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Ties of Dependence: AIDS and Transactional Sex in Rural Malawi

Abstract

Patron-client ties and a moral obligation to support the needy are central to African social life, and are usually understood as operating in a very different realm than the exchange of sex for material support that Western observers have labeled “transactional sex.” Claimed by some to be a major driver of the AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa, transactional sex is described as akin to prostitution, a degraded form of sexual expression forced on vulnerable women by economic desperation. Based on evidence from rural Malawi, we argue that the exchange of sex for money is better understood as one of the many ties of unequal exchange in which Malawians and other Africans engage, an exchange in which the patrons are as important as the clients.

Many analysts see the generalized heterosexual epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa as driven by poverty, more specifically women’s poverty, which leaves women with little alternative but to exchange sex for the resources necessary for survival (Barnett and Whiteside 2006:89-98, 359; Poku 2006; Hallman 2004; Epstein 2002; Epstein and Kim 2007; on “survival sex” see Leclerc-Mdlala 2003; Wocjicki 2002a).¹ Women are indeed poorer than men, and “transactional sex” is indeed widespread.² But we argue in this paper that this view misses a great deal of what motivates and sustains such sexual patterns. Most obviously, it does not provide a satisfying explanation for why many men, even very poor men such as those in rural Malawi, are willing to pay in order to collect multiple partners, nor does it help us understand why women who are not economically desperate may nonetheless prefer multiple partners to monogamous marriage. Using a remarkable data-set—more than 600 observational field journals in which rural Malawians recorded the ordinary conversations they overheard or participated in—we try to give a more socially grounded sense of the larger social pattern that naturalizes and sustains what international observers isolate as “transactional sex.” We argue that seeing each of these features in terms of larger patterns of unequal personal interdependence—the pervasive African reliance on patron-client ties—gives a better account of the dynamics of such relationships than standard accounts provide.

Transactional sex is viewed differently from the perspectives of practitioners and activists, on the one hand, and from the perspectives of academic researchers, on the other. Among the former, the image persists that poor women are “forced” to rely on transactional sex (on women’s vulnerability and efforts to combat HIV by empowering women and reducing their poverty, see, eg. Global HIV Prevention Working Group 2003; Epstein 2002; Epstein and Kim 2007; Human Rights Watch 2006). This view has led in two directions. One direction practitioners have pursued is to challenge the fundamental economic inequality directly by providing women with a path out of poverty, for example through micro-finance programs or vocational training. The second is less ambitious: to accept the durability of economic inequality

and thus focus on altering the balance of power in sexual relationships, for example by teaching and empowering women to negotiate safe sex.³

In contrast to these images, scholarly research on sex and love in Africa has increasingly shown a pattern at variance with the “women’s poverty” approach. Two findings from this literature are relevant here. First, not only is HIV prevalence highest in the relatively wealthy countries of Africa’s southern region, but within countries HIV prevalence is highest among the wealthiest men and women (Shelton et al 2005; National Statistics Office and ORC Macro 2005 for Malawi; Chin 2006).⁴ Transactional sex provides enterprising women with luxuries (Ankomah 1992; Leclerc-Madlala 2003), opportunities to make contacts that foster social mobility and economic independence (Caldwell et al 1989; Pittin 1983 for Nigeria; Halpeny 1975 for Uganda; Akomah 1999 for Ghana), and poorer women with small luxuries such as lotions and soaps (Tawfik and Watkins 2007).⁵ Thus the evidence about transactional sex calls out for an interpretation that would apply to women at many economic strata, not just the poorest.⁶

Second, many scholars have shown that, rather than being seen as unusual or degrading, in sub-Saharan Africa economic exchange is considered integral to a wide range of sexual relationships, from marriages, to long-term non- or extra-marital unions, to brief affairs, (see Caldwell et al 1989; Ankomah 1999; Hunter 2002; 2005; Kaufman and Stavrou 2004; Johnson-Hanks 2006; Poulin 2006).⁷ These turn our attention away from the characteristics of the transactions themselves (e.g. the age difference between partners, the price paid or received, as in Luke 2003; Luke and Kurz 2002) and toward incentives for both men and women to engage in concurrent partnerships. Such partnerships have been shown to facilitate the rapid spread of HIV (Morris and Kretzchmar 1995; Halperin and Epstein 2004; 2007) and to distinguish sub-Saharan sexual patterns from countries where exchanging sex for money is done on the spot market of prostitution rather than being a feature of potentially enduring relationships.⁸

So far, researchers have not explored men’s motivations for spending their resources on multiple partners, beyond a simple assumption, often implicit, that men in general have an insatiable desire for sexual variety; nor has the existing literature grappled with why even women who earn reasonable incomes or are well-supported by their fathers or husbands might want multiple partners.⁹ We thus build on previous scholarship to examine sexual partnerships in relation to broader African patterns of unequal interdependence. Using a set of conversational journals from rural Malawi, we examine how sexual partnerships are understood in relation to ties that link kin, patrons and clients, and others who seek to mitigate social and economic insecurity through constructing ties of dependence. An appreciation of transactional sex as but one manifestation of a familiar, pervasive and deeply embedded system of asymmetrical interdependence will allow scholars and policy-makers a more realistic, grounded understanding of the forces that hold this system in place and what, if anything, might be done to alter it.

The Data

The journals used here were collected in conjunction with the Malawi Diffusion and

Ideational Change Project (MDICP). The spine of the MDICP is a longitudinal survey of the role of social networks in changing demographic attitudes and behaviors, supplemented by semi-structured interviews with sub-samples of respondents (Watkins et al, 2003). When it proved to be difficult to learn who-said-what-to-whom in the context of clipboards and tape recorders, the researchers asked several high school graduates living in or near the MDICP study sites to be participant observers as they went about their daily routines—walking to the market, getting water at the borehole, playing *bawo*. If they overheard anything concerning AIDS or family planning¹⁰ they were to make mental notes of what people said and did, and then write their recollections word-for-word in commonplace school notebooks that evening or soon thereafter.¹¹ We treat the conversational journals as texts that record hearsay evidence: we hear only secondhand, from the journalists' ears—and their memories—to our eyes.¹² These ethnographic field journals give extraordinary access to the perspectives on sexual partnerships that circulate in the countryside of an African country in which approximately 12% of adults are HIV positive (National Statistical Office (NSO) [Malawi] and ORC Macro 2005) and survey respondents attend an average of 3-4 funerals per month.

More than 600 journals, each on average about 7500 words and typically covering several distinct conversations with multiple participants, were written between 1999 and the present (some are on the MDICP web site, with identifying information removed: www.malawi.pop.upenn.edu). Twenty-two journalists (9 female, 13 male) have contributed journals: three very frequently, thirteen frequently, and six only occasionally. All are high school graduates who went no further; all are young (20s or early 30's); and all rely on subsistence agriculture supplemented by casual labor or small-scale retail as well as intermittent MDICP activities. We did not provide any training, since we did not want them to interview, but only to listen, remember and write. Nor did we define what we meant by “conversations about AIDS.” As a result, the content of the journals reflects what the journalists assume we want to know about AIDS: we learn much more about sexual partnerships than about what happens to orphans, either because there is simply much more talk about the former than the latter, or because the journalists think of AIDS primarily in terms of sexual behavior (as indeed prevention activities have emphasized).

The conversations were in local languages, but the journals were written in English – and often hastily, such that the grammar is sometimes poor and words omitted. We have retained most of the idiosyncrasies in grammar and spelling, as well as locutions that reflect local adaptations of English.¹³ For clarity, we have punctuated run-on sentences, made subject and verb agree when necessary, and inserted omitted or clarifying words in brackets [] (words in carets < > are the journalist's). All proper names have been changed, and journal excerpts are cited using the pseudonym of the journalist and the date of the journal in year, month and day format.

The journalists were paid US\$30 for an 80-page school notebook, an amount that was deliberately set high relative to incomes in rural Malawi, as an incentive to continue with the project. Incentives raise the possibility of fakery. The journalists had worked for the MDICP as interviewers and shown themselves to be reliable, honest, thorough, and intelligent. But we are in the same position as classical ethnographers: neither we nor they could know with absolute

certainty whether reports of informants are accurate. We have evaluated the journals in the light of other information (including many months in rural Malawi participating in MDICP data collection). In addition, there is also evidence internal to the journals: because some of the more notorious characters in the area appear in the journals of more than one journalist, and some actors reappear in multiple journals of the same journalist, we can examine consistency of representation across journalists and over time. Most convincing, however, are the internal qualities of the journals. Kaler (2003) notes recurring themes in the journals, but also the relative absence of clichéd situations and characters. We (and other readers of the journals) are struck by their quality of verisimilitude. While only extended excerpts from many journals could make this point fully convincing, it is evident as one reads the journals that only a gifted novelist could have manufactured such a variety of voices, situations, incidents, and viewpoints. As Kaler (2003) observes, it would probably have been much more work to invent these situations and voices than simply to record them.

Despite the verisimilitude and the external and internal consistency of the journals, a journalist is not a mechanical amanuensis. These are texts of recalled conversations, not recordings, and the journalists surely did not remember perfectly everything that was said, and by whom. Nor do we believe that participants in conversations always spoke what they believed to be the unalloyed truth: people have agendas in their interactions with friends and relatives as well as their interactions with interviewers. What the journals do tell us, however, is how talk of sexual partnerships is infused with the expectations that characterize a society in which to be a patron and to have clients are of utmost importance.

Our journal methodology has been approved by institutional review boards at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Malawi, and we have substituted pseudonyms for all individuals and small places. We also note that this methodology provides more protections for human subjects than does most ethnographic or anthropological research. It is true that those whose conversations the journalists report do not know that the journalists are listening with a view to writing down their words for the benefit of researchers. Yet the fact that we use multiple journalists from different villages and different regions of Malawi means that it is much less likely that anyone could trace a conversation or incident to a particular person than when an anthropologist, based in a single village for months or years, reports gossip, conversations or incidents from the smaller group of people among whom she or he works.

Before proceeding further, we provide excerpts from a conversational journal to convey a flavor of their style, the remarkable level of detail the journalists recollect, and the number of people whose conversations and activities they report. The journalist recounts a conversation among strangers on a crowded minibus, drawn together when a man lacks the full fare. The main topic is the desirability—and the evils—of money. These excerpts illustrate the multiple conversations that frame the narrative of AIDS—and, to anticipate our theme, the multiple ties of unequal dependence that characterize Malawian life:

Another man began saying that everyone nowadays is seriously seeking money and you may find a lot of rich people who are not satisfied of what they have and want to have even more. But when you ask them or beg them for money, you may find that they refuse

and complain, saying that they don't have money. They let...their fellow relatives die of hunger without assisting them, even when they have a lot of money in the banks or even at their homes.

Another one said that that's very bad indeed because wealth becomes good and sweet when eating together with relatives....

And someone said that indeed money is wonderful and if people are dying a lot of the disease which has come nowadays known as AIDS its because of money.

People agreed. And the man continued saying that he feels pity when he visits many places, especially in towns where he finds a lot of pretty girls or women being movious [promiscuous] and a lot of them serving in bars because job opportunities are so rare. He went on saying...that they went to school but they are not getting a job. Their parents wasted a lot of money paying for their school fees which is very expensive nowadays and the parents were expecting that the money which they had invested paying for their school fees should be given back to them after school.... [But] after school still they face the problem of job...and girls, especially those [who] look very beautiful, are the ones who find the jobs because they are proposed by the bosses and be sleeping with them and they can keep on changing the job if they want to because for example she might be employed at one company and meet with a certain boss of a certain company and that boss proposes her as well and promises her to find a job in his company with a better salary than the current company where she is working; and she accepts.

A woman agreed and said that then its...better to die unemployed than rushing to get employed and be obtaining money by sleeping with men (bosses in particular) nowadays when there is AIDS [if you do that], the end result is that you wont last long, you will leave others to continue working while you go to the grave to get buried. [Simon 040203]

The journals are in general consistent with data from other sources, but they give a much more vivid sense of the cultural and moral logics, the complexities and contradictions, and the texture of what people say spontaneously in their everyday conversations.

Systems of Dependence

In Malawi as elsewhere transactional sex is linked to the idea that women need money while men have it. But this basic truth masks considerable complexity. It is obvious that men with more money can afford more sexual partners. Malawians, however, frequently make a stronger claim, saying of a man with money that "the money was forcing him to have many partners." At first we were amused by these claims, and then puzzled. But we now think that such statements—and many other aspects of Malawian understandings of sexual interactions—make sense if we understand transactional sex as part of a larger system patron-client relations. Just as women need patrons to provide them with material benefits, men need clients who

provide them with an outward display of power, prestige and social dominance and an inward sense of behaving morally.

Before proceeding, we should also note a limitation of our analysis. In this paper, we develop an institutional interpretation that suggests that men and women are constituted as they are—with the needs, identities and desires they have—by the institutional system in which they participate, a political economy in which ties of dependence are critical and ubiquitous. The theoretical and empirical literature to which we are responding, however, frequently leads us to pose our argument as if women and men had separate motives and exchanged gifts and sex to maximize their individual interests.¹⁴

Throughout Malawian society—and in many other sub-Saharan African societies we have worked in and read about—virtually everyone, at all income levels, is seeking patron-client ties, what we call “ties of dependence” (Barnes 1986; Ekwensi 1987 [1961]; Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Bayart 1993; Vansina 1990; Weinreb 2001; Tibandebage and MacIntosh 2005). Kaler and Watkins (2001) observe that family planning workers in Kenya systematically disobeyed some of the policies of the Ministry of Health because they were casting themselves as patrons, using the services they distributed to earn respect, gratitude, and perhaps unspecified future reciprocity. Daniel Jordan Smith (2003) writes of a similar exchange in internationally-funded family-planning programs in Nigeria. Staff use workshops to “repay the patrons who installed them as officers in the ‘dollar project’ and build their own networks of clients by doling out the per diems and allowances that are paid to participants” (p. 711). This, Smith argues, is part of a pervasive pattern:

Particularly important for negotiating one's way in contemporary Nigeria is what Ubakala natives call ‘having people.’ By this they mean having people—especially kinspeople—strategically placed across the Nigerian social and economic landscape to get access to opportunities and resources. (p. 207)

In addition to opportunities for upward mobility, ties of dependence also provide a cushion against a time when unpredictable events may threaten downward mobility. In a patron-client society, it is clearly advantageous to be a patron to as many clients as possible, and simultaneously to be a client to as many patrons as possible.

Ties of dependence can be observed at all levels of African societies. In semi-structured interviews conducted with a selection of MDICP survey respondents in order to better understand how poor villagers coped with shocks such as famine or the death of a productive family member, people spoke of a relative in the city who sent food or the support they themselves gave to an elderly widow caring for orphans. Similarly, our African academic friends talked of patrons who invited them to international conferences, but also the expectations of kin in their home villages that they would provide both necessities like cooking oil and maize flour and such luxuries as bars of soap, sugar, and tea. We heard many stories of former associates—an old girlfriend, a former nursemaid, an old employee—suddenly showing up destitute, and according to the tellers at least, such potential dependents were not turned away. And of course, as Westerners, we ourselves were frequently cast in the role of potential patrons,

both by those with whom we worked or who befriended us, and by the myriad hopeful seekers who offered themselves as “pen-pals,” assistants, or friends.

Although some of the most influential discussions of patron-client relations come from studies of Latin America and South Asia (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984; Roniger 1990; Roniger and Günes-Ayata 1994), patron-client ties appear to play an even more central role in sub-Saharan Africa, where it has long been recognized that the basic form of social pre-eminence involves “rights in persons” or “wealth in people” (Kopytoff and Miers 1977; Miers and Kopytoff 1977; Vansina 1990; Guyer 1993; Barnes 1986; Smith 2004b). Virtually everyone is simultaneously a patron to those below and a client to those above, “one of the links in one of the many chains of dependence.” (Chabal and Daloz 1999). Thus, as these acute observers have written, “The truly destitute are those without patrons” (Chabal and Daloz 1999:42). And, we might add, the truly insignificant are those without clients.

Chabal and Daloz also emphasize another aspect of patron-client ties that is central for our argument: such asymmetrical ties are fundamentally redistributive.¹⁵ In order to have power one must have clients; in order to have clients one must have resources to meet their expectations. “The acuteness of apparent inequalities is reduced by the imperative to be seen to redistribute on a scale appropriate to one’s standing”—much as village men with money are “forced” to have girlfriends (Chabal and Daloz 1999, p. 28; see also Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984; Roniger 1990). But redistribution is not only strategic and instrumental, it is also the moral thing to do. Hoarding resources is considered to be profoundly anti-social, breeding envy, resentment and disrespect, and, possibly, witchcraft to punish the miserly (Ashforth 2005; Chabal and Daloz 1999; see also Wardlow 2004). Moral obligations to kin and expectations of reciprocity are the core model for such ties of dependence—in Uganda, the word “poverty” means those who have no relatives (Whyte 1997)—but obligations of redistribution and reciprocity spread outward in a broad network of social relationships, such that only the most unfortunate have no social safety net to cushion an unpredictable disaster.

In what follows, we use our understanding of patron-client relationships to interpret otherwise puzzling features of sexual partnerships in Malawi and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa: the pressures on men to seek extra-marital partners; the desire for and the difficulty of achieving fidelity; sexual networking as a form of social insurance; and the potential for independence when ties of dependence fail.

Fidelity versus Multiple Partners

In this section we interpret the tension between fidelity and multiple partners in terms of ties of dependence. Fidelity is seen, even by the promiscuous, as a desirable goal,¹⁶ and perhaps even more so now that all are aware of the risk of premature death from AIDS (Watkins 2004). The favored Malawian expression for fidelity is “depend only on each other,” a phrase which suggests how central ties of dependence are to the way sexual relationships are experienced and understood. Yet despite the emphasis on fidelity by religious leaders (most Malawians report regular attendance at religious services) and from relatives and village elders (the *ankhoswes*, or

“marriage counselors”), husbands and wives, as well as unmarried girlfriends and boyfriends, often find that their partners have been unfaithful.¹⁷ Why is fidelity so elusive? As we will see, the forces that push men—but also women—to seek multiple partners do not come exclusively, or perhaps even primarily, from sexual desire.

In rural Malawi, there is a great deal of gossip about particular cases of infidelity. Men sometimes justified their own behavior to their peers as simply sudden and uncontrollable lust, but other justifications seem to be necessary for a wider audience.

One justification is that regular sex is necessary for good health (see also Caldwell, Caldwell and Quiggen 1989, Johnson-Hanks 2006). Thus when sex with a regular partner is not possible—for example, if a couple is separated by labor migration, or if one or both partners faces a taboo against sex under certain temporary conditions such as post-partum abstinence—both men and women who seek sexual relief from another partner are considered by many to have acted in a justifiable manner.¹⁸ A second explanation, and one which appears to apply only to men, is that sexual variety is so desirable that it can be considered a necessity. This is expressed in the phrase heard frequently in Malawi as well as other African societies, that “one can’t eat *nsima* [the staple food] every night” (Watkins 2004; see Johnson-Hanks 2006:166 for Cameroon). Women’s infidelities are often justified by economic need, either for subsistence or soap and lotions, but also by a husband’s failure to satisfy his wife sexually (“because the husband is a beer drinker and when he reaches home he just sleeps, not having any sexual contact ...”) or by revenge for a husband’s infidelity (Tawfik and Watkins 2007).

Below we show that for both men and women, the temptations of multiple partnerships also derive from the powerful and pervasive logic of patron-client ties. For men, this logic leads them to become patrons of multiple women; for women, this logic may lead them to be clients of multiple men. Mark Bloch (1961 [1940]) describes how in the second feudal age vassals began to swear fealty to more than one lord, receiving a fief from each but creating a crisis of loyalty if the two lords went to war against each other. A similar logic operates, we argue, in ties of dependence in sub-Saharan Africa. In sexual and romantic relationships, people want and hope for fidelity—women sometimes divorce unfaithful husbands or thrash the other woman; men may divorce a wife “caught red handed,” and both men and women express outrage and distress at the discovery of a betrayal. But at the same time, men seek to demonstrate their “wealth in people” by becoming patrons to poorer women, and women may not be able—or may not want—to be a client to only one man.

Understanding Patrons

Important features of Malawians’ understandings of the relationship of sex and money become clearer when we see transactional sex as but one form that patron-client ties can take. We begin with patrons. We first try to understand why it is said that men with money are “forced” to have many partners, and then turn to the obligations of patrons.

A Man with Money Requires Sexual Partners

From the perspective of villagers, it is men's money that "forces" them to have multiple partners:

Mary told me that Kassim has suffered a lot because he has been ill for some years. In the first days he was doing his business of selling fish at the market and he was having some money, so that he was giving the money to his friends by credit but with interest. He was then having much [more] money and the money [was] forcing him to have many partners. [Sophia 031005]

Interpreted through the logic that informs the patron-client system, we think "forced" means that Kassim faced community expectations that as a man with resources he would redistribute them to those who are poorer than he, thus creating clients that demonstrate his standing as a patron. One way demonstrating his standing as a patron is helping "poor women" who cement the relationship by providing sex in exchange. If he does not redistribute his resources—if he hoards his resources and "eats alone," he is behaving immorally, and would be subject to scorn and even witchcraft.

Men's obligation to help poor women recurs frequently in the journals, as in the excerpt below, where the journalist recounts a story heard on the radio:

Here is a rich man <*namadya bwino*> who is married and has children so with this starvation hunger situation which has hit Phalombe and the whole country as a whole there is also a certain household there and it was totally running out of food completely and they had nothing. [In] that household there were two sisters, one 18 and the other one 20. They sat down and made a decision that with the current hunger situation they planned to propose the *Namadya bwino* the rich man of Phalombe but he was married. The sisters went to the rich man and openly told him that he should marry the 2 sisters since they have nothing to do no food no any support. The rich man accepted and married the 2 girls. As of now they are 3 three wives now including the 1st wife and as of now the marriage is going on smoothly.... [Haji 051105]

The rich man may be motivated only by his desire to act morally by helping two needy women. But he is certainly not unaware that in taking on his two new clients provide several benefits in addition to sexual variety: the man gains status for his generosity and for having multiple wives, and he now has a domestic labor force of three to cook, clean, and work on his fields.

The second journal excerpt, in which a neighbor complains to the journalist about her husband, is more explicit about the link between sexual exchange and social obligation, even as the husband's rationale is also more obviously self-serving:

Now what is happening is that my husband wants to marry another wife who is his cousin. I have tried to ask him to tell me why he wants to do this, but his reply to me was she is my cousin and I cannot allow her to be getting worried that men are not coming to

ask for marriage to her.... He told me that he always gets concerned when he sees or hears women who worry that they are [not] getting married or they need help but they don't have means of getting the help like money to buy soap, relish [the meat or vegetable to accompany the staple grain], clothes and other need of their daily life while I know that I can take care of them for I have money and a shop where they can be getting their needs, for God says help the needy <*poti Mulungu anati thandizani osowa*>.

So when I ask him is this the way you can help the needy through the exchange with sex, he says do you think I can just keep spending property with nothing in return? [Alice 041107]

Finally, a third journal excerpt illustrates a fundamental feature of the environment: the importance of patron-client ties for men and women who live with pervasive economic uncertainty (see Johnson-Hanks 2006). An ex-husband, now ill and fallen on hard times, attempts to reconnect with, to “remarry” his ex-wife. This excerpt also shows the strength of women’s social resources—their willingness to divorce a husband who may bring AIDS and their ability to “just say no” (Luke and Kurz 2002:24; Poulin 2006; Reniers 2006). We insert comments in italics.

When I was coming back from Lilongwe, I passed by the house of Silowe’s’ ex-wife. That one was his first marriage but the woman divorced him because of his behaviour of womanizing. Mr. Silowe was getting married to another woman every year and the extra marital sexual partners were there as well. He was doing that because he was benefiting much from his business of selling fresh fish in the town. But Silowe did not know that things will change next time so that he will become poor and fail to help all the women who he married.

When I was ready going home, I went to the market to buy some vegetables and I met with him there. He...bought some fish and gave them to me to take them to his x-wife. I saw him that his body was changed. He has become thin, sores all over his body and his legs are swelling but I did not ask him about his problem which makes his legs to swell especially the feet?

I received the fish and carried them to his x-wife. When I reached there, I told her that her husband was the one who sent those fish for her but [his] wife replied that he was sending them to his children and not her. [*She emphasizes that she is no longer having sex with her ex-husband, so she does not accept fish from him for herself, but only for her children.*] [Since] she managed to divorce him early before he began showing the symptoms of AIDS which he is now showing, she cannot allow him to remarry her again. He was changing women like clothes and he was not listening to advice....

He was also saying that it was his time to enjoy with his money which God gave him. It was time for him to drink beer and help poor women through being his sexual partners [*Note the image of him as a patron obligated to help poor women by having sex with*

them.] therefore his first wife divorced him in order to protect her own life so that she can try to look after her children for a long time. [Alice 040228]

Silowe, once a rich man with many wives/clients, now a poor man—and one who surely recognizes that he will soon die of AIDS—has turned to a former client for support.¹⁹ In this case his former wife refuses to take him in by remarrying him, since doing so would be understood as including sex.

The Obligations of Patrons

The obligation of those with resources to help those without is very general. The primary responsibilities are to kin, but those with wealth who fail to share it are universally condemned. A man worries that disgruntled former girlfriends “may be going around telling people many things like the man is a greedy person he doesn't share food to his in laws and relatives” [Simon 040210], while in the excerpt below a wealthy woman only belatedly begins to act like the patron she should have been all along:

...the wife used to laugh [at] those people who used to go to church every Sunday. She said that those who go to church every Sunday are poor and that they go there to ask God to give them some money and that she can not go to church because she has everything that she needs and that she has a lot of money...and that the money she had can be enough to feed so many people even the whole country for so many years. She was a happy lady but her worries was on her husband who used to have so many sexual partners. She said that after learning that she is HIV positive she began to go to church to help the needy and to chat with everybody even the poor who was her enemies at first. She changed her mind so that when she died many people mourned for her because they worried that their helper has gone and they had nowhere to go and have food or money. [Patuma 040629]

The equivalence between sexual ties and other ties of dependence is sometimes expressed quite explicitly. In one fascinating exchange, the moral obligation of patrons—to redistribute resources—is directly linked to transactional sex: because the uncle has not fulfilled his obligations to his niece, she has sought another patron. Simon, one of the journalists, sits talking with his wife and a visiting cousin, Regina. As she explains why she took an older lover, Regina casts herself as both patron and client simultaneously. She justifies her behavior saying, “she does what she does (having sexual partners) because of her own problems for instance she doesn't have her mother and her brothers depends on her if they are to feed and for everything.” Simon objects vociferously on the grounds that if she contracts AIDS, he himself will be obligated to support her:

I said to her that I am serious and her being my relative I cannot tolerate what she is doing because when she will catch the disease it will be us as her relatives more especially me greatly who will be in great trouble after hearing that she is sick because I can not let her be suffering yet I know that she is my relative...and I will be trying in all

best possible ways that I will be visiting her and be assisting her in all means. She laughed and criticized me saying that if I am not assisting her right now when she is okey and more over at school and school fees becomes very hard for her to get [will I be] helping or caring for her when she will be in trouble as I said?

Simon's wife then sides with Regina. Simon has money, yet has never assisted Regina:

We laughed and then wife laughed too and sided with her and then I told wife that she is backing her [Regina] as if what she is doing is good. Wife said that she was not backing her but she <Regina> was saying the truth. She went on saying that she is now in Form I and she will be going to Form 2 if passing her exam and from the time she started Form One I had never tried to even assist her with a single tambala even K100.00 why?

Finally, Regina teases Simon in a heavy-handed way that puts in straightforward terms the essential interchangeability of the support she might legitimately expect from a relative and the support she gets from a sexual relationship:

Then chatting continued and then I said to her that if she will catch the virus it will be her own fault.... She answered saying that of course she does that deliberately because of the problem which she had raised already that of lack of any relative to aid her regarding to paying her school fees. [Simon 040929]

Another briefer excerpt, from a conversation among several men bemoaning the loose morals of girls today, illustrates again the equivalence of "support" from kin and lovers, and perhaps also the strategy of trying to embarrass a relative into offering help. A man describes what happened when he "shouted" at his niece about having married lovers:

He said that his sisters daughter after being shouted by the Uncle she responded that she will be assisted by sugar dads and eating, getting all personal needs from them because her Uncle can not give her all her needs. [Chunga 050402]

Patrons are expected to give advice as well as material support. The following is an excerpt from interviews with a subset of MDICP survey respondents conducted in two of the MDICP sites on the way households cope with disasters.

I: There are these two people Mstisi and Ledison who you said are the dependable ones as far as your compound is concerned. Now I would like you to tell me what they do to be recognized as dependable in the compound.

Aa! The recognition is that everyone at the compound relies on them for any assistance one might need. They do not hesitate in taking some action. Hence they are reliable people as I said.

I: Okay, you mean if they were not in a position to give assistance, they would not have [be] reliable people?

R: Aa! The assistance does not only belong to material but also in the way they handle issues whenever there is a dispute. That is why we really build our hopes on them as far as the compound is concerned. (van den Ruit 2005, Respondent R53012)

In societies with little effective formal legal protection, as in rural Malawi, resolving troubled social relations may be as crucial as providing monetary assistance.

Understanding Clients

Many Malawians insist that women exchange sex for material benefits because of their “needs,” and many would say that those needs arise out of women’s poverty.²⁰ But much of the recent literature on transactional sex suggests that “transactional relationships are not always related to immediate material necessity and may in fact be a mark of a woman's self-respect” (Wright, Plummer et al 2006:990; see also Caldwell et al 1989; Johnson-Hanks 2006:170). These apparently contradictory images of transactional sex become more understandable when we see women’s sexual ties as an extension of their claims as clients in a patron-client system. Here we find intertwined themes concerning the fusion of sex and money, the legitimacy of clients’ expectations of material support, and, most important, the ways patron-client ties, including sexual ones, function as a form of social insurance for clients as well as patrons.

Money is Erotic

Just as men feel obliged to share their resources with poor women, women make clear that a man’s resources should be available to all women who need it. At the same time, of course, once a woman has established her claim to a particular man, she wants exclusive access and may attack or berate an errant spouse or a rival who threatens her marriage. A flamboyant example—both of the fusion of money and the erotic, and of the terms in which women assert their claims on men—comes from a wild scene in a bar. The diarist, who had been peacefully drinking and chatting, reports the fight that suddenly erupted when an outraged wife stormed into the bar looking for the bar girl who was sleeping with her husband. The bar girl and the husband fled, and the other bar girls beat up the wife; an exchange of insults followed. Note that the wife defines her superior position by the fact that it is she who gets the lion’s share of material benefits from the husband:

...I could hear the woman saying that the man whom [the bargirl] sleeps with is her husband and she has got everything at home and a house too while that one whom she was fighting with has no home, a prostitute moreover and she cannot match with her, the one who was brought [up] in a good and well behaved family [not like] her, a daughter of a snake.

We laughed some of us and then the woman went on saying that even [though] she was bleeding like that but...she [the bargirl] should know that the man is for her [the wife]

and she [the bargirl] is the loser and she only receives K100.00 [less than \$1 US] while she [the wife] manages to keep all the man's salary....

Some of the Bar girls also answered...[that] they pay tax at the government for them to be selling beer there and its their way of earning their living and if her husband is not satisfied of her maybe she doesn't know how to *Kunyamulila*. <Chichewa meaning she doesn't know how to dance up and down during sexual intercourse as the matter of attracting the man to ejaculate fast.> The same bar girl said that probably she [the wife] doesn't have the clitoris that the husband could be enjoying when sleeping with her and that's why her husband tends to seek for someone.... She was drunk a bit and she would talk loudly for the woman to hear and others who came to see the fight which took less than an hour possibly 40 minutes. She [shouted] saying: You have the big problem, big mum your husband is not for you alone! He was born not for you special and indeed he will be sleeping with all of us here because we also need what he has, we need the penis as well for once it enters on us we just know that we are to eat that day no penis no money! [Simon 040215]

The bar girls glory in their sexual talents and lay claim to the man's body, which represents both sex and food (an imagery that recurs in many contexts in the journals)²¹. Of greater interest for our argument here, however, is their claim that "your husband is not for you alone." They assert the right to seek sex and money from any man who has it.

The equation between love and food also works in reverse, as in this discussion among men recalling the terrible 'hunger season' of 2001 in which relationships ended when men could not reliably feed their partners:

He said he remembered a lot of marriages broke and many *zibwenzis* <mere relationships> ended because men were failing to buy them [their sexual partners] maize for food and ... he gave an example of himself that a certain girl ended the affair with him because she kept on telling him that she stayed for 3 days without taking *nsima* [the staple food, made of maize flour] and he should give her money to buy maize flour...for her to cook *nsima*. But he also was starving with hunger together with his parents.... And he said one time he received the letter telling him that he doesn't love her and he doesn't consider her and he said that she ended the affair there despite him meeting with her and pleaded to reconsider rather to be still in love and say about his money problem status. [Simon 040529]

The exchange of material support for sex is so taken for granted that men may demand the return of gifts from women who have betrayed them. In the following excerpt, the journalist, Simon, is drinking home-brewed beer in an informal bar (we would say a "dive") with a group of men he has just met. One drinker recounts his affair with a woman who lives near Simon's village, leading another to tell his own story:

Some one was listening to what we were talking <among the group> and he jumped into the conversation and said that even him he had been destroying his relationships after hearing that the girl is double crossing him.

He also said that when ending <destroying - *kuononga* - chichewa as he put it> he was making sure that what ever he bought for her say half petticoats, pants, shoes, *zitenje*, dresses he was telling her to give him and the one whom she thinks can help her should take the challenges of buying clothes for her.... [H]e said he had a certain sexual partner at Mpale and another one at Nsingo in Mangochi and [when] they double-crossed him he went straight to them and asked for his things. Like the one in Nsingo he asked for the 4 skirts and 2 pair of shoes and a jean round hat to give it to him and she gave him.... [Simon 040210]

Overall rural Malawians take for granted that a man's material support is directly linked to sexual access, so that a man's failure to provide support justifies his partner's infidelity, and a woman in need of support will seek a husband or sexual partner. In the excerpt below a man tells Alice how his former wife justified her infidelities:

She was asked to say why she decided to have sex with other men yet she is married, she said that her husband was not buying clothes for her and he was also not buying groceries and food for her. She was very poor therefore she decided to look for the method which can help her in her problems. She then said that she does not mean that she doesn't love her husband. She will never do it again but her husband should try to be buying some food, groceries and clothes for his wife. She will always be depending on him as her husband. [Sophia 040420]

Sexual Ties as Social Insurance²²

Thoughtful observers of African realities have noted how fundamentally insecurity shapes the ways most Africans must make decisions. Writing of well-educated, and thus relatively privileged Cameroonian women, Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2005:377) notes that, "under extreme uncertainty, when all the rules are changing, what works is not the best strategy but the most flexible one—the one that takes every present in the subjunctive, that keeps every alternative open as long as possible, and that permits the actor to act rapidly and flexibly to take advantage of whatever opportunities arise." The "judicious opportunism" Johnson-Hanks describes beautifully characterizes the conflicted and uncertain sexual strategies that continually recur in the journals as "everyday experience takes on the ambiguity, intensity, and uncertainty of vital conjunctures and standoffs" (Johnson-Hanks 2005:377; 2006; see also Whyte 1997 on Uganda; Ferguson 1999 on Zambia).

The importance of having patrons as a hedge against disaster comes up constantly in the journals, as people bemoan their fate when those on whom they depend die or depart. In this extract from a chief's court, in the southern region again, a man is explaining why his family took the house of his brother's widow:

We did this on grounds that our brother didn't have any children with this woman and its awkward or improper to leave all the property with her, Honourable chiefs. This man, I mean my late brother was supporting a lot of people who are stranded this time due to this death, what are going to do with them, where are we going to get money to support them?

The widow begins to cry, pressing her claim not by referring to her rights, but by emphasizing that she is the one who is most “stranded”:

Honourable chiefs, my second question is that, in his statements, he said that my late husband was supporting a lot of people who are stranded this time, that is completely true and you have to know also that among those who are stranded I'm the person who are completely stranded, I don't know if these people knows that I'm one of those people who is more than stranded, whom do you think then will be assisting me? Tell me?

The reply is that she at least is an adult, unlike the young children who need support, but the decisive argument is that she has others upon whom she can depend:

she is an elderly [adult] person she knows what to do likewise the young ones who can know what to do and you have got your own relatives who can be assisting you. As a matter of fact, she can't be stranded, with this few words, I better stop here, thank you very much. [Trueman 041208]

Sexual relationships, either within marriage or not, are but one type of a much larger category of ties of dependence that are the closest thing to insurance in a perilous world. The previous story of the fishmonger who turned to a former wife when he not only lost his money but had the symptoms of AIDS provided an illustration. Here we extend that logic to multiple partnerships. The diarist, a young woman, is talking with a school friend:

She then told me that after that, her teacher proposed her although he was already married with two wives, she told me that she decided to refuse his proposal but her friends forced her to accept. She then also told me that although she had her teacher as her boyfriend she also had a business man. She told me that she decided to have two boyfriends so that if the other left her then she should already have another one. [Lilyan 040727]

That sexual ties are woven into the social safety net may explain why these ties are so often multiple and overlapping. Just as rural Malawians accept the inconstancy of the weather or the absence of minibus schedules, both men and women accept the inconstancy of sexual relationships and adopt an opportunistic strategy; they try to secure not only a main partner but also a stable of backups, or “spare tyres,” in case the main partner is unavailable, or stops meeting their needs. While women's search for partners is often described as the result of economic necessity, in a world where uncertainty is pervasive and personal ties are the major reserve against future uncertainties, people need ties even when they do not immediately need what those ties might someday offer. That is why small gifts—symbolic luxuries rather than

necessities—are sometimes sufficient to secure a woman’s sexual favors.²³ Gifts signify indefinite promises of availability rather than single exchanges—a small gift can provide a sort of credit, an expectation of reciprocity at a critical time. Sexual relationships then serve as insurance in a double sense. Having multiple partners can provide backup if a partner dies or proves unfaithful, but even former partners create ties that one might be able to turn to in times of need. Ex-spouses sometimes help each other when one falls ill, and in this excerpt, a woman’s relatives are able to call on one of her former lovers for help with her funeral expenses:

When she died, her elder brother went to the member of parliament of her area and asked him to help them taking the funeral back to their home and he did not refuse because she was once his sexual partner before he was elected to be the member of parliament. That was the death of Miss Mdala. [Alice 040119]

We believe that the pervasiveness of multiple sexual partnerships is better understood not as driven by either men’s nature or women’s poverty. Rather, these partnerships are but one form of a complex system of social insurance that mitigates uncertain risk by binding patrons and clients—at every social stratum, and in many of life’s activities—in a web of ties held together by a moral ethic of redistribution and reciprocity. Even if a man’s libido were low or a woman were not poor, it might make sense to forge ties of dependence through transactional sex, just in case.

Conclusions and Implications

In this paper we have made three major points, based on an analysis of an unusual set of ethnographic field journals collected in rural Malawi. These journals bring us closer to what people say to each other about AIDS than do surveys, semi-structured interviews or focus groups. We learned how both sides of the story explain and justify the exchange to others, and then interpreted their talk. First, transactional sex is not only about poor women but also about wealthy men, whose money may “force” them to take sexual partners, and about women who are not desperately poor, but aspire to social mobility, economic independence or simply a life enhanced by soap and lotions. Second, transactional sex is not solely, and perhaps not even primarily, about either sex or money: rather, it is about establishing, maintaining and sustaining ties that bind a man and a woman in a social relationship of unequal interdependence now and may be re-activated in the future. Third, and we think most important, the ties that derive from the exchange of sex for money are but one form of the patron-client relations that are pervasive throughout sub-Saharan Africa and have proved to be resilient over time. Everyone is simultaneously a patron and a client: the resulting web of relationships modulates the insecurity of poverty in a largely subsistence economy with frequent food shortages and the insecurity of wealth in a poor and donor dependent country.

Certainly some sexual relationships are the result of deliberate exploitation of the unequal economic power of males and females; some are corruptions of the ties of dependence that link patrons and clients. But the strategic and moral importance of redistribution and reciprocity in an unequal and uncertain world suggests that those who seek to combat AIDS by excising

transactional sex would do well to consider the social practices and meanings that nourish such unequal sexual relationships. There is good reason why ties of dependence are an accepted practice in contemporary African societies. Such ties are critical for the Big Men at the top of the patron-client hierarchy who require support and even more so for the poor clients at the bottom, who must depend on “wealth in people” rather than bank accounts or a pension system. If patrons had no practical incentive to redistribute resources, no expectations of reciprocity and no belief that not to do so would be immoral, the lives of rural villagers left to go it alone would be even more precarious than they are, and the efforts of enterprising women attempting to get a toehold in the modern sector or to get the capital that would permit them to become economically independent would be less successful.

Seeing transactional sex as part of a larger system of asymmetrical interdependence has several implications for AIDS prevention, implications that go beyond the usual pieties of recommendations to promote economic development or empower women. First, if transactional sex is not driven primarily by women’s economic desperation, programs of economic development or women’s empowerment, however valuable these may be in themselves, are unlikely to decrease women’s vulnerability to HIV infection. Indeed, in many African countries wealthier and more educated women are more likely to be HIV positive than poor rural women (National Statistical Office and ORC Macro 2005; Slutsker et al 1994; Hargreaves and Glynn 2002). Second, as long as pervasive economic and social insecurity and underdeveloped formal labor markets continue to characterize African societies, patron-client ties are unlikely to wither. The extraordinary resilience of such patterns—in the form of political corruption on the one hand (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Smith 2006) and reliance on clan and kin ties on the other—is evidence of the vital roles they play. We think it would be a mistake were the patron-client system to disappear before there are other ways of accumulating resources, power and prestige than investing in people and trusting that they will reciprocate.

If we accept that ties of unequal dependence knit African society together and that both women and men depend upon them, we might try to imagine social alternatives that preserve the fabric of patron-client ties while detaching them from sexual exchange. This, we believe, would preserve the value of patron-client ties for women while reducing their risk of infection. We have a few unconventional suggestions along these lines. One promising alternative is to counter the notion that men with many partners are prestigious with cultural images of such men as foolishly risking their lives by distributing their resources across many women rather than one, a wife. This approach comes directly out of the journals themselves, specifically conversations in which those who are known to frequent prostitutes but object to condoms are spoken of with scorn: since “everyone knows” that sex workers are likely to be HIV positive, any man who patronizes them is said to have “deliberately chosen death,” to have invested in an activity whose only profit was death. Because the scorn is generated in the rural villages, programs that reinforce it are likely to be more successful than those that are generated externally. Another, and similar, approach would build on local criticisms of men who spent money on their own pleasure and as a result now burden their relatives with caring for them and perhaps their wife and children as well: the relatives grumble, “was I there when he was spending all that money on a good time?” Thus, a public campaign might label men with many sexual partners as anti-social

hoarders who keep their resources for their own pleasure, contrasted with men who use their wealth for the good of their family and community.

More radical would be efforts to reproduce patron-client ties in a non-sexual context. For example, wealthy men (and women as well) might be encouraged to give money to clients indirectly through their mosques or churches rather than in person: such money could be earmarked to sponsor a secretary to learn accounting or provide capital for a seamstress to develop her business. Going even further, we can imagine congregations holding public “thank you” ceremonies to give patrons “Heaven Points,” and, like Westerners who sponsor children through World Vision or Save the Children, the donors might receive letters of thanks from those they had helped. Such personal ties, if maintained over time, might also serve the insurance functions of transactional sex. This would not be necessary were Malawi able to incorporate all those who want a job in the formal economy. What most rural Malawians long for, we believe, is reliable work that would allow them to support themselves and their families, and to save for a rainy day (or a drought). Everything that maintains the insecurity of life in Africa and inhibits the development of an extensive formal economy—from structural adjustment, to agricultural subsidies, to lack of investment—accentuates reliance on all forms of patron-client ties.

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ENDNOTES

¹ For example, the prestigious Global HIV Prevention Working Group (2003:8) sponsored by the Gates Foundation and the Kaiser Family Foundation, noted in 2003 that “The growing disparity between male and female infection rates in Africa reflects the degree to which gender inequities are now driving the epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa, as women who lack economic independence, educational opportunities, and access to health information and services often have difficulty avoiding exposure to the virus. Gender-focused prevention programs must address the many economic, social and political disadvantages that directly increase women’s vulnerability to HIV infection”

² On the pervasiveness of transactional sex—and the inappropriateness of identifying it as prostitution—see e.g.: Caldwell, et al. (1989); Standing, (1992); Meekers and Calves (1997); Wojcicki (2002a); Luke and Kurz (2002); Luke (2003); Hunter (2002; 2004; 2005); Hallman (2004); Kaufman and Stavrou (2004); Nyanzi, Nyanzi et al. (2004); Wight, Plummer et al. (2006); Poulin (2006).

³ The more ambitious projects attempt to combine economic support or job training with training in empowerment, sexual bargaining, and how to discuss sexual issues openly (see e.g. Epstein and Kim [2007] on the IMAGE project in South Africa).

⁴ The same point is made by Ankomah (1992; 1999) for Ghana, Leclerc-Madlala (2003) for Tanzania, among many others.

⁵ See, for example, Wines (2004), p. A1, The women in Lesotho whom Wines describes as leaving a box of laundry soap in the window to warn boyfriends when husbands are in town are employed factory workers making a reasonable wage by African standards.

⁶ Wight, Plummer et al. (2006:990) note that “Material exchange for sex, or 'transactional sex', is now recognised to be widespread in sub-Saharan Africa and generally interpreted as a consequence of women's poverty. Some detailed studies, however, suggest that transactional relationships are not always related to immediate material necessity and may in fact be a mark of a woman's self-respect." Indeed, it is said that young Yoruba women became "indignant when it when it was suggested that they took on lovers for any other reason than economic need" (Seidel 1993, quoted in Wojcicki 2002b:341-2).

⁷ See Morris and Kretzchmar (1995); Halperin and Epstein (2004); Epstein (2007). While such relationships are certainly not unknown in the West (Mitterand’s second family; Anaïs Nin’s bigamous marriages), Western images of infidelity run toward a temporary “fling” or the torrid affair that breaks up a marriage, but not a pattern in which both men and women maintain long term relationships with more than one partner.

⁸ Even an analyst like Jennifer Cole (2004), writing about Madagascar, who finds that women see using sex for economic advantage as empowering, casts both woman and men as victims of capitalism and consumerism. We are mindful of Caldwell, Caldwell, and Quiggin’s (1989:186) warning that “needed research is hindered...by a misreading of the situation, ironically arising often from the best of motives aimed at reducing perceived racialism.” They point out the dangers of “find[ing] cultures guiltless by concluding that they do not significantly differ from Western patterns.”

⁹ Status aspirations appear to provide important motivations for transactional sex. According to the literature cited above, women get status from the material goods their partners provide, and men get status from displaying multiple partners (see e.g. Ashforth 1999; Kaler 2003). We agree with this observation, but we explore why these exchanges provide status.

¹⁰ And later, religion.

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of the journals as a methodological tool and as a form of social inquiry see Watkins and Swidler (2007).

¹² Social analysts frequently draw on textual materials created by others—from the memoirs and letters historians analyze, to the newspaper accounts that social movement scholars rely on, to the documents produced by the Inquisition (Ginzburg 1980). These documents always reflect the biases and interests of those who recorded them, and analysts attempt to take those biases into account. But such texts can also provide access to meanings that operate in a culture in spite of—but sometimes because of—the assumptions and prejudices of their creators (as in the fascinating work of Mohr and Duquenne 1996, analyzing texts produced by social service organizations in New York City).

¹³ English is taught in Malawian public schools from the early grades with formal English starting in Standard 5, equivalent to U.S. fifth grade. English is widespread enough that it has in some ways become indigenized. For example, to be sexually promiscuous is to be “movious” and one who has multiple partners is said to be “moving around,” an Anglicization of a chiChewa expression, *woyendayenda*, derived from the earlier association of multiple

partners with migrant labor. The naturalness with which the journalists adapt English to chiChewa, chiYao, or chiTumbuka linguistic forms means that their English is somewhat closer to local languages than the standard English of a Canadian, British or American ethnographer.

¹⁴ Jane Collier (2004, see also 1997), quoting Collier and Rosaldo (1981:276) writes:

Instead of assuming that gender conceptions reflect biological differences, or the sexual division of labor, we “pursued an analysis that links ritualized notions of gender to practical social relations. People celebrate those very self-images that they use when creating relationships, promoting cooperation or conflict, articulating desires and claims. Gender as an aspect of personhood should, we suggest, be understood in terms of its place in a social system, wherein inequalities in status and privilege determine the goals people fight for, their motives for politics, and the conditions they seek to explain.”

¹⁵ In an innovative analysis, Alexander Weinreb (2001) has shown that political patronage has a major influence on the distribution of public goods in Kenya.

¹⁶ Powdermaker (1962:166) cited in Ferguson (1999:179) says that both men and women in the Zambian copperbelt long for fidelity but are “compulsively unfaithful.”

¹⁷ In the 2004 round of the MDICP, 27% of female respondents said they “know or suspect” that their spouse is unfaithful, 46% said that he was “probably faithful”, and the rest said they couldn’t know his behavior. Men were far more likely to report that their wife was “probably faithful”—76%—although since men are expected to divorce an unfaithful wife, their reports may be exaggerated.

¹⁸ In a chief’s court, a woman sued her husband for divorce because she had caught him “red-handed” with her friend and neighbor. When the wife told her story, the audience murmured sympathetically. But when the man told his story—that his wife had refused sex with him for a week—the audience shifted its support. The chief ruled in favor of the man [Simon 060531]. We have not heard about a court case decided in favor of a woman who sought sexual relief, but there are many occasions in the journals when women debate who is able to endure prolonged separation better, men or women.

¹⁹ Meekers and Calves (1997) writing about Cameroon also note that one reason men gave for having many girlfriends is that if the man needs help and one girlfriend can’t help him, another might.

²⁰ The belief that women’s poverty forces them to exchange sex for material support is, of course, sometimes true. But the data showing that much of transactional sex involves “gifts” of luxuries (Ankomah 1999; Poulin 2006; Hunter 2004; Dinnan 1983; Kaufman and Stavrou 2004; Leclerc-Madlala 2003; Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001; Nyanzi, Kinsman, et al. 2001) and that women who are not poor also engage in such practices, suggests a different reading of claims about women’s “poverty.” Bayart (1993), in his classic work on the “politics of the belly,” makes the point that African nations’ use claims about their own poverty and suffering as a key way to gain access to international help. We would suggest that the cultural casting of women as “poor” is a crucial element of social arrangements that bind men and women together in patron-client bonds. This is one case of Gayle Rubin’s (1975) argument that in stateless societies, heterosexuality and the differences between women and men are culturally constructed so as to require the “traffic in women” that binds the political order together.

²¹ The connection between images of eating and sexual eroticism is widespread. Students of Africa have also noted the connection between metaphors of eating and participation in patron-client systems (see Smith 2006 for Nigeria), so that a patron who fails to redistribute resources “eats alone.” Johnson-Hanks (2006:166) notes that among the Beti in Cameroon, terminology for eating, sex, and political corruption are the same: “Food and eating serve metaphorically both in Eton/Ewondo and in Camfrancais not only for sexuality, as here, but also for violence, power, witchcraft, and corruption. A person possessed by *evu* ‘eats’ his relatives; a politician who has embezzled money ‘ate’ it (*adi*).”

²² Insecurity has a pervasive influence on life in Malawi, as in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Johnson-Hanks 2005; 2006).

²³ On the kinds of gifts young women receive, see Poulin 2006. Kaufman and Stavrou (2004:383) note for young people in urban South Africa: “All respondents indicated gifts were an important part of courtship, and the type of gifts cited reveals the variety and their commonness. In general, flowers, chocolates, jewellery, clothes, lingerie, CDs, drugs, meals in a restaurant, drinks at a club, tickets to concerts, and entrance fees to clubs were the most frequently mentioned items.”