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Redefining kin and family social relations: burial societies and emergency relief in Botswana

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the provision of financial relief to members' households by women-centred local institutions known as burial societies (diswaeti) in the event of death. In burial societies, mortality occupies the centre stage, not as a final defeat of human effort but as an inspiration for individual and collective responsibility. The omnipresence of death and dying in Botswana (due to the AIDS pandemic, social victimization, road-related carnage and so on), does not necessarily precipitate despondency; instead it underwrites commitments by members of burial societies to new sensibilities and to imaginative interventions that regenerate, rather than wear out, kin relations. By providing emergency financial and non-financial support, burial societies find practical ways to minimize social tensions and reduce animosity between individuals, family and kin relations. In the burial society community therefore, the social process of providing emergency financial and non-financial relief is more than an instrumental task: it is a nuanced cultural process that redefines kin and family social relations.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with ways in which specific women, as a social group, form burial societies (*diswaeti*) by taking up the challenge of

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living with death and transforming the experience from ordinary responses² to collectively-organized financial relief to a constituency of recipients. Between February 1997 and August 1998 I spent 18 months doing fieldwork in Botswana focusing on the organized intervention of burial societies in two research sites; namely, Gaborone, the capital city of Botswana and Ramotswa, a major village in the Southeast District. Prior to this I had spent three months (June–August 1996) of preliminary fieldwork at both sites. Ramotswa is located about 25 miles from Gaborone and is the administrative centre for the Southeast District. According to the 1991 census the village has a population of 18,000 people engaged in both agricultural and non-agricultural activities. Gaborone is a post-Independence commercial and administrative centre with 133,500 residents engaged in diverse economic activities.

Data for this paper are derived from a larger study which focused on gender and social transformation through burial societies in contemporary Botswana. Data collection methods included a simultaneous application of focus group discussion (Cohen and Garrett 1999, Morgan 1988, Morgan and Krueger 1993, Vaugh et al. 1996) with 65 management committees and a cross-sectional survey (Axin et al.

² There have been radical changes from “ordinary” traditionally practices. Mourners used to comprise a small group of close relatives and community members who are usually in close daily contact. Now large crowds of those who are basically strangers to the bereaved family and community attend funerals. Families who once used to “host” a manageable group of mourners now have hundreds invading their courtyards, to the point where mobile toilets may have to be hired. In addition to the sheer numbers of mourners, other ritualistic practices add drama to the funeral, hence the “extraordinary” nature of the funeral gathering. In this sense “ordinary”, private, family-centred pain is transformed into an “extraordinary” expression of societal anxieties. Other examples of the new, “extraordinary” nature of funerals are the familial conflicts over the “right to bury” when courts may have to intervene to settle unusually complex constellations of social ties such as those between traditional religion and Christianity (Gilbert 1988) or the politics of gender and ethnicity (Cohen and Odiambo 1992)

1991, Babbie 1990, Massey 1987) of 400 respondents from burial societies. Semi-structured discursive interviews were conducted with a panel of respondents (Weiss 1994) including direct participation (Jackson 1989) and unobtrusive participant observation (Bernard 1995). I also collected data from secondary and primary sources from the Registrar of Civil Registration and Vital Events, Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs, Gaborone.

The paper is divided into four parts. The first briefly gives the social and theoretical context of burial society intervention and kin-relations in Botswana. The second gives a brief description of the types of burial societies found in Gaborone and Ramotswa, including the characteristics of their members. The third part briefly examines the mechanism for organizing and disbursing emergency financial relief to households indistress in the event of a death. The fourth part looks at the provision of financial relief in the context of the prevailing conditions of social crisis and the ways in which individuals' craft their obligations to kin. This section has two parts: one looks at sibling partnership and the other at what I have referred to as "co-parenting". A conclusion follows.

Social and theoretical context of burial societies and kin relations in Botswana

In the southern African region, Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa are the countries most impacted by HIV/AIDS-related death rates (UNDP Human Development Report 1997 and 1999). In 1985 the first HIV/AIDS case was reported in Botswana and the rate of infection has been increasing at an alarming rate ever since. In 1997 approximately 352 per 1000 people were infected. Currently, Botswana's HIV prevalence rate is estimated to be 10 per cent.

The AIDS pandemic in Botswana is currently hitting hard the most productive segment of the country's population (aged 15–45). A loss of 17 years in life expectancy is projected by 2010, reverting to the life expectancy in 1960 (UNDP Human Development Report, 1999:174). Furthermore, those mostly affected by the prevalence of death vary along a gender and age configuration. Women between the ages of 15–35 are slightly more infected than men between the ages 25–45 years

old (Botswana Human Development Report 2000). This is particularly tragic if we take into account the fact that the country's median age was 16.8 in 1991 and that youth between 12–29 constitute 36 per cent of the population. It appears that a potential demographic collapse is threatening Botswana as a people.

Botswana is the size of France but had a population of only 1.4 million people who are predominantly Tswana-speaking. It is relatively culturally homogeneous. Given the relatively small population in relation to country size, the frequency of weekend funerals and the movement of dead bodies for disposal in urban or village settings makes the phenomenon of death very visible. Living with the dying and the dead constitutes a major, concrete lived experience in everyday life among Botswana. It is thus not surprising that in his Budget Speech to the National Assembly, the country's President, Mr Festus Mogae declared the AIDS pandemic a national disaster and a distinct public policy and health concern (Budget Speech 1997).

The quantitative omnipresence of AIDS-related death however, cannot be divorced from prevailing sociocultural and economic conditions in contemporary Tswana society. Rather, the magnitude of death events is a result of interlocking forms of vulnerability that ordinary Botswana have to contend with on a daily basis. These include prolonged droughts spells, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. Economic development is characterized by highly-skewed and lopsided income distribution, Botswana being heavily dependent on revenue from the capital-intensive mining industry and externally-controlled markets. Thirdly, the agricultural sector, on which over 60 per cent of the population subsist, is collapsing. Fourthly, from the 1980s government invested surplus revenue to develop an extensive road infrastructure. Good roads and a booming economy encouraged the Botswana to buy cars, resulting in increased travelling and traffic related-deaths (Ministry of Finance and Development Planning 1998:485–487). This created a distinct community of mourners, which, among other things, is engaged in moving bodies from urban settings to the countryside. The reason for this is that among Botswana, as in most African societies, although a person might have a "house" in town, they are expected to be buried

in their "home" village, the place of their birth. These expectations force individuals to invest materially in their homesteads by constructing better houses for their parents (Ngwenya 2000:272-274)

Other forms of vulnerability associated with the social cost of capitalist development in Tswana society include an increase in social neglect and victimization (such as in murder, theft, violence, rape and so on). Lastly, the process of development is gender-biased. The majority of Batswana women bear the brunt of the unequal access to resources, opportunities and income disparities engendered by the development process. Different social groups of Tswana women are excluded from the centrally-controlled process of development.

In Botswana a death event unsettles institutional relations by creating widows and widowers. On the other hand, it crystallizes awareness of self-interest and the interests of others by individuals, groups and communities. As a result death and funerals do not necessarily precipitate despondency. On the contrary: living with the dead and dying creates new commitments among Batswana, especially with regard to an individual's moral obligations and sensibilities towards family and kin.

This heightened awareness must be seen in the context of the ways in which death, as a sociocultural event and process, demands the massive mobilization of labour and resources (both monetary and non-monetary). Family groups are expected to access and redistribute the resources needed to give the deceased person a socially-defined "dignified funeral". Any failure to do this offends the fundamental Tswana humanistic ethos and ethic. Death and funeral events thus in and of themselves create social arenas for collective social action and the regeneration of community life.

According to Giddens (1991), dying and death remains something that is ultimately resistant to social containment and the social acceptance of death and dying is problematic, particularly since death calls into question the most fundamental assumptions upon which social life is constructed. Those remaining struggle to re-establish a sense of identity and purpose. The omnipresence of the dying and death in Botswana therefore, presents a very particular problem, making people feel they are being overwhelmed by cases of death. The reality of living

with the dead and dying is that this experience is likely to render social life meaningless and ultimately precipitate disorder or chaos in everyday life conventions. Giddens (1991) argues that it is therefore necessary for every social system to find a way of accepting dying and death so the living can carry on.

Given the paradoxical nature of death and funerals (that is, the multiple social meanings arising from them such as connecting death and birth, loss and opportunity, affliction and healing, consumption and production [of resources and knowledge] and so on), Tswana women respond to the pervasiveness of death by forming burial societies. These groups constitute one way of dealing with the potential threat of meaninglessness and other existential challenges precipitated by death in everyday social life.

Feminist research has called our attention to how phenomena such as death, childbirth, sex and so on, once regarded as natural and therefore biologically fixed, are socially and culturally-constituted. Their histories therefore constantly change (for comparative study of burial societies in the southern Africa region see, for example, Brown 1982, Hall 1987, Leliveld 1994).

Dead bodies have multiple social meanings and have been found useful as social objects and subjects of social action by various professions and institutions. They provide, for instance, a source of new scientific knowledge for the medical profession, mortality rate statistics for demographers, causality figures and information about the etiology of disease for pathologists and a lucrative "cash crop" for funeral parlours. They provide burial societies with a concrete basis for institutionalizing financial relief which enables those affected by a death to live through and beyond the crisis. What matters, therefore, is not so much the etiology of dying and dead persons *per se*, but the cultural appropriation of the event by specific social groups and institutions for specific purposes. In this case, we explore ways in which burial society intervention underwrites pro-social, as opposed to anti-social, acts of reconstituting kinship social relations.

Given the metanarrative of death and dying in Botswana, I will define a burial society as a relatively autonomous, historically-distinct, local

mutual-aid institution, which may be based on occupation or gender and whose goal is to provide social relief and support (material and non-material) to a member or member's family that is experiencing conditions of distress due to a death. They intervene with proactive collective actions rather than to spread doom and despondency. In the following section, I will look at the various types of burial societies in urban and country settings in Botswana

The types of burial societies and membership profile

From the Registrar of Civic Associations, it was possible to establish that burial societies were found in major regions throughout Botswana in villages and in urban locations. Three general types of burial societies were identified in Gaborone and Ramotswa. The boundaries between these are, however, flexible and there are overlapping areas of commonality among them.

The first type is the work-based burial society that draws members predominantly from workplaces in urban settings. In Gaborone, for instance, these were found in workplaces such as the hospital, the university, security firms, manufacturing plants, government ministries, non-government organizations and so on. The second type, also found in urban settings, was the ethnic-oriented burial society. These draw membership along loose ethnic affiliations, for instance BaKalanga or BaTswana from the north-east and central districts respectively.

The third type of burial society was found in both Ramotswa and Gaborone, whose membership cuts across social and physical boundaries of place (neighbourhood or village ward), occupation, educational level, religious orientation and ethnic affiliation. Because of the inclusive nature of the groups, I will refer to these as communal groups. The social history of the group suggest that, compared with the other types, communal burial societies cut across the urban-rural divide. Secondly, they tend to have a long history of existence dating back to the early 1970s. The ethnic-oriented and work-based groups are more recent phenomenon. They were generally started in the 1990s. Third and lastly, communal burial societies are inter-generational.

Sixty-five groups were studied through focus group discussion with members of their management committees. Of these, 46 (70.8%) were from Gaborone and 19 (29.9%) from Ramotswa village. Forty groups (61.5%) met the criterion of being communal, ten (15.4%) were ethnic-cum-regional and fifteen (23.1%) were work-based. In the cross-sectional survey 75% of respondents were from Gaborone and 25% from Ramotswa. Women constituted 90 per cent of subscribing members and coalesce social diversity such as inter-generational relationship, occupational and marital status, educational attainment and religious orientation.

Most respondents in the survey subscribed to some form of religious beliefs. In the survey, 24.4% were Catholic, 20.5% Protestant, 30.8% Spiritual,³ 10% other and 12.3% indicated that they do not subscribe to any religion in particular.

On average, it was found that a burial society consists of 55 subscribing members. The smallest burial society had ten members and the largest had over 400 members. Communal burial societies are more likely to have fewer member and work-based groups are likely to be larger. Both social, occupational and religious diversity suggest inclusiveness, a practice that tends to foster solidarity among members. These burial societies all provide financial relief to members according to established criteria.

Provision of emergency financial relief

Burial societies are relatively self-reliant. They receive no financial support from government, non-government organizations or external donors. Focus group discussions suggest that 98.4 per cent rely on monthly subscriptions from their members to build a collective fund. These payments range from P5 (about one US dollar) to P30 (about US\$6). About three-quarters of the burial societies in the study paid a

³ Spiritual churches, unlike mission churches, call attention to the active role of the Holy Spirit and strive to preserve most aspects of Tswana way of life. They demand the Africanization of the Church in belief, ritual, practice, worship and theology. These churches have formed the Botswana Spiritual Council of Churches to represent their voice in government (Amanze 1998)

monthly subscription of P20 (about US\$5). Most burial societies deposit the money in a commercial bank: the remainder use the post office. An average burial society (with 55 members) paying P20 per month can raise P1100 per month and P13,200 a year, 60 groups could generate P858,000. As an active population, burial societies generate cumulatively a substantial amount of fluid capital or cash at the disposal of their members.

It was clear during focus group discussions that burial societies tend to agree that their primary goal is to provide emergency relief to members and members' relatives in distress in a timely fashion. This relief is mostly financial, but may also entail non-monetary intervention such as the provision of labour during the funeral process. Each burial society generally specifies those who are eligible to receive funeral support. Typically, the core group of recipients is six, including four parents (whether begetting or fictive parents and or affines), the member's children and spouse. It is taken as a given that a burial society has an obligation to bury the deceased children of a member.

Each burial society decides how much funeral support eligible recipients get. For example, one burial society agreed that upon the death of a member or her child, the bereaved family would be entitled to P1500 (equivalent to US\$300), parents P1000 (about US\$200) and a dependent relative receives P800 (about US\$160). The funeral support claim package each burial society provides is subject to revision in tandem with the ever-increasing cost of mass funerals. Furthermore, each burial society has a six-member management committee that facilitates the organization of fund-raising activities, maintains close contact between members and develops strategies to cultivate and maintain reciprocal relations with other outside institutions (such as household, chiefs and religious institutions). Management committees are usually democratically elected in an annual general meeting each year. At least three-quarters of the membership are present during the elections.

Most groups also have in place an emergency committee (*komiti ya tshoganyetso*), consisting of a treasurer, a secretary and two ex-officio members. This committee is authorized to withdraw and disburse funds

according to the established criterion of entitlement (as member, child, parent or dependent relative). Emergency committees compile detailed information about all members such as the telephone number (home, work or nearest public booth) and plot numbers in neighbourhoods or wards and their ward heads (in the case of a village setting such as Ramotswa). They keep an up-to-date list of who has claimed what, for whom and how often and keep a tag on the members' general pattern of participation in funeral-related events. This information is necessary so as to be able to respond unfalteringly and judiciously in a crisis.

Social crisis conditions⁴ and obligations to kin and family

A range of social crisis conditions (such as those due to natural disasters, epidemics, wars and social victimization), more often than not raise questions about one's moral obligations to one's own well-being and that of others in society. Given such multiple sources of distresses, social actors are most likely to mobilize resources around what is culturally available and accessible to them to deal with contingencies. The industriousness of kin consists of one such resource. Since the death event precipitates a social crisis among kin relations, individuals often find themselves knowing what to do, but not how to do it. It is one thing, for instance, for siblings to buy an expensive casket for their parent, but it is another for them to be knowledgeable about the rituals that accompany burying a widowed mother with married daughters and sons. Burial societies facilitate the removal of anxiety from where is most intense (at household level) to a domain that is relatively free from anxiety (the burial society itself). Thus membership of a burial society opens up possibilities for individuals to manipulate events in potentially conflict-ridden kin relations during funeral processes.

The anthropological concept of kinship refers to a network of social relationships that constitutes part of the total network of relations in any social structure. As Radcliff-Brown (1962) and Schapera (1955, 1963)

⁴ Metaphorically, a crisis situation coalesces economic, political, cultural and social concerns into a single image that expresses their interdependence. In a crisis social activities are transformed to make connections between personal and socio-cultural concerns

point out, kinship deals specifically with the recognition of social relationships based on descent and marriage. In many African societies unilineal descent emphasizes social relations through the male lineage and can either be patrilineal (agnatic) or matrilineal. Tswana-speaking groups trace membership through the agnatic lineage, which consists of an original male ancestor and his descendants through the male line. The lineage consists of all members of the lineage alive at any given time. Lineage principles make it possible for social groups to recognize people in their lineage, for example, relatives (*masika*), as near or distant. One's siblings, for instance, are near family relatives compared with distant great-grandmothers' sisters' children.

Anthropological research has also shown that kinship is not a static and autonomous, self-evident domain (Moore 1986, Motzafi-Haller 1997, Peters 1994). Among the Batswana and elsewhere in Africa, despite a massive re-organization of political, economic and cultural structures by colonial and postcolonial governments, social relations are still understood through the ideology of kinship. For instance, the practices and ideologies of descent still permeate inheritance, birth, death, marriage, residence and seniority (Berry 1989, Guyer and Peters 1987, Schapera 1956, 1970). Kinship matrices have been and still are embedded in and implicated by processes of social change in society. In fact, in most African societies today, the spirit of re-inventing kinship relations is key to the ways in which individuals and groups address environmental contingencies such as death and unemployment.

In both urban and country settings, a commitment to social obligations constitutes the key to the sustenance and resilience of family and community bonds. As a case in point, in the survey, approximately 70 per cent of respondents lived with dependent relatives, about 27 per cent live with one or two such relatives; 25 per cent live with three or four and at least 18 per cent lived with 4 or more dependents. This was in addition to living with their own children.

From the above discussion, the dynamism of kinship and emerging adaptive mechanisms must be seen in the context of the socioeconomic imperatives evident in everyday life. Burial society intervention therefore provide a basis for exploring the ways in which individuals interface

their own self interest (to have direct access to needed cash and enlist non-material support from the group) and their social obligations of shared caring and responsibility to the deceased and to close kin. As I have already indicated in section one, burial societies receive funds only through subscriptions. Recruiting committed members constitutes a necessary (although not sufficient) condition for the group to build a reliable, viable, self-sustaining and collectively-managed emergency relief fund. Without these subscriptions as its foundation, the group is likely to collapse.⁵

In the survey, respondents were asked to indicate who had encouraged them to join the burial society. The aim of the question was to identify the extent to which kin networks were mobilized to create and recreate social relations. Approximately 16% said they were prompted to join by a friend, 28% by a family member, 7% by a neighbour, about 29% by a co-worker and 20% of respondents were self-motivated. Table I summarizes the various social networks mobilized to encourage individuals to become members of a burial society.

Social networks within kin relations play an important role, especially in decisions to become a member of a burial society. As these societies lack the physical assets that could offer surety to their members, individuals joining must pledge their social connections to the burial society as social capital, to make the achievement of their goals possible. Burial societies make connections between the group, individual members and kin by harnessing the trust based on pre-existing relations. It becomes the burden of each member, not the collective itself, to make a direct assessment of new members. Once they have been recruited, the burial society is in a position to enforce rules and regulations of subscription payments on the new member. Relatives and family members were active recruiters for communal burial societies as co-workers were for work-based burial societies. Given the prevalence of death in the country, it is not unusual for a household to experience at least two to

⁵ The Registrar of Societies occasionally publishes a list of burial societies which have not "proven that they exist", meaning they have continuously failed to provide the Registrar with annual returns. See, for example, the *Daily News* 28/03/2001:6)

Table 1: Kin and other social network influencing participation in burial society. (N=400)

| Type of social network | % encouraged to join the burial society |
|------------------------|---|
| Co-worker | 28.7 |
| Family/relative | 27.9 |
| Self motivated | 20.0 |
| Friendship | 16.2 |
| Neighbour | 6.7 |
| Other | .5 |

three deaths simultaneously. For individuals, kin networks become the fulcrum from which the net of social responsibility is cast as well as the point of leverage for accessing resources from the larger community. Recruitment practices may appear mundane, but are, in fact, central to the viability of a burial society and for renegotiating social tensions and disagreements inherent in kinship relations.

In the next subsection, I will explore how sibling partnerships are grafted into the process and mechanism of providing financial relief by members of burial societies and consider ways in which the burial society, as a collective entity, adopts a specific approach to the delivery of funeral support and by so doing, recreates what I refer to as "co-parenting". The concept of co-parenting is used here to imply specific ways in which households, as recipients of the funeral support claim, are made answerable to the burial society.

Sibling partnerships

The Tswana funeral process has been and still is, labour-intensive. The process requires the massive mobilization of resources and a social division of responsibility (by age, gender, social status and so on). Furthermore, a funeral places an economic burden on families and makes households vulnerable to public scrutiny. Since multiple factors come to play during the process, household members engage in a range of decision-making conferences in cross-kin groups to solicit consensus before important funeral tasks can be carried out. These task-oriented

meetings for example, are summoned either according to seniority, age and gender or between siblings (male and female) at a specific point during the burial process.

While kin are generally expected to contribute material or non-material resources, in some situations, for instance the death of a parent, attention focuses on adult working sons or daughters in urban settings as opposed to other village-based kin members who may be perceived as having a low threshold of resources. During fieldwork, I found that close kin decision-making funeral conferences were generally not open to observation by an outsider. This is understandable since some gate-keeping practices are necessary to screen out outsiders, even more so because some family conferences tend to be more conflict-ridden than others.

It became apparent during fieldwork that not only did the sibling group play a significant role in funeral process, but that this group also tended to work collaboratively. I was allowed to observe and have direct access to sibling consultative-conferences, especially in Ramotswa, at the death of a parent. I took particular interest in this group since, as Radcliffe-Brown (1962) noted, in contrast to relations between affines and spouses which can be antagonistic, sibling relationships characterized by internal solidarity can form a viable basis for co-operation. In South Africa Niehaus (1994) has recently shown that, while some aspects of the ties between kinship and marriage may be weakened when conjugal relations are under considerable pressure, other links such as those between siblings, may be strengthened.

Relations of consanguinity (among siblings) are more likely to be characterized by affection. This does not mean that sibling tensions in funeral processes do not exist, but that, in the funeral process, relations of affection can be accentuated while potential sources of conflict can either be downplayed, temporarily suspended or may co-exist without necessarily causing a complete breakdown of the process. Awareness of their social obligations forces siblings to emphasize the pressing tasks at hand. In order to avoid public embarrassment, the mediation of tensions and the avoidance of confrontations during the funeral process is thus preferred.

The sibling group would meet to decide who would take care of what, when and for how much. Resources were pooled and responsibility delegated according to the capability of individuals. One sibling may be asked to buy the coffin, another to supply perishables on an ongoing basis (tea, bread, milk, sugar and so on) during pre-burial gatherings (such as daily evening prayers by mourners).⁶ A sibling may contribute by buying a cow to be slaughtered to feed the funeral gathering or take responsibility for co-ordinating transport, fuel supply or the production and distribution of a written funeral programme. At the end of the funeral process, siblings reconvene to discuss post-burial matters.

From a practical standpoint, the general goal of a sibling consultative conference is to sort out the obstacles that might incapacitate a household following a funeral. In one household, when their mother died, her adult children, who lived mostly in urban centres, had to assess the state of their mother's indebtedness and set priorities for addressing other outstanding concerns. Once the funeral cost has been covered and there is a surplus remaining, the deceased person's unresolved bills are paid and whatever else remains is given to whomever is deemed to be most deserving (a surviving parent, a younger sibling, a wife, husband, children and so on). The sibling group may also decide on whether or not to host post-burial ceremonies and, if so, who will be responsible for each aspect of the ceremony. Post-burial ceremonies include, but are not limited to, the ritual of washing the clothes of the deceased person, the distribution of property and the unveiling of the tombstone.

A sibling who brings an unexpectedly substantial amount of cash carries more clout than others in these consultative conferences. In this situation, individuals who have the financial backing of a burial society have an advantage. By contributing a larger amount of money, such individuals have more authority to influence the decision-making processes within the sibling group (including the household as whole).

⁶ Pre-burial funeral gatherings last for a week or two, depending on whether or not those kin who are considered to be important have been assembled before the burial takes place

According to social stratification theory, in familial household relations most social power and prestige accrues to those members who control and sporadically distribute valued goods such as lump sum payments, while those who provide for basic necessities get less (Blumberg 1991, Huber 1991, Wolf 1991).

We have to bear in mind that the sibling group is both gendered (brothers and sisters), status-oriented (married or unmarried, with or without children) and socially differentiated by age and occupation (formally employed, unemployed, self-employed or homemakers). Familial expectations are thus likely to be played out along status and gender lines (an older, unemployed son *vis-à-vis* a younger, working daughter and so on). It thus appears that women in burial societies gain efficacy and empowerment through control of a funeral support claim, a once-off valued good, which is used within and beyond immediate, everyday household needs. Direct access to a funeral support claim by both unmarried and married women helps them re-establish a sense of solidarity, self-worth and achievement among siblings.

In summary, a burial society provides access to and control over a key resource (large sums of money) that could either stir up tensions or recreate collaborate kinship relations among siblings. However, burial societies also redefine social relations at household level by adopting a "co-parenting" approach to delivery of financial relief. The next subsection explores how this approach ultimately helps minimize conflict between the two institutions.

"Co-parenting"

In the burial society community, provision of emergency relief is more than an instrumental task. Each burial society has to decide how best to approach the handing over of funeral support claims. The fundamental decision to be made is whether to present the funeral support claim directly to the troubled member in the event of death, thus holding them immediately liable to the burial society, or to hand over the claim to family representatives (*batsadi*) who have been identified by the member. In the latter case both the member and her family are collectively answerable to the burial society. I will refer to this approach simply as

co-parenting by proxy, meaning that members are accountable to both the burial society and the household.

In the event of death, the burial society selects three representatives to hand over the funeral support claim to the bereaved family. Generally, the burial society usually expects at least two people to sign the funeral claims register. These individuals serve, in the long run, as eye-witnesses, should a member make fraudulent claims. There are other mechanisms used to ensure compliance with the rules and procedures for filing a funeral support claim. For more of this, see below.

Thus the groups advance several arguments in favour of letting the household, in consultation with the provider of emergency relief, decide who must be held accountable for receiving the money. Arguments for soliciting partnership with proxy parents living elsewhere include, but are not limited to, the idea that the funeral support claim belongs to the burial society and therefore it is important for the society to discourage individuals from deriving personal gain by using such money for their own, personal benefit. By handing over the funeral support claim to household representatives, the women argue, they are making it publicly known that the burial society collects money from members for the sole purpose of family bereavement. If the burial society is to maintain any social credibility, then the money accumulated has to be channelled appropriately to do what it has been originally intended to do. As one respondent pointed out,

A burial society is not a private enterprise. We are not here to play ping-pong with our money by letting individuals engage in irresponsible behaviour using the name of the burial society. This will trivialize our efforts to help households and lay our society open to question. People in the community would just dismiss us as self-serving.

In fact, some burial societies had started off by giving the funeral support claim to individuals, but changed their approach once it became apparent that there were incidents of gross abuse (such as using the funeral support claim to buy alcohol, to complete the construction of a house or improve it, or to pay outstanding bills).

Not only would self-serving individual practices tarnish the public image of the burial society, but also at stake here are real fears of a negative social (and political) backlash that could jeopardize prospects of establishing future workable relationships with other key social institutions in the community (chiefs, members of village development committees, local councillors and members of parliament) including kin. But even more important, handing over the funeral support claim to a family representative promotes a situation in which, in the words of one informant,

Batsadi (co-parents) are very happy to see their children participate in burial societies. They are pleased with the idea that their children are working with other people. They can see their children in burial societies and this assures them that their children are responsible and have not become wayward hooligans in the city. They see the burial society as a parent for their children.

These groups prefer a direct and personalized encounter between socially "responsible children" and appreciative "parents" who validate the latter's contribution. A mutually-reinforcing positive image is thus promoted between the individual member and the burial society on the one hand and a partnership between the burial society and the recipient household on the other.

There are other practical aspects of soliciting co-responsibility between the two parties. It goes without saying that, when individual members file for the funeral support claim, they are cashing in more than what they contribute monthly, which means that an funeral support claim constitutes a *de facto* line of credit or form of savings that can be drawn. While the burial society can control the management and disbursement of a needed resource, they ultimately have no control over how the money is used. This is not their concern, but implicitly, by receiving the funeral support claim, family representatives are also held responsible for the future behaviour of their adult child.

The appeal to the active participation of co-parents living elsewhere is not an accident. The distant co-parents play a practical role in disciplining a wayward member if and when the need arises and can do this in several ways. For instance, communal burial societies are more

likely to involve these co-parents should a member threaten to abscond, defraud or fall behind in monthly payments once they have obtained the funeral support claim(s). If *batsadi* fail to do something about their "child" then they, too, are likely to be summoned to the chief's customary court (*kgotla*) to stand as witnesses and be tried as recipients. In the case of the default of monthly payments, for example, the management committee usually sends warning letters to the individual concerned first, after which a conference with *batsadi* is arranged to inform them how much a member owes the society and what is the best way to make payments. They are also informed that, should a death occur, their child will forfeit a claim; a situation that is most likely to be uncomfortable for everyone and should be avoided.

There is thus an advantage in incorporating outsider as distant co-partners to help monitor the activities of members. Since contact with co-partners is strictly task-oriented and sporadic, these encounters are likely to be pleasant and memorable. A spirit of goodwill thus fostered makes it possible to resolve conflict amicably between the providers and recipients of funeral support claim.

For those members who toe the burial society line, the delivery of the funeral support claim to the household constitutes a process of self-validation. Individuals attest to how their parents and kin were "surprised", "overjoyed" and "proud" of them for providing an unexpected funeral support claim. For some families it was the first time in their lives to have so much money at once. They indicate how their parents received the burial society with "enthusiasm" and embraced them. As one respondent put it, "it was as if they lifted us high with their hands". The direct encounters and affirming responses suggest to members of the burial society that their intervention is central, rather than marginal, to the household and they can directly witness the way their intervention actively reconstitutes specific social relations by allowing individuals to have greater clout in kin decision-making. What is apparent is that women in burial societies do not extol narrowly-defined virtues of motherhood that focus on domestic concerns, but they redeploy a broader concept of parenthood within the spatialized kinship domain. In fact, co-opting the goodwill of proxy parents is

especially significant for married women, who tend to include their affines on an equal footing with their biological parents with regard to funeral support claim entitlement. Usually husband and wife discuss these matters and distribute their responsibility to kin accordingly.

However, some burial societies argue in favour of handing over the funeral support claim to an individual member, but remain adamant about the burial society attending the foresaid funeral as a group. These societies prefer to give the individual the funeral support claim because, they argue, they would rather keep distant from household social dynamics, which, they point out, are not often harmonious. It is up to the individual to sort out the ensuing household problems. As one respondent point out,

Household conflict (*dikgogakgogano*) is a reality and we cannot pretend that household (*lolwapa*) members do not quarrel. This would be unrealistic because even members of our burial society quarrel among themselves much of the time about money and other things. We have been to a lot of funerals and we have seen surprising things happening around money.

These groups also argue that it is the individual member who struggles to raise money for their subscription each month from a meagre budget. When a death occurs, therefore, it should be the individual's responsibility to prioritize their needs without being put under the watchful eye of the burial society. The funeral support claim belongs to the group and is given to the individual as a form of credit and it is the individual who is held accountable.

Those burial societies that hand over the funeral support claim to individuals, however, follow more strict claim procedures and gather a range of material evidence. The latter includes completing funeral claims forms and signing the claims register, obtaining copies of funeral programmes, a signed affidavit from the police or a letter from the chief stating in detail the name of the deceased and their place of birth and death and burial date. The identity of the deceased person in a funeral programme is expected to match the name signed for and relationship claimed in the claims register. If not, the member is taken to task.

Table II: Delivery of funeral support claim by type of burial society*

| Type of burial society | % who hand FCS to | | |
|------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|-------|
| | Individual member | Family representatives | Other |
| Communal | 23.7 | 76.3 | - |
| Village/region | 40.0 | 60.0 | - |
| Work-based | 53.3 | 40.0 | 6.7 |

* N=65

Some work-based burial societies have designed special forms which the claimants complete and then take home to be co-signed by the chief in her/his village. In order to promote eye-witness support for what the funeral, where feasible, the burial society management committee posts notices on bulletin boards or issues a circular which may include information about the date of the funeral, or a road map to the house where daily prayers are held. This is meant to encourage members to attend pre-burial activities and make it difficult for individuals to defraud the burial society by making false claims. Beyond the need to provide evidence, whether the household fights over the claim or not, is not the concern of the burial society.

Table II summarizes the individual *vis-à-vis* family representative delivery of funeral support claims by type of burial society.

Mostly communal (and to a large extent, ethnic-oriented) burial societies tend to promote and favour handing over the funeral support claim to the family representative. Of the communal-oriented burial societies that responded, 29 groups (76.3%) said that they handed over the funeral support claim to family representatives identified by their member and nine groups gave the funeral support claim to the individual. For the ethnic-cum-region burial societies, six groups (60%) handed over the claim to the household representative and four (40%) bestowed the funeral support claim to the individual. In work-based groups 40 per cent indicated that they preferred to deliver the funeral support claim to the family representatives and about 53.3 per cent gave it to the individual member.

However, work-based burial societies which prefer to give the funeral support claim to the family representative but, for one reason or another (such as when the family representatives live far away and the society cannot afford the cost of travel), are unable to do so, then the claim is given to the individual (about 6.7 per cent), against the general practice. The argument they put forward is that they would rather not put pressure on a member to make up family representatives for purposes of making easier it for them to collect their claim. Giving false information about the identity of one's family members is, after all, fraudulent. Thus it is not surprising that these work-based burial societies alternate between handing over money to an individual or to the family representatives, depending on the situation at hand. In southern Africa in general and in Botswana in particular, court battles have raged over the ownership and control of a dead body concerning who has "the right to bury it".⁷ Burial societies thus strive to stay clear of troubled waters. Co-parenting also helps the groups find practical ways of minimizing animosity between the burial society and the household.

In summary, each burial society keeps track of the funeral support claim each member is entitled to. Once the money has been released, it is up to individual recipients and their respective households to decide how to spend it and on what. In so doing, on the one hand, individual members have the opportunity to influence decisions of how to use the funeral support claim in the household context. On the other hand, the burial society, implicitly or explicitly, hold family representatives, as distant co-parents, accountable. In a situation where the funeral support claim is given to proxy parents, this practice becomes a social mechanism

⁷ Cases have been brought before the chief's *kgotla* and the High Court in Lobatse in which relatives fight over who has the "right to bury".

Subsumed under that "right", of course, is that those who have this right are also heir to the deceased person's property. During fieldwork, a case went before the High Court in Lobatse concerning a dispute between divorced parents over the right to bury a deceased son. His mother had raised the son, a young adult who was an employee of the Botswana Defense Force at the time of his death. But the father claimed he paid child support until the boy reached 16 and so was entitled to bury him

that incorporates them as part of collective management, monitoring a common pool of the resources mobilized and distributed by the burial society. Individual members of the group are disciplined to ensure the sustainable provision of predictable and reliable social relief.

Conclusion

The metanarrative of death and dying in contemporary Tswana society, instead of precipitating hopelessness, tends to bring about new sensibilities of caring and compassion. These practices by individuals and groups revitalize otherwise weakening kinship relations. As cultural symbols, dead bodies are appropriated, redeployed and translated by burial societies from being socially-disabling objects of doom and gloom to subjects of individual and collective responsibility. The Tswana funeral process has been and still is, labour-intensive, including the mobilization of resources and the social division of responsibility. The sibling group plays a significant role in this process by contributing material and non-material resources according to their capability.

In the burial society community, provision of emergency relief is more than an instrumental task. Burial societies try to find practical ways of minimizing social tensions and setting off animosity between individuals, family and kin relations. The public image of the burial society is also at stake. Members fear evoking a negative backlash and deliberately and consciously put emphasis on parenthood (*batsadi*), not only to underwrite the co-responsibility entailed, but also the need for collaborative effort across social and physical location with other parents elsewhere. From this standpoint, being a parent becomes a multi-layered social process that spans domestic and public domains. Those burial societies that hand over the funeral support claim to individuals, follow more strictly claim procedures and the production of evidence. These procedures are meant to make it difficult for individuals to defraud the burial society by making false claims.

In burial societies, mortality occupies the centre stage not as a final defeat of human effort, but rather, as an inspiration for social action. The anthropology of dying and death in contemporary Tswana society illuminates the systematic social intervention that links cultural and

moral behaviour to macro processes of social change in which living with and beyond death are interconnected within kin relations in everyday social life.

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