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**Ethnic Structure, Inequality and Governance of the Public
Sector in Botswana**

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March 2004

Part of UNRISD Project on Ethnic Structure, Inequality and Governance of the Public Sector.
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Ethnic Structure, Inequality and Governance of the Public Sector : Botswana Case Study

Onalenna Doo Selolwane

Introduction

Since 1966 when Botswana became an independent sovereignty, the country has been undergoing a stable process of institution building and reform that has given the state a level of legitimacy and moral authority quite rare in post-colonial Africa. Elsewhere¹ I have explained how this process of nation building and consolidation of modern state power occurred in the context of the challenges of the legacy of colonial administration, deteriorating conditions in the world economy, and the growth of civil society. Focusing my analysis mainly on the management of the economy and the political system, I argued that the nature and character of the state in Botswana reflects the outcome of an interplay of sectional interests and structural factors, and that therefore to understand the level of institutional development it is crucially important to examine the roles of both state and non-state agencies in the state building enterprise. For the current discussion I wish to take the argument further and examine Botswana's experience with managing ethnic inequalities in the process of public sector institution building and the consolidation of accountable governance.

The predominant discourse on the role of ethnicity in state building in Africa most often posits multi-ethnicity as a problem or a hindrance that undermines institutional development and is a major source of state failure. This perception has often been informed by the assumption that in Africa ethnic tensions necessarily manifest themselves in violent confrontations that require the use of state coercion to maintain order. Botswana's failure to exhibit these pathological

¹ Selolwane, O 'State-Craft in Botswana: Renegotiating Development, Legitimacy and Authority'

symptoms has sometimes been explained as due to the predominance of one ethnic group over small and segmented minorities [Bangura, 2002, Horowitz, 1991, Holm, 1987]. But most often it has been seen as a time bomb waiting to explode. This for instance was Parsons' position when he argued that the state would in future have to resort to a military solution to suppress people frustrated by their inability to change the situation of ethnic dominance peacefully (Parsons 1994). These positions will be critically reviewed in light of recent public debates and ethnic contestations on nationality and representation.

For even though official policy in Botswana has been to not publicly acknowledge ethnic differences and inequalities for fear of unleashing some primordial genie that the national leadership believed could scupper programs of developing a single national identity, ethnic under-currents have historically informed public policy and decision making. In fact ethnic under-currents have been an on-going subtext in Botswana's state building and modernization program throughout the post-independence era. These undercurrents have occasionally flared up to the surface at certain points. For instance in the late 1960's and early 1970's a group of southerners expressed concern over the apparent tendency for ethnic Kalanga to have favourable access to government bursaries and public sector jobs after someone had spread a rumour that senior Kalanga officials used a selection strategy that was ethnically biased. Some informants suggest that the tensions around this conflict necessitated a public address by the then president against tribalism².

Another major ethnic flare up happened in the 1980's over issues relating to competing interests following policy revisions allowing public servants to enter into

²Personal interview with Dr Gaositwe Chiepe, Ray Molomo, Bias Mookodi, Gobe Matenge and Hugh Murray-Hudson.

private business for property development³. The conflict centered around two major companies competing over pieces of prime property, and also highlighted tense ethnic relations between Tswana speakers and Kalanga speakers in the public service. Recently, there has been yet another major eruption when non-Tswana ethnic minorities, particularly the Kalanga, questioned the legitimacy of maintaining those sections of the national constitution that accorded unequal value to the constituent tribal groups and ethnic identities. By examining where and when these flare-ups have normally erupted and how the conflicts were mediated, this paper intends to demonstrate that these processes of contestation have served both to highlight citizens' confidence in the national governance institutions as well as to strengthen institutional capacity to mediate the conflicting elite interests.

To that end, the paper begins by mapping the ethnic structure of Botswana and problematizing how it manifests itself in key public governance institutions and arenas in terms of representation. This will be followed by an examination of case studies of issues over which there has been open ethnic contestation, social mobilization and public debate.

Language and Linguistic Differences in Historical Perspective.

Linguistic evidence suggests that at present, the people of Botswana can be generally grouped into nine fairly discernable classes of Bantu languages, ten or more Khoisan language groups and one indo-european language group [Hasselbring (2000); Janson, (2000); Janson & Tsonope, 1991]. This means a total of at least 20

³ The two companies at the center of the storm were Leno Holdings [purportedly formed with a deliberate policy to exclude Kalanga] and Land Holdings [formed by nine shareholders, five of who were ethnic Kalanga]. For more detail see Rirchard Werbner, (2002), 'Cosmopolitan Ethnicity, Entrepreneurship and the Nation: Minority Elites in Botswana' in *Journal of African Studies* vol 28, No. 4 December: pp731-753

language groups. There is a general consensus among linguists and other social scientists that the SeTswana language is the most dominant of all the language groups found in Botswana, with at least 70% of the population identifying it as a mother tongue and another 20% using it as a second language [Andersson and Janson, 2000; Hasselbring 2000; Janson, 2000; Janson & Tsonope, 1991]. Among the minority languages, Kalanga is also readily singled out as a significant language in terms of the proportion of people identifying with it as a mother tongue [approximately 11%] and as a second language. In the Khoesan language group the Naro speakers are estimated to constitute the most significant numbers [Andersson and Janson, 2000].

Table 1 below provides an indication of the various language groups that exist in Botswana today, and the ethnic groups associated with them. Two salient points are worth pointing out at this juncture. The first is that the exact number of languages spoken in Botswana is not absolutely certain due to the fact that for some, it has not been determined whether they are dialects of other languages or languages in their own right. Among the Bantu group of languages, for instance, there has been considerable debate over whether Setswapong, Sekgalagadi and Sebirwa are dialects or languages, and if dialects, of which languages in the mutually intelligible Sotho-Tswana family of languages [Anderson and Janson, 2000; Schapera, 1938; Neumann, 1990]. On the basis on current evidence, linguists now tend towards according these three the status of languages.

Among the Khoisan group of languages debate still continues where to separate languages from dialects. Because there is still quite a number of gaps in the linguistic study of these languages, the scientists still estimate the number

Table 1: Botswana's Linguistic and Ethnic Structure

Linguistic category	Language Family Group	Associated Ethnic Groups	Administrative District
SeTswana	Bantu, Southern	Bakgatla	Kgatleng
		Bakwena	Kweneng
		Bangwaketse	Southern: Ngwaketse
		Bangwato	Central
		Barolong	Southern: Barolonge
		Batlokwa	South East
		Batawana	North West
		Balete	South East
		Bakhurutshe	Central
IKalanga	Bantu, Eastern	Bakalanga	North East/ Central
Se-Birwa	Bantu, Southern	Babirwa	Central
Se-Tswapong	Bantu, Southern	Batswapong	Central
Se-Kgalagadi	Bantu, Southern	Bakgalagadi <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bangologa • Baboalongwe • Bangologa • Bashaga • Baphaleng 	Kgalagadi, Kweneng, North West
Shiyeyi	Bantu, Western?	Bayeyi	North West
Otjiherero	Bantu, Western	Baherero/Banderu	North West
Thimbukushu	Bantu, Western	Hambukushu	North West
Sesubiya	Bantu, Central	Basubiya/ Bekuhane	North West
Nama	Khoesan	Nama	Kgalagadi/Ghanzi
!Xoo	Khoesan, Southern	!Xoo	Kgalagadi & others
Ju/'hoan	Khoesan, Northern	Ju/'hoan	North West
Makaukau	Khoesan, Northern	Makaukau	Ghanzi
Naro	Khoesan, Central	Naro	Ghanzi
/Gwi	Khoesan, Central	/Gwi	Southern/Ghanzi
//Gana	Khoesan Central	//Gana	Central/Ghanzi
Kxoe	Khoesan, Central	Kxoe	North West
Shua	Khoesan, Cenral	Shua	Central
Tshwa	Khoesan, Central	Tshwa	Central/Kwenene
Afrikaans	Indo-European	Afrikaans	Ghanzi

Sources: Anderson and Janson, 2000; Hasselbring 2000; Alternative Report of the Botswana Coalition of NGOs for Margilised Ethnic Groups, submitted to the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, August, 2002.

between ten and seventeen. For instance Shua may be treated as having four dialects made up of /Xaise, Deti, Cara, Ts'xa and Danisi, or these may be treated as languages in their own right. Similarly Tshwa is often recognized to have three dialects of Cua, Kua and Tsua or these might be regarded as languages

The second point is that there is uncertainty over the actual number of people associated with the languages and dialects. Given official antipathy towards sanctioning data collection that portrays ethnic affiliation, there are very few reliable figures on the size of these ethnic groups. Scholars are given to extrapolation and guesstimates with such wide differentials that no confidence can in fact be attached to them. This is further compounded by the fact that historically as well as in contemporary times, Batswana are and have maintained multiple and nesting ethnic identities, and constantly migrate and switch identities/languages. Recent linguistic studies have provided several cases demonstrating that people whose parents are mother tongue speakers of one language, may themselves claim a different mother tongue for themselves [Hasselbring, 2000; Chebanne 2002:].

Batibo [1997, 1998] further suggests that while people may take their ethnic identity from their father's line of descent, very often they speak the language of their mothers, which sometimes leads to divergence between social ethnic identity

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