“Making It Bit by Bit, then You Rise”? Social Mobility and Vocational Training as Moral Education in Urban Sierra Leone

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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of those learning tailoring and trading in urban Sierra Leone, examining why they engage in training, what is basically taught, and the training outcomes. It includes ethnographic fieldwork on vocational training schools and apprenticeships in workplaces, and also investigates less articulated on-the-job learning processes, which have been little studied in previous research. I find that learners undertake their training with the primary aim of achieving social mobility; however, neither of these forms of training generally leads to a sufficient and reliable enough income to realize this aim to the desired extent, due to the lack of remunerated employment opportunities and the fact that access to paid work is largely contingent on an individual’s pre-existing social and economic capital. Instead, I suggest, the different forms of training serve more fundamentally as a form of moral education. I argue that they help to develop certain personal moral traits and to alleviate society’s concerns about ‘immoral’ idle youth.

Keywords: Sierra Leone, apprenticeships, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), labour market, youth, unemployment

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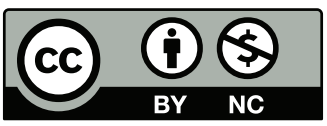

About the author

Bim Kilje is a PhD student in Cultural Anthropology at Uppsala University. Her research interests include the anthropology of work and the new forms of relatedness that arise in response to societal anxieties.

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Introduction

Concerns about high unemployment, particularly among youth, feature prominently in the domestic and international political discourse on Sierra Leoneans' economic situation (Chipika 2012). Increasing youth employment is seen not only as a necessary step in poverty reduction but also as an important aspect of peace building, as 'idle youth' are widely understood in these discourses to have played a prominent role in the outbreak of the country's civil war in the 1990s (Enria and Batmanglich 2014, 8). Attempts to engage youth in vocational training with the expectation that this will lead to paid work and peaceful communities inform investment in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) by the state and development agencies alike. In the Freetown Peninsula, where the ethnographic fieldwork behind this article took place, the understanding that youth should learn a trade in order not to become delinquent is also frequently articulated by the general population.

This article challenges assumptions that vocational training leads to improved material living conditions for the trainees and argues that it functions primarily as a form of moral education. 'Vocational training' would generally be understood emically as training in TVET schools run by the public sector and development NGOs. However, my general argument applies to this form of training and others alike, and hence, I also include, under the umbrella term 'vocational training', privately arranged apprenticeships in workplaces and less articulated on-the-job learning processes. These less articulated kinds of training generally mean learning as you go by practising the occupation, not rarely by assisting a friend or relative in their business. I will elaborate more on these forms of training under the next heading. They all have in common, however, that they are practical and common forms of training, broadly perceived as part of the solution to high unemployment if they are combined with an entrepreneurial spirit on the trainees' part (e.g. Chipika 2012, 84).

This study focuses on the occupations of tailoring and trading and is based on two months of fieldwork conducted in 2020 as part of the author's master's degree in Cultural Anthropology. The methods consisted mainly of in-depth interviews and participant observation in shops, market stalls, tailor shops, and TVET schools. Interlocutors who informed the study include apprentices in tailor shops, TVET students of tailoring, and people learning diverse types of commercial trading through on-the-job training, as well as practising tailors and traders in different stages of their working lives.

Both trading, particularly in small-scale retail goods, and tailoring are highly popular occupations in and around the capital city, and those learning these occupations report engaging in their training to gain skills and eventually to obtain higher social status and material wellbeing. I interpret this as a striving for social mobility by means of increasing one's various forms of capital in the Bourdieusian sense of social, cultural, and economic capital. According to Bourdieu, the various forms of capital largely determine individuals' and groups' social positioning in intersecting relations of power (e.g., Bourdieu 1986a). Economic capital includes money or what can be converted directly into money, such as property rights. Social capital has been described as

> the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. (Bourdieu 1986a, 21)

Familiarity with the forms of culture valued by the upper classes[1] and/or in a given social arena (or 'field', in Bourdieu's terminology)

[1] In line with Bourdieu, I understand class not as a self-identified group, but as an analytical abstraction of an array of people with similar positions in social space (Bourdieu 1985, 725).

constitutes cultural capital. This includes, for instance, language, aesthetic taste, and qualifications. Learning tailoring or trading involves attaining the necessary cultural capital to produce economic capital through that line of work. In tailoring, for instance, this cultural capital can take the form of embodied tailoring skills and recognition from others of one's acquired identity as a tailor. Acquired social capital may include obtaining suppliers, colleagues to cooperate with, and customers.

After providing a brief background on the Sierra Leone labour market, I proceed in this article to describe the job situations in which the trading and tailoring learners find themselves after finishing their training. I then consider the ways in which the learners are and are not able to accomplish their goals of social mobility. Next, I describe the moral role that the socially stigmatized figures of the 'drop-out' and *iduler* ('idler') have in urging youth into vocational training. Finally, I discuss the occupational codes of conduct that the learners are taught and show how these are linked to ideas of what it means to be a moral person at large.

Background to the labour market, apprenticeships, and TVET

In Sierra Leone, a shrinking state apparatus reserves its income redistribution to small networks, while the majority of the population are left to navigate an increasingly harsh market economy (Enria 2018, 72). On the labour market, underemployment[2], precarity, and low-paid or unpaid work, as well as structural inequalities, often impede Sierra Leoneans from obtaining an adequate income. Structural inequalities entail that an individual's opportunities to find employment or to start a business are highly conditioned by economic assets and social capital. Accessing the few employment opportunities in the formal sector generally requires both tertiary education, which is costly, and socio-political connections.[3]

Young people face particular challenges compared to others. They often have not yet had the time to acquire substantial skills, nor to obtain the social capital that is so important for getting by on the labour market (see Peeters 2009, 7). Like many other West African countries, Sierra Leone society is fundamentally based on interpersonal trust, and people rely immensely on reciprocal relationships with others to alleviate hardship, obtain security, create job opportunities, and enable socioeconomic mobility (e.g. Utas 2012a).

According to my interlocutors, the ideal for most people who set out to become tailors or traders is to one day be able to have their own business. However, the decline of jobs in the formal sector in many African countries has led to an increased pull to self-employment in the informal sector[4] (Lindell 2010, 2). This has resulted in high competition, which, in combination with other local factors, such as hostile planning policies, a lack of availability of land (Richards 1996, 122–123; Ahadzie 2009, 272), high market risks, and high interest rates (Harris 2019), contributes to an unfavourable

[2] 'Underemployment' entails "workers who, when asked, say they are willing and able to work more than they are currently working, according to a defined threshold of working time" (ILO 2015, 8).

[3] As of 2018, only 14% of the employed population worked in the formal sector. Of these, the majority were men; only 27% or formal economy workers were women (Danish Trade Union Development Agency 2020, 15, referring to Stats SL 2019).

[4] 'Informal sector' is a term notoriously difficult to define, but the International Labour Organisation (ILO 1972) has suggested that it is characterized by: "(a) ease of entry, (b) reliance on indigenous resources, (c) family ownership of enterprise, (d) small scale of operation, often defined in terms of hired workers less than ten, (e) labour-intensive methods of production and adapted technology, (f) skills acquired outside the formal school system, (g) unregulated and competitive markets." Dividing the economy into formal and informal also risks reinforcing a post-colonial view of traditional and modern spheres (see Potts 2008). However, this definition has made it possible to measure and compare economic activity, which is important in working towards improved labour rights (Jennische 2018, 20–21).

environment for micro-entrepreneurs in Sierra Leone.

Inevitably, the decade-long civil war of the 1990s has also made its impact on the state of the labour market in Sierra Leone, although its importance is often overstated. The key issues Sierra Leoneans face on the labour market today pre-date the war and played a role in starting it, rather than the reverse. After Sierra Leone gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1961, the social inequality of colonialism persisted, and the pseudo-democratic governments of subsequent decades have been characterized by corruption and the political favouring of a small elite (Keen 2005, 9).

In West African countries, apprenticeships in workplaces are commonly perceived to be a vehicle for social mobility (Hanson 2005, 170). They have been described as a key method for youth from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds to obtain a job in Sierra Leone (Ahadzie 2009, 265). Apprenticeships are often tied to the practice of fosterage. Fosterage is highly common in the country,[5] and often entails poor, rural families sending their children to be cared for by more affluent acquaintances or relatives in an urban area, where the opportunities are perceived to be greater, for instance, for receiving an education or learning an occupation by becoming the foster parent's apprentice (Bledsoe 1990). Fosterage can function as a means of social mobility not only for the child, but for the whole family, who can benefit economically and in terms of social status in the future (Bledsoe 1990).

TVET, which is provided in a classroom setting rather than the workplace, has a similar reputation for providing social mobility and raising the life chances[6] of marginalized individuals.[7] It is aimed at meeting the needs of the labour market by providing youth with the necessary tools to engage in entrepreneurship or find wage employment (UNESCO-UNEVOC n.d.). Primarily, it targets out-of-school youth and youth otherwise deemed 'at risk', such as young women who provide for themselves through prostitution. After the war, peacebuilding policies in the international development sector focused heavily on providing TVET education to the poorest. The UN-led Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) programmes also aimed to reintegrate ex-combatants into civilian life by means of teaching them 'legitimate' livelihoods through TVET (Paulson 2009).[8] This attempted reintegration involved civic education, an aspect that is also present in the TVET programmes I visited. The training in DDR was contracted out to NGOs (Paulson 2009, 841) and the connection to the NGO world remains in today's TVET; many schools are funded and/or run by national or international NGOs.[9]

[5] In 2012, it was estimated that one fifth of children in Sierra Leone did not live with their biological parents (Chipika 2012, 48).

[6] The notion of 'life chances', according to Max Weber ([1922] 1978, 302), captures the individual's abilities to improve his or her quality of life and is grounded in his or her social and economic circumstances. Dahrendorf (1979) later returned to the concept, emphasizing that life chances are not based mainly on chance, but strongly related to structural access to social and economic resources.

[7] Applying an 'etic' perspective, I understand 'marginalized' as people who are greatly disadvantaged in terms of economic capital and opportunities to improve their circumstances because of structural positioning and negative treatment by the community.

[8] For an in-depth analysis of the war itself as being concerned with the management of labour, see Hoffman (2008).

[9] TVET in various forms has, however, a long history in Sierra Leone. For instance, the activist Adelaide Casely-Hayford founded a school in Freetown in 1923 for girls to learn a trade, with the goal of encouraging economic independence, but also to teach the students to "respect their African heritage" (Okonkwo 1981, 41–45).

Learning trading is rather different in form from learning tailoring. It generally takes the form of learning by assisting in a friend or relative's shop, or trying it for oneself and increasing knowledge over time by engaging with the work and talking to other traders. Some, however, do learn trading through more articulated workplace apprenticeships. Whilst tailoring requires training of between two and five years, street or market hawking, or 'petty trading', as it is referred to by traders and others, is an accessible way of making money almost immediately, albeit in very modest amounts. Traders who succeed and become established may do better. For them, "business pays more than working in [an] office,"[10] as my interlocutor Binta,[11] who comes from a family of traders and who will be introduced in more detail later, reported.

Social mobility, but to what extent?

What degree of social mobility do aspiring tailors and traders actually achieve as a result of their training? In this section, I consider the life circumstances my interlocutors found themselves in after learning their occupations, and go on to describe the broader life trajectories of two interlocutors, Abdul and Binta.

Mohammed is a tailor of Fula origin[12] in his late twenties, who also holds a degree in finance. He is currently working in the tailoring shop where he trained as an apprentice some years ago. Mohammed acknowledged that TVET "institutions that have finance by donors, when you [as a student] are done, they will present you a sewing machine to start your own work for yourself. But here [in the tailor shop he works in], we don't actually do that. It's kind of a disadvantage to us." Mohammed went on to explain that the opportunity to set up on one's own is often absent because of a lack of start-up capital, so apprentices generally remain in the same tailoring shop and work. This work can take several different forms. Some recent graduates are hired in the shop and gain a percentage of the profit, but often these arrangements involve little income for the new tailor, and not uncommonly there is no payment at all.[13] This is hardly unique to tailoring. A national household survey from 2018 suggests "paid employment is minimal" in the informal sector in urban areas (Stats SL 2019, 112). Many new tailors would, like their peers in other professions, rather engage in productive work than be idle, even when the job is unpaid. Remaining in the tailoring shop also tends to involve material benefits such as meals and even shelter. I encountered shops where the male apprentices would often sleep over at night.

By continuing to work post-training, the tailor or trader gains, in return, practice, experience, and social capital in the form of potentially valuable connections, notably by establishing relationships with big men or women, who might be their teachers, colleagues, or customers. 'Big men networks' (Utas 2012a) of patronage permeate social life in Sierra Leone and entail reciprocal, albeit hierarchical, relations between people holding different degrees of power – notably in terms of economic assets, social standing, and political connections. These relations are sometimes described, emically, as 'being for'

[10] 'Office jobs' would generally refer to employment in the formal sector, or in the public sector particularly. These are desired for a range of reasons, including certain physical comforts, the social esteem involved, a monthly salary, the prospect of obtaining social capital, and the fact that, for instance, obtaining a bank loan often requires formal employment. Office jobs, however, do not necessarily generate a higher income than self-employment in the informal sector. A successful shop owner might make considerably more money than a schoolteacher (see for instance Jennische 2018, 137).

[11] All names of interlocutors are pseudonyms.

[12] The Fulas are an ethnic minority in the country, who are prominent in the tailoring occupation (Jalloh 2007, 93).

[13] A household survey report published in 2019 considers undertaking an apprenticeship as being employed, but shows that only 0.7 percent of apprentices are receiving payment (Stats SL 2019, 100).

someone (Bledsoe 1990, 75; Ferme 2001, 110; c.f. D'Angelo 2015, 249).[14]

Turning from apprenticeships to the topic of TVET, as Mohammed said, some TVET schools provide their graduates with a start-up kit to help them commence their own businesses. These material assets can potentially be advantageous, but TVET graduates often complain that they do not have a location to set up their business and that they have not yet obtained a *custament* – a loyal customer base.[15] Although aid funding tends to be directed towards TVET, apprenticeships in a tailoring shop arguably provide better opportunities to build the social capital necessary to start a business. In TVET, students spend their time in the school's buildings, missing out on opportunities to network with potential future customers. This also applies to building a network of practising tailors, which can be important in terms of finding a venue to work from, and having others to co-operate with in business endeavours. The acquisition of social capital can be at least as important as acquisition of cultural capital.

Some of the TVET graduates who did not manage to pursue the entrepreneurial path reported returning to teach other students. I met female graduates who wished to help other women out of disadvantage via TVET; the goal of finishing in these cases is not only to practise as a seamstress, but simultaneously as a teacher. Graduates would not always be remunerated for teaching, however. Vandi is a tailor from Freetown in his mid-30s. He has founded a TVET school in the capital city's suburbs and recounted that no one in the workplace, including him, was receiving a salary, as the organization was struggling financially. Despite Vandi's claim, however, it is widely known that TVET staff sometimes receive unofficial payments from students.

The fact that many tailors, in TVET and apprenticeships alike, were not able to acquire paid work reasonably soon upon graduation, begs the question of the extent to which the social mobility sought for is actually obtained. This same question might be asked about the aspiring traders, whose situations I elaborate on below. Despite the difficulties finding paid and reliable work, I found my interlocutors could manage to achieve a degree of the social mobility they wished for, and chances increased somewhat over time. At the very least, most gained some level of buffer against poverty and social exclusion. However, the mobility, both for new graduates and for tailors and traders in the middle of their careers, tended to be limited, precarious, and/or slow.

The participants' mobility was limited, as I have discussed, in that the vocational training rarely led directly to sufficiently paid or reliable work. Conversations with tailors and traders at various stages in their working lives suggested that while circumstances did improve over time, it was generally difficult to achieve this even in the longer term. However, the participants did find ways of getting by and were able to increase their quality of life in some respects. This could entail becoming an aspiring seamstress rather than being dependent on transactional sex for subsistence, or it could mean assisting in a friend's shop while learning business skills instead of being economically dependent on one's family. Mobility in social space can happen without fundamentally changing people's 'life chances' (Noret 2020, 2). It

[14] As explained by a young Mende man interviewed by the anthropologist Caroline Bledsoe (1990, 75), 'being for' someone means "'you have made yourself subject to the person. You work for him, fight for him, etc. And he is in turn responsible for you in all ways [such as court fines, clothes, food, school fees, or bride-wealth]'". D'Angelo (2015, 249) has provided a different example of this in the context of gangs in artisanal diamond mining, of "I am behind you" (*I de biaynd yu* in Krio). The gang boss is 'behind' his or her supporters, who receive food daily, as well as small amounts of money; the diamond dealer is, in turn, 'behind' the boss by selling the diamonds.

[15] For instance, Paulson (2009, 842) refers to a consultancy paper by Richards et al. (2003, 5) who, in their study of TVET in DDR, found it was common for the graduates to sell their toolkits, less than optimistic that they could made a living from their new occupation.

appears that my interlocutors usually achieved what Camfield and Monteith call "fleeting social mobility" (2020, 98), also referred to by Hübinger as 'precarious prosperity' (*prekärer wohlstand*) (1996). Precarious prosperity has been described as obtaining a degree of material comfort that allows for some agency, but that is nonetheless subject to a constant threat of downward mobility (Budowski et al. 2010, 274, paraphrasing Hübinger 1996). Coming generally from lower-class backgrounds, many tailors and small-scale traders lack scaffolding in terms of more solid economic, social, and cultural capital. I found those who were able to make an upward class journey must constantly be vigilant in order not to lose their new-found improvement in economic and social position.

One example of this is Abdul's. Abdul grew up in rural, Northern Sierra Leone in a family of farmers. Looking back at his childhood, Abdul told me he remembers the long, hard days in the field and the difficulty they had making ends meet. As a child, he would dream of leaving the village, studying at university, and then finding an office job. When Abdul was ten, a man from Freetown, unknown to him, came to the village and his school.[16] Through this meeting, Abdul's life took a turn. The stranger saw potential in Abdul – "I see something different in you", he said, and wanted to give Abdul a chance at an education in the city. The man offered to bring young Abdul back to Freetown and provide for him, as well as to secure his schooling.

Abdul joined the man and migrated to the capital, which he soon grew fond of, especially having access to the comforts he had not had in the village, like electricity, and even a television. However, his guardian passed away two years ago and Abdul, then 20 years old, found himself at a turning point again. The man on whom his new lifestyle hinged, including access to basics such as housing, was gone and Abdul was left wondering what to do next. Similar stories were shared with me on more than one occasion: of how the loss of a benefactor suddenly rips the ground from under one's feet. However, Abdul was lucky once again. By means of social capital, namely his network of friends, he came to know Michael, a young trader dedicated to becoming as successful as the entrepreneurs he read about in the motivational business books he sold. Michael needed an assistant and today, Abdul is an apprentice in Michael's shop while simultaneously undertaking high school studies. Although things have worked out well for Abdul, he remains in a precarious situation. The tangible gratitude Abdul expressed towards Michael, who had helped him in many ways beyond the apprenticeship, revealed an acute awareness of his precarious prosperity: that he was only tenuously hanging on to his socioeconomic security.

The anthropologist Mats Utas has shown how, in Sierra Leone, even "[p]eople on the street corner do move up the social ladder; they leave the street corner and get out of abject poverty. But the process is slow – too slow" (2012b, 2).[17] My interlocutors' social positions and starting points vary, but the slowness of progress is apparent in their work life trajectories. Binta's story is a good example. Like Abdul, Binta was fostered as a child. She was born in Guinea to poor parents who, in the hope of providing her with a better chance of an education, sent her to live with better-off relatives in Freetown. The studies did not eventuate, however, and Binta was forced to split her time between arduous domestic chores and long hours of assisting in her aunt's shop. As Bledsoe (1990) has noted, fostered children are often expected to perform laborious duties for their new family, which fits into the popular local discourse that hard work teaches children the value of diligence

[16] Abdul provided few details about who this man was.

[17] See also Honwana's (2014) concept of 'waithood', a period of suspension between childhood and adulthood that can occur when chances of gaining an income and thereby independence from family or others are highly limited.

and patience necessary to succeed in life.

Through her work in the shop, Binta became acquainted with a European customer, with the financial help of whom she was able to start school at the age of 15. However, Binta's graduation date was greatly delayed due to her late school start. Over the years, working in the shop also helped Binta acquire substantial knowledge of the trading business, as well as a useful network of contacts. Her life chances can be said to have improved in several ways as compared to her situation at birth, but it will take time before Binta, who is in her late 20s today, can mobilize the capital necessary to realize either of her dreams of owning a profitable business or pursuing a university degree in finance.

Abdul's and Binta's stories illustrate the experiences of many of their peers. In sum, the outcomes of vocational training in tailoring and trading in its different forms did not tend to live up to the wishes for social mobility for my interlocutors. This begs the question of what the training, then, did result in, which is the topic of the next section.

Idleness, the 'dropout', and belonging

Whilst obtaining an income was an important motivation for my interlocutors to undertake training, it was not the only one. Behind the desire for learning a skill and pursuing a respectable livelihood was a wish to feel accepted by one's community. To the interlocutors, belonging in a social context and engaging in morally just activities turned out to be at least as important as the economic aspects.

There is no generally accepted definition of morality in anthropology, but a common approach is for it to be defined "in reference to the virtue-ethics tradition and conceptualised as *character formation*" (Klenk 2019, 338, emphasis in original). As Klenk writes, morality can include learning behaviours that distinguish one from other types of people. Morality can also be defined as "a system of rules and actions that predetermine conduct" where "[t]o act morally is to act in the light of a collective interest" (Bray et al. 1986, 103, referring to Durkheim).

The aspiration to social and moral acceptance was illustrated by the popular conceptions of 'dropout' and *iduler* (idler) as subject positions people wish to avoid. The notion of the dropout often appeared in conversations around learning a trade and refers to people who have left school or who live unconventional lives on the margins of society. Being a dropout is tied to discourses around idleness: an *iduler* is someone not engaged in productive work, who is passive and/or assumed to engage in socially unsanctioned activities like begging or prostitution.

20-year-old Fatmata, who recently started learning tailoring at a TVET school outside Freetown, reflected on idleness in our interview. She chose to start her studies at the school as she did not want to "just sit at home". Fatmata now divides her days between tailoring training and secondary education, while her family provides for her.[18] She reflected on idleness in her reasoning about learning an occupation. Fatmata's negative view on idleness reflects lines of thought that were often expressed by others in discussions about vocational training in general.

> Bim (B): When you say it's not good to just sit at home, why is that? Why is it bad?
>
> Fatmata (F): It's bad because you sit at home alone doing nothing. You will be… always in trouble. Here in Sierra Leone, gossip is too much. If you sit at home and have so many friends around

[18] Fatmata's situation illustrates that TVET students come from a range of circumstances and that not all join these programmes to escape poverty or as an alternative to school.

you, you won't be feeling like only sleeping, eating and get up, do nothing. You feel like being around people. And when you sit around, the only thing you'll be thinking about is gossip other people. And that's bad. And if you gossip somebody, and somebody notice that, it is going to be war! Because there's going to be fight (…) so that's what I don't want.

B: So, is it that you get a bad reputation if you just sit at home, or is it that you speak the gossip?

F: It's not only about talking gossip. It feels really bad. Doing nothing. What if the future comes, then there is no mother, no father. What will happen to you? You'll be thinking of going to do something that is not good for you.

B: Like what things?

F: Like going out in the street. Thinking that street is the place you can get everything you want. When there's… The street is just having crazy things. Going around men and do something that is not good for you. Because right now in Sierra Leone, any man that you're dating with, only a few that you can date with, they can like you, and you can be together, without trouble. But some, they should give you and they should get something in return. So then before doing all that, why can't you fight it your own way?

Fatmata talks about the intrapersonal consequences of idleness; it could feel bad not to do "anything", not to learn a trade or to find a way to provide for herself eventually. Not wanting to be idle is hence to do with self-image, self-sufficiency, and desiring the sense of self-worth involved in using and developing skills by engaging in productive activities. These feelings are understandable, since failing to contribute to society is met with strong disapproval in Sierra Leone. Bürge (2017, 154) takes this so far as to claim, also referring to Bolten (2012, 503), that being 'useless' is "perhaps the worst insult for a Sierra Leonean."

Fatmata reasons that being idle leaves someone with too much time, resulting in gossip that may eventually shatter social relations. The idler depends on parents or others and might even become dependent on people who do not have their best interests in mind. Fatmata is referring to transactional sex, something that was often referenced by others in discussions about dropouts and *idulers*.[19] It is not only undesirable to be considered a dropout or *iduler* because it entails a lack of skills, poor education, and a failure to be of use, but there is also a "moral danger of idleness" (Thorsen 2009, 321) that people wish to avoid. As the quote by Fatmata illustrates: an *iduler* is a lazy person who relies on others for subsistence,[20] or worse: he or she might pose a threat to society, a risk to themselves as well as others. Idle men are thought to potentially be involved in different forms of crime,[21] while idle women are suspected of engaging in prostitution.

Fatmata's claim, albeit metaphorical, that idleness leads to 'war', illustrates the understanding in the international aid community, outlined earlier, that young unemployed people in the unstable economies

[19] There is a wide range of sexual transactions with men that women might engage in to get by; see Diggins (2018, 18) and de Koning (2014, 19) for examples of these exchanges.

[20] However, development aid, which has become ubiquitous since the war, is itself producing dependent beneficiaries. How the aversion to dependency applies or does not apply in different contexts could be worth investigating further at a later time.

[21] A further step from being an *iduler* might be to engage, for instance, in sales of stolen goods. Men who engage in criminal activity are sometimes referred to as *rarray boys*, which Abdullah (1998, 208) describes as "a pejorative term for underclass youth".

of post-conflict zones are often understood as 'ticking bombs', or as violence waiting to happen (Enria 2018, 2–5). The connection between idle youth and violent conflict also exists in official discussions at the national level in Sierra Leone. For instance, a government report from 2012 on the "Status of the Youth" relates to this established discourse (Chipika 2012). The report emphasizes that there is a connection between the lack of job opportunities and young people turning to political violence, yet notes that it is not established to what extent this is true, and that blaming youth is "arguably used as a political weapon by certain groups" (Chipika 2012, 64).

Anthropologists, too, have criticized the link between unemployed youth and violent conflict. Enria (2018, 80) has argued, in the case of Sierra Leone, that the connection was potentially exaggerated by the international peacebuilding missions after the war, to support a common goal. Christiansen et al. (2006) have argued that the connection is in fact one between greatly circumscribed life chances – which some unengaged youth might find themselves in – and violent mobilization, rather than idle youth *per se*.

An observation I made that relates to this debate was that, although *idulers* were stigmatized, no person I met in my research expressed fear that unengaged youth might turn to political revolt or violence. This suggests there might be a dissonance between ordinary Sierra Leoneans' understanding of the issue of idle youth and certain official discourses around the same; what form of 'immorality is entailed by youth idleness differs depending on whom you ask. 'Uselessness' is what appeared to be the main concern of my interlocutors: inappropriately extended economic dependency, asocial behaviour, and, as a result, potential moral decay in society. I suggest that this, by extension, would threaten the relations of interpersonal trust and the expectations of reciprocity around which social and material life in Sierra Leone is centred, and hence jeopardize the social fabric.

The aversion to being unengaged with work or study obviously has bearing on more occupational choices than those of tailor and trader. But what makes it particularly relevant to both tailors and small business traders is the social positions they generally hold. Many of those who become small-scale traders – by far the most common kind of trading – and tailors would be idle if they did not engage in these trades. Engaging in subsistence trading can even be described as a characteristic of the dropout, because it is not necessarily considered a 'real' job.

It is telling that Bourdieu defines social capital as the combined resources that might grant someone "membership in a group" (1986a, 248). It was through enhancing their capital resources, notably social (for instance, becoming acquainted with other practitioners) and cultural capital (trade skills through their vocational training), that my interlocutors navigated their lives towards social mobility. That is also how social belonging and social mobility can be understood as connected, and I would argue that the increase of cultural and social capital involved in learning a trade, and the economic capital that will hopefully follow, serve at length to secure membership in a group. It might be the social groups of tailors, or of traders of specific kinds, but ultimately, it is also about making oneself a valuable member of society at large, or, in other words, of fulfilling the expectation of reciprocity contained in the idea of giving back to one's community. The dropout and *iduler* connote – in contrast to morality and belonging – alienation, and being outside of the group.

The meaning of patience and honesty

It was not only the trainees who saw vocational training as a way of becoming morally and socially well-adapted community members. TVET teachers, as well as masters in tailor shops, also appeared to view training as a way of inculcating into students and apprentices moral ways of being a person in society at large. Specifically, they seemed to aim at constructing learners as productive citizens who would otherwise be seen as a social threat, because of their age and/or socioeconomic position. In this section, I will show how the code of conduct in tailoring training tended to overlap with the teachers' understanding of what it meant to be a moral person at large, and how, in trading, acting morally went hand in hand with the possibility of succeeding.

The emphasis on morality and occupational ethics was particularly apparent in the repeated stress placed by teachers, tailors, traders, and 'bosses' – a general term for self-employed people with a certain experience in their trade – alike on the need for learners to cultivate honest, patient, and hard-working dispositions. They were also expected to behave well in their private lives, and to avoid what was often referred to as *fast moni* (fast money). Patience, honesty, and hard work are multifaceted and entwined concepts which I will elaborate upon further.

The importance of patience is inculcated in the learners by the shape of the learning itself, since the routine practice of tailoring and trading can be monotonous. It can involve hemming metres of fabric or handing over change to the hundredth customer for the day. Patience is often contrasted with the immoral pursuit of *fast moni* – money made quickly, easily, and not necessarily in socially accepted ways. The elderly Fula tailor, Mr Barrie, has owned a tailoring shop for several decades. He complained to me that the younger generation is not patient enough or willing to work hard enough to learn a skill and would rather go after *fast moni.* This could simply be a way Mr Barrie was positioning himself, identifying as part of a hard-working generation in contrast to a lazy one, but he nonetheless seemed to imply that the young are not yet fully formed moral beings. Mr Barrie's complaint is also an illustration of a cultural maxim in Sierra Leone that Bledsoe has called "a hardship ideology: 'no success without struggle'" (1990, 79), in essence, that social mobility must be earned through submitting to the authority of a teacher or benefactor, notably by the beneficiary showing her or his willingness to do arduous work and accept a degree of suffering. This is related to the stigma around being lazy and 'useless' (Bürge 2017, 154).

Many apprentice tailors no doubt quit due to financial pressure and the lack of pay and, not uncommonly, those who do withdraw from training then seek quick cash from day jobs. For men, these can include transporting goods for traders in the market or *okada* (moped) taxi driving with a rented vehicle, while for women a common day job is street trading. Even those who complete their apprenticeships might do these types of jobs if obtaining an income from tailoring proves too difficult.

The term *fast moni* also, however, connotes money made by cheating others – thieves and corrupt politicians, for instance, are understood as chasing *fast moni* (D'Angelo 2014, 279). I also find parallels between *fast moni* and the figure of the *iduler*, as the latter depends on or uses others to get by, or alternatively engages in marginalized or outright illegal livelihoods. "[T]his money is connected with selfishness, greed and with the lack of any sense of community," as D'Angelo puts it (2014, 18). Thus, we see why *fast moni* is immoral – because the methods it entails are, in essence, antisocial. Antisocial behaviour on the learners' part is discouraged by the emphasis on patience and hard work in training.

This notwithstanding, patience and honesty are valued not only as virtues but also as business strategies, ways in which social and economic capital may be gained by means of

increasing *custament*. "Making it bit by bit, then you rise," as fabric trader Rogiatu said when she explained how she had made her business grow. With this quote, she seemed to capture the aspiration to upward mobility and morality shared by my interlocutors, and the widespread perception that patience and diligence are key in that process. By the age of 65, Rogiatu's merits included having acquired a coveted shop space in an indoor market outside Freetown, after having experienced many setbacks during her trading career, including the misfortune of losing her previous shop and all of her goods when the rebel movement Revolutionary United Front (RUF) invaded Freetown in 1999.

Other interlocutors, particularly traders, would also articulate the time and patience it takes to become successful. For a trader, displaying honesty can entail setting fair prices and correcting customers' errors if they accidently give too much payment. For tailors, taking the job seriously and doing one's best in the craft are important parts of the code of ethics, in addition to charging appropriate prices. Traders, however, stress the importance of honesty more than tailors, probably because it is more central to their profession; building a reputation for honesty functions to position oneself favourably against the harsh competition from other traders. Traders who told me they were honest were usually quick to point out that far from all traders are; blaming others for dishonesty can function as an attempt to mitigate others' success (see Van der Laan 1975, 314–315).

However, there are norms around moral behaviour between traders, too, which I interpret as a manner of regulating the impact of the high competition. Between market vendors, for instance, it is morally taboo to approach or attempt to lure in members of someone else's *custament*. Stressing the importance of patience is also an expression of a culture of modesty shared among traders. Jennische (2018, 96–97) notes a similar phenomenon in Ghana, where the small-scale traders in his study tend to emphasize that their business is growing slowly and gradually. The reason for this, Jennische observes, is to prove to fellow traders that one's success is the product of honest and hard work, and hence that one's achievements are moral, which maintains good relationships between traders. It also regulates competition, as steep business growth may come at the cost of others' fair chance at doing business.

The moral relations between traders are also part of the larger societal weave of interdependence. As Ferme (2001, 110) notes,

> 'big people' (for instance those running successful businesses) might be suspected of antisocial behaviour, including witchcraft, 'if there is a perception that they do not use their wealth and status to help dependents and instead seek only their own profit.'

As Bürge has argued, in Sierra Leone, "pursuing upward or forward social mobility, becoming an elder (in terms of social age, thus a timely advanced status), requires not merely economic success, one's activities and success have to be recognized and accepted by fellow community members, often discoursed in a language of moral responsibility and adequacy" (Bürge 2011, 60; see also Vigh 2006).

There are, in other words, many nuances around the inculcation of ethics and morals in vocational training. Another example is that, in life, practices rarely imitate ideals. In tailoring shops, honesty to the master, boss, or teacher is stressed as being important on par with honesty to customers, since it entails showing respect for a senior and positioning oneself adequately in hierarchies of power. Despite this, it is not uncommon for apprentices to secretly make clothes in the shop and sell them to their friends for their own profit when the boss is away. This was spoken about discreetly by my interlocutors, as something the boss ought not

to learn about.[22] Although not officially sanctioned, it is common and silently tolerated by tailoring shop bosses to a degree, as they are aware that apprentices often struggle to make ends meet without a salary. Tolerating whilst disparaging the practice is perhaps a way that moral standards can be upheld whilst economic realities accommodated.

From one perspective, we can interpret this phenomenon as entailing that learners can display 'immorality' and yet successfully merge into an occupational role – that within that role, there is in fact some room for moral 'creativity'. On the other hand, perhaps secretly taking payments can be interpreted as not, in fact, an immoral act, but instead as part of the reciprocal, implicit agreement that the boss or teacher receives free labour and, in return, she or he overlooks the fact that apprentices find other ways to make money. In that respect, this practice may, counterintuitively, be part of the tailoring profession's code of conduct (cf. Herzfeld's (2005) concept of 'cultural intimacy'). Knowing that this is, in fact, tacitly accepted despite codes of conduct overtly condemning it, is part of the insider knowledge that an apprentice should obtain as part of her or his training.

"We do care about their moral upbringing a lot"

Sometimes, the inculcation of morals very explicitly extends beyond professional codes of conduct. One tangible example of this is when masters or teachers also attempt to teach their apprentices or students how to behave in their private lives (cf. Gowlland 2014), and I will discuss how this happens in tailoring. Schooling, as Ball has argued, drawing on Foucault (e.g. 1979), is "fundamentally concerned with moral and social regulation" (Ball 1990, i). Marchand (2008, 245), in turn, has suggested that the "apprenticeship [i]s a model of education that both teaches technical skills and provides the grounding for personal formation".

In some tailor shops in Sierra Leone, bosses expect apprentices to dress and behave 'modestly', an expectation that is not necessarily limited to work hours and the workplace. Omar, a senior apprentice and high-school student in his mid-twenties, explained that an unmarried female apprentice who becomes pregnant is likely to be expelled from the tailoring shop, while a married, pregnant woman could remain in the shop. An example from TVET is given by a teacher, Alusine, who said he teaches the students how to take care of their personal hygiene, since a neat appearance is necessary when encountering customers.

On one occasion, the aim of morally educating apprentices was actually mentioned explicitly. Tailor Mohammed said: "We do care about their moral upbringing a lot." Specifically, he was referring to the fact that he and his colleagues expect apprentices to pray at work – everyone in the shop is Muslim. Hence, teaching what is viewed as proper religious practice can be part of the moral education. Mohammed also said that not only do the parents of apprentices expect the tailors to teach their children practical skills like measuring, cutting, and sewing, but that "they expect us to give them what we know and also how we behave."

The moral education in learning an occupation often coincides with learners' coming of age, and hence with a broader stage of intense social development; I have already pointed out the commonality that an apprentice in a tailoring shop is simultaneously fostered by her or his teacher. In the instances where the learners are children, their moral education might not be problematic, but the situation is quite different when the learners are already adults. Omar recounted instances where an apprentice was of a similar age to her or his master. The stratification based on

[22] This practice is colloquially called *Mamy Caulker business* and occurs in other industries as well – that an apprentice or employee finds ways of doing business on the side. See also Hanson (2005, 167) on similar practices in Ghana.

mastery intersected with the social stratification based on age, leading to disruptions in the relationship, as the adult apprentice would not be subordinate.

In TVET programs, there is an articulated aim of changing the lives of the adolescent or adult students, generally female in the case of tailoring, by teaching them a profession. On the basis of the marginalized positions they generally start out from, they are deemed to be in need of social and moral development. One TVET school that informed this study was founded by a local advocacy group working for peacebuilding. The school appears on a website cataloguing peacebuilding initiatives, and it is advertised that, at this school, students learn their rights and responsibilities, as well as how to contribute to society. This attempt at moral education was also hinted at in my conversations with teachers and founders, in large proportion male, in a range of TVET schools, when they were telling me about their passion for empowering women. The use of the word 'empowerment' is ubiquitous in the development sector, from which many TVET schools receive funding – so popular it has been called a 'buzzword', often used in relation to different groups deemed vulnerable, like 'the poor', but particularly in relation to women (Cornwall and Eade 2010, 146–148). There was an underlying notion in the TVET organizations I studied that marginalized women should be helped into occupational training; this was particularly noticeable in the outreach efforts of these organizations, where employees visit common places for prostitution in order to seek out women and explain to them, in essence, that they can do better. The TVET schools arguably encourage conformity to certain moral codes that are perceived as lacking in their female students. Skeggs (2000), in part building on Bourdieu (e.g., 1977, 1986b), has argued that 'respectability' is one of the most encompassing signs of class belonging. She suggests that lower-class women are understood as lacking a certain respectability that middle class women, by means of their social status, are seen as automatically possessing. Although a deeper analysis of how Skeggs' analysis, based on the accounts of white working-class women in England, could be applied to the context studied in this article, my findings provide reason to believe that similar discourses exist in Sierra Leonean TVET, and that it is in this context that 'teaching respectability' in TVET arises.

TVET does provide marginalized women with a perhaps rare opportunity to develop occupational and other skills; students like Fatmata, who was introduced earlier, reported being happy to be engaged in a programme and excited about this new opportunity. Nonetheless, I wish to raise the potential issue of perpetuating conceptions that certain groups in society are initially morally weak. There are also instances of teachers having romantic or sexual relationships with the students in TVET schools. Fatmata was disappointed with her teacher, as he had a relationship with her friend, who was also her classmate, while also being involved with other students. This begs the question of whether the students' vulnerability is at times taken advantage of. Another question worth raising in future research is whether a completion certificate from TVET functions as a proof of obtained morality, or whether, by contrast, it is viewed by employers as an indication of a rough past, and hence acts to continually define these women as marginal.

Conclusion

Vocational training, here taken to include TVET programs as well as apprenticeships and other forms of on-the-job training, is broadly conceived of as a solution to the economic hardship that many young Sierra Leoneans experience. The public and popular discourse emphasizes learning a trade as the path to obtaining an income, but I have argued that what the aspiring tailors and traders in this study mainly achieved was something else,

namely, a moral education. The trainees themselves strove to be seen as moral and to feel accepted in their communities by means of developing skills rather than being idle, probably in part from having internalized the widespread view that *idulers* pose a threat to the socioeconomic order. Their teachers, in turn, taught work-related ethics aimed at encouraging moral dispositions in learners, including in their private lives. Although there appeared to be an overlap in learners' and teachers' desire to maintain the texture of the social fabric in society at large, the notion that learners are to become socially well-adjusted could also entail classist and sexist undertones. In addition, the educational relationship often involved a dimension of economic exploitation.

The interlocutors who were engaged in vocational training aspired to social mobility, which I defined as an increase in social status and material well-being by means of obtaining cultural, social, and economic capital. I found that these capital assets generally were developed to an extent. Cultural capital was accrued in the form of trade-related skills and a certain respect from others as a result of being engaged in socially sanctioned and productive activities. Social capital was increased via the human connections made during the process of training. However, what defines cultural and social capital as such is their convertibility to economic capital; hence, this is what the gains just outlined must ultimately be measured against. While the interlocutors were able to acquire some economic capital by means of the skills and social contacts they obtained, it rarely amounted to any substantial economic security. Material gains tended to take the form of basic subsistence and, even in the longer term, it was difficult to achieve a reliable increase in life standard. Vocational training tended not to result in any considerable upward social mobility for most interlocutors. However, it did function to impede downward social mobility. This was true not only for my interlocutors, but for the majority of their peers.

It is worth noting that the very concept of individual social mobility, devoid of context, risks feeding a neoliberal rhetoric that presupposes inequality and ignores questions of distribution. This study highlights some structural barriers faced by the majority of the population in Sierra Leone on the labour market, notably a scarcity of decent job opportunities and the fact that access to these is contingent on an individual's pre-existing social and economic capital. In extension, studying the work life trajectories produced by vocational training has suggested that economic development measures and state policies that focus on vocational training without addressing these barriers may be misguided. Further research should address these conditions which inhibit opportunities to make a decent living and to achieve some level of predictability in day-to-day life, particularly for those setting out from positions of limited capital in its various forms.

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