

## 5 Taking What Belongs to You

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*Dilo makwati di kwatabolotswa mo go ba bangwe.*

Things are like bark, they are stripped off from others.

### **I Am a Man: Tuelo's Outburst**

I awoke suddenly, to the sound of Lesego screaming.

At first I imagined that she was laughing while getting ready for school. But then I recognised a note of panic, and then that she was calling for her *malome*, and finally that it was still pitch dark. I was out into the *lekwapa* even before I was entirely awake, and somehow everyone else was also there already, in shorts and nightshirts and hastily grabbed blankets. It was four in the morning.

The first thing that came into focus was Tuelo striding across the *lekwapa* away from the house, dressed in his bright blue overalls and scowling furiously. The next was the loose brick he had picked up and hurled back at the house with ruthless accuracy, smashing the sitting room window.

From the doorway, Modiri, the eldest, was yelling insults. Oratile was holding him there and trying to calm him down. Tuelo strode back and forth at the edge of the *lekwapa*, yelling 'Ga ke tshabe ope!!' – I am not afraid of anyone (also, as I was told later, 'I respect no one' – a statement of profound contempt). Kelebogile said something under her breath that struck a note of concern about the cars, near which Tuelo was prowling as if looking for more missiles.

Tuelo moved threateningly back towards the house, and suddenly Kagiso came out to intercept him. Kagiso was thin and reedy in his boxer shorts, but somehow more imposing than usual. He caught Tuelo by his collar with a straight, firm arm and started slapping him on the side of his head. 'Who do you think you are?!' he yelled repeatedly, clobbering Tuelo each time. 'Do you know who I am?!' I had never seen so much as a violent gesture from Kagiso before – the cheery, implacable

evangelist of the family. In the grip of his older brother, Tuelo had begun to cower, pulling his arms up near his head and trying to duck the blows. 'It's him!! He was beating me! Look what he did to my head!' he began to bleat, blaming Modiri for having provoked the incident.

Kagiso wrangled Tuelo back into the house, the latter shouting about a long string of injustices he had suffered at the hands of his older brothers: being denied access to their cars, being made to work without pay, having his cattle taken from him unfairly. He vowed to set up his own cattle post and build his own house – insisting, '*Nna ke monna!!*' (I am a man) – as Kagiso wrestled him into his bed. When the complaints began to repeat themselves, Kagiso instructed him simply, '*Robala! Robala, monna*' (Sleep! Sleep, man). Tuelo refused, but Kagiso held him in place until his diatribe gradually began to fade, and he dozed off.

Meanwhile, most of the women from the yard across the road had arrived in the *lelwapa*, their blankets secured round their chests. They began telling us about Tuelo's comings and goings: they had seen him leave with the vehicle late the night before, drunk, insulting them as he went. When he finally returned, Modiri had asked where he had been. Tuelo had refused to tell him and insulted him for asking. We all shook our heads at the familiar patterns of Tuelo's drunkenness and violence, although much of the remonstrating focused on his stupidity: why had he stayed out so late with the truck, knowing that Modiri would have to use it to go to the cattle post early in the morning? Why not bring it back earlier? There had been a clear way to avoid the incident, but Tuelo – because he is stubborn and 'doesn't listen' (*ga o utlwe*), they suggested – had provoked it.

It was neither the first nor the last time that Tuelo created such a scene, although it was one of the worst. Generally, the incidents revolved around a borrowed car, alcohol, and month's end – when everyone had been paid, and young men in particular were spending the proceeds of their labour at lightning speed. Month end was a rare opportunity for young men in particular to extend their influence in their friendships and relationships, and they took to it with gusto: buying phone units or gifts for prospective girlfriends, treating friends to drinks or helping them with loans, as well as buying clothes, shoes, watches, or other highly visible items for themselves – seeking and 'achiev[ing] esteem through immediate and conspicuous consumption' (Gulbrandsen 1986: 15; see also Durham 2007; Suggs 2001), and enabling the conspicuous consumption of others. As our builder and neighbour Rra Ditau explained, 'Tuelo only cares about friends and women right now.' Often, the incidents he provoked involved the theft of any cash in the house. The very next morning – once his older brothers were gone, and as the rest of us

prepared to attend a big community event – Tuelo aggressively threatened his mother until she handed over money he had asked her to hold for him, and then he took some of hers as well.

A couple of mornings later, in the bright early morning light, Mmapula rapped on the bedroom door and announced, '*Re tsena mo kgang ya Tuelo*' – we're getting into Tuelo's issue. Modiri was away at the cattle post and Kelebogile refused to come, but the rest of us congregated in the living room, perched awkwardly on the furniture and trying to avoid the seat on which shards of broken glass and a brick still lay. Tuelo was seated across from his father, scowling. The tale of the explosive night was first summarised by Dipuo, then retold at his invitation by Mmapula and Kagiso (the rest of us declined, although we were also invited to give our accounts). Several times Tuelo tried to interject, revisiting his complaints from that night, only to be silenced by his father.

Satisfied with our collective narrative of the event, Dipuo launched into his judgement. He dwelt mostly on the inappropriateness of insulting one's eldest brother, tantamount to insulting the old man himself. Mid-speech, Tuelo, furious, stood up and stormed out. No one stopped him. The old man wondered aloud, primarily to his wife, what they could do with someone so stubborn, who had no respect. After a pause, he concluded, '*Re tla bitsa bo malome*' – we'll call the uncles.<sup>1</sup> No mention was made of the broken window, the car, the alcohol, the cattle, or any of the other things the original dispute had seemed to be about. We disbanded.

'The uncles' were notified, but they never came. Their having been called hung like an ominous cloud over Tuelo for a while, but, as the weeks passed and the meeting did not happen, the threat dissipated. He calmed, was more conscientiously helpful at home, and began working for Kagiso in his shop.

Tuelo, I suggest, ran foul of his family by trying to assert himself as a man through his brothers' things. Kagiso's repeated question to Tuelo – who he thought he was, drawn into comparison with who Kagiso was – made this painfully clear: Tuelo was not a man, he was a younger brother, and in this sense a child. He relied on his older brothers to borrow vehicles, for piece jobs to earn some cash, and even for their hand-me-down clothes. The things Tuelo relied on to assert his independence were often not his; the contributions he made to friends and girlfriends were the repurposed contributions of others. His limited

<sup>1</sup> While Dipuo did not specify which uncles, he usually preferred to call the son of his late elder brother, one of the few potential 'uncles' who had married and was beholden to Dipuo for his help in achieving the marriage.

access to these things made it difficult for him to extend them to others, and thereby form relationships through them. At the same time, he frequently failed to undertake the work of care these things (or other things for which he bore responsibility) required. He had a passable basic knowledge of mechanics, but he couldn't pay for or fix the more complex problems that arose constantly with the vehicles; he refused to undertake yard work without payment; and he had even managed to lose much of the family herd – eventually recovering most, but not all, of the cattle. These failures further disrupted his claim on his brothers' things – and, indeed, on any things of his own. They also meant that Tuelo's ability to contribute was limited and highly suspect, subject to widespread doubt – as the neighbours' input above demonstrated – frustrating his ability to build relationships and assert personhood in turn. If, as Deborah Durham notes, 'the "power" of being a young person lies in one's ability to contribute to relations of caring for others within the family and, through activities associated specifically with youth, to extend those relations with other groups beyond the family, including lovers and future spouses' (Durham 2007: 103), Tuelo's failure to contribute to caring relations at home foreclosed his ability to extend those relations elsewhere, and to self-make through them.

Tuelo's example demonstrates the extent to which the acquisition of things is necessary, but not sufficient for self-making – especially when those things are simply taken or borrowed from others. Neither a gift nor a contribution can meaningfully be made from a theft or a loan. Indeed, part of what makes a contribution of cash or clothes meaningful, or valuable, is that it comes from a limited resource that should or could have been contributed elsewhere. In this sense, making-for-oneself is not simply centrifugal, constantly pulling away from kinship; rather, it relies on the context and counterpoint of kinship for its validation and significance.

That volatile morning, Tuelo lashed out against the constraints that his own lack of things placed on his ability to make-for-himself. In some ways, he was trying to make a break (and he succeeded, with the window at least, which went unattended for months). But drawing his family into conflict also had the opposite effect: it reasserted both their responsibility for him and his dependence on them, especially as it concerned his older brothers. It was partly through engaging this responsibility, I suggest, that he was able to acquire paid work from Kagiso and was not asked to fix the window or make good on the money he had stolen. The fact that the incident was never entirely resolved also effectively acknowledged and left room for Tuelo's claims to independence. More than simply allowing kinship to reassert itself, then, *dikgang* also allow family to respond to and

enable the changing circumstances, growth, and gradual independence of its members.

### Women's Things: *Motshelo*

'*Owai!*' Khumo exclaimed with annoyance, hurrying past me to check the meat on the grill. 'They haven't brought food, they haven't brought money,' she added, shaking her head.

It was a Sunday afternoon, the day of Khumo's grocery party. Her *motshelo* group – a small-scale savings concern in which she participated with five other women, including her younger sister Kelebogile – met for such events monthly, its members taking turns to host.<sup>2</sup> They usually met on Sunday afternoons, at the beginning of the month. By then everyone had been paid, but other standing debts had not yet finished off the money; clashes with Saturday weddings and funerals were avoided; and, by the afternoon, all the housework and laundry had been finished and the women were free to visit one another's yards.

I was familiar with *metshelo* organised for household goods, building supplies, and even savings-and-loan schemes from my previous time in the village, but grocery parties introduced a twist that was new to me. They had clearly become a popular fixture; the women at home seemed to be attending someone's grocery party every other week. Every month, one member of the *motshelo* would send out invitations to the others, and to friends and neighbours associated with other *metshelo* as well. For core members of the *motshelo*, the invitation would specify an item or items of food of a previously agreed value – in Khumo's case, P125 (roughly £10), which was enough for a sizeable sack of rice, maize meal, or flour, or a few bottles of cooking oil. Thus, every month each member would spend P125 to supply someone else with food, but then one month she would receive food worth P725 (£50) in return. Additional invitees would be assigned a smaller item of food to bring, or a comparable amount of money, as a 'gate pass'. One might then be expected to be invited to their future grocery parties, and to contribute something of comparable value.

Other *metshelo* I knew involved regular meetings among members to gather and tally contributions, but grocery parties were fully fledged events. People who attended grocery parties expected to be fed – and fed well. We had spent much of the previous day sourcing meat, vegetables, drink, and sweets to serve the *motshelo* members and anticipated

<sup>2</sup> Older Batswana often called these groups *stokvel*, borrowing the widespread Afrikaans term from South Africa. Comparable arrangements are evident the world over (see Low 1995 for an exhaustive list).

guests. Khumo had had to bear a significant cost up front for these foodstuffs – borrowing from the rest of us at home to cover the expenditure.

'What if the amount of food Khumo gets is less than how much she spent?' I asked Lorato, who was helping me run errands on Khumo's behalf. With six children and a grandchild at home, Khumo struggled to make ends meet at the best of times.

'*Gareitse*,' Lorato answered, non-committally: we don't know. 'We prefer to save our money in people,' she added (an idiom Jane Guyer (1993) might have recognised from Equatorial Africa).

As we helped Khumo finish grilling the meat and preparing the meal, the *motshelo* members chatted behind the house in the spreading shade of an enormous acacia. A long table stood at the head of the impromptu ceremony, covered in a white tablecloth. A blue tarpaulin was laid on the ground in front of the table, folded neatly, the contributed foodstuffs arrayed upon it. It was a substantial amount of food: ten-kilogram bags of maize meal, macaroni, and flour were stacked, each in their own piles, with smaller bags of sugar and jugs of oil and condiments lined up beside them. At right angles to the table, the *motshelo* members sat ranged in two lines on chairs acquired through another *motshelo* in which Kelebogile participated. Kelebogile had carefully registered everything in a ruled exercise book, alongside the names of the contributors, and had just finished reciting every contribution to the ululations and applause of the gathered members.

Neighbours and other invited guests who were not members of the *motshelo* trickled into the yard over the rest of the afternoon, helping themselves to meat and salads, many without having brought anything to contribute. Standing by the grill, we made rough calculations and figured that Khumo was probably running at a loss. At this, her daughter Boipelo – with her own infant child on her hip – became thoroughly annoyed. 'What's the point of *motshelo* if it costs you more money than you get? Why not just use your own money to buy your own food?' She tsked to herself, hoicking the baby up to redistribute her weight.

Not all *motshelo* groups ran such events. Indeed, once everyone in Khumo's *motshelo* group had hosted their own grocery party, the decision was made to simplify things. After I joined the *motshelo*, we would simply meet in the yard of that month's host for a drink and some simple snacks, to ensure that all payments had been made, collected, tabulated, and appreciated. Where there had been covered tables, ceremony, and ululations, now there were chairs pulled into a circle in the *lekwapa* and informal chat (mostly about the *motshelo* itself). Kelebogile even hosted

the group in her pink polka-dot pyjamas, a hat thrown absent-mindedly over her uncoiffed hair.

Not all *metshelo* focused on food, either. Kelebogile and Mmapula belonged to a *motshelo* in which each member bought four chairs for the main recipient each month. *Metshelo* were organised for dishes, cookware, furniture, and even building supplies. Occasionally recipients simply pooled money; in the *motshelo* I joined, we each contributed P150 (£12) to the main recipient each month. Often they were set up on a savings-and-loan basis: each member would contribute a certain amount up front, from which pool loans would be offered either to other *motshelo* members or to friends, neighbours, and family, usually at steep interest rates of 10–30 per cent (see James 2012 for South African corollaries to this practice). The interest would then be divided equally. Savings-and-loan *metshelo* were often kept close: Kelebogile, Oratile, Lorato, and Khumo ran one for a while, as did another friend of mine in concert with her siblings.

Above all, in Dithaba, *metshelo* were women's initiatives. While men might, in principle, have a *motshelo* of their own, these were rare. But every woman in the yard with access to even small amounts of money belonged to at least one *motshelo*, and often several; at one point, Kelebogile belonged to no fewer than eight. Most *metshelo* comprised a cross-section of women linked through family, neighbourhood, work, or friendship; they were often intergenerational, although many explicitly preferred to join with *bagolo* (elders) rather than *banyana* (girls). Many also nominally included members' children, whose contributions were supplied by their mothers. And they were as common in the city as in the village: social workers I knew ran them together, and the young professional women running one major NGO in town had tables recording who was due to pay what to whom tacked to the walls behind their desks (this is a long-standing practice in South Africa's urban centres as well; see Kuper and Kaplan 1944; Verhoef 2001).

The things women bought with *motshelo* money or organised *metshelo* to acquire were seldom small-scale personal items like clothes, shoes, or toiletries: they were usually major purchases for the household. Attempting to illustrate the value of *metshelo* to me, Kelebogile noted that she had acquired the sitting room furniture, her wardrobe, 16 matching chairs, a set of good dishes, large pieces of enamel cookware, and various other items useful at home and for hosting parties. *Metshelo*, she explained, 'help to buy the things that we need at home'. But *motshelo* proceeds were also strategic, and answered to the participating women's sense of what was most needed. *Metshelo* grant women considerable autonomy – and also begin to establish their capacity to provision and

manage a household, an important dimension of making-for-themselves (Suggs 2001; see also James 2015).

*Metshelo*, in this sense, echo the contributory economies seen in the Legae household in Chapter 4. While in principle they looked like more straightforwardly reciprocal arrangements, carefully tabulated to ensure equivalence, the exchange never quite added up – nor was it expected to do so. Khumo's additional expenditure on feeding the *motshelo* group was not tabulated, but taken as the responsibility of a host. Indeed, when *motshelo* members failed to make their contributions, they faced no reprimand, nor were they chased for any debt. *Metshelo* were less about exchange or reciprocity than about contribution, circulation, and redistribution (Alverson 1978: 59). And those contributions could, and usually would, be contributed onwards, in cycles that could make both families and selves. They were frequently intergenerational, and they could strategically conflate parents and children. They enabled both an 'egalitarian mutuality' among contributors, shielded from capitalist imperatives, and opportunities for social mobility, provided by financialisation, which preserved distinctions, 'inequalities and dependencies' (James 2015: 1051) – not unlike the dynamics we saw among siblings in the accounts above.

But while savings groups have often been described as creating new and lasting ties of mutual support, particularly in an era of neoliberal capitalism (see, e.g., Carsten 1989 for Malaysia; James 2015; Krige 2015), in Botswana these ties were often highly attenuated and relied heavily on pre-existing relationships with neighbours, colleagues, or kin. They were also explicitly *not* kin-like ties – not even, uncannily, when they were conducted among family. The *metshelo* I knew of were often strikingly short-term, fluid, and transient. Most groups I knew lasted through one cycle of contributions – which might last for anywhere between a few months and a year, or perhaps two – and were then disbanded or reorganised. *Motshelo* contributions were seldom used or looked after by members collectively; the proceeds, like the contributions themselves, were explicitly attributed to and earmarked for separate members, and were consumed separately. Contributions therefore bound *motshelo* participants together in only limited ways. *Motshelo* contributions are not, after all, contributions of care; they are contributions of things, explicitly disentangled from the work and sentiment of care. And this disentanglement is one reason why they can be contributed onwards in turn, in gestures of kin-making and self-making.

Tellingly, *metshelo* in Dithaba – though prone to conflict – struggled to deal with *dikgang*. Kelebogile told me numerous stories of cheating treasurers and defaulting members, and the risk of potential loss is ever



present in savings groups, especially in contexts of tenuous employment (James 2015). In Kelebogile's examples, offenders were either privately approached or quietly excluded, or the *motshelo* itself was left to lapse. In worst-case scenarios, the *kgotla* might be involved, but that eventuality was vanishingly rare. Just as the negotiation of *dikgang* is productive of kin relationships, I suggest that the near total absence of collective reflection, discussion, and negotiation of *dikgang* in *metshelo* indexes limits on the relationships it can produce. Notably, the riskiest of *motshelo* projects – making loans – is frequently undertaken only by siblings, who have recourse beyond the *motshelo* to other means of engaging *dikgang*.

Rather than establishing community among women or alternatives to kinship, *metshelo* contributions have another, equally critical, effect: they render accumulation for oneself moral, and they secure that accumulation from the expectations of one's natal family, in part by enabling additional, highly visible and strategic contributions to be made. If Kelebogile were contributing to eight *metshelo* every month, the resources promised to those groups were as good as spent and could not be claimed elsewhere. I could not understand how Kelebogile managed to sustain eight *metshelo* until I saw that they acted like a sort of investment that sheltered her available resources from the expectations of her family. *Metshelo* helped Kelebogile 'enclave' her resources, insulating them from the demands of kin and making them 'unavailable at the moment [but] never completely unavailable' (Durham 1995: 112; cf. Appadurai 1986: 22ff. on enclaving; cf. James 2015 for a comparable story among South African savings clubs). I do not mean to say that Kelebogile wasn't contributing to the family out of the proceeds of her *metshelo*; she was. But so long as she was involved in these groups, there were no expectations that she should contribute more at home – unlike the expectations levelled at Kagiso. This sheltering, I suggest, is made possible because those resources could be interpreted as facilitating further, significant contributions to the household, thereby ameliorating any suspicions about Kelebogile's ability or willingness to continue to contribute. Even if some of the things one acquired through *metshelo* were individually owned or intended for personal use – like Kelebogile's wardrobe or bedroom set – they were among other things available for household use, and could be cast as household contributions. And, in this sense, their accumulation was easily hidden and rendered irreproachable.

At the same time, Khumo's frustration demonstrates the difficulties of striking the right balance among contributions. One must be seen to contribute enough at home, but it is equally important not to contribute too much elsewhere; in both cases, it is critical to keep one's contributions in proportion to one's capacity and to the contributions being made

by others. A similar imperative was at work in the dispute between Kagiso and Modiri. But in the context of *metshelo* – where grudges and outright conflict are avoided, and where recourse is limited – it is one's own projects of making-for-oneself that suffer should that balance be upset. Over-contributing to *motshelo* attracts no moral approbation, but it risks the suspicion that one's ability and willingness to contribute at home will be compromised. The balance between what is contributed and what is kept – between saving in others and contributing to others, which *metshelo* enables – requires substantial practice and fine-tuning.

As we saw in Chapter 2, being able to establish a family and household, a *lekwapa*, of one's own is a critical means of making-for-oneself. But the things through which Batswana establish personhood, and families of their own, are subject to pre-existing claims from their natal households – which also figure powerfully in acquiring those things in the first place. Stocking things for oneself runs the risk of doing so at the expense of one's natal family, putting them at risk of insolvency and putting oneself at risk of moral turpitude. At the same time, contributing everything to one's natal family puts one's own self-making at risk, in part by sharply constraining one's ability to create relationships and a *lekwapa* of one's own. Much as the building of Lorato's house required her to find a balance between being away and being at home – a balance she was ultimately unable to strike – the acquisition and management of things such as food, cattle, cash, or cars require constant balancing work between having and contributing, and further balancing work in terms of what is contributed to whom. And the difficulties of that balancing work produce *dikgang* that families are constantly called upon to address, in ways that assert the family's stability while making room for its children to build independence.

Whether in friendships and relationships, *metshelo* or paid work, associations that stand beyond and between families have important implications for the acquisition of critical things and for the exercise of specific forms of work and sentiment, and therefore for the negotiation of both selfhood and kinship. Informal extrafamilial associations, which range from choirs and drama groups to burial societies, are a long-standing feature of Tswana communities. But they have proliferated and become formalised in new ways in response to AIDS: home-based care projects, support groups for people living with HIV, orphan care projects, and village- and district-level AIDS coordination committees have become a part of everyday village life. Framing the pandemic primarily as a 'crisis of care', the major concern of many of these organisations has been with the provision of some of the very things, work, and sentiment discussed above – either to replace, or to supplement, contributions lost by those

who have died. I turn next to a consideration of the sorts of contributions and care that NGOs and government agencies intervening in response to AIDS provide. I suggest that such 'supplemental care' programmes closely map the contribution economies of the household and of self-making described above. But in supplemental care, not only are care things disentangled from care work, they are disarticulated from their contributors. The effects of these dissociations disrupt kinship practice without enabling making-for-oneself, thereby provoking crises in some ways worse than those they aim to address.