

News/Feature

A quiet leader - Botswana

This is the second of a series of articles on Africa.

by Nancy K. Cameron

Democracy must not only work, it must be seen to work.

- Sir Seretse Khama
(first President of Botswana)

Botswana, a peaceful country landlocked in the middle of southern Africa, has only begun to be known in world politics. Dwarfed in population by the surrounding countries of Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa, Botswana had no standing army until repeated incursions from its neighbors made it necessary to invest some of its resources in military defense.

Largely bypassed by foreign investors (South Africa still provides cheap labour without the cost of workmen's benefits), and operating under the handicap of cyclical drought, nevertheless Botswana maintains a good standard of living for its citizens, and enjoys a stable democratic government.

The peaceful, enduring stability of Botswana in the realms of economy and government have quietly brought it to the attention of other African nations, and of the world. When SADCC (now SADC) was created in 1980 to wean surrounding countries from a dependence on South Africa, the Vice President of Botswana became the chairman of the council of ministers. When civil war engulfed Sudan, the Botswanan government was sought as a mediator by the leader of one of the factions. As part of an international peace-keeping move, Botswana has sent aid, a medical team, and a force of 300 troops to Somalia.

Where does Botswana's internal peace and stability come from, on a continent troubled by conflicts both within and among nations? A look at the culture of the Botswana—the people of Botswana—reveals the existence of some institutions, past and present, which serve to guard democratic principles and to modernize the country while still keeping a firm grip on the stability of past traditions.

For centuries, on the dry and dusty plains south of the lush wetlands of the Okavango Delta, each of several tribal kings has settled himself in his house, and his near and distant relatives have settled themselves in concentric circles around him—like ripples around a raindrop in a pond. If the tribe is very large, chiefs or headmen settle yet further out from the centre. As the settlement grows to the limits of the surrounding ecosystem, sons fan out to begin their own concentric villages. It is a peaceful, balanced way of life.

That the institution of royal lineage should be able to continue under the democratic government of Botswana is largely a tribute to the nature of that position: The title of king does not confer unlimited power upon the holder. It is, rather, a position of privilege, which brings with it heavy responsibilities: The king is the caretaker of the tribe. As such, he is entrusted with the welfare of the people and the lands that support them.

Nor does he hold absolute sway over the people and the land. His

word is not absolute—his decisions may be overruled by the elders of the tribe. In fact, should his actions dictate it, the king can be severely disciplined.

The institution which serves as a check on the king, and as a sounding place for all the Botswana—the people of Botswana—has existed for centuries within tradition, as the *kgotla*. The *kgotla* is a system of courts which exist simultaneously at all levels of Botswana society. Each of the several kings in Botswana holds his own king's court. Below the king, the same thing may be done by the chiefs or headmen (existing only in large tribes). Within the many villages which are not the home of a king, the leader of the village calls *kgotlas*. In every family, the same system is put in place by grandfathers and fathers.

Above the *kgotla* of an individual king, there is a customary court of appeal made up of a panel of kings. In addition to hearing civil cases, *kgotlas* can have jurisdiction in minor criminal cases. All *kgotla* decisions (as well as decisions made by the Magistrate's Court and its superior, the High Court, in the Roman-Dutch law system) can be overturned by the Court of Appeal. (Only the President stands above that.) Nevertheless, the *kgotla* exists as a powerful force for justice at all levels of society.

The power of this institution lies in the fact that even a child can speak at a *kgotla*: "All of the words of the *kgotla* are beautiful," is a popular Botswana saying. Regardless of how much public influence they have, any man, woman, or child has the right to speak at a *kgotla*. At a tribunal *kgotla*, any problem threatening the tribe will be addressed, the affairs of the tribe discussed, and legal matters decided. At the other end of the scale, the same technique is employed to address family problems.

Another institution which existed within Botswana was the "mephato"—groups of young men or women of the same age and from the same village, who were placed under the supervision of a male or female instructor, respectively. Formed for the tribal rite of initiation, a group underwent isolation and training over the course of one winter, the participants experiencing the forging of a strong bond amongst themselves, and, on a grander scale, among the members of their tribe.

As tribal initiation ceremonies were phased out of Botswana life, young people of similar age graduating from secondary school were

formed into mephato work groups in their villages. The activities of the mephato were directed along the lines of community service during times of war, by the kings and chiefs.

Today, initiation is practiced by only two tribes in Botswana and, although the tribal institution of mephato is still carried on by a few others, mephato no longer makes a major contribution to the national economy.

Now rather than being sent into isolation as a group at a certain age to learn the secrets of their tribe, Botswana upon leaving high school are sent across the country individually to do community service and learn how people of other tribes and other environmental niches live in Botswana. Although this system of "national service" was re-

next five years, schools were built in all major centres. This still meant that a child had to leave its village home and live in a town with distant relatives or at a boarding school. Moreover, teaching was not a favored vocation, as it entailed leaving one's home village (where the poor salary could be partially offset by assistance from one's relatives).

It was not only teaching that pulled workers away from home and family. Hut tax and other levies imposed during colonialism had forced the Botswana to divert their men from subsistence agriculture in the villages to paid employment in the towns, and served to fuel the gold mines of South Africa with a steady supply of cheap labour. Working in the South African mines became synonymous with attaining manhood.

It was not until education could be seen to have a practical value for a Botswana citizen that the drain of the men to South Africa began to slow. When the possession of an education (now being provided free of charge) began to lead to qualified positions in government and other high level jobs, parents began to send their children to school.

A baby boom in the early 1970's, plus the universal drive for education, combined to present a problem: As the baby boomers reached school age in the late 1970's and early 1980's, more schools were needed, urgently, and more teachers to staff them. At the same time, Botswana was experiencing a prolonged drought.

To build new schools and alleviate a drought simultaneously was more than the national economy could support. The government began a system of drought relief which provided the country with schools: In order to earn wages to offset crop losses, and to get a school, a community would provide the materials and labour to build a school and a home for the teacher. In turn, the government would supply the teacher, and a generator. As incentives to the teacher, there was not only a rent-free home and free electricity produced by the generator, but the opportunity to stay in one's own home village.

Villages which had formerly operated completely independent of each other began to pool their efforts and resources in order to establish joint schools. "0-Level" schools, which are fewer in number (representing the final two years of secondary school), were built in locations central to a larger area.

Today, although there is still an

exodus from Botswana villages, it is less an emigration of young Botswana men to South Africa than a migration of educated parents and their children to the towns of Botswana, with higher prospects for a good job. This same generation, having gained a sense of national unity through national service away from home, is also losing the tribal discrimination which is characteristic of the traditional villages.

In spite of the changes in education and employment, much of Botswana life goes on as before. Life is more than problems and work. In every town and village, there is a drama and dancing and story telling, for villagers and town dwellers alike. Whether of the related Tswana tribes in the south or of the many unrelated tribes in the north, the Botswana know how to enjoy themselves.

One popular activity is dancing. In the dances of Botswana—similar throughout the country—dancers go in turn, surrounded by all the other dancers. A ring of older women do a special kind of hand-clapping, all the while singing with the other Botswana present. Singing and hand-clapping may be accompanied by a very fast clapping noise made by snapping lengths of cattle bone between the fingers—a talent unique to one tribal group.

After the dancing, food is set out. Perhaps it will be "delele," a delicacy of the north—plant leaves cooked in salt and baking soda to a jelly-like texture. Delele does not tempt the people of the south—nor would many care to eat the ground meat of the monitor lizard (now a Protected Species)—but meat is available everywhere from the beef cattle which manage to graze in the desert. A porridge of maize meal is common to all Botswana tables, as are beans, bean leaves, spinach and other "morogo" ("green vegetables"). Another popular dish consists of a paste of groundnuts (which vary from peanuts), mixed with the leaves of the herb "nyevi."

When the dances and the feasting are over, when the people of Botswana go to their homes for the night, the voices of the grandmothers tell stories to the children. As the folk tales unfold, the grandmothers sing the songs in the stories—songs of kings and *kgotla*, of mephato and initiation, of chiefs and elders. Thus the traditions of the Botswana are carried down generation after generation.

It is that continuity of tradition, merged with modernization in education and employment, which carries Botswana into the global limelight as an example of peaceful, democratic co-existence.

Correction: The photos in last week's article "Ujamaa-Tanzania style" were by Jane Oliver not Nancy Cameron as stated. We wish to apologize to Jane Oliver for this oversight.



University of Botswana students studying an insect collection.

stricted to a limited number of participants when it was initiated in 1980, it has expanded since then to include all Botswana as they graduate from 0-Level.

This removal from one's childhood village and tribe, and exposure for one year to people of other regions and other tribes, leads to an awareness of both shared and unique problems and solutions. New languages are learned, and new ways of interacting with people—those who are not related to you—are gained.

Although national service is the first program deliberately designed to take a young person out of his or her locality of birth, this is not the first time in Botswana history that young people have had to leave their homes. In the not-too-distant past, both education and jobs could be found only outside the country.

On the matter of education, forty years ago the few parents in Botswana who valued education and could afford it, had to send their children to South Africa—to the school at Tiger Kloof (Tiger Cliff). Some missionary schools did offer primary school for ages 5-12 in Botswana, but they were located in isolated spots.

It was not until the coming of self-rule in 1965 that Botswana acquired its first government secondary school, to teach young people 13-18 years of age. Over the

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