

8 Recognising Marriage

Bogwe gabobole.

Relationship-in-law does not decay.

‘Ah, it’s not going to work out,’ Kagiso admitted with resignation and a slow smile as he stood under the backyard acacia, absent-mindedly pulling leaves from one of its thorny branches.

It had been two months since Kagiso, his parents, and representatives from his father’s family had formally visited his girlfriend’s house with the hope of asking for her in marriage. They left without ceremony one Saturday afternoon, no one having made any mention of it beforehand. I only heard about it later, when I found Dipuo’s sister’s son drinking tea in the *lelwapa* and chatting deferentially with his *malome* Dipuo.

The foray had not gone well. To their collective astonishment and dismay, the girl’s father had refused even to receive the delegation. Much of the men’s chat over tea circled around how strange the father’s reaction had been. When I spoke to Kagiso on his return, he was disappointed and angry, but already strategising for workable alternatives. His parents were less hopeful. Dipuo had reserved comment, simply shaken his head and left for the lands promptly after taking tea. Mmapula, uncharacteristically, spent the whole of the following day lying on the stoep, alternately sleeping, pondering, and talking through the previous day’s disappointment with her daughters. It was perhaps the only time I had seen her stop her incessant work and movement for so long – as if resolution of the impasse lay in her stillness, or as if she were healing a familial wound the way an invalid contains and heals from illness, by staying home.

After his original determination, Kagiso’s resignation came as a surprise to me. ‘Are you just going to give up, then?’ I asked, realising suddenly that there may have been a reason for the family’s silence on the issue in the intervening months. ‘What can I do?’ he countered, smiling again, in his tranquil, reconciled way. ‘You know, he refused even to come out to greet us,’ he said, describing his girlfriend’s father’s

odd recalcitrance. 'He just hid in the house. The wife [his girlfriend's stepmother] kept telling us he was coming, but he didn't come.'

Kagiso had been seeing the young woman for two years by then, and he was keen to marry. He had been working assiduously for years to set aside the money needed to pay *bogadi*, and had since become a respected preacher in a local church; he knew he was a good catch.

But Kagiso had had an inkling for some time that his girlfriend's father would prove evasive. The man avoided him and refused to greet him when they passed each other in the street. After some 'research', as he called it, Kagiso concluded that there was an unresolved conflict with the girl's mother's family – likely related to the custody of the girl herself. 'Maybe he took the child when he wasn't supposed to, and they are still disputing it,' he ventured. 'That would explain why he refuses her to visit her mother's family in the city.' Whether the girl's parents had been married was unclear, and her mother had met a strange and untimely death (which, like the death of Lorato's baby, rendered it subject to the suspicion of witchcraft). 'Who can say?' he concluded, alluding to unsavoury possibilities. 'But he knows I know something is wrong – that's why he can't look at me or greet me.' I asked whether the young woman had told him anything. 'Even she doesn't know the whole story,' he noted, 'but there are things she's not willing to say, even to me. Some other things she has come close to telling me, but in the end she keeps quiet.'

'He could have come out at least to reject us,' Kagiso mused, after a pause. 'He refused because he knew he had no right. Her cousins on the mother's side told her that man has no say in your marriage. Why is that? The stepmother even said, "You know him – this thing, you have to do for yourself."'

'How do you get married by yourself?' I asked, perplexed.

Kagiso shrugged. '*Gakeitse!*' he answered – I don't know. 'Without the parents? I don't know. I don't think there is a way.'

'Getting married is a problem,' I observed.

'I'll keep trying,' said Kagiso, flashing his confident smile. It wasn't clear whether he meant to keep trying with the girl's family, or just to keep trying to get married – with another girl if necessary. The ambiguity seemed deliberate.

While some of the details around Kagiso's failed proposal initially struck me as exceptional, the failure itself was common enough. And, on reflection, his apparently singular misfortune had more in common with other failed attempts than I expected. His older brother Moagi, for example, had embarked on marriage negotiations with his then partner and the mother of his son a couple of years previously, while I had still been away. The build-up had been extended. Roughly two years before

the negotiations had even begun, he had undertaken construction of a two-and-a-half-room house in the yard of his parents. His parents had insisted on it as a prerequisite to undertaking negotiations on his behalf. When – well over a year later – it was completed and they had made the long journey to the woman's home village, the woman's family had been particularly demanding in their *bogadi* requests (in contrast to the colonial-era expectation Schapera described for the Bakgatla, that whatever the man offered would have to be accepted; Schapera 1940: 87). 'They wanted a house built for them, so many cows, a nice suit for the old man and dresses for the old woman, money, blankets, everything!' Lorato recounted. Moagi's delegation replied that they had heard the request, and then returned home, nonplussed.

When I asked after the situation on my return, nobody was clear about what had happened or where things stood. The process had faded back into a certain inscrutability – much as it had with Kagiso after the initial attempted negotiation. Moagi's sought-after bride occasionally called to check on her son, who lived with the Legaes; she even came to stay once, for a couple of days. However, the woman now called Moagi's younger sisters to ask them to send her son to visit, rather than calling Moagi himself, causing everyone discomfort and some consternation. Whether this reflected some breakdown that had happened before the marriage negotiations took place and had railroaded them, or whether it had been caused by the mysterious suspension of the negotiations – or whether, indeed, there had been no breakdown at all – no one could say. 'Maybe she didn't want to get married to him, and told her parents to make it impossible,' Lorato surmised. 'Or maybe the parents didn't like him and made it impossible by themselves. *Gareitse*,' she concluded, as she often did – we don't know. The relationship had receded into opacity.

Marriage stands at the heart of the unique structural ambiguities and flexibilities of Tswana kinship. Historically, Tswana marriage preferences were an anomaly among Southern African kinship systems: they accommodated marriages between cross-cousins, the children of siblings of the opposite sex (e.g. a man's son with his sister's daughter), and parallel cousins, or the children of siblings of the same sex (e.g. a man's daughter with his brother's son; Kuper 2016; Radcliffe-Brown 1950; Schapera 1950).¹ Over time, these preferences created an overlapping

¹ Both preferences are cast in terms of keeping property within the family. Cross-cousin marriages kept property between the households of cattle-linked siblings, where the *bogadi* acquired through the marriage of a sister was used to finance her brother's marriage, giving her a preferential claim on his son for marriage to her daughter in the next generation. Parallel cousin marriages kept property within a patriline.

and indeterminate field of kin relations, in which any given kin tie might be ‘at once agnatic, matrilineal, and affinal’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 138, emphasis in the original) – meaning that, in practice, kin relationships were susceptible to constant contestation and renegotiation, oriented around relative wealth, power, and so on (ibid.; see also Comaroff 1981). While it was more often nobles who married kin than commoners (Schapera 1957), parallel cousin marriage – and the principles of ambiguity, flexibility, and pragmatic responsiveness to social variables it generated – remained one ideal form of union (an ideal that appears to persist in other areas of Botswana; see Solway 2017a: 317 on ‘Formula One’ marriages among the Bakgalagadi). What I want to emphasise here is that these ideals were markedly insular: rather than simply prioritising the extension of kinship to other, unrelated households, marriage was in many ways preoccupied with containing, reproducing, and reorganising *existing* kin relationships (perhaps especially following the decline of polygyny; see Solway 1990).

Tswana marriage has long been characterised as a drawn-out, indeterminate, often incomplete, and potentially reversible process – rather than a definitive event or state of being – which reproduces and compounds the structural ambiguities described above (Comaroff 1980; Comaroff and Roberts 1977). By contrast, contemporary anthropological accounts suggest that marriage is increasingly geared towards foreclosing indeterminacy. Where the stages of marriage once unfolded over years, they are now concluded rapidly and all at once, with *bogadi* paid, vows made, and spectacular celebrations happening in one extended event (Solway 2017a; van Dijk 2010; 2017). Government has taken a more prominent role, formally registering marriages and overseeing mass ceremonies that generally precede the ceremonies and celebrations organised by kin. Where marriage was once an explicitly intergenerational undertaking – a father paid *bogadi* for his son’s bride; a sister’s bridewealth enabled her brother’s marriage and established her claim on his daughter in marriage for her son (Kuper 2016: 274) – intergenerational kin involvement now seems to be waning (Gulbrandsen 1986; Solway 2017a).

At the same time, marriage itself has been in sharp decline, since at least the advent of labour migration in the region (Gulbrandsen 1986; Pauli and van Dijk 2017; Townsend 1997). Explanations for this trend have surmised that, in an era of waged work, both men and women are less reliant on one another’s labour and resources, and less willing to put up with the constraints of married life; and that men’s natal families in particular have greater reason to want to retain their contributions at home (Gulbrandsen 1986; Townsend 1997). Links have also been made to growing inequalities, with the lavish displays of conspicuous

consumption that now characterise weddings increasingly a privilege of the elite (Pauli and Dawids 2017) or bound up with emerging loan industries and the acquisition of substantial personal debt (James 2017; van Dijk 2010; 2017). And yet – as the conversation at the beginning of Part III suggests – marriage remains a highly desirable goal for men and women, if an elusive ideal. Approaching marriage in terms of recognition and the *dikgang* that accompany it, I suggest, shows that this elusiveness is not only a question of political economy but also remains linked to ambiguity. Rather than being eliminated, ambiguity seems to have been relocated from marriage as such to the pre-wedding phase – and, beyond that, into familial histories. Aside from the question of financial strategies and resources, the failure to marry may also be a question of the costs of seeking definitive clarity in intergenerational relationships, which rely on a degree of ambiguity for their continuity. In this sense, I suggest that contemporary Tswana marriage remains preoccupied with the management of existing kin links – showing an uncanny resonance with pregnancy and its reorganisation of women’s natal kin relationships.²

Ideally, marriage negotiations involve a step-by-step process of seeking formal recognition for a conjugal relationship. At every stage, acts of seeing/showing, speaking, hearing, and knowing are explicitly foregrounded, requiring other acts of recognition in turn. Each of these acts explicitly makes the previously hidden seen (Werbner 2015), to wider and wider groups of people. The potential interpretations of what is newly grasped must be carefully managed, especially given the historical tendency towards indeterminacy and dispute (Comaroff and Roberts 1977).

After conducting the relationship itself with great secrecy, Kagiso had to tell his parents of his intentions, disclose his financial status to them sufficiently to demonstrate his ability to pay *bogadi*, and ask them to call ‘the uncles’ (as he described them) to speak to his potential in-laws. His parents, having heard his request, had to identify, call, and speak to appropriate kin (Dipuo chose his younger sister’s son and the son’s wife); demonstrate the viability of his proposal to them; and then ask them to assist in repeating the process of speaking, making known, and asking with Kagiso’s potential in-laws. The cycle continues right through wedding-related rituals: as Solway (2017a: 316) notes, ‘seeing’ and

² In a different sense, Tswana marriage has long sought to eliminate ambiguity (*pace* Comaroff 1980) – if not between partners, then between their children and their kin. Batswana make provision to marry the dead (Dahl 2009a: 1), for a man to marry his children, or for boys to marry their mothers on behalf of their late fathers (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991), generally when the original conjugal relationship has ended. Such marriages work to secure the recognition of children and their inheritance rights – thereby reworking their relationships with their parents and forebears.

showing *bogadi* cattle have long been crucial aspects of conferring recognition on a marriage and on the networks of relationships that enable the achievement of a wedding, which the cattle make evident – although they, too, are subject to multiple interpretations (ibid.; see also Comaroff 1981: 172). Today, showy white weddings, photographs and videos, and social media posts with customised hashtags seek similar recognition in novel ways, extending the recognisability of the couple's success, and that of their kin, in time and space (Solway 2017a: 313; see also Pauli and Dawids 2017: 23).

But at each stage, these processes face an increasing risk of disagreement, refusal, failure, or jealousy, among an ever expanding group of people – *dikgang* that may adversely affect the relationship of the partners and of the negotiating kin, whose contributions to the process remain key. Even where couples seek to avoid these difficulties by 'marrying themselves', as van Dijk (2017: 36) notes, potentially fraught disclosures of the marrying couple's resources to their respective kin run comparable risks of inviting jealousy or refusals to assist. When Kagiso's would-be father-in-law refused to see the delegation or hear their request for his daughter's hand, he not only refused to recognise the relationship but also showed Kagiso's parents and negotiators that refusal, refusing them in turn. The refusal undermined Kagiso's hopes for marriage and his claims to adulthood; like Lorato's failed house, Kagiso's failed proposal frustrated and stalled his ability to make-for-himself. But the repercussions were greater, in proportion to the number of people concerned and the degree of exposure involved: it was not only Kagiso whose ability to manage people, relationships, and *dikgang* was called into doubt, but also the ability of those who had gone to negotiate for him. The failure cast doubt on his family's ability to secure marriage for him, and on their status relative to that of their potential in-laws as well.

The recognitions involved in marriage negotiations demand other disclosures and recognitions in turn, and so such refusals may also be explicit concealments: not only of relative resources, but also, as Kagiso speculated with regard to his partner's father, of the unresolved – or unresolvable – *dikgang* of the past. By Kagiso's assessment, the would-be father-in-law's refusal to receive Kagiso's kin was most likely a question of keeping the fraught, ambiguous history of his relationships with his child, his (deceased) partner, and her family hidden, removed from further reflection or interpretation. In part, Kagiso's speculation was an effort to cast the failed proposal in a specific light: as a *kgang* that was irreconcilable because it was oriented around his partner and her family, rather than him and the Legaes. While this framing didn't change the outcome for Kagiso, as an explanation circulated among family it served

to shelter them from any further intransigent conflicts around an issue that was out of their hands, to sustain Kagiso's own capacity to self-make, and to mark an insuperable distinction between kin and non-kin (a point to which we will return). But Kagiso's speculation also indicates an expectation that marriage negotiations routinely risk forcing long-standing, unresolved familial issues out of suspension and back into play – whether between a potential spouse's own parents or between the parents' respective siblings and extended kin, the full range of whom will be called on in various ways for the marriage to succeed. It taps into an assumption that marriage negotiations risk rendering the ambiguities of those relationships recognisable, often uncomfortably so, to a generation among whom they were previously unknown and for whom they might pose further problems. Marriage negotiations also offer a rare means of resolving such long-standing *dikgang* – but, in practice, they often exacerbate them.

Thus, for example, were Boipelo to get married – as Dipuo reminded her at the beginning of this part – the payment of *bogadi* from her marriage would go to Dipuo, her mother's father, unless her own father managed to pay *bogadi* for her mother first. The impending marriage of daughters was often a major reason given by men I knew in their forties and fifties, having set up households with their wives and children long before, for finally wanting to pay *bogadi* (see also White 2017). Knowing that *bogadi* would soon be received for marrying daughters meant that they could finance their own *bogadi* with greater confidence. Children's marriages, then – daughters' marriages in particular – enable the formalisation of their parents' marriages, resolving any suspended questions of their status, their respective responsibilities, inheritances, and so on (a development that suggests that marriage remains an intergenerational matter, but in inverted terms). Ideally, the distribution of *bogadi* from Boipelo's father among Dipuo's family, and then from Boipelo's would-be husband among her parents' family, would strengthen and reinforce their relationships to one another, reconcile past misunderstandings, and provide a new framework of relating. Both Boipelo and her partner, and her parents, would also achieve a certain degree of recognised independence, as households and as individuals. (The Tswana term *kgaojanya* – both 'sharing' and 'separating' – also connotes 'resolving'.) At the same time, should delays or disputes about the payment of that *bogadi* emerge between Boipelo's future husband's family and her parents, or between her parents and her mother's parents, the confusion of stakeholders and proliferation of claims – and the questions raised about what those delays or disputes suggested about the people and relationships involved – could well destabilise relationships even further and derail either

marriage altogether. Certainly, the inability of Boipelo's father and his kin to successfully negotiate the *dikgang* of his own 'marriage' without the help of his daughter's marriage would also render his capacity to cope with *dikgang* suspect, thereby further undermining his position.

Similarly, had Kagiso insisted on negotiating his marriage with his girlfriend's maternal kin, the causes of animosity between her maternal and paternal kin would have had to be articulated and addressed. However, if – as seems likely – the issues at the heart of Kagiso's would-be father-in-law's evasiveness were deeply insoluble, pushing his case could have risked irreparable ruptures in the young woman's family, and might have foreclosed the possibility of marriage. In the end, her father having refused to recognise Kagiso's overtures, Kagiso's girlfriend moved north to visit her maternal kin. Her relationship with Kagiso faded into obscurity not long afterwards. Having failed to negotiate the *dikgang* of recognition, Kagiso found himself back at square one, his role and relationships within his own family unchanged.

Beyond the often cited pressures of expense – whether for *bogadi* or weddings – it is perhaps the difficulty of addressing long-standing, suspended *dikgang* within families, as well as managing the *dikgang* that emerge between families, that introduces 'new forms of slowness' (Solway 2017a: 218) in the negotiating stage, making marriage so difficult to achieve in contemporary Botswana. Even more than pregnancy, marriage is a deeply fraught but critical means of reorganising and reproducing families. And this fraught creativity affects not only prospective spouses and their children, but also the generations that precede them. The tension I have described attaches not simply to questions of exchange or love, affinity or procreation, but to the *dikgang* generated by recognition. At the same time, marriage is one of the few processes that offers the structural possibility of resolving the suspended *dikgang* of the past, while enabling the reproduction of kinship into the future – leaving Tswana families, and particularly their men, in something of a quandary.

As Gulbrandsen noted for the Bangwaketse, 'no bachelor can ever be fully recognised as a man' (1986: 12; *pace* Lafontaine 1985: 162). At stake for Kagiso was not only a 'form of adulthood' (van Dijk 2010: 290) but also a new role in the family, in which he could 'tak[e] decisions in family affairs, inheritance and the ownership of property' as well as negotiating the marriages and disputes of others (*ibid.*; see also Durham 2004; Townsend 1997). In Setswana, a man marries (*o a nyala*) whereas a woman is married (*o a nyakwa*); in asserting that relative agency, an important measure of social and political personhood is conferred that goes beyond the man's ability to accumulate or provide resources (*cf.* Gulbrandsen 1986: 15). I suggest that such recognition

emerges as a result of a man's proven willingness and ability to make the hidden seen, by drawing both his relationship and his capacity to marry to the awareness of a wide range of kin and non-kin, and by successfully navigating the risks that emerge with that awareness. In other words, his recognition is first achieved, and then continuously reproduced, in the acquisition and management of pronounced, perpetual – one might even say chronic – *dikgang*. The ability to tackle *dikgang* successfully with a vast range of kin and affines, which a man demonstrates by securing his marriage, and the continued responsibility for further negotiations he will bear as a married man, establish his suitability to participate in other public forms of negotiation – whether they be additional marriage arrangements or the hearing of cases at *kgotla*.

Marriage is not the only, or final, marker of a man's adulthood, of course. Setting up a household for a wife and children (Townsend 1997: 409), his father's death, and his own record of participation in decision making (Durham 2004: 596) all mark further projects of self-making in which a man's adulthood, and his personhood, grows. But like marriage, these projects involve new forms of exposure and recognition, as well as the acquisition of other *dikgang* that require reflection and negotiation, of the sort explored throughout this book. His success in handling the *dikgang* of recognition leading to marriage both creates opportunity for and forecasts his potential in addressing these additional *dikgang*. In this sense, while marriage may seem to have become irrelevant to a man's rank and status since the advent of waged labour (Gulbrandsen 1986: 15), it nonetheless remains a key aspect of his self-making and his aspirations to ethical personhood.

Kagiso was ultimately successful in negotiating a marriage several months after I left the field – perhaps a year and a half after his previous attempt. He had met his wife-to-be at the local home-based care NGO where they both worked. I had met her a few times when she was spending time with Kagiso at his shop, although usually she stayed in his car and was at pains to avoid anything but the most basic greeting. After Kagiso's initial negotiations with her family, she still lived in her own rented house in the village, but I heard that she had become warm and friendly with the family at home, regularly visiting in the afternoons and often coming to stay with Kagiso at night. All that remained in Kagiso's marriage trajectory were the ceremonies: at the district commissioner's hall, at the church, and at the two families' natal homes. The expense and logistics involved in the ceremonies meant that they would be some time in coming; dates a year and longer after the initial negotiation were being considered. However, the two families' successful management of the initial marriage negotiations laid the groundwork for

equally successful joint responses to future issues – the critical factor in maintaining flexible and creative kinship bonds in the context of inevitable *dikgang*. It is this proven capacity to share and jointly negotiate *dikgang* that gives affinal kinship sufficient persistence that – as the proverb which opened this chapter suggests – it does not decay, even if the married spouses themselves part.

In the context of the AIDS epidemic, however, the recognition of relationships has taken on new risks, and associated *dikgang* threaten to take on new forms while continuing to work in ways familiar from the discussion above. It is to the dynamics of recognition in the epidemic, and the *dikgang* that result, that I turn next.