were visible to one another, the susu structure was invisible to outsiders.

In their understandings of “knowing”, market women privileged observations instead of talk. Such a process was embedded in African modes of expression that favored silence and was observable in everyday susu interactions. When asked if she talked to her susu members when collecting money, a susu ma replied:

No, I don't talk. I come to you, I say hello and you know why I come for. They [the members] give it. I have responsible people in my susu. People who know. They know that when they eat, when they get their susu, they are supposed to buy small small things and put them on their table. So they don't give me too much of a hard time.

This susu ma preferred silence over talk. Members automatically knew the purpose of her visit to their stalls. They had a tacit understanding of the susu rules, which were typically communicated once the member joined the group for the first time. Talk signaled a rupture in normal susu relationships. As shared by Wokie, a dry goods vendor, “Sometime, they [susu members] talk. When there is a problem, they make palaver<sup>29</sup>, then you can hear.” As shown here, talk occurs in case of “palaver” or conflict.

Procedure occupies the other end of the relational continuum. The basis of procedure is neutrality. There is no consideration of exception as individuals are ascribed to the same standards, regardless of their personal circumstances. Procedure supersedes rapports of kinship. This means that the rule of “knowing” someone which governs susu

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<sup>29</sup> Making palaver is another term for a full-fledged overt conflict.

groups has no relevance under procedure. The LMA provided the blueprint for procedure, which was expressed through written communication in Fiamah market.

This emphasis on records was visible when susu groups came to the office to solve their issues. The superintendent and the assistant superintendent expected susu mas to bring their notebook, which recorded all susu transactions. The office would closely examine the notebook, call the incriminated susu member, and settle the issue. The examination of the susu notebook by the office constituted a susu rule violation. Members of a given susu group typically did not have access to the notebook, which belonged to the susu ma. They did not ask for it and trusted the susu ma. Similarly, the susu ma rarely displayed her notebook during daily collections of money and kept the information it contained secret. During interviews with susu members, I realized that many of them did not know about this type of information, even if they had been in the susu groups for several years. For instance, it was common for susu members to hesitate when specifying the number and identity of members in their group. The ma acted as the susu gatekeeper because she knew all the susu members and where they stood in the susu cycle.

Procedure violated trust as the relational basis of the invisible. The office did not rely on the word of the susu ma, who was typically a trusted individual in the market. Rather, operating under a different relational basis, they asked her to produce her records. In addition, the office reviewed the case, considering both susu ma and incriminated susu member equally. This mode of processing was not the norm in the invisible, as the susu ma had a higher importance than susu members. This did not imply

superiority of the susu ma over the members. Rather, susu members chose to delegate susu responsibility to the susu ma. Refusing to be equal was a strategic choice that guaranteed the smooth and timely functioning of the group.

Susu groups negotiated their passage from the invisible to the visible in two ways. One way was preventative; the second way was reactive. “Knowing” someone constituted the relational basis of susu groups. Both susu mas and susu members had been vetted through a rigorous collective process that had deemed them trustworthy. This vetting process was sufficient in many cases to avoid going to the office. However, in the case that the initial selection of susu mas and members were insufficient, members of the susu engaged in talk. Talk constituted a first breach in secrecy as the relational basis of the susu groups. Talk was connoted positively at first, as the susu ma tried to reason with the member who wouldn’t pay. Margaret conveyed the importance of talking to the member at fault before going to the office:

[...] We can do it only if we talk to you. Then we will get together and say ok she will pay. Since she says she will pay, she will pay. But if you don’t pay at all, then we talk to Georges [the superintendent].

However, as the situation deteriorated, talk took negative meanings. News started to spread inside the susu group as well as within the market. Wokie conveyed this sentiment by saying: “If it is somebody’s turn to eat and I don’t have money to pay, the susu ma will get offended and then people will be talking.” This stage was commonly known as “plenty talking.” “Plenty talking” meant gossip about a delinquent payer, causing embarrassment for the payer and susu group. Marie, one of the few market



women who did not belong to a susu group, feared “plenty talking.” She refused to join susu groups because she had too many children to take care of and couldn’t contribute to the group. When groups. As I asked her what people typically said when someone did not pay, she replied:

“You ate, you ate somebody’s money! You want to get people’s money; you want to get people’s money! You finished eating my money and you don’t want to pay when it is my turn to eat!”

This quotation which takes the form of a diatribe illuminates the aggressive nature of “plenty talking” and frames it as a negative form of communication. “Plenty talking” serves as an instrument of social control to reprimand delinquent payers and make them pay the susu money promptly.

**Structural.** The final level is connected to structure, spanning from the susu groups to the office. The women regarded susu groups as market women’s organizations and had creation rights over these structures. This understanding reflected the dual-sex principle of organizing. Forming a susu stemmed from the need to be self-reliant, according to Sia, a dry goods vendor:

If you ask someone in the community, “please help me”<sup>30</sup> They will say, “You are selling, why should I help you? I am not selling. You are the one selling and you come to ask me for help?” They can’t help you. So, it is better for you to find help in the market by laying a susu. When you need money, you talk to the susu

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<sup>30</sup> In the sense of giving money.

ma, “Mother, help me, I have problems, I don’t have goods on the table, so please help me.”

This quotation shows how susu groups are entwined in market women’s economic activity. The groups are designed to provide financial assistance to purchase goods. Sia relates the fact that a woman can get money even if it is not her turn to eat in the susu cycle. Susu groups constitute emergency credit funds. They require little time and material resources to function, making them fitted for the busy lives of market women. In this vein, women designed susu groups as structures to serve their needs. Susu mas and susu members felt entitled to susu group creation, a right that the market office could not encroach on. As Jane noted, “You don’t need to come here [office] and say ‘I am going to put susu down.’” Implied in this quotation is the idea that the office could only know about the existence of a susu when the group made itself visible. This was the case when a significant problem emerged, as stated by Korto, a dry goods vendor, “They [the office] don’t know about the susu, until confusion breaks out, until someone brings the susu ma to the office.”

The practice of not disclosing the existence of susu groups to the office is connected to the dual-sex principle of organizing. Susu groups as market women’s structures lied outside of the realm of influence of the office. This idea is best illustrated by Dekontee, who stated, “The office got nothing to do with it [the susu]. The susu is just for us. The susu is just for women and there are no men inside of it. We, the women, understand one another.” Wahde reiterated this feeling by indicating, “Men can make their own susu, but here, on this side of the market, there are women.” Both men and

women had distinct sets of susu groups in Fiamah market. The tendency towards single-sex susus was confirmed during an exchange with Paul, one of the few male vendors of the market:

Paul: the women have their own susu, the women group themselves in their own [susu]. The men group themselves in their own [susu].

Interviewer: So the women and the men are not mixed in the susu?

Paul. No, we are fine, but we decided that everybody should take part in something. Let the women take part in something. Let the men take part in something.

Paul's "no, we are fine" statement suggests that women and men got along well in the market, despite the fact that they had distinct susu groups. This choice was a conscious one, espoused by all. Susu members were reluctant to join a susu of the opposite sex. For instance, Margaret explained that men would not join women's susu groups because "maybe the men don't want to join the women susu. When we tell them, they say 'that susu is women's business, we don't want to put our hands inside it.'"

At the other end of the structural continuum was the office, which was visible. It was a structure in charge of different affairs than the susu groups. Edwina explained, "You come to the office when people fight or curse. I don't think they are responsible for the susu." Sianeh shared this view:

The office people have a different duty. You can bring problems in the office if somebody is cursing in the market and you are unhappy about it. You come and

you voice your complaint here [in the office]. If you curse, you come here and you pay a fine of 500 dollars or 1000 dollars.

Market women believe that office affairs involve general regulation of the market, including vendors' conduct. It ensures harmonious business transactions. In this sense, market women circumscribed the influence of the office to officially-sanctioned LMA rules. Aware that the office had final authority over market stalls, susu groups denounced delinquent susu payers, hoping that they would be sanctioned. As Jane described,

When we come to the office, the market people will say, "If you don't pay your friend's susu, you will not sell." Yeah, so if you know that, if you want to continue your business, you will be compelled to pay the susu.

She added, "They [the office] tell you to pay. If you don't pay, they threaten the table and you. Because you know, the table, the table business is everything." The fact that the office prevented a delinquent susu payer from selling was a clear bifurcation of official power. There was no mention of such a rule in the market handbooks, in which susu groups were absent and secrecy was proscribed. However, market women artfully instrumentalized the office by requesting the use of official power to resolve susu affairs. In many cases, the women were conscious of manipulating the office and expressed amusement and laughter at this prospect. For instance, Edina, a susu ma, refused to inform the office about her susu because "that is the advantage we are taking over the

office.” She added in almost complicit tone “when it gets rough [the situation] we are quick to come to the office, what can they do then<sup>31</sup>? They just have to settle it for us.”

For market women, the office was embedded in a distinct structural reality than the susu groups. It was the lowest rung in a hierarchy of official postconflict structures. This is evidenced by the following quotation, “You have to go to the office before you can take anything to the police station or to court. You can’t bypass the office.” As shown here, the office is the point of entry towards “the police station” and tribunals. Market women viewed these three structures as interconnected. They belonged to another reality in which problematic situations would undoubtedly worsen and no possibility of reverting to the status quo. Susu groups used their own structural mechanisms to address defaulted payments before going to the office due to women’s wariness of these official structures.

These mechanisms negotiated the passage to visibility and were embedded in both leadership and membership levels of the groups. At the leadership level, susu mas had to “correct” the susu money. This meant that they paid a due for any member who failed to pay. This was expressed by Sia, who said:

If there is any problem, I will pay because I am the susu mother. If someone doesn’t pay, I will pay because I am the susu mother. I am forced to pay because if you decide to sue me, you will be right, because I am the susu ma.

The need for a susu ma to pay a member’s debt stemmed from the previously discussed dual-sex principle of organizing. For susu mas and susu members alike, susu groups

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<sup>31</sup> What alternative do they have then?

were market women's sole responsibility. This extended to debts, which had to be paid by susu mas who were the leaders of the groups. Susu mas also controlled structural features of membership to avoid problematic situations. This often occurred through the regulation of susu group size. Both susu mas and susu members feared susu groups that were too large. The following exchange I had with Evelyn, a susu ma, captured this sentiment:

Interviewer: Does everybody in the market know about the susu?

Evelyn: No, everybody doesn't know about it.

Interviewer: Why don't they know about it?

Evelyn: Because I don't want to make it large. When it is large, it will be trouble.

As illustrated by this excerpt, susu groups that were too large had the potential to generate problems. In this sense, susu mas limited the number of members to a manageable size. In order to do so, the susu mas deliberately chose not to talk about their groups inside the market, for fear of attracting potential members. They engaged in an inverse strategy when wanting to recruit more members. In this case, they would exceptionally make the susu groups visible through announcements in the market.

## **Discussion**

This chapter explored how susu groups negotiated invisibility and visibility in postconflict Liberia. Findings showed that this negotiation occurred at three levels: the temporal, the relational, and the structural. At the temporal level, susu groups existed in the everyday, characterized by the routine nature of daily, punctual monetary collections. The groups only made themselves visible under exceptional circumstances, which

occurred when a susu member stopped making payments. However, the passage from the everyday to the exceptional was not systematic, as susu groups considered the number of days of infraction.

At the relational level, susu groups emphasized secrecy that was based on trust and characterized by silent interactions. In the visible, the relational basis shifted to procedure, which emphasized neutrality and written communication. The transition from visibility to invisibility was facilitated by talk, both connoted positively and negatively. At the structural level, the susu groups were typical African women's organizations, stemming from the dual-sex principle of organizing. However, the market office, which was visible, reflected official structures in the postconflict context. In their move from the visible to the invisible, the susu groups deployed structural mechanisms embedded at both leadership and membership levels.

As we consider theoretical implications, the chapter contributes to nascent research in invisible organizing. When scholarship has theorized on the topic (Stohl & Stohl, 2011), it has tended to treat invisibility and visibility as separate and discrete realms. In such a perspective, invisible organizations are isolated from official power structures, which are framed as oppositional. By contrast, this chapter traces points of junction between invisibility and visibility. It nuances the second characteristic of invisible organizations, as established by Stohl and Stohl (2011): "The internal activities and collective governance structures operate furtively, outside the public realm" (p. 1199). The example of the susu groups shows how these structures occasionally interacted with the "public realm," or the market office. This was done through the

manipulation of market authority, which was diverted from its original function and used to serve the susu groups. The groups subverted structural features initially meant for official control and regulation. In this sense, they inverted power relationships between invisible organizations and visible organizations in postconflict Liberia. The chapter uncovers a liminal space, through which invisible organizations negotiate invisibility and visibility. It encourages us to look at this negotiation as a communicative process, occurring at multiple levels.

The chapter also contributes to postcolonial incursions in organizational communication. It examines African indigenous organizations, which contrast from Western types of organizations. The chapter traces the structure of the susu groups to the dual-sex principle of organizing. In doing so, it shows that there are alternatives to the public/private sphere principle of organizing used almost universally by scholars in the field. In this regard, this work sheds light on alternative rationalities (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007) in the understudied context of Africa. It also features African feminist ethnography as a new theoretical and methodological lens. Because this lens focuses on organizing in contexts where issues of survival dominate, it opens new possibilities for research. It can enable us to examine organizational forms, which like the susu groups, primarily rely on trust and require little material resources to function.

In terms of practical implications, the chapter hints at the importance of susu groups for market women in postconflict Liberia. It provides a nuanced understanding of invisibility, which has tended to be connoted negatively by domestic and international actors. There has been an assumption that women's grassroots structures need to



embrace the visibility paradigm, in order to experience development in postconflict times. However, the chapter demonstrates how invisibility allows the susu groups to thrive in postconflict times. It specifically enables them to steer clear of the *Liberian Marketing Association* (LMA) which has encroached on all realms of market life, including the economic, by levying fees from market women.

The chapter also points at the significance of susu groups as connected to economic development and empowerment. Market women have been encouraged to use banks to save their money in postconflict times. However, banking institutions are not currently accessible to a majority of them because of structural obstacles. Fiamah market women explained that they were not familiar with a banking process that involved too many procedures. Saving money in the bank was seen as a time-consuming enterprise which was not adapted to the busy lives of market women. In addition, going to the bank meant that the market women would have to leave the market. This was not possible for many of them, as a few hours away from their stalls translated into a significant loss of profit. In this regard, market women had specifically designed the susu groups as flexible structures, which directly served their financial needs, inside of the market. This insight encourages us to nuance the push to use official financial institutions in postconflict times. The example of Fiamah reveals that such a transition need not come with an eradication of women's susu groups, which are currently better adapted to serve market women's needs. Rather, domestic and international actors should encourage market women to think of susu groups as one step towards banking.

In terms of limitations, the use of focus group interviews instead of individual interviews could have provided more insight on the group dynamics of the susu groups. However, it was not possible for me to conduct focus group interviews, given spatial and temporal obstacles. The only space available for interviews was the office, which was small in size. In addition, I could only use the office for limited periods of time. Focus group interviews would have span over several hours, which could have generated problems if the superintendent and the assistant superintendent needed it. Furthermore, I could not use several hours of market women's time, given the fact that time was precious to them. For future research on the susu groups in Liberia, I wish to secure funding to rent a space outside the market to conduct focus group interviews and to remunerate research participants.

CHAPTER VI  
MARKET WOMEN, FOOD  
AND PEACEBUILDING

This chapter focuses on how market women frame food distribution in the peacebuilding era. Peace scholars have examined women's roles in formal (Hudson, 2009; Abdullah & Fofana-Ibrahim, 2010) and informal peacebuilding (de la Rey & McKay, 2006; Pollock, 2007). State and international actors typically undertake formal peacebuilding, while citizens perform informal peacebuilding activities, away from official venues. This research either focuses on women and formal actors in peacebuilding or on women's informal strategies and activities with an overt goal of peace.

Instead of investigating women's activities in these defined arenas, I analyze peacebuilding activities that women do not necessarily understand as contributing to peacebuilding. I specifically examine market women's food distribution activities in postconflict Liberia. Market women provided a constant supply of food in the capital city of Monrovia both during and after the fourteen-year civil war (1989-2003). This was particularly important, given the influx of internally displaced persons who fled to Monrovia. I argue that market women help sustain peace in postconflict times by holding together a fragile society. My claim is conceptually embedded in literature that shows the inherently political nature of food (Counihan, 1998; Counihan & Van Esterik, 2008). Although this literature examines food consumption and preparation, it neglects

the question of food distribution. Closing this gap is my goal in this chapter, which investigates how Liberian market women frame their food-distribution roles in the peacebuilding era.

### **Review of Literature**

**Women and peacebuilding.** Scholarship on peace has explored the place and role of women in both formal and informal peacebuilding. Formal peacebuilding typically involved formal power holders like national governments and international agencies that initiate and sustain peace. The literature either documents the absence of women in formal peacebuilding or questions their inclusion. A study by Hudson (2009) represents the first trend by looking at the exclusion of African women from formal peacekeeping. Despite recent inclusion efforts, they have been absent from leadership and peace negotiation processes.

Hudson (2009) claims that major actors discount the relation of gender to peace. In Côte d' Ivoire in particular, rebels, the government, and the international community failed to acknowledge the various roles of women in conflict and framed them as victims. The absence of women in formal peacebuilding discussions contributes to the maintenance of radicalism that fuels conflict. Interestingly, Hudson (2009) reminds us that the official and the unofficial are closely related. For example, in Rwanda, women have used their customary roles as mothers and wives to effect official peacebuilding.

A study by Abdullah and Fofana-Ibrahim (2010) exemplifies the second trend by examining flawed governmental and international approaches to female empowerment in postconflict Sierra Leone. The authors (2010) contend that both the Sierra Leonean

government and the United Nations fail to address feminist concerns about women's empowerment including women's sense of awareness and political agency. If the government tries to promote gender-progressive views, structural obstacles, such as laws and a lack of financial resources, prevent women from being fully integrated in postconflict societies. The UN encounters similar obstacles when seeking to empower women. For instance, although the UN created a gender adviser position, "the job description, staffing conditions and the location of the GA [gender adviser] within the mission's structure have been subjected to intense scrutiny" (p. 264). Ultimately, both approaches bypass the possibility for real structural change.

In contrast to the focus on formal peacebuilding, some studies look at informal peacebuilding. This body of literature is embedded in a larger feminist project that demonstrates how gender fundamentally structures war and peace making (Mazurana, Raven-Roberts, & Parpart, 2005). Feminist peace scholarship often views patriarchy as an obstacle to women's participation in formal peacebuilding (Badmus, 2009; Enloe, 2005). This research emphasizes the fixed location of women during war and peace by showing the pervasiveness of sexual violence (Denov, 2006) and discussing new roles and opportunities brought by the war (Fuest, 2008).

Informal peacebuilding is often conflated with women's histories that have been erased from official peacebuilding narratives (Pollock, 2007). According to Pollock (2007), this exclusion warrants a reconceptualization of women's place in the informal realm. As she (2007) states: "It becomes essential to broaden peacebuilding beyond exclusionary political processes, enabling the possibility for gendered and sustainable

positive peace to emerge” (p. 7).

The literature on informal peacebuilding looks at meanings and strategies of peacebuilding. In terms of meanings, de la Rey and McKay (2006) adopt a gender and culture approach to understand the ways in which 16 South African women leaders make sense of peace. Their study hints at the importance of basic needs, such as “food, water, and shelter,” as creating a foundation on which people can “develop an appreciation of differences of culture, race, ethnicity, and religion (p. 147).

In terms of strategies, women sustain informal peacebuilding by creating committees and building alliances across political and ethnic lines, which are sometimes fostered by nonprofit organizations (Hudson, 2009). A study by Hillhorst and van Leeuwen (2005) examines the everyday of a women’s peacebuilding organization, The Sudanese Women’s Voice for Peace, in Southern Sudan. They (2005) adopt a human security framework that defines peace more extensively by considering connections between the economic, the political, and the social. They (2005) advocate for an approach that achieves geopolitical complementarity by integrating the local with the national and the global levels.

Badmus (2009) examines women’s roles in peacebuilding in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Côte d’Ivoire. In Sierra Leone, women created groups and mobilized the mass media to encourage peace. In Liberia, women adopted a similar approach. In Côte d’Ivoire, women organized demonstrations and condemned human rights violations. Women not only organize protests, but also sustain peace in the long term by supporting “socio-economic development and physical reconstruction” (p. 830).

Research on formal and informal peacebuilding presents problems.

Peacebuilding has been framed as an institutional process involving discrete steps state and social actors must follow (Hudson, 2009). Conventional uses of peacebuilding favor state-oriented peacebuilding activities and overlook local, less official understandings of peace and peacebuilding. When researchers acknowledge informal peacebuilding, they tend to focus on activities with an overt and recognized goal of peace. Such a lens obscures the study of social, cultural, economic, and political activities that build peace indirectly. In this chapter, I contend that market women may not always identify what they are doing as peacebuilding, yet they perform services in the form of food distribution crucial to maintaining peace. They may not use “official” language to talk about peacebuilding. In turn, this renders their roles and activities in peacebuilding invisible to scholars, politicians, policymakers, and themselves.

This project addresses the possibilities of unofficial peacebuilding that occurs in informal market settings. Instead of replicating prior studies that have researched international and grassroots peacebuilding agencies (Abdullah & Fofana-Ibrahim, 2010), peace activists and leaders (de la Rey & McKay, 2006) and women and girl soldiers (Fuest, 2008), I focus on how market women sustain peace through food distribution in daily life.

**Food and politics.** Cultural research on food points to its inherently political nature (Counihan, 1998; Counihan & Van Esterik, 2008). It shows how processes and practices of food production, distribution, and consumption inform macro-level dimensions like gender (Holtzman, 2006; Parasecoli, 2005), race (Williams-Forson,

2008), and nation (O'donnell, 2010; Protschky, 2008; Sengputa, 2010; Xu, 2004). When considering the intersections of food and gender, some scholars assert that food is a feminist issue because of women's historical connection to it (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2008). Exchanges around food establish connections or distinctions between genders (Counihan, 1998). Food access and control also constitute sources of power for women and men.

While men are typically in charge of the purchase of food, women have significant leeway in food preparation (Counihan, 1998). McIntosh and Zey (1998) examine food production within the household and the role of women as gatekeepers. The concept of gatekeeper is connected to the idea that women are in charge of food supplies in the home. McIntosh and Zey (1998) argue that the more women produce valued goods, the more likely they are to wield power in society. Their findings reveal that women's position in relation to food is significant, despite the fact that men make the final decisions.

Research on food and gender in Africa uncovers comparable dynamics. For instance, Holtzman (2002) looks at politics and gastropolitics in pastoralist communities in Kenya and Sudan. The notion of gastropolitics refers to the daily distribution of food in the household. Holtzman (2002) explains that pastoral men highly depend on domestic food distribution and preparation, which is the realm of women. Elders who are afforded much power because of their age also depend on this distribution and are unaware of the quantities of food that are prepared when absent. Ultimately, Holtzman (2002) contends that food distribution sheds light on the links between domestic and



political realms. Similarly, Arnfred (2007) challenges the common idea that food-related tasks are connected to female subordination. She (2007) shows how skills in food preparation constitute a source of pride and agency for women in Mozambique. It allows them to gain authority in a society where the reliance on subsistence agriculture is significant. Because grain is kept in storage space to which older women have access, they control food supplies.

The aforementioned literature presents two problems. It focuses on food production and consumption and overlooks food distribution. When it examines food distribution, it frames it in domestic terms by circumscribing it to the household (Arnfred, 2007; Holtzman, 2002). I depart from this research by examining food distribution beyond the household and within the communal space of the market. I make the case for the political nature of food distribution here by discussing studies on African women traders. This strand of research is historical and falls under two categories.

The first strain demonstrates how food distribution allowed women to garner power in precolonial societies. Many scholars contend that trading staple food items was the domain of women before colonization (Ekechi, 1995; Falola, 1995). For instance, Amadiume (1987) argues that selling foodstuffs in the market was an activity reserved for Igbo women in precolonial Nigeria. She (1987) discusses the case of a few women who garnered wealth through trade, which allowed them to become “female husbands” who could secure women as wives (p. 46). This practice shows how prosperity in trade affairs allowed women to increase their political stature by acquiring wives.

The second category shows how food distribution was a source of struggle

between colonial and postcolonial authorities and African women. Glazer (1997) examines alcohol production, consumption, and distribution in Zambia. She (1997) shows that these three areas were dominated by women prior to colonization. Colonial authorities outlawed women's beer production and manufactured beer industrially. They also allowed men to control this domain, further marginalizing women. This trend was accentuated during postcolonial times when poor migrant women had no other choice but to distribute beer illegally as a way to survive in the city. Similarly, Ekechi (1995) shows how the colonial regime enabled men to encroach on the female-dominated distribution of palm oil and cassava in Nigeria. These studies (Ekechi, 1995; Glazer, 1997) place food distribution at the heart of politics by showing its appropriation by colons and male elites as a way to gain power. Gaps in the existing literature on women and peacebuilding and food and politics allow me to pose the following research question:

*RQ: How do market women frame their food distribution position in the Liberian peacebuilding era?*

## **Method**

**Discursive reworkings of gender in Liberia.** In order to understand the current position of market women in postconflict Liberia, information on gendered discourses is essential. Liberia is a West African nation with a total population of 3,786,764 and 882,000 people living in the capital city of Monrovia (CIA, 2011). Three periods of Liberian history need to be considered in regard to discursive reworkings of gender: the

Americo-Liberian period (1847-1980), the Samuel Doe period (1980-1990), and the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf era (2005-present).

The Americo-Liberian period corresponds to the inception of the nation. With the support of the American Colonization Society (ACS), freed American slaves established Liberia or “the land of the free” as the first African republic in 1847 (Sessay et al., 2009). Settlers formed an elite class by cutting themselves from the majoritarian indigenous population (Jaye, 2003). As a ruling class, they discriminated against indigenes and adopted Americo-Liberian national symbols that reinforced their control over the nation (Jaye, 2003). They also established attributes of civilization to distinguish themselves from autochthonous populations (Fraenkel, 1965). As stated by Shick (1980), “the settler intention was always to convince Africans to give up their traditional beliefs and values in favor of ‘Civilization and Christianity.’” (p. 60).

Because settlers could not assert superiority based on race, they emphasized education, Christianity, and manners (Moran, 1990). This historical period generated the “civilized/native” dichotomy used to distinguish those who were “civilized” or had gained “civilized” status from the “natives,” who remained uneducated. “Civilized” status for women was connected to a paternalistic conception of womanhood stemming from the American South that emphasized domesticity. In the nineteenth century, settlers’ wives sometimes wore elaborate gowns and gloves in public, a direct testimony to their “civilized” status. By contrast, “native” women wore traditional clothing and worked in farming or marketing. In the twentieth century, the civilized/native dichotomy became entrenched under the Americo-Liberian president, William Tubman (1944-

1971). Tubman in particular is notorious for setting the trend for men's top hats and tuxedos in Monrovia during this period, accentuating the divide between "civilized" and "natives" through clothing (Sirleaf, 2009).

The 1980s were marked by discursive transformation of the civilized/native dichotomy with the accession of Samuel Doe to power (1980-1989). Doe, who became the first indigenous president in 1985, fostered a return towards indigenous roots, favoring the "native" part of the civilized/nativity dichotomy. However, this return was fraught by contradiction (Moran, 2006). A military man lacking formal education, Doe also aspired to civilization, which made him a source of ridicule in the press and in Americo-Liberian circles (Moran, 2006).

Contradictions around "civilized" status at the state level also reflected broader tensions in Liberian society. Moran (1990) uncovers ambiguities surrounding the civilized/native dichotomy in rural Liberia at the time. She studied Glebo women of southeastern Liberia, noting that among this group "personal dress and comportment, etiquette, formal education, and religious instruction, all designed to produce a civilized person" (p. 65). In this sense, a "civilized" woman was not supposed to work and would be taken care of by a man. In this configuration, a "civilized" woman suffered indignity when she was forced to sell in the market due to economic hardship. This process was more demeaning if the woman started to wear the lappa or traditional garb, conventionally perceived as a market woman's attire.

Market women lacked the attributes of civilization amongst the Glebo because they had not received a formal education, wore the lappa, and most importantly, were

economically self-sufficient (Moran, 1990). They were caught in an intermediary space between “civilized” and “native” status. On the one hand, they wanted their children to attain “civilized” status through education. On the other hand, they took pride in working hard and sometimes taking the place of men in their households (Moran, 1990).

Contradictions around the civilized/native dichotomy were exacerbated in urban Monrovia. Civilization took on negative meanings as it became conflated with urban prostitution. “Civilized” women were seen as idle high school girls, wearing western-style clothing and trading sexual favors with married men for material benefits (Moran, 2006). In this sense, market women who lacked formal education and performed physical labor were viewed in a slightly more positive light than “civilized” women, equated with prostitutes. Although the Doe period somehow reshaped the civilized/native dichotomy, the fourteen-year Liberian war (1989-2003) was most decisive in changing this century-old discourse.

Poor women in general and market women in particular who were previously relegated at the margins of Liberian society gained prominence during the war. Faced with the collapse of social, economic, and political institutions, market women took on the role of food organization and distribution in Monrovia, negotiating with warlords and rebels in the process. These responsibilities led to a positive redefinition of market women’s role in postconflict Liberian society. This process may have been accentuated by the wartime exile of former Liberian elites, who had fostered the oppressive civilized/native pairing. The positive redefinitions of market women’s role and their regained sense of agency were most visible in the 2005 postwar election of Ellen

Johnson Sirleaf as Liberia's first woman president. Market women turned out in large numbers to vote for Sirleaf, whom they frame as their president. Since then, Sirleaf has been reelected for a second term in 2011 (2011-2017). She has emphasized her closeness to market women by drawing on her biography, in particular the fact that her grandmother was a rural market woman (Sirleaf, 2009). Affectionately called "Ma Ellen" by market women, the president often wears lappa ensembles and visits markets in Liberia.

Her administration has focused on encouraging self-confidence and empowerment in market women. This new discourse is also fostered by foreign entities who have pursued an aggressive, gender-mainstreaming agenda in postconflict Liberia. Fuest (2008) provides the following explanation for this strategy:

The significant level of external intervention in gender-related policies in Liberia is perhaps indicative of recent approaches to war-torn societies by the 'international community', whose concerns with international security have entailed a 'radicalisation of development. . . amounting to a commitment to transform societies as a whole'. (p. 218)

Illustrative of this discourse is the NEXT level program, which was initiated in Monrovia for the first time in 2011. The program sought to teach basic business skills to market women, taking them to the "next level" in society. The first module of the program was designed to teach market women self-confidence. The program also sought to redefine market women as "business women" and rewarded qualities, such as hard work, passion, positive attitude, and initiative taking.

The new discourse seems to have challenged previous classist perspectives on market women stemming from the foundational civilized/native discourse. However, remnants of the civilized/native discourse may persist in postconflict times, emerging in new configurations with the more recent women's empowerment discourse. This study examines how market women frame their roles in food distribution, mapping traces of the civilized/native discourse and the women's empowerment discourse in their understandings.

**African feminist ethnography.** Using African feminist theory (Amadiume, 1987; Mikell, 1997; Nnaemeka, 1998; Oyewùmí, 1997) I understand African feminist ethnography as a method to explore contemporary concerns in Africa. In terms of ontology, the method acknowledges the significance of survival in uncertain contexts. In the case of postconflict Liberia, it recognizes the primacy of food and peace in everyday life and practices. In terms of epistemology, I reckon the importance of recovering market women's understandings of food and peacebuilding. The language they use differs from dominant and officially sanctioned discourses. In terms of axiology, African feminist ethnography rejects the stereotype of women as war victims. Instead, it recognizes their resourcefulness and creativity as they hatch a livelihood in times of war and peace.

African feminist ethnography guided my fieldwork in Fiamah market, a food market in central Monrovia. Fiamah depends on the Liberian Marketing Association (LMA), an umbrella organization in charge of most Liberian markets since the seventies. The LMA plays a regulatory role over Fiamah vendors, who pay weekly fees

and abide by the rules of the organization in postconflict times. The market is administered by a superintendent and an assistant superintendent who oversee 250 to 300 vendors. Most vendors are women, with the exception of eight men. They sell staple food items including rice, beans, greens, and fresh and dry meat.

I initially contacted a market woman from Fiamah, through my connections at the Ministry of Gender and Development. A first visit allowed me to explain my project to the market superintendent and assistant superintendent and to the commodity leaders who are each in charge of supervising vendors selling one type of commodity. I received informal approval to conduct research and the information was passed along to the entire market. I conducted 100 hours of observation and 40 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Fiamah vendors from May to August 2011. Interviews included two parts. The first part encompassed questions about market women's economic activity in connection to war and peace times. The second part focused on market women's grassroots associations in the market. I also collected organizational documents, which included two LMA handbooks.

The market superintendent and his assistant allowed me to use their office for interviews, scheduled when they left for field trips or meetings at the LMA headquarters. During interviews, I explored understandings and practices associated with food and peace. I asked market women about the process of buying and distributing food during war and postconflict times as well as the particular meanings that food held for them. I also asked how their food-distribution activity contributed to peacebuilding, asking them to define peace in the process. Observations supplemented interviews by enabling me to



document daily food exchanges between market women and customers and gain a general sense of the market climate. With time, market women let me sell for them, which allowed me to further understand their daily routine. Finally, I accompanied some women in their periodic trips to Gobachop-Redlight, the biggest food market in Monrovia, in order to purchase goods in bulk.

**Data analysis.** I used a grounded theory approach to analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Charmaz, 2004). I initially engaged in open coding and in vivo coding. In accordance with open coding techniques, I coded transcripts in an unrestricted fashion by using sentences and words as units of analysis. I analyzed five to seven interviews at a time, by writing codes in the margins of transcripts. Research memos facilitated open coding and in vivo coding. The second step involved following focused coding conventions (Charmaz, 2004) by analyzing each new data set of five to seven interviews, in light of previous codes. As Charmaz (2004) indicated, “[b]y the time you engage in focused coding, you have decided which of your earlier codes make the most analytic sense and categorize your data most accurately and completely (p. 508). Focused coding allowed me to progressively reduce the number of codes, thanks to the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Finally, I combined codes under broader categories, establishing connections between them using axial coding. Throughout the analysis process, my fieldnotes helped contextualize meanings I inferred from interviews.

## **Analysis**

Market women framed their food distribution position in four ways: community keeping, physical work, maneuvering, and empowerment. Community keeping is defined as a responsibility to care for the poor. Physical work emphasizes the arduous nature of food distribution that requires bodily strength. Maneuvering depicts market women as navigators, whose mobility and special knowledge allow them to locate food in the postconflict landscape. Finally, empowerment focuses on how food distribution allows women to gain an advantage over men in the household.

**Community keeping.** Market women first position themselves as community keepers by framing food distribution as a responsibility for the whole community. They portray themselves as community guardians, a role that evolved from enabling people to survive during the war to bringing them quality and affordable food in the peacebuilding era. Ultimately, the community keeper position allows market women to emphasize their closeness to the “people” or urban poor of Monrovia and distance themselves from the elites in general and “civilized people” more specifically.

As women talked about the community keeper position, they focused on how they enabled people to survive in wartimes. Sianeh conveyed this sentiment by mentioning, “If the market women were not there, plenty people may have died. Because who will bring food? Who will supply the food to other people to eat?” Here, the term “people” calls for contextualization. During the war, “people” who remained in Liberia were viewed as individuals who were unable to flee due to several constraints, including material ones. Monrovia saw the afflux of many internally displaced persons (IDP), who

had lost all material possessions and joined the existing population of the urban poor. This reality informed the collective belief that Liberian elites who were rich had deserted the country and gone to “America,” leaving poor people to die behind. In this sense, Sianeh understood market women’s role as rescuing poor people.

Although governmental and foreign entities acknowledge market women as “poor,” women do not necessarily identify in this way. They feel slightly more privileged than “poor people” because of their economic activity. In this sense, they understand “the poor” as a category below them, characterized by an inability to make a living in any way. What connects market women to poor people is the sentiment that they share a common struggle: that of survival in urban Monrovia. This sense of kinship between market women and poor people is asserted in opposition to rich people. Based on these meanings, market women framed their role as one of rescue, evidenced by Sia:

[...] Not everybody is able to get up and go on that side and buy and come back. So you go, you buy, you come, you sell today, they buy it. It is important because I brought food for you to buy and protect your life. You are not able to go over there. So it was important to save everybody’s life.

Sia’s role went beyond simply selling food items during wartime to “protect your life.” This phrase refers to starvation that threatened people in a time of food scarcity. It is also an allusion to the risk of being killed if one ventured outside to look for food. The ever-present risk of death informed market women’s rescue mission. Anna stated,

A fact is we go and bring food, and people buy and live with it. God blessed people and they survived. Because if you don’t eat today, you don’t eat

tomorrow; you will be draining down. So we market women are important in society, because we bring food, people buy it, they live, they survive with it.

“Draining down” means losing weight and strength due to starvation, a common occurrence during war. Anna acknowledged that individuals would have drained down and eventually died without market women. The deaths of children deeply concerned women and provided further justification for market women’s community keeper role. Anna added:

People died from hunger in 1990. Many of them and their children died in their houses [...] Because they were scared to get out, so market women are very important, because we help. God came first, and we came second.

Alluded to in this quotation is the first Liberian war (1989-1996) and the year 1990, a particularly arduous one. The deaths of children left a deep imprint on market women, many of whom were mothers, and framed the community keeper role as a protective one. Michelle mentioned: “Yeah, they [market women] were important because they were doing it [bringing food] for those that didn’t have food in their house so that they would be able to buy it and bring it to their children to eat.” In a similar vein, Fortee recalled:

If we were lazy and didn’t sell in the wartime, then the children would have died. [...] if you are an adult and don’t eat, you are able to survive, but small children are not able to survive, they can last two days. They are weak.

Community keeping was accentuated by the collapse of social, economic, and political institutions. At the market level, this involved the dissolution of the LMA, The LMA had been in charge of regulating food pricing and quality.

The LMA's disintegration during the war put market women in charge of food organization and regulation. Many women related how they directed customers to form lines in the market if they wanted to buy food. They also rationed food by selling limited quantities to people so that each person could have something to eat. If, in practice, someone with enough money could buy as much food as s/he wanted, market women did not allow it. Fortee explained, "When you say, 'I want 7 cups,' I say, 'I can give you 3 cups.' The other person's got to eat too. So everybody can buy a small quantity." When confronted with people wanting to "buy everything," Adelaine said, "You say, 'No, everybody just has to survive.'" In this sense, the community keeper role included rationing food sold in the market during wartimes. Market women depicted this role as going beyond the mere pursuit of profit to enable people to survive.

Community keeping continues during postconflict times and encompasses new activities. Although concern for helping people survive has receded, it has been replaced with making them "satisfied" or content. Making customers "satisfied" implies the provision of food that is both affordable and of good quality. Lydia, a meat vendor, shared the affordability concern:

Not everybody can [go] to the Lebanese people and go buy it [meat] because they don't have the money. So we have to go there and get it from them and

bring it. Cut it piece by piece, to make it affordable for them, to get the little money. If we don't do that, there will be no eating.

Lebanese immigrants are highly integrated into the food-distribution business in Liberia, supplying frozen meat to market women. Of significance here is providing affordable meat to all, and more specifically, to poor people who have "little money." In this sense, market women still understood the community keeper role as one of helping less fortunate individuals than them. Besides from affordability, the women also focused on the provision of quality food items. Frida, a meat vendor, shared this point in a simple yet powerful way: "The meat is fine; I eat it, it is good. So I sell it for everybody to eat it. It is not bad meat; it is good meat." Like Frida, many other market women expressed satisfaction at the idea of selling "good" or quality food and knowing that it would be cooked and eaten.

Ultimately, "satisfying" customers also "satisfied" market women. Lurpu, a fish vendor expressed this thought:

The fish that we are selling, you know sometimes, it satisfies people [...] The fish that we are selling, people like it. That is why I love selling fish. Because they really buy fish in the market more than any other things.

At the heart of the community keeping role are protective and caring qualities that cast market women as guardians of the urban poor in the peacebuilding era. By framing themselves in this light, market women subtly distance themselves from "civilized people" who are perceived as uncaring and selfish. Understandings of womanhood are

embedded in “native” status as they emphasize solidarity between struggling people who are united against the elite.

**Physical work.** Besides community keeping, market women also define food distribution as physical work. They underline their ability to perform arduous work under dangerous and inclement conditions in times of war and peace. This positioning allows them to frame themselves as necessary laborers in the peacebuilding era and set themselves apart from “book business” or intellectual labor, reserved for “civilized” people. The image of food distribution as arduous emerges from wartime accounts. As Lydia shared:

We used to go [to get food] without cars. We walk in the morning; at this time there was no motorbike in Liberia. We walk in the morning to go, and we walk to come back. That load will be on your head, you walk, walk, walk, you set the load down, you rest. You pick it up, you put it on your head again, you walk, walk walk, you come back. Just for you to be able to supply the other people with food, because other people couldn't go there.

This story emphasizes the physical prowess of market women during wartimes. It echoed many others, in which the absence of transportation during war prompted women to walk relentlessly for hours to find food in various markets. Coming back was most difficult as Lydia mentioned the “load” or goods that women had to carry on their heads. The emphasis on physical exploits is also salient in this excerpt in which Evelyn related crossing a body of water to purchase food:

I went with my friend to get food. We went to Redlight<sup>32</sup> to buy oil, but we couldn't find it at all. So I told my friend, "Let's go where other people are going for food." We went somewhere where you have to cross big water.<sup>33</sup> They had floaters there and it cost 100 dollars for each. I told my friend, "Let's lie down on the floaters." But when I lay down, the floater leaned towards the water. The boy in charge of the floaters said, "Lie down in the center." We crossed the water, we paid 100 dollars. We went across to Duala.<sup>34</sup> We bought food, and we came back to our side.

Evelyn remembered a challenging wartime episode, during which she crossed the Mesurado River that runs through Monrovia to access Duala, an area where food was available. Food distribution was not only difficult but dangerous as Evelyn almost drowned during this endeavor.

The emphasis on danger makes market women's physical accomplishments even more spectacular. Lydia also recalled, "There were some areas where fighters were fighting, where men couldn't go. Women went in to get food and buy it for other people to buy." The fact that women went into dangerous areas that men could not access is noteworthy in itself. It signals a shift from prewar Liberia in which men tended to be archetypal figures of courage. Encountering combatants was a regular occurrence that could be deadly. Fortee reported, "We were selling outside the building here, two soldier men came from this side, they stood right in front of a store and started shooting." In an

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<sup>32</sup> Redlight market.

<sup>33</sup> Deep water.

<sup>34</sup> Duala market.



interesting parallel, war metaphors infiltrated the way market women framed themselves, as illustrated by the frequent use of the verb “fight” to describe food distribution during wartimes. The women’s “fight” for food mirrored the men’s fight for power.

This image of market women as fighters is not necessarily a war-specific one as women have historically been framed as warriors in some parts of Liberia. For instance, the Glebo people of southeastern Liberia depict women as warriors in childbirth (Moran, 1990). Such historical meanings contribute to market women’s portrayal as their work as fighters in regards to food affairs, a traditionally female realm. In this vein, war merely reactivated latent cultural meanings of female pugnacity.

In postconflict times, food distribution continues to be framed as physical work and inclement conditions have replaced wartime danger. Meryl shared, “For example, a morning like today, a rainy morning, some people are in bed and don’t want to go anywhere. But we jump in the rain, we go, we buy food and bring it, we sell it.” Present in Meryl’s statement is the idea that market women work in the rain, which can be particularly heavy in Liberia. The rain is notorious for interrupting many daily activities and constitutes a culturally acceptable excuse for not working. When waiting for market women to conduct interviews on rainy days, I was told that they would be late or absent “because of the rain.” The fact that market women “jump in the rain” to find food constitutes a physical exploit in itself. Mustella recounted:

We can fight hard. When it is raining, we get under it, we go look for food, and we bring it for other people who are not able to look for it, for them to be able to get it because everybody is not able to go and sell.

Her narration illuminates the combative qualities of market women through the “we can fight hard” iteration. To illustrate this idea, Mustella indicates how women do not hesitate to “get under” the rain to purchase food and bring it to customers.

The figure of market women emerging from these accounts emphasizes their physicality and casts them in opposition to “civilized” people, a group implicitly acknowledged by Marie:

Some people are not able to work; they are not able to sell how we are selling.

They are not able to walk for a long distance, but some of us can walk. So some of them will stay in the house.

Highlighted here is the fact that “civilized” people are soft and incapable of physical labor. “Stay[ing] in the house” is connected to the domesticity of “civilized” women, who can leisurely stay indoors without having to perform physical work. Ultimately, market women describe their physical abilities in a biologically deterministic way.

“Civilized” people are unfit for physical labor because of a natural deficiency. The fact that “civilized” people and more generally the elite cannot perform physical work casts market women as necessary laborers in the peacebuilding era. By contrast, “civilized” women can devote their time to “book business.” As Edwina mentioned, “some people know book, and as for us, we don’t know book. So we sell.” Positioning food distribution as physical labor reinscribes the oppressive nature of “native” status. It

conveys the idea that market women can only perform physical work and not intellectual endeavors. However, this negative positioning is countered by the third theme of maneuvering.

**Maneuvering.** Market women depict food distribution as maneuvering requiring mobility and knowledge that only they possess. In the process, they feature Liberian elites as immobile and unaware of the food distribution circuit. An important idea is the notion of “bringing food,” which requires extensive mobility. If wartimes created obstacles for market women trying to locate and distribute food, postconflict times are equally challenging. Women focused on the difficulties of accessing food in a postconflict landscape characterized by damaged infrastructure.

Although Fiamah market women’s economic activity was confined to Monrovia, they were aware that the food they purchased came from the “interior,” or the rural areas. The women depicted the “interior” as a remote and almost mythical location that only market women could access. The following exchange I had with Lydia illustrates this idea:

Lydia: Market women are doing a lot because without us, the country will go nowhere. Because we are responsible for bringing in food. Other than us sitting on the table, there are other market women who do border marketing. They go far away to other countries to bring things into the country.

Interviewer: They are the ones bringing food?

Lydia: Yes, except for a few men who go up in the interior. Market women go up in the interior, look for it, and bring it in the city. Without them, no rural country food will be available in the city.

Lydia affirms that market women travel beyond Monrovia to rural areas and neighboring countries to purchase food items. Fiamah market women differed from the women Lydia mentioned because they did not leave Monrovia. However, they still emphasized their significance in “bringing” food to customers by going to Gobachop-Redlight market, framed as a remote and difficult urban terrain to access.

During the last few years, Gobachop-Redlight has grown to become one of the biggest distributors’ market in Monrovia. Its extensive size, combined with a wide concentration of people, has made its reputation as a high selling point and a breeding ground for criminality. In the Monrovia collective imagery, Gobachop-Redlight connotes a place where respectable and refined women do not wander. It is seen as a dirty and dangerous space, where shrewdness is required to survive. Market women amplified these meanings by depicting themselves as savvy business people who were fit to navigate Gobachop-Redlight.

Their physical mobility, which enabled them to locate food in remote areas, stood in contrast to the immobility of “office people.” The term “office people” is widely applied to wage workers and is generally performed by the elite in general and “civilized” individuals in particular. Market women depicted office work as sedentary in nature as Lydia explained: “Everybody will not leave their office and go in the interior to look for food. Somebody just needs to go there to bring it for them to buy it.” Lydia

invokes the difference between market women and “office people,” who are framed as immobile, and more implicitly as helpless.

This idea of helplessness was conveyed specifically when market women framed themselves as possessing secret knowledge. For instance, Sianeh indicated:

They [customers] don't know the secrets we know about buying. They are not able to go and bring it [food] I can go in the corner corner, I go there, I check it, I buy it, I bring it, I sell it and customers buy it. As a customer, you don't know it, and you can't buy it. Market women know all the secrets; they know all the corners, where to get it from. But if you are a buyer, you don't know where to get it from; you only come in the market.

Sianeh highlighted the secret knowledge that market women hold and that customers lack. The phrase “I can go in the corner corner” directly speaks to this idea as it frames market work as an almost clandestine activity occurring in corners cloistered from public view.

Secret food knowledge is presented as the domain of market women. Sia talked about this knowledge, which helped her recognize and find rice during wartimes:

Some people don't know rice. When we went, we planted rice. Some of them couldn't see it; they couldn't know it because they didn't know how it grows. Don't you get it? But me, when I saw it, I knew it because I grew up in the interior.

Sia's rural heritage served as the source of her knowledge. She spoke with pride about her background:

Some people don't know. Because some people don't know the bush. Like me I was in the bush before coming in the city, I have an idea about it. I know how to walk in the bush, I know about the bush, I study about the bush. So I know but some people don't know.

Sia depicted herself as a "country woman," visible in her general knowledge of the "bush" and more specifically of the rice growing cycle. She put this knowledge to use when she planted rice during the war, which connects her to farm work and illuminates her "native" status.

"Native" women have historically been defined through farm and market work in Liberian society. Noteworthy is the fact that Sia redefines the previously negative category of "native" in a positive way by showing how her rural roots allowed her to find food. In this sense, pride associated with "native" status seems to be a consequence of war during which knowledge of the rural world helped women to scavenge or find food and hide from soldiers and rebels. In this sense, the maneuvering position depicts "native" status in a positive light.

**Empowerment.** Finally, market women frame food distribution as an activity that enables them to become empowered in their households. This sense of empowerment stems from wartime experiences of increased female responsibility that help women articulate the significance of their role in the household. Their definition of empowerment is close to Western understandings as they frame it as complete equality between women and men. I argue that this definition derives from the dominant

women's empowerment discourse of the Sirleaf era that has become vernacularized in micro-level understandings and practices.

As market women talked about relationships with men within the household, they described how war had changed prewar gender dynamics. Talking about prewar Liberia, Dekontee said:

Yes, because before the war, we were not working; men were working. We only used to go to school. We never experienced hard times. We didn't know what hard times meant during the Tubman administration and the Doe administration. I can still remember that I was not providing food money for myself; I was not paying school money for myself.

Liberian women were not used to working before the war as men were the primary breadwinners of the household. While Dekontee's more privileged background partially explains why she did not work before the war, her reply still hints at a shift in gender dynamics, brought about by the war or "hard times."

During this period, men could no longer go outside to work because they could be drafted as combatants or mistaken for fighters for an opposite faction and killed. This explains why women performed the role of sole breadwinners of the household. Mustella recalled the risks men faced when venturing out of the home:

Yeah, sometimes, they can beat you [men]. Sometimes, they can take you, all those things. So the men stayed inside with the children; then you the woman, you went out. You looked for it [food], you brought it back.

As highlighted by this quotation, danger restrained men's mobility and circumscribed it to the house. This situation left women in general and market women in particular with little choice but to venture outside to look for food. It generated a reversal of gender roles as men stayed with children at home while women went outside. Like Mustella, Adelaine reported:

During the wartime, the people [combatants] were aiming at the men. If you are a man, the people [combatants] will say, "Oh, you are a rebel" or "reconnaissance," they can catch you and kill you for that. For that reason the men were living indoors, you know, and we went and looked for food.

War experiences placed increased responsibilities on market women, buttressing their sense of empowerment in postconflict times. Women's economic activity solidified this position by enabling them to contribute to the household as much and sometimes more than men.

This reality can be explained by the lack of work opportunities for men in postconflict Liberia. Martha, a widow, conveyed this sentiment:

If my husband were alive, he would go to work; sometimes he would work for L\$1500 a month. What can he do with that money? I put my market on the table, and by the time I go home, I will get L\$1000. L\$1000 just for one day. So at the end of the month how much do you think I can get? I am also in three susu groups and get L\$3000 from them. So at the end of the month, won't my salary be more than his salary? So with this money, we send the children to school, we pay the children's school fees, we pay rent, we pay for health expenses.



Martha highlighted how men who lacked formal education cannot find employment.

Like Martha, Lurpu illuminated the difficulties that men encountered in the postconflict landscape:

Men are not making enough money because the job business is hard. So men are not making enough money. You get small money from the little things you sell in the market, you help. That is how we do it. We the market women.

Many market women were the sole financial earners in the household because their boyfriends or husbands could not find work. When available, work for men usually entailed providing security for businesses and companies that did not pay well. By contrast, market work could rapidly provide income alternatives for women. A self-starting enterprise, it just necessitated purchasing a table spot at a local market and initial capital.

When women talked about their financial contributions to the household, they framed it in terms of equality. Mustella claimed:

Your husband is making money; he is bringing 5 dollars. Yourself, you are going in the market; you are bringing 5 dollars. The two of you put it together. Yeah, so men can't take advantage of you easily.

Through the "5 dollars" example, Mustella highlights the fact that both women and men contribute equally to the household. This puts women in a position of power, as men cannot "take advantage of you easily." In this sense, the fact that women gained economic empowerment allowed them to renegotiate gender relationships at home. In an

almost similar manner, Lurpu stated: “My husband brings 5 dollars, I bring 5 dollars, we put it together, we decide what to do. We pay children’s school fees, we pay the rent.”

These views of equality are directly influenced by a broader women’s empowerment discourse fostered in the Sirleaf era. One of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf’s 2005 campaign slogans was “what men can do, women can do better.” During my fieldwork, I noticed that some market women had adopted this phrase or variations of it because it had become a part of their everyday language. Market women seemed to be particularly receptive to women’s empowerment discourse because of their historical and cultural vantage point. Urban market women have conventionally taken care of large households in Monrovia, including men partners. In this sense, the culture of strong female matriarchs had been normalized within these households, and the women’s empowerment discourse provided a template onto which the women simply transferred their practices.

The direct connection between market women’s micro-level understandings of equality and the dominant women’s empowerment discourse was most evident in my interview with Dekontee:

More men respect their women now. And our president is opening women’s eyes to education, to business. So now men know the importance of women. Before that, men used to beat women, but now you can’t really find that. Under this president, this regime, this administration, men can’t beat women like that. Even if we have a child and you happen to leave me, she [the president] will force you to support that child. You can’t just leave like that. Also, if we build a house and

we don't get married. If we have a four-room house, you take two rooms, I take two rooms, to be able to sustain the child and me. But before that, during the war nobody was doing it. Nobody had time for women. But for now, things are really okay, things are very very okay.

In an almost exaggerated manner, Dekontee describes gender-equality policies and practices implemented in the Sirleaf era, including splitting a four-room house in half. This quotation shows how women's empowerment discourse now serves as a referent for market women. The women invoke this discourse in everyday life to make sense of their own micro-level practices, including equal financial contribution in the household. If in practice market women have been equal contributors for a long time, this discourse now gives them the opportunity to consciously articulate and justify this position.

### **Discussion**

This chapter explored how market women framed their food distribution activities in the peacebuilding era. The themes of community keeping, physical work and maneuvering deployed the civilized/native discourse in various ways. However, the theme of empowerment was connected to a more recent women's empowerment discourse. Market women portrayed themselves as community keepers by highlighting how they enabled people to survive during wartime. In postconflict times, community keeping was exemplified through the provision of food that was both affordable and of good quality. Market women also presented food distribution as physical work. This framing emerged out of wartime accounts of physical prowess under dangerous circumstances. In postconflict times, food distribution continued to be depicted as

physical work accomplished under inclement conditions. Maneuvering emphasized the mobility and special knowledge of market women that allowed them to retrieve and sell food in postconflict times.

The theme of physical work amplified oppressive meanings associated with “native” status by depicting market women as laborers in the peacebuilding era. By contrast, themes of maneuvering and community keeping emphasized the shrewdness of market women and their solidarity with the urban poor, conferring on them the status of “native” heroines. The theme of empowerment depicted food distribution as an activity that enabled market women to gain empowerment in the household. It was most directly connected to the recent women’s empowerment discourse of the Sirleaf administration and specifically to the notion of equality between women and men.

In terms of theoretical contributions, this chapter adds to research on women and peacebuilding and on food and politics. It unveils the significance of micro economic practices and more specifically food distribution in connection to peacebuilding. Findings show how market women’s understandings and contributions to peacebuilding are directly connected to their ability to feed people. In this perspective, food often absent from dominant scholarship on formal and informal peacebuilding proves essential to assess where civil society stands in the peacebuilding process. The chapter conveys this point by fleshing out connections between discontentment or contentment expressed towards food and times of disruption or stability.

The chapter also adds to existing literature on food and politics, which has tended to focus on food preparation and consumption and overlook food distribution. I make the

case for the political nature of food distribution by showing how themes of community keeping, physical work, maneuvering, and empowerment inform us on power relationships in the postconflict landscape. Micro-level understandings of food distribution are directly connected to broader class and gender dynamics in the peacebuilding era. In this sense, meanings of food distribution inform us on broader discursive negotiations at the state level.

In terms of practical implications, the chapter highlights potential gaps between micro-understandings of peacebuilding and policy elaborated at the governmental and international level. It shows how individuals closest to the margins like market women emphasize survival in their framing of peace. In doing so, it encourages policy makers to design policy which fully integrates food. Regarding limitations, I did not have the opportunity to interview market customers. This group could have provided insight on food preparation and consumption, thus providing an additional layer to understandings of food and peacebuilding.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

In the introductory chapter of this dissertation, I explained how external constituencies imposed meanings on Liberian market women, leaving them little to no possibility for self-definition and expression. This process began with the inception of the Liberian nation, during which market women were defined as “native” women. “Native” status connoted lack of education and manners and was constructed in opposition to “civilized” status that encompassed education, proper manners, and Christianity. Such a definitional process continued in the postconflict Liberian context marked by the two presidential terms of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (2005-2017). Although the Sirleaf administration redefined market women in a positive light, little was known of how market women talked about themselves and their roles in postconflict Liberian society. This paradox was the starting point of my dissertation, which explored market women’s micro-level understandings and practices as related to peacebuilding. At the heart of this work was the desire to recover the women’s micro-world and their voices. In the process, I acknowledged that dominant discourses may infiltrate this micro-world.

I used food distribution as an anchor point to understand market women’s understandings and practices. Ultimately, I argued that the women sustained peace through their organizations and practices in the context of markets. I examined organizations by focusing on grassroots structures, which sustain food distribution through the provision of financial capital. I also looked at food distribution in itself and

at how market women made sense of it in the peacebuilding era. In this last chapter, I provide a summary of my findings, followed by implications. Finally, I feature future research avenues.

### **Summary of Findings**

This dissertation was based on 40 in-depth semi-structured interviews and 100 hours of observation conducted in Fiamah market located in central Monrovia. A daily food market, Fiamah is affiliated with the Liberian Marketing Association (LMA), an umbrella organization overseeing most Liberian markets since the seventies. The LMA, which disintegrated during the war and reformed in the aftermath of the conflict, plays a regulatory function over Fiamah vendors in postconflict times. They pay weekly fees to the LMA and abide by the rules of the organization. Fiamah market encompasses 250 to 300 vendors, a majority of whom are women with the exception of eight male vendors. My interviews were divided in two parts: the first one examined meanings and practices associated with food distribution and peacebuilding while the second part focused on market women's grassroots organizations called susu groups.

Susu groups pool money on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis by collecting membership dues from susu members, putting the money together, and distributing the lump sum to one person at a time. Susu groups typically have a leader called the *susu mother*, or *susu ma*, and several members. The groups perform complex financial operations, allowing members to double, triple, quadruple, or quintuple their dues and receive a proportional return on their investments. In postconflict times, market women rely on their susu money to purchase goods necessary to maintain their food business.

Observations supplemented interviews by allowing me to grasp the general climate of the market and interactions amongst market women and between the women and their customers. I also observed susu group activity in the market on a daily basis. I conducted observations during several days of the week, often seating with market women at their stalls as they sold food items to customers. With time, I gained a more active role as I sold for the women occasionally. I contextualized interviews and observations by examining organizational documents secured during fieldwork. These documents included two LMA handbooks for the years 1999 and 2010 and the trainer's manual for the NEXT business program, which taught basic business skills to market women in Monrovia in 2011.

As explained in Chapter II, I used African feminist ethnography as a theoretical and methodological lens. My specific topic, which explored survival issues such as food and violent conflict in West Africa, warranted an equally specific lens. It justified the design of African feminist ethnography that draws on insights from African feminist theory (Amadiume, 1987; Mikell, 1997; Nnaemeka, 1998; Oyewù mí, 1997) and feminist ethnography (Abu-Lughod, 1990, 1993; Lengel, 1998; Pillow & Mayo, 2007). Some African feminists have long discussed pressing issues that shape women's lives in contemporary African societies, including endemic poverty, disease, conflict, and globalization (Mikell, 1997). These concerns make for feminisms grounded in praxis and informed my African feminist ethnographic lens. I also drew on insights from feminist ethnography, which has given significant attention to self-reflectivity as well as rapports of power between ethnographers and the communities they study. I argue that



these topics are particularly salient as we consider African women who have often been victimized by both scholars and the general public. In terms of ontology, African feminist ethnography is concerned by volatile contexts, where questions of survival dominate. In this sense, it understands that daily practices including organizing directly stem from these contexts. Uncertain contexts in general and postconflict contexts in particular also pose epistemological questions.

Recovering knowledge proves difficult given the destruction of material evidence by war as well as trauma experienced by people. These issues are compounded by cultures of secrecy in Liberia and Sierra Leone. This explains why African feminist ethnography follows traces and fully incorporates absence, silence and detour. For instance, I recognized that market women would use food-related terminology to describe their peacebuilding role or would not always acknowledge what they were doing as peacebuilding. In terms of axiology, African feminist ethnography rejects the dominant stereotype of African women as victims of war. Instead, it focuses on the resourcefulness of women and the solidarity they deploy in times of war and peace.

Chapter IV and Chapter V illuminated different aspects of susu groups. Chapter IV explored the impact of the civil war (1989-2003) on susu group organizing practices in postconflict times, while chapter V focused on how the groups negotiated invisibility and visibility in postconflict times.

Chapter IV uncovered three postconflict organizing practices: legitimization, amplification, and contraction. Wartime memories were used to legitimize susu group existence in postconflict times by featuring ideal conditions of existence out of accounts

of disintegration. At the individual level, susu members talked about the wartime focus on survival rather than saving money. At the collective level, displacement and distrust hindered the functioning of susu groups during wartime. Consequently, ideal conditions for susu group existence included a focus on saving money, stability, and trust.

Wartime memories also shaped the practice of amplification, which pushed trust at the forefront of susu group organizing while other elements receded in the background. Susu groups reshaped trust by deploying definitional elements stemming from wartime. This definition served as the basis of amplification, which found expression through the creation and sustenance of susu groups in postconflict times. Only trustworthy individuals could establish a susu group and become susu mas. Similarly, susu members used trust as a criterion to grant access to the groups. Finally, war memories also engendered contraction or an inward focus of susu groups in postconflict times. Memories of money extortions entrenched the groups into rigid boundaries. Wartime experiences with Nigerian susu men in particular solidified gender and nationality as dominant features of susu group organizing. The groups also cut themselves from official banking institutions.

Chapter V focused on how susu groups negotiated invisibility and visibility in postconflict Liberia. Findings showed that this negotiation occurred at three levels: the temporal, the relational, and the structural. At the temporal level, susu groups existed in the everyday, marked by the routine nature of daily, punctual monetary collections. The groups made themselves visible under exceptional circumstances, which occurred when a susu member stopped making payments. However, the passage from the everyday to

the exceptional was not systematic, as susu groups considered the number of days of infraction.

At the relational level, susu groups emphasized secrecy based on trust and characterized by silent interactions. In the visible, the relational basis shifted to procedure, which emphasized neutrality and written communication. The transition from visibility to invisibility was facilitated by talk, both connoted positively and negatively. At the structural level, the susu groups were typical African women's organizations, stemming from the dual-sex principle of organizing. However, the market office, which was visible, reflected official structures in the postconflict context. In their move from the visible to the invisible, the susu groups deployed structural mechanisms embedded at both leadership and membership levels.

Chapter VI explored how market women framed food distribution in the peacebuilding era and uncovered four themes: community keeping, physical work, maneuvering, and empowerment. Themes of community keeping, physical work and maneuvering deployed the civilized/native discourse differently. However, the theme of empowerment was connected to a more recent women's empowerment discourse. Market women portrayed themselves as community keepers by highlighting how they enabled people to survive during war. In postconflict times, community keeping was exemplified by the provision of food that was affordable and of good quality. Market women also presented food distribution as physical work. This framing was carved out of wartime accounts of physical prowess under danger. In postconflict times, food distribution continued to be depicted as physical work accomplished under inclement

conditions. Maneuvering emphasized the mobility and special knowledge of market women that allowed them to retrieve and sell food in postconflict times. The theme of physical work amplified oppressive meanings associated with “native” status by depicting market women as laborers in the peacebuilding era. By contrast, themes of maneuvering and community keeping emphasized the shrewdness of market women and their solidarity with the urban poor, conferring them the status of “native” heroines. The theme of empowerment depicted food distribution as an activity that enabled market women to gain empowerment in the household. It was directly connected to the women’s empowerment discourse of the Sirleaf era and specifically to the notion of equality between women and men.

### **Implications**

Findings of the dissertation yield several implications for organizational communication and peace studies. In regards to organizational communication, findings add to the three following areas: context and organizing, invisible organizing, and feminist organizational communication. As we consider context and organizing, this study sheds light on organizing in the aftermath of tragedy and trauma. Although organizational communication scholars have considered such contexts, their insights remain limited in space, time, and orientation. Studies tend to focus on the American context and look at environmental and natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina. This strain of research frames tragic events as punctual occurrences spanning from the moment they strike to their immediate aftermath. In this sense, there is no long-time orientation as tragedy is addressed and erased shortly after it strikes. These mechanistic

understandings simplify the complexity of the past, which continues to affect societies years after. I contend that traces or residues of tragedy subsist long after traumatic events, insidiously lodging themselves in everyday life, including organizing practices. Although organizational members depict a return to normalcy after tragedy, their organizations and practices are never exactly how they used to be.

Chapter IV directly speaks to this idea by examining the pervasive nature of war experiences that weigh heavily on postconflict organizing practices. Findings for this chapter highlight the potency of memories of disruption and distrust on postconflict organizing. I contend that tragedy affects both discursive and material levels of organizing. Discursively, tragic events modify organizational narratives by either amplifying or minimizing certain elements. For instance, susu groups emphasized the element of trust because of widespread distrust experienced during wartimes. Materially, tragedy as the potential to dismantle organizational structures and annihilate the willingness of individuals to join organizations. For instance, war memories engendered postconflict susu groups that tended to be more exclusionary than their prewar counterparts. Chapter IV encourages us to explore organizing practices in traumatized communities differently than before by adopting a long-term temporal orientation instead of a short-term one. In regards to this suggestion, the Liberian case is telling as my fieldwork occurred eight years after the war (1989-2011). Yet, the war was still to be felt.

The dissertation also adds to nascent organizational communication scholarship on invisible or clandestine organizing (Stohl & Stohl, 2011). Chapter V specifically

addresses organizational invisibility and visibility and constitutes a first empirical study on the topic. Stohl and Stohl (2011) provide a conceptual starting point to address these questions. However, their argument is embedded in a western logic that frames invisible organizations as negative and malevolent structures. This view is evidenced by the focus on terrorist types of organizations to support the invisibility thesis. I argue that assumptions of malevolence need to be nuanced when considering African contexts. Scholars have acknowledged secrecy as a dominant organizational principle in Liberia and Sierra Leone. In this vein, secrecy has structured many organizations aiming for individual and collective good. Market women's susu groups drew on the secrecy principle to foster economic empowerment in the postconflict period. In this sense, these structures provide a counterexample to Stohl and Stohl's (2011) argument, encouraging us to consider invisibility in a more positive light and more specifically as a refuge for marginal groups. This means that invisibility provides the possibility for oppressed groups to shield themselves from predatory organizational structures.

Chapter V also challenges the rigid dichotomy between invisibility and visibility, often treated as separate and discrete realms. In such a perspective, invisible organizations are cut from official power structures, which are depicted as oppositional. I highlight points of junction between invisibility and visibility by conceptualizing an intermediary space between both. For instance, susu groups often interacted with official structures. This was achieved by manipulating market authority, diverted from its original function of regulation and control to serve susu groups. Ultimately, findings focus on the negotiation of invisibility and visibility, which is fraught with tension.

Finally, susu groups as organizations are an integral part of African women's micro worlds and add to feminist organizational communication. My essay in Chapter II fleshed out the contributions of an African feminist perspective to dominant feminist organizational communication approaches. During the last few years, this body of work has countered the bias towards oppressive masculinist organizations. Instead, it has focused on more equalitarian organizations, based on feminist values. However, this strain of research is still embedded in white American women's rationalities. Although it focuses for fairer organizing, it still largely excludes a majority of poor women's organizations.

I address this issue by studying susu groups that function with no material resources. While doing so, I make the case for the incorporation of poor women's organizations in feminist organizational communication. Women's ways of organizing in poor communities may be counterintuitive to feminist organizational communication findings. For instance, the imperative of survival may reduce or suppress the expression of voice, perceived as necessary to equalitarian organizing by feminist organizational scholars. In this sense, this dissertation encourages feminist organizational communication to revise many of its assumptions.

Not only does this research contribute to organizational communication but also to peace studies. Chapter VI sheds most insight on the topic and counters dominant approaches to peacebuilding. Scholarship has tended to conceptualize peacebuilding as a formal process, emphasizing the full cognition of social actors as they participate in peacebuilding activities and practices. I revise these assumptions by showing how

peacebuilding occurs away from official negotiation tables, in informal market settings. I contend that market women frame their peacebuilding practices through the lens of food distribution. Although they may not have an overt goal of peace on the surface, they contribute to its sustenance by providing food to the community on a daily basis. In such a perspective, food often absent from dominant scholarship on peace is essential to assess where civil society stands in the peacebuilding process. I convey this idea by illuminating relationships between discontentment or contentment expressed towards food and times of disruption or stability. After providing a summary of findings and highlighting implications, I propose future research avenues.

### **Research avenues**

A first one pertains to expanding the geographic scope of my project. I conducted research in Fiamah, an area of Monrovia where food was scarce during wartimes. Fiamah is located away from the Freeport area of Monrovia, corresponding to the port of Monrovia. During the war, food items were stocked in the port. This meant that markets in close proximity of the port tended to be better supplied than markets that were more remote in location. In this sense, experiences of food scarcity may have been more significant for Fiamah market women than for market women who were close to the Freeport area. Examining markets in this vicinity would allow me to nuance some of my findings pertaining to access and availability of food. A second research avenue is connected to the inclusion of market customers in the study. This group can shed light on the significance of markets and market women during wartimes and provide a more complete understanding of food as connected to peacebuilding. Interviewing market



customers could also provide insight on processes of food preparation and consumption during war and peacetimes. Finally, a future research avenue pertains to the comparison of market women's organizations in postconflict Liberia and postconflict Côte d' Ivoire. As illuminated in this dissertation through the case of the susu groups, market women's organizations in postconflict Liberia tend to be informal. By contrast, market women's organizations in postconflict Côte d' Ivoire tend to be formal. A comparison could help us understand why market women's structures differ in both countries.

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APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Date, time and location of interview:

Demographic information

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Professional occupation:
4. Family status:
5. Number of children:
6. Ethnicity (?)

**Interview questions**

**Questions about selling food**

1. How long have you been selling food in the market?
2. How and where do you get the food from?
3. Were you selling food in the market during the war? If yes, move on to question 4, 5 and 6. If no, move on to question 7.
4. Can you talk about your experience selling food in the market during the war? Did you sell food in a different way? What is the difference between the market before and after the war?
5. How did you adapt to the war? Did you have to change anything about the way you sold food?
6. Was it easy to get access to food during the war?
7. Do you feel that life in the market is easier/better for you after the war ended? Why or why not?
8. Can you talk about selling food today?

9. Have there been times when food was scarce? Could you tell me about a specific time? What was it like? What happened?"
10. What does peace in Liberia mean to you? Has the end of the war made your business easier? How do you feel in the market after the end of the war?
11. Is the food that you sell important for peace in Monrovia and Liberia? Why or why not?
12. What do market women selling food do for peace?
13. What do you want from peace as a market woman?

### **Questions about susu groups**

1. How long have you been a member or a leader of the susu?
2. If you had to describe the susu to someone unfamiliar with it, how would you describe it to that person?
3. Were you a member of the susu during the civil war? If yes, move on to question 9, 10, and 11. If no, move on to question 12.
4. How did the susu do during the war?
5. What was your experience as a member of the susu during the war?
6. Can you talk about the work of the susu today?
7. How does the susu help you for your business?
8. If you have a problem with the susu, do you talk to the assistant superintendent and assistant superintendent?
9. Does everybody in the market know about the susu? how it works?
10. What happens if you have a major problem with the susu?
11. Is the work of the susu important for peace in Monrovia and Liberia?
12. What do you want from peace as a member of the susu?

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**PUBLICATIONS**

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