

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.

Few citizens of minority/subordinated background, regardless of achievement or wealth, can entirely escape the stigma of a ‘minority’ status (553; 554; 555; 556; 557). Tswana assimilation was purposely promoted after independence in 1966. 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. 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, it has not had a singular impact.

Thus, modernity has not eliminated particularistic difference and has, in many instances, contributed to a cristallization 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. Yet, ethnicity was not the only issue of division within Botswana’s society (558; 559; 560), as differences regarding political power and voting patterns existed and exist between regions, thereby cutting across ethnic and

⁵⁵³ [Modiba, 2008]

⁵⁵⁴ [Sebudubudu, 2009]

⁵⁵⁵ [Selowane, 2004]

⁵⁵⁶ [Solway, 2002]

⁵⁵⁷ [Werbner, 2002b]

⁵⁵⁸ [Makgala, 2009]

⁵⁵⁹ [Nyati-Ramahobo, 2009]

⁵⁶⁰ [Werbner, 2002a]

tribal divisions, complicating issues of identity and political alliances further.

Hence, ethnicity 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 (⁵⁶¹), enjoy privileges through their constitutionally granted recognition as the only tribes in Botswana which the other ethnic groups lack (see e.g. ⁵⁶²; ⁵⁶³; ⁵⁶⁴; ⁵⁶⁵). 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 (⁵⁶⁶; ⁵⁶⁷, 2; also ⁵⁶⁸; ⁵⁶⁹), who are even considered as unequal citizens by some Tswana (⁵⁷⁰, 315). Sebedubudu (⁵⁷¹) 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”(⁵⁷², 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” (⁵⁷³, 12).

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 (⁵⁷⁴: 227-228; ⁵⁷⁵, 6-7; 2002; ⁵⁷⁶; ⁵⁷⁷, 578; ⁵⁷⁹; ⁵⁸⁰; ⁵⁸¹). 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 (⁵⁸², 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 (⁵⁸³).

Yet, 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. ⁵⁸⁴)), and party politics are not mainly orga-

⁵⁶¹ [Sebedubudu, 2009]

⁵⁶² [Solway & Nyati-Ramahobo, 2004]

⁵⁶³ [Nyati-Ramahobo, 2009]

⁵⁶⁴ [Solway, 2002]

⁵⁶⁵ [Werbner, 2002a]

⁵⁶⁶ [Solway, 2004]

⁵⁶⁷ [Nyati-Ramahobo, 2009]

⁵⁶⁸ [Freedom House, 2009]

⁵⁶⁹ [U.S. State Department, 2010]

⁵⁷⁰ [Nyamnjoh, 2007a]

⁵⁷¹ [Sebedubudu, 2009]

⁵⁷² [Nyamnjoh, 2007a]

⁵⁷³ [Bennett, 2002]

⁵⁷⁴ [Makgala, 2009]

⁵⁷⁵ [Nyati-Ramahobo, 2009]

⁵⁷⁶ [Solway, 2004]

⁵⁷⁷ [Solway, 2002]

⁵⁷⁸ [Solway, 2009]

⁵⁷⁹ [Werbner, 2002a]

⁵⁸⁰ [Hitchcock, 2002]

⁵⁸¹ [Nyamnjoh, 2007a]

⁵⁸² [Solway, 2004]

⁵⁸³ [Nyati-Ramahobo, 2009]

⁵⁸⁴ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2007]

nized 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. ⁵⁸⁵: 316-317). And, as Werbner argues, they are more successful in attracting attention (higher “visibility”) on a global scale (⁵⁸⁶; ⁵⁸⁷; ⁵⁸⁸; ⁵⁸⁹, ⁵⁹⁰). 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. ⁵⁹¹), 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” (⁵⁹², 144-145). The different groups within the country increasingly request their inclusion in politics along lines of cultural differences.

For coding the status of the different relevant groups, we followed Selowane’s (⁵⁹³) 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 (⁵⁹⁴, 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, which make them a very strong junior partner, as the politically dominant Tswana have to deal with this socio-political reality (e.g. ⁵⁹⁵). 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.

⁵⁸⁵ [Nyamnjoh, 2007a]

⁵⁸⁶ [Werbner, 2002a]

⁵⁸⁷ [Hitchcock, 2002]

⁵⁸⁸ [Wilmsen, 2002]

⁵⁸⁹ [Solway, 2002]

⁵⁹⁰ [Solway, 2009]

⁵⁹¹ [Werbner, 2002a]

⁵⁹² [Solway, 2004]

⁵⁹³ [Selowane, 2004]

⁵⁹⁴ [Makgala, 2009]

⁵⁹⁵ [Werbner, 2002b]

Therefore, they are coded as politically powerless, but not irrelevant.

Yet, it is rather difficult to precisely determine boundaries of ethnic groups and their respective size, as ethnic formation is dynamic and often situational. Some sources (e.g. ⁵⁹⁶; ⁵⁹⁷; ⁵⁹⁸) 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. ⁵⁹⁹). 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. ⁶⁰⁰, 4; ⁶⁰¹, 8).

For the codings, the figures stated in the Ethnologue country report (⁶⁰²) 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 (⁶⁰³, 8), which might be both politically biased and therefore prone to criticism.

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. Ian Khama retained his position as president and the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) won again the majority (37) of parliamentary seats in the 2014 elections. A newly formed opposition alliance, the Umbrella for Democratic Change (UDC), took 17 seats (⁶⁰⁴). On a less political level, tendencies towards an understanding of national unity based on ethnic and linguistic diversity and away from one based on Tswana culture and language seem to become apparent, as e.g. a study on the national education vision 2016 shows (⁶⁰⁵, 73). Effectively, however, no changes concerning the rights of minority/subordinated groups have been made, which is why ethnicity is still considered a salient feature in Botswana’s politics. The majority of ministers (10 out of 16) stayed in office and no evidence has been found that any of the ethnic groups previously coded as powerless are represented in government. While an online newspaper (⁶⁰⁶) as well as Wikipedia mention a **Birwa** ethnic origin of minister Shaw Kgathi (2009-2014 Education Minister, 2014-today Security Minister), no evidence from official and reliable sources have been found to back this claim. While it is evident that Kgathi originates from the Bo-birwa sub-district, his ethnic background could not be confirmed. Furthermore, Kgathi has actively opposed efforts to introduce indigenous languages, including the Birwa language, in schools (⁶⁰⁷), indicating that his participation in government had no effect on minority rights of the Birwa. **Whites** and Kalanga are continuously coded as Junior Partners. Whites are represented in the cabinet by Minister Christian DeGraaf.

In the 2019 elections, the BDP increased its vote share and gained one more seat in the National Assembly, even though the former president Ian Khama left the party and switched support to the newly-founded Botswana Patriotic Front (BPF) (⁶⁰⁸, ⁶⁰⁹). A new cabinet was formed in late 2019 (⁶¹⁰), but no evidence of changes in

⁵⁹⁶ [Scarritt & Mozaffar, 1999]

⁵⁹⁷ [Cheeseman, 2007]

⁵⁹⁸ [U.S. State Department, 2010]

⁵⁹⁹ [Werbner, 2002b]

⁶⁰⁰ [Nyati-Ramahobo, 2009]

⁶⁰¹ [Meinardus & Heinemann, 2006]

⁶⁰² [Lewis, 2009]

⁶⁰³ [Meinardus & Heinemann, 2006]

⁶⁰⁴ [Lansford, 2017]

⁶⁰⁵ [Dryden, 2017]

⁶⁰⁶ [The Monitor, 2016]

⁶⁰⁷ [Modise, 2013]

⁶⁰⁸ [Fabricius, 2019]

⁶⁰⁹ [The New York Times, 2019]

⁶¹⁰ [Botswana Daily News, 2019]

terms of ethnic composition was found. Even though DeGraaf, the White minister identified by the previous coding, is no longer part of the cabinet, Whites are still coded as junior partners based on the continuity with previous codings. No evidence of any relevant changes in access to central executive power was found.

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Political status of ethnic groups in B

From 1966 until 2021

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



Figure 102: Political status of ethnic groups in Botswana during 1966-2021.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Botswana

From 1966 until 1966

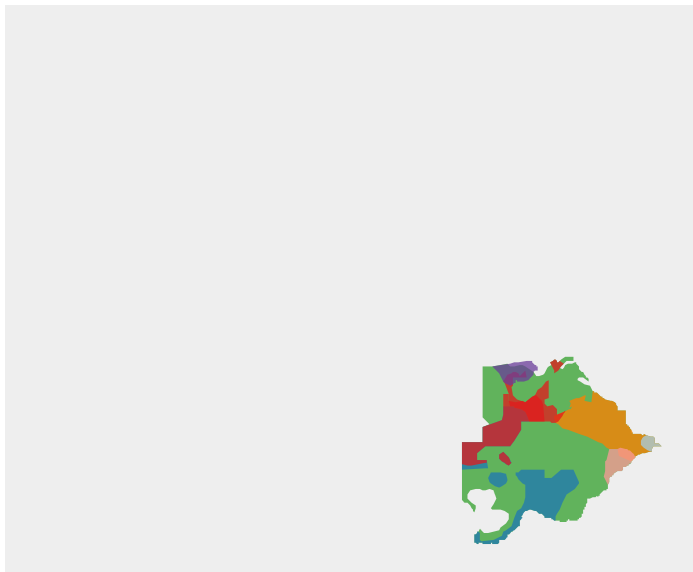


Figure 103: Map of ethnic groups in Botswana during 1966-1966.

Group name		Area in km ²	Type
■	Tswana	541 046	Regionally based
■	Kgalagadi	110 797	Regionally based
■	Kalanga	85 203	Regionally based
■	Herero/Mbanderu	58 743	Regionally based
■	Yeyi	33 541	Regionally based
■	Mbukushu	18 573	Regionally based
■	Tswapong	15 469	Regionally based
■	Birwa	4612	Regionally based
■	White	0	Dispersed
■	San	0	Dispersed

Table 38: List of ethnic groups in Botswana during 1966-1966.

From 1967 until 2021

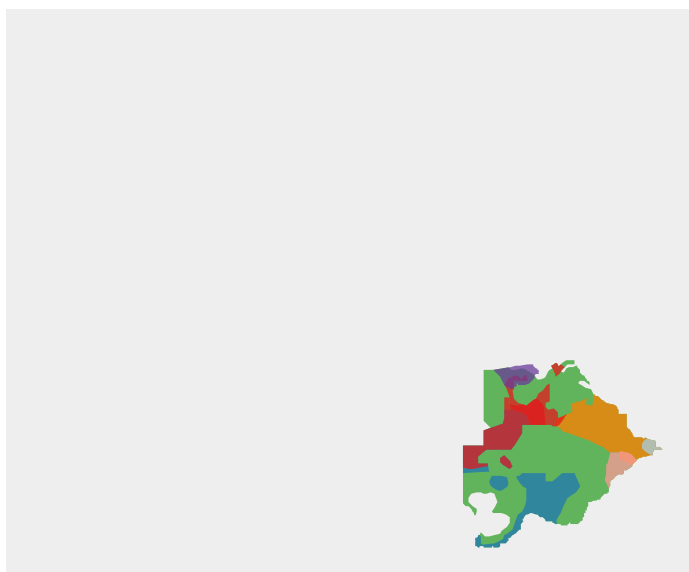


Figure 104: Map of ethnic groups in Botswana during 1967-2021.

Group name	Area in km ²	Type
Tswana	541 046	Regionally based
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White	0	Dispersed
San	0	Dispersed

Table 39: List of ethnic groups in Botswana during 1967-2021.