

## Conclusion: Part II

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Some time after I had returned from fieldwork, I was chatting with Lorato on the phone and asked whether the family had been out to the lands recently. '*Haish! Ke kgang,*' she replied – that's a problem.

Years previously, her grandfather Dipuo had been insistent about buying the family's second lands, in a village a significant distance away. The land in the area was known for its fertility, and he was convinced that it would be a good investment. He had even contributed a cow from the herd to assist with the purchase. Suddenly, Lorato explained, he was demanding his cow back.

Mmapula had taken most of the responsibility for ploughing at these lands, but she was suddenly made solely responsible for the lands in question by this gesture. Of course, she had no cow to give her husband. The cow had become land, and while the land produced ample food, it was all either eaten by the family or sold to cover the running costs of both the farm and the household. And, of course, women did not typically invest in cattle, as Dipuo knew well. A cow would have to come from among their sons' heads of cattle, if anywhere, which was a request Mmapula could hardly make. The demand was deliberately awkward – and seemed to portend something worse.

'My grandmother has realised he's been slowly separating his things for a long time now,' Lorato said.

'Like what?' I asked. 'Why would he do that?'

'*Gareitse!*' she said, in a tone of suspicious resignation – we don't know. 'First he says Dithaba is his lands, the others are hers. Then he gave away the donkeys. He's been taking all of his clothes to the lands bit by bit. His money, food, now the cow ...' She trailed off.

Dipuo's separation, hoarding, and demands for 'his' things – like Kagiso's threat to take his cows – illustrate the fundamental uncertainty and potential reversibility of contributions and of the care they instantiate and produce. The contribution of the cow to acquiring lands for Mmapula to plough was a gesture of care – but when Dipuo demanded it back, with potentially profound effects on the further contributions it had enabled (the cow for land, the land for food, and so on), it called into

question his care, and the relationships he had built through it to Mmapula and the rest of his family. And it was not only the futures of these relationships that were suddenly destabilised, but also the meanings of the full range of his contributions in the past. Previously shared understandings of what Dipuo had provided for his family, what it meant, what they had done for him, and with what effects were thrown up into the air.

Contributions, then, are critical to binding together kin, reflecting and shaping responsibilities by age, gender, and generation over time; but they are also means by which kinship can be confounded, rejected, and undermined. This instability and reversibility renders contributions, and *tlhokomelo* in turn, prone to *dikgang*, which – though never fully resolved – allow for the active negotiation, renewal, and recalibration of family relationships and their ethical underpinnings.

As we have seen, contributions are equally essential means of making-for-oneself. Contributions to friends, neighbours, and partners are required to build relationships with them and to establish or assert oneself as a person, as well as to build one's own *lelwapa*. And the things, work, and sentiment one is expected to contribute are similar to those expected by one's family. This conundrum affects women and men alike, if in different forms, over the entire life course (as Dipuo's example suggests). The tension between these divergent demands frequently produces *dikgang* – which defer outright fission in the natal family by reasserting its claims and relationships, while making room for the accumulations and redirections required by the project of self-making. According to this model, personhood is meaningful only if it is built *within* the context of kinship, in spite of appearing opposed to it. It marks a form of self-determination derived not from demonstrating independence but from demonstrating and carefully managing *interdependence*. In contrast, NGO and government contributions of comparable things, work, and sentiment – though cast as a form of care – behave more like gifts that cannot be reciprocated, shared, or given in turn; as such, they disrupt both the contributory economics of the family and those of making-for-oneself.

Of course, the tension between the imperatives of self-making, its reliance on one's natal kin, and the role of *dikgang* in negotiating that tension is not confined to questions of contribution and care. Similar tensions arise in attempting to secure intimate relationships – predominantly through the careful management of the ways they are seen, spoken, and known, or *recognised*. The often fraught negotiations of the *dikgang* that emerge around pregnancies and marriages perhaps best illustrate this process of managing recognition, and in Part III I turn to a consideration of the reproduction of kinship through conflict.



Figure 6 'I Care, Do You?' Government public health messaging by the highway.

## INTERLUDE: AN INCIDENT

It was already dark when the phone rang. Down the line, Boipelo's voice was frantic. 'My father has attacked my mother! With a knife! Please come, you must come quickly!'

Boipelo's family lived on the edge of the village, where it met the bush. Everyone who was home piled into my small car. Kelebogile, Oratile, and Lorato hurriedly wrapped themselves in blankets and tucked themselves into the back seat. Thabo and Kabelo, two of Boipelo's little brothers, were staying with us that night and clambered onto the adults' laps. Everyone else was away at the lands or the cattle post.

'We should at least be going with the men,' Kelebogile muttered to herself, noting her brothers' untimely absence. 'Or weapons,' added Oratile. 'No time,' responded her sister. I pulled out of the yard and drove as quickly as I could along the rutted, twisting dirt roads of the village, leaving a billowing cloud of red dust behind us.

We arrived at Boipelo's place in minutes. Everyone piled out into an oddly quiet, pitch-black darkness. We entered the gate quietly, letting our eyes adjust. The wide, sandy yard was dotted with leafy trees and well-tended ornamental plants. The house itself was little more than a two-room shelter of iron and beams, but well built.

We found Boipelo's father, Mosimanegape, seated on a bench not far from the house, facing us. Boipelo and her infant child sat on another, under the tree near the house; her mother, Khumo, stood some distance beyond them both. Kelebogile greeted them all with a slow, flat *dumela*; we all followed suit and were greeted in turn – an act oddly mundane in its tone, given the violence of the event. We each took up positions around the yard: Kelebogile moved to the stoep in front of the house; Oratile across from her, together with Lorato, standing in the sand. I hunkered down on a discarded tyre at the edge of the gathering, and the two small boys jostled for space in my lap.

Kelebogile began by asking Mosimanegape what had happened, while moving towards her sister Khumo – who sobbed suddenly, but wiped her face and regained her composure almost as quickly. I noticed that she was soaked to the skin. Mosimanegape began complaining, in a mix of awkward English and equally awkward Setswana, about wet blankets. Gradually the story of a fight the previous night emerged. Khumo had gone off to a late shift at her security post, locking him in with a padlock on the outside of the corrugated iron door. He, in turn, had fastened a padlock to the inside and locked her out. When she returned late at night, he refused to let her back in and left her outside for some time. Eventually, frustrated, she fetched the hosepipe and snaked it through the narrow opening of the trap window, soaking the blankets in which he slept.

Khumo then chimed in, to say that Mosimanegape had disappeared with their youngest at 3 a.m. Having returned to their yard later to find the man home, she had set about preparing to go to work – only to have him turn the hosepipe on her

this time, soaking the one uniform she had to wear for her post. As we were speaking, a workmate from down the street arrived to accompany her to her shift – only to be turned away apologetically, and without explanation.

Suddenly, the beams of car headlights swept through the yard, and another car arrived at the gate. Seconds later, Kagiso entered. I had no idea how he had known to come, although I suspected that Kelebogile might have sent him a text message. He took a seat on another bench, opposite Kelebogile, so that they bracketed the quarrelling couple between them. He, too, asked what had happened, crossing one knee over the other and folding his arms together thoughtfully, as if concentrating. After a pause, Mosimanegape said simply that Khumo had soaked his blankets, and Khumo simply that he had tried to kill her.

Then a slow-moving shadow appeared, walking with deliberation from the gate. I noticed the cane first, then the floppy woollen hat, and realised it was Dipuo, the elderly patriarch of the family. His presence came as something of a shock, as he was seldom in the village. He had been biding his time in Kagiso's car. His carefully paced appearance produced a dramatic effect: Kagiso finished what he was saying and everyone else fell silent.

The old man sat on a bench across from Mosimanegape, forming an open square, and leaned his walking cane against one knee. He didn't seem to need to ask what had happened, although it was unclear whether he might have overheard any of the prior recriminations. Instead, he asked Mosimanegape, 'What use are you?', rhetorically and damningly. He accused Mosimanegape of laziness, and of breaking promises to help in the fields with the ploughing. Mosimanegape attempted to stand up for himself, but Dipuo spoke over him effortlessly. He told Mosimanegape that he had long waited to hear that his daughter Khumo would be married, and he had been disappointed for years. 'I have been waiting all this time. I don't know whether you are bringing me marriage or death,' he said, flatly.

Suddenly, Khumo rushed up behind Mosimanegape, attempting to upend the bench under him. He stood up and shouted at her defensively: '*Tswa mo go nna!*' – get away from me! She shouted in turn that she was trying to get the knife, which he was holding under his seat. Mosimanegape denied this categorically, but then started backing awkwardly around the side of the house, protesting his innocence as he did so. 'Don't go anywhere with that knife. Just stay where you are,' Dipuo warned him. Even after he had disappeared behind the house, Mosimanegape kept voicing an insistence that there was no knife, that he had done nothing wrong. After a few moments, he walked back to the front of the house and resumed his seat.

'Where is this knife?' the old man mused, more than asking. While he continued with his litany of disappointments, Lorato indicated that we should go to look for it. She, Oratile, and I clambered over the low fence behind the house and began sweeping the area with the weak flashlights on our mobile phones. We stumbled between dense thorny bushes, over clumps of grass and ankle-turning stones, remarking on the improbability of finding anything. But then I caught sight of a

large, rusty carving knife lying in the dirt. I gave it to Lorato to take back to her grandfather.

As we returned from behind the house, we passed Boipelo, her little girl on her hip, standing in the shadows. Usually quiet but carefree and quick to smile or laugh, Boipelo was visibly shaken and reserved. I asked her if she was alright, and she nodded quickly. Then I told her that if she didn't feel safe and needed to come and stay with us, I would give her and her siblings a lift. She shook her head emphatically, and said, 'No, we'll all stay here,' with a quaver in her voice. I asked if she was sure, and she insisted.

Dipuo was holding the knife in both hands, at arm's length, examining it. '*Ijo!*' he had exclaimed, in surprise, when he first saw it; 'A knife as big as this!' After some moments he began berating Mosimanegape for his cowardice, saying that a man would never attack anyone with a knife – and definitely not a woman. Mosimanegape now stood some feet away, wearing a hangdog expression; his outbursts were fewer now, less convinced, and more easily brushed away by a simple '*Nnyaa*' – no – from the older man.

Dipuo began considering, out loud, the wisdom of involving the police. He seemed to suggest that usually he would be reluctant to involve them, but that the knife was of such a size that a line had been crossed. In front of us, he asked Khumo what she thought. She mumbled that she didn't like the idea and that things should be sorted out among them. Dipuo then made a show of asking the rest of us what we thought. Kelebogile and Oratile each muttered a non-committal '*Gakeitse*', I don't know, and Kagiso remained silent – letting the threat hang in the air. Mosimanegape had been protesting in the background that it was unnecessary, but he was formally ignored in the old man's consultation.

After a pause, Dipuo asserted, 'I am taking my children home.' Immediately, Khumo, Boipelo, and the other children in the yard set about gathering some clothes and necessities to take with them. Boipelo's earlier insistence on staying dissolved. Mosimanegape was shaken and became confused and defiant: first insisting that he would stay there alone (Khumo refused, as it was her plot), then saying that he didn't care – he would go to stay with his father's sisters and call them in on his behalf. 'Yes,' the old man concurred, 'we need to speak with them.' The assertion set Mosimanegape on his back foot again. He stammered, clearly caught off guard, and fell silent. We drifted back to the cars. Mosimanegape stormed off into the night.