

11 Living Outside

Ngwana e o sa leleleng o swela tharing.

The child who does not cry dies in its carrying-skin.

Arriving home one twilit evening, trading loud greetings over my shoulder with others in the yard, I walked into the sitting room and had a shock. An unfamiliar young man sat there, alone, glowering up at me from the edge of the couch. I greeted him; he looked away without response. I passed through into the kitchen to put the kettle on, and when I returned I found him unmoved: leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, he clutched a book and stared into a dark corner of the room.

I went out into the *lelwapa* and asked Modiri surreptitiously who the young man was. He shrugged, took a drink of his tea, and said the boy was waiting for Kagiso.

Later that night, as we sat scattered around the *lelwapa* after dinner, I noticed Kagiso's voice in the house. The lights had been turned on in the sitting room, giving it a pale blue glow through the window. The door was closed. I asked Kelebogile what was happening, and she explained that the young man attended church with them and had come to ask help from Kagiso – their sometime preacher – because his family was bewitching him. They were enclosed together in the sitting room praying intently, and they stayed that way until long after I had gone to bed.

The next morning, I was surprised to see the same young man, now in school uniform, drinking his morning tea by the fire.

I didn't learn the young man's name for almost two weeks. He and I circled around each other warily, each of us equally confused by the presence of the other. We seldom spoke, unsure how to take one another or what to say. I would sometimes go for days without seeing him, and he seemed to come and go freely, but a great stack of his school papers and books had appeared on the bookshelf in Kagiso's room, where he slept. I heard from the younger children in the yard that Kagiso had gone to visit the boy's family to tell them where he was; he had visited

the social worker and the school to make similar reports and discuss alternative arrangements – of which, apparently, there were none. There the matter rested.

His name was Bonolo. He had been staying with us for eight months before I asked to sit down with him and hear his whole story. During that time, he had integrated more or less seamlessly with the Legaes. He took on chores of his own almost immediately, including starting the fire in the morning, sweeping, and occasionally doing dishes; he often also went out to the cattle post at weekends to help with the heavy work of finding, herding, and feeding the dispersed herd (see also Archambault and de Laet 2010: 196 on chores and integration). He spent many of his week-nights at Kagiso's shop, helping out and passing the time with the Legae children who worked there. His clothes were mostly hand-me-downs from both Kagiso and Tuelo, and he was served and ate at home with everyone else. He was well liked by the children of the yard and became close to them, spending much of his time at home in their company.

But there were subtle limits to his integration, too. Unlike the other young people of the house, for example, I didn't feel I could send him for things, or ask for his help. Other adults in the house seldom sent him for anything, although he would often volunteer to go with one of the other boys when they were sent. The chores he had taken on – at home, at the cattle post, at the shop – were all voluntary; I never saw him being asked to undertake any specific tasks, nor scolded for neglecting any, although the men might invite him along on errands. His relationships with the adults in the yard seemed to remain aloof. While he would sometimes seek help with homework or engage in lively debates around various Christian precepts, he did not seek the adults out for advice or attach himself to any of them particularly. And they, in turn, remained aloof from him and avoided inquiring into his background or life. Kagiso – who was running three small businesses, working as a full-time driver, and conducting a clandestine courtship – was seldom home or available. While Bonolo clearly considered him a sort of mentor, their connection did not seem to run much deeper than that.

As companionable as they found him, none of the family members – not even the children – referred to Bonolo using kin terms either. Occasionally family members teasingly referred to Bonolo as *ngwana wa ga Kagiso* – Kagiso's child – but these comments were used in humorous banter among the women, seldom made in front of Kagiso, and I never heard Bonolo called that to his face. Kagiso, moreover, was never called *Rra go Bonolo* (father of Bonolo), even in jest. The closest comparison was with the foundling calf that Modiri had brought back from the cattle post. The women's commentary seemed to be more about playfully recognising an unexpected potential to provide care in

both men, without asserting any real sort of obligation or relatedness. Indeed, the commentary was perhaps more about the fact that neither man had children of their own, while expressing the hope that one day they might.

While there had been occasional meetings between Kagiso and his parents, Mmapula and Dipuo, about Bonolo's situation, these had never involved the rest of us; we heard of them as if by rumour, long after the fact. (As Bonolo pointed out to me, these meetings never involved him, either.) Barring Tshepo, who was Bonolo's age-mate and former classmate, none of us had any real idea about Bonolo's circumstances. We speculated and swapped overheard snippets freely among ourselves, but nobody asked.

Bonolo had a slow, intense, non-committal gaze when he was listening that almost inevitably dissolved into an affable, indiscriminate smile when he spoke – whether he spoke of happy things, or frustrations, or things to which he took exception. So I was uncertain how he actually felt about the notion of being interviewed, or about anything else for that matter. But he was insistent that people should know his story, and even that I should use his real name (which I have done). In fact, he insisted on writing his entire story out, in longhand, before we began talking.

The story, written in English in a confident, broad hand, traced his movements among all the places he had been raised. Having spent time initially in a small town in the south-east, he moved to the northern border of Botswana to begin schooling. He stayed there for several years before moving to Dithaba for a year, and then to the western desert, all by the time he was 12. After a couple of years there, staying with family and in a boarding school, he came back to Dithaba again, and had stayed there ever since. When he moved the first time, at perhaps seven years old, so had his mother – not north with him, but to the far north-eastern corner of the country. By that time, he reflected, she was working and didn't seem to be 'into alcohol or any habits unusual ... and me also, I saw my photos ... it seems like I was well provided [for]'. He took a curiously distant, sceptical perspective on himself. He surmised that they had had to separate and move 'because of life'. His mother and two of his siblings still lived together in Francistown, and an older sister lived near them with her own children. Another of his sisters 'lived outside', as he described his own circumstances, but he could not say where, or with whom, or why.

He was in Form Four¹ when his relatives began to abuse him, as he described it, making him 'do too much household chores and shopping'. The rest of the children in the yard had been too small to help with work

¹ Form Four is the fourth year of high school and the first of senior high school.

around the home, and he had been left with all of it. This complaint, a usual one for people his age, was what he said had finally brought him to our yard. His account made no mention of the witchcraft he had cited on his first appearance. 'None of them came to hear why I runned [sic],' he said of his natal family. He lavished praise on the Legaes as his hosts, noting that 'my mother didn't contribute any cent, and they didn't demand nothing [sic]'. He added: 'I wish the most high to drive me not to forget them ... they are my saviours and trusted friends.'

To this narrative, Bonolo had added a family chart. On one page, he drew in his mother's parents and their descendants, down to his sister's children. Down the right-hand side of the page, from his mother's father, he drew an additional, long line to a second grandmother, with a generic dichotomous split line below her, and nothing else. He focused on his mother's family, telling me about her siblings and their children. As we talked, I realised that he had not been staying with any of them in Dithaba – indeed, none of them were in the village at all. I asked him to tell me more about the second grandmother he had sketched at right angles to his grandfather, and her family.

He explained that she and his grandfather had not been married, and so he had not sketched in that side of the family. He began to do so, with some hesitation. Slowly I realised that one of the women on this branch of the family tree was the one who had taken him to school in Ghanzi; and that one of her brothers was the *malome* who had followed up Bonolo's 'issue' with us occasionally at home. He then explained that he had been living with this grandmother, two of her daughters, and their children in Dithaba for years – and it was in reaction against them that he had come to stay with us. He described the grandmother and her daughters as people who had raised him, although they were not *batsadi* (parents). He did not even list his mother among his *batsadi*. Only his mother's married parents achieved that status.

Perhaps halfway through the interview, the phone rang, and Bonolo paused to answer it. Uncannily, it was his mother calling. I had heard that she called from time to time to check in on him but had not witnessed a call myself. He smiled and his voice became excited, like a child suddenly, asking about when he could go to visit. As the conversation progressed he became quieter, mumbling assent. Finally, he dropped the receiver with a sigh. She was promising to come to Dithaba to visit his extended family and then take him back with her for the school holidays. He was sceptical. '*Nna ke blamea mama,*' he said – me, I blame my mother. When he had had his misunderstandings with his family in Dithaba, he explained, she had refused to come. 'If she had come, they

could have known the problem and resolved it,' he asserted. 'But she didn't come at all. Even now she is not going to come.'

We spoke about the future, his plans to study engineering at the university and perhaps go to work for the army or the mines. 'I want to stay far from my mum, both geographically and emotionally,' he said, when I asked where he'd like to settle.

As we wrapped up the interview, I mentioned to Bonolo that the government was thinking about launching a formal foster parenting programme, whereby people would be recruited and trained to look after children who were having serious problems living with their families – much as he had. He was categorical in his response: 'I don't support that.' Surprised, I asked him why not. He shook his head. 'It's not good to take children from their families; they should know they have responsibility for those children no matter what,' he explained. I asked what he would tell children in his situation to do. He smiled. 'I guess they could do what I did. But they should try by all means to solve their problems.'

Most of the Batswana friends to whom I mentioned Bonolo's presence at home found the situation surprising, even dubious. As common as it is to circulate children among kin, for a child to stay with non-kin is somewhat beyond the pale, and many view it with suspicion. One friend, however, described a very similar situation in his own family. A close friend of his daughter's had lost her parents in her early teens, and afterwards spent much of her time at their house. When they were making plans to move across the country to the capital a few years later, the girl's older siblings approached them and asked whether they would consider taking her with them. The siblings explained that she had come to see them as parents, and were concerned she might take their loss doubly hard. And so my friend and his wife agreed. He laughed bitterly as he recalled how difficult it had been to have two teenage girls in the house at once – all the more so because while one was his daughter, the other wasn't (he used the English phrase 'foster daughter' throughout our conversation). He sent her home to her family during the holidays, and he had recently put her into a boarding school nearer to them, retaining responsibility for her fees and upkeep.

There are three telling details in these stories. One is that – contrary to popular assertion – Batswana do indeed take in children from outside their kin networks. The second is that it is often the children themselves who orchestrate these arrangements (Archambault 2010; Leinaweaver 2007a). And the third is that – although they undertake the responsibilities of a family member and are treated in many of the same ways – these children do not necessarily see themselves as, nor are they seen to be, members of their fostering families. They are 'living outside' both

their natal families and their host families. Like child circulation among kin, then, 'living outside' does not extend or replace kinship so much as define and reproduce its limits.

Thus, although Bonolo slept, ate, worked, played, and otherwise stayed with the family in much the same ways as the other boys did, and although he was treated with affection and goodwill, he was not identified – nor did he identify, nor apparently want to identify – as family. No specific claims were made upon him: although he took on chores, he was not sent on errands, he was not scolded, and neither he nor his mother was expected to provide any specific contributions to his upkeep. Nor did he, in his turn, make any specific requests or claims beyond being allowed to stay. He was not taken along to funerals, weddings, or other events, nor was any great fuss made of his presence at home. There was little special effort to get to know him, develop intimacy, or otherwise draw him closer into the family. And Bonolo himself seemed satisfied with this arrangement, preferring to think and speak of his host family as 'saviours' and 'trusted friends' rather than as surrogate kin.

These limitations become clearest if we include *dikgang* among the defining characteristics of kinship. Bonolo's experience with his chosen host family was marked by a surprising lack of conflict – especially considering the frequency of conflict we otherwise experienced at home. Mutual claims, obligations, knowledge, and intimacy were all avoided, I suspect, precisely in order to ensure that there would be few things to fall out about. The Legaes did not get involved with the ongoing disputes in Bonolo's natal family whatsoever. Although Kagiso visited Bonolo's family to report his presence with us and hear about the issue at hand (like a mediator might), and although he shared that information with his parents, once it was clear that Bonolo would be staying, Kagiso conscientiously avoided getting involved – or drawing in anyone else. He took the care of Bonolo as a temporary responsibility, but he did not take on the negotiation of the conflicts the situation involved. Neither Kagiso nor anyone else at home was asked to help expedite the issue by Bonolo or anyone in Bonolo's family. Only Bonolo's mother was in a position appropriate to engage *dikgang* with her family; no one sought to replace her.

While, on a superficial level, Bonolo's experience suggests a kin-making dynamic, closer examination shows that it is anything but – precisely because those situations in which *dikgang* might emerge are explicitly forgone. Bonolo is not called or sent, nor reprimanded for his movements, and is left to stay as and where he sees fit; neither he nor his family is required to make contributions, nor are their contributions

compared with those made by others in his host family; and his pre-existing relationships are neither enquired into, nor discussed, nor made unduly visible. Care, in this scenario, is delinked from *dikgang*; and, thus delinked, is insufficient to making kin. As Bonolo himself emphasised in parting, responsibility and problem solving are equally critical to kinship. In a context where kinship entails risk, where those who are closest to you are also most dangerous to you, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that a family otherwise willing to provide care would hold the expansion of their kin networks in such careful check.

Child circulation among Batswana, then, has an unexpected effect: to produce and reproduce nearness and distance in relatedness, whether among kin or between kin and non-kin. Circulation does not extend nor supplement kinship; rather, it defines its terms and limits. And, as a practice, it creates this distinction primarily in terms of differential responses to *dikgang*. How, then, might government-driven initiatives in formal foster care – where children are removed from environments of perceived abuse or danger and placed with non-kin foster parents trained for the purpose – fare in the Tswana context?

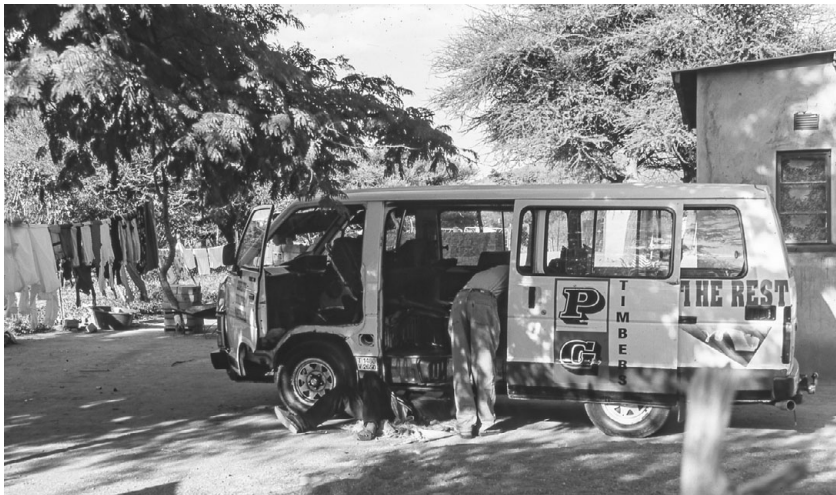


Figure 8 Tinkering: brothers, mechanics.