

# 1 Going Up and Down

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## Tefo's Beating

Tefo's voice came in a sudden and surprised cry from behind the closed door, followed by steady sobbing. From the broad slapping sound that punctuated his wailing, I gathered that his mother Kelebogile had taken a *pata-pata*, or flip-flop, to him. As she beat him she challenged him with scarcely controlled fury: 'Why do you like to go up and down so much, eh? Why don't you listen?'

I sat uncomfortably in the *lelwapa*, trying not to wince. Everyone else in the yard went about their usual business: Modiri sat drinking tea, leaning back in his wooden chair; Mmapula sat on the stoep with her feet out, chatting with Oratile. Lesego and Tshepo darted efficiently between the pot on the fire outside and the kitchen in the back of the house, carrying chopped vegetables or maize meal or utensils, moving with a little more alacrity than usual. There was a studied avoidance of the beating happening behind the thin door of Kelebogile and Tefo's room.

I leaned over to Boipelo, Tefo's older cousin,<sup>1</sup> and asked what had happened. 'Ah, Tefo is always going up and down, his mother's been telling him for days that it's not okay,' she explained. 'Every afternoon he takes long to come home from school, then goes out to play with the neighbours, or he goes to the shop. He comes late. When she calls him he is far, she can't send him for things.'

'But a shoe?' I asked, discomfited.

Boipelo laughed self-consciously, as she often did when I said or asked things that were inadvertently naïve or eccentric. 'Tefo doesn't listen. It's a problem [*kgang*]. It's not good that she's beating him in the room,' she said, reflecting a moment. While the children were not beaten often, when they were, it was almost always out in the *lelwapa* or the yard. 'But

<sup>1</sup> Boipelo is the eldest daughter of Kelebogile's older sister; to Tefo, she would be *ngwana a mmamogolo*.

you see that she didn't lock the door. So it's safe. Any of us could go in at any time.' The *pata-pata* didn't seem to be of concern.

'Why doesn't he run away, if the door's unlocked?' I asked, with Tefo's cries beginning to wane with exhaustion.

'He can't,' she answered simply, as if it were an obvious impossibility.

Not yet ten, Tefo was clever and a little shy, and when no one was looking, he delighted in quietly showing off to me things he had learned or skills he had picked up. He was close to and protective of his mother, and was generally quick to do as he was bidden. But he was restless, too, and gregarious, with a mischievous streak; he had an ample share of the stubborn contrariness so familiar to me from his mother and her siblings (a trait we had in common and which we jokingly referenced as evidence of our relatedness). Tefo was not the only child to be beaten for 'going up and down'; it was an accusation frequently levelled – both jokingly and disparagingly – among the adults at home as well. In Botswana, movement presents the possibility of both mundane and mystical danger: car, bus, and combi-van accidents are frequent and often fatal (MVA 2018; see also Livingston 2019), and witchcraft can be worked on the traces of people's movements, including their footprints (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 275). But beatings and chastisements were seldom framed explicitly in terms of concern for safety. More often children were scolded, and adults teased, either for moving too much in the wrong ways or for being in the wrong places at the wrong times.

On the way home from school, Tefo often went to play football with friends for a while, or he would pass by Kagiso's shop, or stop to play at the neighbours' house – instead of coming home directly to change out of his school uniform, so that it could be washed for the following day. Uniforms were expensive, and generally the Legae children had only one or two changes of uniform for the week; they had to be washed daily and kept carefully so as not to wear out. Tefo's peregrinations not only delayed the laundry but ran extra risk of putting holes in his already faded trousers and shirt. Even if he did come home to change his clothes, he often roved so far afield afterwards that his mother could not call him back to send him for anything – mobile phone units, bread, things from the neighbours, or other simple items she might need. Calling (*go bitsa*) and sending (*go roma*) are crucial means of expressing intergenerational relatedness and hierarchy for Batswana: adults frequently exercise the right to call children for help, or to account, and to send them on errands; and children are expected to (and mostly do) respond immediately and without complaint.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the two words perhaps most

<sup>2</sup> See Durham (2004: 595) for an evocative description of the combination of fear, physical threats, and love with which Batswana children are raised.

commonly used by adults when speaking to children were *tlakwano* and *tsamaya* – come here, and go. The phrase *o a bidiwa*, you are called, was commonplace, and children were often sent to others with that message. These instructions were less common among peers and inappropriate for use with elders, but were commonplace with children and adults younger than the speaker; they served to articulate a relationship of power and responsibility in which elders were entitled to direct the movement of their juniors. In this sense, Tefo's absences challenged his relationship with his mother – by making it difficult for her to look after him (keeping him well dressed and clean) and by making it difficult for him to be called for and sent by her, as befitted his responsibilities as her child. It was this risk of destabilisation – a *kgang* that unsettled appropriate intergenerational relationships, rather than one of personal safety – that Tefo ran when 'going up and down'.

Tefo followed his mother around like a shadow for perhaps two days after the beating. He sat on the ground next to her chair, went in and out of the bedroom whenever she did, and followed her around the yard. By the second day she had become annoyed. She snapped at him: '*Hei!* What do you want here [*mo go nna*, lit. in my place]? Go!' She raised her hand at him threateningly. Initially he refused to budge, but soon he was moving around the yard more freely; within a day or so, he was playing with the neighbours in the lane again.

In this episode, I suggest, Tefo and his mother were negotiating the central difficulty presented by competing imperatives of closeness and distance in the spatialities of the Tswana family: finding the appropriate *balance*. Strain, tension, and outright conflict – *dikgang* – emerged when this balance was upset, either because kin were too far from or too close to one another, were not moving (or available to be moved) in the right ways at the right times, were in one another's spaces at inopportune moments, or were otherwise 'out of place'. It was a *kgang* that beset and threatened appropriate intergenerational relationships and hierarchies in particular, and through which intergenerational relationships were mediated in turn. This disordering of people, place, and generational relationships could be managed only by drawing closeness, distance, and movement back into appropriate balance – often with the threat of violence. It was a similar process of disordering and reordering space, and the intergenerational roles attached to it, that was at work when Mmapula's husband Dipuo's feet swelled up.

### Mending *Ntate's* Ways

It was early evening, and Dipuo had come in from the lands unexpectedly. He sat on the low wooden chair in the corner of the *lelwapa* he

favoured, near the room where the old woman and the children slept. He hung his hat on the back of the chair, pulled off his shoes and socks, and was rubbing one foot absent-mindedly. His feet and ankles were swollen, thick and round – unsurprising for a man in his mid-seventies having just walked several miles in the heat, I supposed. Then he stretched back into the hard chair and spent the rest of the evening calling and sending the boys on various errands, or upbraiding them for some overlooked chore or some ill-mannered comment.

He stayed at home for a number of days, which was decidedly unusual. We seldom saw him at home for longer than a day and a night, maybe two, generally at the beginning of the month when he would come to collect his meagre pension from the post office. Otherwise he was almost always at the lands. It was an arrangement that suited everyone, as he had a cantankerous streak and a penchant for provoking trouble. But for the time being, one of his sons had been sent out in his place, and Dipuo – whom we all called *nate*, father – remained in the village.

Things had been particularly bad with Dipuo for several months. First, Mmapula had discovered that he had taken up with a local woman who had been widowed the year before. While his wife was ploughing and tending several acres at the family's other, far distant farm on her own, the old man stayed at the lands near the village and became more and more unwisely entangled. He diverted dribs and drabs of money and part of his harvest to the widow and her family; and he began to opt out of settling disputes or engaging in ongoing issues at home. In the most dramatic incident, shortly before my arrival, he had unilaterally decided to sell most of the family's donkeys and give the money to the widow for some expense she had complained about. Mmapula suffered much of this ignominious treatment stoically, muttering to herself and occasionally attempting to talk sense into him. When she found out about the donkeys, however, she rebuked her husband roundly and damningly in front of their children, and spoke of her contempt for his behaviour openly at home. '*Haish, ke kgang e tona,*' Lorato noted of the situation as she updated me afterwards – it's a big issue.

Dipuo's ill-advised liaison had created any number of awkward situations for his children, and for their children as well. Some months before my return, he had been in the widow's yard and had heard an accusation from one of the younger children there about an exchange of threats and insults with one of the young children from his own yard. Immediately, he had summoned the accused child and his eldest grandchild, Lorato, as well, asking her to act as mediator in resolving the dispute. She had been appalled – and was still appalled, judging from the incredulity with which she recounted these tales to me. 'Imagine!

Calling his own children to *someone else's yard!* And what did he want me to do there?' While there was no question that Dipuo's behaviour towards his wife was indefensible, it was in incidents like this – when the issue became explicitly intergenerational – that the *kgang* became pressing, and that subtle means of addressing it emerged.

Adults in Botswana are generally free to discipline the children of their friends, neighbours, or even strangers, and will do so without compunction. I often saw children respond to such discipline with humility and respect. But such situations only really arise in public places, or in the disciplining adult's own yard. By calling his grandchildren into the widow's yard, Dipuo was behaving as if he was *of* that yard and had assumed the role of disciplinarian in it. Indeed, it was as if he had decided to take the widow's children as his own, and his own children as if they were simply neighbours. This confusion of places and the swapping of roles and allegiances it connoted was distasteful and hurtful in its own right. But what made it ridiculous to Lorato was that, having adopted this new position, the old man could not engineer a reconciliation without relying on his previous position in his own yard, and the claims to which it entitled him. By calling both the accused child and Lorato as the mediator, in other words, he was calling himself out: emphasising his inability to discharge a basic role in mediating *dikgang* and meting out discipline among his experimentally assumed kin, by having to rely on his established kin to pull it off. The physical distance from family created by his living at the lands made room for an upending and rearrangement of relationships, and for confusion about Dipuo's 'proper place' to emerge. But, at the same time, that distance had its limits; it could not create a total break from his family, and so his connection to and reliance on them was reasserted.

As his feet swelled up, Dipuo's behaviour began to change. The change was out of necessity rather than choice: he couldn't walk without pain. And so, for a short time, he stayed at home, did not go to the lands, and made only brief visits out of the yard. But then he went to visit his *ngaka ya Setswana*, or traditional healer. The visit was conducted quietly, perhaps in acknowledgement of the fact that Mmapula was a churchgoer and disdained the practice; but it was nevertheless subject to gossip and speculation among the siblings, one of whom had accompanied him. We heard that he had been advised that his feet were swelling up because of his inappropriate dalliances, and that they would continue to do so until he stopped. None of the siblings made any claims about the causality at work, but Schapera (1940: 195) recorded the attribution of various afflictions to liaisons with widows whose blood was still 'hot' (a marker of dangerous sexuality due to their closeness to death). Regardless,

Dipuo's children had a clear sense of the justice in the situation. He had been going up and down in ways he shouldn't have done, ways that were hurtful to his family; an illness that curtailed his movement and forced him to behave appropriately had therefore afflicted him, and it would resolve itself when he both literally and figuratively mended his ways. Indeed, the siblings' response reminds us that Batswana trace various types of illness to disruptions in appropriate intergenerational relationships – including with the ancestors – such that the management of illness often amounts to the management of intergenerational *dikgang* and vice versa (Livingston 2005: 10; see also Lambek and Solway 2001 on *dikgaba*).

Whatever had actually transpired during Dipuo's visit to the *ngaka*, what the siblings heard from each other explained and resolved the issue to their satisfaction. In this case, the siblings' gossip and speculation were an opportunity for them to engage the *kgang* at stake meaningfully. Reflecting on Dipuo's illness and treatment allowed them to participate in diagnosing the underlying issue – his inappropriate dalliances and their knock-on effects for his relationships with his children and grandchildren – and to collectively assess what it meant about each of their parents, the relationship between them, implications for the siblings, and the wider relations of the family as a whole. Intergenerational *dikgang* present especially tricky situations: any attempt at confrontation or mediation would have exacerbated the existing difficulties drastically, further upending appropriately hierarchical relationships, and playing havoc with the mediatory roles the elder Legaes were expected to play both at home and among their wider kin. But they also present opportunities for those of more junior generations<sup>3</sup> to subtly participate in and address the problems of their parents. While Dipuo had experimentally abandoned his rightful place, the indirect engagement of his children left room for him to reoccupy it.

Perhaps a week after his diagnosis, Dipuo was back out at the lands, his feet improving. And it seemed that he had abandoned his extramarital fling. While he would continue to distress and confound his family in other ways, there were no more stories told of ongoing improprieties with the neighbour. And on the rare occasion when they both found themselves at home from the lands, he and his wife would sit up late with their heads together by the fire, sharing news, apparently reconciled.

Following Schapera (1940: 173, 178), we might associate Dipuo's *kgang* with distance, continuous movement, and staying apart. Dipuo's

<sup>3</sup> Generations, like most other kin structures among the Tswana, are highly fluid – a topic to which we return in greater detail in Part II.

transgressions and the familial conflicts they sparked emerged from the time he spent away. But Dipuo's indiscretions were not met with attempts to collapse or erase those distances. He was not called upon to stay at home; neither his wife nor anyone else in his family moved to stay with him. Nor was he excluded or cut off from his family's usual visits to work and help. Rather, his relative distance was carefully maintained. Any attempts to 'solve' the problem of Dipuo's waywardness by bringing him closer, I suspect, would have upset a delicate balance between distance and closeness that made it possible for him and his family to relate. The necessity of maintaining distance suggests that intimacy and proximity present risks of *dikgang* that distance helps ameliorate. (These risks, of course, are not simply spatial, but also draw in other dynamics that create intimacy and mutual dependence, to which we will return in Parts II and III.)

As much as it helps alleviate *dikgang*, then, the continuous work of keeping familial closeness and distance in appropriate balance – and the specific measures required to do so, from beatings and reprimands to visiting traditional doctors – is often a source of further anxiety, strain, and conflict within families. As we will see in the next chapters, the work of coping with these strains presents further issues and requires further management, creating a cycle of conflict and irresolution that, I suggest, is constitutive of the Tswana family. Out of this cycle and the variety of tensions that generate it, a dynamic develops in which individual family members feel simultaneously compelled to stay and driven to leave. The attempt to balance this need for simultaneous nearness and distance from one's family is perhaps best understood spatially and temporally in the process of *building* – which is as critical to the development of Tswana personhood as it is to reworking kin relations.