

Part IV

'They Were Far Family'

Circulating Children and the Limits of Kinship

Go lemala ganamane ke go lala le mma yo.

The way to spoil a calf is to let it sleep with its mother.

'My aunt wanted somebody to go and stay with her in the city, one of the girls, so that she could take her for schooling, pay for each and every thing ...' Lesedi trailed off, looking wistful and laughing at herself a little. 'It's a kind of funny story,' she started over, and then hesitated, laughing uneasily again.

Lesedi and I sat in the University of Botswana library, where I had found her studying for her exams. After updating me on her cousin Tumi's condition – Tumi had finally been allowed to leave the hospital and return to their shared house – Lesedi had fallen to reminiscing about their childhood. Her usually bright, direct gaze had taken on a contemplative, inward-looking quality.

Lesedi and Tumi had grown up in the same yard, with their mothers' mother, Tumi's mother, and three other children of their mothers' siblings. Lesedi's mother was still alive then, moving back and forth across the nearby borders with Zimbabwe and South Africa to buy and resell clothes. She wasn't home often, although she visited from time to time. Her older sister stayed in a nearby city. 'Tumi's mother was not working,' Lesedi explained. 'Well, my mother was also not working at the time, not really' – income from itinerant selling was hardly reliable – 'so it wasn't just about that,' she said, piecing the situation together with some caution and uncertainty.

'My aunt¹ in the city was the first person at home to work, and help my grandmother,' she explained, having settled on a way of framing the tale. 'My uncles were all working, but they were married and looking after their wives. My aunt wanted one of us to go and stay with her, because

¹ Lesedi used 'aunt', 'grandmother', and 'uncles' in English, but the Setswana equivalents in this case would be *mmamogolo*, *nkuku*, and *bomalome*.

she had a baby, she wanted somebody to go and look after her boy, and also go to school.

'At the time we were suffering, you know, we were just staying at the lands.' She laughed again, with a hint of embarrassment. 'None of us had shoes or anything at that time; we would just go to school without shoes. So my aunt told us she was only going to take someone who had shoes. We had to go and ask for shoes from somebody, the neighbours or whoever. I went to the neighbours' place – there was one girl who was my age, so I asked to borrow her shoes. And she agreed. So I said, "Okay, it's fine. I'll come in the morning to take them."

'In the morning I slept late,' she said, chuckling at her own laziness. 'But I told Tumi the story, that I asked for shoes from the girl next door. So Tumi, early in the morning, she went there to take the shoes! Hey, Tumi was clever, you know? She took the shoes that were supposed to be mine.' When their aunt arrived in the yard that morning and found Tumi wearing shoes, she took the girl to live with her in the city.

'But Tumi grew up – my aunt really helped her,' Lesedi added, becoming reflective. The intervention had marked a profound shift of circumstances for Tumi. Having left her mother at home in the village, Tumi had moved to stay with her *mmamogolo* in the city and had been raised there. She had had the advantages of city schooling, of the food and clothes and comfort that her aunt, working in a well-paid job, could provide. Like the rest of their extended family, Tumi visited her home village at Christmas and during other holidays; she and Lesedi remained close. But she had few friends or acquaintances in the village, marking the extent to which the city had become her place. Given the apparently arbitrary nature of the original decision to take Tumi, Lesedi's taciturn way of relating the story took on a new clarity: such comparative advantage could easily have been a source of jealousy and bad feeling between her and her cousin. But Lesedi was carefully ungrudging. 'I was a little bit clever; I could manage to pass even when no one was interested in education at home. But Tumi might have struggled. Now you see her here, working. My aunt helped her.'

In Part IV, I explore Tswana practices of child circulation and the ways in which they differentiate degrees of relatedness across Tswana kin networks. Being called or sent to stay with a wide variety of relatives, or taking relatives in and looking after them, whether temporarily or semi-permanently, is a crucial and common experience of kinship for Batswana. For children and young people, living with grandparents, the siblings of either parent, and a range of more distant relatives, caring for and being cared for by them, constitutes a formative exposure to the people and relationships that make up their extended families. It makes

them kin. But more than simply mobilising relationships of care and thereby strengthening bonds between kin, I argue that child circulation plays an important role in differentiating kin as well: in establishing and reproducing degrees of relational nearness and distance, and ultimately in setting limits on relatedness. Like other tensions in family life, the tension of sustaining mutual responsibilities of care across extended family networks, while simultaneously ensuring that those networks are carefully distinguished and do not collapse in upon themselves, produces and is made legible in *dikgang* – conflicts and the processes of ethical reflection, negotiation, and irresolution that follow. And, as we have seen elsewhere, parallel tensions between effectively sustaining those networks and leaving space for *go itirela*, or self-making, exacerbate these *dikgang*.

At the same time, child circulation – as both a cause of and solution to familial *dikgang* – is a critical object of concern in assessing and addressing the repercussions of the AIDS epidemic. Among governmental and non-governmental organisations, it is simultaneously considered the ‘traditional’ practice best positioned to compensate for the supposedly widespread loss of parents and the ensuing ‘orphan crisis’; feared to be breaking down under the twin pressures of modernisation and disease; and viewed with concern as a practice that may render children prone to neglect and abuse.² In Botswana, formal fostering alternatives have been set out in law and piloted in practice, but they have failed despite a widespread sense of their necessity among social work professionals. In this context, child circulation is an especially useful lens through which to consider Tswana kinship, the effects of AIDS, and the legacies of institutional interventions that have emerged in the epidemic’s wake.

Circulation and Distinction

I have deliberately framed these chapters in terms of ‘child circulation’ rather than ‘fostering’, ‘adoption’, or even ‘parenting’. Early structural-functional work on the topic focused on defining and distinguishing adoption from fosterage – primarily by identifying the range of tasks involved in parenting and tracing which were transferred in which

² See Madhavan (2004) for a thoughtful example of this argument, made at the height of the pandemic in South Africa, and Block (2014: 714) for an overview of similar concerns in Lesotho. A significant branch of anthropological literature on child fostering in sub-Saharan Africa describes and responds to the third concern in particular (Archambault 2010; Archambault and de Laat 2010; Bledsoe 1990; Verhoef and Morelli 2007) – latterly concluding that it may be overstated. Alber et al. (2013b: 15) note a similar ambivalence in West African framings of children’s rights, where fostering is simultaneously held up as the best way to help children access schooling and the greatest risk for promoting child labour.

contexts (Goody 2013 [1982]). But, in practice, the two categories frequently blur together (Lallemand 2013 [1988]); and, as later critiques pointed out, identifying tasks and transferences downplayed the plurality of parental roles, their gendering, and the fact that most were processual, negotiated, and ongoing rather than properly transferrable (see Alber 2013: 79–107 for a detailed critique). Susan Lallemand (2013 [1988]) originally used 'the circulation of children' in part to avoid these assumptions and rigidities, and the phrase has since gained currency in ethnographic work from Peru (Fonseca 1986; Leinaweaver 2007a) to Alaska (Bodenhorn 2013). I adopt the phrase here to avoid assumptions about practice and affect with which the English terms 'parenting', 'adoption', and 'fostering' are laden, while bringing the situations I present into fruitful conversation with these globally diverse contexts.

The open-endedness of 'child circulation' is particularly suited to Botswana in a number of ways. In Botswana, arrangements made for (and by) children may be more or less permanent – as in the case of Lesedi staying with her grandmother, who raised her both before and after her mother's death; but they are also likely to be punctuated by a series of shorter-term circulations as well, as children are claimed by or sent to kin to offer help, or to stay for periods of schooling or work. The practice may not involve the child's physical relocation at all, or it may involve several relocations, including across the country. Perhaps most importantly, 'child circulation' leaves the question of agency open, making room for ways in which children circulate themselves, as well as ways in which they are circulated by both kin and institutions (see Archambault 2010 on children circulating themselves among the Maasai in Kenya; Leinaweaver 2007b for Peru). It gives a sense of movement appropriate to the Tswana experience and management of kin spatialities and associated dangers, too; children circulate not just between adults, but with them, or away from them, as the adults undertake their own movements (Coe 2013). At the same time, the term emphasises something specific to children's movements: both the highly transitory nature of children's residential patterns (e.g. Alber 2018; Alber et al. 2013b; Coe 2013) and a perpetual, cyclical element to them, giving an apt sense of the simultaneously interrupted and continuous temporality of the practice.

Notably, there is no term in Setswana for 'fostering' – whether in the sense of taking in the children of kin or non-kin – nor for 'foster child', although practices of asking for, giving, and taking children are widespread and long-standing, among family and even neighbours (Schapera 1940: 246–7; cf. Ingstad 2004). Cati Coe suggests that a similar absence in the vocabularies of West Africa may indicate that fosterage is

'an unmarked, and unremarked upon, aspect of daily life' (Coe 2013: 207; see also Alber et al. 2013b: 6). Friends whom I asked about this terminological gap explained it by saying, 'If I am sent a child, that child becomes my child,' underscoring the extent to which parenting responsibilities should be shared, and to which children ought to take all of their elders as *batsadi* (parents). However, these same friends took in the children of distant relatives as nannies and maids, treated them rather differently from their own children, and called them and were called by them using either the terms of their existing relationship or with reference to a 'real' parent (*malome, ngwana wa ga ...* – 'child of ...'³). 'Parenting' or 'parenthood' (*botsadi*) is therefore an equally problematic framing, for while it connotes critical kin ideals and encompasses a wide variety of caregiving arrangements in ways suitable for the term's highly inclusive Setswana usage, it does not clarify the discriminations among them that Batswana routinely make.

Of course, there is no term in Setswana for child circulation either, other than in descriptive phrases (focused on calling, sending, or taking). But its relative ethnographic and analytical open-endedness unsettles the assumptions attached to fostering in some strands of the anthropological literature. One long-standing theme in this work, globally, emphasises the role of fostering in creating, extending, strengthening, condensing, or multiplying kin ties, both between child and foster parent and between the child's natal and fostering families, especially where families are dispersed (e.g. Alber 2004; Bledsoe 1990; Bodenhorn 2013: 139; Carsten 1991; Lallemand 2013 [1988]; Leinaweaver 2007a; Meier 2013; Stack 1974: 62–89). This interpretive angle has proven productive, drawing our attention to processes of becoming and transforming kin, creating belonging, even to equality and social cohesion, and to the crucial roles children play in those processes (e.g. Alber 2003; 2018; Block 2014; Goody 2013 [1982]; Leinaweaver 2007a; 2007b). But it is a line of argument that seems to begin with what Roy Wagner (1977) describes as 'the traditional anthropological assumption of the innateness of kin differentiation ... [and the] human responsibility to integrate them' (1977: 623). That is, it takes separation as a given, a problem for relatedness that is overcome by creating connection, belonging, and integration. What, then, of contexts where selves are not only inter-subjective, but kin ties are potentially so dense, overlapping, and indeterminate that connection and integration pose the problem, rather than the solution? In Tswana practice, I suggest, child circulation is frequently

³ This distinction is milder and more mutual than Schrauwers describes among Indonesia's fostered 'Cinderella' children (1999), but a careful distinction nonetheless.

experienced as a process of segregation, distancing, and exclusion. In Part IV, I look at ways in which Tswana child circulation circumscribes the fraught intimacies of kinship, enacting a 'moral duty' not to integrate but 'to differentiate, and to differentiate properly' (ibid.). And, in keeping with Wagner's mention of the 'moral', I examine the ways in which *dikgang* shape this differentiation, in part by containing processes of ethical reflection to specific relationships, while actively avoiding them in others.⁴

Anthropological work on fostering also shares a concern with the economies of child circulation, considering it variously in terms of transactions and gifts, exchange and sharing – with special relevance for social mobility (Bledsoe 1990). Indeed, Lallemand's original analysis of child circulation was intended primarily to grasp its exchange dynamics – and specifically to reconsider the practice in terms of alliance, concerned not just with parent–child relations but with anticipating, enabling, or replacing marital ones (2013 [1988]: 61–2).⁵ Coe notes that even previous studies analysing fosterage in terms of the 'transfer, sharing, delegation, surrender and circulation of parental rights' rendered 'parenthood a form of property' (2013: 202) that could be transacted. Taking a slightly different tack, Erdmute Alber et al. (2013b) emphasise the expectation common across West Africa that children are born for their wider families and should be shared as food is shared – an extension of the notion that kin is a form of wealth. Janet Carsten's description of children's movement among Malays bridges these frameworks, noting that child circulation – prefigured by marriage exchanges – 'blurs the distinction between sharing and exchange in that it may be interpreted either as

⁴ There are, of course, a wide range of ways in which children of different ages may be circulated, including between friends and their kin, or into the care of church leaders or other respected public figures. In some cases, these forms of circulation may crosscut kin groupings or create alternative networks of kin-like relations (for example, the *losika la semoya* or 'spiritual family' that Mma Maipelo sought to establish in her Gaborone church, as described by Klaitz (2010)). These relations may be instigated by the children themselves, too. However, the more kin-like these ties become, the more consternation they seem to cause natal families – suggesting that the expectation or moral norm is that such circulations should create distinctions among kin, rather than connections between them.

⁵ Child circulation is not, to my knowledge, understood in these terms in Botswana – although there was at least one unsavoury connection between child circulation and marriage. The Adoption Act (1953) was infamous among my social work colleagues in government for providing for the marriage of an adopted child by their (opposite-sex) adoptive parent once they reached the age of 18. My colleagues attributed this clause to the degeneracy of the British colonial government and frequently used it as an example to emphasise the need to update pre-independence laws still on the books.

exchange between discrete units or as sharing within an expanded unit' (Carsten 1991: 438).

The ambiguity between children's capacity to bind and distinguish family units in Carsten's account has echoes in Tswana practices of child circulation. However, in keeping with the economies of kinship explored in Part II, I suggest that Tswana ideals around child circulation are framed primarily in terms of contributions, which also subsume sharing and exchange; and that these contributions are not always reciprocal or reciprocated, nor unambiguously positive (see Block 2014: 714 on Lesotho for a similar point). Circulating children both *are* contributions and *make* contributions; they are both objects and agents of care. Children may be requested from or offered by one's siblings, one's children, the family of one's *malome*, and the full range of paternal and maternal kin – people with whom one would otherwise have long-standing contributory relationships of various kinds. In these cases, the child herself is a contribution to the management and completeness of one's household on behalf of those figures. But once moved, the children bear a responsibility to contribute help and care, including mobilising resources from their natal homes and other sources (including NGOs and government). The child's capacity to meet expectations of contribution, the host family's willingness and ability to contribute care in ways that benefit the child and her projects of self-making in turn, and the child's natal family's sense of whether their contribution to the host family is being adequately matched are all subject to ongoing assessment and reflection – and are therefore potential points at which *dikgang* emerge.

In Lesedi's brief account above, we begin to see how the practice of circulating children among extended families maps experimental extensions of many of the key practices of kin-making we have explored in earlier chapters: moving, staying, being called, and being sent among a multiplicity of 'kin spaces'; contributing care, through the provision of things and the work attendant upon them, in ways that build mutual obligation as well as personhood; and even making oneself and one's relationships and capacities (such as being able to mobilise shoes from neighbours) visible and known in ways that ground opportunities *go itirela*, to self-make. And across all of these experimental extensions, *dikgang* emerge – making child circulation a practice in which the full range of possible familial conflicts is condensed.⁶ As Alber (2018: 144)

⁶ See Alber et al. (2013b: 9–10) for a description of conflict in child fostering situations across West Africa; and Bledsoe (1990) for an early exploration of conflicts and fosterage among the Mende, to which we will return.

notes for Benin, conflicts around circulated children in particular risk triggering conflicts between 'taking' and 'giving' households, but also conflicts between husband and wife, and potentially their respective kin, with broad implications for the family's moral standing. In the Tswana case, I suggest that the management of such densely potent *dikgang* works primarily to assess and establish the limits of the experimental extensions of kin-making undertaken in circulating children, and to assert distinctions among kin. Family is segregated into those who contribute and manage resulting *dikgang* together, for example, and are therefore close, and those who do not, or cannot, and are therefore distant.⁷ In the process, circulated children not only learn to accept hierarchies of gender and generation (Alber 2018: 140) but also to identify relational distance and appropriate ways of sustaining relatedness across it while carefully reproducing it.

In Chapter 10, I explore the spectrum of Tswana child circulation practice, the range of *dikgang* it maps, and the differentiation between 'near' and 'far' kin it produces. In Chapters 11 and 12, I consider two comparatively atypical situations involving the circulation of children among non-kin: one in which a young man placed himself with the Legaes, a family to which he was unrelated, in response to perceived witchcraft and abuse at home; and one in which a pilot government programme formally removed children from their family and placed them with unrelated 'foster parents'. Considered exclusively from the perspective of care and kin-making processes, all of these practices might be assumed to represent creative extensions and adaptations of – or at least substitutions for – kinship in times of crisis. However, comparison among these examples, paying attention to *dikgang*, makes clear the critical role that child circulation plays in continuously differentiating specific relational distances among kin, and in distinguishing kin from non-kin. And it illustrates continuities in child circulation and parenting practice that extend across the 'crisis of care' that AIDS is assumed to have created.

⁷ Notably, in the differing 'constellations' of fosterage described by Verhoef and Morelli, those organised across the greatest relational distances corresponded with the greatest likelihood of conflict (2007: 46–8).