



## “TOO FAT TO BE AN ORPHAN”: The Moral Semiotics of Food Aid in Botswana

**BIANCA DAHL**  
University of Toronto

Kefilwe was twelve years old when she became an orphan upon her mother's death in 2003.<sup>1</sup> Her father had never been in the picture, so the girl moved to the home of her maternal grandmother in Lentswê, a village in southeastern Botswana. Like many other orphans in Botswana, Kefilwe was uprooted and sent off to live with a poor elderly relative who admitted having no desire to feed another belly, much less the seemingly bottomless one of a growing child. Fortunately for Kefilwe's family, however, Lentswê was home to an institution that I call Bathusi Orphan Day Care Center, part of Botswana's then nascent industry of foreign-funded feeding programs for orphaned children. It did not take long for Kefilwe's arthritic grandmother to make her way to Bathusi and register her grandchild for the free meals, recreational activities, school support, and day-care services that the organization provided exclusively to village orphans.

In 2006, three years after Kefilwe had first arrived at Bathusi bearing a shy demeanor and thin, pinched face, the girl had a second homecoming to Lentswê. In the intervening time, Kefilwe had been sponsored by a generous European donor who paid for her to attend a boarding school in another part of Botswana, and she had only recently returned home for the summer. One afternoon, I passed by her grandmother's place to catch up. Sitting on a flattened piece of cardboard in front of their two-room house with a casual assortment of other visitors, I watched a middle-aged neighbor approach the home and call out a salutation.

Kefilwe slowly got up and strolled over to clap the woman's hand in greeting, looking every bit the part of a "cool girl" in her pink bandana and matching velour tracksuit pants. The older woman let out a raucous laugh, slapped the teenager on her rear end, and hooted in a mixture of Setswana and English, "Kefilwe! Oooooee! Look at this girl. Nowadays, you are too fat to be an orphan!" Everyone watching burst into laughter; even Kefilwe rolled her eyes to hide her smile and managed to slowly, regally, turn around—showing off her growing figure to full advantage—and regain her seat in the shade, every bit the icon of unscathed.

I offer this anecdote as an entry point into my larger concern in this essay: an examination of the moral semiotics of children's bodies,<sup>2</sup> during the peak of what is often referred to as Botswana's AIDS orphan crisis.<sup>3</sup> According to the third Botswana AIDS Impact Survey, 16.2 percent of all children under fifteen in Botswana are orphans like Kefilwe (BAIS 2009)—comprising well over 130,000 youth (UNICEF et al. 2009), or one in five children under the age of seventeen (UNAIDS 2010).<sup>4</sup> This growing population of parentless young people is the long shadow AIDS has cast over a country where one in three pregnant women still tests positive for HIV (UNAIDS 2010). Foreign-funded aid organizations like Bathusi flooded Botswana following a plea for social and medical aid issued by then-president Festus Mogae to the United Nations in 2001, in which Mogae famously claimed his people were "faced with extinction." In many ways, Botswana has become a hotspot for humanitarian aid during the HIV epidemic, and much of that aid has centered on orphans.

Kefilwe's neighbor's teasing comments—although obviously playful as well as disparaging—echo critiques that circulated in Lentswê after the founding of Bathusi, when villagers began to voice concerns that orphaned children were growing plump off of overly indulgent foreign aid for children during the epidemic. This article seeks to explore why these supposedly fat bodies of orphans have become idioms for what Tswana people see as a moral predicament: through well-intentioned humanitarian programs, orphans are problematically gaining access to resources that other villagers do not have, and—as I will argue—these same orphans are pushing back against normative ideas about the provision of resources and forms of patronage at the heart of how Tswana people enact good kinship (Durham 1995). Bathusi's targeting of resources directly to orphans has transformed these children's social status from being pitiable indices of strained kinship to being enviable indices of even more profoundly strained kinship. When Bathusi's program began to attract an abundance of foreign donations in the early 2000s, many villagers—in joking comments like those of Kefilwe's neighbor, as

well as in more serious gossip criticizing the children—suggested implicitly that a new structure of inequality and excess was being written in flesh on the most public of objects: the body, specifically the bodies of orphans.

This article untangles villagers' ambivalent feelings about excess, privilege, and entitlement of orphans by tracing symbolic discourse in Lentswê about two kinds of food aid for children: that provided by the Botswana government, and that provided by foreign-run NGOs like Bathusi. I will show how aid initiatives' and Tswana villagers' constructions of orphans as a category defined by its lack (lack of both food and love) at first converge and then diverge through the politics surrounding feeding programs. Fat and skinny bodies provide conceptual fodder for villagers, aid workers, and orphans alike to negotiate the changing forms of resource provision and individualistic consumption practices that Tswana elders blame the AIDS epidemic for importing. Focusing specifically on the moral dimensions of the semiotic signaling occasioned by children's bodies, this essay frames local discontent about aid through its simultaneously corporal, ethical, and representational dimensions. By recognizing how moral anxieties intersect with semiotic representations of "victims," and by following the changing public discourse around orphans' bodies (both how their bodies appear and what those bodies do), I offer revealing examples of how the moral and the semiotic converge to produce powerful reactions to humanitarian aid.

### THEORIZING BODIES AND IDIOMS OF EXCESS

Two decades ago [Emily Martin \(1992\)](#) argued that the proliferation of attention to bodies in anthropology resulted from rapid social changes in how bodies are configured, experienced, and felt during the era of globalization. Despite this widely remarked-on scholarly focus, the bodies of children have remained relatively understudied in both theoretical and ethnographic discussions (see [Hirschfeld 2002](#)). Yet children provide a particularly relevant locus for exploring the ways in which bodies are conceptualized, shaped, and politically mobilized in the context of Africa's HIV pandemic and of course more generally, for they at once engender heightened anxiety about proper forms of care, and carry a rich range of semiotic meanings. It is not simply what children's bodies look like that prompts such discourses; by attending to moral semiotics I also seek to retain a focus on how those bodies act. In an era in which principles of globalization have spread from the market economy into the realm of aid, pressures to conform to international standards of child wellbeing are ever-increasing, both as a prestigious marker of modernity and as a necessary precondition for full participation in the

global marketplace (Cheney 2007; Cole and Durham 2008). Moralizing representations of children's bodies are significant sites for discourse about and contestation over the reconfiguration of local caregiving practices in the name of larger sociopolitical projects.

The political stakes surrounding control over bodies are central to humanitarian organizations more generally (Ticktin 2006; Nguyen 2010). Interventions targeted at children's bodies in particular are becoming a hallmark of aid initiatives; several scholars have noted that the presumed suffering of children calls forth a strong affective response in the Western donor world (Bornstein 2005; Malkki 2010; Wark 1995). The broader literature on humanitarian ideology tends to focus on how aid organizations imagine and delineate recipients' physicality in terms that emphasize their desperation and lack of agency—in other words, by depicting recipients as susceptible to the toolkit of humanitarianism (Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Redfield 2005). To legitimate interventions in the name of crisis response, aid relies on a spectacle of misery, which renders recipients as pure victims and authorizes engagement (Fassin and Vasquez 2005). Drawing on such insights, I am also concerned with the moralizing ways in which Tswana villagers, not just aid organizations, utilize bodies as conceptual and semiotic material. While exploring how the corporal dimension can become a locus of contestation over the (presumed) subjectivities of aid recipients, I move toward Janelle Taylor's (2005) proposition that anthropologists should seek to destabilize more systematically our treatment of bodies qua objects. Through analyzing bodily surfaces as represented and contested by aid recipients in idioms of fatness, this article exposes the local moral-political stakes in humanitarian intervention targeting children—stakes ultimately grounded in Tswana villagers' deep-seated fears about AIDS destabilizing kinship.

The concerns about bodies that I discuss below are important because they index wider anxieties about forms of social change at the present moment. These changes—including the perceived materialism of youth, the possibility of girls bartering their bodies for survival or social status, the weakening of bonds of kinship amid rural-to-urban migration, growing disparities between the rich and poor, and the like—are often discursively associated with the epidemic, though of course in many ways they precede it. Amid these social transformations, fatness and skinniness are loaded metaphors in much of Africa, made all the more so by the specters of illness and inequality. Jean Comaroff (2007, 203), in calling attention to the "everyday signification" practices embedded in how South Africans talk about HIV, suggests that "adjectives such as *fat* or *thin* . . . prime the delicate

labor of framing identities and broaching futures in the shadow of the pandemic.” In other words, such language forms the building blocks of how individuals identify, interpret, and signify AIDS, as well as of other social changes about which people are ambivalent.

Specifically with regard to the epidemic, these idioms of fatness and skin-iness delineate the common redistributions of body fat characteristic of both HIV and antiretrovirals. But the meanings reverberate well beyond biology. In Nigeria, Igbo people complain of the proliferation of new nongovernmental organizations arising to “feed fat off AIDS”—marked by enterprising individuals who create and divert funds from HIV-related NGOs as a means to devour their share of the so-called national cake (Smith 2014, 103). Helen Epstein’s (2007, 27) account of HIV in the subcontinent offers a story relayed to her by a doctor in Uganda, who claimed that Ugandans talked about two types of AIDS: slim AIDS and fat AIDS. People with slim AIDS just waste away until they disappear. Fat AIDS, on the other hand, “afflicts doctors, bureaucrats, and foreign-aid consultants with enormous grants and salaries; they fly around the world to exotic places and get fatter and fatter and fatter.” In this tongue-in-cheek example, slim AIDS results from contracting HIV; fat AIDS marks the industry arising to profit from the virus.

It’s no surprise that this would be the case. Fat, of course, is an idiom of excess. Appropriating the Ugandan example, fat AIDS describes the complex that gives rise to fat orphans. The embodiment of excess reflects widespread preoccupations with the bodily signs of AIDS: both the disease and the NGO industry that appears to profit from it are linked by the moral tone of bodies. Relations of patronage and responsibilities of kinship are called into question around metaphors of fleshiness and dependence on aid. Contestations over children’s skinny and fat bodies in turn lead to reconfigurations of the very ideas of orphanhood and kinship. Further, it is worth noting that that even bodies of children who did not appear fat to me—or certainly not any fatter than non-orphaned peers—often came to be cast as such by villagers, signaling deeper concerns about dependence on aid and problematic kinship relations.

The analysis that follows begins with the aesthetics of fat in Botswana, linking it to a national preoccupation with orphans’ bodies during the AIDS epidemic. Through an exploration of villagers’ reactions to the government’s Food Basket Initiative, I show how orphans have entered the social imaginary in ways overdetermined by collective fears around the waning role of kinship. Moving on to describe concerns emerging from Bathusi’s foreign-funded feeding and day-care program, I argue that the institution’s practices produced behaviors on the part

of orphaned children that exacerbated preexisting fears about threatened kinship structures. Drawing on more than forty months of ethnographic field research conducted between 2003 and 2012, I seek to disentangle the social and semiotic stakes in the cultural politics surrounding children's bodies during Botswana's era of AIDS.

### THE MORAL TONE OF FATNESS

Arguably the best-known authority on the aesthetics of fat in Botswana is, perhaps ironically, a Scottish fiction writer. Over the past decade, Alexander McCall Smith rose to international fame for his best-selling novels in the *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series, set in a whimsically parochial portrayal of Botswana's capital city, Gaborone. Readers familiar with these stories associate Tswana people's physiques with the novels' heroine Mma Ramotswa, whose generous proportions McCall Smith euphemistically memorialized with the catchphrase "traditionally built." Certainly many people in Botswana value an ample body size for both genders. At the same time, in the era of superslim global pop stars and the dissemination of American televisual standards of beauty, Botswana, like many societies, has also bought into a skinny aesthetic. In Botswana, beauty in adults has multiple standards; village boys frequently whistle at the sight of round young ladies sauntering past, just as there are now scores of slim sirens leading the ranks of local beauty pageants. Children figure differently in this range of attractiveness. The local preference has long favored plump children, and unlike the case with adult women, these standards in children have proven resistant to change.

This is partly because slim and fat take on loaded social meanings when it comes to young people. Indeed, the story I aim to relay does not concern beauty. It pertains to the moral tone that a fat child's body takes on. People in Botswana see obviously well-fed children as indisputably well looked after. Their corpulence, their charmingly chubby cheeks, are touted as the outward manifestations of good caregiving on the part of relatives who provide ample food to ensure a child grows strong and stout. While adults might prefer a slim physique, a skinny child aesthetically pleases no one in Botswana. As [Deborah Durham \(2005, 201\)](#) notes, in Botswana, "a well-cared-for body, bathed and clothed, is reciprocal evidence both of being the object of positive sentiment and of creating that sentiment in others." A fat child is therefore rather like a clean one: such a body must be read metaphorically as a sign of social value, of full integration into the reciprocal labor that characterizes how Tswana people "do" kinship in its ideal-type form ([Durham 2005, 1995](#)). Adults provide food and other necessities to

children, who in turn help with household chores as their part of the cycle of domestic life.

Julie Livingston (2008, 305) has further argued that in Botswana, “bodily aesthetics operate as signifiers in the dense web of practices that either build up or threaten sociability”; in other words, Tswana people presume that the nature of social relations and the practice of both good and bad kinship manifest in people’s physical appearances. As such, a suitably plump child is one who is well fed, well loved, and not overworked—and therefore a presumably happy and satiated member of the family and the community. At least in theory, a chubby child serves as the ambassador to society of a good, moral household.

Given that fatness signifies being loved, it merits noting that Tswana villagers (much like international humanitarian aid campaigns, as I discuss below) ascribe to an ideology about who might be expected to grow fat. By this definition, orphans and other so-called vulnerable children,<sup>5</sup> as supposedly less well-cared-for members of society, can be expected to bear the traces of their disadvantage on their (emaciated) bodies. To return to Epstein’s metaphor, in the social imaginary of sub-Saharan Africa, orphans are widely presumed to index a version of slim AIDS—the embodiment of malnutrition, disease, and neglect. Indeed, staggeringly high AIDS seroprevalence since the 1990s<sup>6</sup>—which was the second highest in the world during my fieldwork—and deaths concentrated in the adult (read parental) generation, have normatively configured the orphan in Botswana as a starving body in need, both in everyday conversation and in government policy.

### FOOD BASKETS AND THREATENED KINSHIP

Although Botswana is not plagued by widespread hunger, the country invests tremendous resources in feeding orphans (and, to some extent, other citizens deemed vulnerable). Many of those food resources have national sources, taking the form of a countrywide orphan food basket initiative that makes registered orphans eligible for generous monthly food rations from the government. Since the program’s full national rollout in 1999, a growing number of families have come to depend on their orphans’ food rations to provide nourishment to the entire household. The feeding program has the stated aim of offsetting the additional burden placed on individuals who care for the children of their dead relatives, so that orphans are not turned onto the streets, neglected, or abused. At its inception, and now, it constituted an ambitious biopolitical project, aiming to register all orphans with the Department of Social Services for official oversight.

Crucially, the Department of Social Services describes the food baskets as for the entire household, *not* simply for the orphans (although the local interpretation holds that the food should be reserved for orphans). Botswana's government made the early and proactive decision to support families directly, rather than investing in residential orphanages or care centers. The legacy of this decision remains palpable today, in that almost all funding for day-care institutions like Bathusi comes from foreign sources. That the government's intervention has focused on feeding has precedent, however. [Jacqueline Solway \(1994\)](#) has written extensively on Botswana's drought relief programs in the 1980s, which included extensive food aid and were widely hailed as a political success, despite ultimately undermining the long-term production capacity of farmers and exacerbating inequality. Not coincidentally, the government introduced the orphan food baskets around the same time as a national old-age pension scheme offering financial support to the elderly and destitute. In documenting the public response to old-age pensions, [Julie Livingston \(2005\)](#) has shown that elderly Tswana welcomed the financial autonomy and intra-household power the pensions afforded them in an increasingly wage-based economy, but Livingston also argued that these pensions resulted in a reduction of consumable gifts and food provided by juniors to their older kin.

While regular Tswana people and politicians laud the orphan food baskets for their cultural sensitivity—ensuring that kin can fulfill their familial obligations of caring for needy orphans—the program also ran into almost immediate criticism similar to that aroused by the old-age pensions. People across Botswana expressed discomfort with a system in which relatives appeared to require a kind of governmental bribery to provide a supposedly cherished responsibility—the raising of their families' children. The program drew attention to the limits of "cultural safety nets" (as kin-based child rearing is often euphemized). That the program worked so effectively, encouraging reluctant kin to house orphans, seemed only to heighten many people's laments about what they described as the "failures of [Tswana] culture," as one official in the Ministry of Local Government explained to me in 2004. Yet unsurprisingly, the demographics of kin-based care reveal a different tale. Although the discourse surrounding orphans has highlighted their vulnerability to the vagaries of unmotivated relatives, with few exceptions, orphans in the villages in which I conducted fieldwork were cared for within extended family networks. Botswana continues to host but a handful of residential orphanages, with no formal fosterage system beyond family. The NGO focus on orphan care further obscures that both orphans and non-orphans have long been



circulated within Tswana familial networks or raised collectively in shared households. For many of the children I worked with, the deaths of their parents occasioned no shift in residence, as they had long lived within an extended family compound. Instead, the discourses about failed kinship reflect an underlying anxiety about perceived moral shifts, rather than demographic changes, in family life.

As an example of these moral negotiations, in the wake of new modes of government provision of food to orphans, I witnessed numerous rivalries emerge between relatives who began competing to exercise their right to raise orphans in their families. Villagers often blame this phenomenon on the introduction of food baskets. In one typical case, the twenty-five-year-old half sister of two young girls constantly fought with their grandparents for custody, forcing the children to bounce back and forth between households. Neighbors and other kin usually describe competitions like this in scathing terms, claiming that the prospective caregivers are not fit guardians with pure motives, but instead are motivated only by greed for the food baskets. Newspapers and village gossip abound with tales of relatives who sell off the orphans' food baskets to buy beer for themselves or special luxury items for their own children, leaving the orphans to "starve."

The discourse surrounding such relatives reveals Tswana people's underlying—and often contradictory—sentiments toward the government's provision of resources more generally. Even as villagers seem to feel that the food baskets help protect children, they also express concern about the ways in which the program has failed to achieve its stated moral ends of bolstering kinship through food.

Although I have encountered few children who appeared worrisomely underfed in my more than ten years' span of fieldwork in different regions in Botswana, the continued belief that orphans are starving derives at least in part from the discomfort with kin who require food bribes to fulfill their obligations, and from the moral significance of metaphors of skinniness and starvation. Due to concerns over whether relatives provide adequate love, and due to the commensurability of care and fatness, Tswana people have represented even orphans with food baskets as on the verge of starvation.

The omnipresence of gossip about selfish relatives is grounded in people's sense that kinship is not functioning normally, and so they seize on dramatic examples like greedy kin and starving orphans to illustrate their concern about shifting ethics. Such apprehensions about kinship undeniably have a far deeper history, and lamentations about youth splintering from the moral values of their parents also constitute a more general preoccupation in Botswana. Yet in the time

of AIDS, the figure of the starving orphan has emerged as a central social anxiety. In criticizing their neighbors, villagers utilize a moral semiotics to distinguish themselves as good, ethical, and proper individuals—and thus they strive to uphold the same cultural order they see as failing. Actions perceived as treating children like mere commodities with a particular (food basket–sized) value attached to them are inimical to the ethos of proper caregiving at the heart of Tswana kinship.

### THE POLITICS OF FOREIGN-FUNDED FEEDING PROGRAMS

Given the ambivalence about the government's food-basket initiative, one might well expect that foreign-funded programs like Bathusi, which emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s and transparently gave food and material resources directly to orphans instead of to their relatives, would have been welcomed. To an extent, they were. Tswana people lauded and still laud many NGOs for providing an admirable corrective to the feared shortcomings of greedy kin. At my tally in 2008, almost every orphan-care organization in Botswana (well over two hundred then) provided meals for needy children as arguably the foremost of its services. When Bathusi Orphan Day Care Centre first opened in Lentswê in 2002, villagers were suspicious of its aims, but soon praised the project for helping orphans whose kin may not have been caring for them adequately. Children would attend programs like Bathusi during the day but return to sleep in the homes of their extended family members, thus remaining "connected to their kin and culture," as Bathusi's website proclaimed. Relatives like Kefilwe's grandmother sought the service for the additional food it gave orphans, which also freed up their food baskets for the rest of the household to consume without guilt. For the first year and a half, while Bathusi remained a modest enterprise (little more than a glorified feeding program), I found that most villagers saw it as a largely positive intervention.

The preoccupation with starving orphans appears to be just as pronounced in transnational aid organizations as among Tswana villagers, and their moral semiotics converged around the bodies of supposedly starving orphans. Yet despite an emphasis on cultural sensitivity, foreign donors are driven by what at times seems like a context-blind desire to provide a specific variety of services to needy children. The iconography of the African AIDS orphan, captured in National Geographic–style images of what Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins (1993, 181) call "starving ungendered children"—that is, wide-eyed toddlers with distended bellies and flies buzzing around their orifices—constitutes the motivating stereo-

type behind much of the well-intentioned flow of money from the West toward organizations like Bathusi. Such institutions operate on the presumption of poverty, neglect, and/or abandonment of orphans by their relatives. As James Ferguson (1990, xiii) has suggested, in Western perceptions “the bloated bellies of African children are the signs of social as well as nutritional deficiency.” Despite partial convergence between donors and locals about the needs of orphans, discontent began to arise in Botswana when NGOs started to provide a quantity of these material services that far exceeded the mere avoidance of starvation. Their mandate extended to empowering children through educational support and self-esteem-building activities, and increasingly gifting orphans not just food but also fashionable clothes, toys, and even cell phones.

Here I turn to examine what happened when Bathusi began complicating the already fraught social scene by giving resources directly to orphans themselves, circumventing their kin. Gossip in Lentswê about relatives’ questionable motives continued to coexist alongside new discourses, practices, and concerns associated with Bathusi. Villagers often criticized the motives of orphans’ kin in the same conversations in which they pitied those relatives for new difficulties arising in the wake of Bathusi’s influence. Just as feeding can move from being laudable to damaging, kinship can also seem to crumble from many angles simultaneously.

Had Bathusi remained focused on food and education, it may not have become the object of discontent in Lentswê. Yet the European man who founded Bathusi had a particular knack for fund-raising, and he began to market the stories of hungry orphans (and greedy relatives) to donors. Growing international support came from sponsors as high-profile as the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the Gates Foundation. Bathusi soon turned into the pet project of several foreign embassies, and quickly became a favorite stop for international media doing stories on AIDS in Botswana. The brightly colored buildings and laughing children created an appealing contrast to tales of orphans’ hardship and loss that the director and a steady stream of foreign volunteers provided to visitors. In 2004, after two years of operation, Bathusi’s fund-raising successes had enabled the NGO to grow into something of an orphan paradise—but herein lay the problem for villagers. By the time that Kefilwe had become “too fat to be an orphan,” the program’s modest origins as a feeding center had evolved into a sprawling property with a computer lab, a music room complete with a full band kit and imported “traditional” drums from South Africa, a swimming pool, and an awe-inspiring collection of kung fu DVDs. The children not only had two meals a day at Bathusi but were served fresh meat and a regular intake of junk

food, as well as hamburgers at restaurants in the capital city paid for by overseas donors who wanted the children to enjoy the special outings that children in their own countries took for granted. In NGOs like Bathusi, orphans were not just being fed to offset their presumed immanent starvation—they were *overfed*, literally and especially metaphorically, as recipients of this growing excess of aid. Donors were moved by accounts of children living in three-room houses with twelve relatives—not realizing, of course, that these numbers do not offer a reliable measurement of destitution by local standards. Even the village chief (a “big man” in many senses of the term) shared with a dozen family members what was by Western standards a modest cinderblock home.

As Bathusi’s policies changed, the meaning of orphans (usually referred to by the Setswanified English term *diorphans*) in Lentswê village also began to shift from being a vulnerable category to a privileged position. At the same time, the children began to redefine what their rights to being equal, empowered, and *entitled* meant. They often accomplished this redefinition by excusing themselves from their responsibilities vis-à-vis their extended families, refusing to contribute to household labor in their homes. For example, fourteen-year-old Phenyio informed me in 2005 that he no longer fetched firewood at his grandmother’s home; as he put it, “I don’t really eat their food anymore, so why should I be the one to fetch the wood to cook it on?” In a later conversation I had with his relatives, his aunt complained about Phenyio’s invocation of his so-called human rights to justify what she saw as simply laziness. The government-sponsored food basket program had precipitated widespread discontent with perversions of duty and dependence within families; Bathusi’s program served to exacerbate villagers’ concerns and take the problem to a new level, as children themselves began to reject the norms of reciprocal caregiving—from a newly formed position of privilege. Of course, not all orphans behaved this way, but the more outrageous examples of bad behavior infused village discourse and contributed to significant semiotic shifts in the connotations of *diorphans* as a category of person. The behavior of disrespectful orphans was augmented by more general concerns about today’s youth being influenced by trends associated with urbanization and consumerism. Further, as many orphans stopped helping at home, some relatives used this to justify selling off the food baskets. The insertion of foreign aid into village life perpetuated a feedback loop of threatened kinship.

### WHEN ORPHANS ACT FAT

One Saturday afternoon in 2005, I passed by the home of a fifteen-year-old orphan named Tumelo and called out to ask if she was home. Her grandmother roused herself from her seat under an acacia tree and muttered something about how Tumelo was nowhere to be seen, and had not fetched water or done any household labor in weeks. One of her aunts joined in the conversation, telling me that they were concerned about Tumelo, who was running around with a number of Bathusi kids, and that they were no longer able to control her or make her “hear” (in the sense of obey) them. As the aunt pointed out, Bathusi gave the girl everything she wanted. According to her, Tumelo would respond to their requests for her involvement in household chores by asking them: “Why should I listen to you?”—a question her relatives felt unable to answer. In the aunt’s account, the girl’s kin had lost whatever influence they had, given that “nowadays, we don’t feed her any more.” Feeding, it was understood, served as a metaphor for the provision of material support more broadly. This concern about feeding also reflected Tumelo’s physical and geographic movement away from the collective hearth where the family would eat together. Her body was always elsewhere, and so she did not receive sustenance—care—from her relatives.

Although resource provision and feeding form a fundamental part of caregiving, the exchange of food and other necessities is supposed to stand for a more selfless, loving, mutually respectful relationship in Tswana morality. Much as women measure their lovers’ affections by the gifts the latter give (Durham 2002), so things, including food, are not supposed to be sought after as an end unto themselves, but should rather stand in for intimacy in relationships (Durham 1995). Relatives condemned Tumelo’s materialistic attitude, which kept her going to the bars (one of which was tellingly nicknamed “Bathusi bar” after the frequency with which orphans congregated there when the NGO closed at night) or strolling around the village with friends instead of investing in her familial relationships. Relatives saw Tumelo’s appetite for material resources as standing in the way of good kinship.

I tracked down Tumelo the following afternoon. Dressed in tight white jeans, new track shoes, and a pretty silver necklace from one of Bathusi’s donors, she was undeniably fetching. She had always had a pouty expression and curvy figure that attracted boys; wearing nice clothing, she was even more striking. When I asked Tumelo about the problems at home, she dismissed them with a wave of the hand. “They tell me I am lazy and just sitting around, getting fat, but the problem is really them, not me,” she insisted. According to Tumelo, her

relatives wanted her as their slave. When I asked if that was really true, she nodded vehemently, then abruptly changed the subject—asking me with a hopeful expression if I would give her my wristwatch. Not long after that exchange her grandmother forbade her from attending Bathusi, claiming it was too negative an influence. This decision went against the family's material interests, as they now had to allocate more food and resources to Tumelo, but neighbors praised their efforts to regain authority over her as a sign of their good kinship.

As Bathusi grew, villagers in Lentswê began to comment on orphans' fat bodies with greater frequency. Like Kefilwe's neighbor's playful banter, much of this dialogue had the valence of relatively lighthearted teasing. While fatness in Tswana youth may have held general value, no one considered being spoiled and materialistic positive traits. As in Tumelo's story, these allegations formed the subtext of comments like Kefilwe's neighbor's "too fat to be an orphan," linked as they were to Bathusi's services. Orphans considered too fat by implication enjoyed an excess of material support.

Young attendees at Bathusi themselves began to self-consciously play with the stereotypes of starving versus fat orphans. On one afternoon in 2006, I visited a North American expatriate named Jennifer who had once worked at Bathusi and now served as a consultant for Botswana's government. Jennifer continued to live in Lentswê and mentor a sixteen-year-old orphan named Masego, whose relatives approved of their friendship. On that particular occasion, I brought Masego and Jennifer each a small bag of the potato chips they loved. In typical fashion, Masego devoured her snack in fistfuls, licking the salt off her fingers when she had finished. She then turned to Jennifer to watch her slowly savoring her chips one by one. After a few moments, Masego begged Jennifer to share. Jennifer merely raised an eyebrow and continued to eat her chips with exaggerated, pointed slowness, a picture of restraint: her controlled body language clearly and humorously indicated that she had no intention of indulging Masego's gluttony.

Masego slouched for a moment, then brightened and began to rub her belly in the gesture of hunger used by street children begging in the capital city. She opened her eyes wide, affected a melodramatic pout, and began to whisper theatrically, motioning to her stomach, "Orphan, I'm an orphan! I have no mother—I'm starving! Please feed me!" Jennifer and I burst into laughter. Although Jennifer did not relent and share the chips, Masego was pleased with the reception of her joke. By alluding to the cultural conception of orphans as starving, Masego openly called attention to her full belly and evident greediness. In making fun of herself, Masego revealed that she recognized that she was too privileged to be the kind

of orphan who deserved pity and favors. She was, like Kefilwe, too fat to be an orphan. And yet unlike Kefilwe, such fatness perhaps ironically served as a source of pride, even as it widely evoked in their community the kinds of moral concerns detailed above.

### READING FAT: The Paradox of Plump Orphans

This leads me to raise more directly the perhaps obvious question: If chubby children constitute the cultural ideal, what exactly is the problem with fat *orphans*? Should the villagers not feel gratified by such a population, as a mark of their conquest of AIDS? Or, by extension, what difference lies between a foreign organization providing resources to children and the Botswana government providing food to families?

Mark Graham (2005, 178) uses the term *lipoliteracy* to indicate the ways that fat gets read as simultaneously a gauge of people's health *and* of their morality; for fat is, as Don Kulick and Anne Meneley (2005, 7, 1) have written, a "supremely cultural fact," that is "larded with meaning"—pun no doubt intended. *Skinny* orphans are presumed to be the lamentable lipo-index—the living, embodied, pitiful proof—of overburdened relatives who struggle to provide for all their children, or who selfishly appropriate food baskets for themselves. Skinny orphans offer a straightforward morality tale about the challenges of kinship during the epidemic. Their postulated emaciation justifies the resources spent on feeding them, while also providing conceptual and semiotic fodder for Tswana villagers to voice concerns about social changes more generally.

Both fat and skinny orphans point toward the moralizing semiotics of how bodies are categorized. In Tswana culture, diorphans by definition are not supposed to manage to *get* fat in the first place. Fat orphans constitute a contradiction in terms, a category violation in the semiotic sense, and a moral transgression given the means by which they became fat (through an NGO that seemed to undermine kinship structures). Talking about orphans used to be—and to some extent continues to be—an acceptable way of bemoaning the deleterious effects of AIDS on kinship, and villagers appear invested in the moral tale that skinny orphans tell. But fat orphans force a different moral tale—one in which these abandoned children fall even further afield from the moderations imposed through good kinship practices in their extended families. No longer the objects of pity, well-fed and well-clothed orphans worryingly became objects of envy in Lentswê. As such, they could not possibly be diorphans; they had entirely exceeded their category meaning.

When Bathusi opened its doors in 2002 and began showering children with ever more generous gifts, toys, and food, villagers started seeing orphans less as the innocent victims of greedy relatives who exploited kin ties for their own material gain; instead, children like Tumelo were increasingly indicted as themselves rejecting the ethos of kinship. When Bathusi began giving resources directly to orphans, in many cases it was the *kin* who were pitied for losing the authority that accompanies the responsibility of providing food and other necessary items to dependent orphans. Children's assertion of their empowerment—and, eventually, entitlement to resources—became a driving force in exacerbating the fraught nature of social reproduction in Lentswê today. As one high-ranking official in the Department of Social Services put it, "Botswana has the fattest orphans in Africa"—a comment that simultaneously points to the excesses of feeding programs as a whole and to the forms of entitlement embedded in the paradox of a fat orphan.

## CONCLUSIONS

Bodies, however, are far from silent. They express stories in many and complex ways.

—Asha Persson, "Incorporating Pharmakon"

Bodies are public things, and particularly the bodies of children, which people in Botswana presume to be the outward and mobile manifestations of care invested by adults. In the wake of Bathusi's campaign to provide material resources, fat orphans became signs of a growing sense of entitlement among children, and of their lack of incentive to engage in building good kinship ties with extended family members who could never give them anything comparable. It is not surprising that a neighbor called Kefilwe fat when she was dressed in trendy clothes, playing up her composed sense of superiority outside her grandmother's humble home, or that Tumelo's family mentioned her laziness and her plumpness in the same breath. Although fat orphans could have appeared pleasing to the general populace as a sign of revitalized kinship networks, the *way* that orphans grew stout—as the recipients of aid that countered the logic of reciprocity in Tswana families—made these children a semiotic category violation. The moral dimensions of these corporal signs exceed the merely symbolic: problems arose precisely because of the material, relational, and concrete realities that the children's bodies indexed. These youth did not reflect happy, well-functioning homes, but rather the opposite—they seemed to further indicate the breakdown of good



kinship in a time when foreign organizations invested more in children than could their own families.

One last point is crucial to emphasize here: although I did not weigh the children during the years of Bathusi's influence, my photographic evidence supports my impression that the Lentswê orphans did not actually gain weight—at least not significantly more than their non-orphaned peers. What changed during the early years of the past decade was less their actual bodies than the social relations for which fat served as a meaningful metaphor and for which feeding constituted a moral activity. Popular anxieties about excessive foreign influences on children aligned with an uneasiness about familial breakdown that has a much deeper history in Botswana; the similarity of these concerns about excess led to their idiomatic expression in corporeal terms—to what I am calling a moral semiotics. What we see in Botswana is not simply a form of lipoliteracy that reads bodies in a straightforward way for the interior subjectivity they presumably “surface” (Taylor 2005) but also a discourse surrounding bodies as material things whose meaning ultimately derives from what those bodies do, and from what gets done to them. It matters that the bodies in question were youthful ones, bodies still being shaped by the social relations in which they were embedded and which they also represented.

And so it was that Kefilwe's well-clothed and ample rear end rendered her a teaseable and somewhat discomfiting figure. By dressing and eating well, Kefilwe had graduated out of the class of orphan. As for Masego and her potato chips, she showed remarkable perceptiveness when she began to mock herself, calling somewhat ironic attention to the distance she had traveled from being a true orphan. Adeline Masquelier (2005, 5) has suggested that the surface of bodies “can simultaneously mediate the ‘self’ and the ‘social’ and exclude one from the other. It is precisely this paradoxical potential of the bodily surface to signify inclusion in the community as well as separation or deviation from it that makes it such a powerful vehicle of moral contestation.” The surface of the body as a division between self and social appears particularly fraught in the case of young people, whose bodies are so malleable and whose socialization is presumed incomplete. Such bodies become even more contested in the context of humanitarian endeavors to provide support according to a set of priorities that do not fully map onto those of the local population. The reckoning of orphans in idioms of fatness and skinniness constitutes at once a social commentary on changing values and a recognition of help gotten out of hand.

In a now classic essay, [Jean-François Bayart \(1989\)](#) described African politics as quintessentially a “politics of the belly”—drawing on a West African metaphor for corrupt officials colluding with elites to “eat” the resources of their nations. In Botswana, the politics of the belly (and its temporal extension into the politics of fatness) have been appropriated with a new twist: the metaphor continues to stand for disparities of power and wealth, but in an even more uncomfortable fashion, as they are produced and made public through the impossible bodies of fat orphans. While Bayart concerned himself with forms of patronage characteristic of African states, vectors of resource provision within *kinship* appear doubly important in Botswana, where material exchange is strongly believed to reflect and build relations of affection and love ([Klaits 2010](#)).

For Tswana villagers, behaving like loving kin also requires controlling and disciplining children. The modes of affiliation that the children transferred onto Bathusi—coming as these did with no expectation of children’s reciprocity through performing chores at the institution—undermined the normative ways in which Tswana people believe that good people are produced. These fat orphans, problematically, were not well-loved orphans—but neither did they make themselves particularly loveable.

And so we return in the end to idioms of excess and lack. Skinny orphans and slim AIDS make for significant tropes because they both reflect and reinforce local ideologies about the challenges to and for kinship amidst the HIV epidemic. In other words, these tropes are valuable because they fit in with a larger set of concerns commonly articulated by Tswana people during the time of AIDS and even prior to it, about how kinship cannot be relied on, marriage rates are plummeting, life courses are disrupted and sped up, modern gender identities are leading to dangerous forms of sexuality, and social reproduction more generally is threatened in ways that can feel just as palpable and troubling as the demographic ravages of the epidemic itself. In the loaded context of slim AIDS and skinny orphans, fat AIDS and fat orphans therefore disrupt an already destabilized moral order.

Yet we must remember that idioms of excess also, perhaps ironically, constitute hopeful complaints. We must recognize the role of fat orphans in villagers’ calls to fine-tune the services of a government that actually—remarkably—feeds its needy children; fat AIDS also reminds us to focus our analytic attention beyond what has widely been called the AIDS industrial complex and instead to recognize a medical system that helpfully fattens up its HIV patients through free antiretroviral drugs and food supplements. In a world where kinship may feel destabilized

by humanitarian intervention and demographic change, the wry and insightful humor demonstrated by Masego's self-mockery, Kefilwe's neighbor's teasing, and the ability to refuse certain forms of humanitarian aid demonstrated when Tumelo's relatives withdrew her from Bathusi, all show how kinship and moral values can be symbolically and semiotically buttressed through a discourse about their demise.

### ABSTRACT

*The iconography of the African AIDS orphan, captured in National Geographic-style images of half-starved toddlers with distended bellies, inspires humanitarian aid for the continent. In Botswana, stereotypes underlying both foreign-funded and governmental programs for orphaned children—which imply that orphans are underfed and underloved—initially resonated with Tswana people's anxieties that neglect by overburdened kin results in parentless children going hungry. However, during the past decade international feeding projects began to evolve into elaborate day-care complexes in which village orphans gained exclusive access to swimming pools, DVDs, trendy clothing, and daily meat rations. This article traces the shifting moral semiotics of orphans' fat and skinny bodies, explaining why new discourses protesting the overfattening of orphans arose in a southeastern village. Metaphors of fat and feeding have become a scale on which the excesses of humanitarian aid and the perceived shortcomings of local kinship practices are weighed. A new kind of "politics of the belly" calls into question relations of patronage around metaphors of fleshiness and dependence on foreign support. In the process, contestations over children's skinny and fat bodies lead to reconfigurations of the idea of orphanhood. [humanitarianism; HIV and AIDS; orphans; moral semiotics; food aid; Botswana]*

### NOTES

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1. All names of individuals, villages, and organizations (except those whose relevant involvement is a matter of public record) are pseudonyms.
2. I generally refer to orphans as "children," following NGO and government practice, even though many could be termed "youth." In utilizing the term *children (bana)*, NGOs, the government, and villagers are clearly emphasizing a position of dependency.
3. For example, "Children Orphaned by HIV and AIDS," AVERT website, March 27, 2014, <http://www.avert.org/aidsorphans.htm>, accessed September 1, 2008.

4. An orphan in Botswana is a child who has lost both parents (if they were married) or the primary caregiver if the parents were not married, which holds true for the majority in Lentswè.
5. The phrase *orphans and vulnerable children* became increasingly popular in the early 2000s. Vulnerable children comprise an ill-defined category including HIV-positive kids and those with terminally ill parents.
6. The AIDS Impact Survey of 2009 identified prevalence for adults in the most affected demographic, ages thirty-five to forty-five, at about 40.6 percent of both sexes (BAIS 2009). This cohort with high HIV prevalence is also a group highly likely to have children, who are orphaned on their parents' deaths.

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