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Telling families, telling AIDS: narratives of crisis in Botswana

This article examines how families tell crisis, how non-governmental organisations tell it, and what a comparison offers for ethnographers of crisis. In Botswana's time of AIDS, families tell the stories of those they've lost in collaborative, fragmented, and mediated ways. Where words have risky intersubjective effects – especially among kin – family stories both produce and contain their danger, generating selves and relationships. Tales told by orphan care NGOs draw on different language ideologies, to different ends: they focus on the crisis of AIDS, its causes and effects, to generate solutions and legitimacy – potentially disrupting family tellings. I argue that ethnographies of crisis deploy a similar, EuroAmerican, narrative logic: they focus on crisis to generate change. But this approach may obscure the lived experience of crisis, and foreclose creative response. I propose specific ways that anthropologists might experiment with 'non-crisis narrations' (Roitman 2013) instead, taking family tales as inspiration.

Keywords: kinship; stories; crisis; HIV and AIDS; Botswana

The only thing truer than the truth is the story.

Jewish Proverb

People bleed stories, anthropologists gather narratives.

Unni Wikan (2000:219)

'You know, sometimes I ask myself if my mum died of AIDS.'

Kgomotso pushed the shirt she was washing back into the suds, and pulled it out again, working it quickly and sharply against her wrist. She tipped her head to the side and kept her eyes trained on

her work. I was standing across from her, working on a tough pair of trousers at the other end of the washtub. I watched her for a moment.

'What makes you think that?' I asked.

She shrugged. '*Gakeitse*,' she said – I don't know. 'They have never said so at home. But you know, if I think about it... When my grandmother was looking after my mother, sometimes she would wear gloves. And you know about how she sent all my aunts and uncles to be tested.'

We were standing in the shade of a tree in my front yard in the gathering evening, making our way through the week's laundry. We stayed quiet awhile, up to our elbows in sloshing water, our wrists raw from the abrasive laundry soap.

'Sometimes my grandmother says things that make me wonder,' Kgomotso reflected, after a long silence. 'The other time she was complaining about the neighbours. You see how we don't really talk to them at home, they can refuse to help even with little things. Then she called them "your father and those others," something like that.'

The shift of topic threw me – but not so much as the mention of Kgomotso's father. As far as I knew, she didn't have one. 'Wait, who...? Was he ill too?' I asked, trying to stitch the details together. 'Have you ever asked your grandmother about it directly?' I added.

'O!' she scoffed; 'How can I ask that?' She paused, considering the prospect a moment. 'Anyway, she wouldn't tell me. I didn't understand at first what she was saying. I only thought of it after. Next time he passes the yard I'll show you. I kind of look like him...'. She trailed off.

'But, so, what does that have to do with thinking your mum died of AIDS?' I asked, indelicate in my confusion.

'I don't know. I just had that idea.' Kgomotso ventured.

'Don't you want to know?' I pursued.

'For what?' she responded, pegging shirts on the line.

By the time of this conversation, I had known Kgomotso and her family – the Pules – for over two years.¹ I met them through a local orphan care centre at which I volunteered, a non-governmental organization (NGO) based in the village I call Dithaba, in the south-east corner of Botswana. Kgomotso had family working at the project, and she attended as a client; they lived nearby, and we developed a habit of visiting. We'd become close over the years, and spent a lot of time together; but this was the first time I'd heard Kgomotso speculate on her mother's cause of death.

Her ruminations did not entirely surprise me. In passing comments, I'd heard about Kgomotso's mother's long illness, which had left her bedridden and sometimes hallucinatory. Kgomotso had told me about a family friend, who ran the home-based care centre, coming to advise her grandmother about caring for her mother; and how shortly thereafter, her grandmother had insisted that her aunts and uncles all get tested. And she'd once described being summonsed home from school, on a dubious pretext; finding the yard full of relatives, knowing immediately and irretrievably what their presence meant; running away to stay with an uncle, and being kept away from the funeral, as children customarily are. I had met Kgomotso while I was volunteering at a centre for children and youth orphaned by HIV and AIDS, after all: while children whose parents had died in other circumstances also attended, the centre had been established in response to the purported crises of orphanhood, care, and family breakdown that the epidemic had brought to Botswana.

Kgomotso had put all these details together for herself before, no doubt, as had I. But our conversation over the laundry was the first time I'd heard her – or anyone else – put those details together out loud. Putting those details together had produced other unanticipated details, and other realms of relational possibility besides: possible fathers and patriline emerged among unfriendly neighbours, before receding again. And so, while in some ways Kgomotso wasn't telling me anything new, she was telling me something very new indeed. Separately, the details had been intimate, but innocuous; together, they became risky, somehow dangerous, but also creative – to Kgomotso's understanding of herself, of her mother, and of her relationships within and beyond her family. In drawing these discrete details together, Kgomotso was tentatively sketching a particular sort of story; and she was drawing me into the shaping of it, and into the generative dangers of it, too.

Kgomotso's ruminations invite us to consider how families tell stories, how stories tell families, and what insights family stories provide on living with, and studying, crisis – in this case, AIDS in contemporary Botswana. I argue that Tswana families construct stories of life, illness, and death in ways that allow them both to produce and to manage the potential for crisis presented by the epidemic, in a context where language and intersubjectivity pose threats of their own (Comaroff and Comaroff 1989; Klaitz 2010; see also Niehaus 2013). Dispersed among family members in

specific ways, expressed in discontinuous fragments and marked silences over extended periods of time, and mediated through everything from photos to houses, these tellings harness crisis to reproduce and realign kin relationships – and thereby make selves. Family tales prove oriented towards the future as much as the past, and to preserving possibility over articulating knowledge. They work to distinguish kin from non-kin; to define and reorder specific kin relationships, by gender and by generation (see also Ochs and Taylor 1992); and to preserve and create opportunities for making selves through those relationships. Family tales move across and produce distinctions between the personal, familial, and public in specific ways – working to contain the contagious risks of AIDS, by re-asserting the social boundaries that have been collapsed and transgressed by the epidemic (Comaroff 2007:198).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) responding to AIDS – like the centre Kgomotso attended, and at which I volunteered – tell their own stories of crisis: tales that justify intervention, attempt to form relationships with client families, and generate support from donors, seeking meaningful change. But these stories take rather different forms, drawing on different language ideologies, for different audiences and to different relational ends. Instead of making selves or families, NGO tales focus on the disease itself, attempting to make sense of its causes and effects, and thereby generate therapeutic solutions and institutional legitimacy. In their orientation towards ritualised modes of disclosure – of disease status, and through the disease, of selfhood (Black 2013; Brada 2016; Robins 2006) – NGO tales often assume ruptures with kin, and radically different models of personhood. They deliberately rework the spheres of ‘private’ and ‘public’, and the relationships and distinctions between them. And as they interact with family tales, they unsettle and disrupt kin tellings. Paradoxically, I suggest that this storytelling mode may exacerbate the crises that AIDS presents, as much as alleviate them.

Anthropological accounts of AIDS – and of other public health and humanitarian crises, from Ebola to Covid, from the refugee crisis to the climate crisis – have offered penetrating insights into the narratives deployed by NGOs, government, and other intervening agencies, and their ambivalent effects. But many leave their own narrative modes and legacies unexamined – while reproducing the assumptions about language, stories, relationships, and persons that make those crisis tales problematic (Brada 2013:438). Edward Bruner (1986) has argued that ‘ethnographies are guided by an implicit narrative structure, by a story we tell about the peoples we study’ (1986:139), which shapes what counts as data and as acceptable analysis, underpins a specific attitude to history, and has political implications for the roles of anthropologists and peoples alike. Janet Roitman has applied a similar insight to the study of crisis specifically, as a term and concept that orients both history and social and political theory around the question, ‘what went wrong?’ (2013:91). Crisis, she argues, ‘secures “a world” for observation’ (2013:39), enabling certain questions and political responses but foreclosing others, featuring as both the analytical foundation and an analytical blind spot for the social sciences (2013:*passim*). I suggest that the implicit narrative structure of ethnographies of crisis runs even deeper, however: crisis is also a key constituent in the construction of EuroAmerican stories and drama, its resolution key to producing change (J.Bruner 2004). Anthropologies of crisis, which often implicitly or explicitly seek social change, deploy this narrative logic to achieve it – but in doing so, may inadvertently homogenise, depoliticise, and even reproduce the crises they hope to address. Oriented around the question of what went wrong, and

what change it might make possible, these tales can lose the creative ways in which people live with crisis. Contextualising these crisis tales with those told by and through families – figures whose absence or irrelevance is often assumed in times of crisis, and especially a time of AIDS – unsettles narrative assumptions about crisis in anthropological writing, while drawing out the lived experience and political effects of crisis. It also encourages us to think of our tellings as participatory, and implicated in the management of the crises we study.

In this article, I compare these storytelling strategies, and explore the ways in which they might rework one another. This comparison is descriptive, not evaluatory: families, NGOs, and anthropologists tell different stories, in different registers, to different audiences and different purposes. But these tellings are not incommensurate, either; they interact, and with observable social effects, suggesting a range of narrative possibility. Kgomotso's musings above, I suggest, were less about disclosing her mother's status or cause of death – which, ultimately, remains unknown – than about attempting to map out possible relational landscapes, and to gauge and manage the risks and opportunities they present to her own self-making. The ways in which her family enabled and constrained that process – and in which they, and she, positioned me in it, in a context where other narratives of AIDS proliferated – speak to the socio-political importance of storytelling in times of crisis, and of the ways anthropologists might best engage it. And they offer creative possibilities for what Roitman has called 'non-crisis narrations': stories that convey the lived experience of crisis, while 'suspending crisis as the foundation of narration and critique' (Roitman 2013:71).

Telling tales in Botswana's time of AIDS

Botswana is often described as 'Africa's miracle'. With the most productive diamond mines in the world, it enjoys a long track record of peace, stability, and good governance, and pronounced success in state-led development. And yet, the country has faced one of the world's worst AIDS epidemics for over thirty years – complicating epidemiologies of AIDS that tie it to poverty, political instability, or lack of political leadership. A unique constellation of donors, pharmaceutical companies and biomedical researchers, persuaded of Botswana's exceptionalism (Chabrol 2013), were mobilised and coordinated by the state to provide proactive, ground-breaking responses to the pandemic – including the free, nationwide provision of antiretroviral treatment. But Botswana's pandemic has persisted, in spite of these successes.

As such, the lived experience of AIDS retains an aspect of crisis in Botswana, even in the context of treatment availability. Rates of new infection remain catastrophically high, and life with HIV remains marked by stigma, risk of cross-infection – including heightened vulnerability to cancer (Livingston 2012), and possibly to newer viruses like Covid-19 – unpredictable illness, and the possibility of sudden death. HIV and AIDS have become quotidian, chronic sorts of crisis. Discourses of crisis have shape-shifted accordingly: what began as an urgent crisis of national survival, in the words of then-president Festus Mogae (LaGuardia 2000), became a long-term 'orphan crisis' and 'crisis of care'. These crises are often described in familial terms; among government agencies and NGOs, family breakdown is frequently cast as both the cause and effect of the pandemic. Interventions launched by these agencies target families above all else. As such, AIDS provides an

apt lens through which to examine how families articulate with local, national, and transnational political projects as they frame and respond to crisis.

These discourses of disease and families in crisis do not, of course, stand alone. They are embedded in global narratives, generated across an array of local and international actors and institutions (see, e.g., Nguyen 2010 on the ‘markets for testimonials’ and ‘confessional technologies’ that emerged with AIDS in West Africa; or Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2003 on cholera narratives in Venezuela). The telling of AIDS stories has been one of the key means by which international actors and local activists have sought to battle the disease, the spread of which is often linked to stigma and silence (Brada 2013:439; Niehaus 2013; Nguyen 2010; Robins 2006). But this storytelling imperative creates dilemmas where words are understood to take part in, or even create, that which they describe, as they do in Botswana and elsewhere in southern Africa – where they can materialise illness, posing a particular danger to kin (Comaroff and Comaroff 1989:286; Klaitz 2010; see also Hunleth 2017:Ch.3 on Zambia; and Niehaus 2013 on South Africa).

In their account of the colonial-era politics of language, Jean and John Comaroff (1989) contend that talking – and especially naming – conveys reality among Batswana. Words and actions, causes and effects are continuous with each other; and they have connotations that may be unwittingly triggered, with unpredictable repercussions. While the forms and narrative modes of the Tswana language – and associated forms of kinship, subjectivity, knowledge and being – have been reworked by the colonial encounter (ibid.), Batswana remain ‘quite conscious of how words do things with persons’ (Klaitz 2010:165, echoing Austin 1975). And perhaps the greatest power of words resides in the effects they can have on the bodies and relationships of others – especially in the harm they can do. Words can disrupt hierarchy, unleash emotions, and induce illness in others’ bodies (Niehaus 2013:11), or interfere with their self-making efforts (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991:134); they can create serious *dikgang*, conflict or crisis (see Author forthcoming). Words can also have therapeutic effects, creating healing, faith, and love in others (Klaitz 2010). But ‘fear of the destructive capacity of words outweigh[s] faith in their therapeutic potential’ (Niehaus 2013:11). And their destructive capacity is most marked among those with whom one is most closely connected, and upon whom one’s self-making most strongly relies: one’s kin.

I suggest that Tswana families tell stories in ways that seek to contain the dangerous potential of words, while sustaining their relational generativity. In their dynamism and indeterminacy, family stories create a temporary distance between the word and the world, simultaneously producing and containing the potential for crisis that words represent. The imperative of doing so means that Tswana family stories may take a very different form from those we find in NGO or anthropological accounts of similar events – and may offer a creative alternative to those tellings, too.

Research into life stories has described the collaborative, open-ended ways in which they may be told, the ways they build relationships and shared lifeworlds among families (Ochs 2004:269), and the ways those tellings structure relational hierarchies (Ochs and Taylor 1992) in larger ‘communit[ies] of life stories’ (Bruner 2004:699). But the implicit emphasis has remained on the

ways people tell themselves, rather than the ways they tell each other; and in contexts where making selves is a fraught, processual, intersubjective project (Alverson 1972), the latter cannot be overlooked. Family tales, in the Tswana context, are part biography, part autobiography, part collaboration; they sustain a 'tension...between lives as singular, unique, and irreducible, and lives as instantiations of a shared, collective, and enduring experience' (Oakdale and Course 2014:11). This tension also characterises kinship itself, and marks the ways in which both storytelling and kinship are fundamentally political – not only in terms of mediating between the 'private' and the 'public' (Arendt 1958; Jackson 2013 [2002]), but in terms of actively producing those two domains and the distinctions between them. In this sense, family stories can provide unexpected insights into the politics of crisis, as well as into the production and reproduction of kin relations in epidemic times.

Speaking things brings them into being in specific ways for the Tswana, with particular implications and risks, for particular modes of personhood and relatedness with their own historical contexts. But, as the philosopher J.L. Austin (1975) has argued, every utterance is an act, and all words do things. The question of what words do with persons, relationships, and experiences can be asked of any social context, and can offer insight into how stories shape and manage these effects. By the same token, the stories told by NGOs or anthropologists are never simply stories, but are social acts, with political and ethical effects that bear careful contextualisation and consideration – a project this article undertakes.

If people bleed stories, as Unni Wikan suggests (2000:219), stories may mark violent injuries, doubly risky in an era of blood-borne disease. But they may also be the stuff that binds kin together – one Setswana term for family, *losika*, means 'vein' – in part by sharing that risk among them. In gathering and reproducing narratives, NGOs and anthropologists may both run the risk of missing the experiences these blood-stories produce and contain, the relationalities they trace, and the social lives they enable.

Family tales

A framed portrait of Kgomotso's mother, yellowed with age, hung on the narrow strip of wall between the doors to her brothers' bedrooms. It showed her smiling behind sunglasses, sitting on her haunches in some stubby grass by the round headlights of an old car. The sunglasses were so large they obscured her face, and I could never make out what she looked like – though her cheeks and smile reminded me of her siblings. The portrait hadn't always been there; it appeared some time after I'd come to know the Pule family, many years after Kgomotso's mother's death. It was the first image I ever saw of her. When I asked Kgomotso about it, she said, simply, 'Yeah, my mum loved having her photo taken.'

In ten years after our conversation over the laundry, Kgomotso and I never spoke about the cause of her mother's death, or her father's identity, again – though occasionally, when the neighbour who might have been her father walked by, she would shoot me a pointed, humorous look. In the

meantime, she had finished school, begun work, and was becoming an adult; and I had left my volunteering role, trained as an anthropologist, and returned to conduct research. In that time her mother was rarely mentioned, much less in connection with AIDS. But like the portrait, the woman's presence remained among us, obvious and obscured.

One evening, Kgomotso's aunt Boipelo and I were chatting in the gathering dusk. Kgomotso had begun building a house on land inherited from her mother. That evening she'd asked us for help transporting bricks, but hadn't shown up. I was annoyed. 'You know, she's like her mother that way,' Boipelo confided suddenly. In all the years I'd known her, I'd never heard Boipelo talk about her late sister. 'Kgomotso's mother was very strong-willed. She got that plot and she started building because she wanted to make her own life. She and the old woman didn't get along because of that,'² she added, referring to their mother, Kgomotso's grandmother. I hemmed attentively – aware of the parallel she was drawing between my annoyance with Kgomotso, and the old woman's annoyance with Kgomotso's mother – but she said nothing further.

The house-building drew out other bursts of commentary. One afternoon, Kgomotso reflected in the presence of her mother's sisters that the plot she was building on was the only thing she had by which to remember her mother. Her eldest aunt scolded her harshly, asking her how she could say such a thing and why she needed things to remember people by. Kgomotso went quiet.

Other members of Kgomotso's family were either mute on the subject of her mother, or directed their commentary in other ways. Kgomotso's grandmother had been instrumental in ensuring Kgomotso's inheritance of her mother's plot, and had set aside a small amount of money and some building materials left behind after her daughter's death, for Kgomotso's use. I never heard her speak about her late daughter; but on occasion, Kgomotso described memories or observations her grandmother had shared. I would sometimes hear Kgomotso's female cousins, old enough to remember her mother, tell their youngest siblings about their late aunt, her quick temper or her generosity. Like Boipelo, they drew comparisons with Kgomotso, compared tensions with their grandmother, and emphasised special connections between Kgomotso and a cousin Kgomotso's mother had particularly favoured. But Kgomotso's uncles never spoke of her mother in my presence, nor, as far as I was aware, did they say much to Kgomotso herself.

Do these stolen glimpses make a story? They scarcely conform to the narrative arc most anthropologists might expect of stories, or the ways we are accustomed to telling them: as emplotted, integrated accounts in which events, causes and effects are sequenced and synthesised (Ricoeur 1991:21-2; see also Ochs 2004). But this non-conformity may mark a shortcoming in the default disciplinary understandings of stories, rather than a shortcoming in the story or its telling. In these fleeting narrative moments, allusions and deferrals, we might see what Ana De Fina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou identify as 'small stories' (2012:116); or we might see an example of experimentation with the 'upper bound' of tellability, where the line between what can and can't be told is selectively breached in order to build intimacy (Norrick 2005). Allowing the possibility that the snatches of insight and character offered above are part of a distinctly Tswana, familial mode of

storytelling invites us to rethink what we understand stories – and especially stories of crisis – to be.

I suggest the elements above experiment with the possibilities of a tale, or several tales, sketched in juxtaposed detail over long periods of time by a wide range of people who share unspoken aspects of that tale in common. Far from emplotted and integrated, this scattered tale is contested and contradictory, experimental and reversible, and carefully unfinished. Not simply retrospective, and not oriented towards making the past – nor even Kgomotso's mother's death – meaningful (cf. Oakdale and Course 2014:4; Robins 2006), the snippets recounted above are oriented instead towards sustaining, transmitting, and transforming specific relationships into the future, and producing selves thereby. Like Kgomotso's musings at the outset of this paper, they are subjunctive, maintaining a variety of possible futures and pasts by staying in 'the middle' (Samuels 2018:104; see also Whyte 2002; Wood and Lambert 2008). But here, contingency is preserved through silence, unknowing, and the mediation of information through a range of people and things, as much as speech.

Comaroff and Comaroff (1989:276) describe colonial-era Tswana symbolic practice as built into quotidian life, and note that history – and by implication, ethnography – is not always reducible to narrative, requiring a 'poetic of the concrete' (1989:288). When words can be dangerous, ways of signifying beyond words are required (Niehaus 2013:11). While the colonial project may have changed the forms of Tswana language and sociality, family tellings demonstrate a continuity here: photographs, land, half-finished houses and the process of building itself all come to mediate Kgomotso's mother's story, and the relationships that framed – and continue to frame – it. And these mediations, too, are indeterminate; like the portrait described above, they conjured Kgomotso's mother in certain ways to those who'd known her, while hiding her from those – like me – who hadn't.

This conjuring traced specific family relationships. Its conjurers, after all, were also its primary audience, and drew upon substantial shared experience in Kgomotso's mother's life. This shared experience bound them together, but also differentiated them, as their degrees of shared experience varied – as, too, did their roles in the telling. Thus, for example, the story of Kgomotso's mother seemed primarily to be kept and circulated by and among the women of the family – a tendency I observed in other families, particularly among daughters who had lost mothers. But it also moved in specific generational patterns. Kgomotso's mother's sisters might share scraps of story among themselves, as their daughters did, but such details seldom moved between generations – and, as such, served to distinguish them. A similar distinction may explain Kgomotso's grandmother's silence with me on the matter. The exception to these patterns was, of course, Kgomotso herself – who not only had a wealth of her own experience to draw upon, but was offered other snippets and details, from her grandmother and the full array of her aunts and cousins. Kgomotso was in a unique position to cobble such details together, and the best-positioned to construct – if never complete – possible storylines. That capacity reinforced the ways in which she gradually assumed her late mother's familial roles and responsibilities, becoming a daughter to her grandmother, a sister to her aunts, and a parent to her younger cousins. Of course, stories

weren't the only way in which Kgomotso gradually occupied her mother's position; they were one practice among many that effected that change. But they offered an important means of articulating and reflecting on that change as well, creating a space in which it could be recognised (see LeMarcis 2012:489). Tellings offered to her from across her family connected Kgomotso to her mother, and served to produce new distinctions in her relationships with other family members, gradually marking her as an adult. While her mother's story did not move between generations, it moved Kgomotso between them.

In this sense, the experimental story of Kgomotso's mother shaped social distinctions, both among kin and between kin and non-kin. It distinguished the Pules by generation and gender (Ochs and Taylor 1992:308), but in ways that allowed a degree of intergenerational dynamism in those roles over time, for Kgomotso especially. Kgomotso's putative father was marked off as a figure outside this story – neither necessary to it, nor accessible through it. And the tidbits told of her mother were never, to my knowledge, shared with neighbours or friends (though these people, too, would occasionally offer comments or comparisons to Kgomotso herself). As I came to know more about Kgomotso's mother, I was drawn into specific familial roles closely linked to both women; but I was also never privy to enough information for that incorporation to be complete. I could describe the living room portrait of Kgomotso's mother, but not what her eyes looked like behind her sunglasses.

These tellings produced specific problems. Where words take part in what they describe, and where accidental connotations or interpretations pose threats (Comaroff and Comaroff 1989: 286), contingency can be as dangerous as it is generative. Family stories must contain subjunctivity as well as preserving it. Tales of Kgomotso's mother posed two interrelated issues for the Pule family that required managing. The first was that a family's capacity to care is drawn sharply into question when someone sickens or dies from AIDS, or is thought to have done so (Klaits 2010:33; Livingston 2005:3). Long-standing associations of illness with ill-will on the part of one's elders or ancestors may be triggered (Lambek and Solway 2001; Schapera 1940). Speculations are made on the willingness and ability of family members to love and look after one another, and the faultlines of otherwise-hidden grudges, refusals, and misunderstandings (*sotlego*, or scorn, the opposite of care – see Klaits 2010:Introduction) are sought, or produced. While the prospect of AIDS can never be eliminated entirely, it must be rendered uncertain – as the Pules' telling rendered it, a rendering I have deliberately echoed above.

The second problem was that the production or circulation of her story stood to expose aspects of Kgomotso's mother's life that might retrospectively undermine the success of her self-making project, and destabilise the relationships critical to it. Beyond the importance of accumulating relationships in self-making, Comaroff and Comaroff (2001) describe the need to fragment and conceal the self to protect it from attack (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; see also Durham and Klaits 2002:779, 784 on concealment). Like Arendt's (1958:185) 'real story' – an unfolding of events that indicates agency but has no author – Tswana personhood requires a certain effacement or concealment of the self in order to make the self at all. The added scrutiny that AIDS brings threatens to frustrate this process: to expose and trace networks of sexual relationships otherwise

kept secret, to throw one back on one's fraught dependencies towards kin, to alienate existing relationships and to foreclose new ones (Author 2019; Klaitis 2005; see also Hejoaka 2009).

In this light, the partial, piecemeal tellings of Kgomotso's mother, conveyed in fragments and speculations by different family members over time, begins to make sense as narrative. The tentative tale that emerges is decisively *not* a story of AIDS, but of a mother, daughter, sister, aunt, and lover. It is, in other words, a figuring of the relationships Kgomotso's mother had built up in her lifetime; it is an account of her self-making, which emphasises her personhood. It is the unfinished story of a woman's life – not of her illness, and not of her death.

By emphasising and enacting her relationships, but also keeping certain aspects of her biography concealed, I suggest that the partial tellings of Kgomotso's mother's life kept her project of self-making open and incomplete – even after her passing (a practice which may contribute, in part, to producing agency among Tswana ancestors; see Schapera 1940:274). They made her place in the family clear, sustained and reproduced the relationships (and tensions) around it, and kept the conditions of self-making in play and unresolved. These tellings were not a matter of producing coherent explanations, nor of remembering her or the circumstances of her death. As Kgomotso's aunt's scolding suggests, remembrance was inappropriate: both for the risks of reviving pain it presents (Durham and Klaitis 2002; Klaitis 2005:316), and because it implies the foreclosure of a project as yet ongoing, of relationships as yet unfolding – from which Kgomotso was benefitting in her own self-making, in a sort of relational inheritance. Kgomotso's self-making project relied on her mother's self-making legacy, and perpetuated both women's personhood – and their shared relationships – in turn.

In its incompleteness and uncertainty, and in its distribution across the Pule family, the family telling of Kgomotso's mother worked both to produce and to contain the dangers that her story, her illness, and their connotations presented. Its contingency contained the risks raised by talk of AIDS; and its careful distribution among family contained the dangers of contingency. These constraints and silences were not so much a matter of blockages in transmission (Carsten *et al* 2018:8), as a crucial aspect of what gets transmitted. If, as Paul Ricoeur argues, it is the audience that completes a narrative (1991:25), family members variously positioning themselves as teller and audience ensure the story is always shifting, unfinished, and yet contained – sustaining life not so much by integrating or examining it (1991:20-21), but by systematically dispersing and obscuring it.

The patterns of this telling emerged over an extended period of time, and only as I was being drawn into the Pule family in a range of other ways – by contributing to their household, attending significant events, and living with them. They required sustained intimacy with one family, and given they also marked the limits of family, they were not easily corroborated by other examples. But patchy, scattered, and tentative commentary about late kin and a reluctance to speak about causes of death were common among orphaned children I worked with and friends alike.

Family tales in Botswana's time of AIDS, then, are not simply a matter of disclosure – often described as an articulation of selfhood through the revelation of a secret truth (Davis and Manderson 2014), here the disease, frequently ritualised (Brada 2013) if also ambiguous (Black 2015). Nor are they a matter of exposure by others (Manderson 2014). They are both, and neither. When selves are understood as relational, analytical distinctions between disclosure and exposure – and the linked distinctions between the 'private' and 'public' that they assume – collapse; and when managing the dynamics of kin relations and preserving possible futures for self-making take precedence, both disclosure and exposure are studiously avoided.

In *AIDS and its Metaphors* (1988), Susan Sontag sets out to 'deprive [AIDS] of meaning' (1988:14, my emphasis). In the face of an epidemic, the Pule family was doing something similar: attempting to deprive the disease of the endless variety of meanings transposed upon it, by a global array of actors – thereby asserting authorship over the disease, over one another, and over the stories and selves they were producing through one another. Specifically, they were depriving AIDS of its connotations of poor care, of familial failure, and of death – and asserting new meanings, of care, resilience, and life in their place. And by doing so, they were preserving Kgomototo's mother's self-making project, differentiating and delimiting the sphere of family, and working to contain the transgressive contagions of AIDS itself.

Intervention tales

In the worst years of the epidemic, when every Saturday was filled with funerals, when antiretroviral treatment was still unavailable, and when AIDS was still unspeakable, a couple in Dithaba had an idea. Their friends and colleagues were sickening, and dying; children were being orphaned and infected; extended families, especially grandparents, were being overburdened with demands of care for the ill and the left-behind, and were becoming neglectful, or abusive. Families were collapsing. Given the scale of the pandemic, the government was already overstretched; better a non-governmental organization (NGO), based in the village, which could help take on the burdens of local families – specifically in the care of orphans.

So their story went. Its logic was inexorable, and fit neatly with the narrative emerging in the discourse of government, international agencies, and global health research about the trajectory and effects of AIDS (see also Dahl 2009). The first task was to raise money and awareness for their proposed programme. With ample experience in the NGO world, the first place they looked was to their connections overseas. They commissioned a friend to turn the tale into an origin story, a short film detailing the illness and eventual death of one of the couple's colleagues in Dithaba. He produced a stirring, tragic narrative, following the woman's daily routines and struggles as the disease progressed, and foregrounding her uncertainty about what would happen to her two children when she died. It followed her to her death, to her funeral and burial. At each step, it reinforced the inevitable outcomes of AIDS – situating the couple's programme as an answer, and a gesture of respect to the last wishes of the dying as well.

The short film was a success. It was broadcast widely in the filmmaker's home country, and it generated significant support for the NGO, drawing the attention of foreign viewers who would go on to become volunteers and benefactors. The couple founded a drop-in day care centre, which orphaned children from the village attended after school. And the origin story it recounted was institutionalised: I heard it – and told it, for it was the story of the NGO at which I volunteered – many times, when important guests visited, when other videos were filmed, and when newsletters or grant proposals or websites were written. In time, the NGO was touted as one of the country's 'best practices', and attracted substantial international funding.

The films' dramatic telling of the NGO's founding differed sharply from the Pule family's telling of their daughter's life. The NGO tale condensed long stretches of time into a short, urgent moment; was told in a unified narrative voice, offering a carefully emplotted commentary that encouraged extrapolation to the human condition (Ricoeur 1991:23); and gave a coherent, cause-and-effect understanding of events (Ochs 2004:280). The tale's retellings took on a ritualised, catechismal aspect (Brada 2013). Perhaps most importantly, its drama was organised around crisis, the 'trouble' (Bruner 2004:697) of AIDS, marking a breach in cultural expectations of family care, and making room for the protagonists – the NGO directors – to produce transformation and new orders of legitimacy (Turner 1982). These, of course, are some of the defining characteristics of EuroAmerican storytelling and performance – exemplary of a genre deployed by many other NGOs in Botswana to legitimate their work.

But there was a twist. Some time after its release, the coordinators of the NGO decided to show the film to the children attending their day-care programmes. Two of them were the children of the woman featured in the film; and their older brother, who was doing some piece-work for the organization, saw it too. He was astonished and angered to discover that his mother's funeral had been filmed. That it should be shown in front of children, and the children of the deceased, added insult to injury. The film's narrative focus on AIDS caught his little brother and sister off-guard, too. No one had spoken of their mother's death in those terms, to them or to anyone else. Upset and confused, the younger children went home to tell their grandmother. She removed them from the project immediately, and they never returned.

I never saw the film. It was made well before I first arrived in Dithaba as a volunteer, in 2004. It was awhile before I heard the story of the film's fallout, which emerged after I'd begun getting to know the children who attended the centre and meeting their families. Some who had attended the centre from its opening filled in the details for me, having developed ambivalent feelings about the ways their own stories were being told – and linked to AIDS – by the NGO.

The NGO's (re)telling of the AIDS story, and the rumours surrounding it, created narrative possibility for a series of social effects. Perhaps the most profound were the reversals and inversions it wrought. The careful concealments through which civility is maintained around deaths and funerals (Durham and Klaitz 2002) were laid open for foreign audiences; children and strangers were privy to information once exclusive to parents and elders. Uncertainty was replaced

with extensive detail, and alternative pasts or futures were foreclosed. In place of curated life stories, death headlined. The links, distinctions and balances family tellings struck between the familial and non-familial, the private and the public, were collapsed and refigured. Key actors, and the appropriate distinctions in their relationships, were erased: the film did not account for the orphaned children's older siblings or grandparents. In their place, the narrative insinuated the NGO.

But just as they positioned the NGO in the family, these narrative profusions undermined that positionality. The story of the film as it circulated in the village and eventually came to me unsettled not only the familial story of a woman's death, but the origin story of the NGO and the larger narrative about the effects of AIDS on families that underpinned it. If there were working, healthy elder brothers at home, and if grandmothers would summarily remove their grandchildren from such NGO programmes rather than receiving the benefits they offered, could the film's story – of illness, death, and inevitable familial collapse – be quite true? Though purporting to tell the 'real' tale of AIDS obscured by stigma and secrecy, the film took these families neither as tellers nor as audience, much less as both. A struggle emerged, between a rendering of these families as the object of the NGO story, and their attempts to remain the subjects of their own stories (Gomez-Temesio 2018:741).

Such narrative reworkings have potentially far-reaching repercussions for Tswana personhood, as well. The Pules carefully managed the details of Kgomo's mother's illness, death, and funeral, leaving them largely unspoken; but these were the very details on which the film focused in recounting its subject's tale. The NGO justified the act of filming funerals in terms of the money to be made to support orphaned children. Veena Das (2007) identifies an assumed link between subjecthood and willingness to embrace signs of injury or victimisation – here infection, illness and orphanhood – common to humanitarian discourse. Similar reflections might be applied to the NGO film, which echoed growing expectations, by NGOs and government alike, that Batswana should competently narrate their illness, the stories of their dead and the collapse of their families, to access support (for further examples, see Dahl 2009; Nguyen 2010; Robins 2006). And yet, as we have seen, personhood in Botswana involves asserting quite opposite conditions for self-making: building, extending, and protecting relationships, while simultaneously concealing them from each other and fragmenting the self (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). While institutionalised story frameworks can create narrative possibilities for telling the 'fragile stories' of HIV, in ways that produce positive transformations in subjectivity and new collectivities (Black 2013; Robins 2006:312) – especially where treatment availability is tenuous – they can also threaten loss of subjectivity and rupture (what Gomez-Temesio describes as zombification; 2018). The danger of words that materialise illness, especially among kin, outweighs their therapeutic potential (see also Dahl 2009:177; Niehaus 2013:9, 11).

Individual tellers often find creative ways to negotiate these demands, strategically articulating or concealing their experiences of AIDS (Black 2013), and experimenting with new, hybridised forms of storytelling. But NGO stories can also produce crisis in a way that complicates, and even forecloses, its management by families. In their focus on crisis, NGOs tellings are effective in recruiting financial, social and political support, especially from EuroAmerican audiences; but they

may actively rework the categories of the personal and the social, the 'private' and 'public', relegating the family into the former and attempting to subsume its political role. It is in this sense that the differences between family and NGO tellings of AIDS have most to tell us about the potential effects of anthropological tellings of crisis.

Anthropological tales

I never asked for the whole story of Kgomotso's mother. Perhaps, at first, as a volunteer, I thought I knew it; there was an oversupply of similar stories generated by the NGO, all adhering to the same plotline. Then, as I got to know the Pules, it seemed insensitive to ask. It is peculiar, now, to try to arrange my glimpses of Kgomotso's mother's life and death into the sort of story a reader might expect from an anthropological paper – especially one on AIDS and crisis.

Early anthropological literature on AIDS and illness developed its own mode of storytelling, which has proven both intellectually and politically effective (on AIDS, e.g. Farmer 1992; Fassin 2007; on illness, e.g. Kleinman 1988; Mattingly 1998, 2010). In some ways, this literature inspired the narrative practice of 'public' anthropologies that followed, especially on humanitarian crisis and social suffering. Tales in this genre are often selective and partial, like family tellings, but tend to be individualised, decontextualised, and linearised, like case studies; and they often focus on highly emotive representations of suffering (see Butt 2002 for an overview). They are exemplary of the emplotted, synthesizing, causal logic of competent EuroAmerican storytelling, humanizing the lives they recount, and thereby offering insight into the human condition (Ricoeur 1991; Ochs 2004). They also evoke a long tradition of understanding narrative as therapeutic, a way of interpreting experience and making sense that enables healing and change – a tradition that dates back to Freud (Mattingly and Garro 2000:6-8). The problem-solving, therapeutic dimensions of narrative are frequently the subject of study, but also inform the style of writing. As their readers, we are drawn to their drama, their ethical stance, and the promise of change or resolution they offer. But as their authors, we may have to restructure our research and material to fit these expectations of what narrative should be and do. These narrative forms are normative; and though they are deployed to offer access to vernacular attitudes and personal experience, the possibility that narrative itself has vernacular or relational forms – and effects – is minimised.

I could have generated this kind of story by filling in missing details with a few well-placed questions. But I suggest that the ways in which the tale emerged, what was said and what was silenced, when, and by whom, are more important to the story of Kgomotso's mother – as a story set in a time of AIDS – than the complete, causally-arranged details of her illness, death, or even her life. My approach attempts to rethink anthropologies of crisis which implicitly and explicitly grapple with the ethical and political imperatives of creating change. I suggest that those imperatives are embedded in a largely unexamined narrative logic not unlike that of NGOs, posing similar risks.

Betsey Brada (2013:438) points out that medical anthropologists have avoided a close analysis of the language of HIV and AIDS treatment because they assume a language ideology similar to biomedicine – namely, that the word unproblematically indicates, but is separate from, the thing it references. I would suggest that they assume a narrative ideology, too, prioritising tales that take a synthesised, explanatory shape, emphasising change, in part because they echo EuroAmerican narrative practice. Elinor Ochs (2004:279) adds that the social sciences often ignore open-ended, probing, collaborative narrative, in spite of its pervasiveness, and in spite of the fact that similar narrative activity characterises social scientific discourse. These approaches not only miss key elements of local language ideology and narrative practice; they reproduce power differentials between social scientists and their informants (particularly fraught tendencies in the anthropology of Africa; Nyamnjoh 2011:711), and erase subjunctive, relational tellings like those we have seen – reinforcing the assumption that families have disappeared in the face of the pandemic. By overlooking the implicit assumptions of anthropological narrative practice, and the effects they have on what stories we recognise and tell, we normalise and depoliticise our assessments of what questions matter, and which tellings offer answers.

I suggest that the political dimensions of anthropological narrative practice are obscured because, in attempting to engage the political and ethical imperatives of change, anthropologists are motivated and constrained by a EuroAmerican narrative logic: that transformation can only be achieved through breach, conflict, and crisis, and through agentive responses to that crisis (Bruner 2004; Turner 1982). Anthropologies of crisis are drawn to ‘the trouble’ (Bruner 2004) as both a topic of research and a narrative device, in part because of its narrative role as a harbinger of transformation. Roitman contends that ‘critique and crisis are cognates’, and that ‘crisis [forms] the basis of social and critical theory’ (2013:8) because of its capacity to define and generate history (2013:3). I would add that that history-generating capacity derives in part from the fact that crisis is also story-generating, a necessary component of EuroAmerican storytelling.³ Rather than accounts of crisis as a lived reality, then, ethnographic work often becomes a matter of revealing – or creating (Roitman 2013:35) – the sort of crisis around which the desired sorts of change can be produced. Once the crisis is identified, stories can be deployed to make sense of and resolve it (Ochs and Capps 2002).

In the genre described above, illness, disaster, suffering, and death are marked as key forms of breach – experienced, negotiated, and resolved in narrative sense-making, by sufferers and by anthropologists alike. Even anthropologists who describe contingent telling among their informants as a means of sustaining hope position ethnography as a practice of ‘deciphering, decoding...and unifying’ (Wood and Lambert 2008:216), thereby generating therapeutic agency (2008:214). And this narrativisation is often deployed to the same ends by anthropologists as by their interlocutors: articulating moral imperatives, to elicit strategic institutional responses and social change. Effective though these strategies may be, they naturalise and authorise a specific way of experiencing, telling, and responding to AIDS which may be discontinuous with the ways AIDS is experienced by people who live with the epidemic, and which may frustrate their strategies for managing it. Anthropological tellings may not have the same social effects that NGO tellings do – there are important differences in their audiences and political economies. But in their unmarked narrative

politics, and in their intersections with NGO tales, anthropologies of crisis, too, may inadvertently exacerbate the crises they seek to address.

How might anthropologists tell crisis differently? The comparison above offers possibilities, as well as warnings. First, the narrative choices anthropologists make – especially when telling crisis – require situating in specific political histories of language and narrative (Comaroff and Comaroff 1989; Mattingly and Garro 2000; Norrick 2005), and not just in the global politics of crisis and its responses (Brada 2013:448; Roitman 2013). Rather than beginning with the trouble, or with the question ‘what went wrong?’, we might begin with the telling: attending to what tales are told, by whom, and how, and to telling as a process with lengthy histories, being negotiated into unclear futures – much like the lived experience of crisis itself. Where the apparently straightforward, ethical aim of ‘opening conversations’ (Abu-Lughod 2016:605) in anthropological writing, for example, might inadvertently connote the terms and legacies of the missions’ colonising ‘conversation’ (Livingstone 1857:21, in Comaroff and Comaroff 1989:271), historicisation and contextualisation in the language ideologies and narrative practices that shape given experiences of crisis is crucial.

This contextualisation requires anthropologists to make room for unexpected, subtle, or marginalised tellings (Jackson 2013:51), and ways in which they interact and change; and it challenges us to engage in alternative narrative practices, experimenting with form and genre (Nyamnjoh 2011). Not all experiments are equal, however: stylistic experimentation for its own sake, while generative of possibility, risks falling into the same ideological traps identified above (Gupta and Ferguson 1992:17; Pandian and McLean 2017:4). But the experimentation our interlocutors undertake, as they navigate intersecting story forms and changes in telling practice, may offer some generative cues. Anthropological tellings could thus become a mode of participation, like ethnographic research itself. More than a literary device, experimentation could enable conscientious engagement with the analytical, temporal, and political dynamics of storytelling, and with existing socio-linguistic practices for producing and managing change – while rendering anthropological work familiar and accessible to wider audiences.

Finally, a careful anthropological telling of crisis requires attention to the relational, intersubjective dynamics of telling. While the intersubjective risks of language among the Tswana may be particular, all tellings have intersubjective dimensions that offer key insights into how selves, relationships, language and narratives are articulated through one another. Family tellings are especially useful in this regard: collaborative, mediated, contested and open-ended, they foreground the making of relationships and selves over time, as well as the creation and management of change. Like public anthropologists (Fassin 2015; Abu-Lughod 2016), families lose – or rather, give up – control over the mediations of their stories, to one another. But that loss of control is anticipated, and its dangers ameliorated, by the ways in which the tales are told, and the relationships they produce. These tellings offer creative ways of disrupting common-sense positions and the narrative modes that reinforce them, creating possibilities for political change (Abu-Lughod 2016:604). They offer means of thinking – and doing – otherwise that does not rely on

the politically-limiting concept of crisis itself (Roitman 2013:9). Beyond what or whose stories are told, *how* the stories are told matters to the kind of change that can be made.

In the patchy, incomplete telling of Kgomotso's mother I offered above, I have attempted to mimic the uncanny juxtapositions, restrained revelations, drawn-out timescales and deliberate incompleteness to which tales of crisis were subject among the Pules. But even in its fragmented, inconclusive form, I offer my telling with trepidation. It invites an unknown, unpredictable audience into a process of delimiting exclusive relationships among kin; it tests the boundaries of the tellable, with unforeseeable results. In part, I understand my imperfect telling as a way of participating in the unfolding Pule family tale; of taking what has been told to me, the potential for crisis it represents, and expanding its uncertainties and possibilities in ways that draw others into its telling. I am telling one partial, unfinished story of the family, through you as readers, in part to differentiate, sustain and reproduce that family, their self-making projects, and my own. An analytical focus on the telling, instead of the story, emphasises and perpetuates that process, leaving it open-ended and incomplete. But my telling is no doubt as much a theft from as a contribution to the Pule project I've described – and a betrayal of it, as perhaps all family tellings, and ethnographies, are (Lambek 2011; Pandian and McLean 2017:14).

Conclusion

Michael Jackson argues that 'storytelling implicates not only a politics but an ethics' (Jackson 2013:28). So, too, does the study of crisis. And the politics and ethics implicated are those of our interlocutors, and our own as anthropologists. Attention to the ways stories of crisis are told in our fieldsites generates analytical insights into those politics and ethics – and suggests creative, effective means by which we may respond ethically to the crises we encounter, as well.

Few modes of relating mirror the socio-political dynamics of stories, the ways they straddle and separate the personal and the public, so closely as kinship, making it an ideal context from which to explore crisis tales. A study of the ways families tell crisis – and the sorts of relations that are produced, sustained, or re-negotiated in the process – makes explicit the relational dynamics among tellers, and between tellers and audiences, providing fresh perspective on the anthropologist's role therein. For Botswana, stories mark a key means of both producing and managing crisis; and managing crisis is a key means of (re)producing relations and persons (see Author forthcoming), as well as distinctions between the 'private' and 'public' – a process in which families, NGOs, and anthropologists are all implicated.

And yet, family stories tell crisis quite differently than NGO and anthropological tellings, with their implicit focus on answering the question, 'what went wrong?', and on generating resolution, agency, and change. Family stories are deliberately dispersed, contingent, and incomplete. Their irresolution may offer a productive, 'non-crisis' alternative narrative (Roitman 2013:71) for anthropological tales of crisis – foregrounding the dilemmas and experiments of lived experience, without foreclosing possible responses. Perhaps the multiplicity, indeterminacy, and creativity of

unresolved stories forestalls crisis; not only rendering crisis livable, but defusing it, by situating it in an infinitude of other unfinished, unexplained tales, people, and places, and leaving it open to unscripted sorts of change.

Jackson notes that '[a]ll stories are, in a sense, untrue' (Jackson 2013:14). He privileges the *techné* of storytelling – its practice – over the *epistemé* of what the story signifies about knowing the world (ibid.). Kgomotso's disinterest in knowing the specific nature of her mother's illness and death, or in knowing whether her neighbour was in fact her father, suggests that she might be more concerned with *techné*, too. In this context, the truer truth of the proverb that opens this paper is not a question of knowing or accurately representing the truth of what happened; it is a question of how to tell the relational experience of *who* happened, to sustain the ongoing, open-ended ways those experiences and relationships are being negotiated through times of crisis. It seeks a truth, as Klaits (2010:25) puts it, that does true things for other people. The search for that truer truth draws attention not only to the *techné* of storytelling, but to the *techné* of kinship and personhood as well – and to our embeddedness, as anthropologists, in all three.

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¹ All names have been changed. Quotations are from memory, in consultation with interlocutors, and in the language in which they were originally spoken (usually a mix of English and Setswana), unless noted otherwise.

² Translated from Setswana by author.

³ Roitman muses on the role of crisis in narration and its prevalence in novels and books, but stops short of making this connection (2013:34).