

Introduction

‘Ao!’ the elderly woman exclaimed, squinting with contempt. ‘Does this person have no manners? Doesn’t she know she should greet us by saying *dumelang*, *batsadi* [hello, my parents]?’

It was early evening and shadows were lengthening across the dusty *lelwapa*, the low-walled courtyard huddled between the small houses of the yard. The old woman sat on stitched-together sacks laid on the smooth cement *stoep*, her back against the wall of the main house, where the shadows were deepest and coolest. I had a passing familiarity with the yard from beyond its fence line, but had just entered it for the first time, mumbling a shy *dumelang* – hello. The simple greeting was about the limit of my Setswana; I could scarcely understand the old woman’s reprimand. But I could tell I’d already messed up somehow. I stood there, bewildered, and said nothing.

‘Hei! You, old woman, do you speak English?’ A woman about my age, perched on the low courtyard wall, came unexpectedly to my defence. ‘Why should you expect this one to know Setswana?’ The elderly woman looked grudgingly at the younger – her daughter, it later turned out. Then she shot me a surly look and harrumphed. A child emerged from the house, carrying a plastic chair, and set it down next to me, her eyes wide. I glanced around, uncertain what had been said; I hadn’t planned to stay. The woman who had defended me nodded at the chair. I sat down. We all remained silent.

I had come on an awkward errand. I knew the older woman’s teenage granddaughter, Lorato,¹ from the local orphan care centre, where I was a volunteer. I knew her son Kagiso, who worked at the project, too. I had often walked Lorato and her friends home from the centre as far as their respective gates, and they frequently came to visit me when the project was closed, sometimes staying to eat or to help around the house. Lorato and her friends had helped make me feel at home in the village in those

¹ All of the names in this book – including the names of villages – are pseudonyms, unless noted otherwise.

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first months of my life there, showing me its shortcuts, sharing its rumours and dramas, laughing at my confusions and mistakes. But I knew very little about their families. Generic stories circulated at the centre: accounts of caregivers making their orphaned charges take on unfair amounts of work around the house, refusing to buy them clothes or toiletries, treating them differently from the other children of the yard. My visit that day was the first time I had met one of these families in person – and the circumstances did not seem to bode well.

A few days previously, I had seen Lorato's grandmother standing outside the tall fence that surrounded the centre, yelling across its open playing areas at some volunteers in the yard. She had sounded aggrieved and angry. I asked someone what she had said, and was told that she was insisting that the lot of us were attempting to ruin her family. No one responded to her directly, nor did they invite her in or ask about what had happened or what her specific concerns were. They stood where they were, listening but not getting involved, until she finished what she had to say and went home. But the allegation had been serious.

'*Haish, ke kgang*,' a friend at the project commented wearily, telling me about the incident afterwards: this is a problem. He had a degree in social work, and explained that her complaint was the sort that could have the organisation called in front of the *kgotla*, the village tribal administration and customary court. It wasn't the first time the organisation had fallen foul of families in the village. But the management was haphazard in its approach to such misunderstandings, often leaving it to staff and volunteers to orchestrate compromises. My friend suggested that, as the volunteer closest to Lorato, I should pay her family a visit. 'Get inside the gate,' he specified. 'Otherwise that old woman will be even more insulted.'

That first visit, in the gathering summer of 2004, was brief and uncomfortable. When Lorato translated the exchange for me later, I thought it odd that her grandmother – whom I call Mmapula – should insist that I call her 'parent', especially given her evident displeasure with me and the organisation in which I worked. I assumed it was a generic means of demanding respect from one's juniors. But in the years that followed, no one else ever required it of me quite the way Mmapula had. She was being both deliberate and literal in ways I could not have anticipated.

A few days after my initial visit, Mmapula visited the centre in person to request my help in guiding Lorato's behaviour there and at home, where she had begun to shirk her responsibilities. I was taken aback by the request, but agreed to have a talk with the young woman. Thereafter, I began to visit the family – the Legaes – on occasion, at first just to sit awkwardly with them, later to chat a little or play with the children.

Then Lorato's aunts began visiting me, often bringing the children with them, especially on their way out to or back from 'the lands', as they called the fields the family ploughed outside the village. In time, I was invited to go with them and help with the harvest. Later, we would venture farther afield, as they invited me to attend weddings and funerals with them. The older children were sent to stay with me during their exams or to help me at home. I began to wonder whether, at our first meeting, Mmapula had been making a specific claim on me: whether she was demanding acknowledgement and respect as Lorato's parent in her own right, but also drawing me into a web of obligations by claiming recognition as *my* parent, too. Either way, we both gradually came to take that claim seriously – and it defined the terms on which I was drawn into social life in Botswana.

In late 2005, I moved from the orphan care project to a job with Botswana's Department of Social Services, coordinating non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that served children orphaned by Botswana's AIDS pandemic around the country. At the same time, drawing on my time with the Legaes, I began to question the discourses that dominated the NGO and government spheres in which I worked: of the neglect and abuse of orphaned children, and of inevitable family breakdown in the face of AIDS. My experience with the Legaes – unquestionably impacted but by no means destroyed by the epidemic – made me question the effects of AIDS on families, as well as the rationales and legacies of government and non-governmental interventions launched in response. Those questions shaped my personal and professional life until I left Botswana in 2008, and they took me back three years later to undertake the research project on which this book is based.

This book gives an ethnographic account of Tswana family life in a time of rapid socio-political change, epidemic disease, and unprecedented intervention on the part of governmental and non-governmental agencies. It is grounded in the everyday experience of one family – the Legaes – but draws in the interlinked lives of neighbours, friends, workmates, and churchmates, as well as the social workers, NGO staff, and volunteers who live and work among them. It traces the dense, shifting relationships of a single extended household, but also the unexpected ways in which these relationships entangle and bind together a village and a district, and extend right across the country. It also challenges the widespread assumption – common to humanitarian, development, and public health interventions in Botswana, to government and non-governmental programmes, and to representations in the country's media – that AIDS has destroyed families by showing how crisis *creates*, recalibrates, and reproduces kin relations among the Tswana. And it

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argues that government and NGO agencies that intervene in families during times of crisis – often in relevant, culturally appropriate ways, but with quite different notions of crisis and how it ought to be addressed – may be having more lasting, deleterious effects on families than the epidemic itself.

Each of the following chapters engages with ways in which the Tswana make family: from living, eating, and working together to managing a household and contributing to one another's care; from forming intimate relationships to bearing and raising children and negotiating marriage; from coming of age to holding parties and burying the dead. I argue that every one of these processes simultaneously produces risk, conflict, and crisis, which I have glossed with the Setswana term *dikgang* (sing. *kgang*). These *dikgang* need constantly to be addressed in the right ways by the right people; who ought to address what and how is not simply prescribed by age, generation, and gender, but establishes relative authority and reworks familial relationships. *Dikgang* are seldom, if ever, fully resolved; negotiations are fraught and uncertain and may escalate misunderstandings or introduce new conflicts, while solutions are often tacit or suspended. But their aim is not to resolve problems so much as to engage those involved in an ethical process of reflecting on the ways they affect one another, the quality and history of their relationships. Tswana kinship, in other words, is generated and experienced as a continuous cycle of conflict, mediation, and irresolution; it creates crisis – and to some extent thrives on it. In this sense, *dikgang* do not mark breakdowns in or failures of kinship; they are a critical means of constituting and sustaining family. In a structurally fluid kinship system like that of the Tswana (to which I return below), the ongoing negotiation of *dikgang* charts the limits of kin relations, defines different modes of relatedness within those limits, and establishes specific interdependencies and distinctions between the familial and the extrafamilial as well.² *Dikgang* draw our attention to the surprisingly effective ways in which families respond to crises like the AIDS epidemic, creatively accommodating the change crisis brings while simultaneously asserting continuity.

The unexpected family-making effects of crisis among the Tswana encourage us to rethink kinship broadly, as an ideal and in practice. I suggest that kinship may be best understood as something that straddles

² I use 'kinship' and 'family' more or less interchangeably throughout this book. I take both to involve abstract ideals, structural dynamics, and moral codes as much as the concrete practices and processes of everyday lived experience. By taking them together, I hope to challenge latent associations between kinship and 'small-scale', 'pre-modern' societies, implying that families are somehow more modern – allowing us to trace connections and patterns of influence across social domains, and globally, with greater ease.

a series of competing – even opposed – relational, ethical, and practical imperatives. In Botswana and beyond, families are expected to persist indefinitely, while accommodating both massive socio-political change and the tumultuous upheavals involved as family members attain new roles or new status, as new relationships are incorporated, or as generational roles and responsibilities shift over time. In many contexts, families are idealised as sources of intimacy and belonging – although that intimacy brings unique risks and there is danger or flux in that belonging. At the same time, families must find ways to create distance sufficient to reconfigure their relationships and incorporate their own growth and reproduction. Families work to include and exclude (sometimes the same people), to share and separate, to display and conceal; they are oriented simultaneously to histories and futures that are both domestic and political, public and private. Being family requires a delicate balance to be sought between these and many other contradictory and mutually unsettling demands; but that balance is elusive and easily upset, and needs continuous recalibrating. Conflict and crisis, I argue, emerge when the balance is off-kilter and the paradoxes most prominent; reflexive efforts at negotiating and addressing conflict are one ongoing means of recalibration. Conflict, in this sense, is not simply an unfortunate exception to a general rule of kinship harmony; it is a key factor in the flexibility, persistence, and specificity of kinship as lived experience. While this book explores the unique tensions arising in Tswana kinship structure and practice, it also invites comparison with similar tensions in other contexts; and it proposes conflict as one way of rethinking kinship in potentially global, comparative terms.

My appearance in the Legae household in response to *kgang*, and as an object of *kgang* myself, foreshadows a linked trend with which this book is concerned: the widespread involvement of governmental, non-governmental, and transnational agencies in the Tswana family, an involvement that has increased sharply since the start of Botswana's AIDS epidemic. *Dikgang* mark the points at which, and shed light on the rationales and ethics by which, organisations intervene in families. The programmes these organisations run – commonly conceptualised and delivered by Batswana, if often funded by foreign donors – are frequently well-aligned with the needs and practices of the families they serve, partially embedding institutions and practitioners in networks of kin. But their dominant approaches to *dikgang* – as problems requiring definitive solutions, best offered by professionals – diverge significantly from familial logics. This divergence creates new, volatile *dikgang*, involving a wider and more unpredictable range of actors, and novel, opaque frameworks for the reflexive assessment of what *dikgang* mean.

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In their scope, complexity, and ethical repertoire, these new *dikgang* often complicate and undermine the family's usual means of response. The partial embeddedness that makes agencies effective, then, also makes them a risk – and the sort of risk they present exacerbates the conflicts and crises families already face, undermining the support these agencies seek to provide. Gradually, these new *dikgang* rework relationships among kin and between the home, the village, and the *morafe* (tribal polity). *Dikgang*, in this sense, mark key ways in which the spheres of kinship and politics are linked, and describe the work by which they are distinguished and their relationships managed by families and agencies alike.

Families in Botswana interact with a vast array of organisations, ranging from the governmental through the non-governmental to the informal: from clinics and schools to police and the customary court or *kgotla*; from government agencies for water, agriculture, or land to churches of many denominations; from support groups and home-based care projects to rights advocates and development projects; from burial societies and small-scale savings groups to choirs and dance or drama groups. The breadth of government programmes is substantial, and they play a significant role in many people's lives – whether by providing local development opportunities or old-age pensions, agricultural subsidies or destitution relief, pre-school places or post office-based banking services. NGOs offer nearly as wide a range of services, sometimes in partnership with government. While the arguments I set out about *dikgang* could be made for any of these programmes or interventions, I focus on two that have become especially influential in Botswana's time of AIDS: orphan care projects (run by NGOs) and social work offices. I spent over four years working with both types of organisation before undertaking this research. In that time, I became sharply aware of how unpredictable their programming could be in its effects – much to the frustration of the highly qualified, experienced, and dedicated Batswana who deliver it. In this book, I trace those mixed results: first, to divergent understandings and interpretations of *dikgang*; and then to a subtler but deeper tension between conflicting expectations, experiences, and practices of kinship that animate the work of these agencies. I suggest that NGOs and social work offices working with families operate with specific, conflicting, and inexplicit visions of what families ought to be like; and, in many ways, they work like conflicted families themselves. They also work within larger political projects for which these kinship orientations are crucial means of depoliticising, naturalising, and reproducing power. But the family-like processes and ideals by which these organisations are animated are simultaneously Tswana, British, American, European, and so

on – reflecting the range of family models that underpin professional training, benchmarking, ‘best practice’, international guidelines, and donor funding regimes. This profusion of kinships – mutually recognisable but disparate and carefully obscured – complicates the effects of practitioners’ everyday work and undermines the political projects within which they are embedded. In the following chapters, I give an account of orphan care centres and social work offices that draws out the ‘persistent life of kinship’ (McKinnon and Cannell 2013) in their work and traces its effects as an unruly, disruptive force that collapses distinctions between the familial and the political in unpredictable ways.

In this introduction, I situate these arguments first in the context of Botswana, and then in broader anthropological conversations around kinship and crisis, humanitarian and development intervention, and HIV and AIDS. I then explore the ethical and methodological questions that emerge in studying *dikgang*, both by being family and in NGO and governmental interventions. Finally, I provide a summary of the chapters to follow.

Botswana: A Potted History

Botswana is a landlocked, sparsely populated country in the heart of Southern Africa, which takes pride in an international reputation for peace, stability, and good governance. It has become commonplace to describe the country as ‘Africa’s miracle’, especially in light of its rapid rise to prosperity after achieving independence from Britain in 1966 and the discovery of diamonds (see Mogalakwe and Nyamnjoh 2017: 2 for an overview of the case made for its exceptionalism). And yet Botswana has struggled persistently with some of the highest rates of HIV infection in the world (UNAIDS 2021) – an apparent anomaly in its otherwise auspicious record. The unusual combination of a stable government and economy, evident political will, and a disastrous epidemic has drawn floods of resources into the country for over three decades: funds, personnel, infrastructure, organisations, and programmes of every stripe. In that time, Botswana has produced responses to AIDS that are globally recognised as ‘best practice’, including the free public provision of antiretroviral treatment (UNAIDS 2003). Still, new infection rates remain high for the region, and the prevalence of HIV among adults remains near 20 per cent (UNAIDS 2020). In this section, I provide a brief historical background to contextualise this ostensible conundrum, and set the scene for the analytical themes through which I approach it.

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Botswana's relative success is often linked to the unique circumstances of its colonisation. Aware of Cecil Rhodes' ambitions in the region, the dispossession of chiefs, and the violent maltreatment of their people that occurred under the auspices of the British South Africa Company (BSAC) in South Africa and Rhodesia, the paramount chiefs of the three most powerful *merafe* (tribal polities) in what is now Botswana chose a novel approach. In 1895, the Three *Dikgosi* (chiefs), as they were to be known later, travelled to England in the company of missionaries from the London Missionary Society. They made a request to Joseph Chamberlain, then Colonial Secretary, that Bechuanaland be made a protectorate of the British Empire, governed directly from London rather than by Rhodes' BSAC. When Chamberlain refused, the chiefs undertook a highly successful tour of England, campaigning in churches and at public events. They garnered the support of temperance, anti-slavery, and humanitarian groups and of many of the churches, which in turn lobbied Chamberlain to reconsider his position. Concerned that it might become an election issue, he did reconsider – on the condition that the chiefs cede the land necessary for Rhodes' railway and that they accept the introduction of taxes (Sillery 1974; Tlou and Campbell 1984).

Bechuanaland was ruled indirectly, from Mafeking in present-day South Africa, and was governed in large part as a labour reserve for its southern neighbour (Parsons 1984) – a role it continued to play well beyond its eventual independence in 1966. The British colonial government invested minimally in administering the protectorate and famously left the country with only seven kilometres of tarred road and a capital – Gaborone – with little more than a railway station. And yet the legacy of colonisation, and of the ambitious missionisation that preceded it, is evident everywhere: in Botswana's government structures, in its parallel systems of customary and common law, in the disappearance of initiation rites, in changes to bridewealth payments, and in much of its education, health, and social welfare provision (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Griffiths 1997; Schapera 1933; 1940; 1970). Nonetheless, the strategic foresight of the Three Chiefs, combined with the impression that Bechuanaland was little more than an arid desert, spared the nascent nation some of the more egregious violence, rapacious resource stripping, and racist political landscaping that characterised the experience of other colonies in the region. Botswana generally hold the intervention of the Three Chiefs as a defining moment in the history of the nation; one of the country's few monuments, *The Three Dikgosi*, was raised to them. The influential role of churches and humanitarian groups in this tale speaks to the long-term involvement of international civil society in the

country's political and social life, dating back to a period well before the current spate of NGO programmes.

At independence in 1966, Botswana was one of the poorest countries in the world, considered a 'hopeless basket case' (Colclough and McCarthy 1980). However, diamonds were discovered within a year, and the country's fortunes changed rapidly. Botswana is currently the world's largest producer of diamonds by value (Krawitz 2013) – although it is only in recent years that the value-added aspects of sorting and polishing have been kept within the country. The diamond industry, overseen by the government in partnership with De Beers, has allowed Botswana to take a strongly state-led – and highly successful – approach to development (Taylor 2004: 53–4). Roads, schools, and clinics have been built and staffed countrywide, and a wide range of social welfare schemes have been introduced, from old-age pensions to drought relief. Until the global economic downturn of 2007–2009, Botswana's diamond revenues were sufficient for the country to avoid dealings with the World Bank or International Monetary Fund altogether, and thereby sidestep the economic and political legacies of insupportable debt and structural adjustment that have plagued many other African countries since the 1980s. Botswana is currently ranked a middle-income country by the World Bank.

At the same time, for decades Botswana has routinely been in the top echelon of countries globally for income inequality. In 2020, it was listed as the fourth most unequal country in the world in terms of income distribution (World Population Review 2020). Domestic rates of employment have improved since the era of labour migration, but job opportunities remain limited, with unemployment rates averaging around 18 per cent over the past three decades (CEIC 2019). While the economy has diversified around tourism and beef exports, it remains heavily dependent on diamonds – a fact brought home during the financial crisis, when diamond markets collapsed. Many Botswana – including the Legae – continue to rely on subsistence farming, a tenuous business in a place that faces increasingly frequent and devastating droughts as the global climate emergency progresses (Solway 1994). At the latest count, nearly 20 per cent of Botswana's population still live in poverty, although the rate is significantly higher – nearly 50 per cent – in a number of remote districts, and poverty disproportionately affects Botswana's indigenous peoples, the San (World Bank 2015).³

³ See Mogalakwe and Nyamnjoh (2017) and Mogalakwe (2008) for detailed analyses of Botswana's other underexamined challenges and shortcomings as a liberal democracy.

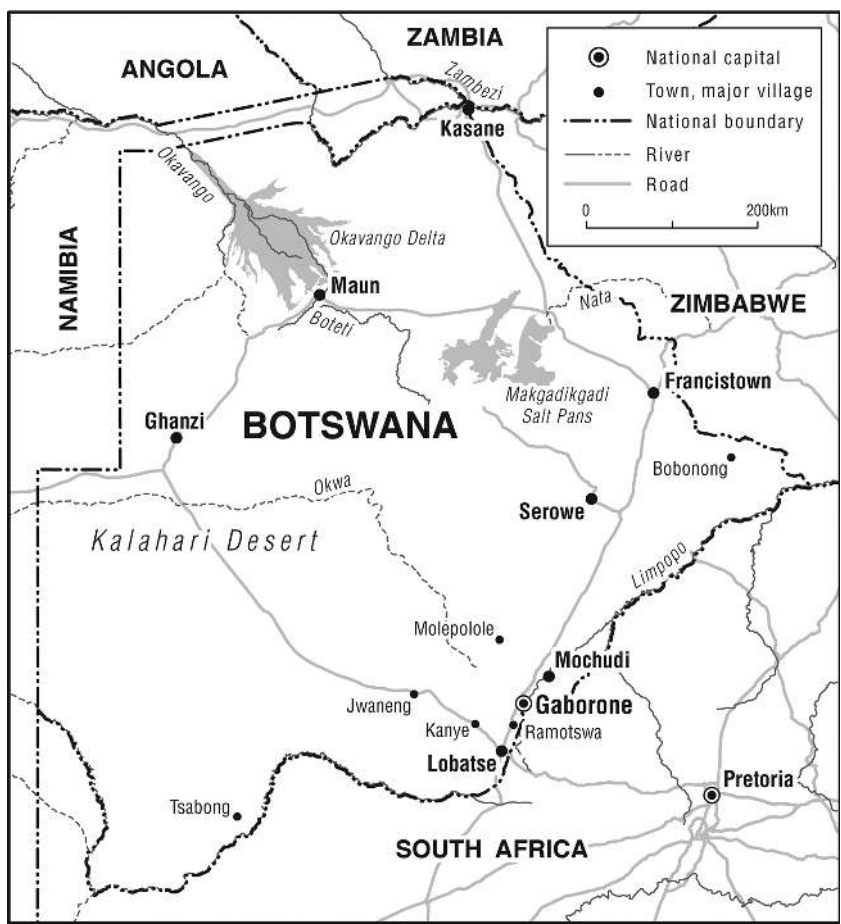


Figure 1 Map of Botswana.

The major thoroughfares of Botswana, built on the proceeds of the diamond trade, trace a rough diamond between larger settlements scattered sparsely around the edge of the country, avoiding for the most part the driest expanses of the Kgalagadi (Kalahari) desert at its heart (Figure 1). The building of roads and opening up of trade routes were key to the wide distribution of the state’s resources and services (Livingston 2019) but also stimulated what seemed, on the face of it, to be a major urbanisation of the country. Gaborone, Botswana’s capital, was one of the fastest growing cities in Africa when I first arrived there in 2003 (Cavric et al. 2004). And yet, at month ends and on major holidays,