**Obsessed by Love: Erotic Magic, Delirious Love and Female Power in Mozambique**

We cannot sleep, eat or think clearly. Our mind is focused on the one we want. We are in love. Or are we obsessed? Many people in the suburbs of Maputo, the Mozambican capital, insist that these signs are signs of obsession or even witchcraft. Some call it erotic magic. It is well known that many women, and some men, use erotic magic to seduce and enchant each other also known as the practice "khotsolar" or “to put the man in a bottle" (por o homen na garrafa). This practice is subject to much debate and concern among women and men, youth as well as their parents. Many men who believe they have been “put in the bottle” go to the local healer (curandeiro) in order to break the spell and regain emotional control, or as they say, come out of the bottle. So what does this tell us? While many people in the Western hemisphere tend to romanticize the state of “being in love” and excuse the madness and anxiety that often follows as innocent or as a natural part of love and companionship, many Mozambicans are more prone to stress the danger and destructiveness of this state of mind as something made up by someone in alliance with human or spiritual others. On one of my several field trips to the Mozambican capital of Maputo since 2007 I asked a young man if his lack of sleep, anxiety and longing for his loved one was not simply an expression of love (amor). I said, common Peter, you just in love. He instantly replied, No, no no, this is really bad. I cannot control myself anymore. I don’t know if Im going mad. Love, you know, is about living together in harmony and trust, building a future together. Being good to each other, wanting to do good, making a sacrifice. But I sometimes feel like I want to do bad, to her or to myself. I’m feeling jealous, I don’t trust her. Does she really want me? It makes my crazy, now is this love? No something has been done to me”, he said. Like what, I asked? Well, witchcraft, Im not sure, the tricks of women. Maybe she did it, or her sister, I heard she is evil. So she can put me in the bottle. Other men talked about this as making a coup and women who use tricks as coup-makers (golpistas). The latter expression to make a coup (fazer um golpe) refers to notion of conspiring by using sex to take over a persons money, property, status and network. This is what local men fear, and surpricingly maybe, a large number of male expats believe in as well.

Since 2007 I have been following in the footsteps of younger women called "curtidoras" and their more wealthy partners, both local men and expats, as well as these women’s less wealth boyfriends and their families and kin. The term curtidora derives from the expression “curtir a vida”, which in youth slang means “to enjoy life” and refers to a lifestyle of going out to bars and discotheques. The curtidoras is a group of women who are known for going to the city center to drink, dance and to find a more wealth man who can take care of them and become their lover or boyfriend. Often they meet these men in nightclubs, cafes, restaurants, malls, beaches or other parts of public space in the rich parts of inner city. As part of this process many powerful tricks to gain power and control over men as well as to win their love, dedication and economic support. This specialized knowledge and practice called "khotsolar", is often transferred from older female kin and healers to the women. Thus, “to put men in the bottle”, is often a collective female kin project. The female elders who train curtidoras in the art of seduction and sex also expect reciprocation through remuneration, especially if they daughters or nieces are successful in establishing a lucrative relationship. Before I return to the questions of love and erotic magic let me briefly address how these intimate relationships work out.

**TRANS SEX**

Often referred to as transactional sex or sexual economies in the literature these relationships encompass expectations about exchanges of sexual, monetary, material and emotional kind. But, as I argue, they contain much more and cannot be understood without seeing them as part of broader questions about gender, power, kinship, sexuality, and exchange moralities in urban Africa. The men with whom curtidoras engage are often referred to by curtidoras as patrocinadores (sponsors or donors), because they shower the young women with gifts and support them for a shorter or longer period. Some of them are local big men in business, politics or in neighborhoods. Others are expats migrating to Maputo as businessmen, development workers, and diplomats and most of these come from Europe, North America, and South Africa. Curtidoras who have steady patrocinadores usually meet to have sex with them in out-of-the-way places like hotels, men’s private homes, or resorts, to avoid having neighbors and families see them. The benefits of having a patrocinador include access to luxuries such as fashionable clothes, mobile phones, and money to spend in the nightclubs. Some curtidoras get the opportunity to travel with partners to richer countries. People told stories of women who had moved to Europe with their partners, as lovers, wives, or sex workers and who returned with money and a good education, but there were also stories of abuse, loneliness, and shattered dreams. I have written about the intimate migration of these women to Europe elsewhere. Many curtidoras negotiate with their men about receiving a mesada (monthly allowance), which is transferred to their bank account so they can dispose of the money as they wish. The mesada a curtidora receives ranges from $200 to $3,000, depending on the number of partners and the steadiness of the relationships. In the case of one-night stands or more casual relationships, curtidoras either ask for payment after each sexual encounter or convince the partner to pay for acute expenses such as medicine to a sick relative, school tuition fees, or a new dress for a party. Sexual liaisons with white men are often more lucrative than those with local Mozambican men, but some women have relationships with men in both groups.

To what extent do these relationships, exchanges and erotic practices challenge Western notions of **love** and **gender**? To what extent is “being in love” an innocent affair, a result of “chemistry” and a beautiful expression of destiny to be celebrated in songs, movies and novels, consumed in Western countries and to what extent can this emotional state be seen as an effect of intimacy, desire, spirits and illicit practices that are far from innocent or disinterested?

A related question is this: To what extent are these relationships marked by gender inequality and female subordination? Can we understand the exchange of sex, money and emotions in these relationships as something more than commoditization, exploitation, and patriarchal privilege?

In order to discuss these questions, let me give you some examples from fieldwork and interviews with the expat men, the curtidoras and their female kin.

**Erotic magic in Maputo’s sexual economy**

This is the story of Lucia and Peter. Lucia, who had recently dropped out of secondary school, was 22 years old when she bumped into 51 year old Peter at a bar in downtown Maputo. Peter was a Norwegian development worker eager to make a difference in one Africa’s poorest countries. When I met Peter he was out of his mind. He told me he began to drink one month before and had sold his Hummer to pay for a piece of land that Lucia and her family asked for. They said they wanted this as a sign of his love for her. Basically, he said, “I just feel I want to help. Lucia is poor. She never had the opportunity I can give her now”. And he added, “ **she is my personal development project**. I will invest everything in her.” But”, he said, “it is getting out of hand. I can no longer see clearly. Is she playing me? He wondered because he has seen with other men and she refused to tell him about her whereabouts. At some point he decided to do what many local men do when being “madly in love”: he went to the curandeiro (healer) to get help. He asked the healer to cure his sadness and madness and to help him survive as he was also getting thinner and thinner from not eating or sleeping properly. The healer told him to go home to his home country to find comfort among friends and family, much like Mozambican men who are obsessed by a woman are advised to go to a village in their ancestral land and apply ancestral spirits as a shield against the spiritual force that attacked them and hold them hostage emotionally. Isolation from and distance to the object of one’s obsession is seen as essential. In Peter’s case it was meant to break his unhealthy attachment to Lucia, and hopefully make him sane enough to either “forget her” and get on with his life or to regain his powers so he could return and negotiate a marriage proposal. Peter himself, was torn between the Western discourse of “being in love” and Mozambican notions of erotic magic or love magic, or witchcraft. Being in Mozambique, he said, he just couldn’t rule out the latter.

Not only local men discus and fear women’s erotic powers, so do white men. Ever so often they would sit in the bar discussing the danger of “black beauties”. The saying, that “once you go black you never go back”, is applied to mean that having sex with a African women will make you hooked to an extent where you no longer decide who you want to be with. The erotic practice of the women and her bodily features and magic will captivate you and imprison you. What is clear here is that both men and women share strong notions of men as weak, and women as strong, in the game of love, lust and eroticism.

Lucia emphasized, as did many other curtidoras, that men are emotionally weaker and softer in the field of intimacy and sex. She told me that, “They loose their mind easier, and are thus easier to affect, but also dangerously unpredictable”. Might become violent, or become so weak they become useless and crippled. Peter, Lucia, believed, was an example of this. He was drinking and “going down”. At the same time curtidoras are acutely aware that they must protect themselves from “falling in love” in order to stay in control and keep the upper hand vis-à-vis sponsors. So is the woman the stronger gender when it comes to sex, in particular transactional sex? Obviously this would be an exaggeration, since many other elements of power shape these relationships, such as age difference and hierarchies related to incomes, race and nationality. Women do not in a broader sense have the upper hand. However, sex is seen as a particularly privileged resource, and women are seen as possessing a highly gendered force when it comes to using eroticism to extract money from men, as witnessed by metaphors of extraction such as “skinning the goat”, “milking men”, “drinking men’s money”, known from other Southern African countries like Malawi, Zambia and SA. Yet, as I will show using this privilege productively and with success cannot be done by curtidoras alone, their extractive practices are developed and put to use in close collaboration with female kin and families who also eventually benefit from their transactional relationships.

**Erotic magic in the wider system of social reproduction**

When I sat and talked with curtidoras’ family members in their homes, I often noticed a generational hierarchy between younger women and female seniors. Curtidoras

acted more restrained and were less talkative than when we met in the city. I noticed a strong emotional tie between female relatives, which did not seem to exist between male and female kin to the same extent. The majority of curtidoras admitted that they felt indebted to their female seniors, especially within the household and with regard to spiritual issues, whereas male seniors were seen as more marginal in domestic affairs. This gendered division of households reflects what Ifi Amadiume described in her study of gender dynamics of the Nnobi in eastern Nigeria, where she observed (I quote) “a strong matrifocality and female orientation . . . [in which] mother and children formed distinct, economically self-sufficient sub-compound units” (Ad´es´ın`a 2010:7). The logic of reciprocity between young and older female kin in the poor suburbs of Maputo was tied to such matrifocal principles: The mother and other female kin are the primary caretakers and educators of girls in all matters of life throughout childhood, and daughters collaborate with their mothers in domestic and income-generating activities.

When girls reach puberty, they are taught certain forms of knowledge, which are presented to them by more powerful female seniors as “arts of becoming a woman” or as “khotsolar” (catching men/putting a man in the bottle). As I argue, the erotic knowledge that female elders transmit to daughters and nieces is transformed into bodily capacities that women use to seduce possible sponsors. When emotional bonds have been established between them or they have had sex, a curtidora expects to receive money, gifts, and support from the man. Not receiving monetary reciprocation from a man is regarded as cynicism, even abuse or exploitation. The money curtidoras earn (and other material resources such as clothes and mobile phones), is used to cover “nightlife expenses” and other necessities. The rest is distributed among female kin. Elders, mothers, aunts, and older sisters use this money to buy food, medicine, and clothes for the children and male members of the extended family and often save some of it for harder times or to invest in housing or transport. In cosmological terms, the exchanges also serve to satisfy ancestral spirits who are seen as masters of life and death and from whom elders derive their authority and knowledge. Elders are seen as living representatives of ancestral spirits who have generative powers to assist in the birth of new family members as well as in the production of wealth and success.

**Erotic powers** are reproduced within a female space where secret knowledge is passed on from older to younger women. The female space is separated from the male space of husbands and uncles, who traditionally are not allowed access to or do not understand “women’s secrets.” The patrocinador is also strictly cut off from this female space where secrets are kept and exchanged. Sadia, a 22-year-old woman, explained to me what “putting a man in a bottle” can imply: (I quote) “The other night when I seduced him in bed he promised that he would stay with me and pay so I can stay in the apartment and help my nieces who are often sick. My sister and my aunt helped me. The female healer gave us these herbs that I rub into my body. . . My aunt always told me, “If you put a man in the bottle, he will go nowhere without you.”

There was no consensus among informants about the process leading up to a man being in the bottle and what putting men in the bottle implies. Nevertheless, in general terms, women agreed that the process can be divided into the following steps or levels: The first step is the seduction of men and the evoking of men’s desire. This involves a woman being seen by men in public and making a desired partner become sexually interested in her. The second step involves the satisfaction of men in private space by using various bodily, sexual, and sensual elements, such as good hygiene and maintenance of a beautiful body and smooth skin, special body movements and vaginal contractions, and, possibly, the application of spiritual and magical elements like love potions and charms—regarded as highly secret and sacred knowledge deriving from the world of ancestors (vaphi). The transmission of erotic knowledge begins after the girl’s first menstruation and continues (at least) until she gets married. Which types of the above-mentioned erotic knowledge are taught and in what combination they are used depends on the religion and faith of the instructor–relative and the extent to which the instructor acknowledges or refuses to accept the existence or legitimacy of traditional knowledge, power, and magic. When a girl has her first menstruation, her mother, who is normally not allowed to be an instructor, calls an aunt or someone in the extended family believed to be an expert in matters of pleasure, procreation, and conjugal matters. This person takes the girl to a house of relatives outside the city where she can introduce the girl to her new life as a woman. If the girl is thought to have special needs or if no female relatives are gifted enough to prepare the session, the mother brings the girl to a female healer who can educate her. Different tricks and skills are presented to the girl as ways to take care of herself, to achieve pleasure, and to understand how men think, and she is taught to use the power of her “sex” with caution. Instructors and initiates speak Changana or Ronga during sessions, or any other language of the ancestors from whom the knowledge derives. The transmission is mostly oral, but it can also involve role-play in which the initiate, the instructor, and a niece or sister are present. In such sessions, the women are permitted to speak freely and joke about sex, satisfaction and orgasm.

**Beautification and the arts of “being seen”**

Curtidora were seen as very attractive by their sponsors and other men, whether of Western or Mozambican background. They were well aware of their value as attractive women, and so were their kin, who helped them maintain and improve their magnetic qualities. Curtidoras’ power to extract money from men was closely associated with their ability to “appear,” (ta boneka) and as a consequence, to be seen and wanted by men. Some applied special creams to their body or washed themselves in herbs or applied herbs to their lipstick. Combined with more profane beautification practices like putting on hair extensions and fashionable clothes, this was believed to have a powerful effect toward attracting men. Although elder women from different suburbs told me that such practices are gaining popularity, they also insisted that transmission of such erotic knowledge from elders to initiates is far from a recent phenomenon. This can perhaps be confirmed by Henri A. Junod’s classic book “The Life of a South African Tribe” ([1912] 2003). Writing about initiation rituals and love charms among the Thonga in southern Mozambique, he notes that what he calls “physicians” helped young women to “appear” to male peers by using (I quote) “a certain medicine which produces an abundant lather when boiled in water. The physician washes the girl’s body with, it, after which she will ‘appear’ (a ta boneka) to the eyes of would-be suitors (tobane)” (end of quote) (Junod 2003:100). The “physician” that Junod mentions was a female instructor, who, he adds, was responsible for ensuring that herbs and medicines had the desired effect on a man. Junod’s work illustrates that the belief in women’s erotic powers has deep historical roots.

**Bodily extractions: Hygiene, special herbs, and sex “flesh against flesh”**

If the process of seducing men in public is the first stage in “putting men in the bottle,” the second stage consists in applying erotic knowledge in the private space of bodily intimacy. Female kin introduce them to the powers of creams and herbs that can be applied to the vagina and other intimate body parts before intercourse. Together with the effect of herbs they believe vaginal contractions will “suck the energy” from a man’s penis so that he will “become soft” and thus more generous. This idea is consistent with Thonga cosmology, in which sex and bodily heat have the generative potential to create wealth and to soften the male organ and mind (Feliciano 1998). This is probably one reason why women talked about sex as “sucking energy” or “milking men.” For herbs and creams to have their full effect during intercourse, there must be a free exchange of body fluids, mirroring the continuity between bodies within a collective life-giving cosmology (see also Taylor 1990). In discussions of the pleasure of sex, some curtidoras admitted that their focus was on satisfying their male partners because, they said, if they themselves got too much pleasure out of sex, they might lose control. Other informants told me that they felt sexually and emotionally at ease with sponsors because the men were good and sensitive lovers who gave them attention, pleasure, and a sense of safety. Others ascribed pleasure in bed to the very feeling of having the power, in an almost literal sense, to control men and “milk” them for money.

**Creating male generosity: Aphrodisiacs, love potions, and magic charms**

The most secretive level of “putting men in the bottle” concerns the use of aphrodisiacs, love potions and the placement of charms. The young women told me how a mother or sister had taught them to prepare special soup that can be served to a partner. The idea is that the man is affected in a desired way when he drinks the substance. Because of their presumed aphrodisiacal effects, these love potions were thought to work most effectively if served prior to the woman making her advances toward the man or just before having intercourse. Another strategy for “putting a

man in a bottle” was to leave charms like a necklace, a ring, or a bodily substance in the man’s possession. The placement of charms was seen as a powerful trick because the spirit of the person who owns the object is believed to cling to it and “work on the man even when he is traveling to

faraway places,” as the mother of one curtidora explained. “The man,” she told me, “will experience an attraction to the girl who owns the item, especially when he is close to it.” All of these erotic practices are thought to have the combined effect of making a man emotionally and sexually dependent on the woman who performs them.

**Female agency or commoditized women?**

From one perspective, transactional sex across Africa may be interpreted as a sign of women succumbing to men’s monetary capabilities. But if the sexual–monetary exchanges are seen as part of a larger system of reciprocity and female eroticism, and from a postcolonial feminist perspective, another picture evolves of women who, with the help of their female friends and kin, actively choose men with “a big wallet.” In his study of young men and women in the highly commoditized and impoverished sexual economy of Dakar, Senegal, Francis Nyamnjoh (2005) portrays female agency as overshadowed by a generalized promiscuity. This promiscuity, Nyamnjoh asserts, has evolved as part of a desperate search for commodities by people who themselves seem to have become commoditized. When people are gripped by the prospect of accumulating wealth with little effort, in a context where work and income are lacking, consumption becomes an indicator of achievement. In this consumer culture, young women shop up for consumer opportunities by engaging with sugar daddies who shop down for the rarest and juiciest female bodies (Nyamnjoh 2005:296). While Nyamnjoh’s portrait of young women’s sexual strategies in Dakar is one that resonates with the situation in urban Mozambique, there also seem to be remarkable differences.

The fetishisms involved in the Senegalese disquette’s (young female lover’s) sex-for-mobile phones and the thiof’s (richer man’s) economic exploitation of women, are solely financial. The potentially spiritual or erotically powerful elements of female engagement in these relationships are absent or downplayed. While the sexual practice of the disquettes in Dakar appears to be almost completely driven by capitalist and patriarchal forces, the power of the curtidoras in Maputo appears to be solidly rooted in inter-generational and matricentral alliances with female kin and female healers. Curtidoras, I argue, show that we need to be open toward aspects of kinship, inter-generational alliances, female exchanges, and cultural institutions that are not just tools for capitalist consumption, but which can in fact also imply redistribution and social reproduction.

Id like to note that curtidoras cannot be seen as agents cynically taking money from men; they also become dependent on the men’s company and support and feel obliged to be with them. The exchanges within these emotionally charged relationships occur in a highly unstable field, which is perhaps best captured by the logic of dangerous love magic than by the marketesque language of transactional sex. The young women knew that they were not immune to the effects of eroticism. For example, they often struggled to control their emotions so that they did not become weak, docile, or give in to love. The most feared consequence of doing so would be to suddenly “forget themselves or their families” because of their desire for a man. Their indebtedness to a beloved partner might slowly move them to favor him over the family, to whom, as one informant said, “one owns everything,” and this might led to retribution from the ancestral spirits. Female informants also explained that a woman should avoid falling in love because this could make her too emotionally dependent on the man, and the man might back out of the relationship. The woman loses control over the man’s emotions when she falls in love with him. The fundamental problem with being obsessed or “falling in love” in Mozambique, I argue, is that one forgets one’s most important and fundamental social ties and obligations: to family and ancestors. This is the secret of khotsolar. And this is probably why, men, especially expat men are vulnerable to love/obsession.

In Western countries, where individualist autonomy is both condoned and criticized, being “in love” becomes a sign of reaching out from one’s individual self, of being more than an isolated entity and the desire for the other, even if utterly insane, demonstrates a sacrifice of individuality, rationality and façade. This is seen as a natural pretext to marriage and the nuclear family, and has little consequence for the extended family, with which the person has few socio-economic obligations. in Among the majority in Western countries “being in love” reveals a ambiguous relationship to the self and exposes a radical selflessness and selfishness al at once. In Mozambique, “being possessed” does not refer to questions about the self. It points to a neglect of family obligations as well as to external forces and persons working on one emotional state.