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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"The wife is the mother of the husband": Marriage, Crisis, and (Re)Generation in Botswana's Pandemic Times

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Abstract

Forty years into Botswana's AIDS epidemic, amidst persistently low rates of marriage across southern Africa, an unexpected uptick in weddings appears to be afoot. Young people orphaned in the worst years of the epidemic are crafting creative paths to marriage where—and perhaps because—their parents could not. Taking the lead of a pastor's assertion that the wife is mother of her husband, I suggest these conjugal creativities turn on an understanding of marriage as an intergenerational relationship. Casting marriage in intergenerational terms is an act of ethical (re)imagination that creates experimental possibilities for reworking personhood, pasts, and futures in ways that respond closely to the specific crises and loss the AIDS epidemic brought to Botswana. This experimentation is highly unpredictable and may reproduce the crisis and loss to which it responds; the multivalences of marriage-as-motherhood can be sources of failure and violence, as well as innovation and life. But it also recuperates and reorients intergenerational relationships, retrospectively and prospectively, regenerating persons and relations, in time. While different crises might invite different sorts of ethical re-imagination, marriage gives us a novel perspective on how people live with, and through, times of crisis. And marriage emerges as a crucial if often overlooked practice by which social change is not only managed but sought and produced.

Keywords: regeneration; marriage; kinship; generations; crisis; HIV and AIDS; pandemics; Botswana; ethics; personhood; social change

"When a man comes home, what does he expect to find?" The pastor paced in front of the assembled wedding guests with long strides, looking round at them expectantly. They waited, silent in anticipation. He stopped and faced them, sweating into a button-lined double collar that was starting to go out of fashion, his suit a lavish blue, the long tips of his shoes polished and pert. "A *mother*," he answered himself, firmly, searching the crowd's faces.

We were gathered in straight rows of plastic chairs in the yellow twilight of an enormous, dusty tent, which had been pitched in a cleared lot at the edge of a village in

southeastern Botswana. The pastor resumed pacing past his lectern, an assistant manning the audio equipment behind him and occasionally leaning into a microphone to shout exhortations of his own. Two couples sat at the front, on either side of a tent pole, their families arrayed in the chairs behind them. Aside from a few older men in collared shirts and good vests, carrying their hats, the tent was full of women—most in blue patterned skirts, wearing the blue checked wool blankets and blue headscarves that signified they were married. Out by the roadside, a white, pockmarked sign announced the name of the ministry in black block letters: "CITY OF SIGNS AND WONDERS, also known as Revelation City." A dust devil whirled through the sprawling lot, and the roof of the tent flapped and billowed heavily.

It was the summer of 2018, and this double-wedding in Revelation City was one of a full slate of wedding events in which my family in Botswana was involved, stretching from October through December. Most weekends, we found ourselves bathing and ironing early in the morning to be on time for one ceremony or another, to start preparing a feast, or to attend a family planning meeting. Two old friends were also planning their nuptials for the coming months; I'd scarcely seen them in weeks, because their schedules were equally packed with dance practices, meetings with tailors and decorators, and endless rounds of family negotiations. For all of the years I had lived in Botswana, weddings had been relatively rare events, mostly for the well-employed; but now everyone seemed to be getting married, all at once.

With all the work to be done, I rarely had the chance to attend a church ceremony, but for this event I had been relieved of my cabbage-chopping duties to taxi some older women there. With his talk of mothers, I assumed the pastor was gearing up to preach on the importance of child-rearing, but he took an unexpected tack. "*You*," he said, pointing to a woman in the front row, "You! are a *mother* to your husband! Where is your husband, is he working?" he added in a stage whisper, joking aside. And then he boomed: "You are a mother to what?" and whispered again, "…your husband. *Mosadi ke mmagwe*…," he prompted, switching into Setswana; and the congregation replied, quietly at first, "…*monna*." The wife is the mother of the husband. He repeated his prompt, the congregation replying with more conviction this time, and then underscored it definitively in English: "Your wife *is* your mother."

The pastor's assertion took me aback. It touched a nerve as deep as the incest taboo, which made the conflation of mother and wife feel like a troubling Oedipal throwback. And it touched a feminist nerve, too, reminding me of friends in Botswana and around the world who faced the sometimes explicit, sometimes unspoken expectation to "raise" their infantilized husbands alongside their children. But both the pastor and his congregation took his advice quite seriously —not metaphorically, but literally (Robertson 2011)—as an ethical framework for the new sort of relationship on which the marrying couples were embarking, and for the effects that relationship would have on their other relations in turn.

In this paper, I ask: what might it mean to think of the wife as mother of the husband? Or, more precisely, to think of marriage in contemporary Botswana as an intergenerational relationship? And what might thinking of marriage as an intergenerational relationship tell us about the apparent uptick in marriage among the young people I knew, nearly forty years into Botswana's AIDS pandemic, and not long before the unexpected advent of another? I argue that marriage—as an institution that draws together "the intimate, political, ritual and legal" (Carsten *et al.* 2021: 4)—is a key space of ethical re-imagination and experimentation in times of chronic crisis. Marriage has long been a site in and through which deep anxieties

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about social change are expressed and navigated, especially as they implicate gendered and generational authority (Rice 2014). Rendering wives the mothers of their husbands not only naturalizes marriage and absorbs it into natal kin relations, stabilizing both modes of relatedness and authority; it also creates possibilities for experimentally reworking personhood, pasts, and futures in ways that respond closely to the specific crises the AIDS pandemic has brought to Botswana, creating space for change. This experimentality proves highly unpredictable and may sustain the crisis and loss to which it responds. But in doing so, it also proves regenerative: it recuperates, reorients, and renews intergenerational relationships, their flexibility, and their potential. Regeneration is a process of regrowth in contexts of loss or death; and intergenerational experimentation is uniquely suited to this creative process in contexts of crisis, making a simultaneous move toward continuity and change. While different crises—from financial austerity and cost-of-living crises to war, the climate crisis to COVID-19—might invite or afford different sorts of re-imagination and experimentation, I suggest that marriage is a crucial, often overlooked practice through which radical social change is not only managed but sought and produced, and that changing marriage practices, in turn, may give us a novel perspective on the lived experience of crisis.

Marriage and Generations in Botswana's Time of AIDS

Botswana is often described as "Africa's miracle," having transformed itself from one of the poorest countries in the world at Independence in 1966 to one of the wealthiest in southern Africa, courtesy of the state-led management of massive diamond deposits. At the same time, Botswana is also one of the most unequal countries in the world and has been battling one of the world's worst AIDS epidemics for four decades. Public reckonings with these profound changes and their ambivalent implications often fix on fears of breakdown in the Tswana family—cast in terms of "lost generations" and an ensuing "crisis of care" since the advent of HIV and AIDS (Reece 2022), and a "crisis of marriage" apparent in persistently low rates of marriage over the same period (for Botswana, averaging 17 percent, per Statistics Botswana 2022; see also Pauli and van Dijk 2016), amid fears of skyrocketing rates of divorce and the specter of cohabitation (though actual rates of divorce and cohabitation rates sit at 1 percent and 7 percent, respectively; see Statistics Botswana 2022, and Setume 2017 for more on cohabitation). The pastor's interpolation of marriage and intergenerational relationships, in other words, speaks to a specific historical and socio-political situation in which these two modes of relatedness are associated closely with experiences of—and responses to—crisis and change.

Epidemiological, public health, and social welfare responses to AIDS in Botswana —whether on the part of government, NGOs, churches, or international donors— have been perhaps the most prominent source of the "lost generations" discourse and have explicitly framed their interventions as answers to the "crisis of care." On this narrative, one "lost generation" of parents is assumed to have died in the worst throes of the epidemic, producing another "lost generation" of orphaned (and possibly infected) children, purportedly deprived of parental love and guidance. Those children's grandparents—themselves elderly and vulnerable—are left with their care, an arrangement often disparaged in interventionist discourse as both impractical and unconscionable, implicitly threatening not only family breakdown,

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but total social collapse. Generations in this discourse are assumed to be naturally distinct, determined by relative age, and rigidly horizontal. Intergenerational relations become pathological, a site of contagion at best (Meinert and Grøn 2019), and of social breakdown at worst. This epidemiological logic does not reflect the characteristic fluidity of generational relationships among the Tswana—to which we will return—nor the reality of Tswana family life in a time of AIDS (Reece 2022). But it has produced new social realities and generational spaces of its own, as government and other agencies sought ways to fill missing generational roles and to reproduce them in new, ideal forms.

In the meanwhile, for those who were still at risk—and a risk—of HIV infection, these same intervening agencies have been highly invested in promoting marriage as a solution to the pandemic. Reflecting tendencies John Borneman (1996) observed many years earlier in the U.S. AIDS pandemic—and undoubtedly inspired by them, in part—these institutional imaginations cast marriage as "a way out of death" (ibid.: 228), an antidote to pathologized sorts of sex and intimacy that are associated with the social and moral failures AIDS was feared to signify (ibid.: 230; see also van Dijk 2010; Reece 2021). Even long after the free, nationwide provision of antiretroviral treatment radically reduced the risk of HIV leading to AIDS and death, these agencies have remained thoroughly committed to brokering marriage as a means of stabilizing social upheaval in the shadow of the pandemic and legitimating their own work (Reece 2021). Overlooking the fact that marriage has long been a primary site of infection (Hirsch *et al.* 2009)—one possible reason for the widespread reluctance to marry evident over the course of the pandemic (until recently)—these interventions imagine marriage as an immediate means of expanding networks of care and providing a new foundation on which to rebuild families and societies. The apparently sudden glut of couples (and families) seeking and achieving marriage now, after over a generation of forgoing marital projects (even in the widespread presence of ARVs), have explicit reasons of their own: for those with aspirations to middle-class lifestyles, in particular, marriage has become a means of attaining distinction amid rampant inequality (compare Pauli 2019 and James 2017, on similar trends in Namibia and South Africa). In both cases, marriage is understood to be in crisis and to offer a way out of crisis—to reflect social change, and to provide a unique opportunity for creating it.

Beyond its suitability to understanding Tswana experiences of and attempts to shape change in pandemic times, thinking of generations and marriage together also provides a defamiliarizing perspective on the relationship between kinship and marriage as they have been analyzed by anthropologists and in the social sciences broadly. From early work on the apparent universality of the incest taboo (Lévi-Strauss 1969[1949]) to models of marriage as exchange (ibid.) and more recent attention to the apparent globalization of companionate marriage grounded in emotional intimacy and choice (e.g., Giddens 1992; Hirsch and Wardlow 2006; see overview and critique in Mody 2022: 273), the social sciences have tended to reflect ideals of marriage as a more or less horizontal, symmetrical, increasingly egalitarian relation—even where it relied on and produced hierarchies of gender or class. I suggest that similar assumptions underpin a latent tendency to take "kinship" and "affinity" as separate modes of relatedness—one vertical or lineal and "natural," the other lateral and "cultural"—in spite of ample ethnographic evidence showing those categories are often actively merged in everyday life. Thinking of marriage as an intergenerational relationship allows us to see more clearly how kinship and affinity

are brought together, distinguished and reworked, ethically and in practice; it invites us to attend to "variability and instability in 'occasions of symbolization' where practices and forms [of kinship and marriage, but also power, gender, and sex] are reiterated" (Borneman 1997: 574). It also encourages us to think of marriage as a "relation in time" (Alber, van der Geest, and Reynolds-Whyte 2008), with genealogical, political, and historical dimensions (ibid.)—and as a practice deployed to create transformation, specifically in times of crisis. And it provides a new twist on anthropological analyses of Tswana marriage in particular, which to some extent have always been about the management of relations in time—whether in classic accounts of Tswana marriage as an open-ended, cumulative, and even reversible process, a becoming rather than being (Comaroff and Roberts 1997), or in more recent accounts of attempts to speed up and condense marriage events in order to avoid long-term debts to kin (as in Jacqueline Solway's "fast *bogadi*," 2016). Rather than a simple mechanism of reproduction or bastion of continuity, which can only reflect or respond to social change, marriage emerges as a key site of imagination, innovation, and experimentation through which to rework histories and generate alternative futures (Carsten *et al.* 2021).

This paper is based primarily on fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2019, among a number of villages of the same *morafe* (tribal polity) in Botswana's southeast, all within commuting distance of the capital, Gaborone. I also draw on twenty years' experience in the area, including my Ph.D. fieldwork in one of these villages (2010–2013; see Reece 2022), and professional experience working in the NGO sector and with Botswana's Department of Social Services (2003–2008). I focus on the experiences of young people, many of whom I have known since their childhoods, who occupy a singular, constructed, generational space, and provide a unique perspective on experimental responses to the crisis of AIDS (compare Gusman 2009, on Uganda's "Joseph generation"). Born and raised at the height of the pandemic, and coming of age around the advent of antiretroviral therapy (provided nationwide since 2002), many were orphaned, and subject to wide-ranging government and NGO interventions; most had unmarried parents; and many are now forging inventive paths to marriage, with unexpected effects.

In the sections that follow, I return first to the pastor's tent, to look more closely at what it might mean for the wife to be mother of the husband, and at the historical, moral, and political charge vested in that idea. I suggest that casting marriage in these intergenerational terms is an act of ethical (re)imagination that turns on the production of a non-reciprocal, non-mutual asymmetry between wife and husband, which proves uniquely generative—specifically of personhood. In this framing, the wife-as-mother gains a form of power over life and death, rendering marriage a site of existential recuperation and potential change-making for selves, relations, and social worlds.

In the second section, I turn to look at how young people orphaned by the AIDS pandemic experiment with these imaginative intergenerational possibilities in securing their marriages, with notable speed and success, often where their parents failed to do so. Marriage, here, serves to regenerate intergenerational relations, retrospectively and prospectively, in the context of crisis and loss. In keeping with the attribution of regenerative powers to wives-as-mothers, most (though not all) of the examples I provide are of women who have achieved this creative feat. This experiment, however, is a highly unpredictable one, which can go wrong or hit unexpected limits. As the meanings of marriage shift, and the meanings of other

intergenerational relationships and self-making shift too, the change being wrought proves difficult to control—taking more conservative as well as more innovative shapes. In the final section, I look at what happens when one of these experimentally intergenerational undertakings regenerates more long-standing dynamics of power and abuse. I suggest that the multivalences of marriage-as-motherhood can be sources of failure, exclusion, and violence as well as innovation, inclusion, and life, and that the ethical creativity that regenerates relations out of loss and crisis regenerates loss and crisis, too. These persistent, renewed forms of loss and crisis can have devastating effects. But at the same time, they remain ways of remaking and recuperating intergenerational relationships, which enable a reaching simultaneously into the past and the future in ways that sustain the possibility of both managing and generating radical social change.

"Men are men by their women": Re-Imagining Marriage, Generating Personhood

The pastor moved effortlessly from shouting biblical exhortations to chatty, joking banter with his audience, to the patient pedagogy of call-and-response, fill-in-the blank invitations. He strode up and down the rough red-carpet aisle that had been laid out across the dusty ground for the occasion, diverting between the rows of chairs to loom over the wedding guests or fold them into his sermon.

"A woman will only show her true colors when you marry her," he growled into his microphone, making the oversize speakers crackle with static. "That is when she will say, now I *own* you. Now I'm the secretary, the accountant…," he added, laughing generously as he proceeded, making his assertions ominous and humorous all at once. "There is no man who is more clever than the woman he has married," he continued, emphatically now, to little bursts of applause. "There is no man who surpasses the woman he has married in any way. If a woman wants to kill you, she knows the simplest way!" he exclaimed, laughing, drawing tentative but wary chuckles from his audience. "A woman is the one who washes your clothes, who cooks for you, and it is a woman who makes you a man! Men are men by their women!" he continued, his voice echoing around the tent now, drawing applause and "Amens" from the women seated around me. His assessment of women's power and danger seemed to meet with their approval.

"*Tlogela bodipa*!" he shouted—leave your stubbornness. "If your wife does not bless you, you cannot be blessed," he continued. "Your wife can close doors to you. Listen to your wife! If you want to live, listen to your wife. If you want to die, listen to other men," he added, and chuckles rippled round the tent.

"We all know that our brothers and sisters like to eat well, right?" he added suddenly, slipping into a confidential tone. The audience murmured its agreement. "If your siblings try to talk to you, if they're asking you for things, tell your wife. If she is your mother, she is their mother. She is their what? Their *mother*. Of course she has to be involved! Don't try to deal with them alone."

The pastor drew no passages from the Bible into his advice, having marked off these ruminations as a specifically Setswana concern from the outset—in part by tracing his own lineage, noting where he and his parents were from, and describing the purity of his upbringing in Setswana ways. The rest of the sermon ranged over an equally unpredictable mix of topics: he mused provocatively on the perils of

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pornography and the dangers of masturbation for the healthy sex life of married couples; he teased the grooms about past proclivities for schoolgirls and advised them to curb their appetites; and he insisted the couples call one another by their secret pet names—to great hilarity—as he coached them through vows he invented and adapted on the spot. The juxtaposition of spouses-as-parents to one another with spouses-as-sexual-partners caused no apparent tension; in the pastor's framing, the incest taboo was suspended, descent and affinity were conflated (compare Borneman 1997: 577, referencing Lévi-Strauss 1969[1949]: 50), and this conflation was not only natural, but moral.

Piqued by the pastor's sermon, I brought his advice up with friends and family to hear their reactions. I wondered whether his framing was a theological intervention, but others I spoke to recognized it much as the pastor himself had described it, as distinctly "Setswana"—a term used to describe "traditional" culture, which emerged in explicit opposition to *sekgoa*, or European ways associated with colonial governance and the missions (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1987). One younger woman I spoke to was dismayed by the expectation that she should have to raise her husband as if he were her child, but an older co-worker, whom she consulted in turn, responded that this was precisely how marriage worked, and that that was the proper Setswana way of understanding it. Another friend mused that women were usually expected to look after the men, but added, "Traditionally it's like the husband is the father to the wife, too. If you want to ask a man how his family is doing, you ask, *bana ba kae*, how are the kids? That includes the wife, right." One of the sisters who had attended the wedding with me agreed, adding, "It's about caring for each other. The wife has to care for the husband like a mother, and the husband too has to care for the wife like a father." When I observed to both women that the pastor had said little about the men or this reciprocal responsibility, they laughed wryly. It was an imbalance evident in Tswana wedding songs, too, many of which focus on "promot[ing] traditional (feminine) values" for brides, and few of which mention grooms at all (Ellece 2011: 44). There was, then, plentiful precedent for the pastor's assertions—but the idea that the wife should be mother to the husband was also subject to interpretation, historicization, and contestation, within and across generations. It was, in other words, an open ethical question and grounds for experimentation.

What do these competing interpretations suggest about what it might mean for wives to be mothers to their husbands? While there may be a story to be told about the role of religious imagination and practice in shaping Tswana marriage, both the pastor and his interpreters above were explicit about framing his advice in terms of Setswana ethical considerations, which I pursue here. One of the women just quoted interpreted these parental responsibilities in terms of care (see Borneman 1997); but the care provided by the mother-wife of the pastor's sermon implied more existential powers. On the pastor's account, care—washing clothes, cooking meals, perhaps even being the secretary and accountant—was linked to women's (implicitly occult) knowledge of the simplest way to kill their husbands, and to their simultaneous capacity to bless or curse them, to make them thrive or suffer. And this was a total power, indeed of ownership. A wife enjoyed existential control; if a wife did not bless her husband, no one else could, either. The pastor was explicit about what this verticalization of the spousal relationship stood to produce: nothing short of (gendered) personhood. Marriage is a key means of *go itirela*, or relational self-making (Alverson 1978), by which men in particular build selfhood by accumulating

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relationships—and, as I have argued elsewhere, the conflicts and mediations those relationships entail (Reece 2019). The pastor's assertion, that men are men by their women, echoed the widely-used Tswana proverb *kgosi ke kgosi ka batho*, the chief is the chief by the people (Gulbrandsen 1995)—and was one I heard repeated by marrying men themselves. One young man I knew, reflecting on his reasons for getting married, explained simply that getting married made him a man. But the pastor's account and advice went beyond these proverbial truisms: it demonstrated how marriage changed a man's relations and selfhood and located the source of that change in his wife as a parent. By becoming not only the groom's mother, for example, but his siblings' mother, too, his wife grants a man a new precedence and elderhood over his siblings that he might not otherwise enjoy; she shifts his relationship to his siblings into a different generational register. And this power, as the pastor evoked so vividly, is a power over life and death.

There is an uncanny echo, here, and perhaps a colonial legacy, of kinship models from a very different time and place: specifically, of *patria potestas*, articulated in Roman law as the power of the father over the life, death, and property of his descendants (which Henry Maine [1861] identified as the first form of kinship organization in law). From this perspective, patriarchy—whether in its Tswana, Roman, or other forms—is an intergenerational order of power grounded in marriage, linking the power of men to their marriage to women, and their ability to generate children. As Borneman (1996) has pointed out, it was also an organization of power around "'symbolics of blood' … based on both inheriting blood by descent and mixing blood in marriage" (216–17)—a symbolics that took on new relevance with the advent of AIDS (ibid.). The pastor inverts the classic gendering of these rights and powers, attributing them to mothers rather than fathers; but the power remains existential, defined in terms of life, death, and ownership, and rendered in intergenerational terms. In insisting wives are the mothers of their husbands, the pastor imports that existential power into marriage, making it, too, a matter of life and death (see also Mayblin 2011). Far from a companionate, egalitarian ideal, the imaginative ethical space the pastor creates in his whimsical wedding ceremony—and that the Setswana framing of wives as mothers to husbands creates—is thus also a profoundly existential one.

The ways in which a man might be expected to be a father to his wife in Botswana has a rather different historico-legal dimension than the idea that a wife should be his mother, though it also resonates with *patria potestas.* Historically, Tswana women were not legal persons: they could not own property and could not represent themselves at or even attend meetings of the customary court (the *kgotla*). They were the wards of their fathers until they were married, at which point they became the wards of their husbands—on a legal footing equal to their children. Indeed, a woman's role was articulated in a proverb that is the mirror image of the pastor's assertion: "*mosadi ke ngwana wa monna*," a woman is a man's child (see also Mafela 2007: 523). This proverbial precedent demonstrates that marriage in Botswana has long been understood as an intergenerational relationship, with implications for other intergenerational relationships in turn. But the groom's parental responsibilities toward his wife scarcely figured in the pastor's sermon, in part because these responsibilities have changed. Following radical shifts in women's access to education and employment, especially during colonial-era labor migration to South Africa (ibid.), Tswana women are now recognized legal persons, can own property, and can attend and even represent themselves at *kgotla.* While there is

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ample precedent for understanding marriage as an intergenerational relationship, then, the terms of that relationship remain in flux, and its dynamics are historically situated and apt to shift. It is *as* an intergenerational relationship, in other words, that marriage proves to be not just an institution that reflects social change, but a site of ethical reflection, reassessment, and potential experimentation with producing change.

There is also, of course, ample precedent for this flexibility, creativity, and experimentation in interpreting generational relationships in Botswana. Among the Tswana, as elsewhere in Africa, generations are highly fluid and frequently interchangeable; the same relations can be read in horizontal or vertical, egalitarian or hierarchical terms depending on the context and purpose of interpretation. Siblings, for example, can be cast in egalitarian terms, as members of the same generation, to emphasize cooperation or mutuality; or they can be cast in parent-child terms, especially where the responsibilities of elder siblings to their younger siblings need to be emphasized (see also Reece 2022: 103–4). Sons can pay bridewealth and thereby marry their mothers on behalf of dead or absent fathers, to render themselves legitimate and make their own future marriages possible (Schapera 1940; Dahl 2009). The pastor's exegesis drew the couples he was marrying into all of these relational arrays at once: they became one another's parents, the parents of one another's siblings, but also one another's children. Far from connoting incest, rendering the wife the mother of the husband, or the husband the father of the wife, marked their appropriate socialization into moral, adult personhood. The classic flexibility of Tswana generations enabled spouses to be absorbed into one another's natal relationships, making marriage, as one young man I knew put it, "a nature thing." While this flexibility naturalized marriage, it simultaneously denaturalized the generational relationships in which the marriage is situated—especially siblingship. It explicitly demonstrated, in other words, that intergenerational relationships are not given, but continuously made and remade, and, perhaps most counterintuitively of all, it located a key site for this differentiation in marriage.

Marilyn Strathern observes that Euro-American notions of "parent" and "child" represent an "irreducible asymmetry" (2011: 246): unlike other kin terms and categories, like grandparent/grandchild, or sibling, they are not reciprocal or mutually-defined terms or ideas. While the Setswana notion of "parent"—*motsadi*—is more generic than the English term and can be attributed to those who have not in fact had children (e.g., Reece 2019: 48), it remains a relative term; one is *motsadi* to those who one has cared for or raised in specific ways, or because one has borne (or lost) a specific child. *Motsadi* and *ngwana* (child) turn on an asymmetry similar to the one Strathern describes; and, I suggest, it is this non-reciprocal, non-mutual asymmetry that distinguishes generations for the Tswana. *Motsadi-ngwana* relationships are generally not interchangeable; they mark one limit on the characteristic fluidity of generational roles. That the Tswana render so many different kin relations in parent-child, intergenerational terms suggests that asymmetrical, non-reciprocal, non-mutual dimensions of kinship are just as crucial to its lived experience and capacity for change as are the more often cited imperatives of long-term reciprocity, indebtedness, and mutuality (pace Sahlins 1972; 2013; also Lamb 2015: 854). Wives-as-mothers and husbands-as-fathers add a twist to these intergenerational asymmetries, however, because they *are* interchangeable: both spouses are simultaneously one another's parents and children. This interchangeability marks a potential equivalence between

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wife-as-mother and husband-as-father (to which we will return)—while at the same time retaining the asymmetries of each parent-child relationship.

Strathern points out that this asymmetry is also gendered, producing gendered distinctions that are also non-reciprocal. Keeping in mind that the Setswana terms for "wife" and "husband" are the same as for "woman" and "man," there is nothing necessarily reciprocal or symmetrical about this relationship either. In Setswana, being "*mosadi*" (woman/wife) does not necessarily or automatically imply the existence of a specific "*monna*" (man/husband)—it is a generic category of personhood. And so, as above, a non-reciprocal distinction emerges, which marks both a gendered and a generational distinction, marking off the unique and insuperable asymmetry of motherhood in particular. As Isabelle Clark-Decès notes of Tamil understandings of motherhood—and indeed of all relations mediated through mothers, including to the mother's brother—it explicitly "transcends the field of mutual exchange" (Clark-Decès 2019: 97), and falls outside paradigms of reciprocity. While there may be a similarity or equality in principle between men and women in terms of the powers they hold over one another's personhood (here, in terms of self-making)—as Maya Mayblin (2011) also argues for northeast Brazil—in Botswana, ethical effort is focused on distinguishing and hierarchizing these powers, on introducing and reinforcing asymmetries by recasting marriage as an intergenerational relationship.

Casting a spousal relationship in asymmetrical, parent-child terms may imply specific practices and responsibilities of care, and, as Strathern points out, forms of knowledge—but it also implies a specific orientation in time, and a linked attitude toward change. Parenthood, in Strathern's terms, is both prospective and retrospective (Strathern 2011: 246); it implies having and raising a child, casting forward in time, and having been the origin of someone, casting backwards. It involves a simultaneous movement toward the future and the past, which not only connects them, but—in its active attribution of origins (Borneman 1996)—presents the possibility of reconfiguring both. Others have described the temporal creativity of intergenerational relationships in terms of lives that overlap but are not contemporaneous (Durham and Cole 2007): the lives of grandparents, for example, overlap with those of their grandchildren, but extend further into the past, just as the grandchildren's lives extend further into the future. The interchangeabilities or identifications of grandparents and grandchildren are thus powerful means of working on time and prove highly regenerative (Robertson 2011). But in Tswana marriages, we find that creativity made contemporaneous, and immediate. The possibility of reconfiguring pasts and producing futures—of making change, in its broadest sense—is drawn into the comparatively narrow present of a shared life-course.

Of course, the pastor's sermon and my friends' reactions to it reflect discursive ideals of marriage, rather than the everyday practice or lived experience of wedlock. At the same time, I suggest these discourses mark an everyday practice crucial to this reconfiguration of time and relations in its own right: one of ethical reflection, evaluation, and (re)imagination, a key practice of both self-making and kin-making for the Tswana (Reece 2022). Most of the married couples I knew best in Dithaba, including those featured in this paper, did not live together full-time. If employed, they were often posted apart (sometimes on opposite sides of the country); if not, and particularly among the older generations, one spouse might live at their lands or cattle post while the other lived in the village. In this context, situations that bring the couple and/or extended family together to confront and navigate complex

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issues—whether they involve negotiating conflict or negotiating bridewealth, whether they occur at home or in the ritualized context of a church wedding—take on particular significance in the production of selves and kin. I suggest that the pastor's sermon, and the debates involving similar advice and ideals in more informal contexts, mark key examples of those significant practices. And their significance is not simply interpersonal or limited to the family and household. The generational play described above—like any play with kin roles (Borneman 1996; 1997)—is not neutral: it is morally and politically charged and has moral and political effects. Identifying wives with mothers, not unlike identifying late grandparents with their grandchildren (Robertson 2011), introduces a "dynamism … [that] entails the building of a child, an ancestor, a family network, and ultimately images of … history" (ibid.: 595). As well as establishing two people as spouses, as woman and man, the intergenerational experimentation of marriage recuperates lost parents and resituates their children, patches a frayed family network, and allows an opportunity to rework the history of Botswana's AIDS pandemic. It is a form of ethical imagination in which different ways to address problems of selfhood and self-making, of relating to others, and of social change are tested, assessed, and reflected upon, and pushed to their limits. In the next two sections, I turn to the possibilities that this ethical imagination opens and forecloses for the contemporary practice of weddings and marriage in Botswana.

As we were leaving the feast that followed the pastor's sermon, my friend and I went into the main wedding tent to congratulate the couple. Prominent in front of the lavishly decorated head table was a poster of the pastor to whom we had been listening earlier, gazing dramatically into the middle distance, or perhaps toward God. The text "I AM NOT AN ORPHAN I HAVE A FATHER" ran in bold red capitals across the bottom. It seemed an unusual slogan to dominate a wedding tent, but it offered an uncanny echo of the morning's sermon. Its imagery suggested that the couple were not only parents to one another, as well as spouses; they were also the spiritual children of the pastor. In the multiplication of parents that the couple's wedding produced and performed, it was impossible to be an orphan. The poster's claim had a unique resonance in a context where AIDS had rendered orphanhood a specter of social crisis, and where marriage was often advocated as a solution to that crisis. In the next section, I turn to the ways in which the possibilities of marriage described by the pastor above have been experimentally deployed as a response to Botswana's AIDS pandemic—by orphaned young people and their families as much as by governmental or non-governmental organizations.

Marrying Orphans, Managing AIDS: Intergenerational Experimentation and (Re)Generation in Pandemic Times

"Everyone is getting married! Even people you would never expect to get married, people that you always knew: this person is not going to get married." Keitumetse looked serious for a moment, for effect, and then burst out laughing at her own cheek.

Keitumetse had been married nearly a year herself when we met up one month-end in late 2018, as everyone was out enjoying the momentary wealth of payday. We were catching up on news we had received from Dithaba, the village we shared in common, about old friends and neighbors, and in particular about their weddings. There seemed to have been a sudden spate of them among people from the village

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who were Keitumetse's age, in their late twenties and early thirties. At first I thought I was just seeing weddings everywhere because I was researching marriage, but Keitumetse soon corroborated my impression. Even her grandmother had taken to complaining about how often she was expected to attend negotiations, planning meetings, and wedding events, which seemed to fully occupy every weekend through the summer, and several weekdays besides.

I had been telling Keitumetse about bumping into a young man in Dithaba who I had not seen in perhaps fifteen years. He was one of a family of six siblings, who we both knew from the orphan care center they had attended with Keitumetse, and at which I had once worked as a volunteer. The center had often described the family, to donors and supporters, as a child-headed household. The description was something of a stretch, given that the eldest sibling was an adult and employed. But it recognized the unusual circumstance that the siblings had inherited and lived in a yard not only without either of their biological parents, but without aunts, uncles, or grandparents —all of them potential parents, in Tswana terms—in residence. They had a large extended family, in Dithaba and neighboring villages, who remained involved in their lives, but unusually, they stayed alone. The young man had asked me if I knew that his older brother had married. I did not, and asked Keitumetse if she had heard. "Mm, that one was staying with the family of this other priest for some time," she explained. "*Gatwe* [it is said] the priest and the church helped with *bogadi* [bridewealth] and everything. Did he tell you about the sister?" she added. I nodded; he'd mentioned that his older sister had married recently too. "Mmm!" Keitumetse commented, widening her eyes; "Did he mention she paid her own *bogadi*?" Before I could recover from the shock of that statement—women paying their own bridewealth was virtually unheard of in practice, though often mooted in public discourse as a sign of pending social chaos—Keitumetse had already moved on: "And the younger one is getting married in December!" She laughed and took a swig of her drink while my head swam with surprise. The innovations of the siblings' paths to marriage, and the fact that so many of them had married so swiftly, were astonishing. As Keitumetse had suggested in her joke, given the loss of their parents and their apparently straightened circumstances, no one might have expected the siblings to marry; and yet most of them had found creative means of doing so, and more swiftly than many of their peers.

Part of the mischief in Keitumetse's joke was that she might have included herself in the category of people you'd never expect to get married, who were getting married anyway. Not long before we met up, Keitumetse had posted a nostalgic WhatsApp status featuring photos of her and her husband at their wedding. She captioned one image, in English, "My husband, my everything … my father, brother, sister…." At first glance, it gave the expansive feeling that her new spouse fulfilled all the possible roles of family, of either gender, as parent or sibling, making the marriage a complete family in its own right. On second glance, however, I realized that there was something specific about the roles Keitumetse had attributed to her new husband: they were familial figures she had not previously had in her life. No substitutions or identifications were involved. She had only heard rumors about her father, and had no siblings. These absences made little real difference in her day-to-day experience of family: her grandfather raised her as his own; her mother's siblings mostly lived in the same household and were active in her upbringing; their children grew up as siblings to Keitumetse, and as she became an adult, her aunts and uncles became siblings to

her as well. But in her WhatsApp status, she named and recognized those specific absences, and filled them with her husband.

There were other absences Keitumetse might have filled in the same way but chose not to. As a teenager, Keitumetse had lost her mother—but her mother's role seemed not to be a role she expected or wanted her husband to fill. Substitution was avoided. When I asked Keitumetse about how she felt her mother's absence had impacted the process of marrying, she surprised me with her response: "I don't think it would have made much difference, if she was here." She described her mother as someone who had not really been there when Keitumetse was a child in any case, and that it had been such a long time since her mother's death that she had become used to her absence. "You don't miss something that was never there," she added, in a matter-of-fact tone. I mused that if her mother had not managed to marry—none of her mother's siblings had managed to marry, either—her mother's parents would have led the negotiations in any case. "Mmm," she agreed, "from the beginning my grandmother said, '*Ke nna motsadi wa gago*,'"—it's me who is your parent. "*Kana* my mother did not get along with the old woman," she added; "they could have fought over *bogadi* or the plans for the wedding. Things could have been more complicated, you know. Maybe we would not have managed."

Now, as we reflected on her wedding and others, Keitumetse's experience and that of her recently married peers started to align. The reason that no one might have expected these young people to marry was not so much that they had been orphaned, but that their parents, like the vast majority of people in their parents' generation, had never married. And, indeed, marriage itself had become a rarified (if still desirable) achievement, partly confined to urban elites (Solway 2016; Pauli 2019; Pauli and van Dijk 2016). "Do you think that being orphaned made it … *easier* for all of you to marry?" I asked, as bluntly as the thought had struck me. Keitumetse stopped for a moment, considering. "*Gareitse*," she said, as she often did; we do not know. "But maybe. Maybe it's not so complicated somehow." She shrugged. "Ah, *nna* I don't take this marriage thing seriously, for me it's just an experiment. Let's see how long they last, *kana* these days people can just divorce by next year!"

Weddings were a frequent subject of gossip and speculation throughout my time in Botswana, increasingly so as more people—even the unlikely ones—got married. Who was getting married and how were the main subjects of concern. Friends and family I spoke with were often less concerned with whom someone was marrying or the suitability of the match, than with the sources and content of the bridewealth, and the details of the celebrations (which were often widely shared on social media). All of these questions were inevitably subject to ethical evaluation, and often recruited as evidence of the shortcomings and failures of modern Tswana life. The fact that someone might have their bridewealth paid by a church was a sign of the breakdown of the extended family, for example. Even worse, a woman paying her own bridewealth marked a perversion of proper gender roles and threw the relations between the marrying kin into question (Schneidermann and Moore 2024). At the same time, the fact that these young people "had managed" to marry—*ba kgonne*—was an incontrovertible sign of self-making success. Like the pastor's sermon above, this gossip and speculation was an ongoing ethical practice, in which the imaginative possibilities of contemporary marriage were tested, limits imposed, and effects assessed.

The loss of parents to AIDS emerged in Keitumetse's gossip and speculation as just this sort of imaginative possibility, with its own looming ethical shadows. In

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Botswana, the category of "parent" is multiple, expansive, and shifting: a person might well have multiple mothers or be a parent without ever having had a child of their own, by dint of their responsibility for others. Older siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, even elders in the extended kin group may count as parents. When it comes to wedding negotiations, this array of parents—like Keitumetse's mother and grandmother—frequently have competing priorities, differences of opinion, even long-standing grudges and unresolved intergenerational conflicts that can derail a marriage completely (Reece 2019). Keitumetse's success in marrying, and the success of her peers, suggest a concomitant intergenerational dynamic: where potential sources of intergenerational conflict are absent, marriage negotiations move with surprising rapidity and meet more frequent success. The loss of one, or some, of these parents to AIDS not only significantly simplified matters but created unexpected spaces—and need—for innovation and creativity. There was room, suddenly, for the involvement of new actors, like the priest and congregation that mobilized bridewealth above, and for experimentation with new practices, including paying one's own bridewealth. In their absences as much as their presences, parents remain key to what is and is not possible to imagine and enact.

I suggest that, for the young people of Dithaba, the absence of parents was a factor as or more important to the speed and success of their nuptials than factors like class or access to wealth (cf. Solway 2016). Far from signifying impending familial and social collapse, as epidemiological narratives of HIV and AIDS would have it, the loss of parents may have made it easier for many of the young people I knew in Dithaba to marry and provided them with both the motivation and the opportunity to do so more quickly than before. The implicit threat associated with children succeeding into their parents' roles or even surpassing them in their self-making projects is obviated when the parents have passed away (Reece 2022: 220–21), or when there have been shifts to other relational configurations (e.g., Lambek 1988; 2011); potential sources of contestation or delay are eliminated. And at the same time, by turning marrying spouses into one another's parents, marriage promises the possibility of both regenerating family and regenerating history (see also Robertson 2011: 596), in ways that simultaneously enable the self-making projects of those that remain—reclaiming a power over life and death significantly shaken by a devastating pandemic.

At the same time, this experimental regeneration through marriage has also introduced new tenuousness and uncertainty to marriage as such. The familial relationships, histories of dispute, and practices of mediation that marrying spouses might have had to navigate had all their parents survived become opaque; their own ability to navigate those conflicts is unclear, and the personhood they are accumulating is thereby thrown into doubt (Reece 2019). These swift marriages also feel potentially temporary in unexpected ways. While Keitumetse's joke about divorce downplayed the significant financial, legal, and bureaucratic hurdles most Batswana face should they wish to leave their marriages—a process nearly as expensive as getting married in the first place—it expressed a comparatively new sense that divorce is an option, if still a rarity (only 1 percent of adults are divorced; Statistics Botswana 2022), and that marriages need not last forever.

To an extent, the temporalities of Tswana marriage in a time of AIDS mirror the temporalities of the pandemic itself: simultaneously temporary and chronic, urgent and open-ended, quickened and delayed or postponed. That temporal mirroring may be one thing that makes marriage an effective response to AIDS, and a meaningful

way of building new futures out of the pandemic. But it means marriage in a time of AIDS remains an uncertain undertaking, with ambiguous implications. As Keitumetse's parting remark about divorce suggests, greater ease in marrying does not necessarily translate to lasting marriages. While orphaned young people creatively deploy the intergenerational dynamics of marriage to build and reshape their families and themselves, the persistent ambiguities that make Tswana marriage so socially generative mean that the change it produces is often ambivalent at best.

"Do they think you don't have parents?": Marriage, (Re)Generating Crisis, and Uncertain Futures

The message flashed up unexpectedly on the screen of my cell phone: "Call me." It was from Lorato, with whom I had been close since we met in Dithaba's orphan care center many years previous; her family and I had come to take each other as our own (Reece 2022). It was late 2019 and I was back in the UK. Lorato texted me from time to time, but seldom to ask me to call. I looked at the message for a moment, puzzled. Seconds later another message joined it, asking again, "Cn u call." It was odd enough to alarm me, and I called right away.

Lorato picked up after a single ring but stayed quiet a moment. I could hear a muffled sound, her breathing, its raggedness: she was crying, or had been. I waited. She said hello, finally, her voice constricted and hollow, and sniffled. I asked what was wrong, what had happened. "He is beating me," she said, clearly, loud enough to be overheard. And then I heard her husband's voice snap in the background, agitated and angry. She shouted back at him, a torrent of accusations thick with grief, punctuated by the occasional, irrepressible sob.

I realized I had been called as a witness, or a buffer. They shouted, threatened, almost as if I were not there listening—but for the moment, the violence being done was not physical. I tried to call Lorato's attention back through the din and over the staticky connection, and when I did, told her I was concerned for her safety and suggested she should get out of the house. She flatly refused, insisting it was her house and that he should get out. (It was a rental he paid for and she lived in while he worked at a post across the country; the rent money was often subject to threats.) There was more shouting, and then the line was dropped.

I called back immediately, and Lorato picked up without answering, still deep in the throes of the verbal battle. I caught her attention again, asked her to leave again, asked whether she had called the police. She lived in a small town near the border, and there was a detachment not far from the house. In the background I heard her husband shouting that she should not have called me; she replied that she had texted two of her late mother's sisters as well, that he could not stop her telling her family. The line was dropped again, and when I rang back, no one answered.

After perhaps half an hour had passed and a number of texts had gone unanswered, Lorato finally texted back. Her aunt had called too, and the line had dropped when she picked up. Eventually the husband had left, and Lorato had locked herself in their room. The deep hurt of the first call had been replaced by an incandescent rage, and a sort of merciless clarity. I asked what she planned to do. She said she would go home to her family the next day to tell them what had happened.

The next day we stayed in touch by text. The husband had not returned home. The full emotional weight of what had unfolded was beginning to hit, and I called while

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Lorato was on the half-hour bus ride back to Dithaba as a way of accompanying her. I stayed on the phone until she made it home, until I had heard her walk into the *lelwapa* and greet everyone, and then break down in inconsolable sobs. Her voice had faded to a distance: she must have let the phone fall away from her ear, dangling in her hand. I heard the voice of her *malome*, and of her grandmother Mmapula, asking what was wrong, and then I hung up, knowing she was safe. It was not quite a year since her wedding.

I called to check in over the days that followed, as Lorato and her family processed the situation. The first day, her voice exhausted, Lorato described her family's reactions. "My grandmother was really upset," she began. Lorato had admitted to the old woman that there was precedent to her husband's behavior, dating back well before the wedding. "She just kept saying, 'But you're young! Why do you want to live the life I lived?'" We stayed quiet for a while, processing the enormity of that remark. Mmapula was generally very even-handed, even stoic, not often given to emotional reactions or frank laments, but her marriage had been a difficult one, perhaps more than we knew. "She also kept asking, 'Do they think you have no parents?'" Lorato added. It was a question with a bitter edge for both of them: for Lorato, who had lost her mother as a teenager, and for Mmapula, who had raised Lorato, but whose success as a parent was now being called into question. I asked what Mmapula was doing just then. "She's just been lying on the *stoep* all day," Lorato noted. I had known the active, social old woman to do that only once before: when one of her son's marriage negotiations had collapsed (Reece 2022: 154).

I thought, then, that Mmapula might step into the fray. She was a staunch, highly experienced, and authoritative negotiator. Lorato seemed to have expected as much, too. She had often contended that marrying outside her home village was preferable because if there were problems, and she had to go home to her parents to address them, the chances of a successful negotiation were higher with in-laws from far away, with whom her family did not share long, entangled histories. But as the initial shock of the beating faded, and the old woman consulted with her husband and Lorato's aunts and uncles, the likelihood of intervention faded too. Lorato's eldest aunt, herself unmarried, told her that she should just talk to her husband, and that she should not have come home when things had gone wrong. "*Ka Setswana*"—in proper Setswana culture and practice—"his parents are my parents now," Lorato explained, synopsizing the advice she had received. "So I should take this issue to his mother," she concluded. I asked what she thought of that suggestion, and whether she would do so. "What's the point?" she asked, disappointed but resigned. "She always takes his side." Mmapula's rhetorical concern had proven unintentionally prescient: when it came to addressing violent conflict in her marriage, Lorato had no one who would protect or advocate for her; she had no parents. Her marriage had orphaned her in ways that AIDS had not.

I heard later that the husband's mother, who was newly widowed and lived on the other side of the country, had tried to call her son and his wife together to mediate the issue. Both ignored the summons. By that point, Lorato had returned to the house in town and they were living apart for work, at the far ends of the country. It was easy enough to let the issue slide.

An anthropological observer might note a certain predictability in Lorato's predicament. Grooms' families right across southern Africa, and elsewhere, characteristically subsume their daughters-in-law into subordinate roles. Indeed, the songs and snippets of advice that punctuate Tswana weddings are almost

entirely preoccupied with describing a daughter-in-law's often onerous responsibilities to her new household. In conflict, spouses become someone else's children again and are rendered siblings; but Tswana siblings also have generationally verticalized relationships, in which men (or brothers) are automatically treated as the elders of women (sisters), regardless of their relative ages. For the purposes of mediation, a man and wife in conflict become the children of the man's parents, but the man is the elder, and while his parents ought to remind him of his own obligations, it would be unusual for them to gainsay him. Even the violence of this scenario is distressingly common; in his ethnographic work on marriage in Botswana dating back to the 1980s, Ørnulf Gulbrandsen (1986: 14–15) notes the prevalence of fighting, beatings, and violence after marriage, and the tensions that emerge in affinal relationships as a result (see Moore 2020 on similarly high rates of domestic violence in contemporary South Africa). In all the warnings and advice that characterized the pastor's sermon at the outset of this paper, violence was never once mentioned—mainly, I suggest, because it is a taken-for-granted part of married life, rather than a problem.

But why, then, would not only Lorato, but also her grandmother, expect things to be otherwise? Their shock and dismay are hardly a matter of naïveté. Both Mmapula and Lorato had imagined something different for the younger woman. I suggest their reactions come from an expectation of change—and improvement—over time, and specifically across generations, by virtue of their own intergenerational work. Ruth Prince (2008) describes a similar expectation among the Luo, of movement from generation to generation, which they articulate in terms of growth (contrasted with *chira*, an intergenerational stagnation they associate with a form of death). Both Lorato and her grandmother expected that, in negotiating and securing Lorato's marriage, they were creating a sort of momentum that would provide new opportunities for each of them, and their kin, to acquire new relations and thereby expand their self-making. Instead, they both found they had lost or been excluded from relations—including those that had previously enabled them to self-make, exert influence, and create change. In this context, the intergenerational generativity they both expected (to borrow the term from psychology, via Sjaak van der Geest 2008) is more than a "drive for continuity outliving the self" (ibid.: 19): it is a struggle for and expectation of change, which will not only outlive but potentially extend the self, and create new opportunities for others to make themselves as well (compare accounts of the aging who hope not only for continuity, but improvement, in Mattingly and Grøn 2022). More than personal disappointments, the failure to create that change casts doubt and aspersions on Mmapula's and Lorato's self-making projects, and on their abilities to enable the self-making of others; it puts their personhood in question. In this sense, for both Lorato and Mmapula, the beating and their inability to respond marked an unexpected ethical failure, with implications for their selves and relations.

I suggest there are a couple of key factors at work in this apparent failure. The first is to do with the historical moment in which these women find themselves. After decades during which marriage was extremely rare, and at a time when young people are actively experimenting with new ways of getting married, what marriage is and means is in flux. The roles of spouses, of their kin, and of key institutions are shifting and being reinvented, in an active attempt to shape significant, ongoing change—in ways that go well beyond an increasing desire for companionate marriage or lavish weddings. Julie Livingston links the "spectacle of gender violence" in Botswana to "the rupture of expectations" for men in particular (2009: 664; compare Cole 2014 on managing the horizons of expectation in marriage), who once had clear ways of being

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fathers to their wives but whose creative powers in that regard have been thrown into question long since. There is ample precedent for a high degree of intergenerational interdependence among women where men are absent or otherwise failing as providers (see Rice 2014: 383 for an overview), dating back to the era of labor migration and beyond; but in marriage, those intergenerational arrangements must be reorganized around men, both absorbing them and privileging their roles. At the same time, churches, NGOs, and the government are all actively promoting and enabling marriage—while making divorce ever more difficult—in part as a means of securing their own relative influence and legitimacy (see also Reece 2021). While women may be able to strategically appeal to these institutions to challenge marital violence, doing so often exposes them to still other subjugations (see Moore 2020 on South Africa).

The second factor links the historical moment with the fluidity and creativity of Tswana generational configurations—which, in Lorato's case, seem to have hit a limit. As a powerful and experienced negotiator in her own right, Lorato's grandmother *could* have done something different: she could have called the husband's family or mobilized a delegation to do so. But I surmise that she did not in part because she had taken on the role of Lorato's mother. And in this moment of marital crisis, that substitution became complete. A bride's mother is often excluded from the formal negotiations of marriage, from wedding events like the advice-giving *patlo* ceremony (Reece 2021), and from the resolution of conflicts; she must rely on her husband, sons (especially those who are *malome* to the bride), and perhaps brothers or brothers-in-law. Indeed, Mmapula had consistently relied on these figures in negotiating the major issues and conflicts that had emerged in Lorato's life since her mother's passing. As none of her sons (Lorato's *bomalome*) were married, however, involving them in marriage-related negotiations was tricky; she had had to rely on her husband's married nephews (brother's sons). Their allegiances to the old man gave him a great deal of influence in the situation, and given his own apparent attitudes to the appropriateness of violence in marriage, he was unlikely to help. That Lorato's parting advice came from her mother's younger sister, herself unmarried, underscores the limits on Mmapula's ability to intervene effectively. Mmapula's relocation into the role of Lorato's mother, then, proves complete and durable, but also limiting, and it highlights tenuous dimensions in both women's self-making projects. It is in the context of Lorato's marriage that her mother's loss, and Mmapula's substitution, are crystallized (Robertson 2011: 596). The crisis and uncertainty introduced by Lorato's mother's death is reproduced by the very generational flexibility that ameliorated it.

What, finally, does this event suggest about mothers—who, as we have seen, occupy a uniquely un-reciprocable role and linked combination of powers over life and over death? In Lorato's case, her work, her mother-in-law's work, and Mmapula's work seems to have been diverted from their own self-making prospects, and turned toward sustaining her husband's ethical selfhood, in spite of his violent transgressions. As mothers to their husbands, wives are embedded in a series of other intergenerational interpretations that ensure their generative power is primarily focused on the ethical self-making of their men. Here limits are set on the imaginations and experimentations that an intergenerational understanding of marriage seemed to offer—and their promises of change prove just as likely to be conservative as creative (Magee 2021). As noted above, one unique dimension of the asymmetries between wives-as-mothers and husbands-as-fathers is that it *can* be

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reversed whereas other such asymmetries cannot; and here it *is* being reversed, setting back the promise of change embedded in imagining wives as the mothers of their husbands. The generative asymmetries that distinguish motherhood, in other words, are easily recruited to imbalances of power by which women are also subjugated.

Summoning an image of grandparents holding their grandchildren, Margaret Mead suggested the elders could not "conceive of any other future for their children than their own past lives" (1970: 1; quoted in Durham and Cole 2007: 21). But Mmapula's lament—"Why do you want to live the life I lived?"—suggests she had conceived of a future for her granddaughter very different from her own past life. She had helped the young woman secure her marriage with the expectation that it would produce that difference. When it failed to do so, the old woman found herself at a loss; she was no longer Lorato's parent and had to rely on others to rectify a situation they had little apparent willingness or ability to address. For the old woman, history seemed to be repeating itself, and ensuring her granddaughter's marriage had unexpectedly excluded her from generating new and different futures. The marriage had opened up the possibility of self-making and of change, but offered no guarantees about the shape either would take, and ultimately eroded the old woman's means of shaping it—and Lorato's, too. In her work on marriage and death in Brazil, Maya Mayblin recounts the Santa Lucian assertion that "it is only through the ambivalent pleasures and pitfalls of a marriage that a person comes to understand the true limits of his or her own strengths and weaknesses" (2011: 135). In the Botswana case, other limits emerge as well: on projects of self-making, on the generative powers of motherhood, and on the possibility of shaping change in selves, families, and wider socio-political realities.

Reflecting on the U.S. AIDS epidemic in the early 1990s, Borneman identified the need for an analysis of marriage as a zone of foreclosure, exclusion, abjection, and death (1996; see also 1997). In a very different field of the same pandemic, decades later, Lorato's beating invites a similar interpretation. As an intergenerational relationship, marriage opens up new and experimental possibilities for self- and kin-making among Batswana who have grown up in the shadow of AIDS. But in contexts of such uncertainty, identifying wives with mothers is a "relationally contingent" (Robertson 2011: 593) undertaking that produces further uncertainties of its own, relying on the full network of relations surrounding the players involved to "theorise, speculate [and] choose" (ibid.). In its contingency, this marital mode of ethical experimentation is prone to failure, risking the foreclosure of the very opportunities it promises, especially for women, and the sorts of social change they might otherwise have wrought. Angela Garcia (2014) notes in her study of intergenerational heroin addiction in New Mexico that loss and inheritance are inseparable; loss persists, and indeed is reproduced, through intergenerational relationships and inheritances. In the case of Botswana, the power over life and death that marriage seems to recuperate in posing the wife as mother to the husband is at once incomplete, limited, and multiplied, proving highly contestable and unstable. And as such, it, too, reproduces the very crisis it sets out to address—in this case, orphaning Lorato in ways that exceed even her experience of AIDS. At the same time, the loss and crisis that are regenerated remain ways of renewing and reorienting intergenerational relationships in times of radical social change, for better and for worse: they secure Mmapula in her adopted position as Lorato's mother, in the latter's absence; they secure Lorato in her naturalized role among her in-laws; and indeed, perhaps most powerfully (if problematically), they bind Lorato and her

husband together. Crisis itself continues to regenerate intergenerational relatedness (see also Reece 2022).

Conclusion

In their analysis of generations, Deborah Durham and Jennifer Cole contend, "How we think about and treat children, youth, or the aged is central to how we create possible futures, whatever they may be" (2007: 21). I suggest that the ways the Tswana think about and undertake marriage—as an experimental, intergenerational relationship—are also key means of creating futures and shaping possibilities of change. Like other intergenerational relationships, marriage is "a highly imaginative undertaking in which … visions for the future meet the broader forces of history and culture in unpredictable, uneven ways" (Cole 2010: xii). In some cases, as with the swiftly-marrying orphaned youth of Dithaba, these imaginative undertakings and visions for the future meet history in ways that open space for new possibilities for self-making, kin-making, and broader social change. In others—as Lorato's example demonstrates with frustrating clarity—marriage experiments fail, meeting unfolding histories of gendered and intergenerational violence, or pandemic flux, by which those same possibilities are foreclosed. In both cases, loss and crisis—here the crisis of the AIDS pandemic—are not simply reproduced but regenerated: they take on simultaneously familiar and new forms. In the regeneration of crisis, relations and persons are regenerated too, enabling a continued recuperation and reorientation of kinship, as well as personal and political histories and futures.

Thinking of marriage in terms of intergenerational relationships enables us to see not only its genealogical dimensions, but its historical and political effects—just as it enables Batswana not only to regenerate intergenerational relationships, but to act on personal and collective trajectories and time. Of course, what I have described here is a framing of marriage—and a generational mode of thinking and relating—in some ways particular to the Tswana. In other contexts, marriage might instead be cast as a sibling relation, for example, rather than a parent-child relation. I would argue that such framings remain generationally informed, however, and they, too, tell us a great deal about the orientation of marriage in time, toward history and toward change, as well as specific ways in which affinal relationships are naturalized into kinship. They also remind us that marriage has always been an intergenerational project: through which parents have sought different futures for their children, or through which children have sought ways to look after their parents, ancestors, inheritances, and histories. More broadly, an intergenerational approach to marriage encourages us to rethink marriage—and indeed kinship—in non-reciprocal, non-mutual terms (Strathern 2011), in which asymmetry becomes a source of generativity with genealogical, historical, and political implications. Even marriages shaped by companionate ideals, like those described above, turn on the creativity of these asymmetries more than their apparent egalitarian promises. While they may work differently in different contexts, the intergenerational dimensions of marriage—and what they stand to (re)generate—open an ethnographic perspective on how people manage and produce change through their everyday lives and intimate relationships.

As new marriages appear to proliferate in Botswana—after decades of statistical decline (Statistics Botswana 2022)—they demonstrate something more than the resilience of extended families through the AIDS epidemic, or the unexpected

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opportunities for refiguring kinship the epidemic has introduced. They point to marriage as a key site of existential, ethical re-imagination of selves, relations, pasts, and futures, responsive to different experiences of crisis in highly specific ways. In the case of Botswana's AIDS epidemic, marriage simultaneously stabilizes gendered and generational modes of authority unsettled by the epidemic; opens new spaces for shaping selfhood through experimental reorientations of relations with kin and partners alike, in contexts of sexual risk; and recuperates and reorients intergenerational relationships in situations of widespread loss. The very things that tie marriage to death in pandemic times, to repurpose Borneman's (1996) terms, may also be those through which it regenerates life. Marriage practice may respond to other crises in other ways: the neoliberalization of partnerships and marriage noted elsewhere in southern Africa (Pauli 2022a; 2022b), for example, might mark a response to financial crises or ongoing crises of inequality; just as the involvement of partners and spouses in the socio-spiritual labor of recuperating former combatants might mark a response to the legacies of war and displacement (see Victor and Porter 2017 on post-conflict Uganda). While it is difficult to determine what patterns of practice or structure might result from this experimentation, a pattern of experimentation with, in, and through marriage as a response to times of upheaval and crisis emerges nonetheless. Marriage is a space of everyday life charged with existential questions about who we are, what our lives are for, and what we can create and change in the world. Re-imagining marriage involves re-imagining what it is to be a moral person, how relations ought to be, and the politics of realizing those possibilities, in the face of sociopolitical change that might otherwise seem well beyond our control.

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