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Introduction

At weddings in the town of Molepolole in Botswana, once the festivities are over and many of the guests are leaving, one might come across a seemingly unobtrusive event. Once the cooking of the meat in the big cast-iron pots is done, the guests have eaten and shared the meat, and these pots are empty, a traditional healer (*ngaka*) is often called upon to perform a public act that is known as 'extinguishing the fire' (in Setswana, *gotima molelo*). The *ngaka* then applies special doctored water for the purpose of extinguishing the fires at the site used for cooking (van Dijk 2017). This commonly takes place at a designated spot within the compound of the parental home of the bride or the groom. While the fires are still smouldering but the cooking of the food has ended, the traditional healer pours this special liquid over the burning wood, which then produces a lot of steam and smoke that can be seen throughout the compound. As people explained, the water that puts out the fire and cools down the heat is symbolic. It is meant to put out and cool down any 'argument', any tribulation, any feelings of envy or jealousy that may have arisen during the days of the festivities, the sharing of food, the exchange of gifts and bridewealth, and the displays of success, status and prestige that many of these weddings involve. Publicly extinguishing the fire of the cooking pots is about acknowledging openly that such feelings, sentiments and expressions may have existed – or even that they actually have occurred – but that now the couple and their families are armed and empowered to counteract these 'negativities' and the possible detrimental impacts they may have on their lives and their future.

Such an act of publicly extinguishing a fire – a fire that symbolically signals, expresses and contains hidden and dark sentiments and intentions that are assumed to have been present – is precisely situated in the movement between explicit local pronouncements and implicit local practices that Lambek (2010) hypothesized in his study on everyday ethics. As the introduction to this special issue indicates, through such practices tacit ethical concerns of the everyday can become explicit – tacit ethical concerns that may indicate those ethical concerns that are inferred or implied in particular actions or utterances. In this case, this move to the explicit can be seen in the context of the type of event that weddings represent. Weddings imply a range of tacit ethical concerns – about tension and

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misgivings, about jealousy and the implicit danger of spiritual attacks – that find their explication in practices such as extinguishing a fire. Such a practice accuses no one; it does not name the unethical and the evil; it does not upset or interfere with social relations. Yet, its message cannot be misunderstood. It is tacit and extraordinary at the same time.

This explication of the tacit in and through ethical practice is at the core of this article. I aim to investigate the manner in which extraordinary events – a wedding in this particular local cultural context – allow for the expression of tacit ethical concerns in and through particular practices. These weddings largely follow particular ideas of protocol, order and conduct in terms of their execution, such as those relating to the (bridewealth) exchanges between the families involved; these ideas also shape an explicit publicness about the status, prestige and profile of all involved. Overall, the means and opportunities for this move to the explicit and the articulation of ethical concerns in public domains have increased enormously in recent years. The media in Botswana (including social media) have contributed significantly to the increased public profile of these weddings, their consumerist styling, the heated discussions about bridewealth exchanges, the power of elderly generations, and a space in which the young see themselves as able to break away from all this. Yet, the ethics and aesthetics of prestige, reputation and public profile that these grand events harbour also involve more tacit ethical dimensions. A call for attention to be paid to the ethics of events and the way in which they involve explications of tacit concerns forms the basis of the central question of this article.

Event ethics in anthropology

Running counter to what Didier Fassin (2008) recently called the 'anthropological discomfort with morality', an entire field of study has emerged that takes a core interest in the ethnographic approach to ethics and moralities (Faubion 2011; Fassin 2013; 2014). In a recent article, Csordas (2013) critically assessed, and was even puzzled about, how and why something that comes close to being a specific sub-discipline in the anthropological academic tradition has emerged. Studies such as those by Zigon (2007), Robbins (2012), Lambek (2010), Laidlaw (2010), Fassin (2012) and Faubion (2011) have provided the impetus for the rise of a field that has brought to life a cross-cultural comparison of local cultural processes of ethical and moral refashioning, formulations and contestations, especially by dealing with the intersections of institutional and identity formations, law and social circumstances that give rise to such processes.

Zigon (2007) has argued that moments of moral breakdown resulting from war, violence and disasters are usually the moments when – in their aftermath – attempts emerge to passionately pursue reformulations and new articulations of ethical concerns. Yet, the question is whether we need to recognize a more continuous attempt to explicate and articulate this: that is, a situation in which there are not only 'moral breakdowns' occurring at unexpected moments but also more *regularly recurring events* that produce an extra-ordinarization of ethical concerns (see also Vogel 2009 for a similar argument). This means that people can be passionate about events because of the manner in which they provoke a process of debating, questioning and pronouncing on conduct. This article aims to highlight

how more regularly recurring events – such as weddings – can produce an opening up and an explication of tacit ethical sentiments, reflections and concerns, and that this can occur during the period of preparation for the wedding, during its execution or in its aftermath. At each of these moments, ethical concerns can be inferred or implied in actions that are specific to the 'setup' of the event.

In this dialectic, what is here referred to as 'event ethics' differs from what Lempert (2013) has called ethical or moralizing events in that the former presuppose a reflexive distance between the practice of the event and the attention that is drawn to its ethical concerns. Lempert's concept of ethical events suggests an immanence and embeddedness of ethics *in* the event through which ethics and event cannot be separated, and the moral nature of the event is thus differentiated from that of other events. Yet, the term 'event ethics' does not presuppose a moral qualification of the event; instead, it points – inversely – at how ethical concerns are shaped by particular events while arguing that, in this relationship, the publicness and extraordinariness of the event appear to matter a great deal. Event ethics in this sense stand out against, while being co-productive of, the ordinary ethics of the everyday in the way Lambek (2010) perceived them. If we think of events and ethics as mutually informing each other, the anthropology of ordinary ethics needs to be linked to an anthropology of events. Zigon comes close to Derrida in exploring what the latter has called an 'eventology' (Derrida 2007); that is, in exploring how the unexpected nature of events such as disasters is perceived as producing an 'aftermath' in which a discursive signification and interpretation of (ethical) reflections take place (see also Das 1995; Vogel 2009). For an anthropology of events, however, the question is how the *planned nature* of grand events – which these weddings are – makes a difference to ethical pronouncements. As an ethical discursive formation and performance, an event is not only about its interpretation after it has taken place but also about the perception of protocol and conduct, and their valuation, while it is being prepared, organized and managed. While events intersect with the ordinary flow of everyday life, tacit ethical practices – such as the extinguishing of the fire – do not take place in ordinary, everyday life as such, but appear to be nested within the larger framework provided by the wedding event.

These ethical concerns, as they surface on the days before, during and after the organization and management of weddings, are primarily nested within families, family relations and their valuations. Yet, this nesting is even more important in terms of how valuations of appropriate behaviour, and concerns about expressing a good and respectable life, take place on different scales of social interaction during the wedding, ranging from broad to more specific valuations according to the level of social interaction involved. While weddings often engage broad valuations (and evaluations) of the behaviour of entire families, households, guests, churches and (religious) leaders and specialists, at the same time smaller circles of interaction can be discerned where such evaluations become much more specific. This is a nesting of different scales of ethical valuations that, interestingly, appears to allow social actors an extra margin of manoeuvre, and they can take advantage of this in view of the pronouncements and judgements made. I am interested in exploring how extraordinary situations, such as weddings, provide social actors this extra margin, which I propose to term 'elasticity'. By elasticity I mean the manner in which the broad and overarching valuations of a wedding – that is, the public pronouncements on its prestige, its success

and its glamour – are not necessarily unsettled by pronouncements that concern smaller segments and elements of the many steps that couples and their families take during the entire wedding process. As the wedding process indeed involves many steps, interactions and exchanges, ethical concerns over these minutiae may not necessarily have a bearing on the event ethics as a whole, despite the fact that they are a constituent part of them. Even if more intimately scaled pronouncements on some of these elements are negative or condemnatory, and thus have the potential to cause a disturbance on the larger scale of the event, the ethics of the event may allow for a general reflection on the event's meaning and significance that leaves its overall image, profile and status unscathed. This is why this article proposes studying this difference in scale as a kind of elasticity of and in event ethics that is intimately interwoven with the manner in which these ethics appear nested and multi-scaled.

Weddings and event ethics in Botswana

Weddings in Botswana have become important events. This is because of the many ways in which they stand out from normal, everyday life as an experience of the grandiose. In the town of Molepolole, where I conducted research on marital arrangements in the period 2007 to 2012, weddings have not only become highly glamorous in contrast with the mundanity of everyday life (see van Dijk 2010; 2012a; 2012b; 2017), they are also a moment of heightened ethical awareness. While couples and their families spend fortunes on styling these weddings with colourful decorations, dresses, food, flowers and so forth, this aesthetic is combined with a kind of frenzied concern about the valuation and evaluation of conduct pertaining to the roles of the couple, their parents and their significant others, among whom the mother's brother (*malome*) is by far the most crucial. Such perceptions almost take the form of a protocol that prescribes matters such as how a couple should treat their families, how they should approach their mother's brothers, or how the families should treat each other in the often highly formalized negotiations (known as *patlo*) about the payment of the *lobolalbogadi* (the bridewealth exchange of cattle that is transferred from the groom's family to the bride's family; see Kuper 1982; Solway 1990; 2016). Yet, beyond such protocol-governed notions of conduct, the event ethics of the wedding also include explicit pronouncements and judgements on how the couple and their families are behaving, the reputation and prestige they accrue in the way in which they conduct the wedding, its expensive styling, the food offered, the speeches delivered, and the presents exchanged.

Event ethics thus present an interplay of reflections on the steps taken before, during and after the wedding and the judgements they receive. Furthermore, event aesthetics interact with event ethics in the way in which a level of globally inspired perfection is to be achieved for a white wedding, while at the same time the expectations that now apply in terms of bringing marital arrangements to a successful outcome are brought into sharp relief. As I have argued elsewhere in greater detail (van Dijk 2010; 2012a), the wedding, usually celebrated at the home compound of the couple's parents, is primarily a public display of status and success, and testimony to apparently being able to bring all the negotiations, preparations and arrangements to the level of a public display of success. Taking

this analysis and pursuing this investigation further in order to explore the question of an explication of ethical concerns, these weddings can be perceived, primarily, as public spaces that showcase the economic success of couples and their families. They commonly take place in and around strategically pitched large wedding tents that are usually rented from event operators.

While the bride price payment of *lobola/bogadi* in Molepolole is a standard eight head of cattle in cash or in kind, it is not unusual for such a tent to cost much more than the bride price, making these tents by far the most expensive item of all in the marital arrangement (see van Dijk 2010; 2012a; 2012b; 2017). These tents epitomize the way in which this explication of ethics occurs in what can be called a private–public space. It is a space that is neither entirely private, nor entirely public, since the tent serves as an extension of what is known as the *lolwapa* (the secluded space in front of the house), usually demarcated by a low and often decorated wall. The *lolwapa* is commonly used to receive visitors, but it is not an entirely private space as interactions with guests within this secluded area can still be observed from outside the *lolwapa*. Thus, it combines an 'interior' with an 'exterior' in a particular but highly conventional fashion. Usually pitched near or in the *lolwapa* of the parental home, the tent creates an interior where selected guests are seated while it publicly signals the special occasion, as it can be seen from afar, and thereby is intended to transmit an image of success, status and prestige for the family and the couple involved.

This level of reflection about the organizing and managing of the wedding as an event starts at exactly the moment when the couple expresses an interest in getting married. In a strong sense, event ethics involve reflections on and valuations of the 'before' of an event as much as the 'after'. As many couples explained to me, this is a tense moment, one not to be taken lightly, since it sets in motion a process of marital preparations that generally lasts for two years, if not longer. It also initiates a process of identifying the public roles that some of their relatives are supposed to adopt. There are many steps involved in the marital arrangements, including much travelling and communication between all parties, and following the announcement of the nuptials (financial) resources come into play (and are often rapidly depleted); this also means that there are many moments when something can go wrong. Disagreements and misunderstandings can arise easily, both *between* the negotiating families and *within* the organizing families, and much consultation is required to prevent irreparable mistakes and blunders. Hence, many of the ethical pronouncements on the event relate to protocol-governed notions of what to do and what not to do, what to say and what not to say, often orbiting around the figure of the *malome*. He is the most important representative of the family and, in principle, he should give his consent to or be aware of all decisions concerning the proceedings of the event (see also Kuper 1982; Griffiths 1997; Solway 1990). The negotiations with the other family about the terms of the marriage are his responsibility and much of the success of the wedding depends on his skills and competence. In particular, the couple is required to forge a working relationship with him since the era of arranged marriages is long gone. Many responsibilities – especially the financial ones – are now in the hands of the couples themselves. In earlier publications, I showed in greater detail (van Dijk 2010; 2012a; 2012b; 2017) how the couples are crucially placed to budget for the entire wedding: that is, to ensure that the high expectations of the wedding's glamorous format are met. This means that, in terms of their ethical and aesthetic

concern with the (public) prestige and profile of the wedding, they need to maintain a good relationship with the *malome* on both sides of their families as such figures are key to accessing this support. This is a process of careful negotiation, because, in many cases, there is a drawback to this support as new or unexpected demands emerge from these uncles. In interviews, couples often expressed their concerns about the complexities of such situations; at times, conflicts seemed to arise about what they felt were utterly trivial matters and demands. Yet, while couples, families and the *malome* are engaged in a complex web of navigation together, the raising of issues of dissent by these family elders ensured that the *malome*'s authority over certain parts of the marital arrangements was felt and understood.

It is in this constellation that event ethics, as ideals in practice, extend into the organization and management of the public moments of the wedding. During those moments, then, how does the event of the wedding *make explicit* considerations of the morally good and bad that otherwise tend to be more tacitly present in everyday speech or conduct?

Implications and explications of marital event ethics

One telling example of the process of explication can be found in the following wedding event in Molepolole in November 2011, which involved a traditional healer (*ngaka*) in the preparations. At the home of the groom, where the wedding celebration typically takes place a week after similar festivities at the bride's compound, a *ngaka* could be observed working silently at the section of the plot where important matters relating to the festivities were to be located. Invited to do so by the *malome* of the groom, he was marking out the places where the big cast-iron cooking pots were going to be set for the cooking of the meat, which was to be provided by slaughtering a number of cows. Specifically, he was indicating the points where the four corners of the cooking area would need to be placed. He marked these spots using a fly whisk (made from a cow's tail), dipping it into what he called special water, which he then splashed on the ground with the whisk, drawing a rectangular space with this water. He placed some stones at the four marked corners so that they would remain visible once the liquid dried. His unobtrusive but publicly visible activities were explained to me as being a way to provide protection (*go sireletsa*) of important spaces such as this, where, in the following days, the wedding would bring many people – family and strangers – to this compound to celebrate and eat. This kind of activity forms part of a range of other activities that, in the preparation phase of the wedding, begin to signal the possibility of evil, afflictive powers that the family or strangers could potentially bring to the compound. As is the case with the extinguishing of the fires by the *ngaka* at the end of the wedding festivities, this practice is a publicly visible act that indicates the potentiality of ulterior powers that may cause harm while not accusing anybody or hurting anyone in terms of status or public profile. It resonates within a conception of marriage as opening up participants (not only the couple) to the workings of evil, jealousy and envy. The event is seen as a vulnerable moment, when the presence of so many strangers, the opening up of the compound, and the display of wealth, food and success can trigger malicious forces and thus wreak havoc and bring about misfortune.

In terms of the social imagination of the event, this leads to a practice whereby the *malome* becomes responsible for the spiritual protection of much that is involved in the wedding: the place where it will be held, the food that will be consumed, the clothes that the main players in the event will wear and so forth. This is the reason why the *malome* may invite a *ngaka* to the wedding venue at the parental compound in order to spiritually cleanse and protect it. The *malome* is crucially positioned to control and patrol, so to speak, the outer limits of the family and what comes in and goes out – materially and spiritually – even at a house that is not his. Furthermore, the couple is required to bring their clothes and cloth to the *ngaka* long before the wedding for a spiritual blessing and protection of everything that they will be wearing during the celebrations (van Dijk 2017).

This demonstrates ethics as ideals in practice. The value of spiritual safety, security and a closing-off from ulterior forces allows the *malome* to take on the role of a guard; the event allows for a publicly visible explication of an otherwise much more tacit anxiety about the dangers of witchcraft, the control of such powers, the distancing of strangers from the private milieu and the checking of what they bring into the compound. The event-related nature of his policing means that nobody takes offence at this explicitness of an otherwise much more hidden activity; asking a *ngaka* to come to the house or the compound would ordinarily be shrouded in secrecy and not an activity that is publicly 'advertised'. In other words, its public explicitness as a practice relating to the event is not contested, refused or critiqued by anyone and is deemed fitting to the occasion, irrespective of the fact that it lays bare the potential presence of powers that otherwise would remain tacit and unspoken.

While such acts of explication during such events may be expressions of more hidden and tacit dynamics of tension and misgivings, the reverse process of *implication*, situated in the movement between explicit local pronouncements and implicit local practices, presents itself forcefully as well. Of particular relevance here is Christianity. Molepolole is the site where, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, missionary Christianity was first introduced in this part of the region by David Livingstone (for a comparative case, see Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). He established the first post of the London Missionary Society (LMS) among the Bakwena chieftaincy, a paramount chieftaincy that remains in power in this part of Botswana today (Griffiths 1997). From the LMS sprang the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA), which has a church building in the centre of town that is referred to, especially by the elderly generation, as 'Lonton'. From the outset, the LMS made the explicit pronouncement that marital relations would be reshaped according to its moral principles – bringing Livingstone into direct conflict with the Bakwena chieftaincy over the issue of polygamy (see Griffiths 1997). In the local praxis of wedding events, the inclusion of certain Christian practices is striking, especially in cases where the couple and/or their families are not particularly active in church life or even where they have professed some distance from the church.

The long history of the connection between Christianity and marriage in Molepolole (and in other parts of Botswana) has produced a relationship between the ways in which notions of the implicit status, prestige and profile of the wedding and the families involved find expression in Christian practices. Civic virtue at weddings requires and is produced through the presence of Christian representatives (a pastor, reverend or deacon) and/or Christian

prayers and hymns, in order to mark the occasion and build its respectability (van Dijk 2010; see especially Werbner 2014; 2016 for a comprehensive account of this form of civic virtue and respectability). Speeches held inside the tent and directed towards the couple sitting at the high table frequently refer to God and his benevolence; thus, while being explicit, pronouncements are at the same time part of the implicit common civic *habitus* on such occasions. However, while mainline missionary Christianity has, in a sense, become ingrained in the speeches used to mark occasions of this sort,[1] in many cases the reference to Christian values and concepts does not impinge on the presence of traditional healers or the execution of rituals performed by these *dingaka*, like the ones discussed above. References to the Christian God and the prayers or citations from the Bible that are woven into the speeches often tend to galvanize differences by presenting Christianity as appropriated, as being part of 'our cultural traditions' (*ngwao* in local parlance). Indeed, the explicitness of Christian ethics in these speech acts sets apart any speaker who does not refer to Christian values or who does not include a prayer, hymn or biblical citation in his or her address on these occasions. Speech praxis creates a reality of implicit virtue and deference, and may therefore also disqualify such speakers as being 'rude', 'disrespectful' or 'misguided' if such a reference, allusion or quotation is omitted.

This Christian referencing in speech, respectability and framing of the event usually takes place without any apparent interest in pursuing a missionary agenda of eradicating 'heathenism' by changing or preventing certain (ritual) practices, such as the operations of these traditional healers. This is commonly the case when couples and their families belong to one of the mainstream, former mission churches or to some of the smaller African Independent Churches, of which various denominations exist in Molepolole. This situation usually changes dramatically if there is a Pentecostal context to, or presence at, these weddings. As new charismatic-oriented Pentecostal churches began to become significant in Molepolole from the mid-1970s onwards, the young couples that I met increasingly preferred their weddings to be conducted in a style that conformed to the strict moral codes of this version of Christianity. Weddings, then, can acquire a missionary zeal in terms of being events that are crucially placed as moments that explicitly serve the purpose of 'correction'. If couples solicit the help, guidance, counselling and overall involvement of their Pentecostal pastors in the arrangements for their weddings, the presence of traditional healers is no longer tolerated, alcoholic beverages, 'lustful' dancing and 'inappropriate' speeches and singing are prohibited, fires are not ritually extinguished, and protective medicines are rejected. In these cases, the tacit-ness of civility that frames the cultural appropriation of the faith within a concept of

[1]This explicit nature of Christianity – or, at a minimum, Christian references – during weddings can also be noted in the official actions of the registrar of marriages during the public act of registering the marriage under Roman-Dutch law at the premises of the district commissioner. The registrar can open the signing session with reference to biblical verses, irrespective of whether the couple and/or their families belong to any of the many Christian denominations. Werbner (2014; 2016) has drawn explicit attention to the significance of Christian expressions of faith during public occasions as a means of producing civic virtue, respectability and authority in Botswana.

'tradition' often becomes a modality whereby the Pentecostal leadership has an influence on the wedding, its arrangements and preparations in order to proclaim a particular moral code.[2] This moral code creates a specific, if not critical, take on the underlying notion that 'civic-ness', prestige and respect are served by Christian expressions. In the Pentecostal view, the Christian message is not just 'embellishment' in the service of civic-ness; rather, it is an explicit frame for decision making and conduct for the people involved. According to this view, moral virtue emerges only by sending the traditional healers away, by using prayers and preaching to stamp out envy, jealousy and 'negativities', and by using them to create protection and prosperity for the couple. Material success, glamour and the romantic styling of the event in the Pentecostal rhetoric become marked as clear signs of God's benevolence and provision of prosperity to the confirmed believer (van Dijk 2015).

Unlike in other types of churches, during counselling sessions (van Dijk 2013) in Pentecostal churches, couples are required to express their choices regarding which elements of 'culture' they will allow during their wedding and how they will convince their families of such preferences. In the Pentecostal framing of the wedding, the marriage must now represent a 'break with the past' (Meyer 1998) by being different from the marriages of their elders.

Event ethics and the 'aftermath'

The greatest concern of the Pentecostal churches in Molepolole in terms of the ethics of weddings is a local practice known as the 'first bite': in local parlance, *molomo*. As I have discussed in an earlier article (van Dijk 2012b) but will explore further here, the 'first bite' culturally opens the wedding festivities at the crucial moment when the meat of the slaughtered animals is shared with all the guests gathered in the parental compound. For this 'first bite', a piece of meat is cut from the section of the cow where the hind leg joins the main body of the animal. This section is known as *lengamu*, or groin. The cutting of this piece is usually supervised by the *malome* and a traditional healer, who is usually invited by the party of the groom. The reason for his supervision at the moment of this cutting is that the traditional healer will take the piece of meat, prepare it by inserting special medicines and then roast or cook it on a designated fire. After the meat has been prepared, it is termed '*nama ya tshiamo*' – 'the meat of righteousness' (van Dijk 2010: 298; 2012b: 147) – and the couple, along with other members of their wedding party, such as the *malome*, important aunts and other relevant family members (although usually not their parents), is then invited to eat a piece of this meat. Performing this act of consumption is called the *molomo*, the first bite of the meat that will be shared with their guests. It is seen as special meat that has been empowered to establish an innate connection between the couple (van Dijk 2012b; see also Solway 2016 for a comparable understanding of similar practices in other parts of Botswana). On the basis of

[2]For example, inside the wedding tent, speeches by Pentecostal pastors addressed to the couple may turn into moments of preaching that are explicitly directed towards their wider families in the knowledge that the Pentecostal control and inspection of the wedding arrangements often did not go uncontested by the couple's elders.

this sharing, there is a belief that the health and prosperity of the couple and their family might be adversely affected if this bond is not looked after.

While more could be said about the symbolic references of this ritual practice – which would move us beyond the scope of this article – it is important to note that the Pentecostal churches in particular make an explicit effort to reject the practice (van Dijk 2010: 299). They argue that the actions of the traditional healers introduce ancestral and therefore demonic powers into the marriage. In their view, the inseparable connection that the practice establishes between the couple is not 'holy', not God-given, not achieved through prayer, and has not involved the presence of heavenly forces. This, they believe, renders the couple vulnerable to the powers of Satan. In the local understanding, the Pentecostals maintain a much more strict sense of apprehension and rejection about a practice that has already found some contestation among some of the mainline missionary churches and among the more syncretic African Independent Churches present in the area (van Dijk 2012b: 153). While these latter churches have expressed their concerns, unlike the Pentecostals they usually do little to intervene in these practices. In some cases, the practice is justified by saying that it is permissible if the first bite is taken from meat that has not been prepared by a traditional healer, adding to the existing contradictory views and concerns about the nature and status of this practice.

When I attended a wedding in November 2011 where a *nama ya tshiamo* was prepared by a *ngaka* for consumption by the bride and groom, my attention was drawn to some female relatives close to the special fire that had been made to roast the meat. While these women were busy preparing food for the guests who were arriving at the compound, some began making remarks about what was happening to the piece of meat placed on the fire. Some were looking at it with an expression of disgust and dismay on their faces, and one of the women voiced her concerns about what was about to happen. She began publicly questioning the role of 'these elderly men' who find it important to roast the meat and feed it to the youngsters (meaning the couple). Visibly disgusted by the idea of eating the doctored meat, her concern was that this meat could potentially harm them – if not kill them – and that it is not good to control the intimate relations of a man and a woman by consuming something that could have such an effect. While the wedding itself was not the appropriate moment to discuss these concerns with her – concerns primarily expressed through her body language, which radiated disgust – I later did so, and came to understand more about the 'aftermath' according to her projection of the effects of eating this meat. Her explanations were not so much based on 'Christian' – let alone 'Pentecostal' – thinking, but had much more to do with the notion she held that marriage does not exclude by definition extramarital relationships as an element of practical reality. As an ethics in practice, the notion that the consuming of the meat would have dire future consequences for either the man or the woman if and when they engaged in extramarital sexual relations was part of this moral concern. Thus, she was voicing concerns about two aspects of this practice by the elders: firstly, the way in which it enforces a particular and threatening exclusivity, with sex tied to this relationship; and, secondly, the fact that, as we are all human and have human sentiments, emotions and desires should not be causes of death – and death could now be brought about by the uncontrollable spiritual forces embedded in the meat through the machinations of the healer. Hence, her concern and that of her friends at the celebration had been about what she

perceived as a kind of irresponsibility of the act in relation to the aftermath of the event: that is to say, the practice was perceived as irresponsible because it creates the potential to harm the lives of the couple in the case of some possible future activity that should not have such dreadful consequences.

This perception of the *nama ya tshiamo* as a form of ethics related to the maintenance of a blood relationship is believed by some members of the community to be a result of the history of labour migration and the subsequent absence of men from their families and villages (van Dijk 2010; 2012a; 2012b). There is indeed a substantial record of the way in which the long process of labour migration to the South African mining and industrial complexes (Johannesburg in particular) affected marital relations and arrangements (Comaroff and Roberts 1977; Brown 1983; Izzard 1985; Gulbrandsen 1986). Based on the work of Schapera on Tswana marriage (see Schapera 1940), authors such as Townsend (1997) have argued that, despite this absenteeism, strong bonds were nevertheless maintained between married couples, irrespective of the fact that migrating men may have been involved in relations with other women while away from their families. In some views of the practice that I came across in Molepolole, this aspect of consuming the meat as a way of establishing an inseparable and spiritually sanctioned bond between the couple was certainly part of the understanding of its importance (see van Dijk 2012b; Solway 2016). Christian, and more specifically Pentecostal, objections to the practice can thus be seen as actually diminishing the tying of the bond and the potential sanctions that the eating of the meat was supposed to establish.

Yet, this history of the 'need' to spiritually sanction and control the perpetuation of a marital connection over a long distance and over a period of separation can be seen, in a sense, as an 'ethics of the past'. This was part of these women's critique: that the practice, conducted by 'old men', belongs to the past and is no longer relevant to current marital conditions, and belongs to a strategy that wants to impose past means of control that are no longer viable. The widespread forms of labour migration to South Africa have long ceased to exist (they ended in around the 1970s), and marital patterns have now shifted from marrying *within* Molepolole – i.e. linking one family-related ward into another – to marital relations that traverse the entire country and cross ethnic boundaries. The practice of *molomo* can thus be seen in this case as a local, Bakwena-related ethnic ritual practice, which for some is poorly attuned to the modern Botswana context of marital formations across ethnic divides (Gulbrandsen 1986). The women thus expressed their concern that there is no place nowadays for imposing something on the couple that was based on old-fashioned ideas and a nostalgia for spiritual protection. This was a contestation of an archaic practice for which the women appeared little inspired by Pentecostalism and its well-known dictum of 'breaking with the past' (see Meyer 1998). Among the women, there was a fear of what eating the meat would mean in terms of its aftermath; it is meant to produce an indelible link that can only be ended if one of the couple dies, at which point the widow or the widower has to go through a process that delivers them from the bond that the eating of the meat established. This process consists of a range of rituals to undo the consummated bond, and an imperfect deliverance will cause yet another illness – known as *boswagadi* – to manifest itself in the life of the widow (a widow is much more susceptible than a widower) (Kealotswe 2007). Hence, in these women's minds, the potential effects of consuming the meat extend over an entire life and may have dire consequences.

A nesting of ethics and the question of elasticity

The explication of ordinary ethics as ideals in practice can be viewed as a process whereby the marking of what remained ethically implicit before that moment becomes part of the process. What the women did by looking at the meat on the fire in disgust, by shrugging their shoulders, by pointing at it and eventually by commenting on it as they did was to ensure that the practice would not go unnoticed. In the hustle and bustle of the wedding preparations, many people were preparing food, helping with the slaughter of the cows and the preparation of the meat, dressing the tables and chairs and so forth. As the piece of meat was placed on a fire near a side entrance to the house where people were cooking, cutting vegetables, fetching water and doing many more such activities, people passed by frequently, paying more or less attention to what was happening. Drawing attention to the meat on the fire and to their own misgivings in this way meant that the event of roasting the meat became a safe conduit for them to express their disdain, which they would have had little opportunity to do otherwise. The tacit-ness of the event ethics to be explored here reveals an ethics in which the event suddenly allows for the expression of concerns which, in other situations, would have been considered inappropriate. Under the umbrella of an event taking place in the context of an even bigger event – namely, the marital celebrations to be held in the compound – a space emerged for the expression of moral sentiment that ran counter to the usual power divisions based on age and gender. Younger women generally do not comment on elderly men – and especially not on elderly men with a public function to execute at an event that is meant to enhance the prestige of a particular family in Molepolole, as in this case. There is not only very little space for doing so in ordinary life because of the differences in gender and age, power and status; there is also the serious possibility that 'disturbances' might disrupt the preparations for the wedding proceedings as a whole. I have witnessed on several occasions how questions that were raised by members of one family could indeed lead to a disruption in the wedding proceedings, thereby bringing the festivities to a standstill.[3] The way these women used their body language on seeing the meat being roasted and commented on it meant that bystanders could not fail to miss their dismay, which made it a somewhat risky action. If one of the members of the family had taken offence, the proceedings could easily have been disrupted. Bringing things to a standstill, engaging in what then usually become prolonged, often angry, discussions about the issues raised, the possible damage to the status, prestige and reputation of the families and the unhappiness caused to the couple to be married can all be serious consequences of such offence.

This leads to two interrelated observations: one concerning what can be termed a nesting of ethics, and a second concerning a kind of 'elasticity'. The conduct of these women – publicly sneering at the actions of the elderly – in a sense produces and is produced by this elasticity.

[3]Elsewhere (van Dijk 2012b), I describe one such case where the refusal of a bride to take part in the consummation of the *nama ya tshiamo* led to a postponement of the festivities to the next day, creating discomfort on the part of her family.

In terms of the first observation, the event ethics of weddings of this sort appear to shape a nesting of different interlocking levels of ethics. Valuations of appropriate behaviour (and of deviations from such behaviour) and concerns with maintaining a 'good' and 'respectable' life take place on different levels of social interaction, ranging from broad valuations of large-scale interactions to more intricate valuations as the social interaction involved moves further down the scale. Whereas weddings involve broad valuations (and evaluations) of the behaviour of entire families, households, guests, churches, religious leaders and specialists, within these broad valuations smaller circles of interaction can be found where such evaluations become much more specific. A practice such as the eating of the meat belongs to a much more specific, close-knit scale of interaction (limiting itself to the couple and representatives of the two families) than the large, communal feast in the tent: the larger setup of the entire wedding supersedes the more specific significance of this practice. Another example of nesting can be seen in the ethics that come into play in valuing and evaluating the behaviour of non-persons such as children. While roaming the wedding location, rarely being invited to join the feast in the large wedding tent, their begging for food from important guests is simply perceived as part of a smaller-scale level of interaction in which their (in)appropriate actions are primarily the concern of their older sisters or young aunts.

However, the second observation is that this 'nesting' tests the elasticity of ethical concerns and that breaches can occur within and between these scales of evaluation and interaction. Begging for food, as children do, takes place on the level of small-scale interaction, but if they start taking food from the plates of the invited guests they breach a wider domain of valuation and interaction that often makes this elasticity 'snap'. The cases that I witnessed where the wedding came to a complete standstill (see, for example, van Dijk 2012b: 151) also belong to this repertoire, where the limits of that extra margin for manoeuvre that the special event otherwise offers are reached. In these cases, good reputation on a wider level of interaction is now at stake, and wider concerns emerge about crossing that thin line.

Similarly, the women were simultaneously producing and taking advantage of a space in which they could comment on the practice of eating the doctored meat in the knowledge that their action would not 'snap' this elasticity and would not (yet) cause such provocation that the wider event could potentially come to a standstill. Bringing things to a standstill – that is, to a moment when this elasticity snaps – is too much of a step to take if the offence is not too great and if the family elders have not been provoked too much. Hence, in this case, the event allows a certain tacit understanding of where this elasticity can be found between the different levels of the nested ethics. The women exhibited this tacit-ness in their actions and expressions and were not stopped or reprimanded for their behaviour. The elders continued roasting the meat while aware that the women were concerned about the 'doubtful' ethical nature of the thing they were preparing. The men attending to the meat and the fire grinned a bit, uneasily, but never considered stopping this part of the ceremony. The social costs of doing so would have been too high and the notion of being responsible for the proper 'consummation' of the marriage, one that would allow for spiritual protection, empowerment and a binding of the relationship, was too important in their view. The ethics of the event of the wedding – including this consummation – establish an indelible

connection between the couple and between their families, and allows for the tacit presence of the extraordinary: in this case, this commentary on the ethical nature of part of the event. This extraordinariness indicates a level of elasticity regarding the extent to which these women were indeed pushing the boundaries of social acceptability in their critiquing of the elderly men.

The implication here is that there is a social imaginary at play in which there is a hierarchy of order, of scales of importance, within which such extraordinariness may arise; this contrasts with analysis by Zigon (2007), who argues that such extraordinariness only arises at moments of moral breakdown. The elasticity of morality that occurred when the women began to voice their critique of the preparation of the doctored meat was possible because it did not hinder or intervene in the higher order of importance of the proper running of the wedding ceremony as a whole. Their commentary did not lead to a breakdown of that higher aim despite the fact that their actions made explicit a more tacit ethical unease with the aims and effects of the ritual that involved eating the piece of meat.

Conclusion: elasticity in ethics

This article has drawn attention to a notion of ethical elasticity that may exist in what Lambek (2010) calls the space between explicit moral pronouncements and implicit, tacit understandings of ethical conduct. This elasticity does not connect these things through a breakdown, as formulated by Zigon, but rather it relates to practice and, indeed, to the way in which people practise elasticity itself: that is, they act in ways that produce and highlight such elasticity. While events may signal specific ethics and ethical concerns that can be coded very explicitly – for example, in the context of high-profile moments such as weddings – this elasticity-as-practice does not disappear. An aspect of modernity in these event ethics and their elasticity is noticeable in terms of the manner in which a 'past' versus a 'future' was formulated by the example of the women showing concern about the eating of a doctored piece of meat. This is quite different from a Christian or Pentecostal sense of modernity as a break with the past and a break with tradition – which has become the object of many studies of African religiosity. Rather, this 'break' is part of an element that sneers at authority and uses an event as a social space that allows for a critiquing of (gender) roles, however temporarily, within the context of that event. Event ethics allow for the interruption and interpellation of the ordinary flow of life – as the often highly glamorous weddings in this part of Botswana certainly do. However, in that interruption and interpellation a tacit sense of elasticity of ethics at different levels of social interaction and their evaluation is created; this article has identified this process as being an elasticity that belongs to a nesting of ethics. The questions thus open for further research are these: do the breaks that the condition of modernity seems to produce between perceptions of the past and the future lead to more spaces of elasticity? Are elasticities of the kind described in this piece emerging and increasing in African contexts as a tangible phenomenon? While these are important research questions for the anthropological study of ethics, the ethnographic strength in exploring ordinary and event ethics is that both the articulated and unarticulated expressions of these elasticities can be opened up for further exploration.

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Abstract

Whereas Michael Lambek situates the exploration of the significance of 'ordinary ethics' in the everyday as the study of 'the ethical in the conjunction or movement between explicit local pronouncements and implicit local practices and circumstances', this article takes the opposite view by drawing attention to special

events that appear to engage – or provide space for – extraordinary ethics. Special events and their extraordinary ethics bring into relief the implicitness of the ordinary in everyday ethics. Weddings in Botswana are moments in the social life of the individual, the family and the community that produce such event ethics. On one level, the event ethics relate to the execution of these highly stylized weddings in terms of concerns about their performance and marital arrangements. On another level, the event ethics can have tacit dimensions that belong to the special nature of the occasion. This article argues not only that 'ordinary ethics' may be privileged through the study of what is tacit in social interactions, but that 'event ethics' also demonstrate the importance of the tacit.

Résumé

Alors que Michael Lambek situe l'exploration de l'importance de « l'éthique de l'ordinaire » au quotidien comme l'étude de « l'éthique dans la conjonction ou le mouvement entre des énonciations locales explicites et des pratiques locales implicites », cet article prend une position contraire en attirant l'attention sur des événements particuliers qui semblent faire intervenir (ou fournir un espace à) une éthique de l'extraordinaire. Ces événements particuliers et leur éthique de l'extraordinaire mettent en relief le caractère implicite de l'ordinaire dans l'éthique quotidienne. Au Botswana, les mariages sont des moments, dans la vie sociale de l'individu, de la famille et de la communauté, qui produisent une telle éthique de l'événement. Sur un plan, l'éthique de l'événement se rapporte à l'exécution de ces mariages hautement stylisés en termes de préoccupations concernant le déroulement et les arrangements conjugaux. Sur un autre plan, l'éthique de l'événement peut avoir des dimensions tacites qui relèvent de la nature particulière de l'occasion. Cet article soutient que l'« éthique de l'ordinaire » peut être privilégiée à travers l'étude de ce qui est tacite dans les interactions sociales, mais aussi que l'« éthique de l'événement » démontre également l'importance du tacite.