Chapter 8

Social Strategies and Material Fixes in Agotime Weaving

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Introduction: The Problem of Social Networks

Drawing on fieldwork carried out with weavers in a community workshop in Kpetoe Agotime, a small town in southeastern Ghana close to the border with Togo, this chapter explores what problem solving meant for a community of Ghanaian craftsmen. The ethnography presented demonstrates that while Agotime weavers were adept at manipulating tools and materials to solve practical problems that arose during craftwork, the issue that most concerned them was seeking solutions to managing the complex networks of social relationships that secured their positions within the community of makers and that facilitated their work. This strategising was an ever-evolving process, contingent and unfinished, making the social challenge of being a weaver and a person in Agotime an intractable and, ultimately, an insoluble one.

In order to understand how craftspeople managed their lives, I explore beyond those problems that were amenable to a 'quick fix', and look to the wider social contexts in which they lived and worked. Skilful material problem solving went hand-in-hand with the long-term nurturance, management, and strategising of often-precarious forms of social capital. The ability to produce high-quality cloths was therefore closely related to the strength and successful management of the numerous social ties between weavers, customers, patrons, and traders. The crafted product thus became a material manifestation of sociality; a sedimentation of the relationships that went into its making.

By its very nature, sociality is shifting and contingent, and therefore the limitations of the weaver's relationships need to be recognised. Development studies scholar Kate Meagher observed that social capital is never an unlimited good in the context of West African informal economies (2006, 2010a, 2010b). Social limits and borders are an integral part of the community fabric, and they can be both exclusive and exclusionary. In the same way that they may curtail a craftsperson's relationships with fellow makers, customers, and traders, they may also limit his capacity to weave well.

The Importance of Sociality and Exchange in Strategising Challenges

Located on the outskirts of Kpetoe Agotime, the weaving workshop housed the looms of nearly 30 *kente* weavers. *Kente* cloth is a distinctive Ghanaian craft, and that produced in Agotime is renowned for its quality and style. Like much craftwork across West Africa, weaving in Agotime has been a male-dominated activity. Of the workshop's many members, only one was female. Fifty-eight per cent of Ghana's population is aged 24 and younger (Ghana Statistical Services, 2013: 5) and levels of youth unemployment are high (Amankrah, n.d.). These statistics were reflected in the workshop where membership was dominated by young men who had taken up weaving because they were unable to find stable, salaried employment after leaving school. In the absence of state social security systems, the livelihood strategies of these young men routinely and opportunistically combined weaving with other available kinds of work, including subsistence farming and driving taxis, local *trotro* buses, and motorbikes. These men and their young families lived precariously on the margins of an already unstable local economy that, too, was marginalised in relation to a national economy that is centred upon the capital, Accra. They regularly struggled to make ends meet, and the threat of going without food or being unable to pay the rent was ever-present.

By turning to weaving, young Agotime men were not only exploiting the skills they could learn (or that they already possessed) to produce and market a distinctive and popular commodity, but weaving also allowed them to cultivate widespread and resilient social networks. Nurturing loyalty in their relationships and fostering social ties of dependence and mutual exchange with members of their extended families, friends, neighbours, work colleagues, and the visitors to the workshop (and to the town more generally) was a strategy for reducing the risks of hardship. If a weaver was unable to work or was faced with unforeseen expenses, then he could rely on the investments he had made in his networks to 'call in his debts'. This strategy was grounded in relations of continuous reciprocity and cycles of on-going and unresolved indebtedness between all parties. The nature of this sociality demanded that weavers support one another, thereby each securing security for themselves. In effect, a cultivated social network became a buffer against scarcity and the unexpected.

The concept of 'wealth in people' espoused by scholars studying societies in Equatorial Africa (cf. Argenti, 2007; Guyer and Belinga, 1995) has been compellingly applied to explain the importance of extensive social networks for negotiating scarcity and poverty across West Africa (Lindell, 2010; Meagher, 2006, 2010a). Whilst this concept is relevant to the working and social lives of Agotime weavers, I underline that the importance of social ties in the context of the workshop extends well beyond their sheer function of safeguarding against scarcity. My fieldwork observations of the very considerable attention paid to the work of becoming a well-connected person within the weaving community leads me to suggest that the cultivation of numerous and various kinds of social ties of dependence, exchange, and reciprocity was a style of 'social being' with an

aesthetics of its own. At stake was not mere material survival, but also – and perhaps more saliently – the status and prestige associated with being a well-known, well-connected, and successful craftsman.

Social strategising and its continual renegotiation resulted in not only a contingent sense of economic security, but it also propelled one toward becoming a 'full and proper' person in the workshop and in the wider community. Being a full and proper person in the workshop gave access to the knowledge and resources of fellow weavers. The successful cultivation and maintenance of a social aesthetics of exchange, indebtedness, and hierarchical relations created opportunity for individual weavers to become integrated members of the learning community, and thereby grow their craft knowledge and solve day-to-day practical problems in weaving with the resources to hand. In short, the on-going resolution of social challenges created the spaces in which practical and material problem solving could happen.

A Small Pile of Pebbles: Material Solutions to Material Problems

Intense sociality underpinned the ways that workshop members managed the challenges of making a living. But, as craftsmen, they were also constantly engaged in a search for solutions to the tangible problems that cropped up while weaving a cloth. Time was of the essence: the needs of customers had to be met quickly and efficiently. When thinking about practical problems in the Agotime workshop, my memory often returned to a particular case that illuminates the ingenuity of weavers' solutions.

Early one Sunday morning, I was sitting against the trelliswork walls of the workshop, reading a book. Most of the townspeople were still in church, and an unusual stillness hung in the air. In the otherwise deserted workspace, Saviour, a man in his mid-30s, was at his loom shuttling bobbins of orange and black cotton back and forth to weave a series of long and narrow strips. The strips would later be sewn together along their length to make a funeral cloth. He sat perched on a low stool, his upper body bent over his loom, and his legs swiftly working the heddles that open and close the web of warp threads. He was silently focused on the strip of cloth that was stretched out before him. From time to time, Saviour paused to carefully reel in the length of cloth he had produced onto the cross bar on his lap, which grew thicker with finished cloth as he proceeded with the work. On a squat stool next to him were set out a cylinder of brown wax that is used for smoothing the warp threads as they snap open and closed, a supply of prepared yarns to throw as weft threads, scissors for trimming loose ends, a short length of reed, and a small collection of ten or so pebbles divided into two piles. Periodically he paused, looked up from his work, and shifted a pebble from one pile to the next. The wax, the yarn, the scissors, and the reed were standard tools of the trade that I kept in a box by the side of my own loom in the workshop. The pebbles, however, were something new.

Saviour had recently taken up a government job halfway across the country and came home to Agotime for the weekend to see family and friends, and to spend time weaving to make a little money, I guessed. I later heard from another weaver that although Saviour's job started ten months ago, he had not yet received his first pay check. For the time being, he was supporting himself and his family with proceeds earned from weaving. He was busy and time was short. If he managed to complete a cloth or two, he could perhaps sell them to one of his new colleagues in the government office. As each black and orange band of the woven strip was completed, Saviour shifted a pebble from one pile to the next to keep track of the number of bands and thereby to calculate the length of the cloth. Individual strips of the particular cloth that he was making comprised 21 alternating bands of black and orange. When one strip was complete, the next was started.

Saviour's use of the pebbles for keeping count made good sense given the format of narrow-strip cloths. Narrow-strip cloths are composed of a number of woven narrow strips that are stitched together, edge-to-edge, to form a larger cloth. In the case of *kente* cloths, each strip is made up of two or more designs in a number of contrasting colours that alternate sequentially in blocks or bands along its length. Design possibilities and the overall look of the cloth therefore depend on the arrangement of the finished strips, one next to the other, to create contrasting but balanced patterns of colour across the entire cloth. For a cloth to look neat and well-made, each of its constituent strips that are stitched together must be equal in length. Agotime weavers place great store in neatness and balance. Because each strip in a cloth is several yards long, and a cloth might be made up of 20 or more strips, it is vital to keep track of number, the length of each strip, and the length of each block or band of design in a strip. Ability to do so indexes a weaver's skill. A tape measure with a notch in one end was tied to my loom, and I had been drilled in the importance of ensuring that each woven section was of equal measure. The small reed, perhaps eight or nine centimetres long, that sat on Saviour's stool served the same purpose. His pebble counting, though, was a deft and novel solution to a recurrent problem.

I watched Saviour work for a while before interrupting to ask about the pebbles. From where had he got the idea? Why was he using them now? Would he mind if I took a photo? With his characteristic reticence, and perhaps wary about my knowing that he had taken time off work to be in Kpetoe, Saviour merely replied that he was 'feeling lazy'. When nudged a little further, he explained that the pebbles helped him to keep track when he was tired; and then he added that I could take a picture if I wanted. He then returned to his work and I sat back down with my book.

I recorded the episode in my field-notes that evening and returned to it repeatedly when contemplating the role of problem solving in the making of Agotime weavers and their cloths. I imagined Saviour, walking sleepily to work that morning, collecting the pebbles as he went along, and setting them down by his loom as an *aide-memoire*. The image I concocted fit squarely with the *ad hoc* ethos of the workshop. Scraps of material, lengths of yarn, bits of wood, and

Figure 8.1 Gabriel laying out a *kente* narrow-strip cloth in the workshop. Kpetoe, August 2013. Photograph by Niamh Clifford Collard.

parts from old looms were stored away to be refashioned and re-purposed when someone's tool or a part of their loom broke or wore out, and needed replacing. Resourcefulness was born of necessity. The weavers' elegant *bricolage* with gathered objects and leftover bits and pieces 'oiled the machinery' of their working processes when things broke down.

I never again saw Saviour or any other weaver use counters to keep track of their weaving. But, I did start making notes on the uses to which gathered odds and ends would be put. When the cross bar on my loom snapped, for example, Gabriel came to the rescue. Gabriel worked at a loom close by and he kept an eye on my progress and gently mentored me in the craft during my time in Kpetoe. To solve my broken cross-bar problem, he cut a pliable branch from the tree at the back of the workshop and whittled a new one. Brooms were made locally by female relatives by tying together bunches of palm reeds. The brooms were kept in the corners of the workshop and used each morning to sweep the dusty concrete floor. If a bobbin came loose from its shuttle casing, one or two palm reeds were pulled from a broom and snapped to size and used to slot the bobbin back into place. While preparing the weft yarns on the spinning machine, another length of reed (again pulled from the broom and folded back on itself) was used to fix the bobbins in place. Snippets of plastic cut from empty water sachets or stray ends of cotton fabric were wound around yarn that was being spun to keep

the fast moving thread from burning the weaver's fingers. Loose lengths of yarn and excess pieces of fabric from old weaving projects were collected and stored in plastic bags. The yarn and fabric could be later plaited to make straps for the loom: circles of coconut shell were attached to the end of the straps and the weaver could interweave the strap between his big and second toes in order to operate the heddles. If a heddle leash frayed and snapped, this part could be carefully repaired using bits of saved thread. Unused bobbins of yarn were stored more carefully, kept away from the light and dust in case they were needed for some future project that called for that colour and ply of thread. When the carved softwood pulley that held the heddles cracked on one weaver's loom from years of use, an old plastic spool was coupled with a salvaged length of sturdy wire and put to work as a makeshift pulley. Crumbling breezeblocks, left over from when the workshop was built in the late 1990s, had been saved and used to weigh down the wooden sledges that kept the lengths of warp thread in tension. Things that were no longer needed at home eventually found their way to the workshop where they were given a new lease on life: old sofa cushions were used to pad hard wooden stools or as pillows for a nap in the midday heat; worn-out shopping bags with broken handles were used to wrap cloths to protect them from dust and the voracious jaws of the termites that colonised every corner of the workshop. Tools, too, had multiple purposes: a weaver's knife for trimming loose lengths of weft thread, for instance, came in handy when he needed to repair some part of his loom.

Many weavers were also skilled at fashioning the looms and other things that they needed to weave. Francis, who had become involved in the workshop after taking a weaving class at school, said that in the beginning he hadn't the money to buy a carpentered loom and so instead constructed a 'traditional' one at home. This entailed planting a number of interlocking branches into the ground outside his house to form the loom structure. As Francis's weaving skills became more adept, he decided to move into the workshop in the hope of attracting more custom. He could not bring his traditional loom from home to the workshop, but he was still struggling to find the 50 cedis or so needed for commissioning a carpenter to make a portable one.[1] Francis therefore set out to build his own. With the help of a friend, and using another loom as a model, he constructed the base, the frame, the carefully-notched supports, and the cross bars. After years of use, his portable loom had become rickety and Francis spoke to me about replacing it with a properly carpentered one. In the meantime, he patched the old loom when necessary and kept on weaving.

Improvising with available materials and found objects allowed weavers to work around the bigger and costlier problems that arose. It was a kind of tactical and skilful wayfaring for navigating the challenges and getting on with work

1 During the course of my fieldwork in 2012–13, the value of one Ghana Cedi (¢) fluctuated between £0.33p and £0.25p. For most workshop members, ¢50 was a considerable amount of money to pay upfront for tools or materials, and such a sum could constitute a craftsmen's entire working capital.

(Ingold, 2010: 120). Improvisation itself engendered certain kinds of relationships between people and things (Ingold and Hallam, 2007: 7). If a loom got stuck or a tool broke, the weaver had to step out of the workflow to fix the problem. Proper management of one's physical and emotional engagement with the cloth and tools was crucial to succeeding in the craft, and these brief periods of detachment from the regular workflow played a part in shaping the weaver's overall social and material experience of making. The anthropological study by Thomas Yarrow and Sîan Jones of the life of a Scottish masonry yard suggests that this process involves balancing periods of engagement and immersion in the work with moments of detachment in which craftspeople might break to chat and share a smoke or cup of tea (2014: 260). I noted a similar dynamic at play in the Agotime workshop, where finding a rhythm in the work required skill and purposive effort. Maintaining a focused and unbroken attention was demanding and tiring. If a thread snapped, or a tool gave way, the workflow was disrupted, thereby allowing the craftsman to step back and take stock of what had happened. These moments gave rise to reflection and offered opportunity for socialising. Neighbouring weavers in the workshop would take pause from their own work to offer hypotheses about what had gone wrong and suggestion of how it might be fixed. Disengaging from the flow to repair a snapped thread, replace a broken tool, or deliberate with a colleague why the cloth is behaving in unexpected ways, provided, on the one hand, a breathing space that facilitated eventual re-engagement with the flow of work. But, perhaps more importantly, disengaging from the flow of one's solitary work at the loom made time for renewing social relations with other weavers, fortifying networks, and reconfiguring social groupings and boundaries in the workshop.

Skill as the Ground upon which We Work: Sociality and the Invisibility of Skill

During discussions with my fellow weavers, my questions about problem solving were met with confusion. Although they managed problems in their everyday work, as I described above, and developed novel ways of designing and making their cloths, the category of 'problem solving' that I had in mind was nonetheless unfamiliar to them. I rephrased and modified my questions in the hope of eliciting explanations of how sparse, and often elegant, solutions were found to challenges at the loom. I laboured to get my fellow craftsmen to speak about the things that I had been watching them do for months. I was frustrated by the responses I eventually received. The weavers merely made cursory references to 'friends helping each other'. Just as Saviour had said little about his small piles of counting stones, others, too, demonstrated little interest in speaking about the *bricolage* of tools and materials used to resolve hiccups, and keep their weaving on track. The practical, tangible work of weaving was left largely unspoken, and instead preoccupations with making and negotiating relationships always came to the

fore. I felt increasingly that it was my questions, not their answers, which were missing the point, so I eventually stopped raising the issue of 'problem solving'.

In focusing on problem solving as a category for contemplation, I had assumed that the Agotime weavers approached their work in the same way as I. Part of my reason for being in Kpetoe as an anthropologist was to master *kente* weaving, and I had taken learning to be a conscious, deliberate process of enskilment. From that perspective, I had conceptualised problem solving as a material process whereby a maker uses what they know and the things at their disposal to apply themselves in consciously creative ways to the task at hand. Despite my having read the literature that addresses the ad hoc, improvisational, and relational elements of working, and my having been conversant in theories of learning that emphasise the social processes of open-ended collaboration within porous and shifting communities of makers (cf. Lave and Wenger, 1991), my imagination was nevertheless stuck on the idea of craftwork as a linear and mechanistic interplay between skilled practitioner and environment. In temporal terms, this implied that the movement from problem to solution was a single moment – an epiphany of sorts. Upon reflection, the perspective I held was socially and temporally bounded: the individual conceived as the locus of skill and innovation, and the work as comprising discrete and discontinuous moments of practice. In focusing on material solutions to material problems, I was missing the ways in which practice was fundamentally socially mediated over long periods of mutual engagement and exchange between makers.

Anthropological fieldwork and ethnographic writing are processes of learning to be elsewhere, at a constantly shifting frontier between what one already (thinks one) knows and something else entirely. Jean Lave, whose research on apprenticeship placed sociality at the heart of the learning process, has written eloquently about the importance and difficulties of re-engaging with and re-working one's *own* ethnography (Lave, 2011). Lave argued that the commitment to questioning our own work is what makes ethnography 'critical'. In my case, it was only after having admitted defeat in Kpetoe on the 'problem solving' issue, putting my interview questions to one side, and beginning to write up my research back home in the UK that I started to come to grips with what problem solving in the workshop really entailed.

By jettisoning the assumptions I had carried with me to Kpetoe, I was able to revisit my field notes and read what they actually revealed about the links between practical skills and social relationships. In a process that could best be described as 'ethnographic *bricolage*', I tried to make sense of what I had learnt by (re) assembling the parts. Revisiting my recordings of what was said, done, and taught in the workshop made clear that skill was not something talked about, but rather it formed the kind of invisible and unremarked ground upon which weavers worked. Skill that supports craft practice was, like the ground that supports our feet beneath us, taken for granted. Questions of skill were therefore side-lined when weavers spoke about their lives and their work. Talk centred instead upon the meshwork of relationships that bound one to another, in the workshop and beyond. These friendships and ties were ever-present and forever under construction: new ones

sought, existing ones nurtured or abandoned, and old ties reactivated and brought back to life according to the exigencies of personality and circumstance. In contrast to the bounded temporality of the problem solving I had set out to find, friendships (and animosities) were expansive, long-standing, and encompassed whole lifetimes in the community of craftspeople.

Working Together: Craftwork and Collaboration

Although Agotime weavers emphasised the importance of being able to work independently, there were a number of instances in which they would band together to get things done. Depending on the kind of help a weaver might need (e.g. asking for an opinion in passing, seeking guidance for completing a task, or requesting to use or borrow someone else's materials), different levels of intimacy inhered in these collaborative relationships. Although weavers took pride in managing alone, some tasks necessitated collaboration, such as laying out the complex, striped warp designs.

Mensah was one of the first weavers I met in the workshop. Small and sprightly, his shirt and trousers hung loose on his wiry frame, and his open face bore a broad grin that would erupt from time to time with infectious laughter. Mensah was formerly a member of the workshop, but he had moved his loom back home several years earlier. He was nevertheless a regular face around the shed. Stopping by now and then to see his friends, and occasionally lending a hand or offering an opinion on a cloth, his visits epitomised the ways in which weaving was interlaced with the pleasures of socialising. One afternoon, Mensah greeted Gabriel with a handshake and a click of his fingers before squatting down low to the ground on his haunches close to Gabriel's loom to chat. Mensah turned to offer greetings to other friends around the shed. Brimming with confidence, he then introduced himself to me and gestured for me to follow him and Gabriel to the other side of the workspace. The chat between Gabriel and Mensah flowed, and soon they were unpacking a bag of brightly coloured spools of rayon thread that I had bought from a store in town the day before. With the spools counted and organised according to colour and laid out in groups on the dusty concrete floor, they set to work pegging out the warp threads that would be set in the loom for my first cloth. It was an intricate job that involved carefully counting threads and making a series of spatial calculations to determine the length of weft to prepare. These calculations would ultimately determine the width and length of the strips that would make up the cloth. It is an important skill that apprentice weavers struggle to learn and which they might only master at the very end of their training, if at all. Throughout my own apprenticeship in Kpetoe, I remained entirely dependent on friends to help with this task, and I left the field still unsure of how to lay a background. In any case, it was a tricky task even for the initiated, so laying the warp was often done collaboratively.

Trailing yarn back and forth between two sets of nails hammered into several lengths of wood, Mensah and Gabriel worked fluidly, exchanging an occasional

word or glance as they set up an intricate striped pattern of threads in purple, deep blue, and pink. After an hour or so of meticulously counting and calculating, the last of the background was laid. Gabriel snapped the final lengths of yarn from the spool, and then fetched a circular wicker frame from across the workshop. Mensah, holding the frame in both hands and pulling backwards upon it so that his weight pivoted around his heels and his back was angled toward the concrete floor, began to carefully wind the background threads around the frame. After finishing, they returned to Gabriel's loom to continue chatting for a short while before Mensah bid everyone goodbye and headed home.

In addition to the occasional chore of laying the warp, there were other tasks that prompted weavers to turn to a colleague for assistance. For example, if a weaver was tackling a weft pattern that they had never attempted before, it was common to ask for help. In fact, weavers often said that having available help for this task was one of the main advantages of having a loom in the workshop. There was usually more than one way to approach a pattern, and colleagues would discuss the advantages of different techniques before settling on a method. When a cloth was nearing completion, weavers paired up to work out the best arrangement of strips, laying out the pieces edge-to-edge on the workshop floor. Whilst novelty in the choice of colour and design of a cloth was valued, considerable emphasis was also placed on composing a visual balance in the overall appearance of the textile. By flipping strips back to front or end to end, the overall design of the cloth was subtly, and sometimes radically, changed, and colleagues would gather to proffer their opinion on the most attractive configuration before the pieces were sent to the tailor to be sewn together.[2] Both of these kinds of assistance were given freely, even between workshop members who were not necessarily the closest of friends.

The lending of tools and materials was another highly valued form of assistance. In comparison with the preceding examples, however, lending tools demanded greater levels of trust between partners and a shared understanding that offers of help had to be reciprocated. For example, weavers would calculate the amount of thread they needed for a project before starting, but occasionally a weaver might run out of a particular colour before finishing the cloth. It might be financially difficult, if not impossible, for that weaver to buy the thread needed to finish the piece – in fact, they might receive their next income only once they had finished and sold the cloth. Thus, it was important for weavers to have trusting relationships with fellow craftsmen who would be willing to lend the spools of yarn with the knowledge that the debt would be repaid. Having or not having such relationships meant the difference between being able to deliver a completed cloth to a paying customer and the project being abandoned. Bonds of intimacy and

2 Tailoring is a separate craft from weaving, with its own apprenticeship and workshops. In Kpetoe, tailors who specialised in stitching together *kente* cloths were distinct from those who tailored ordinary clothes. Weavers generally had a preferred tailor to whom they would take their finished pieces to be made up into cloths and other garments.

trust also inhered in relationships in which work was shared between close friends and family members. For instance, weavers who had large commissions or who were already busy with other contracts would subcontract out part of their work to trusted fellow craftsmen. This arrangement allowed the principal weaver to both meet the demands of his customers during busy periods and offer valuable work to those who had little of their own. Sharing commissions served to smooth out the flow and availability of work, thereby providing a solution to one of the key challenges facing Agotime weavers.

Making Cloths, Growing Bodies: Collaboration and Commensality

The process of making a cloth in the workshop was a collaborative effort that involved various kinds of social ties. Weavers who worked together also tended to socialise and share food with one another. As such, a parallel can be drawn between the collaborative strategising that went into managing material problems and commensality as a process that organically grew bodies and relationships. If cloths were made collaboratively, then so too did weavers grow together in the shared social and material world of the workshop. The idea that sharing food is a semi-universal mechanism for creating common substance was suggested by Maurice Bloch who wrote, '… food unites the bodies that eat together and eating different foods distances them' (1999: 138). In the workshop, the production of common substance extended from commensality and talk about certain sorts of foods to the practice of weaving itself, so that food and work became bound together in the discursive production of particular types of socialised, working bodies.

The physical demands of weaving, compounded by the intense equatorial heat, called for regular breaks to eat, drink, and rest. Over the course of the day, women bearing tin bowls of fresh oranges, plastic basins of boiled maize, or a bundle of fresh sugar cane on their head wandered through the workshop. Those who were the mothers, sisters, wives, or neighbours of weavers would stop for a chat, setting down their wares and untying sleeping infants from their backs. The weavers kept a few loose coins in their pockets or work boxes to buy a snack, and they would break from their work to eat and talk together.

Sharing food or drink signalled that weavers valued each other's company, and these offers were accompanied by kindly smiles, joking, and chatting. An offer of food might also initiate an exchange of gifts, whereby an offer was reciprocated at a later date.

Offers of food and drink in the workshop were also entangled with complex ideas about the relationship between food, strength, and the work of weaving. While offering me a piece of corn or grilled plantain, Francis would ask what I had eaten for breakfast. When I would reply that I had eaten only fruit and bread, he worried that my diet was inadequate. Taking only 'tea' (i.e. a hot drink and some sweet sugar bread) or a meal of only rice did not count as eating. A meal was considered complete when it included soup or a portion of stew accompanied

Figure 8.2 Pouring libations and sharing drinks in the weaving workshop. Kpetoe, November 2013. Photograph by Niamh Clifford Collard.

by *fufu* (sticky dough made from cassava), yam, cocoyam, or *akple* (a local staple made from fermented corn flour and pounded cassava). If a weaver did not eat enough 'strong' food, then they risked weakening themselves to the point of illness.

The link between 'strong' foods and 'growing strong' was a recurrent theme in conversations among weavers. Their concerns about scarcity or lack were expressed in terms of not having enough of the 'right' kind of food. These worries translated into offers of food and drink as part of the work of maintaining ties with friends, family, and valued colleagues. Exchanges of food and drink therefore functioned in two interconnected ways: to feed the corporeal body and to feed the social body. The intertwining of commensality and collaboration in the workshop bound the organic processes of keeping alive to the social work of belonging to a community of craftspeople.

Mutual Assistance and the Limitations of Belonging

Weavers' strategies for managing the problem of a precarious working life included more substantial forms of mutual assistance. During times of financial need, gifts of money were exchanged between close friends and family members.

For example, weavers could expect friends and relatives to help defray the costs of such unanticipated events as a funeral or the 'outdooring' of a new baby.[3] Like craft skills, these relationships were grown slowly over a lifetime of shared experience and friendship, and they were treasured assets. In functional terms, they acted as a buffer, allowing weavers to even out financial peaks and troughs and to organise their working lives with a sense of security, however limited. In terms of prestige, the ability to call on a wide social network for support was a marker of status. It was expected that gifts of money would be reciprocated. In explaining these arrangements, Gabriel said that he was happy to give to a small and select group of his closest friends and associates because he trusted each of them to return the favour in his time of need. Just as a cloth embodied the sociality that went into its making, money and things exchanged over time became material manifestations of longstanding relationships.

These offers of assistance, however, came at a cost. To maintain close ties one had to possess the means to reciprocate. If one party was unable to return the gift, then relationships were liable to fray and disintegrate. It could be argued that the resilience of the Agotime weavers' social networks was only as strong as the abilities of its most vulnerable members to reciprocate. The literature on the resilience and resourcefulness of social networks has made this point well (Dijkstra, 2010; Lindell, 2010; Prag, 2010; Simone, 2010). Meagher's studies of informal manufacturing in Nigeria, for example, emphasised that in contexts of enduring poverty, state weakness, and infrastructural failure, social ties and networks can only achieve so much and should not be hailed as a cure-all for systemic problems (Meagher, 2006, 2010a, 2010b).

Offers of mutual financial assistance between weavers were never freely made. They operated exclusively between particular people, marking the intimacy of their interpersonal relationship as well as the ties that existed between their families. It was therefore not surprising that some of the most generous offers were made between cousins. Two of Gabriel's patrilineal cousins wove in the workshop. One was Saviour, introduced earlier, and another young man named Bright. The three enjoyed a warm, friendly, and productive relationship that extended beyond the workshop, deep into the fabric of their lives. They were

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3 Funerals in Agotime, and throughout Ghana, are elaborate and lavish affairs lasting several days. The family of the deceased is expected to provide hospitality for the mourners, often numbering in the hundreds. Funerals are an opportunity to socialise as well as mourn, and they are a marker of a family's status and prestige. As such, the weavers believed that a family should invest as much as they could reasonably afford in a funeral not only out of respect for the dead, but to fulfil their obligations and renew ties in their social network.

The so-called 'outdooring' of a new baby takes place in the weeks after birth, when mother and child visit family, friends and neighbours. It is an intensely social occasion that marks the arrival of the child within the community and the passing of the dangers posed by pregnancy and childbirth. Gifts are exchanged and the father of the child is expected to provide a new set of clothes for the mother (often in auspicious indigo wax print or white cloth) and a *kente* cloth wrapper in which to carry the baby.

closely bound together through the sharing of work, gifts of food, offers of help at the loom, and exchanges of money. At times, their conversations became quite lively, with boisterous laughter volleyed across the workshop. The nature of these exchanges communicated to others a definite sense that they enjoyed a relationship of mutual support.

Not everyone in the workshop was included in this kind of tight-knit community of friendship, family, and work. Victor was a shy man in his early thirties who had been apprenticed in adulthood to an older weaver who had since retired. Victor's parents had been farmers from the northern Volta Region. He was friendly and willing to speak, but he lacked confidence, avoided eye contact, and stumbled over his words. Now and again, ebullient chatting and banter in the workshop spilt over into open taunting and mockery, and Victor was often the target. Quiet in nature and lacking the family ties and close friendships that others enjoyed, Victor was easily cast as an outsider. One afternoon, in the midst of a particularly rowdy bantering session between Gabriel and his cousins, Victor was loudly called from his work to carry an empty water sachet to the bin. The indignity of the request was writ large across his face. Nevertheless, he slowly bent down to pick up the rubbish while the entire workshop looked on, and he walked to the bin while glancing over his shoulder. Victor returned to his loom and muttered something angrily under his breath. His retort was met with whoops of laughter from a few, and the ashamed silence of everyone else. He was thoroughly cowed and humiliated. This event fully exposed the exclusionary dynamic at work that allowed some weavers to feel at home in the workshop and others to feel alienated and defeated.

Sometime later, the normally tolerant and gentle weaver who sat next to Victor in the workshop expressed to me his frustrations with his workmate. He complained that Victor did not know how to lay out his own warp background and that he regularly asked neighbours for help with his weaving. It was clear to me that there was little patience afforded Victor by even his kindest colleagues. Victor had not been taught how to lay the warp during his apprenticeship. Not being from a weaving family, Victor depended entirely upon his master to learn the trade. When the master retired and left the workshop, Victor was forced to pay colleagues to help him or to depend on their grudging goodwill. He lacked practical problem-solving abilities and was running short of the social capital that would allow him to acquire that knowledge, and to work successfully. Although it would be overstating the matter to suggest that Victor's master had deliberately withheld training to lay a warp, it does seem reasonable to suggest that Victor had not mastered practical skills because he was not socially-embedded within the community of makers in the ways that others were. In short, Victor lacked the relationships that enabled others to collaboratively problem solve and resolve work challenges, and this fact was reflected in the relatively poor quality of his weaving.

Conclusion: Tracing a Path from Growing to Making

The ongoing and insoluble challenges of being a craftsman and a person in Agotime were socially framed because skilled practice was developed through the careful cultivation and nurturance of relationships of exchange and commensality. Not everyone who weaved came from a family of weavers, or was from Agotime, but growing up in the weaving community offered greater access to skill development and endowed individuals with a certain sense of belonging. Together, these things formed the social basis of the problem-solving strategies that enabled weavers to live and work within the community of craftspeople. Where ties to the community were weaker, there was reduced capacity to collaboratively solve problems concerning practical and social issues that arose in the processes of crafting. The themes of sharing, food, and nurturance that ran through everyday life in the workshop powerfully expressed ideas of community, growth, and belonging – but they could also inflict the opposite.

To be on the margins of the workshop community was an experience that stunted the growth of makers. Without the support of colleagues, a weaver was unable to fully develop mastery and a sense of independence, and his weak social ties crucially impinged on his capacity to problem solve around the practical challenges of making. Such craftsmen struggled on, marginalised and ever-reliant on the 'grudging goodwill' of others. If, as I was told, weaving in Agotime is 'the work of the community', then it was this craft – often shared with warmth and friendship, but also laden with the potential to exclude – that defined the possibilities and limitations of 'being' amongst these men.

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