*On love: the child I carried on my back*

It was a sunny morning, and the large yard was relatively empty. The two younger kids of the household were playing nearby. Lebbo was four years old, and her nephew Ndoro was two. I was not planning other visits this morning, and I had almost completed the write-up of my field notes that recorded the events and observations I made the previous day.

Then, on the spur of the moment, I invited the two children into my hut, which was unusual since most village life activities at that time were held outdoors. I decided to feed these two children in my hut's safe and private space, away from the others. It was a decision I had often considered when I arrived in this picturesque Tswana village. I was deeply conflicted about this. After all, I came to this village to "do research." Nothing in my professional training suggested how to relate to a life of dire material circumstances. Yes. They were cooperative. I loved the daily routine of participating in and recording village life and tracing the local histories of the village I resided in and neighboring villages. My research was going well on all counts. I was collecting important systematic data relevant to my research questions. I made meaningful connections with knowledgeable interlocutors. My many notebooks were recording new and exciting understandings I was gaining. And yet, I could not ignore the fact that many of the children in the village yards I visited and in the mud paths crisscrossing the village had bloated bellies and straw-colored hair, signs of severe malnutrition.

So that morning, I decided to do something about it. It was clear to me that I could not feed all the village children, but I could provide for one little, extremely malnourished two-year-old boy, Ndoro, the grandchild of Serefete, the woman who had welcomed me into her family.

I was a 28-year-old graduate student with no child-rearing experience when I made that fateful resolution to feed little Ndoro. Why Ndoro? He was there, in the yard I lived in. I wanted to help. When Serefete, his mother's mother, was busy preparing the family's meals, I offered to tie Ndoro with a blanket on my back to soothe him the way other women did. When I joined the other women in their daily walks to the waterhole or to collect firewood, I carried Ndoro on my back, not because I wanted to "go native" or blend in. I was deeply attached to the bow-legged child with wide, intelligent eyes. At two years old, Ndoro was more vulnerable than the other children who roamed the village paths half-naked. I knew ‘his story’. His mother was my young, school-going, classificatory "sister." I lived in her mother's yard. My younger "sister" lived with her father in the capital, Gaborone, where she attended high school. On one of her rare visits to the village, I learned that she left Ndoro in her mother's care to continue her studies. Her mother was still nursing her youngest child and had some milk, but not as abundant as in young nursing mothers. I knew that this practice of a grandmother nursing her daughter's child was rare but accepted. Ndoro was highly malnourished because of these early circumstances of his life.

I was a decade older than Ndoro's mother. I remember how she felt obligated to inquire why I didn't have a child of my own. I responded, "I am still a student. I cannot care for a child". I knew I was presenting my cultural logic that was not accepted locally.

"Your mother will take care of your child," the young woman said.

I knew that I needed to explain my choices in her terms. My detailed village census suggested that grandmothers were expected to care for children left behind by young women who studied or worked in the growing urban centers, away from their village homes.

I announced that my mother refused to care for my child. That this is not "our custom”. Hearing this, Ndoro's mother looked embarrassed; what kind of a daughter was I, one that blamed her mother for being selfish? I tried to explain that ‘my culture’ is different and that this arrangement of a mother caring for her grandchild was unacceptable in my world. They seem to accept it. The world of the non-Tswana, collectively known as *makgoa,* was different and incompletable with their views and moral codes.

“Who was the father?” I asked her bluntly, realizing that it was a culturally sensitive question.

“Just a boy from class," She said.

Her statement made it clear that the biological father of her child was not an issue here and that I was prying with my question. She did not attempt to explain her decision. She felt the need to challenge me and the cultural codes I articulated by asking: "Is it true that you people kill babies?" It took me a while to grasp what she was referring to. She heard that young *makgoa* women in her situation abort and end unwelcome teenage pregnancies. I said that yes, many adolescent girls "in my culture" abort a child in circumstances of unplanned pregnancy. She was shocked. She said her friends told her what "makgoa-White people" do, but she could not believe it.

Not having the benefit of a full year of proper nursing, Ndoro grew up to be a bow-legged, severely malnourished child. I watched him cling to his mother's mother, desperately trying to get a few drops of milk from her dried breasts. I watched her cuddle him with great tenderness. She expressed her open love for this child by uttering a long string of nicknames: "Ndoro, Dromio, ngwana wa muifiso” (child of the Gods) she repeated, her loving, joyful voice still rings in my ears decades later. Did I internalize this love articulating string of nicknames? I wonder today, realizing that this is how I behaved towards my own two boys. "kashusha pashusha," I uttered lovingly, inventing names calling Yoni, my first-born Yonito, Yoko, or my second-born David whom I used to call Vidush, or Vidi and a long string of loving utterances reminiscent of Serefete's endearing line of names.

Ndoro was teased by his mother's brothers, who were 9 and 12 years old then. They would point to their mother, his grandmother, and tease the little child who clung to the woman who cared for him with great love: ”This is not your mother," they taunted him. When their sister, the biological mother, came to the village on one of her rare visits, the two boys would point to her and tease Ndoro: "This is your mother

."

I became attached to and cared about this child who was said to "love milk." "Ngwana yo o rata mafshi," Serefete would sigh when Ndoro wanted some expensive store-bought milk.

Because cattle were kept away from the village, this agro-pastoralist community had no fresh milk in distant grazing areas. Villagers bought small boxes of expensive pasteurized milk they reserved for flavoring the tea served to guests. Knowing how much N loved milk and was saddened that it had been denied him despite his loud cries, I decided to feed him.

And so, one late morning, A decision was made to begin special feeding sessions for Ndoro. I tried to coax him into my shaded hut, but he looked at me with large, scared eyes. I convinced Lebbo, his four-year-old mother's sister, to accompany him. The two kids entered my hut, and I poured a full glass of milk. Ndoro clung to Lebbo, who giggled in excitement. He watched her drinking her cup of milk and drank the milk I offered him with great hurried gulps. Excited about my success, I supplemented his diet by feeding him a spoonful of peanut butter and inserting a vitamin pill. But Ndoro resented the peanut butter. "See? This is good," I coaxed him, pointing to Lebbo, who smiled widely, enjoying the unexpected treat.

We carried out our furtive feeding sessions every morning and evening for a few days before disaster struck. Little Ndoro, who shared a sleeping mat with his grandmother and his young uncles and aunt, had terrible diarrhea. In the middle of the night, I woke up to a great commotion in the yard where my hut stood next to the family's shared sleeping hut. The children were running out, bleary-eyed, screaming, and pulling off their clothes soiled with a thick yellowish liquid. And was Ndoro, held by his grandmother, looking like a wilted flower.

I was terrified. I was convinced that it was the feeding sessions that caused this diarrhea. I felt guilty. What do I know about feeding a malnourished child? Is this the result of my well-wishing but badly uninformed idea of "help" or getting "involved? While trying to calm her kids down, and as she cleaned the soiled mat they shared, Serefete made it clear, in her gentle, supportive way, that I should stop my special feeding sessions. "He is fine," she said. "Nothing is wrong with him." "We thank you, but we are not used to this White-people food."

When Moses, my research assistant and brother of Serefete, walked into the yard the following day, he made light of the whole story. Moses was my guide, and he could see the context. "Look, Pnina," he laughed in his relaxed way, "we are all bow-legged like Ndoro here. And we somehow grow up, and we are doing fine." At 32, Moses was a short and somewhat bow-legged, skinny man. Another man who visited that morning added as if it was a joking matter: "All Ndoro needs is this tire-repair tool, you know, the kind one uses for elevating the car frame when you got a flat tire.” I was confused and could not understand his joke, which made everyone laugh heartedly.

“See Pnina, “Moses came to my rescue and 'explained' the joke: “One should put Ndoro’s legs into this jack and pull, and then his legs will be straight again.”

**Ten** years **later**, when I returned to Botswana for a brief visit, I was a mother who had left two young children back home in Boston. I rushed to see Ndoro and met a shy, skinny teenager wearing a grey school uniform. He told me he loved the school he attended in the regional town of Palapye, where his mother, K, was employed as a cleaning lady for a government-owned company.

I returned to Botswana thrice over the following decade but somehow missed meeting Ndoro each time. I was told that he had excelled in school and had secured a full living scholarship for university studies. M, who dropped out of school and was an unwed mother of a daughter at 19, wrote me long letters sharing the news about people and events. From her letters, I learned that N chose to major in Social Sciences and that he lived on campus in Gaborone. But in his third year of studies, M wrote, N became profoundly depressed, and at one point, he did not get out of bed for weeks. He dropped out of school and returned to live in his mother's growing household in Palapye. The failure to complete his studies made him bitter and aggressive, M reported sadly. He refused to search for a job and criticized his mother, who gave birth to six more children, fathered by four different men who failed to support her. "Why do you have all these babies you cannot feed?" he lashed out at her. And things went from bad to worse. His mother took him to a local clinic, where he was prescribed antidepressant pills. The pills made him ravenously hungry. He woke up in the middle of the night, eating everything there was to eat in the house. When he found no food in the house, as often was the case, he broke all the dishes in frustration, waking up the household in a rage.

When I asked about N's whereabouts during my most recent visit to Botswana in 2017, his mother told me with a deep sigh: "Go find him in the car wash place. He spends all his time there, doing nothing." I could feel her despair.

I drove the white rented car to a muddy open space that served as a makeshift car wash. M, now a woman in her late 30s, sat beside me. She pointed him out to me.

Do you see him? He is over there on that bench.

I saw a man dressed in tattered grey shorts and an old T-shirt who sat among barefoot boys holding dirty rugs, waiting to earn a few pennies washing cars entering the muddy arena. M called out his name. He ignored us for a while, but the boys around him ensured he noticed our car. He got up slowly and walked sluggishly towards us. It took me a while to link this tall man with the child I remembered. And then, as the kids were cheering behind him, his face broke into a huge smile.

“Dumela N, le kae?” I greeted him in Setswana, my voice sounding shrill to my ears.

He leaned over, pushing his head through the car window, cramming my space. Ignoring my greeting, he stared at me for a long moment. Then his smile disappeared, and he told me: “Wena! [You!]”. This was an openly disrespectful way of addressing me. Then he added in rapid Setswana:

When are you going to give me something, woman?

I was shocked. I knew what he was doing. And it hurt. For a very long moment, I was speechless. M was the first to speak. She expressed her displeasure at this impolite, openly anti-social behavior of N with loud cries:

“Aa, aa, Monna?” [well well, well, man] she said again and again, shaking her head in disbelief.

“You should speak to him Sekgoa (English), she turned to me, “He knows it very well.”

“Do you remember me, N?” I tried feebly. “I am Pnina…”

“Yes. Yes. I know who you are. They told me that you have arrived.” He responded in English.

And then he looked back towards the small crowd of children who gathered behind him surrounding our car, and demanded in Setswana:

*Mpa madi* [give me money].

When I remained silent, he repeated in English: "I need money! Are you giving me something? I am thirsty, and I need a drink."

I stared at M, lost and hurt. I reached to grab my bag. I pulled out a bill I handed N silently, my eyes not leaving his.

He grabbed the money, and without looking at me or saying a word, he walked away. The kids were running behind him, excited, laughing.

“Now he will come back drunk at night,” M said, her voice quivering with unconcealed anger.

"This man, he has no manners,” she said.

The story of how badly N behaved towards me was told repeatedly in the next few days. One afternoon, as we sat at K's little house sharing memories and drinking tea, one of K's children pulled out a copy of my book published in 2002. The sixteen-year-old half-brother of N began to read loudly from my book. He read a paragraph that described the history of his extended family, the family I lived with during my first ethnographic work in the early 1980s. The reading event was full of joy and laughter as the other brothers competed in loud banter to take turns reading from my book. And then Serefete, my adoptive mother, volunteered to read, stopping after each phrase she read to declare that she didn’t understand what she was reading. The room was awash with glee. One of the teenage boys took my mobile phone and recorded the scene on video, "So you can show the people in your country we know how to read in Botswana," he giggled. N kept quiet throughout this merriment and refused to take his turn in the reading event. When challenged by his younger siblings, he ridiculed their mispronunciations, imitating their mistakes and accents. Neighbors and friends drifted in and out to join the crowded, loud gathering in the room. Food was offered to all.

And then, to my surprise, N asked if I wished to go out with him to the open porch outside the crowded room for a smoke. As we sat there, just the two of us, N turned to me, and for the first time since my arrival, he spoke without rage and open aggression.

“When I heard you became a professor of Social Science…it scared me”. He stated without warning.

“Why were you scared N?”

“I heard you completed three years of University Social Science Studies…”

“What can I tell you? Yes. It was scary.”

I kept quiet, enjoying my cigarette, the loud sounds of the people crowded in the small living room drifting towards us.

“You people are too educated, ” He stated.

"You know, N," I proclaimed. "When you say 'you people, ' what do you mean? I am indeed a lekgoa [a white woman], and yes, I became a professor, but I am also the woman who carried you on my back."

“Yes, I know,” he said softly, and I noticed that he was smiling as he added, "I am sorry I treated you badly. I feared you. [a long silence]. You know, I do not remember you carrying me on your back, of course, as I was only two years old, but I saw the pictures you sent, and they told me about you."

Then he added with a nod towards the overcrowded room we had left:

“Listen. I read your book. I read it from beginning to end.”

“Really? I am impressed! So, what do you think of it? Did I do a good job?

"Yes. Of course. You know. I completed three years of university studies. I am not stupid like these people," he motioned again towards the room.

“I must say,” he added, “I did not understand everything. But I do know what you are still doing in your <https://www.office.com/?auth=2&home=1>visits here. You are writing about our lives. It is a great honor to be in your book.

“But seriously, what can I say? Life here is shit. I am sorry to use this language.”

*Go Mathata,* he reverted to Setswana. It is a burden…No jobs. Nothing.

He looked at me with searching eyes, trying to understand how I might react to his hard words. Then he added quietly, sadly. “Life is boring...That’s why I drink. When I drink, I become more happy.”

I listened to him attentively. I was not interrupting his painful reflections.

Then I asked him hesitantly: “Is it true that you hit your Mom and broke all her dishes?”

"Ha., they told you this. Ah? …Yes…yes, I did. She is crazy. She goes around having all these children. I do not think of them as my family. She has all these men. Her boyfriends. They are useless, drunkards, irresponsible men. They never offer any support for their children."

“Your mother works very hard. “ I tried lamely.

"I know. I know. And she gets such little money for her cleaning job. But why must she have all these children? Listen, Pnina, I told her. I was furious. I said that as a mother, she is responsible for me. She gave birth to me, so she should take care of me. Parents are responsible for their children. That's the law. She is not responsible. How can she take care of all these children? I asked her to stop! And now she has this *monna mogolo* [old man] as her new *nyatsi* lover. You saw him. What for? A woman needs to work with her husband. Not have children with this nyatsi and then another one.”

We walked back to the house in silence.

The tiny room was more cramped now. The younger two sisters I had not met before entered the house wearing their school uniforms. They undressed in the next bedroom, which had no separating doors and changed into simple home clothes. They lost no time cleaning around us. Then they disappeared into the tiny kitchen, reappeared carrying buckets they used to take water from the garden pipe, and began washing the dishes with the water.

K, N’s mother, sat with her guests. A dark-skinned, heavy woman in her late forties, K sat next to an older man wearing a white hat, dressed in a brown jacket or a suit that had seen better days. When she noticed my re-entry, K called loudly: “Peni, tla kwano". She used my Tswana nickname and motioned me to come over and sit next to her on the sofa. She pointed to the older man and said in English. "He is my boyfriend." She chuckled, mocking her attempt to converse in English. "He is from Serowe," she continued her introductions in English. Her girls made fun of her: “He is my boyfriend”…they imitated their mother.

“*Mona mogolo*," [old man], one of the younger daughters taunted the man who clearly did not understand what K was saying,

“*mpa madi*" [give me money] she demanded in a loud, aggressive tone

The old *nyatsi* man ignored her. The way her request was made was to be taken as a jest, and it was clear that she would not receive a severe reaction. I was thinking of how N asked me earlier for money using the exact phrase- *mpa Madi*

At one point, the Serowe man began to talk. He was the kind of man who babbled on and on without paying attention to others.

“You.” He turned to N, “Why don’t you work? You are a healthy young man!”

N watched the man quietly and kept his silence. The older man spoke to the people in the room and made repeated statements about the need for men to earn money, declaring that N needed to support his mother. Why don't you have children? He challenged N in a vicious, insensitive way. "As far as I see, you are an educated man who speaks Sekgoa.” He mocked N.

When N decided to respond, he switched between English and Setswana, intent on making sure that I could follow the conversation and, at the same time, keeping the older man in the exchange while exhibiting his more significant cultural capital.

“Why should I have children if I don’t have a wife? I want to marry first.”

The old *nyatsi* became animated: "If you want to get a woman, you must work. You need to buy her things. Women like to be treated well and taken care of."

"I want to get married," N retorted passionately, "but I don't want just to give money to a woman who already has children from other men." At this, the room erupted into loud, multiple conversations. His two younger sisters and his mother openly giggled at N's idea. M was the first to challenge N directly.

"N? You don't want a woman who already has children, ha?" She spat her words at him, deeply incensed. "So, tell me, my dear sister's son: how old will that woman you wish to marry be? Because if she has no kids, as you require, she should be 18 or younger, and that's too young for you. You are already a man of 36, don't forget."

N was quick to respond to this challenge. He looked at me and stated in English. “ Well, that woman should be about 32 to 36 years old."

"What? No way!" The two younger sisters understood N's English, "There is no woman of that age who does not have at least one or two children unless she cannot bear children. And then, why should you marry her?"

N watched his younger two sisters with open disdain, and speaking in English while inserting Setswana words into his speech, he retorted: "I refuse (*ke a gana*) to marry a woman with children. These Tswana women' (basadi ba Batswana, ba rata madi hela) only want your money. And if you have nothing, they ignore you. I want to work with her. I want us to live, work, and have children together."

The mistrust of N's idea was openly and vehemently rejected by all present, young and old, male and female. They shook their heads. They ignored my presence. I could barely follow their rapid Setswana exchanges.

Monna! Nya…nya… [hay man, no. no way…]

The old *nyatsi* man’s voice surfaced over the turmoil.

"You see," he addressed N, who stubbornly avoided looking back at him, "A woman needs clothes, right? She needs to feed her babies. How can she manage on her own? It would be best if you gave her something. This is what we men do, we need to give our women *bogobe.”* [porridge, a metaphor for food]

K looked at the old man with a huge smile and said, "Eh…rra."

I wasn't sure if K was agreeing with the old man or implying that

he should do something he wasn't doing. After a while, most of the guests lost interest in the conversation. When tea was offered, I asked N if she would like to take a short walk with me.

“So what do you say about all this, Pnina?” He asked me gently.

I took a deep breath. I was not going to patronize N. I told him what I thought: "You think like a lekgoa N. But you know that the concept of marriage, children, and families in Botswana is different from what is common among white people. I don't have to teach you that, right?"

N observed me for a long moment. "I know. I know. You are right. But that's how I want my life to be. I cannot help it."