Ties of Dependence: AIDS and Transactional Sex in Rural Malawi

Ann Swidler and Susan Cotts Watkins

In sub-Saharan Africa, the exchange of sex for material support—labeled "transactional sex" by Western observers—is claimed by some to be a major driver of the AIDS pandemic. Transactional sex is described as akin to prostitution, a degraded form of sexual expression forced on vulnerable women by economic desperation. Using evidence from rural Malawi, we demonstrate that patron–client ties and a moral obligation to support the needy, which are fundamental to African social life, are central elements of transactional sex. 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. (Studies in Family Planning 2007; 38[3]: 147–162)

Many analysts see the generalized heterosexual HIV/AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa as driven by poverty, more specifically by women's poverty, which leaves women with little alternative but to exchange sex for the resources necessary for survival (Epstein 2002; Hallman 2004; Barnett and Whiteside 2006; Poku 2006; Epstein and Kim 2007; for discussions of "survival sex," see Wojcicki 2002b and Leclerc-Madlala 2003).[1] Women are indeed poorer than men, and "transactional sex" is indeed widespread.[2] We argue, however, 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 dataset—more than 700 observational field journals in which rural Malawians recorded the ordinary conversations that they overheard or participated in—we seek to present a more socially grounded sense of the larger 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.

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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. 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, through microfinance programs or vocational training, for example. The second is less ambitious: to accept the durability of economic inequality and focus on altering the balance of power in sexual relationships—for example, by teaching and empowering women to negotiate safe sex.[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, for example, Epstein and Kim 2007 on the IMAGE project in South Africa).

In contrast to these views, scholarly research on sex and love in Africa increasingly has 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 (NSO and ORC Macro 2005 for Malawi; Shelton et al. 2005; Chin 2006).[4] Transactional sex provides enterprising women with luxuries (Ankomah 1992; Leclerc-Madlala 2003) and with opportunities to make contacts that foster social mobility and economic independence (Halpeny 1975 for Uganda; Pittin 1983 for

Nigeria; Caldwell et al. 1989; Ankomah 1999 for Ghana), and provides poorer women with small luxuries such as lotions and soaps (Tawfik and Watkins 2007).[5] Thus, the evidence concerning transactional sex calls 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 extramarital unions to brief affairs (Caldwell et al. 1989; Ankomah 1999; Hunter 2002 and 2005; Kaufman and Stavrou 2004; Johnson-Hanks 2006; Poulin 2006).[7] These researchers turn our attention away from the characteristics of the transactions themselves (for example, the age difference between partners, or the price paid or received, as discussed in Luke and Kurz 2002 and Luke 2003) and toward the 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 and 2007) and to distinguish sub-Saharan sexual patterns from countries where the exchange of sex for money takes place within the context of prostitution, rather than being a feature of potentially enduring relationships.[8]

To date, researchers have not explored men's motivations for spending their resources on acquiring multiple partners, beyond a simple assumption, often implicit, that men in general have an insatiable desire for sexual variety. Nor has the literature grappled with why even women who earn reasonable incomes or are well supported by their fathers or husbands might want multiple partners.[9] Here, we build on previous scholarship by examining sexual partnerships in relation to broader African patterns of unequal interdependence. Using a set of conversational journals from rural Malawi, we explore 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 by 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 provide scholars and policymakers with a more realistic, grounded understanding of the forces that hold this system in place and of what, if anything, might be done to alter it.

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 subsamples of respondents (Watkins et al. 2003). When learning who-said-what-to-whom proved difficult in the context of clipboards and tape recorders, the researchers asked several high-school graduates living in or near the MDICP study sites to act as participant observers as they went about their daily routines—walking to the market, getting water at the borehole, playing the game of *bawo*. If they overheard anything concerning AIDS or family planning,[10] they were to make mental notes of what people said and did, and write their recollections word-for-word in common-place 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 rural areas of an African country in which approximately 12 percent of adults are HIV positive (NSO and ORC Macro 2005), and where attending three to four funerals per month on average is common.

More than 700 journals, each about 7,500 words long and typically covering several different conversations with multiple participants, were written between 1999 and 2007 (some are on the MDICP website <www.malawi.pop.upenn.edu>, with identifying information removed). Twenty-two journalists (9 female, 13 male) contributed journals: 3 very frequently, 13 frequently, and 6 only occasionally. All the journalists had worked for the MDICP as interviewers. All are high-school graduates who have had no further schooling; all are young (in their 20s or early 30s); and all rely on subsistence agriculture supplemented by casual labor or small-scale retail as well as intermittent MDICP activities. We provided no training, because we did not want them to conduct interviews, but rather 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.

The conversations were held in local languages, but the journals were written in English (and often hastily), so the grammar is sometimes poor and some words are 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 where 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/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, of course, raise the possibility of fakery. Although the journalists had shown themselves to be reliable, honest, thorough, and intelligent in their interviewing for MDICP, we cannot know with absolute certainty (as is also the case with more traditional ethnographic research) whether reports of informants are accurate. We have evaluated the journals in the light of other information, including our having spent many months in rural Malawi while participating in MDICP data collection. Moreover, the journals also contain internal evidence: 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 from 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. Although only extended excerpts from many journals could make this point fully convincing, clearly only a gifted novelist could have manufactured such a variety of voices, situations, incidents, and viewpoints. As Kaler observes, much more work would have been required 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 in their interactions with interviewers. What the journals 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 the 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 identifiable places. We note also that this methodology provides greater protection for human subjects than does most ethnographic or anthropological research. Those whose conversations the journalists report did not know that the journalists were listening with a view to writing down their words for the benefit of researchers. Yet because we use multiple journalists from different villages and different regions of Malawi, it is much less likely that anyone could trace a conversation or incident to a particular person than it is 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.

The journals are generally consistent with data from other sources, but they give a much more vivid sense of the cultural and moral logic, the complexities and contradictions, and the texture of what people say spontaneously in their everyday conversations. To convey the uniqueness of this data source—the remarkable level of detail the journalists recollect, the number of people whose conversations and activities they report, and the interweaving of themes that are typically given isolated treatment in other modes of data gathering—we provide the following excerpt as an illustration. The journalist in this instance recounts a conversation held 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.

> 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.
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> Another one said that that's very bad indeed because wealth becomes good and sweet when eating together with relatives. . . .
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> And someone said that indeed money is wonderful, and if people are dying a lot of the disease which is nowadays known as AIDS, it's because of money.
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> 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 are very expen-

> sive 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 [propositioned] by the bosses and are 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.
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> A woman agreed and said that then it's . . . 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 won't last long; you will leave others to continue working while you go to the grave to get buried. [Simon 040203]

This extract illustrates how our hearsay ethnographic data are able to convey the multiple conversations that frame the narrative of AIDS in Malawi and, to anticipate our theme, the multiple ties of unequal dependence that characterize Malawian life.

Systems of Dependence

In Malawi, as elsewhere, the dynamics of transactional sex depend on the idea that women need money whereas men have it. This basic truth masks considerable complexity, however. Obviously, men with more money can afford to have more sexual partners than poorer men. 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. Now, we think that such statements—and many other aspects of Malawian understandings of sexual interactions—make sense if we understand transactional sex to be part of a larger pattern of 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.

In this study, 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 system in which they participate, a political economy in which ties of dependence are crucial 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 here "ties of dependence" (Barnes 1986; Ekwensi 1987; Vansina 1990; Bayart 1993; Bratton and van de Walle 1997; 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. Smith (2003:711) 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." 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. (Page 207)

In addition to providing 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, being a patron to as many clients as possible and simultaneously being a client to as many patrons as possible are clearly advantageous strategies.

Ties of dependence can be observed at all levels of African societies. In semistructured interviews conducted with a selection of MDICP survey respondents in order to 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 mentioned 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—a former girlfriend, nursemaid, employee—suddenly showing up destitute, and not being turned away. And of course, as Westerners, we 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, as has long been recognized, the basic form of social preeminence involves "rights in persons" or "wealth in people" (Kopytoff and Miers 1977; Miers and Kopytoff 1977; Barnes 1986; Vansina 1990; Guyer 1993; Smith 2004b). Virtually everyone is simultaneously a patron to those below and a client to those above them in society, "one of the links in one of the many chains of dependence" (Chabal and Daloz 1999:28). Thus, as these astute observers have written, "[t]he truly destitute are those without patrons" (Chabal and Daloz 1999:42). 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 the 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 1999:28; see also Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984, Roniger 1990, and Smith 2004). Redistribution is not only strategic and instrumental, it is also the moral thing to do. Hoarding resources is considered to be profoundly antisocial, breeding envy, resentment, and disrespect, and possibly inviting witchcraft to punish the miserly (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Ashforth 2005; 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, so that only the least fortunate have no social safety net to cushion them against 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 extramarital 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

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 that suggests how central ties of dependence are to the way sexual relationships are experienced and understood. Yet, despite the emphasis that religious leaders, relatives, and village elders (the *ankhoswes*, or "marriage counselors") place on fidelity, 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, gossip abounds about particular cases of infidelity. Men sometimes justify their behavior to their peers as 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 (Nelson 1987; Caldwell et al. 1989; Leclerc-Madlala 2002; Johnson-Hanks 2006). Thus, when having sex with a regular partner is not possible—for example, if a couple is separated by labor migration or if one or both partners face a taboo against sex under certain temporary conditions such as postpartum abstinence—both men and women who seek sexual relief with another partner are often considered to have acted in a justifiable manner.[18] A second explanation, and one that appears to apply only to men, is that sexual variety is so desirable that it can be considered a necessity. This idea is expressed in the phrase, heard frequently in Malawi as well as in other African societies, that "one can't eat *nsima* [the staple food] every night" (Watkins 2004; see Johnson-Hanks 2006 for Cameroon). A woman's infidelity is often justified by economic need, either for subsistence or for such items as 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).

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 become clients of multiple men. Bloch (1961) 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. At the same time, however, men seek to demonstrate their "wealth in people" by becoming patrons to poorer women, and a woman 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 between sex and money become clearer when we see transactional sex as but one form that patron–client ties can take. We begin with patrons in order to try to understand why men with money are said to be "forced" to have many partners.

A Man with Money Requires Sexual Partners

From the perspective of villagers, men's money 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 fostering clients who demonstrate his standing as a patron. One means of such demonstration 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 is 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 [proposition] the *namadya bwino* but he was married. The sisters went to the rich man and openly told him that he should marry the two sisters since they have nothing to do, no food, nor any support. The rich man accepted and married the two girls. As of now, they are three wives including the first 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. Nevertheless, he is certainly not unaware that taking on his two new clients provides him with several benefits in addition to sexual variety: he 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 in 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 clearly 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 that she is his cousin, and he 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 that 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 needs of their daily life, while he knows that he can take care of them, for he has 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]

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 transmit AIDS and their ability to "just say no" (Luke and Kurz 2002:24; Poulin 2006; Reniers 2006). (We insert our 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 behavior of womanizing. Mr. Silowe was getting married to another woman every year, and the extramarital 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 would change next time so that he will become poor and fail to help all the women he married.
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> 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 ex-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 that makes his legs to swell, especially the feet.
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> I received the fish and carried them to his ex-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 to 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.*] [Because] 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. . . .
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> He was also saying that it was his time to enjoy his money, which God gave him. It was time for him to drink beer and help poor women through being his sexual partners [*he presents himself 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 require her to have sex with him.

The Obligations of Patrons

The obligation of those with resources to help those without them is far-reaching. One's 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 with his in-laws and relatives." [Simon 040210]

In the excerpt below, a wealthy woman only belatedly begins to act like the patron she should have been all along:

> [T]he 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 cannot 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 [were about] 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 were 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 [to get] food or money. [Patuma 040629]

The equivalence of sexual ties to other ties of dependence is sometimes expressed explicitly. In one fascinating exchange, the moral obligation of patrons to redistribute resources is directly linked to transactional sex. Simon (the journalist) 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. Simon notes that she justifies her behavior by saying that "she does what she does (having sexual partners) because of her own problems; for instance, she doesn't have her mother, and her brothers depend on her if they are to feed and for everything." Simon objects vociferously on the grounds that if she is infected with HIV, he will be obligated to support her:

> I said to her that I am serious. [Because she is] my relative, I cannot tolerate what she is doing, because when she will catch the disease, and 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 cannot let her be suffering. Yet I know that she is my relative . . . and I will be trying in all best possible ways to 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 okay and at school having [trouble paying] school fees, [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 that [Regina] was saying the truth. She went on saying that she is now in Form One and she will be going to Form Two, if passing her exam, and from the time she started Form One had never tried to assist her with a single tambala [or] 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, [the] lack of any relative to aid her regarding to paying her school fees. [Simon 040929]

A 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. The journal entry describes what an uncle says happened when he shouted at his niece about having married lovers:

> He said that his sister's daughter, after being shouted at by the Uncle, responded that she will be assisted by sugar dads and eating and getting all personal needs from them because her Uncle cannot give her all her needs. [Chunga 050402]

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] Much of the recent literature on transactional sex suggests, however, that "transactional relationships are not always related to immediate material necessity and may in fact be a mark of a woman's self-respect" (Wight et al. 2006:990; see also Caldwell et al. 1989 and Johnson-Hanks 2006). These apparently contradictory images of transactional sex become more easily understandable when we view women's sexual ties as an extension of their claims as clients in a patron–client system. We find intertwined themes concerning the fusion of sex and money, the legitimacy of clients' expectations of material support, and, most importantly, the ways patron–client ties, including sexual ones, function as a form of social insurance for clients as well as patrons.

Money as 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 them. At the same time, of course, once a woman has established her claim to a particular man, she wants exclusive access to him and may attack or berate an errant spouse or a rival who threatens her marriage. A dramatic 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 journalist, who had been drink-

ing and chatting peacefully, reports that a fight 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. The wife defined her position as superior because she is the one who gets the lion's share of material benefits from her husband:

> I could hear the woman saying that the man whom [the bar girl] sleeps with is her husband, and that she [the wife] has got everything at home and a house, too, while that one whom she was fighting with has no home [and is] a prostitute, moreover, and that she cannot match with her [since she is] the one who was brought [up] in a good and well-behaved family [unlike the bar girl who is the] daughter of a snake.
>
> We laughed, some of us, and then the woman went on saying that even [though] she was bleeding, [the bar girl] should know that the man is for [the wife], and that [the bar girl] is the loser [because] she only receives K100.00 [less than US$1], while [the wife] manages to keep all the man's salary.
>
> Some of the bar girls also answered [that] . . . they pay tax to the government for them to be selling beer there, and it's their way of earning their living, and if her husband is not satisfied with her, maybe she doesn't know how to *kunyamulila* <Chichewa, meaning she doesn't know how to move up and down during sexual intercourse to cause the man to ejaculate fast>. The same bar girl said that probably [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 someone else. . . . She was drunk a bit, and she would talk loudly for [the wife] 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 can provide both.

The equation between sexual relationships 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 [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, Simon is drinking home-brewed beer in an informal bar 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:

> Someone was listening to what we were talking <among the group>, and he jumped into the conversation and said that he had been destroying his relationship after hearing that the girl is double-crossing him. He also said that when ending <destroying, *kuononga* in Chichewa>, he was making sure that whatever he bought for her—say half petticoats, pants, shoes, *zitenje*, dresses—he was telling her to give [them back to] 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 four skirts and two pair of shoes and a jean round hat to give it to him, and she gave [them to] him. [Simon 040210]

Generally, 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. The excerpt below describes how a former wife justified her infidelities:

> She was asked to say why she decided to have sex with other men [while] 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 Insurance

Thoughtful observers of African circumstances have noted that insecurity fundamentally shapes the ways most Africans must make decisions. Writing of well-educated, and thus relatively privileged, Cameroonian women, 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 characterizes perfectly 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; see also Whyte 1997 on Uganda; Ferguson 1999 on Zambia; and Johnson-Hanks 2006).

As in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, insecurity has a pervasive influence on life in Malawi. The importance of having patrons as a hedge against disaster is mentioned frequently in the journals, as people bemoan their fate when those upon whom they depend die or depart. In an extract from a chief's court in the southern region, a man explains why his family took his brother's widow's house:

> We did this on grounds that our brother didn't have any children with this woman, and it's 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 [at] this time due to this death. What are [we] 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 is completely stranded. I don't know if these people know that I'm one of those people who is more than stranded. Who do you think then will be assisting me? Tell me.

The brothers reply that at least the widow is an adult, unlike the young children who most 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 . . . and [she has] got [her] own relatives who can be assisting [her]. As a matter of fact, she can't be stranded. [Trueman 041208]

Sexual relationships, within or outside of marriage, are but one strand within the larger category of ties of dependence that function as insurance in a perilous world. The story recounted above of the fishmonger who turned to a former wife when he lost his money and developed the symptoms of AIDS illustrates an attempt to find such insurance. In another instance, that logic is extended to multiple partnerships. The diarist, a young woman, is talking with a school friend:

> She then told me 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 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, she would already have another one. [Lilyan 040727]

That sexual ties are woven into the social safety net may explain why these ties are frequently 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 tires," in case the main partner is unavailable or stops meeting their needs. Although women's search for partners is often described as the result of economic necessity (Leclerc-Madlala 2003), in a world where uncertainty is pervasive and personal ties are the major reserve against future uncertainties, people often form ties even in the absence of immediate need, as insurance against future need. Small gifts—symbolic luxuries rather than necessities—are sometimes sufficient, therefore, to secure a woman's sexual favors.[22] 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, therefore, serve as insurance in a double sense. Having multiple partners is a way to provide backup if one partner dies or proves unfaithful, but even former partners create ties that may prove helpful in times of need. Ex-spouses sometimes help each other when one falls ill. In the following excerpt, a woman's relatives 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 for 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. [Alice 040119]

We believe that the pervasiveness of multiple sexual partnerships is better understood as driven neither by men's nature nor by 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 an ethic of redistribution and reciprocity. Even if a man's libido were low or a woman were not poor, forging ties of dependence through transactional sex might make sense, just in case.

Conclusions and Implications

In this study, an unusual set of ethnographic field journals collected in rural Malawi brings us closer to what people say to each other about AIDS than do surveys, semistructured interviews, or focus-group discussions. We learn how people explain and justify to others the exchange of sex for material goods or money. Interpreting what they say has yielded three central insights toward a broader understanding of the logic of such exchanges. First, transactional sex is not only about women's poverty but also about men whose relative wealth may compel them to take sexual partners, and about women who are not desperately poor, but who 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 sex or money; rather it has to do with establishing, maintaining, and sustaining ties that bind a man and a woman in a social relationship of unequal interdependence at the time of the exchange, a relationship that may be reactivated in the future. Third, and most important, the ties that derive from the exchange of sex for money are but one form of patron–client interactions that are pervasive throughout sub-Saharan Africa and that have proved to be resilient over time. Everyone is simultaneously a patron and a client. The resulting web of relationships mitigates both the insecurity of poverty (in a subsistence economy that suffers from 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. The strategic and moral importance of redistribution and reciprocity in an unequal and uncertain world suggests, however, 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. Ties of dependence are accepted and widespread in contemporary African societies—with good reason. Such ties are critical for the men at the top of the patron–client hierarchy, who collect supporters, gain status, and reap ancillary material benefits from such ties, and are 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 concept of the morality of sharing what they have, the lives of rural villagers would be even more precarious than they are, and the efforts of enterprising women seeking a place in the modern sector or attempting to become economically independent would be less successful.

Viewing transactional sex as part of a larger system of asymmetrical interdependence has several implications for AIDS prevention 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, then programs of economic development or women's empowerment, however valuable these may be, are unlikely

to decrease women's vulnerability to HIV infection. Indeed, in many African countries wealthier and more educated women are more likely than poor rural women to be HIV-positive (Slutsker et al. 1994; Hargreaves and Glynn 2002; NSO and ORC Macro 2005). 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. It is unlikely that the patron–client system (of investing in people and trusting that they will reciprocate) will disappear before other ways of accumulating resources, power, and prestige have been developed.

If we accept that ties of unequal dependence knit African society together and that both women and men depend upon them, we might begin to promote social alternatives that preserve the fabric of patron–client ties while detaching them from sexual exchange. This, we believe, would preserve the value of such ties for women while reducing women's risk of infection. One promising alternative is to counter the notion that men with many partners are to be admired and emulated by disseminating cultural images of such men as foolishly risking their lives by distributing their resources to many women rather than sharing them with one, a wife. This approach is derived directly from the journals, specifically from conversations in which men who are known to frequent prostitutes but who object to using condoms are spoken of with scorn. Because "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 from which the only profit is death. Because this scorn is generated in rural villages, programs that reinforce local criticism are likely to be more successful than those that are generated externally. Another, similar, approach could build on local criticism of men who spend money on their own pleasure and, as a result, burden their relatives with caring for such men and, potentially, for their wives 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 antisocial hoarders who keep their resources for their own pleasure, as contrasted with men who use their wealth for the good of their families and community.

More radical strategies would include efforts to reproduce patron–client ties in a nonsexual 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 contributions could be earmarked, for example, to sponsor a secretary who wishes to study accounting, or to provide capital for a seamstress to develop her business. Congregations might hold 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. These strategies 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 save for a rainy day (or a drought). Everything that maintains the insecurity of life in Africa and inhibits the development of a reliable formal economy—from structural adjustment, to agricultural subsidies, to the absence of investment—accentuates people's reliance on all forms of patron–client ties.

Notes

1 For example, the prestigious Global HIV Prevention Working Group (2003:8), sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, noted in 2003 that "[t]he 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, for example, Caldwell et al. (1989); Standing (1992); Meekers and Calvès (1997); Hunter (2002; 2004; and 2005); Luke and Kurz (2002); Wojcicki (2002b); Luke (2003); Hallman (2004); Kaufman and Stavrou (2004); Nyanzi et al. (2004); Poulin (2006); and Wight et al. (2006).

3 For examples of works focusing on women's vulnerability and efforts to combat HIV transmission by empowering women and reducing their poverty, see Global HIV Prevention Working Group (2003); Human Rights Watch (2006); Epstein (2002); and Epstein and Kim (2007).

4 The same point is made by Ankomah (1992 and 1999) for Ghana and Leclerc-Madlala (2003) for South Africa among many others.

5 Of course, women may also depend on their boyfriends for more substantial help, but even the women in Lesotho whom Wines (2004) 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 and his colleagues (2006:990) note that "[m]aterial 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 suggest, however, 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, young Yoruba women are reported to have become "indignant when it was suggested that they took on lovers for any other reason than economic need" (Seidel 1993, quoted in Wojcicki 2002a:341–342; see also Leclerc-Madlala 2002).

7 Although such relationships are certainly not unknown in the West, Western images of infidelity tend toward temporary "flings" or the torrid affairs that break up marriages, but not toward a pattern in which both men and women maintain long-term relationships with more than one partner. Zelizer (2005), however, demonstrates that, even in the West, intimacy and economic exchange often go together.

8 Even Cole (2004), who finds that young Malagasy women often see the use of sex for economic advantage as empowering, casts both women and men as victims of capitalism and consumerism. We are mindful of the warning from Caldwell and his colleagues (1989:186) 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's status is increased by the material goods their partners provide, and men's by displaying multiple partners (see, for example, Ashforth 1999 and Kaler 2003). We agree with this observation and explore why these exchanges provide status.

10 The topic of religion was added later.

11 For a fuller discussion of using 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 scholars rely upon to characterize social movements, 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. 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 1997, which analyzes texts produced by social service organizations in New York City).

13 English is taught in Malawian public schools from the early grades; formal instruction in English is started in Standard 5, equivalent to fifth grade in the United States. Use of English is widespread to the degree that it has become indigenized in some instances. 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 between migrant labor and having multiple partners. The naturalness with which the journalists adapt English to Chichewa, chiYao, or chiTumbuka linguistic forms means that their English is closer to local languages than to the standard English of a Canadian, British, or American ethnographer.

14 Collier (2004:36; see also 1997), quoting Collier and Rosaldo (1981) 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, 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), states 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 percent of female respondents said they "know or suspect" that their spouse is unfaithful, 46 percent said that he is "probably faithful," and the rest said they couldn't know his behavior. Men were far more likely to report that their wife is "probably faithful" (76 percent), although because 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 that was decided in favor of a woman who sought sexual relief, but many instances occur in the journals in which women debate who is able to endure prolonged separation better, men or women.

19 Meekers and Calvès (1997), writing about Cameroon, note that one reason men give for having many girlfriends is that if a 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. Yet the data showing that much of transactional sex involves gifts of luxuries (Dinnan 1983; Ankomah 1999; Nyanzi et al. 2004; Silberschmidt and Rasch 2001; Leclerc-Madlala 2002 and 2003; Hunter 2004; Kaufman and Stavrou 2004; Poulin 2006) and that women who are not poor also engage in such practices suggests a different reading of claims about women's "poverty." In his classic work on the "politics of the belly," Bayart (1993) makes the point that African nations use claims about their own poverty and suffering as a way to gain access to international aid. We 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 point illustrates 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, the terminology for eating, sex, and political corruption are the same: "Food and eating serve metaphorically both in Eton/Ewondo and in Camfrançais 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 For the kinds of gifts young women receive, see Poulin (2006). Writing of young people in urban South Africa, Kaufman and Stavrou (2004:383) note: "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."

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