

Part I

‘Where Are You From? Where Are You Going?’

The Geographies of Tswana Kinship

Matlo go sha mabapi.

Neighbouring houses burn together.

‘Welcome home!’ Lorato and Oratile burst out simultaneously, in English, chuckling to themselves.

We had just pulled into the Legaes’ yard after the hour-long drive from the airport in the capital. It had been a quiet trip; the family seldom spoke when they were in a car together, and I had a great deal to take in, travelling down the familiar highway and winding back into the village after two years away. The women’s spontaneous welcome burst the bubble of silence. As if on cue, children came tumbling out of doors, the youngest running full tilt for the car, the teenagers sauntering with studied nonchalance.

The yard had changed little since my last visit. It was an expansive plot, with a huddle of structures at its centre, gravitating around a square, paved courtyard behind a low wall – the *lelwapa*. Oratile’s older sister, Kelebogile, was seated there on a plastic chair, grinning affably as we arrived. A rectangular two-and-a-half-roomed house stood on one side, perpendicular to its predecessor, the main six-room building. In front of the larger house, and across from the smaller one, stood the *isong* or outdoor kitchen, also framed by a low brick wall and covered by a roof of corrugated iron perched on wooden stilts cut for the purpose. Oratile’s and Kelebogile’s eldest brother, Modiri, sat on a low wooden chair near the fire there, tending an enamel teapot in the coals – he was famously fond of Five Roses tea, a predilection we shared. The fourth side of the *lelwapa* faced the road, and we parked in front of it. The space had been roughly paved in rescued chunks of concrete for the cars of the yard; the cars themselves had multiplied, and grown more dilapidated, since my last visit.

The yard sat near a dried-up riverbed, not far from the centre of the village. The neighbourhood, or ward, was known and named for the tendency of springs to burst suddenly out of the clay earth. The shallow

village dam was a short walk away, just near the village *kgotla*, or customary court; two primary schools and a junior high stood within ten minutes' walk. The train tracks threaded through the village nearby, paralleled by the highway a little farther on; behind them stood the modest, craggy hills from which the village took its name.

By the time I arrived for fieldwork in late 2011, I had been a visitor to this yard on and off for seven years – dating back to the times I walked Lorato and her neighbours 'halfway' from the orphan care project nearby. I planned to stay briefly, mostly out of courtesy, while I found my feet. Little did I know that I would be spending most of the year in this yard, or that – for all its unanticipated frictions – it would become home.

In Part I, against this backdrop, I sketch the geographies of Tswana relatedness. I begin with the matrix of places that constitute the Tswana *gae*, or home – a common framing of kin space largely underplayed by ethnographic work on the Tswana household (see, e.g., Klaits 2010: 102; Morton 2007) – and the practices of staying, movement, and work that identify and integrate those spaces over time. In Chapter 1, I explore the ways those practices produce, delimit, and refigure kinship, in part by producing *dikgang* – issues, conflicts, and crises – around the relative nearness and distance of kin. In Chapter 2, I look at building and the spatio-temporalities of making-for-oneself (*go itirela*), which requires navigating similar *dikgang*, the acquisition and successful management of which prove crucial to personhood. And finally, in Chapter 3, I examine the spatio-temporal dynamics of governmental and non-governmental programming launched in response to AIDS, and analyse the effects these programmes have had on the space and time of kin-making and self-making alike.

Ko Gae: House and Home

I seldom slept in. It was usually impossible. There were chickens crowing, cars starting, children shouting, and buckets clattering from early in the morning. But one Saturday morning, not long after my arrival in the field, my sleep went uninterrupted until the gathering heat set the corrugated iron roof ticking as it stretched, sometime past nine o'clock. I woke in what was otherwise an uncanny silence.

I emerged from my room, stretching and curious, into the *lekwapa*. It was not yet mid-morning, but the low-walled courtyard had already been swept, and the stitched sacks and blankets that had been dragged out for the children to sleep on the night before tidied away. Morning tea had already been boiled and drunk, its dregs left in cups scattered around the stoep, the sheltered veranda by the front door of the main house.

It was no small feat for the yard to be so thoroughly unpeopled. Four generations were intermittently in residence, from the elderly couple who had founded the household to their seven children, 11 grandchildren, and one greatgrandchild, making a total of 21 (plus me) – usually between 11 and 18 of us were there at any one time. It was a large household, but then most of the yards in the village housed three generations. Typically, the house was teeming: with children playing or cooking, people sitting and chatting in the *lelwapa*, the men tinkering with vehicles in the yard, the women sweeping or mopping or laundering. But that morning, there was no one to be seen.

I was perplexed. I stuck my head in the door of the main house. Usually at least a few children could be found on the cement floor of the sitting room, watching the fitful signal on the old TV; but the room was empty. The three adult brothers who lived at home – Modiri, Kagiso, and Tuelo – each had spartan rooms of their own opening off the sitting room, but their doors all stood open, the rooms silent. The three brothers were as different as brothers could be. Modiri, the eldest, by then in his late forties, was a lean, responsible man who kept his own counsel. He had worked in the mines and now ran his own small business, but he was unschooled and illiterate; his great passion was for cattle, and he was skilled at overseeing the family herd. Kagiso was more gregarious and charismatic, and he loved to preach and advise, slipping easily between English and Setswana as he did so. He was always sharply dressed with matching accessories, and had several projects either fledging or failing at any given time. Tuelo, the youngest, was the most hot-headed and irresponsible; he struggled to hold down work and seemed constantly to be pushing people to their limits, although he could also be shy and diffident. He depended on his older brothers, especially Kagiso, whom he took as a sort of mentor. But that Saturday, all three were out. Then again, it was not unusual for them to be absent: they were often away during the week, working or on business of their own, and only really came into the house to sleep.

I passed through to the kitchen at the back of the house, where sometimes the older girls might be found cooking, but there were only empty plates scattered over the rickety cupboard unit, and a tin of sugar standing open on the plastic table.

I left through the back of the kitchen to check the backyard. The *segotlo* (backyard) of colonial-era Tswana households was customarily a place of safety, refuge, and protection (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 135) – but also of hiding or shame (Livingston 2005: 71, 184) – overseen by the mother of the house. The backyard at home, however, like its neighbours, and like the front yard, opened through a large gate onto the

street. It was used for impromptu mechanics' interventions with family cars and for mixing and storing building materials, and it struck me as the men's space – although the children sometimes played there, and on hot days we all took advantage of the shade offered by the enormous acacia in the back corner. But there was no one there, either.

I headed back to the two-and-a-half – named for the two bedrooms that stood out on either side of a much smaller, recessed 'half' room, each with its own door leading in from a narrow stoep – from which I had emerged, and tapped gently on Kelebogile's door. Kelebogile was my age-mate, a reserved woman who could be stern and unforgiving when angry but had a quiet generosity and kindness about her too. She was deeply pious and sometimes withdrawn, but could be unexpectedly funny and even playful with me. She stayed just across from the room I shared with Lorato, with her son Tefo, whom I had known since he was an infant. But there was no answer, and her door was locked.

I had been struck by the fact that the women and children were situated around the margins of the houses, with the men – who spent rather less time at home – in the centre; but, at the same time, the women were closer to the *lelwapa*. Although the colonial-era *lelwapa* was often linked to the *kgotla* as a male space (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 137; Kuper 1980: 17), at home it was the women who occupied, used, and oversaw it most frequently – although everyone in the yard used it freely.

Gazing from our shared stoep across at the *isong*, I finally noticed two enormous cast-iron, three-legged pots steaming over a low fire. The whole family spent a lot of time in the small, ramshackle *isong*; the children cooked, served, and cleaned dishes there, and we all warmed bathwater, made tea, or just tended the fire and sat around talking on cold nights. But given a cooking project as big as this, someone – probably Mmapula, the elderly matriarch we all called *Mma* – had to be about. A small, wiry, resilient woman in her sixties, Mmapula was respected as an experienced, fair, and insightful elder, and not only by her family. She was a churchgoer, was widely connected across the village, and was generous of time, energy, and spirit. She also had a sharp, irreverent sense of humour and liked to offer a running commentary of everyone's shortcomings and her consequent disappointments – usually in a teasing and light-hearted tone, even if there was an edge of truth to it. The door to her room – an extension that opened directly off the stoep, which she shared with rotating sets of her grandchildren and occasionally her youngest daughter as well – was slightly ajar. I pulled up a chair in the *lelwapa* and waited for her to emerge.

The *lelwapa*, where I had taken up my waiting, was the geographical centre of the yard and heart of the house, and the space in which much shared family life unfolded. *Lelwapa* also signifies ‘family’ in Setswana: *tlogo ya lelwapa*, the head of the *lelwapa*, is the head of the family; *go aga lelwapa*, to build a *lelwapa*, is both to build a house and to build a family. Family members may introduce or refer to one another as *ba lwapeng*, the people of one’s *lelwapa*. Many terms that describe family, in other words, are explicitly spatialised from the outset; and they are explicitly located in, or in relation to, the *lelwapa*. And, as we will see, the *lelwapa* plays an important role in a variety of events and everyday practices that define, constitute, and delimit family. It is not only the space where family members eat, socialise, and sometimes sleep; it is also where important discussions are held, where visitors are welcomed and fed, where marriage negotiations are conducted, around which parties and weddings are celebrated or funerals observed – and even, in some cases, where people are buried. It is also a space in which grain is dried, laundry washed, games played, and homework finished, and in which long hours are spent braiding hair, gossiping, or simply sitting together. The *lelwapa* is interchangeable – sometimes simultaneously – public and private; it marks the overlap and indeterminacy between those two categories, and is the space in which they are navigated and distinguished. It is at the heart of the compound, but also in full view of the street; it hosts both the formal greeting of visitors and everyday acts of personal and household hygiene; disagreements internal to the family are settled there, but with dimensions of formality and display that encourage shame. Crucially, it is a space *in between* – in between the houses and other places of the yard, in between the family and its visitors or passers-by – and it is in this in-between space that most living at home happens. Staying around, crossing, and dwelling in the *lelwapa* together is one important way of being kin.

At the same time, Batswana are remarkably mobile in their residential patterns, frequently moving long distances to attend school, to stay with and help distant family, or to find work (see Townsend 1997 on men’s migrations over their life courses). In these cases, they might refer to the places they are staying as *ko lwapeng* – at the *lelwapa* – even when they have no particular kinship with others living there. Especially when they are away from their natal families, Batswana designate their place of origin as *ko gae* – loosely, ‘at home’ – a term that might equally refer to a village, a neighbourhood, or a specific yard. The qualitative difference between the terms *lelwapa* and *gae* might be understood roughly as the difference between the English terms ‘house’ and ‘home’ – although

each is constituted differently from its English counterpart. The primary importance of the *lelwapa* to Tswana experiences and understandings of kinship comes from the role it plays in anchoring the *gae* (cf. Morton 2007).¹

As I was contemplating these possibilities from the *lelwapa*, Mmapula came out of her room, wrapping a heavy wool blanket around her waist. I sat up to greet her, asking where everybody had gone. 'They've gone to the lands. I'm going out to check someone,' she said, without further explanation. My Setswana was still too childlike for her to bother with long sentences. 'Watch these pots. Look, like this,' she added, lifting the heavy lid from one with a wire loop. It was full of broth and bones, a toothy cow jaw and socketed skull having floated to the surface. She slid a long, heavy stick with a short fork at one end into the pot and showed me how to lift and stir. The smell of boiled marrow and rancid flesh was overpowering. 'I'm coming,' she added – as Batswana usually say when they are going. And so, shuffling out of the yard, she left me alone with my stinking, bubbling cow heads.

It was already early evening by the time everyone started to filter back into the yard. Mmapula had generalised a little in her description of their whereabouts. Like Mmapula, Kelebogile and Lorato had gone out visiting friends in the village; they came home by mid-afternoon – in time, at any rate, to relieve me of cow head-stirring duty. The brothers Modiri, Kagiso, and Tuelo, and a couple of the boys, had gone out to the cattle post (*moraka*), three hours' walk north-west of the village along rough, sandy roads. The family's cattle roamed widely in search of water and good grazing, the lands they covered being shared and unfenced. The work of finding the herd, watering them, and checking their health was onerous. Kagiso and Tuelo returned at nightfall; Modiri and the boys stayed out for the weekend.

Oratile had gone out to *masimo* – the lands – with her two girls and her eldest sister's two sons. *Masimo*, too, was a three-hour walk away, in roughly the opposite direction from the cattle post, and was a place I had

¹ As noted above, *ko gae* can also refer more broadly to one's place of origin, including wards, villages, or even broader categories of belonging – particularly when one is away from them (cf. James 1999 on how migrant Sotho women in South Africa constructed the *gae* in language, dance, and music, for example). This extensibility may be linked to the movement among *lelwapa*, cattle post and lands I describe in the chapters that follow, which tracks from the heart of the village to its peripheries, passing through and linking the spaces of a community in ways that encompass it, while also being encompassed by it. Equally, it may be linked to the interconnected jural and land rights one retains in one's home village, even as an out-migrant (Townsend 1997: 408) – a recognition both of long familial histories connected to the land (Griffiths 2013) and of the right to found one's own *lelwapa*, cattle post, and lands there in the future.

visited frequently. Dipuo, the elderly patriarch of the family, lived there for much of the time I was on fieldwork. The yard at *masimo* was more developed than at the cattle post; the two dilapidated rondavels facing a rough courtyard had been the family's primary residence before they built in the village. A covered cooking area nestled against a stout barbed-wire fence anchored by upright logs dug in around the perimeter. Its layout was roughly similar to that of the village residence. A small, thorn-fenced kraal stood just next to the yard, with a larger, more complex one for the goats perhaps 20 metres away. The farmland itself was a ten-minute walk, across a dry riverbed; it generated much of the family's staple maize or sorghum and beans for the year, plus some to sell besides. Oratile, her eldest daughter Lesego, and Khumo's eldest son had stayed out there for the weekend, having been called by Dipuo to help him with the goats. The younger two, who had tagged along for company and to help with cooking and in the fields, found their way back well after dark.

This family migration turned out to be typical of weekends, but it was not unchanging. Not everyone left the yard every Saturday, and it wasn't always the same people going to the same places. Both the men and the women might stay at home to spend a morning doing their laundry; the women might put their efforts into cleaning the house and yard, the men into fixing vehicles, and children might stay home to study or help with these chores. If there were a funeral, wedding, or party to attend and help out with, it would be the focus of the weekend's journeys, residence, and work.

The family's movements were not simply interpretable in terms of gender or age, either, although certain patterns were evident. *Moraka*, for example, was a place primarily for the men and boys. In principle, everyone was welcome, but the women and girls in the yard, including myself, seldom tagged along. (In contrast, my brother – who visited the village once, for a week – was insistently invited out and eventually drawn into helping castrate the young bulls.) Modiri, as the eldest son, went there weekly without fail and was not expected to go anywhere else. *Masimo*, on the other hand, was the purview first of the elders, and second of the women. In fact, the family owned two *masimo*, the second over two hours' drive (or several hours' bus journey and walk) to the south-west of the village. Mmapula at stayed the distant lands for most of my time with the family. The women, boys, and girls were expected to help at both *masimo*, and they stayed there at length when they could.

There was also a seasonal aspect to these movements (not unlike that described by Schapera 1940: 27). In months of drought, and through much of the winter, Modiri and any of his available brothers would be out at *moraka* daily, taking extra food to the cattle and ensuring that the

weaker ones had not become bogged down in the viscous mud surrounding their dried-up watering holes. Similarly, throughout the growing year, from the times for sowing through weeding and harvest, the women and children would be expected to attend *masimo* as often as possible. The children were frequently called by Mmapula to join her at the lands for the duration of their school holidays; during quieter periods, the adult siblings would send out their children on their behalf. There was perhaps never a weekend when no one went either to the lands or to the cattle post; movement out and back was as constant as the work was unrelenting, and everyone at home routinely undertook both (see also Griffiths 2013: 216–17; Townsend 1997: 420). As a result, family members were often apart, separated and brought together in shifting patterns depending on age, gender, and the work of the season; and the people they stayed and worked with shifted too. In other words, it was not simply through staying and working together in the village *lelwapa* that the Legae family experienced kinship, but also through staying and working with different subsets of kin at the lands and cattle post, and through being sent to and called for among all three places.²

Of course, movement is not only an experience of home or kinship for Batswana. It is a critical element of sociality, and of personhood. It is no coincidence that the informal way of greeting someone in Setswana is to ask '*Le kae?*' or '*O kae?*' – 'Where are you?' (connoting 'How are you?') – often followed by questions about where you are coming from and where you are going (*O tswa kae? O ya kae?*). Visiting and accompanying people (the latter often described as 'taking halfway') and attending events are all major features of Tswana relationships, as we will see in the coming chapters; and each requires movement (Klaitz 2010; Livingston 2005; 2012; Schapera 1940: 168). And this is to say nothing of the frequency with which Batswana – especially, but not exclusively, men – may also work or attend school far from their homes, making mobility a critical feature of self-making and the life course. Even now, it is not unusual for a man's '[c]attle, job and family [to be] in three different places' (Townsend 1997: 416).

² This pattern of movement may indicate changes from the precolonial-era patterns surmised by the Comaroffs, in which '[l]eaving their houses, women moved out seasonally to the fields, bringing back the harvest, while men moved daily inward to the ward and chiefly courts ... spelling out the connection between the communal centre and the domestic periphery' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 137). At the same time, the Comaroffs' interpretation may be rather too neat – eliding the movement of men and boys to the peripheral cattle posts, for example, and downplaying gendered habits of movement and changes over the life course (Griffiths 2013; Townsend 1997).

However, the sort of movement undertaken between *lelwapa*, *moraka*, and *masimo*, its specific temporalities, and the work undertaken in each place integrate them into a specifically familial space – and simultaneously define who and what makes family. The frequency of movement, as well as its regularity, is the first characteristic that sets it apart. There are no other similarly distant spaces to and from which all (or most) members of a family customarily move as often as weekly or in season-specific cycles. The paths between all three places are well worn and the journeys back and forth frequent enough to take on an almost continuous, perpetual quality. This sense of constancy is enhanced by the fact that family members frequently stay at either *masimo* or *moraka* (as well as *lelwapa*) for short, long, and even semi-permanent stretches of time. Batswana organise geography through people and relationships: lands and cattle posts, like yards in the village, are known by the names of the people who stay there – in our case, as *kwa ga boLegae*, the place of the Legae family.³ Staying, with its associated ease of coming and going (both in the vicinity of each place and back and forth to the others), is very rare for anyone but people who are family members, and works to make people kin.

The ways in which these movements and ‘stayings’ are mobilised are also critical to their unique kin orientation. As we have seen above and will see in greater detail in Chapter 1, parents are able to call for and send their children and grandchildren – often over long distances, and even when those children have become adults – among these places, thereby establishing and responding to claims upon one another that reproduce the hierarchies and reciprocities of their relationships (see Klaitis 2010: 107, 119). These practices of movement and its mobilisation are linked to the reasons for that movement: namely, obligations to contribute to the family’s work and care. This rationale distinguishes movement among places of the *gae* from other sorts of work or care undertaken for friends, neighbours, and more distant relatives. While it is certainly deeply linked to kin spatialities (see Klaitis 2010: 31–3; Chapter 2), we will return to the question of contributing care in more detail in Part II. For our present purposes, it suffices to say that, taken together, the spatial habits described draw the courtyard the cattle post, and the lands into a coherent space that both defines and is defined by family – the *gae*.

³ Alternatively, the names of age-mates of the speaker from among the family would be substituted. See Griffiths (2013) for the ways in which Tswana life histories chart links between families and land over generations, thereby creating a shared understanding of ‘the local’ – yet another way, perhaps, of understanding what I describe here as the *gae*.

Many Batswana in the southern areas of the country hold lands and cattle posts (contrary to the account of the north in Morton 2007: 165). This landholding is not necessarily a sign of special wealth, although it has ramifications for family prosperity.⁴ Even before the colonial era, Batswana men who married expected to acquire not only a residential plot in the vicinity of their own relatives, but also *masimo* for their wives to plough and land to graze their cattle; these acquisitions were arranged through ward headmen and chiefs (Schapera 1940: 95, 105). Virtually every family I knew in Dithaba had both lands and a cattle post, as did friends and colleagues elsewhere around the country. Those who didn't enjoyed – in principle at least – the government-assured right to acquire them for free, much as individuals have a right to free residential land (see also Townsend 1997: 408). Since independence, district land boards and *kgotlas* have worked together to ensure that citizens can secure residential plots in their home villages and *masimo* nearby, as well as access to shared grazing on which *moraka* may be situated. In practice, residential plots have become harder to acquire as the government allows people to apply for plots anywhere in the country, and ameliorates demand by privileging applicants most likely to develop them quickly (a point to which we will return). Plot owners have also begun selling their property privately (see Griffiths 2013 for more on these trends). However, the ongoing political commitment to protecting access to *masimo*, *moraka*, and residential plots underscores the extent to which all are considered basic constitutive elements of the Tswana home.

Property beyond the *lelwapa*, lands, and cattle posts enjoys no such privilege or integration, in terms of either care or movement. Over the years, Mmapula and Dipuo had built a small house in a nearby town, which they rented out; but neither they, nor anyone else in the family, ever went to visit it, tend to it, or otherwise check on it. Many of the family members were unsure where exactly it was, and I never saw it. While it did generate a meagre, sporadic income, the rental property did not constitute a part of the family's lived experience of home.

⁴ I have deliberately avoided attempting to describe the Legae household in terms of class. As Deborah Durham (2020) notes, class categories – and especially the category of 'middle class' – are a rather poor fit for Botswana, particularly when 'theorised through the individual (income) or nuclear family', because they miss the common processes of sharing, gifting, circulation, and redistribution of resources by which Batswana achieve a 'wider participation in the "middle income" of the country' (ibid.). While access to and participation in the country's middle-income status remains highly unequal, it is also shared out in ways that confound categorisation in class terms. The Legaes, like other friends in Dithaba, also struggled with the question of what class they understood themselves or others to be in – and usually rejected the question as irrelevant.

The *gae*, then, is a divided, multiple, scattered yet bounded place, defined and integrated by the movement, staying, and care work of kin. Regardless of the other places in which one might work, live, or even build, the *gae* is the place in which one remains and to which one is inevitably drawn back (Geschiere 2003). But it is not changeless. As we have seen, there may well be more than one *masimo* or *moraka*; they are usually far removed from each other, and from the *lelwapa*; they may be used continuously, infrequently, or perhaps not at all; and, indeed, they may be swapped, sold, acquired, or given away with relative ease. They are also constantly being built and rebuilt (a point to which we will return; see also Morton 2007). In this sense, the *gae* is not only multiple but mutable. The continuous movement of kin between and among the spaces of the *gae*, to work and stay, therefore becomes critical to sustaining and integrating them over time. And this movement simultaneously binds people and places together and keeps them apart – articulating a tension between closeness and distance that defines not only the *gae*, but the Tswana family itself.

This tension becomes even clearer in light of the ways that *gae* are connected and reproduced. By custom, a Motswana has only one *gae*: either one's parents' home (including their *lelwapa*, *masimo*, and *moraka*); or, in the case of a married woman, her husband's parents' home. In practice, however, even married women often speak of their parents' home as *ko gae*, emphasising its link with their place of origin. When Mmapula took us to visit the yard in which she grew up, now uninhabited, she explained simply, '*Ke ko gae*' – this is home. Mmapula's identification with two *gae* suggests the ways in which the movement of women in particular serves to connect different *gae* with each other, while also keeping them apart (even now, married women are often discouraged from returning to their natal homes). Rather than simply splitting or fragmenting, the *gae* slowly but surely multiplies and expands. And in this expansion, as new *malwapa* (courtyards/families) are built and *magae* are both entangled with and separated from each other, the spatialities of wards and villages are structured, sustained, and extended – which is perhaps one reason why *ko gae* can also refer to wards and villages.

In his colonial-era account, Schapera warned of the 'disintegrating tendencies of frequent separation' (1940: 178) – here, in the context of labour migration – and suggested that 'real intimacy and sympathetic understanding are often lacking' as a result, such that 'home life ... does not really exist' (ibid.: 173). In many ways, similar conclusions are echoed in contemporary discourse around AIDS and family breakdown. I suggest, however, that separation and movement are as much integrative as disintegrative. Tswana kinship spatialities generate *dikgang*



Figure 3 *Masimo* – rondavels at the lands.

Source: D. S. Reece

(‘issues’ of risk, conflict, and irresolution); but rather than destroying home life, these *dikgang* seem to enable the negotiation of balance between closeness, distance, and movement that sustains and reproduces the Tswana family, especially its intergenerational relationships. In Chapter 1, I examine this possibility and its gendered dimensions.