Chapter 3: Reciprocity, Respect, and Becoming Established

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Reciprocity, Respect, and Becoming Established

The damage done by the war was immense and multifaceted. Roads were badly damaged and that made travel slow and uncomfortable. Schools and medical facilities were understaffed, undersupplied, and not nearly numerous enough to provide care for the urban population. City lights had only just been restored to a small, central grid of the urban capital when I began fieldwork in 2010. Even then, a government official remarked candidly to me that the city and the country were not really in “reconstruction,” they were in recovery. Young people felt the lack of opportunities acutely. While the scholarship around young people often focuses on the diminished opportunities experienced by a youthful generation, in the case of the young men in Liberia, their parent’s generation was hit equally hard.

“There were jobs before. There aren’t jobs,” Andrew commented one evening in the yard. He was a good friend and a thoughtful guide to my understanding of his country. We had been talking about his experience of growing up during the war and his observations about how the country changed for the people since it ended. “It wasn’t like that before the war, Abby. Really, it wasn’t like that. Like for myself, my dad worked in the mines. We had a big compound. Everybody’s parents were working there. They had what they needed. . . . But, now, parents aren’t able.”

Like Andrew’s parents, many people were employed by foreign companies like Firestone or Liberian-American-Swedish Minerals
Company. Shortly after the war began in 1989 the vast majority of transnational corporations shut down or severely reduced operations in Liberia. Most had been slow to return and reopen, or had not come back at all at the time of this research. The physical and economic destruction that was levied on the country resulted in significant losses for families and households. Money, material possessions, and property were damaged, destroyed, or taken during the years of conflict. Many young people lost their parents to death or separation during the war, which meant that they were out on their own, hustling like Darlington. This chapter explores the structure of support as it was meant to unfold through intergenerational reciprocity, so that the loss of a helping hand can be more fully understood.

During my fieldwork my home was in Central Matadi, nestled on a curve in the road, under a line of big trees that shaded the yard from the afternoon sun. As the weeks went by I found myself frequenting one of the many stands where young men changed money (Liberian and US currency mostly) and sold top-up phone credit, or “scratch cards” as they are called. I usually went to Stephen’s stand because he was always there, no matter the time of day. Tucked under a bright, multicolored umbrella, Stephen could be found leaning on the caged box where he kept his stacks of currency, bound tight with rubber bands, or sitting just behind it in a short plastic lawn chair. He was wily, as many survivalists are. He cheated me out of change once. I returned to engage in a somewhat playful exchange of banter, an interaction in which I was the decided loser, and he kept the miscounted change he had taken in his favor. Stephen was nearly always surrounded by a small posse of young men. They sat with him to pass the time, read the newspaper, talk about football, and comment on the passersby.

On a slow afternoon I sat down with him and listened to his views of the country and his thoughts about the future.

“A lot of people have to live in the area,” he said, referring to the neighborhood. “They rent. They don’t have a house of their own. They don’t have the means, so they are just renting. They’re not investing for themselves, they just rent. You see some guys
around here, they might be thirty or forty years old, and they are not established.”

“What do you mean by established?” I asked.

“If someone is established, they might have their own house. They have a way of getting money. They have their family all around them, their children are in school. A lot of people are not established for themselves. It’s difficult, it’s difficult. . . . As for me, my own parents were killed. My mother and my father were killed during the war. I have to make an effort. There is nobody to help me. I have to make an effort for myself. I graduated from high school in 2002. Since then, I haven't been able to do anything. Eight years, and I haven't been able to do anything, really.”

At thirty-three years old, he was not established, and still very much a “youth.” Despite his frustration, by comparison with so many of the young men in Monrovia, his conditions were relatively comfortable. At some point he had gotten work in private security, saved a little bit of money, and with the help of a patron, started his money changing and scratch card business on the side of the road. He rented a room, hoped to attend the University of Liberia one day, and took care to look after his siblings and remaining relatives when he could.

“I have two little sisters and one little brother, and I have to keep them in mind,” he said. “I have other relatives as well. If they need a little something, if they need help with school fees, they come to me. I don't give them everything, but I give them something to try to help them out.”

Stephen’s inability to transition into a more established social and economic status is a plight he shares with young people, especially young men, around the world. In the literature youth are predominantly cast as a generation collectively thwarted from achieving status as adults. Their feelings of frustration with inhibited or foreclosed transitions take the foreground (see Jeffrey 2010b; Langevang 2008; Mains 2012; McDowell 2003; Utas 2005a). In some instances, environments have become so depleted that authors like Vigh (2006b) refer to youth as a “social moratorium,” and in Jeffrey’s (2010a) estimation, a permanent social
condition for some. Substantial and insightful work has sought to locate and understand youth transitions within shifting political and economic structures that enable and inhibit their ability to make a living or to gain an education (Ferguson 1999; Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Jeffrey 2010b; Mains 2012; Vigh 2006a). This body of work situates the struggle to transition or survive within macro-level analyses of neoliberal economic reform, the false value of formal education, or chronic political instability that prohibits youth agency toward “established” lives. This is perhaps one of the reasons why familial networks of support are often omitted from the literature on youth. In the midst of challenging and informing the failure of large political and economic structures to support the young, there has been less attention given to the immediate social supports that remain essential to young people’s everyday lives and social standing.

Within this literature “navigation” has become a dominant and trendy metaphor invoked by scholars who use the term to describe youth agency in rapidly shifting socioeconomic situations (Furlong 2009, 2013). Navigation, Vigh (2006a) argues, is able to capture a tactical exercise of negotiating immediate circumstances while maintaining focus on future possibilities and destinations. Though this agentive exercise may explicitly include navigating social relationships, as in Vigh’s work, the attention usually remains on the individual’s pursuit of opportunities and status, and we lose sight of their interconnectedness with families, kinship structures, or their broader communities. Part of this tendency is bound up in the liminal transition period of being a “youth,” which is often synonymous with movement outside of family households as well as migration beyond home communities. Young people are not physically with their parents, their siblings, or their wider kin relations. Their movements away from “hearth and home” tend to draw attention to their individual transitions and trajectories. My contention in this book is that family support systems are often more present and fundamental than they appear in much of the literature. When they are absent or unavailable, a neoliberal bias toward emphasis on the individual prevents us from appreciating
how significant the loss of reciprocity in family and kin networks really is.

The following sections illustrate how obligations in hierarchical social relations formed the primary supports for young people’s life chances, transitions, and trajectories. As Chabal (2009, 48) writes, “The web of obligations that link people is densest at the core of the kinship association and more diffuse at its periphery.” The chapter demonstrates how reciprocity works in families and households to facilitate youth transitions and the achievement of honor and prestige. It serves as a foundation that allows us to better understand how significant these webs of obligations in kin networks really are, so that the challenge of living life without them, as Stephen and so many young people were, can be more fully appreciated. It also points to the postwar reemergence of structural power dynamics depicted in the history chapter. Young men’s imagined futures indicate a continuation of value for Americo–elite culture and jobs in government, suggesting that the war has not caused significant disruption to a long-lasting pattern of value for assimilation into the dominant cultural fraction.

Webs of Obligation

The time and energy required to feed, clothe, shelter, and support young people’s transitions through childhood and toward adulthood was a collective, intergenerational effort among members of the household, family, and kin. Certainly, there could be important patrons outside of familial relations (see Bledsoe 1990); however, those who were most obligated were connected through kinship. Before I go any further, I should articulate how I am using these terms about family and kinship. In this work I use “family” to designate immediate relations such as parents, siblings, spouses, and children—the “nuclear” family, as they are known in the West. Wider kinship networks are those extending outward to in-laws, grandparents, cousins, aunties, and uncles. This is my semantic choice, made to establish a sense of degrees of proximity within hierarchical webs of obligation. It is by no means a fixed category.
“Family” as a term of reference was used quite broadly by Liberians to indicate all manner of kinship and fictive kin. Though there were significant expectations around reciprocity to one’s immediate family—for instance, to take care of aging parents—households were often composed of all manner of kinship ties, and the day-to-day reciprocity between them usually fell along gerontocratic lines, where younger members were expected to serve their elders.

Bledsoe’s (1980) work with the Kpelle in Liberia has been particularly useful to my theoretical understanding of young men’s life chances in Monrovia. Wealth in people is a form of social organization that functions through control of others. Traditionally, these hierarchical relations have been gendered, with men in positions of social dominance over women, and gerontocratic, with elders asserting control over younger persons. Among the Gola in Liberia d’Azevedo (1962) observed that every male adult was a patron to a “lesser person,” such as women and children, and a client to others. Though I believe that we may observe some challenge to these elements of hierarchical structure, particularly as women take greater responsibilities as breadwinners in the urban environment, most Liberians, adults and youth alike, were embedded in kinship networks that were still more or less structured around gender and generation.

Unlike theories of social capital (see Lin 1999; Putnam 1995), in a system of wealth in people social relations are not merely helpful connections that assist personal development or socioeconomic mobility—they are literally the means to these ends. “Labor and allegiance,” Bledsoe (1980, 48) writes, “are critical to people’s economic subsistence as well as to their political and economic advancement. Wealth and security rest on the control of others.” In Sierra Leone, Shaw (2000) traces the significance of wealth in people to agricultural reproduction and to the slave trade. At that time the successful cultivation of crops depended on the capacity of a farmer to control the labor of others, something that was accomplished through accruing ties of dependency and indebtedness in kinship, marriage, parenthood, or fosterage. Circumstances precipitated by the slave trade required that groups be armed for
warfare to protect their people from slave-raiding posses, and leaders built a following of supporters whose security depended on them. They in turn provided services that would support the protection and well-being of the group. In such contexts, independence or individual isolation from a group was dangerous. It was through belonging to and with others that one found security (Kopytoff and Miers 1977).

The role of patrons and patronage remains important for social systems throughout Africa, and Liberia is no exception. Though patronage is often observed within political contexts of leadership and authority—as with leaders who acquired the allegiance of warriors during the slave trade—it is also exercised within households. Interdependence through patronage is vital to survival and well-being in the every day as well as in the long term. Goody (1982) observes that the act of rearing a child creates a debt that the child is expected to pay back. The training, provision, and protection that parents and other caregivers provide to their charges creates a debt that children must repay through their labor and allegiance.

In my household, children were the primary task force that kept the household running. There was rarely a lull in the hum of human activity around the house and in the yard. I usually awakened to the sound of a child sweeping outside, the coarse bristles of a broom brushing across the sand, gathering the trash that had blown into the yard during the night. Older children got the young ones ready for school. They dressed and fed them, reprimanded them when necessary—for whining, complaining, or dawdling. Mothers, aunties, and any other onlooking adults supervised the daily routines of the young household members. The patronage of the elders and their investment in the young ones was always near the surface of social interaction. I listened one afternoon as a mother in my yard slowly recounted the amount of money she had spent on her daughter’s clothes, the school fees she had paid, reminding the noncompliant child of her duty to fulfill a command made by her mother, a woman who provided for her so thoroughly.

What might appear to some, at least at first, as an authoritarian and dominating role for older persons who were in positions
over the younger ones is actually part of intergenerational interdependence, relationships that were far more reciprocal than might immediately meet the eye. These were relationships in which exchange and obligation in the mundane, everyday tasks laid the foundation of reciprocal support that would extend well into the future. Children were at the beck and call of their elders, but by fulfilling their obligations, the younger ones earned the right to make certain requests of them. If unmet, these requests would appear equally shameful for their older superiors. It would impinge on the bigger person’s honor. As an older guest, I was tended to by one of the children in my household. She prepared my food every day and she earned the right to make a claim on reciprocity from me—occasionally requesting phone credit, chocolate “from town,” or bootlegged DVDs sold by the road. I did my best to oblige and always felt a twinge of regret and shame if I did not meet her request.

Obligations between elder patrons and their younger dependents extend well into later life. Children are the primary source of social security in one’s old age (Bledsoe 1980; Harrell-Bond 1975), and relations of intergenerational indebtedness are to be taken very seriously. My conversation with William illustrates how significant decisions to reciprocate in the immediate and short term could be for long-term security and well-being. William was a friend of my neighbors. We sat chatting with one another on an afternoon while he waited for someone to return to the house. He explained that he and his wife had two children together, and that his nineteen-year-old stepdaughter also lived in the household. He told me that he and his wife had experienced an enormous disagreement concerning her. It had reached such a fever pitch that he had left the household and chosen to live elsewhere for the past four months. His stepdaughter had gotten pregnant and had a child.

“No one to claim the child,” he noted. This was a huge concern to Liberian parents and caregivers throughout my work, and it will resurface in fuller detail in the following chapter.

William related that his stepdaughter had frustrated him by not attending to her obligations to him. She did not respect her
position in his household by contributing to the workload, by washing his clothes or taking care of things when he asked. He was feeding, clothing, and sheltering her, yet she failed to reciprocate, and had become pregnant with a second child, “another mouth to feed!” His frustration mounted with the second pregnancy, and tension escalated within the household.

“I got vexed,” he noted. He fell out with his wife because she refused to support him when he made requests of his stepdaughter and the young one refused to oblige him. He eventually left the household in anger, and had only just returned when he sat down and began talking with me. He said that he had resolved to come back and work with his wife and stepdaughter to resolve the issue.

“I should take care of my children,” he said. “If I don’t, they won’t be there for me in my old age.”

William’s struggle to maintain intergenerational reciprocity reflects the significance of being indebted to one’s dependents. His experience also highlights how challenging it could be to maintain reciprocity, and build intergenerational interdependence. Ideally, fulfillment of roles and responsibilities strengthens reciprocal relationships. To have wealth in people is to have relationships in which obligations bind two or more parties together. The loyalty and labor of dependent children is contingent upon the provision and protection of their parents or guardians. Each must do their part for the other. Through the exchange of reciprocal obligations, each becomes increasingly indebted to the other.

What I have just described is a very functional arrangement of social exchange. As such, it might appear that there is never a “true” or altruistic gift, a point of extensive debate in anthropology, and one that harks back to early works by Malinowsky (1961) and Mauss (1950). Though Liberian households, families, and kin networks operated on an explicitly conditional and contingent form of intergenerational reciprocity, I do not mean to suggest that there were never gifts, services, or favors that were offered without expectation of return or as an outflow of love or care. Nor should we make the mistake of assuming that duties and responsibilities to reciprocate are devoid of affection or goodwill. Function
and affection are not mutually exclusive (see Mains 2013). That said, I did not observe a pervasive exercise of what Sahlins (1965) coined “generalized reciprocity” within households. He suggests that households are microcosms in which the freest gifts are most often distributed without expectation of return. Though I am sure that such gifts were bestowed among and between members of the household, the majority of social exchange was part of immediate household reproduction and an investment in long-term well-being.

Respect through Reciprocity: An Example in Fosterage

These webs of obligations are intricately and intimately linked to achievement of respect—respect that Stephen’s generation was desperate to achieve and found difficult to accomplish. I have chosen to make use of Spencer’s (1965) distinction of respect as honor and respect as prestige. Though Iliffe (2005) dismisses Spencer’s use of the two constructs, arguing that he has not seen them manifested in his extensive work on the continent, I find Spencer’s work conceptually useful in the Liberian context. Liberians’ prolific use of patronage in foster relationships provides an excellent example of these constructs in everyday life.

Child fosterage was one way to increase the number of dependents in a household—and therefore the number of indebted beneficiaries who would be obligated to their fostering patrons. Fosterage is a long-established practice in West Africa (Bledsoe 1990, 1993; Goody 1982; Isiugo-Abanihe 1985). Fostering children has been done to free parents for other responsibilities, to provide relatives, especially elderly ones, with domestic labor, and for social mobility of the young. Most homes with room and resources hosted one if not several foster children at once. Many received children from outside the city. In some cases, parents were deceased or unable to pay for children’s education, and so they were sent to wealthier relatives in the urban area. In other instances, parents were alive but looked to relatives who could improve their children’s life chances through access to better schools.
By hosting foster children, heads of house earned respect as both honor and prestige. Prestige, according to Spencer, is respect earned for rising above one’s peers. Households with many dependents were noticed and recognized for having the resources to handle many people. In that way, they increased their prominence in the community. The more dependents in one’s sphere of control, the more prestigious one’s social standing became. For the households with the resources to do it, fostering children was also the right and expected—the honorable—thing to do. Relatives of lower socioeconomic status had the right to ask wealthier kin to foster a child. The honor of those who were able to offer a helping hand depended on providing for those who were less socially and economically established. Fosterage demonstrates how intertwined the two forms of respect often were. What was socially honorable led to greater prominence, to prestige. The more prestige won through rising above one’s peers, the more dependents could make claims on obligations to support and provide.

Fosterage was contingent on reciprocity. All of the foster children I knew were incorporated into the household division of labor. Those who failed to comply with their hosts’ wishes lost privileges. I saw multiple foster children lose the privilege to stay. A boy I knew was living with his aunty to attend a better school. He could be slow with his household tasks, and at times disobedient. He was sent back to his mother after several of these episodes occurred. Foster children who worked hard and were compliant earned honor in the eyes of their elders and increased their chances of benefiting from the favor they achieved.

**Mobility through Patronage**

Hierarchical webs of obligation channeled goods, services, and opportunities. It is essential that we position young men’s struggle to become established within the context of these unequal and interdependent relations. The density and durability of their core networks of support determined how enabled and facilitated their transitions toward adulthood were. Their access to school fees or
job opportunities was nearly always a function of their wealth in people. While we were talking beneath the umbrella at his stand, Stephen noted with frustration, “I just need the opportunity. That’s the problem—one of the problems in this society. You know, some people they get a job, and then they get their families jobs there too. It’s difficult. You don’t have a job, and you don’t have family to get you in.”

Though it would be a challenge to substantiate how prolifically patronage networks, especially within kinship, were mobilized to keep opportunities flowing within personal webs of obligation, there was every indication that procuring a spot in school or in a job was largely a function of personal affiliations. Patrons were needed for fees, for introductions, and for placements.

Titus provides a helpful example of family systems and kinship relations that facilitated young men’s transitions under relatively ideal circumstances—the kind of circumstances that most young men wanted, but very few seemed to have. A student at the University of Liberia, Titus presented a calm demeanor, noticeably lacking the edge of frustration I often picked up in conversations with Stephen and other young men. Both of Titus’s parents had survived the war. They had two small dwellings that sheltered the household, which included his grandmother, little sister, both parents, and himself. His parents were able to help him with money if he needed clothes or supplies for school.

Hunched over a table in the upstairs library of the university, I asked Titus, “How did you wind up getting to come to school and so many others don’t?”

“I don’t pay tuition. The reason is because I’m on my grandfather. He’s an employee here. . . . I’m benefiting from his employment. . . . Yeah, so that’s how it come about.”

A well-connected grandfather provided possibilities that young men like Stephen lacked.

“There’s a very important word, Abby,” Moses, a local pastor in Monrovia, noted, leaning across his desk. “Interest.’ Let’s say you and I go for a job in the government. There is a big man there. Let’s say you and I are equally qualified, or even, you are more qualified
than me—but he says, ‘I know the man. I have interest in him.’ I will get the job, because he will say, ‘I know that fellow.’ That’s how it works . . . they’re protecting their own, individual interests.”

Stephen described the redistribution of opportunities within family relations as “a problem” in society. It meant that young men like himself faced reduced options because their links to bigger people were few and because their primary support in parents had been diminished or was entirely gone. However, because of the social value of intergenerational reciprocity, for bigger people being in the position to facilitate a job placement or to redistribute opportunities among their dependents was a chance to increase respect as honor and prestige. They were providing for those to whom they were socially obligated, for whom it was their right and expected duty to help, while increasing their investment in dependents who were under their control.

Dependence was a “mode of action” (Ferguson 2013). Young people’s ability to improve their economic or material wealth was inextricably connected to those upon whom they could call for favors, or lay claim to obligations. In this way, it is important to think about wealth in people as having people above and below one’s position in the social strata. Having dependents under one’s control increased status and security, but it was every bit as important to have others upon whom one could make claims.

Most youth that I knew were in Stephen’s position. They were keen to improve their life chances through education and work but they lacked the wealth in people to acquire opportunities. Edwin was an exception. His social status and social relations provide a useful contrast, one that points to the salience of the class divide that persisted in the years following the war. Edwin was established. He had not chosen a wife, but he had the means to provide for one. He drove a car that had been brought over from America. Always clean, well groomed, and well spoken, he had a house and a job in the government.

“That’s everybody’s dream,” Jake commented. Edwin had the comfort he hoped to achieve. “You have a job. You have money. You have a television in your house. You have your own machine
generator, you know? You are living up to standard, you are living well.”

As an established man, Edwin had achieved the dream. Though we were friendly with one another, it would have been far too personal to ask him about his patronage networks and his links to the government. However, the topic came up one evening over beers with a mutual friend of ours. I asked Tee about how Edwin had managed to acquire a position when so many young men his age were struggling. I noticed that he carried an Americo (Western) name, and asked her about it.

“His father was Americo,” she replied. Edwin shared a surname with one of the most powerful and influential families in the country. “He had Edwin by an indigenous woman who could not speak English. Now Edwin uses his Western name to get the kind of job he has at the ministry.”

Edwin’s status through wealth in people reflects a historic and persistent class divide. Bledsoe (1980) provides an illustrative example of patronage in the decades prior to the war, of the kind of social connections that were now being reproduced among young men like Edwin in the postwar years. She tells the story of a young man named Dumu who was taken from his village in the interior to live with a high-ranking national leader. He lived in the household and was educated in exchange for his contribution of labor. He increased his status by becoming educated and having strong ties to the “civilized world.” Politically, his father gained a useful relationship with the central government that could benefit him in the interior. Connections to bigger people improved life chances for the individual as well as their networks of dependents. In Edwin’s case, his father increased political ties to the interior by marrying an indigenous woman. This gave Edwin a network of obligations to draw upon through his father in the urban center.

Big Men

The more prestige earned for rising above one’s peers, the bigger the person. The top positions in social hierarchies were held by
“big men” and a few “boss ladies,” with the president at the time, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, being chief among them. Big men and boss ladies held their positions of dominance by leveraging social relations to acquire and mobilize goods, labor, and services (see Sahlins 1963; Utas 2012). They had interest in and influence across many hierarchical webs of obligation.

While I was in Red Light, the market area that will fill the content of the following chapter, I asked some of the youth, “What does a big man look like?”

Pieced together from several interjections, they responded, “Big men ride in cars. They live in the fence. They don’t want to expose what they have. Their house, maybe they have two or three cars. . . . They hold position. Most of them work in government. Other people work for them. They serve them. . . . When they come into the community (like Red Light), they come to be known. They want to be popular in the community. If they are good, they will help.”

Their observation that most big men worked in the government always held true in my fieldwork. I never met or heard about a big man who did not hold a position of influence or power purely outside of the government. This was a pattern that had continued from the founding of the republic. Though they might have farms or other enterprises, the Americo minority elite made the business of government their top priority. In the postwar years, the government was again a primary seat of power. Big men were woven into the fabric of power relations within the state.

At one point, one of the young men in Red Light spoke up and said that he and all of his peers were looking for “somebody.”

“You looking for someone to help you?” I asked him.

“Thank you!” he replied, affirming my correct response.

“Big man?”

“Thank you! Someone who can help me [so] I can sustain myself. In the future, I help him.”

Everyone was looking for a person with power and influence who could improve their life chances and support their
trajectories toward higher social status. Utas (2012) notices this as well, observing that people seek out and maintain ties to multiple big men in their quest for the benefits of protection, provision, or opportunity. Young men who did not have patronage through family, as Edwin did, looked to big men who were on the periphery of their core networks of obligations, and in some cases were outside of them altogether. For the big man, a significant part of maintaining the labor or services of his followers was to maintain popularity and leverage through demonstrations of wealth and goodwill, through largesse. They made displays of wealth as a means of demonstrating their prestige, and they redistributed resources of various kinds in order to maintain reciprocal relations with supporters who were under them.

In the postwar context, adulthood garnered respect as both honor and prestige. Socioeconomic establishment as an adult meant that young men were no longer depending on caregivers to support them, and could begin to provide for dependents. This was a socially honorable position that young men wanted to earn in the eyes of their family, kin, and communities. It positioned them well above most of their peers. It was also a difficult position for most to achieve in an environment where maintaining sustainable livelihoods with the resources to support a wife, children, or aging parents was impossible for many.

A Class Ceiling

As I listened to the youth talk about becoming established and looking for big men to help them, there was a common thread in their narratives that points to a resolidification of the class divide historically held by the urban, elite Americos. Nearly all of my informants aspired to jobs in the government. The elite minority of settlers established a clear pattern of choosing government opportunities rather than private sector employment. As the twentieth century progressed, the trend continued. Assimilation into urban elite culture meant looking for opportunities in the government rather than the private sector.
“We feel that the best way to success is to get to government by any means possible,” Alex commented of his countrymen. “Steal from government, and get started. We don’t feel that if you work hard in the private sector or in our own businesses, we can succeed. The only way to succeed is to force ourselves into government.”

Alex’s comments were made from the outside looking in to the government. From the inside, an upper-level employee of the Finance Ministry described the benefit of working for the government in similar terms. There were ways of stealing gas money on the government’s tab or claiming expenses under the guise of state business. It was not that government jobs paid so well. It was that government jobs came with abundant opportunities to freeload on state money. This is how big men who worked in the higher positions of the government were able to pad their own pockets.

One of the biggest benchmarks of elite status was the human and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) that came in the form of a foreign educational degree, most often from the United States. Lower-level positions like Edwin’s job provided opportunities to access government resources for personal gain. Though his elite affiliations, his position, and his material possessions placed him well above young men like Stephen in the social strata, I spent enough time with powerful elites in the city to know that his patronage and level of prestige was not enough to win him status as a big man. The biggest men and women had lived and been educated in developed countries, most often in the United States.

There is a long tradition of elite migration to the United States for education. A large proportion of the ruling minority of elite men received university degrees from colleges and universities in the United States (Liebenow 1962). Elite money and wealth in people in the United States made these options possible. The same pattern was evidenced in government officials and repatriated elites I knew during fieldwork. They hailed from universities such as Columbia, George Mason, Harvard, or the University of Wisconsin. Some members of this group were displaced with
their families when Samuel Doe took over in the coup in 1980. In their case, forced migration laid the foundation for pursuing American education.

Reference, resemblance, and affiliation with the United States produced a significant cultural capital among the elite. To have a U.S. credential was of significant worth among the ruling class. What was on “that side” in America was considered more civilized, and what was civilized was considered more sophisticated, and hence more valuable.

“Yeah, on that part of Liberian history,” Jake noted. “What I read and what I see, only those that came from over there with degree, from Harvard University, from Oxford University, you know? England, Germany, you will find most of them working. But you come from University of Liberia with BSE or master’s, no one will see you [and] carry on serious—any of them you see. Any of them you see going and coming back have position.”

Those who were not of elite origin themselves often benefited from elite connections to the United States. President Johnson Sirleaf has said her education in the United States was enabled through the elite affiliations she possessed among family members (Johnson Sirleaf 2009). Her own education includes a bachelor’s degree from the University of Colorado at Boulder and a graduate degree from Harvard University. I met other, far less famous individuals who pursued bachelor’s and graduate degrees in a similar fashion. Although not all of them could boast the Ivy League clout of Harvard or Yale, it was a stateside degree more than an Ivy League credential that was so important.

Though Western, U.S. credentials were not necessarily the only indicator of elite prestige, they were a noticeable symbol of status that separated the ruling class from everyone else. The young men in this work made it abundantly clear that while pursuing a university degree or vocational training certificate in Liberia was better than nothing, it was not good enough to become a big man. The likelihood that it would provide lasting improvement to one’s situation was dubious. It was better to “go on that side,” where your chances were more certain afterwards.
One morning I shared a taxi with a smiley young man who congenially commented, “We don’t even respect our own degree. If you come with a degree from University of Liberia and someone else comes with a degree from America they will give it to the man with the degree from America.” This issue was pressing on the young people, he asserted. It was better to leave the country and go somewhere else than to remain, because their progress would be slower than those who went to America and came back.

Young people from elite families that journeyed abroad and back again could establish comfortable lives in Monrovia. There are two further observations to make concerning migration to the United States. One is that the war opened a pathway for migration to the United States for a large cohort of nonelite Liberians who were granted access as refugees. What had been an elite privilege became a possibility for others. My informants knew many people who had gone over to the United States because of the war. Some had done well, gotten jobs and education, and were able to send remittances back to their family. There were far fewer stories of families coming back to Liberia. There were even fewer stories of nonelite Liberians taking jobs in higher positions of the government. However, most of those who came back as big men to “hold positions” were from elite backgrounds. On the other hand, it was very common to find nonelite young men who had gotten into trouble in the United States and been deported, losing the educational and economic opportunities that were so sought after “on that side.” In short, the notion of going to the States to achieve something to return with was prevalent. However, the ability to achieve the privilege of prestige as a big man in the government seemed to remain with those of elite pedigree.

Conclusion

This chapter illustrates how goods, services, and opportunities were channeled through patronage, especially patronage within family and kinship networks. Familial relations were extraordinarily important for youth transitions and life chances. Having made this
argument, I do not wish to present a romanticized notion of families as ideal, catch-all, or fix-all solutions to the “social moratorium” of youth. William’s difficulty with his own family demonstrates that intergenerational reciprocity can be a challenge to maintain, and that when family relations are present, it is not a guarantee that reciprocity will follow and inevitably lead to well-being of any kind. What I am suggesting is that in the Liberian social structure, family and kin had the deepest and most enduring obligations to offer support. Patrons could also be found outside of the family. Bledsoe (1990) is clear on this point in Sierra Leone, and I did see indications of this in my own fieldwork. We had a young man who began spending time at our house, working on small projects for my host mother. She took an interest in him, and wanted to help. She became a patron for him, supporting his basic needs while he worked for her. Should push come to shove, however, her obligations to support the needs of her own children and her immediate family would always come first. Though she genuinely wanted to provide for this young man, and was increasing her prestige in doing so, his labor and allegiance were not nearly as important as those of her own family and kin.

Transitions into adulthood were significantly thwarted, and without personal affiliations to bigger people, most youth were relatively immobile. Stephen, like Darlington, could provide for himself but was unable to carry any dependents of his own. Livelihoods in the informal urban economy supported many young people in this way. They provided enough to subsist, but not nearly the means to become established.

Frustrated socioeconomic transitions among youth were in large part the result of the economic and material damage caused to their parents’ and kinship networks during the war. Systems of support were significantly depleted of land, money, resources, and big people to provide patronage to their dependents. Webs of obligation lost their capacity to carry the extensive networks of patronage that facilitated youth transitions into established lives as adults. The implications of losing family and kinship obligations will be more fully explored in the following chapter.
Young men’s perspectives about earning prestige as big men in government reflect a reproduction of social values that has its roots in the very beginning of the country. What was modern, Western, and from the United States was more valuable. The consolidation of the ruling class’s power over the indigenous majority was maintained in large part through the maintenance of their own networks, and on the basis of difference in “cultural style” (Ferguson 1999) and the achievement of human capital from the United States. Positions of power in the government were kept to their class of people, while the rest of the country was co-opted and kept down.

The young men in this chapter did not voice opposition to these structural barriers, but rather, as their forefathers had done for so many generations leading up to the war, they sought to accommodate the demands of the dominant—to assimilate to their civilized culture and to achieve status by acquiescing to their norms and values. The historical struggle for dignity was being reproduced in the postwar terrain. As Jensen (2008) observes, as long as someone else—someone dominant—sets the criteria upon which social worth is conferred, it will remain largely out of reach. The reemergence of a structural class divide has implications for how we understand the postwar recovery of the nation, and will be discussed again more broadly in the conclusion in chapter 7.