

## How Botswana's Nationhood was Conceived and How we Got Here

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The term Botswana means 'Land of the Tswana-speaking peoples'. At the risk of going against the grain and stepping on sensitive toes, I submit that the name is a misnomer. Not every indigenous Motswana is an ethnic Motswana. There are 10 perceived principal ethnic groups in Botswana and nine of these are not Tswana at all. But since the Tswana-speaking group predominate population-wise, our colonial overlords, the British, decided to call the country 'Bechuanaland' in order to isolate the area from other parts which they occupied or intended to conquer. For instance, they had taken over southern part of the territory of Tswana states (called it British Bechuanaland) and annexed it to the Cape Colony which they already controlled. The Boers had taken over what later became Transvaal and Orange Free State from African groups.

Our history begins far and wide. Until relatively recently, it was taken as an article of faith that we originated from East Africa, and West Africa in the area of the Cameroon in particular. It has lately come to light that in point of fact, we originate from north Africa, and Southern or Upper Egypt being the area from which Batswana and most Bantu speakers emigrated. East Africa and Cameroon were simply some of our many detours en route to Southern Africa. Conventional wisdom has it that we Bakwena adopted the crocodile totem after crossing a great river on the backs of crocodiles providentially lined up head-to-tail. Now that I know much more about our real history, I take that with a pinch of salt. Besides there are too many rivers to cross from North to Southern Africa.

In ancient Egypt, the crocodile, which was known as the *messeh*, was a sacred animal. This was because a leading Egyptian god, Sobek, bore the head of a crocodile. Crocodiles were respected and even kept as pets around the homes of aristocrats in the manner we do cats/dogs today. And every pharaoh was upon his coronation anointed with the fat of the crocodile as besides being a sacred animal, the crocodile was a symbol of virility, longevity and immutability.

Arriving in southern Africa circa 1100 AD, the Sotho-Tswana group found a home in today's Limpopo Province of South Africa. It is from there that they spread and over time carved for themselves the largest territorial footprint which ranged from the Drakensburg Mountains in the east to as far as what is currently the Northern Cape in the west, and from what would become the Boer Republic of the Orange Free State in the south to northern Transvaal (another Boer Republic), extending to what is now east central Botswana. Note that until about the fifteenth century, there were probably no Tswana-speaking peoples in Botswana. The country's only inhabitants at the time were Basarwa. When Basarwa say they are the first people of the Kalahari, they do not exaggerate.

Having arrived in Southern Africa, the Sotho-Tswana established a domain which came to be known as the Phofu confederacy under their great king Phofu and whose hub lay between the Madikwe (Marico) and Crocodile rivers in what used to be the Transvaal. There are several versions as to how Phofu dynamics unfolded. One strand of orally transmitted history posits that the confederacy was later led by Mogale, whose heir was Masilo. Masilo's senior most children were Mohurutshe, a daughter, and Malope, a son. By rights and Tswana succession system, Malope was his rightful heir as he was male though he came from the junior house. When Masilo died, however, Mohurutshe refused to defer to Malope and later his son Kwena as the *dikgosi* (kings). That's how Malope and Mohurutshe parted ways and gave rise first to the clans named after them and eventually to the *merafe* (ethnic groups). Malope had three sons namely Kwena, Ngwato and Ngwaketse.

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After Malope and Mohurutshe fell out, the Bakgatla and Batlharo clans splintered off from the Mohurutshe and the confederacy. Around 1530, the Bakwena, who had hoped to keep the confederacy going, split up when the brothers Mogopa and Kgabo quarrelled. The group led by Kgabo in time underwent further splits, giving rise to Bangwato and Bangwaketse. In due course, Batawana split from Bangwato.

The greater majority of the remnants of the Phofu confederacy set up their own *merafe* right in what is now South Africa: only a smaller proportion crossed the Madikwe River to settle in today's Botswana. The distribution of the confederacy was as follows: Bakwena-baga-Mogopa, Bahurutshe, Bakgatla, and Batlokwa in the eastern parts; Barolong, Batlharo, and Batlhaping in the southern area; Bakwena-baga-Kgabo, Bangwaketse, Bangwato, and Batawana in the western and central Botswana. The most powerful of the ensuing *merafe* was that of the Bakwena. The Bakwena were at the height of their power during the rule of Kgosi Sechele I in the nineteenth century, who is acknowledged as the *de facto* founder of Botswana. In his heyday, Sechele was regarded as the emperor of all Tswana-speaking lands both in today's Botswana and South Africa. In other words, Sechele presided over an area of approximately 715,000 km<sup>2</sup>.

In August 1852, the Transvaal Boers, after subjugating most Tswana in the east went to war with Sechele when he refused to hand over to them Kgosi Mosielele of Bakgatla-baga-Mmanaana. Sechele confronted the Boers at Dimawe Hills and almost singlehandedly repulsed the Boers. All historians agree that had Sechele not defeated the Boers in that epoch-making war, Botswana would today not be an independent country but a region of South Africa. Sechele was so revered that it was he who determined at any one point in time who was reigning in Gammangwato. For a long time, Khama III of Bangwato deferred to Sechele; it was only when Sechele grew old that other *dikgosi* began to disregard him.

The next generation after Sechele saw three *dikgosi* take centre stage in the affairs of Botswana. They were Sebele I of the Bakwena; Khama III of Bangwato, and Bathoen I of Bangwaketse. The three are now famously known as the 'Three *Dikgosi*'. Whereas Sechele defended Botswana against the Boers, the Three *Dikgosi* safeguarded Botswana from the clutches of the British imperialist Cecil John Rhodes thereby forcing the British to sustain the 1885 Protectorate agreement. Rhodes succeeded in owning Northern Rhodesia (today's Zambia) and Southern Rhodesia (today's Zimbabwe) but he was unable to prise away Botswana from its people thanks to the resolve of the Three *Dikgosi*. In 1895, the Three *Dikgosi* travelled to England to lobby Queen Victoria to assist in warding off Rhodes' acquisitive designs on Botswana. The international focus the trip generated on Botswana's plight was such that Rhodes indeed failed to usurp Botswana and was even scandalised in the process when his attempted forceful seizure of the country but primarily the gold-rich Transvaal Boer Republic by his commandoes –the infamous Jameson Raid – in late December 1895 to early January 1896 failed dismally.

Meanwhile, the British had declared a Protectorate over the Tswana territory in 1885 to deter the Germans from pegging a claim on the territory. The British gave the Tswana *merafe* in the territory significant autonomy, with the British role being little more than overseers ostensibly, but in practice they treated the territory just like they did their colonies. They heavily interfered in the affairs of the *merafe* and from time to time even detained and banished our kings. For example, Sebele I was almost deported to either the Seychelles or Robben Island while Sebele II was deposed and confined to Ghanzi in 1931. Tshekedi Khama, the regent of Bangwato, was banished to Francistown in 1933 but was quickly allowed back to his Serowe base after a fortnight. Prince Seretse Khama of Bangwato was kept in London against his will for five years over the furore surrounding his marriage to Ruth Williams.

When the Union of South Africa was established in 1910 through merging British territories of the Cape Colony and Natal with Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State in 1910, there was provision to incorporate Botswana into South Africa. Therefore, South Africa remained tenacious on this stand. It was Tshekedi Khama who emerged as the country's most vociferous champion of our sovereignty in this regard. Generally, the *dikgosi* were consistently against the incorporation of the country into South

Africa knowing that it meant loss of their land and severe forms of racism as was the case with blacks in South Africa.

In 1957, Ghana became the first African country to gain independence from a colonial power. Suddenly, every African country wanted to follow suit and Botswana was no exception. The country's first political party, the Federal Party, was formed by Leetile Raditladi in 1959. The Federal Party, however, was short-lived: after changing its name to the Liberal Party in 1961, it died a natural death. The first mass-based party to emerge was the Bechuanaland Peoples Party (BPP). It was led by Kgalemang Motsete, Motsamai Mpho and Philip Matante. The radical BPP did not garner much popularity in that it advocated the abolition of chiefdoms, which was suicidal in a country like Botswana which even today is so impassionedly traditional in terms of loyalty to *bogosi* (chieftaincy).

In 1962, the Bechuanaland Democratic Party (BDP) came into being. Its founding fathers were Seretse Khama, Quett Masire, Archie Tsoebebe, Moutlakgola Nwako, Tsheko Tsheko, and Goareng Mosinyi. BDP was modern, progressive, and anti-tribal and so it quickly endeared itself to the grassroots. Thus in the first general elections of March 1965, the BDP won 28 out of 31 seats, a resounding victory. Seretse Khama first headed the interim government as prime minister and on 29 September 1966, he was sworn in as Republican President. With independence all citizens of Botswana including those of European and Asian background among others came to be called Batswana. By 2019 the BDP had led Botswana for 53 years and under its government Batswana enjoys free education and health services. Government respects the rule of law and governs democratically rather than dictatorially. We do not have political prisoners in Botswana or Batswana political exiles outside the country, except those who run away from their debts particularly tax obligation. Economically, Botswana is a middle-income country and in comparison to most African countries it has done quite well even though at independence it was one of the two poorest countries on Earth. Our infrastructure is one of the best in the region.

The BDP government has prudently harnessed the country's natural resources and accumulated a respectable amount of foreign exchange reserves which we tap into from time to time to develop the country and meet our obligations to overseas lenders. The BDP government has not been without its shortcomings given the fact that we have had five presidents to date, but it has done its best in the circumstances.

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