

## IS MONEY THE LANGUAGE OF THE HEART? LESSONS FROM LIMPOPO

**Bjarke Oxlund**

(University of Copenhagen)

*Much has been written about transactional sex, gender and power in South Africa, while too little has been done to examine the meaning of money and exchange in intimate relations. Bjarke Oxlund argues that there is a lesson to be learned from his ethnographic studies in Limpopo; namely that in true mutuality romance and finance tend to intertwine.*

### Doing away with dirty money and pure love

In most capitalist societies money usually stands for alienation, detachment and the impersonal society. We therefore find it difficult to embrace money, which is seen as belonging to an impersonal sphere. The supposedly alienating capacity of money as a generalized means of exchange is therefore also what is behind the tendency to insist on a grand divide between the altruistic sphere of pure love and the strategic and calculative realm of rational economics. Too often money is understood as the root of all evil, as death, and as a means of exchange that erodes the community basis of people's lives. In short, money has a bad name. In their edited volume, *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, ethnographers Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry have done a good job of showing that money is not necessarily impersonal, transitory, amoral or calculating. As they point out, it is particularly in Europe that monetary exchange linked to sexual or familial exchange is either seen as



Female members of the University of Limpopo Lovetalk Group (2006)

Photo: Courtesy Bjarke Oxlund

immoral or becomes a source of humour. Similarly, in an essay titled “Marginalia: Some Additional Notes on the Gift”, Pierre Bourdieu writes that it is exactly because the economic field has been constituted as a separate field that westerners have been so successful at dividing passion and interest. It is thus business and economic culture – not money itself – that require us to suspend ordinary humanity to keep the personal and the impersonal apart.

Curiously, just as in the economic field, the notion of love is often singled out and placed in a separate sphere. Pure love is thus understood to belong to a sacred realm untouched by the breath of death that money supposedly carries with it. ‘Love me for a reason and let that reason be love’ was a truism that was often cited by students who organised a weekly Lovetalk show at the Turfloop Campus of the University of Limpopo in South Africa’s northernmost province, when I did fieldwork there in 2006 and 2007. This proverb in many ways speaks to the



Male members of the University of Limpopo Lovetalk Group (2006)

Photo: Courtesy Bjarke Oxlund

changing semantics of love in seventeenth-century Europe, where – according to German sociologist Niklas Luhmann – the autonomy of intimate relations was established and raised to the level of reflection, which meant that it became possible to justify love simply by stating that one was in love.

Yet, another proverb that I picked up from the Lovetalk shows in Limpopo was one that spoke directly against the autonomy and separate status of love and relationships, since it reads: ‘A successful man is a man who can earn more than a woman can spend, while a successful woman is a woman who can attract such a man.’ The reiteration of this saying was a rather obvious testimony to the intertwining of romance and finance, since, in relationships among students (and between students and outsiders), it was common for there to be an undercurrent of material and immaterial exchange. Love and money thus tend to become intertwined in one framework, in which commodities are transformed

into gifts and expressions of emotion, while money becomes a vehicle for the expression of gendered identities. To view material exchange in relationships as a tangle of emotion, things and power permits an appreciation of the combined agency of both males and females, as is clearly evidenced by the extensive vocabularies used to describe the differences in status and value of lovers and sexual partners.

“A successful man is a man who can earn more than a woman can spend, while a successful woman is a woman who can attract such a man.”

### **Ubuntu and bridewealth**

At the University of Limpopo students speak euphorically about the right one and romantic love one minute, only to talk about additional lovers and material exchange the next minute. The different concepts that students use to designate a variety of relationships of love and sex are all related to material exchange and socio-economic status. During my ethnographic fieldwork I quickly learned that it is enormously important for students to be in one or more relationships of love or sex, since it is through these relationships that one most significantly enters into the social process of becoming a person. The Southern African maxim of *ubuntu/botho* stipulates that the individual has to realize his or her self through relationships of mutuality, which in the view and praxis of the Limpopo youths I worked with is defined as the exchange of both material and immaterial stuff. This also means that relationships of love and sex are understood as open, fluid social processes rather than as fixed categories, and that the material exchanges that take place in

these relationships have an important bearing on the emerging gendered identities of both giver and receiver.

In South Africa, the well-documented tradition of *lobola* (bridewealth payments) should alert any analyst to the importance of material exchange in relationships of love and sex. In his seminal work on bridewealth, *Wives for Cattle* (1982), the South African anthropologist Adam Kuper showed how the system of marriage rests on the ineluctable principle of reciprocity, where “Cattle were exchanged for wives, wives for cattle”. Kuper argued that among the Sotho-Tswana each gift necessitates a fresh counter-gift, the exchanges of wives-for-bridewealth-for-wives-for-bridewealth ideally stretching from generation to generation, which implies a certain open-endedness in the exchange process over time. In *lobola* practices there is no finality because it is a lifelong process of development and becoming. Today, *lobola* is usually paid in money rather than cattle, and one of my interlocutors summoned up the huge *lobola* that he and his kin would have to pay for his girlfriend should they take their relationship to the next stage: “Close to a hundred thousand [Rands]. She is cute, man. She’s a woman. She’s worth a lot. [...] Like she’s intelligent. She’s studying computer science. She is pretty. Yeah – those things together – they are expensive.”

Many male students were quite worried about *lobola* payments, and this was often a point of heated discussion between male and female students. Outside one of the main halls at the University of Limpopo, somebody had painted a graffiti message: ‘*Lobola, aish!!!*’. Since *aish* is a common exclamation indicating surprise, worry or sorrow, I suspect that the graffiti was the work of a male student, and



Grffiti found outside one of the lecture halls

Photo: Courtesy Bjarke Oxlund

that it indicated the difficulty that many a young man experiences in raising the funds required to marry the woman he desires. On many occasions, I have witnessed girls provoking youths over the enormous *lobola* payments that they would urge their fathers to demand for them in view of the fact that they were educated and thus had the prospect of earning money for the rest of their lives. An alternative interpretation of the graffiti message may be that it is, instead, the work of a young woman who has difficulty marrying a boyfriend of no means. Either way, the message highlights how important material exchange is for the forming of the conjugal bond – and for many other bonds for that matter. For instance, one female student said to me: ‘My uncle loves me; he sends me money’.

### **Towards a reciprocity of love and money**

The French sociologist Marcel Mauss famously argued in *The Gift* that the giving of an object creates

an inherent obligation on the part of the receiver to reciprocate the gift. The range of exchanges that result from this obligation is potentially endless because the individual gift can never be fully recovered, and the mutual obligations therefore come to form the basis of human solidarity. Given the significance attached to giving and sharing under the moral idiom of *ubuntu/botho*, the South African context calls for attention to be given to the obligation to give in the first place. Thus, early 20th century ethnographers stressed the entitlements to gifts, hospitality and assistance that were held by kin among black South Africans. Actually, Mauss himself recognized that the obligation to give is no less important than the obligation to reciprocate, although his famous book mostly focused on the latter. It seems perhaps a minor detail, but I hold that, as an idiom for local morality, *ubuntu/botho* includes the imperative to be generous and that in many respects the obligation to give therefore features more prominently than the obligation to reciprocate. Overall, these dynamics resonate with Bourdieu's observation that generosity is not an individual calculus, but forms part of the habitus. According to Bourdieu, the major characteristic of the gift is therefore its ambiguity, which emanates from the pretence of generosity that is followed by the logic of the obligation to reciprocate (1996). This leads Bourdieu to conclude that it is the time lapse between the gift and the counter-gift that makes it possible to mask the inherent contradiction.

*ubuntu/botho* includes the imperative to be generous and ... the obligation to give therefore features more prominently than the obligation to reciprocate

It is therefore not surprising that the temporal dimension and the explicitly negotiated transaction was a determining factor in how students at the University of Limpopo responded to my questions about how they would define prostitution. They explained that the immediacy and the specificity of the transaction is how prostitution sets itself apart from all other short- or long-term relations. Therefore, I would like to advocate an interpretive approach that focuses on the reciprocity not just of romance and finance, but also of the exchange of love, sex and materiality. Firstly, a focus on reciprocity enables love, sex and relationships to be viewed as phenomena that are always in process, rather than fixed and commoditized entities. Secondly, the concept of reciprocity opens up a path to the exchange of everything, from care and comfort, kisses and body fluids, presents and money, SMS's and love letters, to academic support and sexual pleasure.

### **The right one and the other ones**

My interest in the overlapping idioms of romance and finance was initially sparked by a familiarization with the flourishing township lingo of consumption-based metaphors of lovers and relationships. The ideal marriage partner is known as the *regte*, Afrikaans for 'the right one'. Informants translated this as a steady boyfriend or girlfriend in English. You may keep a *regte* in your home area, while at the same time engaging in more or less steady relationships on campus. Alternative concepts offered by the male students for the right one were: 'the madam', 'mother of the nation', 'the number one', 'the first lady' or 'the Mercedes'. The less steady relations are known under a variety of concepts and metaphors,

the main ones being course pushers, cherries (*makhwapheni*), cheese-boys and cheese-girls, ministers and chickens. The different partner concepts are not mutually exclusive, and the statuses of relationships are fluid and vary over time, which ties in with an understanding of relationships as always in process, developing and becoming.

In the literature on transactional sex one can detect a gendered assumption being made about who is the giver and who is the receiver. Yet, it is quite possible for the gendered expectations of relationship exchanges to be reversed because of the greater socio-economic status of the girl. Indeed, in some cases, female students were better off than their male peers in terms of money because they came from families with resources, and sometimes because they were dating older business men. The latter came to campus in their vehicles to pick up the girls in order to take them to town or the local mall, where they would provide for them. Meanwhile, many of the male students dated younger girls from the secondary schools in the surrounding township area, who were easier to impress with petty cash and their status as university students. Paradoxically, even though there was a fairly equal distribution of wealth within the student community itself, in a way both male and female students produced the inequality in their relationships by intentionally going with persons of a different age and socio-economic status than themselves. This asymmetrical view of relationships in no way made up a totality, since for both male and female students it was not uncommon to have relationships both on and off campus. Further, in the education context of campus, academic skills and knowledge also became important

as social capital and entered into the dynamics of relationships.

### Course pushers, cheese-boys and ministers

The most frequently evoked partner category at the University of Limpopo was probably that of a 'course pusher', which refers specifically to the university context in which this study takes place. At first I understood the concept exclusively as a relationship between a first-year female student and a second- or third-year male student, who could show her around on campus and help her out with her academic assignments and preparations for exams. According to other, later explanations, I came to understand course pushing as a more equal exercise in terms of gender dynamics. Since opportunities for leisure time activities on campus were minimal, many students claimed that campus life was so monotonous that they needed to have a course pusher to be able to cope. This implies that the emphasis is on satisfying each other's emotional, physical and material needs while trying to move ahead with one's studies. At the University of Limpopo – as in most other places I would argue – it is often difficult to divide one need from the other at all sharply, and consequently the different relationship categories came to be overlapping and fluid.

The trends concerning reciprocity in relationships were most vividly confirmed by the allegories used by some of the female students when they talked about their male providers. The most common concept was that of a Minister: the Minister of Transport (often a taxi-driver or somebody with a car), the Minister of Telecommunications (the one who can buy airtime for the cell phone), the



Hip billboard message from the South African LoveLife campaign

Photo: Courtesy Bjarke Oxlund

Minister of Finance (the one who dishes out cash) or the Minister of Education (the one who assists with academic work, or a boyfriend who is a lecturer). Another widely used metaphor is that of the chicken, which refers to men who can be 'plucked' for food or other daily necessities. Female students would often refer to the need for the three Cs: a car, cash and a cell phone (sometimes clothes), which has also been noted by other scholars in South Africa.

Quite often, students would also talk about another figure beginning with a C – namely that of the cheese-boy or the cheese-girl. In a literal sense, the concept of the cheese-boy refers to young men from well-resourced backgrounds who could afford to eat cheese for breakfast if they so chose. In his relationships there will be a clear emphasis on material exchanges, since he can afford to take his girlfriends to the local mall and spoil them at cafés and at the cinema. On campus a cheese-boy usually takes on the more moderate role of someone who has 'everything in his room – a PC, a TV, a stereo', as one male student phrased it, but it can also be

someone who has the means to buy airtime vouchers for his girlfriend (which may eventually make him the Minister of Telecommunications). In most descriptions cheese-boys sound like superficial guys who only take an interest in image and material consumption, and who spend their resources in ways that will provide access to sex and add symbols of status to their social standing. Nonetheless, many youths talk of the image of a cheese-boy with envy in their voices, and even more complain that their poor socio-economic status makes it difficult for them to get a girlfriend because the girls have become so materially demanding.

Not everybody agrees that there is such a person as a cheese-girl. To some, though, a girl who is well off in socio-economic terms automatically becomes a cheese-girl in a relationship involving love or sex. According to a somewhat stereotypical account of the cheese-girl, she does not live up to prevailing standards of beauty and is slightly marginal in social terms, since girls are supposed to be 'normal' and subservient, while guys must have status and achieve prominence. Therefore it is potentially emasculating for a guy to date a cheese-girl, but that does not necessarily mean that it is a bad thing after all. Three of the male students whom I knew claimed to have dated cheese-girls and that 'it was good.' Furthermore, they said that their male peers fully understood and accepted their activities due to the comforts of love, respect and material benefits that they enjoyed in these relationships.

### Towards a reciprocity of love

When we look to theories of exchange and reciprocity it appears that in most cases it would be

inappropriate to talk of transactional sex when interpreting relationships that are underpinned by material exchange amongst students in Limpopo. In fact, if scholars in Europe and North America were more willing to launch studies of exchanges of material and immaterial goods in so-called 'love-marriages' in the west, it would probably be quite easy to demonstrate that there is much more 'transactional stuff' going on than we are often led to believe. Whereas students at Turfloop campus talk endlessly about the material exchanges involved in their relationships, many westerners would probably make an attempt to under-communicate such dynamics, which are not seen as appropriate from a moral point of view due to the prevailing understanding of money in western culture.

Furthermore, as a general rule, the social benefit schemes from which people living in welfare states stand to benefit in times of crisis are seldom available in South Africa. Hence, one would always expect the focus on material comfort to be more explicit in intimate relationships in contexts without such benefit schemes. Not only does this highlight that the intertwining of romance and finance has particular social meanings over and above the cynical and strategic exchange of sex for money. It also points to the capacity of money to convey and communicate emotions of love and respect. Whereas much gender research in South Africa has treated the material exchanges involved in relationships as transactional dynamics that serve to underscore the power of men only, the concept of a reciprocity of love points to broader definitions of exchange that involve differing notions of personhood, identity creation and social becoming.



Gate Three: The student entrance of the Turfloop Campus, University of Limpopo  
Photo: Courtesy Bjarke Oxlund

[the intertwining of romance and finance has particular social meanings over and above the cynical and strategic exchange of sex for money](#)

Students thus find it very easy to distinguish between prostitution and other sorts of relationships that involve material exchange. Interestingly, the majority of exchange processes alluded to here involved female as well as male agency, and it should be understood that among peers it is a regular occurrence that it is the woman who has the upper hand financially. Based on these insights one can easily appreciate how students juggle different interpretations of what the exchange processes of a specific relationship make of them. In this regard it is not simply a question of becoming 'a man' or 'a woman', but rather that one emerges as a minister, a course pusher, a cherry, *the regte*, a chicken or a cheese-boy (or something else), depending on

whether it was money, respect, academic assistance, sex or something else that was exchanged at the time of definition. It also tells us that in order to get ahead in his or her social becoming, a young person must be able to engage in relationships that involve the reciprocity of the material and the immaterial. It is exchange that makes for social relationships in the first place, and the continued reciprocity that keeps the relationship going. Therefore, are we not right to say that 'money talks' and that money is like a language that can be used to communicate matters of the heart? Quite clearly, students in Limpopo are not afraid of the intertwining of love, sex and money – what about you?