ABSTRACT

Recent surveys in southern Malawi suggest that 20 percent of women and 15 percent of men are HIV positive. Despite a long history of matrilineal institutions that traditionally guaranteed considerable autonomy for women, contemporary relationships between men and women have become the site of gendered power imbalances that promote the spread of HIV/AIDS. This ethnography explores the transformation of heterosexual relationships in southern Malawi from relatively egalitarian unions to profoundly unequal partnerships. Focusing on the complex interplay between colonialism, globalization, democratization, and heterosexual relationships, the dissertation is based on ten months of fieldwork incorporating participant observation, interviews, and focus groups at three different field sites: Catholic University of Malawi, rural Chiradzulu District, and urban Blantyre District.

Part I of the dissertation consists of an historical/cultural description and analysis of matrilineal institutions and initiation rites, revealing the significance of indigenous ideals of gendered but reciprocal obligations between the sexes. Colonialism, Christianity, and labor migration, however, eroded these ideals by fostering women’s economic dependence on men. Furthermore, democratization and the introduction of
human rights discourses led to selective interpretations of supposedly “traditional” gender roles – interpretations that in fact disadvantage women.

Part II uses interviews and case studies to document changing sexual behaviors, demonstrating that Malawi’s history of slavery, colonialism, labor migration, and, more recently, capitulation to the neoliberal economic agenda of the donor community, have encouraged multiple partner sex. The exclusion of women from wage earning opportunities has facilitated the subversion of traditional betrothal practices, creating a new type of relationship in which women exchange sexual and domestic services for limited financial support. Meanwhile, endemic poverty and gendered income inequality have forged new links between sex and money that bind women to men in overlapping webs of informal and often exploitive sexual relationships, including young girls’ dependency on older ‘sugar daddies.’

Throughout, this dissertation contends that combined forces of colonialism, globalization, and democratization have created a competitive sexual economy based on multiple partner sex and the sexual subordination of women to men. This transformation has altered male/female relationships in ways that promote the rampant and tragic spread of HIV/AIDS.