

Botswana

Ethnicity in Botswana

Group selection

Botswana is one of the exemplary countries in Africa, with considerable political stability, economical prosperity and development, and low rates of corruption. Yet its success is not, as often stated, due to its "favorable" colonial legacy of ethnic homogeneity. The international perception of Botswana as ethnically and linguistically homogeneous rests upon colonial and postcolonial policies and pronouncements. In an effort to put in place relatively efficient and inexpensive governance structures, as well as to reward chiefs who worked with the British, the colonial government recognized Tswana chiefs as the local authorities over, in some instances, vast multiethnic domains. Non-Tswana peoples became subjects of Tswana chiefs for administrative purposes although they rarely lost their former identities. Tswana assimilation was purposely promoted after independence in 1966 (²⁵⁸, 606; cp. also ²⁵⁹, 47; ²⁶⁰). This led to what Werbner calls "the One-Nation Consensus", an assimilationist policy of the ruling party, for the sake of national unity and prosperity, which left virtually no space in the public sphere for the country's many non-Tswana cultures, unless recast in a Tswana image (²⁶¹, 677; also ²⁶²). Although this assimilationist policy, its emphasis on individual rights, and the success of its process of bureaucratic rationalization have enabled some members of 'minority'/subordinated groups – as it is a contested issue if the Tswana are the (numerical) majority or only the politically dominant ethnic group, "minority/subordinated groups" are further used for the groups usually called "minority groups" – to transcend certain boundaries and attain valuable positions in national society (e.g. ²⁶³; ²⁶⁴; ²⁶⁵, ²⁶⁶), it has not had a singular impact. Few citizens of minority/subordinated background, regardless of achievement or wealth, can entirely escape the stigma of a 'minority' status. Thus, modernity has not eliminated particularistic difference and has, in many instances, contributed to a crystallization of identity on the part of both minority/subordinated peoples and the dominant Tswana whose hegemony has been challenged in myriad ways from the very beginning after the country's independence (Solway 2004, 131; ²⁶⁷, 677; ²⁶⁸, 6; ²⁶⁹; ²⁷⁰: 227-228). Yet, ethnicity was not the only issue of division within Botswana's society, as differences regarding political power and voting patterns existed and exist between regions (²⁷¹), thereby cutting across eth-

²⁵⁸ [Solway, 2002]

²⁵⁹ [Modiba, 2008]

²⁶⁰ [Sebudubudu, 2009]

²⁶¹ [Werbner, 2002a]

²⁶² [Sebudubudu, 2009]

nic and tribal divisions, complicating issues of identity and political alliances further (272, 678).

Ethnicity in my opinion is relevant in Botswana, as political rights and in the end also access to power are enjoyed based on ethnic parameters.

Power relations

The eight Tswana-speaking tribes, Sebedubudu for example calls this alliance even an inter-ethnic coalition, stressing thereby the unanimously successful multi-ethnic character of the government of Botswana, yet forgetting the non-Tswana groups (273), enjoy privileges through their constitutionally granted recognition as the only tribes in Botswana which the other ethnic groups lack (see e.g. 274, 275, 276, 277). As many minority/subordinated peoples argue, constitutional visibility entails several consequences and privileges; the most obvious include group rights to land, direct representation in the upper house of the legislature, and language rights, rights that are denied to people of non-Setswana speaking origin (278, 279, 2; also 280, 281), who are even considered as unequal citizens by some Tswana (282, 315). Sebedubudu (283) is right in stating that the Tswana themselves are not an essential entity, "but rather a marriage of convenience where harmony is more assumed than evident" (284, 309), as it is a fundamental mistake to think of the Batswana of the past as belonging to one or other of a set of mutually exclusive identities. Identities were multiple and layered, just as they are now, when one person can be simultaneously a MoTawana, a Northerner, and a Motswana" (285, 12; also 286, 287, 288).

The political marginalization of non-Tswana through non-recognition of their ethnic identity is in line with the country's constitution. Therefore, the discriminatory sections in the constitution were often targets of parliamentary motions. Starting in the 1980ies and the discovering of the value of entitlement to land and its resources, non-Tswana ethnic groups – but also the sub-groups making up the Tswana – increasingly organized along ethnic lines to represent and reclaim their political agenda on national and international level (289: 227-228; 290, 6-7; 2002; 291, 292, 293, 294, 295, 296, 297). Yet, following the "tradition" in Botswana, the pursuit of minority/subordinated rights issues and identity politics was never undertaken violently, but within the boundaries of (inter-)national law (298, 133-134).

Due to the different campaigns of minority/subordinated groups, over the years the government and the public in general got more sensitive for issues of the non-Tswana groups. This led to some "cosmetic" changes in the constitution and in policies regarding issues of minorities, yet without considerably changing the political scene (299).

It is correct to say that ethnicity in Botswana does not carry a high risk for conflict (although different sources even warn not to neglect the threat of ethnic tensions (e.g. 300)), and party politics

²⁷³ [Sebedubudu, 2009]

²⁷⁴ [Solway and Nyati-Ramahobo, 2004]

²⁷⁵ [Nyati-Ramahobo, 2009]

²⁷⁶ [Solway, 2002]

²⁷⁷ [Werbner, 2002a]

²⁸⁹ [Makgala, 2009]

²⁹⁰ [Nyati-Ramahobo, 2009]

²⁹¹ [Solway, 2004]

²⁹² [Solway, 2002]

²⁹³ [Solway, 2004]

²⁹⁹ [Nyati-Ramahobo, 2009]

³⁰⁰ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2007]

are not mainly organized around ethnic identity, as Solway for example states: "The BDP does not simply or overtly foster Tswana hegemony. The party leaders would quickly deny such allegations and would point to their ethnic 'blind' policies, and the fact that the party includes many minority members, and they would highlight their attempts to distribute infrastructure widely. They might also add that their promotion of bureaucratic rule and the concomitant reduction of chiefly authority (especially with the establishment of Land Boards that removed chiefly control over Land

...

) have lessened Tswana control. However, at the same time, the BDP government, as noted earlier, eliminated all languages other than Setswana and English, maintained the geography of Tswana power, and most painfully for minorities, wrote and maintains a constitution that lists only Tswana groups as 'tribes' and has a House of Chiefs whose full membership is restricted to Tswana"(140).

Therefore, as stated above, ethnicity is considered as relevant in politics in Botswana – and not just in form of the discrimination of the San. Actually, following the literature consulted, there is not a specific discrimination against the San. San people, or Barsawa how they are – negatively connoted – called locally, are as much "victims" of these constitutionally backed politics as all the other non-Tswana peoples. Yet, San people might be more prone to this negligence due to their way of life (while other groups have been able to cope with modern life and participate in politics, San people had more problems with it (e.g. ³⁰¹: 316-317). And, as Werbner argues, they are more successful in attracting attention (higher "visibility") on a global scale (³⁰²; ³⁰³; ³⁰⁴; ³⁰⁵, ³⁰⁶). As various scholars show, also due to global developments, the "One-Nation-Consensus" is in a crisis since the 1990ies at the latest (e.g. ³⁰⁷), or as Solway argues, "the continued capacity of Botswana's seemingly contradictory policies to satisfy or contain minority interests and aspirations appears, to many minority individuals and groups, increasingly limited" (³⁰⁸, 144-145). The different groups within the country increasingly request their inclusion in politics along lines of cultural differences.

Regarding the periodization, it appeared reasonable to change periods after general elections (if they were followed by changes in the access to political power of specific ethnic groups) which take place every 5 years since independence and are generally considered to be "free and fair" (update 2014: collapsed to one single period). For coding the status of the different relevant groups, the coding followed Selowane's (³⁰⁹) unique study on the ethnic structure within Botswana's politics. His delineations of ethnic composition of the cabinet (ibid., 26), and Makgala's update for 2005 (³¹⁰, 236) were considered. Therefore, throughout the country's history, the Tswana are coded as senior partner, aligning themselves with other tribes as junior partners. It is noteworthy that the Kalanga are overrepresented in the bureaucracy and the security forces of the country,

³⁰¹ [Nyamnjoh, 2007a]

³⁰² [Werbner, 2002a]

³⁰³ [Hitchcock, 2002]

³⁰⁴ [Wilmsen, 2002]

³⁰⁵ [Solway, 2002]

³⁰⁹ [Selowane, 2004]

³¹⁰ [Makgala, 2009]

which make them a very strong junior partner, as the politically dominant Tswana have to deal with this socio-political reality (e.g. ³¹¹). Some ethnic groups were never represented in the cabinet, and although challenges by minority/subordinated groups to the Tswana dominance became more pronounced only after the 1980s, they are included into the list from the very beginning of the coding since these ethnic groups were always represented by interest groups. Therefore, they are coded as politically powerless, but not irrelevant.

³¹¹ [Werbner, 2002b]

It is, yet, rather difficult to precisely determine boundaries of ethnic groups and their respective size, as ethnic formation is dynamic and often situational (e.g. ³¹², 2002b; ³¹³; ³¹⁴; ³¹⁵; ³¹⁶; ³¹⁷; ³¹⁸). Some sources (e.g. ³¹⁹; ³²⁰; ³²¹) code language groups, not ethnic groups, thereby including ethnic non-Tswanas in the share of Tswana, as people often state Setswana as their first language, due to various advantages (see e.g. ³²²). Following these statistics Tswana make up around 80% of the population. Others, however, sustain that the Tswana are numerically the minority in the country, with 60 to 90% non-Tswana (e.g. ³²³, 4; ³²⁴, 8). For the codings, the figures stated in the Ethnologue country report (³²⁵) are considered, which offer something like a "compromise" between the figures stated by the Government in its censuses and the RETENG's calculations on ethnic identity found in Meinardus and Heinemann (³²⁶, 8), which might be both politically biased and therefore prone to criticism.

³¹² [Werbner, 2002a]

³¹³ [Nyamnjoh, 2007a]

³¹⁴ [Solway, 2002]

³¹⁵ [Wilmsen, 2002]

³¹⁶ [Makgala, 2009]

2009 - 2013: Ian Khama, an ethnic Tswana who first assumed the president's office in 2008, won the presidential elections in 2009. As 14 out of 17 members of cabinet stayed in office and no other significant changes occurred during the period, the previous period is extended to 2013.

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Political status of ethnic groups in Botswana

From 1966 until 2013

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Tswana	0.57	SENIOR PARTNER
Kalanga	0.08	JUNIOR PARTNER
Kgalagadi	0.02	POWERLESS
San	0.02	POWERLESS
Herero/Mbanderu	0.017	POWERLESS
White	0.015	JUNIOR PARTNER
Mbukushu	0.011	POWERLESS
Yeyi	0.011	POWERLESS
Birwa	0.008	POWERLESS
Tswapong	0.001	POWERLESS

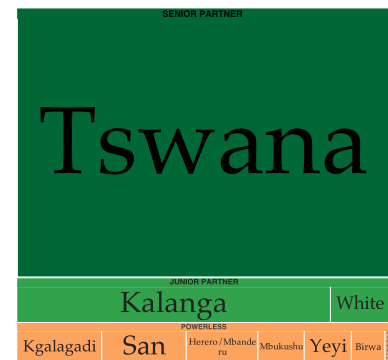


Figure 76: Political status of ethnic groups in Botswana during 1966-2013.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Botswana

From 1966 until 2013

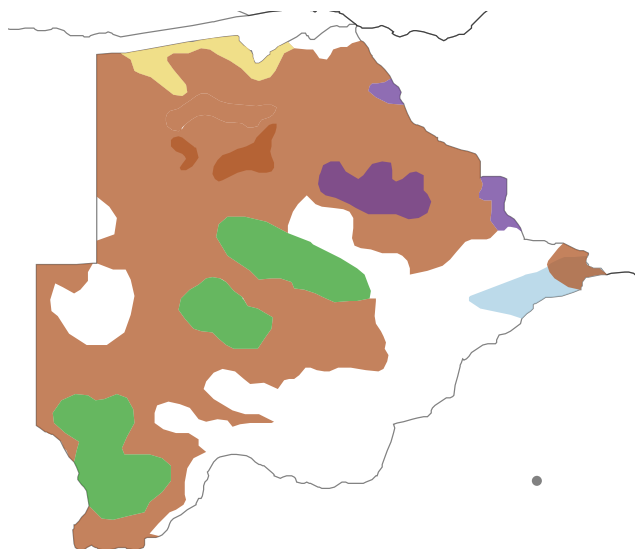


Figure 77: Map of ethnic groups in Botswana during 1966-2013.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
Tswana	327 383	Regionally based
Kgalagadi	62 519	Regionally based
Yeyi	26 447	Regionally based
Kalanga	19 725	Regionally based
Tswapong	11 916	Regionally based
Mbukushu	11 899	Regionally based
Birwa	4626	Regionally based
Herero/Mbanderu		Dispersed
White		Dispersed
San		Dispersed

Table 27: List of ethnic groups in Botswana during 1966-2013.