The “Failures of Culture”: Christianity, Kinship, and Moral Discourses about Orphans during Botswana’s AIDS Crisis
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In the midst of Botswana’s HIV epidemic, moral discourses about the provision of care for the nation’s 100,000-plus orphaned children encapsulate Tswana people’s most fundamental anxieties about the effects of AIDS. This article examines a shifting relationship between popular narratives about the supposed shortcomings of Tswana “culture” and widely proliferating assertions that Christian love can provide a more successful moral paradigm for the care of orphans. As Tswana people increasingly draw on a Christian framework to imagine alternative approaches to caring for needy children, they are responding to profound dislocations in the material and demographic foundations of their society. By tracing these moral claims and their transformation over time, this paper illuminates the changing context of social reproduction during Botswana’s AIDS crisis.

Introduction

Botswana has long had a reputation for fierce national pride and a pervasive commitment to what its people call the preservation of their culture, even—and in some ways especially—in the midst of the AIDS epidemic. The last decade has witnessed an explosion of supposedly culturally appropriate nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that aim to alleviate the devastation of AIDS in Botswana, which has the second-highest prevalence rate in the world; estimates indicated that 23.9 percent of the population ages 15–49 was HIV-positive in 2007 [UNAIDS 2008b:215]. In the wake of largely foreign-funded NGO interventions, talk of cultural sensitivity continues to be a prominent concern in the Botswana public sphere, voiced by politicians, tribal chiefs, and ordinary Tswana people. In particular, widespread anxiety about the provision of care for the nation’s 100,000–plus orphans—approximately 15 percent of all Tswana children—has long motivated a near-universal insistence on keeping orphans within the homes of their extended
families, out of respect for Tswana traditional practice. This strategy is said to prevent “a loss of community and culture,” as one NGO’s promotional material states (Orfund Foundation 2009).

Concurrently with a continued insistence on cultural sensitivity, however, an opposing discourse has been gaining ground in recent years, with more Tswana people lamenting the so-called failures of their culture in the wake of AIDS. Claims that “culture” no longer merits protection are contributing to a nascent shift in policies and practices. The tension between cultural sensitivity and cultural inadequacy regarding orphaned children’s needs, I argue, is increasingly playing out in the idiom of Christianity. Many politicians, church leaders across denominations, and ordinary Tswana people are beginning to deem local culture an inadequate moral paradigm for ensuring the proper upbringing of orphans, instead promoting a kind of broadly Christian love as a corrective. In this article, I explore the meanings, motivations, and implications behind an incipient shift in many people’s attitudes toward culture and Christianity, manifested in concerns over Botswana’s “orphan problem.”

Through official and quotidian commentary about orphans, the ways that Tswana people invoke the idea of “culture” reduces its meaning to the traditional practice of kin-based care, thus discursively equating culture with kinship in this context. While the concept of Tswana “culture” certainly includes more than ideologies and practices related to kinship, in Botswana, as in many African societies, social change is commonly experienced most acutely in the arena of the family, with the AIDS crisis proving no exception (Weisner, Bradley, and Kilbride 1997). Nonetheless, strains in social relations emerge also out of an ever more monetized economy, rural–urban migration, high levels of formal education, decreasing marriage rates, and changing consumption practices. The reciprocal ties and generational hierarchies that characterize Tswana kinship have long been threatened by the attractions and demands of modernity (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). Demographic devastation caused by the AIDS epidemic exacerbates people’s sense of crisis and threatens even more directly the processes of social reproduction associated with kinship.

In the essentializing ways that the supposed failure of culture is discursively abridged to suggest a particular kind of moral failing—the inability or refusal to care for orphaned kin—Tswana people utilize religious idioms to tell a moral story about the perceived inadequacy of culture-as-kinship and the potential for an unselfish “Christian love” to motivate proper care for needy children. This narrative simultaneously hides and exposes the essential materiality of social relations: on the one hand, these discourses reduce the difficulties in providing for orphans to a problem of morality, obscuring the material underpinnings of the crisis; on the other hand, complaints about culture that implicitly highlight the shortcomings of kinship point poignantly to the sociological basis of the orphan problem. In public health and policy circles in Botswana and across southern Africa, many politicians and practitioners have been speaking of the extended family networks as being
“saturated” for some time [Maudeni 2009]. Even though almost all orphans still live with their kin, the struggles of families to accommodate rising numbers of orphaned children—and their dependence on government food handouts to do so—are leading to a perception among many Tswana people that family-based orphan care is becoming untenable, a problem of both moral and material dimensions. This concern is increasingly visible, as it is debated both in the public sphere—in newspapers, on radio and television, and among church leaders and politicians—and in everyday conversations.

Though Christian critiques of Tswana culture are unfolding in circumstances where most orphan care is still undertaken by kin, these moralizing discourses suggest some incipient changes. By altering how they talk about Christianity and culture on this issue, Tswana people are seeking a channel to make sense of a world in which so-called traditional values seem to have less import—a fact people frequently attribute to HIV, but which has deeper links to Botswana’s process of modernization. Such commentaries serve as discursive means to prepare Tswana people for changes in the nature of social relations. The emerging Christian response to Botswana’s orphan problem depicts the solution to the crisis as rooted in forms of loving charity that are ostensibly free from the selfishness that Tswana people fear has been unleashed by the challenges of kin-based care. I argue that the sense of moral crisis pervading contemporary Tswana discourse about AIDS and orphans is rooted in the profound demographic, social, and economic changes that have been created and exacerbated by the epidemic. At the same time, I suggest that these religious discourses disguise Christianity’s own relationship with and contributions to the changing material dimensions of sociality and caregiving.

It is no coincidence that people focus on orphans when they voice their concerns about culture and kinship. Botswana’s population of orphaned children is a ready stand-in for the devastation wrought by HIV. In times of dramatic social change, the upbringing of children frequently becomes the subject of contestation, one in which concerns about the past, present, and future coalesce (Cole and Durham 2008; Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998). With adults dying, many orphans abandoned or neglected by their kin, and social relations undermined by stigma, Tswana people nonetheless find it difficult to confront the consequences of the epidemic directly. As a 26-year-old HIV-positive mother living in Gaborone said, “It’s hard to talk about HIV, but it’s a lot easier to talk about the orphan problem” [interview, March 2007].

One reason why orphans are a pivot point for concerns about social reproduction and social morality is that they are the neediest members of a family, the ones most dependent on relatives to provide support for their upbringing, the population whose survival depends most on the goodwill of others. A common claim across Botswana is that the nation had no orphans before the epidemic—an idealized vision of the past, which underscores the claim that parentless children were traditionally adopted unproblematically into their kin groups [Dahl 2009; MLGLH 1998; Skinner et al. 2006]. When Tswana people grapple with the social repercussions of AIDS, they frequently do so
by discussing the plight of orphaned children, drawing on the idioms of both Christianity and culture as paradigms with which to make sense of their world. While these discourses are emerging specifically around orphans, they stand in for broader concerns about “culture” in the contemporary moment.

The material presented below stems from thirty-eight months of ethnographic observations in three communities (one northwestern town, Maun; one periurban village near the capital city; and a village in Southeast District), including attending services at eleven churches of various denominations; hundreds of interviews with villagers, church members, government officers; analysis of six years of local media coverage on orphans; and examination of promotional materials from approximately thirty orphan care organizations (both nongovernmental and faith-based). I conducted in-depth ethnographic research in two nongovernmental orphan-care organizations (one residential, one daycare center) and in one faith-based organization that provided counseling to orphans. Field research in Botswana took place between 2003 and 2008.

I begin with an overview of the relationship between Christianity and culture in Botswana so as to describe the context and analytical purchase of emerging complaints about “culture.” I then present representative examples of moralizing discourses articulated by pastors, tribal leaders, government employees, and ordinary villagers, tracing these shifting discourses as they began to alter over the last few years. Finally, I analyze the moral and material transformations that underpin these discursive shifts, suggesting that the appeal of Christian morality is related not only to its ability to articulate people’s struggles and laments regarding kin-based caregiving, but also to Christianity’s part in offering new forms of community, sociality, and material support—both imagined and actual.

**Religious Discourse and Concerns about Culture**

A Christian ethos is pervasive, even ubiquitous, in contemporary Botswana. The widespread custom of commencing business meetings, government conferences, official speeches, and the workday with collective prayer reinforces the difficulty of any effort to identify a secular sphere as distinct from a religious one in this nation. Many people—especially men—do not attend church regularly, but 71.6 percent of people living in Botswana identified as Christian in the 2001 census, while 6 percent claimed to follow purely traditional beliefs, with a small minority of Hindus or Muslims, and 20.6 percent professing no religion.

“Christianity” has a broad range of meanings in Botswana. Pronounced differences exist among denominations, between the so-called churches of the law (the mission denominations) and churches of the spirit (apostolic and Pentecostal churches), between churchgoers and the many Tswana who identify as Christian but do not attend services. While I will not parse out distinctions among these different groups, this omission is not meant to suggest
that these are insignificant features of Botswana’s socio-religious landscape. Instead, my focus on commonalities across denominations seeks to underscore the discursive critique of Tswana culture that is emerging throughout a range of Christian churches and their socially diverse adherents, as people grapple with the orphan problem in their families and churches. It is the resonance of this discourse throughout Botswana’s diverse spiritual terrain that is of particular interest. Whether Pentecostal, Protestant, or Roman Catholic, Tswana people, when speaking of the orphan problem, increasingly complain that “traditional culture”—read as kin-based provision of care—is failing in the wake of the AIDS epidemic, and that a form of Christian morality, preaching unconditional love that traverses kinship, can take its place.

Through much of sub-Saharan Africa, the promotion of religion as a corrective to culture may be seen as reflecting a prevalent movement, given that the denunciation of so-called traditional customs has frequently, albeit not universally, been an integral part of the spread of Christianity across the continent, from its introduction through mission churches to the more recent popularity of Pentecostal churches (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991; Corten & Marshall-Fratani 2001; Gifford 1994). Since colonial times, churches have often served as platforms for the reification—and, at times, celebration, or critique—of local culture (Coe 2005; Meyer 1995). In Botswana, the boundaries between “Christian” and “traditional” have been blurred by the long-standing prevalence of Christianity (Parsons 1999). Many of the things that Tswana people count as being part of their culture are Christian in origin. At the same time, Botswana has long experienced religious opposition to traditional practices like polygyny and initiation rituals (Schapera [1940] 1966). Modernization and its incumbent attitude of resistance to “backwardness”—together with a far-reaching history of changes in marital patterns, gender relations, and age hierarchies prompted by missionaries and migrant labor over the last two centuries (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991, 1997; Livingston 2005; Solway 1990)—have factored into Christian critiques of traditional Tswana values. The current tension between “religion” and “culture” thus has historical precedents, and it is unsurprising that Christian leaders and laypeople should speak out against tribal customs in Botswana today.

Because distinguishing “Christian” from “cultural” practices makes little sense in Botswana, I do not aim here to parse out what Tswana culture or Christianity “really are.” I am concerned, rather, with how culture and Christianity and their respective moral spheres are currently being opposed and reified, specifically around the concern over orphan care. While pointing to the historical depth of discourses opposing Tswana culture and Christianity, I argue that the novelty and specificity of the discourses described below lies in their engagement with recent social and demographic transformations brought about or exacerbated by AIDS. These emerge from Tswana people’s ambivalence about the simultaneous desire for cultural sensitivity and critique of cultural inadequacy that are apparent in attitudes over orphan-care policies.
To avoid potential analytical slippage between Tswana people’s everyday lives and their beliefs about their culture, throughout this article my use of the concept of “culture” is therefore not meant to index culture-as-practiced. Instead, I am concerned with culture-as-reflected-upon, with people’s thoughts and feelings about their own customs, with “culture” as a contested local category—and all references to “culture” (henceforward without quotation marks) should be read in this light. My approach stems from the premise that moral discourses—which can be as simple as judgmental gossip about the way people behave, or as complex as theological debates about what is right and wrong—represent important attitudes toward social life, providing fruitful fodder for how people make sense of often troubling aspects of the world. Such commentaries are always more than “mere” gossip about what people see as good and bad, and their analytical value exceeds the underlying function or truth of their claims. Rather, as historian Luise White suggests, rumors and gossip are accurate reflections of historical experience: “people want to tell stories that work, stories that convey ideas and points” (White 2000:30). My aim is to examine the work that moral discourses do, to interrogate what gossip, scandalous tales, and commentaries on culture can tell us about people’s experiences of social change. I take cues here from Webb Keane, who argued that Sumbanese people’s reflexive talk about their own culture is indicative of historical shifts in the relationships among “social institutions, modes of action, and beliefs about the world” (1995:103). As Keane pointed out, anthropologists have often viewed their informants’ reflections on their cultures with some suspicion; yet these skepticisms neglect the multiple purposes of talk, as well as the insight into changing social realities it can afford (Keane 1995).

Of course, talk is cheap, as the saying goes; and my aim is not to focus on language alone. Instead, I suggest that unpacking shifts in people’s talk about their culture allows us to see one means by which Tswana people reorient the moral terms on which childrearing (and, by extension, social reproduction) effectively and legitimately takes place. Widely circulating moral discourses surrounding the challenges of providing for orphaned children—which are at once conversations about an idealized past and an uncertain future—offer a privileged lens onto the sociocultural context of the HIV epidemic and the present moment more broadly.

**Moralizing Tales about Kinship, Culture, and Christianity**

I begin in the early 2000s, when references to aunts, uncles, and grandparents who neglected their duty to care for the orphaned children of their deceased relatives circulated in village gossip, national news, and government discourse alike. Villagers frequently told me that Tswana culture once valued wealth in people, and relatives used to undertake the responsibility of raising each other’s children freely, and even with great pleasure. Critiques of kin-based care lamented the decay of both culture and kinship.
These moralizing stories clustered into two broad versions. In the first, these relatives were said to be unequivocally bad people who refused to open their homes to their family’s orphans. As a young man stated in an interview in September 2004, “Those relatives, they don’t even know their own children”; or, in the words of one social worker in August 2003, “It’s like these people don’t know their family [losika—literally, ‘vein’].” In these accounts, kin refuse to know [go itse]—in the sense of recognize—their kin affiliations. In short, they reject the ideology and practice of kinship altogether.

In the second version of “bad kin” stories, relatives take in orphans as they ought to, but neglect or abuse them, rather than providing proper care. Villagers often decry “greed” or “jealousy” (bofula, lefufa) as the motivation underlying this sort of behavior. Ever since the Botswana government launched its Orphan Food Basket initiative in 1996, the families of registered orphans have received generous monthly rations to offset the burden of taking on additional mouths to feed; however, while widely praised for providing relatives with incentive to keep orphans connected to their kin and culture, the initiative is also condemned for creating situations where the “wrong” sort of kin take in orphans, solely out of a desire to access the ample food baskets.

A 22-year-old woman in one southeastern village told me a story in July 2003 about a villager who took in all the children of her three deceased sisters, but rather than providing care, she neglected the children, selling their food baskets to buy beer to entertain [presumably unsavory] men, and leaving the orphans to “dig through the [garbage] bins” for food. I witnessed cases of misappropriated food rations myself, so I know tales like this one are not [or not always] apocryphal. The theme of greedy kin pervades news articles, official speeches, and promotional materials from NGOs [Botswana Press Agency 2004; Moseki 2004]. In this brand of moral discourse, the criticism is not that relatives refuse to “know” their kin, but that they pretend to follow cultural norms of kin-based care while in fact perverting and maligning the underlying principles behind these norms—a kind of twisted simulacrum of kinship and culture.

Common to both of these accounts of improper behavior is the site where they locate the concern: the problem lies with the widespread phenomenon of kin perverting or rejecting cultural norms and customs by refusing to care properly for orphans in their families. A recent newspaper article in Botswana quoted the leader of the Batlokwa tribe, Chief Gaborone, as saying: “In the past when this nation respected its culture, orphans were never left in the cold and the poor relatives were taken care of by those who had better sources of income” (Legodimo 2008). Chief Gaborone’s claim articulates the ideology behind the discourses of problematic kinship: when culture is “respected” and followed, the nation’s social welfare needs take care of themselves. The concern about respecting culture is by no means a new one [Livingston 2003a], but in the context of the AIDS epidemic and the orphan crisis, people describe the problem as without precedent.
Both versions of the “bad kin” story—relatives who do not “know” their kin, and family members who only nominally pretend to follow cultural prescriptions—remain prevalent; however, beginning in 2005, I began to encounter criticisms that occurred on a different register. A schoolteacher told me in a conversation in Gaborone: “It [the orphan problem] is a failure of our culture: our culture can’t handle all these orphans” (June 2006). Rather than blaming individual people who choose to ignore cultural norms, his claim lays the responsibility for moral decay on the entire system of culture itself. Phrases circulated by NGOs, the Botswana government (in policy documents and in statements to the public), and ordinary villagers alike make assertions such as “the family networks are saturated,” or speak of the “failure of the family” in providing adequate care. In the words of one male villager I interviewed in January 2008, “this [the orphan problem] is because our culture does not work.” Here, the problem is aggregated: with so many families presumably flaunting their kinship duties, this issue is articulated as being both systemic and endemic. Even though most children remain with their kin (suggesting that the cultural system has not fully “failed”), the perception that kinship has deteriorated appears to be bound up in concerns over inadequate or immoral relatives.

In the context of the AIDS epidemic, kinship and culture are thus regarded with considerable ambivalence. On the one hand, many Tswana people continue to defend their culture when describing the sort of orphan care interventions they deem most appropriate, such as those that provide daycare or feeding services to orphans who continue to live with their extended families (Maudeni 2009); on the other hand, as in the examples just cited, many people feel that the kinship relations they see as foundational to their culture are no longer sufficiently motivating appropriate behaviors in the midst of the AIDS epidemic.

In their critique of culture-cum-kinship, many Tswana people promote Christianity as a moral order that can rectify these shortcomings. In 2005, Pastor Sepako, the leader of a small apostolic congregation in the northern town of Maun, informed me that most of the church leaders in Maun had come together to form a committee of clergymen. This group—the Brotherhood of Ministers—sought to discuss shared religious and social concerns. Rather than attempting to pursue the needs of their individual congregations, they felt they would have more political sway vis-à-vis local and national government policy if they joined forces in the name of Christianity. One of the most important issues they were tackling was what to do about the orphan problem. As Pastor Sepako relayed, this ministerial committee was campaigning to remove all orphaned children from their extended families and place them in church-run dormitories, where their proper social and religious upbringing could be undertaken in a protected environment by churches. Members of the Brotherhood of Ministers claimed that too many kin were neglecting orphans, but these community leaders were unable to determine precisely which people were bad kin, as the Tswana predisposition for concealment in the domestic sphere (Durham and Klaits 2002) often
hid specific instantiations of misbehavior from the ministers’ sight. And so, they believed all orphans should be raised by the church; culture—read as kinship—could no longer be trusted.

Until confronted with the Brotherhood of Ministers’ plan to place orphans in dormitories in 2005, I had never heard a Tswana person suggest the unilateral institutionalization of orphans, nor had I imagined such a thing would occur in a nation where vast governmental and NGO resources were expended in the pursuit of avoiding institutionalization. The initial orphan-care policy literature in Botswana, as well as early scholarly work responding to the AIDS epidemic, indicated that the care of orphans by their kin was always considered the most appropriate option (MLGLH 1998; Skinner et al. 2006), up until around 2004 or 2005, when an acceptance of care outside of kinship began to increase (Maudeni 2009).

In another case in the southeast in early 2006, I listened to a prophet (moperofeti) from an independent charismatic church wax poetic about how each of us had the moral responsibility to find an abused orphan and take it into our homes, just as Jesus loved the children. Afterward, I asked my research assistant, a member of the church, if I had understood correctly. She nodded and told me that this was the position put forward by some of the pastors. I asked her if anyone would actually adopt or foster a child that was outside their kin group, especially if they did not receive material compensation—something that Tswana people do not practice, unlike in other African contexts (e.g., Bledsoe 1990, 1991). My assistant pondered the question and said she did not know if anyone did this, but that the pastor was encouraging us to show “love” (lerato) toward the orphans. In short, my assistant understood it to be a rhetorical device, pointing toward the failures of many extended families, and the responsibilities of good Christians to pick up the slack. The pastor probably did not expect his congregants to go around the village collecting all the underfed orphans; however, the metaphor was obviously powerful, given the audience’s ululating response, and it positioned itself as a self-conscious corrective to the problems of failed kinship that had long been decried in the village.

This minister’s rhetoric resonates with the Brotherhood of Ministers’ proposal to institutionalize orphans in Maun—both examples promoted Christian love as somehow better than normative kinship practices. Family members, in taking in orphans, are accused of doing so out of greed and not necessarily because it is the correct and moral thing to do. Sometimes reluctant kin are even forced to foster orphans by decree of the tribal chief (kgosi). By contrast, the ways that these church leaders encouraged their fold to show their faith and love suggest that caring for children who are not kin could be somehow more moral, less suspect—in a word, selfless. The notion that Christian morality could provide a solution to the orphan problem was not limited to church leaders and pastors: government programs in 2006 began to expound the importance of Christian charity to encourage people to foster nonkin.

In 2007, the Department of Social Services (DSS) launched its pilot Foster Care Program. Social workers involved in formulating the program
sought to locate Christian adults who would open their homes to abused and neglected orphans in their communities. In providing care for unrelated children, foster parents would be “giving love” to the needy and acting as “good Samaritans,” in the words of social worker. For those working for DSS, public service was closely tied to the enactment of Christian love. Virtually all the officers at DSS were practicing Christians, and the social worker who spearheaded the initiative in a village I call Lentswê was a Roman Catholic nun. In their discussions of the program, the social workers and DSS officers drew upon a rhetoric of Christian love, a rhetoric emblazoned in inspirational messages on the walls of many offices at the department.

In the villages targeted, the nascent Foster Care Program provoked much conversation about Lentswê’s neediest orphans. On a visit in August 2007 to a middle-aged Lutheran woman known by the teknonym Mma-Tshepo, I listened as my friend and her cousin discussed the situation of two orphaned girls (ages 8 and 11) from the other side of the village. These sisters were the wards of their elderly grandmother, who was known for neglecting the children; there had also been recent rumors that the younger one had been sexually molested. I mentioned that the social worker was searching for a suitable foster family in which to place the girls.

Mma-Tshepo pressed her hands together, as though in prayer, and said simply, “I will take them.” The divorced 48-year-old explained her willingness to be at the forefront of the emerging program: “It is something I can do. I can give these children love. I will take them to church and teach them to open their hearts, so they behave properly and hear the word of Jesus.” When I asked what she thought about removing children from the homes of their kin, Mma-Tshepo paused before answering, “Today, I think maybe our culture [dingwaô tsa rona] cannot always help us.” Her cousin chimed in with a click of her tongue, “Our culture is dead [culture ya rona e sile].” In subsequent conversations, Mma-Tshepo told me she had prayed about the issue, and she was convinced it was God’s will that she should foster the children.

The action incumbent in Mma-Tshepo’s declaration was somewhat surprising. She had little external incentive to take in children who were unrelated to her, as she already had two children of her own, and formal foster parents were supposed to assume responsibility for all the costs incurred through their voluntary fosterage—a policy that sought to ensure that people volunteered not out of “greed,” but out of selfless Christian love. Further, I had known Mma-Tshepo for four years, during which time she had always been an ardent defender of the responsibilities (and rights) of kin to provide care for their own orphans. And yet she did take in the two girls for several months, patiently striving to teach them good manners, and encouraging them to show “God’s love” to one another. In some ways, her action reflected continuity with cultural precepts and practices, as her behavior was in line with proper ideas of how orphans should be brought up. Where she differed from traditional practice was in her choice to take in children who had no familial connection to her, treating them “as though
they are my own children.” She also self-consciously distanced herself from traditional norms by framing her actions in a Christian idiom. Mma-Tshepo’s increasing cynicism regarding the adequacy of cultural precepts stands in parallel to broader transformation in attitudes, as Tswana people move toward the church as a possible solution to contemporary problems. In her own rendering of her actions, her faith superseded her culture.

The critiques laid out in this section would have one believe that the problem of providing care for orphans is primarily a moral crisis—one that could be solved by finding the right ethical imperative to encourage people to provide resources and care to needy children; however, in the next section, I examine the relationship between Christian discourses criticizing Tswana culture-as-kinship and recent transformations in the material and demographic conditions of life in the wake of AIDS.

The Materiality of Culture and Christian Morality

The discourses cited above simultaneously illuminate and conceal important concerns. Most notably, in the prevailing opposition between culture and Christianity that is emerging out of orphan care debates, the moral dimensions of caregiving are highlighted, while the material aspects of how people take care of each other are obscured. By questioning the motives of potentially “greedy” kin, Tswana people imply that care and love can be given in a purely moral and nonmaterial way. When kin seem unable or unwilling to provide care for needy orphans, even with food baskets to offset the costs of feeding additional children, Christian morality seeks to provide the corrective with a different set of motivations for the provision of resources (e.g., love, goodwill, Christian charity). Through debates over the orphan problem, Tswana people grapple with the right way to provide care during the AIDS epidemic, but at the same time they also recast in moral terms things that have material, economic, and demographic underpinnings, and thereby reconfigure—or justify reconfiguring—social relations both within and outside of kinship.

Caregiving and kinship in Botswana, as through much of África, are rooted in expectations of reciprocal exchange—of household labor and of material resources—that are often more salient to how people talk about family relations than are more abstract ideas of love or affection (Durham 1995, 2002a, 2002b, 2007; Livingston 2003b, 2005, 2008). Providing care (go tlhokomela) is a form of labor (tiro); it is a sentiment and a practice, entailed both by the work of maintaining households (cleaning, cooking, building, fetching wood and water), and by the provision of resources (food, clothing, school fees, cattle) that together comprise the basic stuff of life (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Durham 2002a; Klaits 2001; Livingston 2003b). The labor and resource provision that adults invest in children is an investment against the future, to be reciprocated when those adults become elderly and dependent on their younger relatives (Livingston 2003a, 2003b). Caregiving
is thus multiply determined—it is at once about providing for the immediate needs of dependents and a part of an ongoing cycle of reciprocity.

That cycle is interrupted by kin who refuse (go ganal)—or appear to refuse—the needs of their dependents. In her analysis of the “spirit of asking” in Botswana, Deborah Durham describes different logics at play in the numerous small requests that Tswana people make of others to give them things. When friends or peers demand gifts of each other, as happens quite often, the point is not foremost about receiving the item: rather, the more salient purpose of the request is to initiate a joking banter that constitutes the parties as equal and mutually agentive, and the relationship as friendly [Durham 1995]. These demands can be refused or fulfilled without consequence, and without debt or need for reciprocity. By contrast, requests that are voiced in the idiom of kinship are serious, and not easily denied, because to deny the request for help from a kinsmen would risk denying the kin relationship itself—and rejecting the basic unit of sociality in Botswana [Durham 2007]. The scandals and gossip about kin who refuse to acknowledge or “know” their orphaned relatives are at once stories of people under tremendous strain to provide care and resources, and stories about people who undermine proper sociality.

Chief Gaborone’s comments, cited earlier, implied that culture used to work well because orphans and poor people were taken in by relatives who had greater income—a built-in social-welfare system; however, the prevalence of orphans today indexes the prevalence of dead adults, whose household labor and/or wage-earning capacities have been lost. Even relatives with comparatively “greater income” often have incredibly limited resources—and many households live solely off the government’s food baskets for orphans, the elderly, or the destitute. AIDS has made more visible demographic transformations that have been underway over a longer history, such as decreased marriage rates, increased premarital sexual activity, and extramarital childbearing [Schapera [1940] 1966; Suggs 1987; Townsend 1997]. The large numbers of orphaned children whose mothers were unmarried further complicates claims over custody—whether children belong to their maternal or paternal kin [Dahl 2009; see also Solway 1990]. And so the challenges of providing care to orphans are not simply moral issues about bad kin or failed kinship norms, as Tswana discourse on the matter suggests, but reflections of a changing material and demographic world, in which granting requests and “knowing” one’s many kin can seem pragmatically impossible.

Discourses condemning bad kin illuminate some of the problems with traditional social welfare practices, even as they obscure the challenges faced by kin who do take in orphans. These “good kin” are often pitied but not, by and large, socially rewarded for their efforts. Those who foster needy orphans from their extended family are thought of as fulfilling obligations, and not generally seen as being especially noble or good, or meriting praise [Thupayagale-Tshweneagae 2008]. As I heard one social worker grumble under her breath following a meeting with a demanding kin guardian in December 2005: “you won’t get a prize for taking care of
your grandchildren.” By extension, many Tswana criticize the food baskets as a form of bribery, saying that people should value wealth-in-people, not wealth-in-things (Guyer 1995).

In this context, families who fulfill their social obligations often face accusations that they are fostering orphans only because they wish to access the children’s food rations, regardless of their motivations. Adults are blamed for freeloding off the food baskets that orphans receive: they are seen as inverting the hierarchy of caregiving. This is why government officers designing the Foster Care Program decided not to give food baskets or monetary support to foster parents like Mma-Tshepo. In removing material gain from the equation, social workers tried to eliminate greed as either a potential motivation or accusation. However, the program has since failed, for precisely the reason that one cannot provide care without resources—particularly given how central resource-provision is to Tswana caregiving (Durham 1995). Mma-Tshepo’s foster children eventually returned to the care of their kin, after she could no longer support them materially. Additionally, despite their professed appreciation of regular meals and an affectionate home environment, the elder child told me they both found the restrained lifestyle at Mma-Tshepo’s home to be a burdensome limit on their freedoms (interview, March 2008). Even as people promote a Christian ideology of nonmaterial love (which appealed to the orphans as well as to Mma-Tshepo), they do not escape the Tswana conception of caregiving, in which “love” alone cannot be enough. Bonds and care have to be worked on and labored at, built up over time (Durham 2002a; Klaits 2001).

Another factor influencing public opinions about kin caregivers is the widely held belief that HIV is an illness resulting from breach of sexual taboos (Heald 2006; Livingston 2005). Stigma against people who are known to have died from AIDS can extend to the kin who take in their children, who themselves become the subject of rumors. Such was the case of a Lentswê woman called Koketso, who endured her neighbors’ allegations that her dead sister must have been a prostitute since she had died of AIDS—allegations that Koketso felt were intended to besmirch her reputation along with her sister’s. As Koketso told me in January 2008, “Some people don’t want to take the orphans because of these reasons [stigma]; they say to themselves, if we don’t take the orphans, we don’t have to say we are part of the same family [as people who died of AIDS, thereby sharing in their stigma]. . . . Sometimes I even wish I did that, when these children give me many headaches. But I can’t [couldn’t abandon the children], because they are my sister’s children.” Stigmatized and publicly condemned if they refuse to provide care to orphans, relatives also risk being stigmatized and materially strained if they do take the children in. Such concerns can further discourage relatives. While most orphans are still living with their kin, these discourses both reflect and feed into many relatives’ growing reluctance to do so. Throughout my fieldwork, numerous people told me that it is only the material incentive [such as food baskets] and legal pressure [from tribal chiefs] that make kin-based orphan care possible.
While being “good kin” ceases to hold straightforward rewards for many people, the idea of being a “good Christian” appears unquestionably positive. Both Koketso and Mma-Tshepo were undertaking the same task of caring for orphans, yet Koketso was stigmatized and felt unappreciated, while Mma-Tshepo cemented her reputation as a good Christian and someone who exhibited botho, humanity (see Livingston 2008). In the preference of “love” as a necessary precursor to “care,” the moral contrast between kin who simply fulfill an expected duty and Christians who proactively reach out, displaying their good deeds and Christian love for needy children to whom they owe nothing, is demarcated—even though they may be providing exactly the same kind of care. Churchgoers across Africa have historically emphasized the importance of displaying one’s identity as a strong Christian: by wearing distinctive church uniforms or lapel pins, by carrying one’s Bible, by adorning one’s home with embroidered Biblical verses, or by engaging in overt acts of charity (Comaroff 1985; Klaits 2001, 2005; Meyer 1998). Though I know of few cases of church members actually taking unrelated orphans into their homes, talk about strangers caring for orphans is gaining public acceptance, and this talk itself has become an overt marker of a person’s Christian goodwill, even though widespread shifts in behavior remain incipient, germinal. As most relatives (churchgoers and otherwise) continue to house their orphaned kin, and few Christians foster unrelated children, these discourses must be understood as a kind of identity-display. By talking like Christians, Tswana people distance themselves from potential accusations of greedy, selfish behavior—and so, such talk is inextricably bound up in a broader moral economy.

The vast majority of church members that do not foster orphaned strangers further demonstrate their Christian morality by volunteering time and resources to the increasing number of faith-based organizations (FBOs) providing support services. Churches have become important players in the field of orphan care: in 2007, Botswana’s yearly Child Care Forum—a meeting convened by DSS and UNICEF to encourage dialogue among social workers, government strategists, and NGOs—included a series of workshops acknowledging this growing role of FBOs. The Roman Catholic Church operates a major charity that runs numerous daycare centers and preschools for needy and orphaned children. Botswana Christian AIDS Intervention Programme is another umbrella organization that operates what has now become the nation’s largest daycare center for orphans and vulnerable children. With FBOs on the rise, the Christian version of love and caregiving is being propagated widely and represents a key component in the future direction of orphan care. Indeed, being a good Christian who gives love to needy children can contain greater social rewards than simply fulfilling one’s kin duties.

Ironically, even as many Tswana people criticize culture-as-kinship for failing to provide adequate care, they promote a Christian corrective to the problem that is rooted in a kinship metaphor of “spiritual families” (losika la semowa) (Klaits 2001). Advocating a more distant, yet proactive,
kind of love as a Christian corrective to Tswana caregiving practices, church discourses reveal and encourage the changing facts of social reproduction. Though this vision of Christian love is partly a matter of foregrounding one’s individual religious choices, of moral actions that index the strength of a person’s Christian identity, these “Christian” features are bound up with Tswana sociality, which has long grappled with tensions between individual desires and social cohesiveness (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). Most congregations in Botswana serve as centers for the distribution of resources and care, particularly for people cut off from their kin. Some churches strive to involve members’ families and work through kinship, but numerous churchgoers in Lentswê informed me on disparate occasions that spiritual connections with church members had greater stability in the midst of the HIV epidemic than did the bonds of one’s losika (family, vein). Stories of failed kinship were common in sermons at all eleven churches I attended during my fieldwork.

Implicit in church members’ discourses promoting Christian charity are their expectations that they will also be beneficiaries of church aid when they need it. Christian love, in other words, is not always as “selfless” as it purports to be. In the context of rapid modernization across Africa, the “prosperity gospel” of many Pentecostal churches—the promise that Jesus will help the devout to reap material benefits—is a reflection on the changing social and moral landscape, as African nations increasingly enter into the global neoliberal economy (Dijk 2005; Meyer 1998). Church burial societies in which congregants pay dues that are distributed upon death of a member, defraying the costs of funerals, are yet another popular means by which the responsibility of blood kin can be transplanted onto spiritual kin. Relations based on Christian love thus entail a transfer of the same expectations characterizing provision of care and resources in Tswana kinship onto a different set of social relationships, one that is chosen and shared by people with a common faith.

Conclusions

In the climate of social upheaval and moral apprehension that surrounds the AIDS epidemic, Christian moral discourses are mobilized as a means to voice anxious critiques about social reproduction. Such talk points toward new ideologies, modes of caregiving, and patterns of relatedness that are at once attractive and disconcerting to Tswana people, apparently new and yet deeply rooted in age-old practices and principles of kin-based caregiving. Somewhat obscured by the focus on moral failures is the degree to which threats to Tswana culture, kinship, and caregiving are rooted in the material deprivations of the epidemic and related social changes, which themselves are connected to changes long underway. Tswana people’s focus on rupture and discontinuity in relation to AIDS and kinship thus overlooks the longer historical roots of contemporary problems.
Contestations over good kinship and bad kinship, over appropriate caregiving and inappropriate neglect, over failed culture and curative Christianity, are also idioms in which to make moral and ideological claims, in which to assert and debate the politics of social relations. In the contemporary moment, AIDS has drastically reduced the population, modern consumption and wage labor have dovetailed with different values about how to “do” relatedness, and the future of social reproduction itself appears to be threatened. While the anxious debates in Botswana about orphans, love, and greed force Tswana people to question the morality of their kinship practices, the challenges to fulfilling the materiality of caregiving obligations produces collective doubts. When the causes and consequences of the “orphan problem” are portrayed in purely moral terms, we must attend to both what is revealed and obscured about the nature of contemporary kinship and its relationship to profound demographic and social change.

The discourses that blame Tswana kinship and culture for failing to provide adequate care for all the nation’s orphans, what Daniel Jordan Smith has labeled in another context “collective self-criticism” (2006:87), are multivalent and ambivalent. Tswana people’s critique of their own culture is both a reasonable assessment of breakdown in patterns of social relationality, and a discourse that conceals the structures of power and unequal access to material resources that are underlying this breakdown. Thus, where Tswana people used to claim simply that the problem is with “bad kin,” many are now suggesting it is in fact “bad kinship” that is the root of the matter. And of course they are partly right. The values at the foundation of good kinship and good culture—such as reciprocity, mutual dependence, provision of material support for the needy, and hierarchies of respect for kin and elders—are deeply undermined by the ruptures brought about by the AIDS epidemic, just as they had already long been destabilized by preceding aspirations toward modernity. All this suggests that the critique of Tswana culture is, in many ways, a lament about its demise.

In promoting a Christian ideology of “spiritual kinship,” Tswana people find a means to resurrect the supposedly dying moral tenets of Tswana culture and kinship, by shifting the focus from what is portrayed as a reactive obligation, in which one provides for orphans out of familial duty, to a proactive sociality, in which one provides for orphans out of pure Christian goodwill and love of humankind. Even though widespread changes in practice have not yet occurred, these discourses are the harbinger of transformations underway: churches and FBOs are becoming prominent actors in orphan-care policy, and kin-based care continues to be viewed as an unsustainable response to the orphan problem. And so, the debates over providing care for orphaned children must be understood as productive efforts to rearrange the moral codes for social relations—a pragmatic response to fraught transformations in the time of AIDS.
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NOTES

1. When I refer to “culture,” I mean specifically the ways the Tswana majority conceptualizes and speaks about its culture—I make no pretense at my own definition of what Tswana culture “really is,” instead concerning myself only with how Tswana people reflexively invoke the concept. Speakers of Setswana use several words to gloss this concept—including dingwaô, melao, and setswana, as well as the English word “culture” (as in the common phrase culture ya rona—our culture). I follow local convention in translating all of these under the umbrella of “culture.” Finally, although I acknowledge the multiplicity of cultural and ethnic groups in Botswana, my concern in this paper is solely with the vast majority of citizens that are ethnically Tswana. In doing so, I nonetheless note that the double meaning of the term “Batswana” (or the root word “Tswana”) as both citizens of the nation and the dominant ethnic group allows for a civic discourse of national unity that has been well studied for its problematic effects (e.g., Durham 2002b; Nyamnjoh 2004; Werbner 2004).

2. Orphans in Botswana are, by definition, children who have lost at least one parent. Legal definitions of “child” vary, but I follow the most common convention and the most prevalent statistical data in Botswana, which defines children as those below the age of 17 years.

3. Estimates vary on both the proportion and number of orphaned children; given the range of statistics, I offer the figure only as illustrative of scale. This percentage derives from the last Botswana Census data of 2001 and from UNAIDS’ estimates on the number of AIDS orphans (UNAIDS 2008a).


5. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Setswana are my own.

6. I do not suggest that African Christianity is universally critical of local cultures; in fact, many churches pressure their members to preserve elements of their traditional customs and mores, and many engage in a dialogue about the relationship between Christianity and tradition (Denis 2006; Fernandez 1964). Though churches may seek to draw boundaries between themselves and that which they define as traditional, the distinction is rarely seamless. Jean Comaroff’s (1985) monograph on the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) in the Botswana-South Africa borderlands reminds us that churches can be loci for redefining moral orientations.
(through practices, signs, and discourses), even as they are inextricably bound up in more traditional vectors of power and resource provision. Similarly, Birgit Meyer demonstrated how Pentecostal Christianity among the Ewe in Ghana is used as an idiom for cultural critique, in ways that actually reinforce and reinstate supposedly traditional, cultural, or animistic beliefs and practices (1999; see also Blunt 2004).

7. For example, in many “cultural performances” conducted by youth at schools or village tribal courts, I observed young people singing Christian hymns as specimens of what they claimed to be traditional music.

8. Jealousy is both a sentiment and a disposition in Botswana. It is frequently articulated as being the source of self-centered and socially destructive actions, and is often closely related to greed in the thinking of many Tswana people (see Durham 2002; Durham and Klaits 2002; Klaits 2001).


11. The names of all people, organizations, and villages have been changed.

12. I found it particularly interesting that the committee contained pastors from both charismatic and denominational churches, as these types of congregations have historically been divided over their attitudes toward many issues, notably premarital sexuality—differences that remain salient despite a growing acceptance of sex out of wedlock, even among the more traditionally conservative mission denominations (Livingston 2005:148–149). To see these churches uniting under a single rubric of shared Christian morality struck me as an important and interesting historical move, one that pragmatically marks the same vision of shared Christianity as the discourses I analyze in this article.

13. I have heard of only a few cases where people fostered children completely unrelated to them. Julie Livingston (personal communication) noted certain instances occurring from time to time in a community near the capital city. Such arrangements do occur, but they are rare. Children are commonly circulated among kin, but this almost never occurred with nonkin before the Foster Care Program, launched by the government in 2007, which I explore later.

14. I observed this policy in interviews with DSS officers and at the one-year review session on the Foster Care pilot in February 2008. At that two-day meeting, the social workers involved in the program debated the issue of whether foster parents should receive food baskets. One social worker said she would not personally take in an orphan without material compensation, despite being a “good Christian” and hence “the perfect person” to be a foster parent, as she put it. However, all the other attendees of the roughly fifty-person meeting challenged her, insisting that foster care had to entail pure, Christian motivations, which to them meant no material resources. The opposition between greed and Christian love was a foundational part of the program.

15. The percentage of women in Botswana who had ever married at all by the ages of 45–49 years (only 77.6 percent in 1991) is an extreme outlier in continental sub-Saharan Africa, where this figure in the 1990s was otherwise universally in the 90th percentile and upward (excepting only Namibia and South Africa, whose rates were just shy of 90 percent); with similar figures for male marriage (UNPD 2000).

16. Although I have not encountered reliable recent figures on the number of orphans cared for by kin in Botswana, there are fewer than seven hundred children in Botswana who are in residential or foster care with nonkin, according to numbers listed by the residential institutions.
17. I am indebted to Ruth Prince for this observation.
18. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this point.
19. This is, of course, a common practice in many parts of Africa, and is not solely attributable to the rise of HIV, nor are burial societies exclusively Christian in nature; however, these societies are an increasingly important form of insurance against impoverished or uncaring kin during the AIDS epidemic, and are a common feature among Christian congregations of various denominations in Botswana.

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