

## **A Note on the Origins and Development of the Democracy Research Project at the University of Botswana**

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In 1987 I was due for sabbatical leave from my regular teaching duties at Cleveland State University in Ohio, United States of America. I wanted to use my leave to do research in Botswana. My dream was to be a visiting scholar at the University of Botswana (UB) and in return perform some service such as teaching a class or supervising student research. I wrote Professor Thomas Tlou, the Vice Chancellor at UB, to ask if there were any opportunities in this regard. He and I had known each other since we both did field work in Botswana in 1970.

Professor Tlou immediately replied saying that he had an idea. He wanted a visiting scholar to organize a group of Botswana staff to study the development of democracy in Botswana. There had been four national elections and a fifth was coming up in 1989. He thought that there was sufficient history to provide plenty of data for analysis. He envisaged that if we worked together there could be a synergy which would lay the foundation for serious study of Botswana's political development for years to come. We could look at everything from the role of elections and Parliament to civic groups, newspapers, and *Dikgosi* (Chiefs) in the first two decades since Botswana's independence in 1966.

In his reply Professor Tlou also suggested that I visit UB at the end of July and the beginning of August, just as the 1986-1987 school year was commencing. I arrived on 26 July and stayed until August 15. When I met Professor Tlou, he handed me a list of academic staff he thought might be interested. As I recall, the list included Leonard Ngcongco, Part Mgadla, Glorinah Somolekae, Patrick Molutsi, Athaliah Molokomme, Harry Nengwekhulu, and Mogopodi Lekorwe. Tom was emphatic that the group should be multi-disciplinary so that a number of departments would be energized by the project. Thus there were staff from History, Sociology, Political Science and Law. All (except Ngcongco and Nengwekhulu) were just beginning their careers, either as newly minted PhDs or planning to leave for their doctoral studies overseas.

I spent my three weeks meeting with each person individually to explore his or her research interests and experience. We also met collectively as a group to outline the questions and methodology which would serve as the focus of the project. I was delegated to return to the United States and write up grant proposals, send them to the group for review, and then draft and submit the final applications. What pleasantly surprised me about the group was that every person Tlou suggested became a founding and active member of the group. What I did not realize at the time was that members included some of the most talented new members of the UB academic staff. Others would be added during the first year, such as the political scientist Mpho Molomo, but it was the initial group which put in the time and energy in 1987-1988 to produce our first major reports at The Botswana Society's 'Democracy Symposium' held at UB in August 1988. Before I left Botswana in August, we agreed to call our group the Democracy Research Project, which it has remained to this day.

During the 1987-1988 academic year I fleshed out the proposal we had outlined in our discussions in August and returned it to the members for comment, criticism, and suggestions. Then began the hard part, writing and submitting proposals to various funding sources. My recollection is that about 25 applications went out. The Swedish Embassy in Gaborone was the first proposal recipient to give a positive response, US\$8000. The first grant is always the most difficult to obtain. Once we had the Swedes on board, we could tell other potential funding sources that we had already obtained credible support. Over the next

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year we received additional grants from Social Science Research Council in the USA, Friedreich Ebert Stiftung in Germany, Human Rights Fund of the US State Department, University of Botswana, United States Information Agency, and British Council. The total was close to US\$90,000.

We began our research in June of 1988. The first four months were taken up with final drafts of the questionnaires and conducting the mass survey. Development of the survey was time consuming. The questions for the survey were formulated in English. Given the low level of literacy in Botswana at the time we felt the interviews needed to be in Setswana, the country's lingua franca. Thus, we had the questions translated into Setswana by Bernard Segopolo from the Department of African Languages and Literature. Next, members of the project translated the Setswana version back into English in order to check whether the English meaning had been lost in translation. Any differences were ironed out in discussion with Segopolo. The result of all the discussion was that we had common agreement, both in Setswana and English, as to the questions we were asking and why.

Toward the beginning of July we took the questionnaire out for a number of field tests. We learned that some questions just would not work. Most notably, questions that required the respondent to use a ranking of one to ten were not going to be understood in the rural areas. So we had to develop a simpler ranking system. We also used the field testing to train our interviewers. They were third and fourth year students in the social sciences at UB. Our sample consisted of 1297 persons taken from randomly selected census enumeration areas in Kgatleng, Kweneng, Ngwaketse, and Gaborone (Given our transportation budget we could not cover the entire country). Project members went out into the field with our student interviewers for purposes of providing transportation, feedback, but most important was quality assurance. The latter ensured that students could quickly ask any questions they had as a result of an interview, and that they met their goals each day.

During the first semester of the 1987-1988 academic year the members of the Project undertook a number of elite questionnaire studies including ones of parliamentarians, district councilors, civic association leaders, women's association leaders, and civil servants. In contrast to our mass survey questions which were forced choice (i.e. respondents must choose from specific options), our elite questionnaires were open-ended, thus allowing our respondents to elaborate on their thinking.

Toward the end of our elite data collection, The Botswana Society, most especially in the person of Alec Campbell, began discussions with Project members about the possibility of doing a symposium on 'Democracy in Botswana'. That proposal gave focus to the first set of papers to come out of our data collection. Members of the Project each used our collective data to write essays on a whole range of topics related to aspects of the development of democracy in Botswana. In addition, The Botswana Society after discussion with Project members solicited papers from prominent members of the community including politicians, civic association leaders, chiefs, educators, journalists, and civil servants. To provide an international reaction to these presentations, five outside scholars from Africa, Europe and America were brought in to give their perspective on the state of democratic development in Botswana. The conference took place in August of 1988. A year later the papers and the resulting discussions were published as a book *Democracy in Botswana* by The Botswana Society, the University of Botswana, Macmillan Press Botswana, Ohio University Press and edited by myself and Patrick Molutsi. The book received some very favourable reviews and continues to be cited to this day. A number of members of the project subsequently published their own papers from the data they had generated collectively.

Most impressive about the Project was that after the initial year of research and writing, the management of the project was totally in the hands of UB staff, including fund raising, project design, survey construction, and data analysis. Patrick Molutsi was the first coordinator, but over time a number of other members took their turns as the administrator. In the years since, the Project has conducted election surveys, taught courses on political campaigning, run seminars for newly elected councilors and

parliamentarians, provided extensive critical commentary on the development of democracy in all sorts of publications, organized public debates on issues of the day, and conducted internal elections for political parties and trade unions among others. Part of the reason for this extraordinary range of activities is that the Project has had an extraordinary success in obtaining outside funding.

The most notable development in African political and social opinion research over the last two decades is the Afrobarometer surveys conducted every three to four years since 1999. Botswana was one of only twelve countries surveyed in the first round. The reason for its early inclusion was the advanced survey capabilities of Democracy Research Project (led by Mogopodi Lekorwe). It was fully prepared from a decade of experience prior to 1999 to undertake the necessary data collection. Unlike some of the other countries Afrobarometer included, the Democracy Research Project needed no outside assistance. As a consequence, there are now seven rounds of public opinion data tracing the evolution on all kinds of public opinion in Botswana over the last twenty years.

The accumulated data is a rich lode of information which can be easily accessed by researchers, journalists and students at the University of Michigan international data archive. In the last year I have read a number of publications using the Afrobarometer Botswana data extensively, including newspaper articles, a master's dissertation, and a major study from Harvard University on the role of ethnicity in Botswana.

In a very real sense, the Project has realised Professor Thomas Tlou's original vision of the University of Botswana academic staff studying, reporting on, and encouraging the political development of its community. I very much appreciate that he encouraged me to participate in the Project's founding. And, I would like to commend all the members of the Project for making it such a success over the last three decades.