

## 10 Far Family

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*Bosa iphuteng methala lotshosa diletseng.*

Fail to know your relatives and one day they will turn on you. / Fail to help your relatives and you won't receive help when you need it.

Lesedi eventually had her own experience of being sent to stay with other relatives, like Tumi had, and like almost everyone else I knew in Botswana. Lesedi's mother died while she was a teenager, but that did not affect her living arrangements as such; she remained with her grandmother and Tumi's mother, who continued to look after her, until she finished her public schooling at Form Five. Having failed her exams, she had limited opportunities at home – until she was called by relatives living in the south, in one of the large villages close to the capital.

'They were far family,' she explained, 'on my grandmother's side – he was my grandmother's brother's son.'<sup>1</sup> The man's wife had taken a teaching post in a distant peri-urban village, and they told Lesedi's grandmother that they wanted to take her so they could help her repeat her Form Five. On the face of it, it looked very much like the sort of help Tumi had been offered years previously, which gave Lesedi hope. 'But it didn't work like that,' she explained, with a look of resentment. 'When I came to stay there they wanted me to be their maid. They didn't even take me to the school they promised. They wanted somebody to help them, so they just lied that they'll take me to school.'

She stayed with them for a year and a half. 'It was bad ... I just had to, to stay there. She couldn't even give me two pula,' she added, referring to the wife. At one point, her hosts had even begun passing comments about the cost of feeding her, suggesting that her grandmother should be contributing something for her care. The injustice and disappointment in being expected to contribute to a household when the contributions promised towards her schooling were withheld – along with the

<sup>1</sup> She thereafter referred to him as *malome*.

opportunities for self-making schooling presented – were still raw in Lesedi's telling. Lesedi had felt unable to say anything to her host family about the issue or its possible resolution. I asked if she had told her grandmother, through whom the arrangement had originally been made. 'I didn't want to stress her,' she answered. 'I only told her after I left. Because you know how people are – if you tell, tomorrow it's like you are trying to destroy people's families or something. So I just stayed. Also it was hard at home. My brother had just started working, but others were staying with him, plus he was looking after everyone.'

Lesedi had done quite well for herself since then. She had eventually put herself through Form Five exam rewrites and had passed, and she was attending university, which meant that she was receiving a substantial stipend from the government – enough to comfortably cover her expenses, from rent and food to clothing and toiletries for herself and her daughter. The father of her child had a good job and also supported them both financially; he had bought her a car and helped build a house for her in her home village. She was comfortably settled in the capital. Partly as a result of this visible success, and partly because she stayed in the city, close to its amenities and opportunities, she had moved into the role her mother's older sister, 'far relatives', and brother had all played before her: two younger cousins had been sent to stay with her at the time we spoke.

A younger male cousin,<sup>2</sup> who had come to the city to attend agricultural college, was the first to ask to stay at Lesedi's. She agreed to accommodate him on the condition that he assist with the care of her school-aged daughter. He often cooked, cleaned the house, and played with or babysat the little girl. However, as his comings and goings became more frequent and unpredictable, and as it became clear that he was at risk of being kicked out of school, Lesedi sent for a younger female cousin to come and replace him. The girl had failed her Form Three exams, and Lesedi offered to help her repeat her courses in exchange for help around the house. She prepared meals, cleaned the house and yard, babysat the little girl, and did anything else she was asked. She seldom left, except to attend classes or to make the long, occasional trip back to their home village. Lesedi described these arrangements with some frustration, however, noting the unreliability of both cousins in doing housework and despairing of either making anything of themselves. The parallel between both situations and Lesedi's own, at a similar age, went unremarked.

<sup>2</sup> Lesedi described these relationships using the English term and did not specify further, but they were related to her via her mother's siblings.

While her younger relatives looked after the child and the house, Lesedi had taken on primary responsibility for Tumi's care after her return from hospital. It was proving onerous. On a recent trip back to their home village for a wedding, at one of the large family meetings that typify such events, Lesedi told me that she had made an explicit move to disengage from any further responsibility for relatives coming and going to the capital: 'The city is eating us,' she told them. 'I don't want to encourage anyone else to come there. If they do, they should make their own arrangements.' To a mutual friend, she vowed: 'From now on, I just want to think about me and my daughter.'<sup>3</sup> But at the same time, she would continue to need help caring for her daughter, and for Tumi's infant child, especially while Tumi remained ill. Lesedi may have hoped to escape the cycle of circulating kin, but it seemed unlikely, a matter of needs and obligations beyond her control.

Lesedi's experience describes many of the ways in which children and young people circulate, are called, sent, and taken in in Botswana – and it charts the trajectory of growing from a circulating child to an adult attempting to manage such circulations, and the perpetuity that characterises those cycles. As a child, Lesedi's unmarried mother left her *ko gae* – at home – to be cared for by her maternal grandmother and her mother's sister. Having a child meant that there was pressure on Lesedi's mother to work; and work meant being away from the village, in this case in a transnationally mobile manner. After her mother's death, like many orphaned children, Lesedi stayed where she had been: with her grandmother. As a teenager at a loose end, she was taken to care for the children of distant relatives in conditions that she described as unfair and uncaring, oriented towards labour. And once she had become a mother and had acquired a house herself, Lesedi hosted younger kin going to school in the city, eventually sending for a young cousin from home to assist in the care of her child in exchange for better schooling opportunities – much as her mother's sister had done for Tumi and Lesedi's *malome* had done for her. Perhaps the only sort of circulation she hadn't (yet) undertaken was of sending a child of her own to relatives for company and help, or for accommodation during schooling or work.

Lesedi's story is not unusual. Many of the Batswana I knew, girls and boys, men and women alike, had had similar experiences: they were raised predominantly by grandparents, had lived with other kin while

<sup>3</sup> Lesedi's attempt to withdraw herself from her family's child circulations, and thereby 'nuclearise' her family, echoes trends described by Archambault (2010) and Archambault and de Laat (2010: 202) among the Maasai in Kenya, where modernising discourses emphasising sedentarisation and nuclearisation are changing fosterage practice.

working and/or attending school – often in exchange for providing child-care or other forms of help – and, as adults, had taken in the children of relatives for various periods of time. And these practices are not new: Mmapula, the elderly Legae matriarch, had been raised by her own grandmother in the 1950s and had in turn raised her sister's child (as well as housing several other members of her and her husband's extended kin for different periods of time). Lesedi's experience of fraught, unspoken conflict and bad feeling while staying with her 'far' relatives – compared with the relative ease of her relationship with her grandmother, or Tumi's ease with their mothers' sister – was also typical of others I knew. Hers were, in other words, widely shared experiences of child circulation and of kinship in Botswana.

These diverse situations involve many of the kin-making processes described so far. All cases involve co-residence; free, frequent movement between places of the *gae*; and care work undertaken in each of those places. They anticipate the contribution of certain resources and labour by the hosting families – especially food, clothing, toiletries, and transport, as well as discretionary funds; but also cooking, guidance, and discipline, or help with schoolwork. And they anticipate the care contributions of circulated children as well – in raising younger children, cleaning and cooking, and mobilising additional resources. There are, however, noteworthy distinctions among the sorts of child circulation described above, which I suggest work to define gradations of relatedness, from 'close' to 'far' family. Such distinctions are already apparent in the reasons behind children being circulated, which fall into two rough, sometimes overlapping categories: the absence of birth parents (commonly because of work, but also because of illness or death); and the absence of children, specifically children old enough to contribute to the household. And these distinctions vary with the places to which children are circulated, from *ko gae* (at home) to away. Thus, in the absence of birth parents, ideally children are circulated *ko gae*, if possible with the absent parent's mother or older sisters, often in semi-permanent arrangements; whereas in the absence of children who can assist in the work of the household, they tend to be drawn from away, farther from the host's home both geographically and genealogically, and often for shorter periods of time.

But these distinctions are perhaps most evident in the sorts of conflicts that arise, in the ways in which they are – and aren't – addressed, and in the people called on to address them. We have seen in the preceding chapters the different ways in which *dikgang* emerge and are addressed among families living together at home. These same conflicts, and the means of addressing them, are roughly common to situations that arise

when children are circulated *ko gae*. Tumi's mother's sister would have addressed any conflicts with her much as her own mother would have; if the issues had been serious enough to involve calling in others to intervene, the same *bomalome* would have been called in the same ways, by virtue of comparable relationships. In assessing the problems at hand, the quality of relationships among many of the same people would be called up for reflection as if *Lesedi* had been at the heart of the matter.

When children are circulated away from the *gae*, similar problems emerge, running the full gamut of *dikgang* we have explored so far, with the potential to embroil children, husbands and wives, siblings, multiple households, and an extensive range of kin (Alber 2018: 144). However, these *dikgang* are seldom engaged directly, and seldom addressed within the host yard.<sup>4</sup> Instead, they are either carefully avoided (see *ibid.*: 140), indefinitely postponed, or expressed through – and referred for resolution back to – the family from which the young person was sent in the first place. *Lesedi* would not have considered raising her concerns directly with her host family; only her grandmother, who sent her, was an appropriate audience, and then not until considerably after the fact. Likewise, her hosts would not have confronted her with their concerns; instead, they would have presented them to her grandmother for resolution. Within the hosting yard, conflicts are actively muffled: fostering adults may pass comment, but only indirectly, and circulated children are expected to hold their tongues respectfully. A grudge-like atmosphere emerges. Expectations and interpretations of the scenario diverge, but they are not voiced, discussed, or reflected on collectively.

The result of this scenario is frequently an impasse. Having not been witness to the causes of conflict, and having no means of hearing the story from both sides without casting aspersions on people who have offered a favour, the family *ko gae* does not weigh or attempt to establish the comparative truth of each tale, nor reflect on what they may mean for the relationships at hand, nor pronounce judgement. They are, essentially, unable to mediate. Most often they will counsel their child simply to be respectful and do as she or he is told, especially if there are no better

<sup>4</sup> The Tswana case here contrasts sharply with that of Sierra Leone as described by Bledsoe (see, e.g., Bledsoe 1990) – and yet the contrast substantiates my overriding argument about the role of *dikgang* in forming kin (or kin-like) relationships. Bledsoe notes low rates of suing over foster-child treatment and a tendency to resolve issues in formal 'house palavers', like those we have seen elsewhere in this book. The difference, I suggest, is that in Sierra Leone natal parents are attempting to create long-lasting relationships of patronage with foster parents, through their children – and, as in Botswana, engaging in the formal, collective consideration of disputes seems to be key in cementing those relationships.

immediate solutions available; and if the issue persists and seems impossible to resolve, they will simply summon or allow the child to come home, without further discussion, letting silence and movement resolve the *kgang* (see Alber 2018 for similar strategies, if in quite different contexts).

Lesedi's comment regarding the risk of telling her grandmother about her poor treatment at the hands of her 'far relatives' – for fear she might be accused of 'destroying someone's family' – is telling in understanding this dynamic. The family she risks destroying by speaking ill of their conduct is not her extended family as a whole, nor her natal family, but the family that has taken her in. Like any kin who live together, she is a potential threat; and speech, especially the articulation of discord (or *puo*), is one of the most potent means of actualising that threat. But, in this case, the threat she poses is greater because it risks drawing kin into conflict who would otherwise carefully avoid it. As such, the threat is best contained by exclusion and distance, silence and grudges, and above all by forgoing active engagement in conflict. By the same logic, the departure of a circulated child will be accepted without remonstrance or accusation (see also Coe 2013: 170).

To the extent that the 'far' host family in a scenario like Lesedi's does not engage in inevitable *dikgang* the way her family *ko gae* might, they are distanced from her; they do not, and cannot, replace her 'near' family (cf. Coe 2013: 157–8). This distancing reflects their distance from other members of her natal family; in this sense, it reproduces the 'farness' of their relatedness. By referring the conflict at hand, and its resolution, back to the natal kin, the latter's unique capacity to engage and resolve conflict is emphasised – reproducing the nearness of their relatedness to the sent-out child.

When I asked her to map out her family however she saw fit, including and excluding whomever she liked, Lesedi did not include the family that hosted her; nor did she include them among the broad range of people who had raised her. Staying with them, caring for their children, and ultimately coming into unresolved conflict with them did not bring her closer to them; it clarified their distance and reasserted their position as 'far relatives'. In a similar exercise, Tumi listed her mother's sister who took her to be raised in the city as kin, but did not give her any particular priority – certainly not above her own grandmother and mother. She acknowledged the help she had received from her *mmamogolo*, but the time spent with her did not change their relationship so much as reaffirm it. Child circulation among Tswana families thus seems not so much to tighten bonds of kinship, nor even to transform those bonds, but to assert appropriate degrees of closeness and distance between kin and to

reproduce these differentiations across generations. Circulated children come to know their relatives and apposite ways of relating to them that ensure help in times of need, while containing the danger – suggested in the proverb above – that misreading their likeliness to help might produce. And in the process of doing so, acquiring and demonstrating good judgement in managing *dikgang*, their circulation contributes to their projects of self-making as well.

But what about child circulation – undertaken either informally or formally – with non-kin? Does it serve to create a sort of replacement or substitute kinship where kin circulation does not? What practices of care, conflict, and resolution does it involve? And how does it compare to kin-circulating practice? In Chapters 11 and 12, I consider these questions with reference to the case of a young man who brought himself to stay with the Legaes during my fieldwork, and the case of Botswana's first – and only – formal placement of children with a trained foster parent.