THE RISE OF THE NORTH-WESTERN TSWANA KINGDOMS: ON THE DYNAMICS OF INTERACTION BETWEEN INTERNAL RELATIONS AND EXTERNAL FORCES

Ørnulf Gulbrandsen

The history of southern Africa may be written as the history of societies in flux and change, of societies in confrontation and of notoriously unstable polities. It may be written as the history of peoples who, from their early beginnings in East Africa, have been on the move: to a locality of material security, to a society of politico-military safety and to a state of spiritual satisfaction—only to end up in the arms of Western imperialist forces and racist regimes.

These are historical images which feature prominently in professional discourse among historians.1 In anthropological discourse, by contrast, southern African polities and major cultural institutions have typically been portrayed as self-perpetuating and relatively impervious to changing historical contexts. Often southern African societies are portrayed as isolated entities, and the relationship with the dynamics of larger regions is underplayed.2

The present article assumes that neither of these images, of 'flux' and 'stasis', of southern African societies should be abandoned. Instead, they should be treated as complementary, enhancing our ability to understand the cultural and social significance of major historical events in particular historical settings and, above all, the long-term transformations of southern African polities.

To advance this understanding, I shall focus upon the formation of the north-western Tswana kingdoms (merafe, sing. morafe) during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These merafe were peculiar in several respects. Most notably, although located on the margins of the Kalahari, the north-western Tswana merafe grew tremendously in terms of both political strength and population from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, epitomised by the formation of exceptionally large, compact villages of thousands of people. By contrast, the majority of Tswana merafe, which at one time numbered around a hundred, remained small or declined during the early nineteenth century. (Schapera, 1965: 1; cf. Van Warmelo, 1935: 103; Schapera, 1952; Legassick, 1969; Lye, 1969; Thompson, 1969, J. Comaroff, 1985: 36–7; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 127.)

In spite of the fact that this development took place in an extremely turbulent politico-military environment, considerable political stability prevailed in these merafe, as is indicated by the persistence of ruling dynasties for generations. In contrast to the conquest states of the Ndebele and the Zulu, the rise of these merafe, located at the extreme outer reaches of the so-called Bantu expansion, illuminates, at least in relative terms, how quite small groups may constitute a core around which larger societies developed 'under the relatively undramatic conditions of local frontiers' (Kopytoff, 1977: 7).
The notion of 'Bantu expansion' invokes the inherently fissionary character of the so-called southern Bantu polities, in which disputes among members of the royal family often cause one of them to secede, and... start his own tribe' (Schapera, 1956: 27). In the case of the Tswana, for instance, around A.D.1500 the large Hurutshe–Kwena confederacy began to split up, 'so that within three hundred years its members were spread from the centre of the Hardveld near the Brits to the borders of the Kalahari, and as far south as the Caledon River' (Logassiek, 1969: 100; cf. 111 ff.). While southern Tswana kingdoms presented themselves as large, powerful city states at the beginning of the nineteenth century, only a few decades later some of them were divided into small communities with weak political leadership (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 127). Similarly, while the Hurutshe polity had regained strength and scale by the eighteenth century (Campbell, 1822: I, 277), it was weakened by confrontation with the western Tswana and further disrupted by the extensive warfare in southern Africa (dhagaane) during the first decades of the nineteenth century (Thompson, 1969).

The features of decline and segmentation have attracted scholarly attention to such an extent that southern Bantu polities are often depicted as essentially fissionary in nature. In consequence, their equally inherent fissionary tendencies are less well understood. The rise of the north-western Tswana merafe exemplifies the latter tendency, particularly in view of their very long-term growth and relatively high degree of socio-political stability (associated with the largely peaceful integration of vast groups of immigrants and very limited political segmentation), and above all their extraordinarily high concentration of large villages, which have extremely few counterparts in sub-Saharan Africa (Gulbranssen, 1991b).

Gluckman has significantly advanced our understanding of the culturally inherent fissionary processes in southern Bantu polities, pointing out that 'the effect of rebellion (as opposed to revolution) was at least temporarily to reunite the nation about the kingship' (1970: 46–7; cf. 1954). In the particular case of the Tswana, Schapera has described, in great detail, socio-political integration of Tswana polities in terms of their institutional arrangements and normative rules. The present study draws, in particular, upon his accounts of the principles according to which foreigners were incorporated in a Tswana merafe (1952: 21 ff.) and the normative order of the politico-administrative hierarchy (1938a, cf. 1940).

But since the mechanisms identified by Gluckman and the normative structures described by Schapera are found in both small and large, both weak and powerful polities, they cannot alone account for the considerable degree of variation in scale and stability among these polities. Most important, in relation to the present issue, they do not explain the socio-political transformations of these systems which evolved through their long-term interaction with the wider world, and by which their power structures were amalgamated and expanded.

Analysing the southern Tswana, Comaroff and Comaroff emphasise the force of integration represented by the strength of the ruler to counteract what he recognises as the inherent centrifugal tendencies among the Tshidi, springing from the 'ecology of the household' (1991: 146 ff.: cf.
J. L. Comaroff, 1982: 157–8). This approach meets the need for a dynamic, diachronic approach, and contextualisation is taken care of (cf. J. L. Comaroff, 1984), enabling the historicity of growth and decline to be established. Yet, as we shall see, the notion of centrifugal, rather than secessionary, forces is not very illuminating in the case of the north-western Tswana. Moreover, the emphasis upon the personal capacity of the ruler to exercise control over the population ('decentralisation, weak incumbency and the egalitarian individuation of the universe went together'; J. L. Comaroff, 1982: 158, italics added) draws attention away from the stabilising force vested in the royal office (bogosi), anchored in the royal ancestry.

This article acknowledges the importance both of the Tswana 'king' (kgosi, pl. dikgosi) as an operator and of the aggregation of material and symbolic resources in the bogosi. Its major aim is to demonstrate how the rulers activated and transformed socio-political institutions by virtue of their successful interaction with the larger world (through warfare, raids, trading and the incorporation of immigrants) in ways which amalgamated and expanded these polities, ensuring their survival.

This perspective enables us to see the north-western Tswana merafe as culminations of regional forces and as peculiar formations, rather than to conflate them into a general stock of Tswana societies described in terms of pan-Tswana institutions. In accounting for the Tswana merafe 'in their making' within the larger regional and even global context, I hope to escape the prevailing reification of 'Bantu societies' as localised entities and 'to move beyond naturalised conceptions of spatialised cultures and to explore instead the differences within common, shared and connected spaces' (Gupta and Ferguson, 1992: 16). Accordingly, I aim to demonstrate how the territoriality of these formations was determined not only by the ecological and political-economic aspects of their localisation on the fringe of the Kalahari, but also by the regional and global systems into which they were progressively integrated. In this sense the article complements Wilmsen's study of the 'political economy of the Kalahari', exploring the diversity of San peoples, who are geographically scattered yet integrated in systems extending far beyond the limits of the Kalahari (Wilmsen, 1989; cf. Gulbrandsen, 1991a).

AN ETHNO-HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Early north-western Tswana history involves some notable political secessions. Thus the first group known as Tswana moving towards the Kalahari, the Kwena, originated from the Hurutshe–Kwena of the present Transvaal. It split, probably around A.D.1500, into two major sections, allegedly led by Mohurutse and Mokwena (Breutz, 1953), who fought for precedence in the first-fruit ceremony (Ngcongo, 1979: 26), one of the most important Tswana ritualisations of seniority. The Kwena, in turn, gave birth to the Ngwato and the Ngwaketse, who, in the late seventeenth century, moved to the north and the south respectively. About a hundred years later a major group, the Tswana, departed from the Ngwato and settled in Ngamiland. The Ngwaketse gave birth to no new groups; nor, with the exception of the Tswana, did the Ngwato or the Kwena.
The Ngwaketse, the Kwenka and the Ngwato are situated along the fringes of the Kalahari, the Ngwaketse being the southernmost among them. Their country is a vast plateau about 1,000 m above sea level, constituting a highly marginal natural environment, with an average rainfall of less than 450 mm per annum.

When the Ngwaketse broke away from the Kwenka, moving south into their present territory, they probably numbered only a few hundred. During their emancipation from the Kwenka they were repeatedly attacked by the parental morafe with the aim of bringing them back into the fold. At this time the Ngwaketse were no more than a tiny group, moving around under constant threat of defeat and capture. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, however, they represented a powerful military force under their widely feared kgosi, Makaba II (1790–1824).

During the second half of the nineteenth century the Ngwaketse polity was still under the rule of the senior line of the same dynasty. By this time the
Society had grown tremendously: not only had the capital been extended, but a number of provincial villages had also been established. Whereas the Bangwaketse found themselves entirely surrounded by enemies in the early nineteenth century, by the later period a pattern of political alliances had evolved, as expressed, for instance, by diplomatic intermarriage among the north-western Tswana royal families.

While kgosi Makaba II was remembered as an extremely forceful warrior, his great-grandson, kgosi Bathoen I (1889–1910), was photographed in London in 1896, wearing a European suit, with the dikgos of the Bakwena and the Bamangwato, during their diplomatic mission to Queen Victoria, seeking protection for their countries from South African colonisation (Sillery, 1965). The image of his great-grandfather was that of a charismatic figure leading his regiments to the battlefield; kgosi Bathoen, on the other hand, was seen as presiding over the kgotla—the royal court—the proceedings of which he always opened and closed with a prayer to the Christian high God (Gulbrandsen, 1993). Like the other north-western Tswana dikgos, Bathoen controlled a government (puso) with considerable juridico-administrative capacity, and an indigenously recognised legislative competence: that is, the Tswana polity was highly suited from the British point of view to the policy of indirect rule (Roberts, 1985: 81).

Like many other Tswana, the Bangwaketse lived much of their lives in large villages. The capital, Kanye, numbered more than 10,000 people by the early nineteenth century. All villages were divided into administrative wards, each of which was under the guardianship of a headman appointed by the kgosi (cf. Schapera, 1935; A. Kuper, 1975: 75 ff.). The wards were subdivided into units, generally composed of co-residential, agnatically defined descent groups. These groups were recruited on the basis of patri-virilocal residence, a principle which could be overturned only by kgosi decision. The wards were structured from above in the sense that the kgosi might divide descent groups and move one section to another ward or use it as a building block in the creation of a new ward. Moreover, all immigrants who were granted citizenship were assigned to one of the existing wards as a subordinate group. In instances where an incorporated group was big, it was either divided and scattered between different wards or, occasionally, allowed to form its own ward, with its leader receiving kgosi recognition as a headman (Schapera, 1935: 19 ff.).

At each level, residential hamlets surrounded the council place (kgotla), located at the heart of the ward. At the apex of this politico-administrative hierarchy resided the royal family, located in the royal kgotla at the centre of the capital village. Traditionally the kgotla was a male domain (although open to litigation by women) and the recognised place for civic (reteng), public life. Besides serving as the appropriate place for national ceremonies and gatherings, the royal kgotla constituted the forum for the kgosi’s conduct of political meetings and the administration of justice.

Women were customarily associated with the residential hamlet (lolwapa) and the arable fields (masimo), often located separately at a considerable distance from the village. Cattle were customarily kept separate from both the village and the arable fields, near a permanent water source, where they were traditionally tended by young men and boys.
THE PROBLEMATIC OF CENTRALISATION

In order to examine the development of the Ngwaketse polity in terms of its interaction with the changing historical context of the larger world, I shall establish a theoretical framework for analysing this particular form of political centralisation. While there is limited direct evidence for the earliest period with which I am here concerned, this article assumes that the essential cultural principles underpinning centralisation and political stability were similar, in their basic features, during this early period to those described by Schapera on the basis of his historical investigations and contemporary observation in the mid-colonial period. This assumption about cultural institutions of the *longue durée* has often been made (Schapera, 1956; Wilson, 1969a, 1973; A. Kuper, 1982; J. Comaroff, 1985: 42 ff.; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 126 ff.), and can, in the case of the Tswana, be justified by the fact that not only do they share basic cultural premises, but most of their customs and law, indigenously known as *mekgwa le melao*, appeared very similar more than two centuries after they had departed (Schapera, 1938a; cf. Schapera, 1938b). Certainly, since these *merafo* have responded to the natural as well as the politico-military and economic environment in quite similar ways, the parallel development of their cultural principles is to be expected.

Moreover, it seems possible to argue that in their essential features these cultural principles underpin social formations throughout the so-called ‘Southern Bantu’ societies (Schapera, 1956). Criticising the conventional dichotomisation of Nguni and Sotho peoples of southern Africa (e.g. Samson, 1974b), Kuper and van Leynseele (1978) point to ethnographic features which clearly suggest that the Nguni and the Sotho, respectively, cannot be distinguished by such criteria as scattered v. concentrated settlements, lineage exogamy v. cousin marriage, strong v. weak/absent lineages, stress v. less stress on cattle, polities based on military v. conciliary centralisation. Instead, they submit, it seems possible to trace an underlying ‘Southern Bantu social structure’ across this opposition, which essentially involves an association between a ruler, a people and a territory. Everywhere this association is expressed in the symbolism of the first-fruit ceremonies and the rain-making rites. The stress upon agnatic seniority is reflected in the kinship system, which is Iroquois in its structure throughout the southern Bantu societies. Moreover, whether ‘Nguni’ or ‘Sotho’, ‘the ruling class marries endogamously, and the commoners attempt to attach themselves to notables (patrons) by hypergamous marriage, which leads to a pattern of MBD marriage’ (1978: 341). Marriage is based everywhere upon the payment of bridewealth, generally in the form of cattle, and polygynous arrangements are widely practised (A. Kuper, 1982; cf. Krieger and Comaroff, 1981; Preston-Whyte, 1974).

Since it seems likely that Tswana cultural institutions are rooted in this broader cultural tradition, I assume they formed a persistent normative repertoire during the period with which I am at present concerned. These cultural institutions include: (1) marriage ratified by cattle bridewealth; (2) polygynous marriage; (3) preference for MBD marriage—as the proverb goes: *Niska wa matho ke mogatse* ‘A person’s cross-cousin is his [rightful]
spouse'; (4) acceptance of FBD marriage, also proverbially justified: Nkwana rrangwane, nnyale, kgomo di boele sakeng ‘Child of my father’s younger brother, marry me, so the [bogadi] cattle may return to our kraal'; (5) strong emphasis on agnation and ranked seniority, dictating senior male succession to office and reception of the major part of the parental herd.

Furthermore, the Tswana dikgosi, like other southern Bantu rulers, were the commanders of the state’s military force (age regiments), legitimately privileged in their access to cattle and other politically significant resources. The dikgosi was entitled to all the cattle received through raids and warfare, all the unclaimed stray cattle (maitimela) and those paid as fines at the royal court. He received an ox from the father of every child attending initiation ceremonies, and another as a ‘death token’ (itatelo) whenever an important man died. The dikgosi was the ultimate owner of the land and legitimately monopolised all trade in fur, ivory, ostrich feathers and metal objects. In addition, the dikgosi was entitled to hunting spoils (sehuba) and was granted baskets of sorghum after harvest from each household (dikgafela). The royal granary was also supplied by the harvest from large fields to which subjects supplied tributary labour and, after the introduction of the plough, draught animals too. In addition, political power by means of cattle was also exercised through a system of cattle clientship (mahisa, kgarello). Basically, mahisa relations were established on all levels between a cattle owner and persons in need of cattle for milk, meat and calves. The owner could terminate the relationship at any time, a rule which, in the case of the dikgosi and other large cattle owners, involved an important political check upon their mahisa clients.8

Before we examine how these normative repertoires might, in principle, facilitate the rulers’ efforts to amalgamate the polity, it should first be noted that principles of unilineal descent and patri-viriloclal residence carry the possibility of large, co-residential descent groups and, over time, a segmentary system. In a cross-cultural perspective, political centralisation is often structurally constrained by such powerful segments, with their tendency towards secession. In the present case, without jeopardising these basic cultural principles, the royal privilege of creating wards and appointing headmen in charge of them represented one important factor limiting the significance of such unilineal descent groups. Senior members of the royal families, by dikgosi decision, were delegated headmanship of subordinate courts (kgotla), typically by being given the right to rule segments of commoner descent groups and immigrant groups. Such a privilege was sometimes also granted to politically significant favoured commoners. The solution to agnatic rivalries was to remove one of the quarrelling parties to another kgotla, exploiting an inherently lower-order fissionary force to central political advantage while preventing the development of large, co-residential descent groups. Hence the system relied essentially upon a principle of delegation rather than decentralisation: the lower-order units had decision-making capacity by virtue of the ultimate support of the dikgosi.

Yet these features of centralisation were found in large as well as small polities, and cannot therefore explain the variations in time and space among these units. In order to account for the formations of Tswana polities I shall also consider the rulers’ privileged control over interaction with the larger world. The significance of external forces has been indicated by, for
instance, Legassick, who points out how the growth of some Tswana kingdoms during the eighteenth century was connected with the rise of long-distance trade (e.g. Legassick, 1969: 106 ff.). The present article confirms the significance of this factor and identifies several others. Above all, I aim to demonstrate the dialectical character of a series of transformations: the translation of external factors into polity-building ventures not only increased the rulers’ internal control but also the historical context moved, to exploit ever-changing forms of external forces from a position of strength. I shall argue that cattle constituted the principal material mechanism underpinning the political economy of centralisation and its articulation with the encompassing natural, economic and politico-military environment. I thereby challenge the conventional notion that cattle were ‘more highly valued’ in the eastern region of southern Africa than in the west (Samson, 1974a: 150). The political economy of the royal herd among the Tswana is, moreover, of some theoretical interest: I shall demonstrate that cattle might be used as a key centralising resource in the hands of a ruler to limit fissionary forces, not simply through ‘redistribution’, but through the transformation of the polity, notably by establishing a kind of pastoral feudalism and by controlling the ward system. Above all, in the context of the centralised polities based upon a pastoral economy in East Africa, the number of exceptionally large villages is extremely significant.

Referring to the duality of ‘flux’ and ‘stasis’ already indicated, the present efforts to combine a diachronic and a synchronic approach involve an attempt to synthesise two distinct bodies of knowledge, that of normative rules and event history, to both of which Schapera’s momentous contributions on the study of the Tswana are the most important (cf. References). Yet such an approach, limited to the rulers’ pragmatic management of normative rules and material resources in changing historical contexts, is insufficient to account for the considerable degree of political stability, as indicated by the persistence of the ruling dynasties of north-western Tswana merafe.

My approach in analysing the nature of this persistence follows that of Bloch (1986), who argues that power relations are reproduced when cultural categories are underpinned by ritual practices and taken as an order of nature. Hence my aim is to bridge the images of ‘flux’ and ‘stasis’, historical event and socio-cultural continuity, by demonstrating how the successful Tswana dikgosi translated ‘flux’ into ‘stasis’. Momentum was added, through popular experience of a forceful ruler, to the substantive trope of supreme force, morality and wisdom vested in a royal ancestry.

Such features invoke Bourdieu’s notion of ‘symbolic capital’, involving ‘conversion of material capital into symbolic capital [which is] itself convertible into material capital’ (1977: 180). The key issue in this notion is ‘conversion’. Accordingly I shall argue that the cultural ideas of a hierarchical system of ancestry constituted a peculiar mechanism by which the successful exercise of strength and wisdom, materialised in terms of societal harmony and safety, was converted, by virtue of popular experience, to a fund of supreme authority; that is, to a kind of persistent symbolic capital which ensured the ruling dynasty’s rightful control over the bogosi, despite the fact that it occasionally produced unsuccessful incumbents. In any case the incumbent epitomised the wealth of the merafe, as expressed by the notion
of kgosi itself, connoting both power and wealth (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff, 1990: 205). In other words, the kgosi may be seen as a vehicle by which the material and symbolic force of the government (puso) was merged, most apparently in the idiom of cattle.

The overall argument in this article, then, is that the transformations of the Tswana polities involved two types of dialectics which are interconnected. There was a socio-political dialectic at work in the interaction between internal relations and external forces. But, in addition, the operation of the ruler as agent of articulation between internal relations and external forces involved a transformation of the socio-political construction of the polity, at the very same time as the cultural ideas which constituted the source of its legitimacy were reproduced. Thus my aim is to demonstrate that such persistence and continuity are retained not in spite of an ever changing historical context but, on the contrary, because of it. I shall pursue this issue from the principal perspective that 'what predominates in change is persistence of the old substance; disregard for the past is only relative. That is why the principle of change is based on the principle of continuity' (Saussure, 1959: 74; quoted after Sahlins, 1985: 153).

THE FORMATION OF A TSWANA MORAFE

I now turn to the substantive demonstration of these socio-political transformations. For this purpose I examine one of the north-western Tswana morafe, Ngwaketse, through the major stages of their development over the past 300 years,10 that is, from the time they broke away from their parental morafe, the Kweni.11 During the initial appropriation of their present territory the Tswana defeated and incorporated the peoples already living there. Many of the peoples encountered were also agro-pastoralists. The superior political strength of the Tswana stemmed not only from superior cattle numbers, but from the successful concentration of cattle, and thereby power, in the most senior lines. The practice of parallel cousin marriage among the Tswana was instrumental to this end. At the same time, such an arrangement helped to translate potentially antagonistic agnic relations into affinal and, in subsequent generations, matrilateral support.

The earliest known instance of a Ngwaketse kgosi venture fundamentally transforming the power structure at the centre is that of the defeat and incorporation of one of the ‘Bakgalagadi’ groups of the area, the Bakwataleng (Schapera, 1942b: 2–3; Ngcongo, 1977: 78 ff.). While most of the Bakwataleng were located in various existing makgotla, their leader was granted the right to form his own kgotla (Schapera, 1952: 43; 1938b: 122–5). This kgotla was located close to the royal kgotla, representing a symbolic expression of a close association with the royal house.

This measure of establishing independent support helped the kgosi both to counteract pressure from rival agnates and to establish ties of control over these immigrant groups. Furthermore, non-royal families were incorporated into the royal kgotla, symbolically and physically, constituting a wall between the kgosi’s family and potentially rebellious sections of the Ngwaketse aristocracy. Matrilateral and affinal ties were established with the Bakwataleng as women of these non-royal families were married to men of the kgosi descent line.
This kind of alliance, moreover, facilitated the attachment of the foreigners to the ruling house through repeated affinal and matrilateral linkages. In other words, what was advantageous to the kgosi personally in one generation subsequently served to institutionalise this support of the ruling family's control over the bogosi.

The transformation had additional politico-structural significance. The distribution of the majority of the Bakwataleng in existing lekgotla provided the kgosi with a measure of control: the headmen grew in importance by virtue of the fact that the kgosi increased the number of people subject to their courts. As already indicated, hierarchical integration was supported by hypergamous marriages. The consequent potential for political secession and mobilisation against the ruler was checked by the simultaneous formation of a network of cross-cutting loyalties. Although the Bakwataleng were linked with other groups in the kgotla in which they were located, through affinal and matrilateral bonds, the Bakwataleng retained their identification with their leader, through which the kgosi had the possibility of controlling those sections of the Bakwataleng who were distributed among royal headmen (dikgosana).

During the eighteenth century, however, the possibility of repeating such a strategy of conquest and incorporation within this extremely sparsely populated north-western region was restricted. In order to explain how the scale of the Bangwaketse morafe expanded to its tremendous politico-military strength in the early nineteenth century, we must consider how this society articulated with the larger region.

REDUCING THE CONTROLS OF AGNATIC RELATIONS: THE FORMATION OF A CATTLE CLIENTSHIP

The conquest of the Bakwataleng brought the Bangwaketse into the heart of their present territory, where the Ngwaketse morafe gradually took shape in the early eighteenth century. This period appears to have been characterised by plentiful rainfall and growth in human and cattle population, not only among the Ngwaketse but in the larger region (Parsons, 1982: 48). Furthermore, being well established in their territory, the Bangwaketse developed the production of copper, which was traded with the BaHuti-sha to the east and the Bataping to the south.12 By virtue of his privileged control over trade, the kgosi expanded the royal herd considerably. The eastern neighbours also linked the Bangwaketse with the expanding networks of fur and ivory trading (see Parsons, in press). As their territory was located at the border of the extremely rich hunting ground of the Kalahari, ostrich feathers, fur and ivory were within easy reach. Moreover, the Bangwaketse developed their craftsmanship.13 In exchange they received cattle. The main source of subsistence was grain and milk. Meat was supplied predominantly through hunting, allowing for an accumulation of cattle. The wider political significance of these ecological and economic factors became particularly evident when the period of favourable climatic conditions came to an end in the eighteenth century. The years of significant rainfall had simultaneously contributed to a considerable population growth in the Transvaal. When stricken by drought, a number
of people moved westward, keen to escape the drought-affected, and thus over-exploited, pastures and attracted by the cattle wealth of the rulers of the north-western Tswana merafe.

The Bangwaketse and other north-western Tswana merafe received these immigrants from a position of strength. Not only had they been in a much better position to retain their herds, they had been able to increase their cattle numbers. On the one hand, they found themselves in an area where there were still vast unexploited pastures. On the other hand, they were able to limit the off-take from their herd by hunting for meat in the Kalahari.

The ever increasing number of immigrants allowed the ruler to exploit the ward system and then to take the structural transformations of the polity an important step further. The kgosi could not possibly bring the increasing number of immigrants, many of whom came in small groups, under his control by arranging strategic marriages. He ran the risk that the immigrants, distributed in wards headed by senior members of the royal family, would become closely tied to a potentially rebellious section. It was at this stage that the political potential of mahisa, mentioned above, became extremely significant to the kgosi's attempts to consolidate his power base. With a vast royal herd and the immigration of large numbers of people, the stage was set for the formation of a political mahisa clientage. Thus, rather than being a threat to the Bangwaketse, the ever increasing number of foreigners constituted a resource for the ruler by which the political importance of cattle wealth gained momentum.

The employment of the mahisa system for political purposes was thus a most important step in transcending the structural limitation of marriage-based alliances. Its importance lay in the fact that it was at once more flexible and more effective in establishing a political support structure, enabling the kgosi, in any generation, to distribute cattle to politically important retainers, such as leaders of immigrant groups. The political significance of the system stemmed from its flexibility, since the patron-client bond could be established and terminated at any time by the kgosi personally, without the need to consult his council.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, similar developments were also taking place in other Tswana merafe surrounding the Ngwaketse. Since all dikgosi needed cattle to reproduce their political power base, the ground was prepared for inter-merafe raiding and warfare. Their accumulation of cattle made the Bangwaketse an attractive target. During the rule of Moleta (1770–90) they were attacked by neighbouring merafe and repeatedly forced to shift to new settlements. By the reign of kgosi Moleta's son and successor, Makaba II, however, the picture had totally changed. Soon after his accession he attacked the Bakwena and captured many of their cattle. According to a contemporary source, having staged an equally successful second raid,

... on a third attack he slew Seechangway [the Bakwena king], which enraged the Boquians [Bakwena], that they rallied and made furious attack upon Makkabba, killed many of his people, and captured a great number of their cattle. [Campbell, 1822: I, 315].
Subsequently Makaba moved the capital village to Kanye Hill, which he fortified with (still visible) stone walls. Shortly before the turn of the century he repelled an attack from the east by raiders armed with guns, losing no cattle, and defeated the BaKgatla-bagaMmanaana (Schapera, 1942b: 4). Other groups who had been driven from home by civil wars joined the Bangwaketse, and they supported Makaba's 'successful cattle raids upon the Batlhaping, Bakwena, BaHurutshe and other tribes who at last combined to attack him . . . but, protected by his stone walls, he succeeded in beating off his enemies' (ibid.). At this time the Bangwaketse army was the most powerful force in the entire region. Makaba and his people were widely feared, as is reflected in the accounts of the first travellers. The Bakwena and Batlhaping portrayed the Bangwaketse chief as notoriously cruel. One early missionary reported:

Makkabba succeeded his father, and it is said that he poisoned him for the sake of obtaining one of his wives . . . Choos [Tshosa] is his eldest and only surviving son, having murdered all the others, from fear, it is supposed, lest they should murder him, as he had murdered his father . . . He once drove away his uncles . . . and murdered his children by magic. [Campbell, 1822: I, 314–7]

The impressive power and wealth of Makaba and his people were mythologised. For instance, Campbell noted that:

Makkabba wears on his breast the os humeri, or bone of a king's arm whom he had slain, round which he has tied the hair of a knoo, that had been killed by a lion. When he feels fatigue on a commando, he dips the knoo's hair in water, which, hanging wet on his breast, he says, revives his spirits, and enables him to proceed with vigor . . . He and his people possess cattle in abundance, which the inhabitants of Lattakoo account for in a way satisfactory to themselves. There is a large deep hole, say they, in the Wanketzen [Ngwaketse] country, down which Makkabba has only to call, and the cattle come up to him [1822: I, 316–17]

Makaba was well informed about the penetration of guns into the region and tried to extend trading relations in order to obtain such weapons. For this reason, like the other dikgosi of the region, Makaba made great efforts to establish relations with the missionaries (cf. also Comaroff, 1989). While Campbell, as the preceding report suggests, feared to approach him (1822: I, 314–7), Robert Moffat was determined to 'open a communication' and 'friendship' to this man, who 'has been represented to us as the worst of men, a robber, a murderer, possessing almost satanic cunning'. In the event, the encounter with Makaba and Ngwaketse society came as quite a surprise:

On reaching the summit of the hill, at the foot of which lay the metropolis of the Bauangketsi [Bangwaketse], turning our eyes northward, we were greatly surprised on beholding the number of towns which lay scattered in the valleys. Our guide conducted us through a widening street to the habitation of Makaba, who stood at the door of one of his houses, and welcomed us to the town . . . [Moffat, 1842: 394]

Moffat conveys an atmosphere of self-confidence, popular support for the kgosi and societal harmony. What struck this observer was not barracks and military exercises: women were working in the fields; men, cutting skins, were found in the royal kgotla, 'the houses, though not larger than
those of the Batlapis, were built with greater regard to taste and comfort', and 'their outer yards and house-floors were very clean, and smooth as paper' (1842: 399). As already indicated, the size of the population impressed the missionary; from a height 'I was able to count fourteen considerable villages . . .' (1842: 400) and 'the town itself appears to cover at least eight times more ground than any town I have yet seen among the Bechuana's' (1951: 138).

Although he looked like a forceful warrior ('tall, strong, and healthy') Makaba seemed friendly and intelligent; his 'countenance displays a good deal of cunning; and from his conversation one may easily discern that he is pretty well versed in African politics' (1951: 137–8). He conducted governmental affairs in 'a circle . . . formed with round posts of eight feet high . . . Behind lay the proper cattle fold, capable of holding many thousand oxen' (1842: 399).

Previous portrayals of Makaba had been heavily influenced by the fear created by the Bangwaketse and by the image of one of his contemporaries, the famous Shaka Zulu (Ritter, 1972). But this comparison is superficial: the conquest state of Shaka Zulu and the Ndebele kingdom of Mzilikazi were highly centralised military kingdoms, with less importance attached to the civic institutions of their government (cf. A. Kuper, n.d.). When the centre of the conquest kingdoms experienced crisis, they proved highly vulnerable to segmentation, as with the death of Mzilikazi (Omer-Cooper, 1969: 222).

Makaba, on the other hand, successfully translated the authority achieved and the resources gained through military exploits into symbolic capital (see below). The ensuing polity was based upon ideals of civic order and socio-political harmony rather than despotism. Yet, with its great influx of immigrants and its extensive use of military power, one may well suggest that Makaba's morafe did embody essentially the same politico-military elements as found in the typical conquest state, where they were much more dominant in the development of the polity.

THE TRANSLATION OF EXTERNAL FORCES INTO A STRENGTHENING OF THE INTERNAL ORDER

The conditions for the development of the north-western Tswana morafe were particularly favourable during Makaba's rule. The royal herd grew very substantially, and the Bangwaketse attracted numerous people from the surrounding societies who sought material and military security. The strength of Makaba depended not only upon his qualities as a charismatic13 warrior ruler, but upon his success in diversifying and cementing the power base of his office. For as we move into the nineteenth century we find that the senior royal headmen (dikgosana), who were the kgosi's closestagnates, and who thus represented the immediate challenge to his reign, were controlled in two ways: first they were increasingly outnumbered by headmen who were genealogically remote from the ruling line, and by headmen of foreign origin; second, they were granted headmanship of different wards.

During the difaqane the Bangwaketse were attacked and defeated by the Makololo, and Makaba was killed (1826). The Ngwaketse morafe split into two main sections (Schapera, 1942b: 6). During the 1850s, however, they were reunited under the grandson of Makaba II, Gaseitsiwe. The polity
was re-established and the royal herd increased once more. Although the second half of the nineteenth century brought new external threats, there were favourable opportunities as well: the trading of fur, ivory and ostrich feathers, which had been conducted through external links for a long time, was now intensified by the presence of Western traders (Okhiro, 1976; Parsons, 1977; Solway and Lee, 1990).

With the growth in the number of cattle (and consequently in the number of people) the political centre was strengthened not only through vertical links. The highly unequal distribution of this most essential resource provided the political elite, royal and commoner alike, with a vested interest in the stability of the system. Thus there was increasing horizontal integration at the centre of the polity, cross-cutting loyalties based on genealogical ties or a common ethnic origin. The wider significance of these interdependencies is emphasised by considerable evidence indicating that other northwestern Tswana experienced similar developments.16

The formation of an underclass of serfs brought further transformations. It will be remembered that the first people to be conquered and incorporated by the Bangwaketse were the Bakwatleng. This group, indigenously known as 'Bakgalagadi', is difficult to define. First, it is not clear whether the name actually refers to a category of people distinct from the Tswana', seen in a longer-term ethno-historical perspective, or whether it refers to a category of minor offspring who had moved into the Kalahari before the more powerful, politically centralised Kwenya-Herero split. Second—and this is particularly relevant to the present point—the various groups classified as 'Bakgalagadi' were integrated into the Tswana polities in fundamentally different ways.

We have already seen how such a group as the Bakwatleng was brought into the Ngwaketse polity in a way which broadened the power base of the ruler and limited secessionary tendencies. I shall now show how the treatment of other groups of Bakgalagadi increased the vertical integration of the polity.

While some Bakgalagadi achieved the status of full citizens of the morafe (cf. Mackenzie, 1871: 128; Schapera and van der Merwe, 1945: 2), the majority of the Bakgalagadi were incorporated as serfs, subject to a Tswana master, to whom they were attached as herdmen or domestic servants. There was also a third category of Bakgalagadi who in principle were freemen, but who had to reside in provincial villages and were treated as inferior.

The varying integration of the Bakgalagadi does not reflect any ethnic hierarchisation prior to the interaction with the centralised Tswana polities. For instance, among the Bangwaketse, as we have seen, the Bakwatleng were granted a privileged position in the morafe, with their senior section intermarrying with the ruling line. Among the Bakwena, on the other hand, the Bakwatleng were initially serfs of the Kwenya kgosi and two royal headmen; gradually they were assimilated, and most of them are now living in the provincial village of Letlhakeng (Schapera, 1952: 56–7; Okhiro, 1976: 123 ff.).17 Furthermore, among the Bamangwato one Bakwatleng group became serfs (Schapera, 1952: 72), while another group also classified as Bakgalagadi, the Paleng, became closely linked with the Ngwato kgosi. The full circle of ambiguities is illustrated by the fact that one section of the Paleng
living among the Bangwaketse, that of the senior descent group of the Moswaana, is still referred to by the degrading term 'Makgalagadi'.

These features reflect two important mechanisms, both of which have considerable bearing upon the transformation of the north-western Tswana polity's power structures. One is the incorporation of the Bakwatlang through cattle clientships. The second is of a fundamentally different order. While the mahisa system involved the distribution of cattle of royal origin throughout the socio-political hierarchy, the ruler and prominent people kept some of the cattle they owned or held under their own management. And for this purpose they needed shepherds, living permanently where herds were located in the grazing areas. Such herdsmen formed a distinct category of serfs who were barred from citizenship and prohibited from taking up residence in the capital, except as domestic servants attached to their master. The Bakgalagadi were of value to the kgosi and other prominent people, both as herdsmen and as hunters (Okihiro, 1976; Solway and Lee, 1990); in legal terms, they related to their masters as 'children'. This kind of Bakgalagadi incorporation follows from the fact that the kgosi was the one to acknowledge the right to hold serfs and to allocate serf families to his political clients, much as he distributed mafisa cattle.

The changing historical context is again an important factor in explaining the integration of the Bakgalagadi. In brief, during the initial stage of their expansion the Bangwaketse probably had scarcely more cattle than they could herd themselves. However, since their herds were in constant danger of being raided by the Bakwena, they needed to increase their numbers and hence their military force. At this time the Bakwena were already well established, and those sections of the Bakwetlang valued for their cultivating skills in this dry region were incorporated as serfs. The Batawana of Ngamiland, on the other hand, who desperately needed to increase their politico-military strength, started in the middle of the nineteenth century to intermarry with those local groups of Bakgalagadi whom they had first made serfs (Tlou, 1977). In effect the serfs were emancipated (Schaper, 1952: 96), becoming a significant fraction of the Tswana polity at a time when such groups elsewhere were kept in servitude. By contrast, among the Ngwato, the Kwen and the Ngwaketse, who were located farther east, and, who therefore became the principal recipients of immigrants from the Transvaal, the Bakgalagadi became less important from a politico-military point of view, whereas their labour was increasingly an asset as the hunting--trading--cattle connection grew ever more important. The Batawana's need of serfs was satisfied by capturing members of another group, the hunting--gathering San, who were subjugated.

Thus not only cattle but also subjugated human beings became an increasingly important political resource to the north-western Tswana. Indeed, these resources were systemically interconnected in the political economy centred on the royal office.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF TERRITORIALITY

Attracting a number of people from surrounding groups, Makaba not only broadened his power base through the formation of commoner wards and an extensive, non-royal cattle clientage. As Moffat indicates, he also
THE RISE OF THE TSWANA KINGDOMS

concentrated the population in a well organised, rural town of more than 10,000 people, the capital of Kanye.

With the regained strength of the polity and the arrival of vast numbers of immigrants during the second half of the nineteenth century, the Bangwaketse entered a fundamentally new phase in the spatial structuring of their society. In this post-£ifaqane historical context, the challenge was primarily neither to raid nor to protect cattle. The major threat, represented by the Boers, was a territorial one. Thus, towards the end of the century, a number of provincial villages of immigrant groups were established, reflecting a continuing need to protect the borders. The danger of reduced political control over immigrants was counteracted by kgosi appointments of provincial representatives, in charge of the outlying wards. In fact the dikgosi went further and appointed overseers of agricultural and pastoral areas. Both ventures involved a further broadening of the kgosi power base, the attachment of these appointees to the royal office being strengthened by mahisa relationships.

From the late nineteenth century onwards this development was supported by an internal process of ‘villagisation’ of the subjugated groups of Bakgalagadi. With population growth among the Bakgalagadi, a declining proportion of them were attached to a Mongwaketse master. Moreover, like the rest of the population, they now had the opportunity of sending their sons to the South African mines. In addition, the dikgosi were under moral pressure from missionaries to abolish serfdom. These conditions prepared the ground for the ‘emancipation’ of the Bakgalagadi. The most successful of them managed to accumulate large numbers of cattle and started forming their own communities, based essentially on the principles of agnatic descent, similar to those of the Tswana (cf. Schapera and van der Merwe, 1945; A. Kuper, 1975). Villages were established in different parts of the territory. Their leaders could offer legal protection, independent of a Tswana master: a move from the stigmatised residence of a cattle post to a respectable village homestead, and a shift from the economic insecurity of serfdom to cultivating one’s own fields.

Although this development entailed some complaints among the masters who felt their access to free labour curtailed, it was not at odds with the Ngwaketse kgosi’s political interests. Through villagisation the former serfs supported the kgosi’s attempts to extend the spatial control of his political-administrative domain. Hence the kgosi actively incorporated these communities into the existing order, by granting their headmen and the family heads formal recognition as independent juridical administrators.

And yet, in spite of these often successful ventures to ensure territorial control, by the late nineteenth century the threat posed by imperial forces from the south were a serious problem for the north-western Tswana rulers. They not only needed to retain supremacy over the large political communities which had sought refuge within their territories in the wake of the imperialist expansion; they had also witnessed the destructive impact of these forces upon the southern Tswana (Shillington, 1985; cf. Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991). Moreover, for some time the dikgosi had been experiencing considerable difficulty in retaining their extremely important trade monopoly against
the rivalry of European traders. Above all, they themselves had experienced the brutality of the Boers. It was in this extremely difficult context that northwestern Tswana rulers were persuaded by the missionaries to seek British protection (Sillery, 1965; cf. Mackenzie, 1887: 181 ff.), which was granted, though rather hesitantly. Whatever may be said about this venture, the fact remains that these Tswana rulers retained their integrity in the face of developments in South Africa. Although they lost their sovereignty, they were generally supported by the British in their efforts to manage internal conflicts, regulate the activities of European traders and settlers and sustain their territorial integrity within the confines of the protectorate. This was a most significant achievement, for by the later nineteenth century these polities had incorporated some large foreign groups, which reluctantly accepted a subordinate position as tribute-paying communities. A major positive factor, from the British point of view, was the institutional strength of these polities which made it possible to implement a low-cost system of indirect rule. This in turn ensured that the socio-political order was retained.

Socio-Political Transformations and the Reproduction of Symbolic Capital

The persistence of north-western Tswana dynasties and the relative stability of their polities cannot, as already indicated, be understood simply in material terms, i.e. the establishment of a cattle clientage and the pragmatics of elite politics and the formation of wards. Significantly, dynastic disputes arose only among the closest agnates (Schapera, 1963b), indicating the prevailing acknowledgement of the most senior line of the aristocracy. This acknowledgement, I shall argue, involved fundamental cultural ideas about the ruling line as the embodiment of a supreme force, morality and wisdom. The present section aims to explain how this symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1977: 180) vested in the royal ancestry was reproduced by virtue of kgosi action in different historical contexts.

As an ‘operator’ confronting ever changing historical challenges the kgosi often acted in a Weberian sense, charismatically. At the same time, however, the exercise of his power depended on ‘traditional authority’ (Gerth and Wright Mills, 1964: 269). This duality involved, I shall argue, ‘a synthesis of stability and change, past and present, diachrony and synchrony’ (Sahlins, 1985: 144). We have seen that an important source of kgosi power lies in privileged access to material resources. The Bangwaketse not only justify but, in principle, also idealise this privilege by claiming, for instance, that ‘a poor kgosi is a weak and therefore dangerous kgosi’. A strong ruler is an independent ruler, likely to be less prone to nepotism, and therefore able to enforce decisions which will ensure the prosperity and welfare of the whole nation. The cultural underpinnings of such an idealised image of a ruler is apparent if we consider how he is located in the cosmological order.

In brief, the Tswana have a notion of their kgosi as a motswadintle, one from whom good things come. The objectification of this generosity is found in the royal granary and cattle kraal. Customarily, the granary was the centre of a redistributive system, ensuring essential food supplies for the whole nation in years of general crop failure. The supreme authority of the kgosi depended upon his exclusive access to the most senior ancestors (badimo),
who were considered to be the most powerful agents of prosperity and health. A powerful kgosi who ensured societal harmony (kagisano) and prosperity (kokollegelo) is said to communicate well with his badimo. The badimo did not constitute the only source of power, however. Earthquakes, drought and pests, for instance, might also be caused by enemies. The force of a kgosi was consequently also dependent upon his control over sufficiently strong charms to fortify the morafe and upon access to powerful medicines for making rain (Schapera, 1971).

The Tswana distinguish clearly between incumbency and office (Schapera, 1938a: 84 ff.; cf. J. L. Comaroff, 1978). As already indicated, their notion of authority compares well with the Weberian definition of 'traditional authority', namely 'domination that rests upon piety for what actually, allegedly, or presumably has always existed ...' (Gerth and Wright Mills, 1964: 269). At the same time, the emphasis upon the personal capacities of a particular kgosi, epitomised by the management of magic, is more in accord with Weber's notion of 'charismatic authority' (ibid.). This concession to the pragmatic operations of the kgosi is reflected, for instance, in the fact that the kgosi is entitled to adapt 'tradition' to the ever-moving historical context by making laws (melaqo, sing. molao) which, in the kgosi's administration of justice, overrule ancestral custom (mokgwana, pl. mokgwana).

The two major components of the construction of kgosi authority in principle reinforce one another. Thus, in Tswana thought, the strength demonstrated by a living kgosi—to the benefit of the nation—is added, on his death, to the collective forces vested in the royal ancestry. At the same time the duality in the construction of kgosi authority is illuminated by those few instances where a junior royal descent line has taken political control. The consequent distinction between the ritually and the politically most senior royal descent lines is most perfectly expressed in the first-fruit ritual. The discrepancy between the descent line—which, by virtue of its seniority, holds certain ritual prerogatives—and the ruling line is explained in the case of the Ngwaketse in terms of a myth according to which one of the ancestors of the present ruler, Kutoyane, was a younger brother of Kuto, who proved to have insufficient strength to rule. Since then, this lack of strength has been associated with the genealogically senior line. My interlocutors often stressed that the power of the ruling descent line was firmly established by the hero kgosi Makaba II, who, I recall, increased the military strength of the Bangwaketse and developed the polity very significantly. Similarly a distinction between the politically and the ritually senior lines of descent is acknowledged among the Bakwena (Willoughby, 1928: 229).

However, authority located in the ruling dynasty should not be confused with the personal ability of the dikgosi to exercise power. Historical accounts indicate that the latter varied considerably (Gulbrandson, 1992). It would therefore be wrong to assume that political centralisation was necessarily vulnerable to 'weak incumbency' (J. L. Comaroff, 1982: 158). That is, while the Tswana stress the importance of the qualities of the kgosi described above, they value councillor government (puso) and a societal harmony (kagisano) dependent upon popular consultation, epitomised by the Tswana notion of kgosi ke kgosi ka morafe 'the king is a king by the grace of the people'.

A ruler's personal shortcomings or immaturity may well be compensated by the force vested in the royal kgotla. Correspondingly, I reiterate, the strength and force of a particular regime are projected, in popular conception, on to the image of the ruler and, by extension, add momentum to the symbolic capital vested in the royal ancestorhood. The emphasis placed by the Tswana upon a ruler who successfully enhanced people's material wealth and welfare helps to explain how material capital was converted into symbolic capital. That is, political authority, which, for a clever and forceful ruler, in turn formed a platform for accumulation of material wealth and politico-military strength. Thus the notion of royal ancestorhood in Tswana thought meant that the successful exercise of strength and wisdom, materialised in terms of societal harmony and safety, was converted, by virtue of popular experience, into a fund of supreme authority vested in the ancestry of the politically senior line of descent.

The cultural construction of Tswana royalty and the reproduction of the symbolic capital vested in a particular royal ancestry can be only briefly illustrated, within the limits of this article, by Bangwaketse's response to the changing historical context. I have attributed the strength of the north-western Tswana meroqe to their cumulative socio-political institutionalisation of the polity, and the cumulative character of dynastic authority is an aspect of this process. For instance, authority was forcefully embodied in the ruling dynasty by the hero kgosi Makaba II (see above), representing a very significant source of power to his successors who had the difficult task of re-establishing unity.

Kgosi Gaseitsiwe, ruler of the Bangwaketse between 1845 and 1889, is a case in point. In the period before the Bangwaketse split up they were defeated by the Matabele and Makaba II was killed (1824). The Bangwaketse regrouped in two major sections, but from 1845 onwards an ever increasing number joined Gaseitsiwe, who was the firstborn son of Makaba's heir, Shosa (killed by his father's soldiers after an attempted revolt). By 1859 the Bangwaketse were fully united under Gaseitsiwe. At that time they were impoverished after decades of raids and warfare, and the royal herd had declined substantially. The fact that they so strongly and unilaterally recognised Gaseitsiwe suggests the significance of the symbolic force vested in the senior line. Gaseitsiwe could not depend entirely, however, upon this source of authority throughout his long reign. In order to justify his incumbency, he had to be seen to act for the good of the people. And he did so in a way which brought him widespread recognition as an independent and fair judge, for whom the Bangwaketse had considerable affection.

Although Gaseitsiwe was never a forceful figure like his warrior grandfather, Makaba, he reinforced dynastic authority by establishing a defence network of provincial villages (see above), and through the use of missionary mediation for diplomatic purposes he managed to retain territorial integrity for several decades, despite serious threats of encroachment and annexation.

As colonisation and the penetration of market forces assumed more significance, another aspect of the kgosi executive role became more prominent. The penetration of commodity traders, increasing the opportunities for
marketing livestock and crops, and the ever increasing number of migrant workers moving back and forth to the South African mines heightened the importance of the politico-judicial hierarchy. As more and more legal cases were brought before the royal court, the kgosi was increasingly seen as the principal source of morality, societal harmony (kagiso) and hence prosperity. This placed a considerable responsibility upon him to apply the existing mkgwa le melao to an ever diversifying range of cases. Customs were replaced by laws or legal Vacuum filled, with the dikgosi vigorously appearing as significant political operators in their rightful capacity as legislators.

Thus the increasingly complex interface between Ngwaketse society and external forces brought about transformations of family and community relations, in which the ‘traditional order’ was reproduced through the adaptation of that order to an ever changing historical context. This means that the dikgosi conducted their office on the basis of an enduring cultural code in such a way that they succeeded at one and the same time in reproducing their traditional authority and taking initiatives which caused radical changes. Most important, these transformations involved the increasing institutionalisation of the polity (Gulbrandsen, 1992). Yet the fundamental codification of kgosi authority, based upon privileged access to the material and symbolic capital of the bogosi, remained quite constant, as witness the fact that even the christianisation of the dikgosi did not fundamentally affect the cultural scheme upon which their authority was legitimised (Gulbrandsen, 1993).

The dialectics of ‘flux’ and ‘stasis’ were valued, then, as the fund of authority thus attributed to the royal office (bogosi) came to constitute a source of power for the amalgamation of the polity, and to be continuously augmented by new external forces, incorporated from a position of strength. In addition to reproducing the cultural categories in terms of which power relations were constituted, the actions of successful Tswana rulers further enhanced this valued cultural content vested in their royal ancestorhood, ideologically underpinning the authority of any particular ruling dynasty.

STRUCTURAL CONFLICTS AS A CENTRALISING FORCE

While the kgosi and the royal kgotla acted to consolidate central power, under the surface of the main pattern—a gradual growth and strengthening of the polities—there were significant tensions and conflicts at work within the north-western Tswana merafe. I shall examine several major types of internal conflict in order to demonstrate how they were not only counteracted by the strengthening of the power structures building up the central authority, but also actually contributed to fusionary processes.

While new power structures were introduced, prevailing tension in the royal house did not end (cf. Schapera, 1963b: 161); indeed, it remained even in contexts where immense power was building up at the centre, as during the reign of Makaba, when his eldest son and heir, Tshosa (Gaseitsiwe’s father), rebelled unsuccessfully against his father in an attempt to usurp the bogosi (Schapera, 1942b: 5). Another pertinent instance occurred at a time (the 1860s) when the Bamangwato had gained tremendous strength, partly
owing to extensive trade. In a conflict over Christianity, Kgama III (1872, 1875–1923), the heir of kgosi Sekhuma I, mobilised his age mates and an ever increasing fraction of the morafe against his father and ultimately defeated him, at which point Kgama assumed the bogosi (Mackenzie, 1871: 421 ff.; Gulbrandsen, 1993) and subsequently gave it tremendous strength (Parsons, 1973a; cf. Landau, 1992).

However, although dynastic tension continued to feature in Tswana politics, the significance of the new power structures is reflected in two important facts. (1) Dynastic disputes in the morafe with which I am here concerned did not, I recall, give birth to any new Tswana morafe after the Tswana had branched off from the Ngwato in the latter part of the eighteenth century. It might be suggested that this is attributable to the difficulty of exceeding the ecological limits of the hard veld and entering the Kalahari sand. On the other hand, some groups did actually move into the Kalahari. (2) If we consider the outcome of dynastic disputes as an indicator of the strength of the central authority, it is significant that the royal genealogies of the north-western Tswana morafe display an almost unbroken line of descent from ruler to ruler (Schapera, 1938a: 301 ff.). This indicates the increasing strength of the ruling dynasties, a point which is confirmed by the royal marriage practices.

As already indicated, royal FBD marriage could bring potentially rebellious paternal uncles under the kgosi’s control. With one exception only, however, no Ngwaketse kgosi entered such a marriage after the beginning of the nineteenth century. Among the Bamangwato the practice was brought to an end by Kgama III in the 1860s. This change is an important expression of the force of the ruler which resulted from the steady accumulation of cattle in the royal centre, enabling him not only to build up an independent political support structure, but also to ensure that agnates were personally dependent upon him. When they attempted to bring this practice to an end, they had considerable difficulty in resisting the pressure from close agnates to marry their daughters, attracted by the privileged avenue to influence and royal cattle which FBD marriage brought with it.

I now turn to two other fields of potential conflict, that of exercising control over subject communities and that of retaining a hierarchical order. One immigrant group which resisted the Tswana dictum of Ra tlou e tlola noka ke tloutswe ‘When an elephant crosses a river, it becomes a small elephant’ was the Bakgatla Ba-Ga-Mmanaana. They repeatedly tried to insulate themselves from the rule of the Ngwaketse kgosi and in several instances they renounced their subordinate status as a tribute-paying community. The efforts of the Ngwaketse dikgosi to keep this group under control show that the Bangwaketse political establishment shared a common interest in unifying forces under the leadership of their ruler.

As the north-western morafe became increasingly stratified in socio-economic terms, why were there apparently no horizontal divisive forces affecting the polity? It might be suggested that unlike the ethnically divided interlacustrine kingdoms, with their small upper stratum of cattle owners, the vast majority of people in a Tswana morafe were not prevented from owning and accumulating cattle. The exception was a stratum of servants.
or serfs, including Bakgalagadi and San-speaking peoples at the bottom, who, as already explained, constituted an important labour force for herding and hunting. This stratum was comparatively thin, and therefore lacking any potential for mobilisation, since the requirement for labour of this kind was limited. Pastoralism is a labour-extensive form of production compared with cultivation, while a significant proportion of wealthy people's herds was lent out as mafisa. Mafisa holders were full citizens who regarded cattle loaned as an opportunity to increase their own herds, not as exploitation.

In view of this we may adopt Guy's perspective and say that 'differences between chief and homestead heads were differences of degree and not differences in kind', and that the 'subordinate class consisted of women and children, the product of their labour being appropriated by their husbands and fathers' (1987: 24, italics added). And we may add that junior brothers were open to exploitation by their elder brothers. To the extent that these relationships were, in fact, conceived culturally as conflicting, they never surfaced in any corporate action. Yet 'the homestead' and 'the family' did constitute a key field of tension and conflict among the Tswana, which found its ultimate resolution in the royal court. It is therefore possible to go further and say that the household heads identified deeply with the kgosi as the principal source of paternal authority. Thus conflicts generated among lower-ordered units of the family and the kin group constituted a centrifugal force reinforcing the centrality of the polity.

One might suggest, following J. L. Comaroff, that a potential conflict was to be found in the 'contradiction between the ecology of household production and the implication of chiefly control' (1982: 157). This refers to the tension arising from a combination of exceptionally large compact villages and extensive use of marginal natural resources. However, the significance of such tension is not, on the whole, apparent among the Bangwakete, nor, according to my own records, among other north-western Tswana either. Elsewhere I have argued that the perpetuation of large villages with remote agricultural fields and grazing areas is attributable to the importance of the pastoral component in the political economy of these polities. This combined with a division of labour according to which women were mainly responsible for agriculture, young men and boys for the cattle herding and mature men for cultivating socio-political relations in the centre—the whole complex thus constituting a major source of male prestige as well as of material wealth in cattle (Gulbrandsen, 1987: 230 ff.).

According to J. L. Comaroff, centrifugal forces at work in the Tswana society of the Tshidi are related to a culturally inherent tendency towards 'egalitarian individuation' (1982: 158), propelled by rivalry, intrigue and hostility in (hierarchical) agnatic relations (1982: 151, cf. 1991: 134 ff.). While it is undoubtedly the case that agnation, and agnatic relations, are, in part, culturally associated among Tswana with rivalry and competition, this is above all because they objectify the symbolic capital of the polity which is at the apex of any agnatic group at any level (cf. preceding section). Opting out of agnation is tantamount to opting out of competition for cultural capital and all the material, social and cultural benefits accruing to it. Hence any centrifugal tendency to escape from the constraining, authority-based
relations of agnation, located at the centre, is opposed by centripetal forces, both material and symbolic, compelling co-operation between (royal) agnates. While factions may mobilise support from affinal and matrilateral kinsmen, some of whom may also be agnates, the achievement of office—and hence a share in the cultural capital at the centre—necessarily implies the need to co-operate with agnates qua agnates. Hence competition between royals, as indeed Gluckman argued, ultimately strengthens the value of the centre, enhances its cultural capital and makes attraction, to some extent, independent of a temporary weak incumbent of the bogosi.

Werbner (1977, 1980, 1992) makes a related observation: the periphery strengthens the centre at the expense of intermediate levels of authority. In cases where authority is perceived to fail at ward or sub-ward level, marginal groups are able to leapfrog direct to the centre to appeal for justice (1977). Werbner sees the Tswana state as a galactic polity (cf. Tambiah, 1985: 252 ff) in which 'the centre' constitutes the highest value, continuously replicated and reconstituted at lower levels of administration. The ruler at the centre of centres thus attains an encompassing, axiomatic legitimacy (Werbner, 1992; cf. 1980).

Two points emerge from the preceding arguments. First, dynastic disputes were never sparked off or aggravated by conflicts with any of the large incorporated communities which attempted to resist subordination. On the contrary, these external threats served to strengthen the central power and unify the elite. Second, any tendency among less wealthy people to protest against the prevailing politico-economic hierarchy would have immediately been met with severe punishment from the central power, strongly supported by those who had a fundamental interest in the preservation of the status quo. On the one hand, any mobilisation of this kind would have unified the aristocracy; on the other, it would probably have split many of the descent groups, because the unequal distribution of pastoral wealth was a feature of all groups, even those of low-ranking commoner origin. In other words, by the later nineteenth century the north-western Tswana merafe had reached a degree of socio-political integration which meant that internal conflicts served mainly to consolidate the government (puso). Controversies, whether on a large scale (e.g. the rebellion of subject communities) or a small one (e.g. family disputes), activated the ruler as a motswadinile and enhanced his reputation as the source of supreme force, knowledge and morality vested in his royal ancestry.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the rise of the Bangwaketse—and the other major north-western merafe on the Kalahari rim—may profitably be seen as localised culminations of regional processes, propelled by regional and global forces. I demonstrated that during successive historical eras the north-western Tswana merafe gained strength by translating ever new types of external forces into the constructive underpinnings of a central authority.

In summary, the initial conquest and incorporation of local groups gave these polities demographic strength. By virtue of virgin pastures, copper
production and the natural resources of the Kalahari the centre grew in wealth and strength, attracting foreign groups and incorporating them politically through clientisation. These regional economic and ecological processes underpinned the growth of royal pastoral wealth and diversified the composition of the population, allowing the dikgosi to use particular cultural institutions to strengthen their internal control and military capacity. In particular, through several decades of military success from the later eighteenth century onwards, the resources and authority commanded by the dikgosi were institutionalised through the politico-administrative ward system.

By 'institutional' I do not mean a frozen structure beyond people's consciousness and interests. On the contrary, I assume that the attachment to the royal centre depended upon a strong interest in material and non-material sources of wealth, prosperity and protection. There was a popular belief in the strength and morality of the ruling descent line, as this was underpinned by the vast royal herds. The interests thus directed towards the centre were organised by the implementation of the ward system in ways which enhanced the control of the central authority.

I have tried to show that the progressive strength of these polities involved two types of dialectical transformation: first, a socio-political dialectic at work in the interaction between internal relations and external forces, by which the kgosi translated cattle and people into political controls; and, second, the reproduction and strengthening of the symbolic capital vested in the royal ancestorhood, upon which the kgosi's legitimacy rested, was effected by the transformation of any successful ruler from being kgosi to becoming a royal ancestor. Although the transformative operations of the rulers are thus emphasised, their successful agency of translating external forces into royal capital is attributed primarily not to their personal capacity but to the advantageous structural conditions under which they operated as the historical context changed.

This analysis of the formation of the north-western Tswana merafe has some bearing upon the larger issue of socio-political evolution. In the context of a massive flow of studies concerned with the taxonomy of evolutionary stages, rather than with the mechanisms of evolution (Fried, 1967; Service, 1975), Carneiro's path-breaking emphasis on the interaction between socio-political systems and their environment in terms of his innovative notion of 'circumscription', arguing that warfare and conflict could lead only to centralisation where there were bounded agricultural lands (1967, 1970, cf. 1978, 1979). Yet the present article lends support to those who have criticised Carneiro's preoccupation with warfare (e.g. Cohen, 1985: 276, cf. Claessen and van de Velde, 1985: 136). For, unlike the conquest states of the Zulu and the Ndebele, the formation of the north-western Tswana merafe depended only initially upon wars of conquest; wars and raids were of significance for the Ngwaketse polity only at one particular stage (the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries). Most important, I have argued that it was the ability of the central power to accumulate material and symbolic capital—in the midst of an unbounded natural environment—which determined the rise of the north-western Tswana merafe. Despite Goody's assertion that 'it is difficult to centralise cows' (1974: 33, cf. Maquet, 1961;
Schneider, 1979), the peculiar and essential material basis of the expansion of these centralised political formations was cattle, rather than control over scarce agricultural land.

I have tried to go beyond debating the question of which particular factors were important for state formation, preferring to emphasise the considerable socio-cultural flexibility of the ruler, which allowed him to act pragmatically in an ever changing historical context. The internal order of the polity thus gained strength through its own transformations at the same time as momentum was added to the symbolic capital vested in the royal office—a process epitomised by those Tswana dikgosi who christianised their polities, intending to enhance this capital by tapping the ‘spiritual’ as well as the ‘secular’ forces introduced through the agency of evangelising missionaries (Gulbrandsen, 1993).

Certainly, the formation of the north-western merafe may have been related to their progressive circumscription and demographic growth. I think, however, that the analysis of the interface between socio-political formations and ‘external’ forces may be carried a step further if we reconsider the internal–external divide. I have suggested an alternative perspective by arguing that the political formations of the north-western Tswana merafe may be seen as culminations of regional and even global systems at any specific historical moment. The point is that the socio-political structure of the north-western Tswana merafe was clearly localised, yet through the multiple connections between the internal circulation of power and wealth and super-local systems it became an expanding socio-political organisation.

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NOTES

1 A recent example is the current controversy on the forces underpinning the Holocaust of southern Africa in the early nineteenth century (the difaqane) set in train by Cobbina (1988).

2 See J. L. Comaroff (1984) for a critical review. Besides the vast number of anthropological monographs on southern African societies, the compendium The Bantu-speaking Peoples of Southern Africa (Hammond-Tookey, 1974) illuminates the ahistorical features prevailing in anthropological accounts of southern African societies. 'Social change' is, of course, recognised, and occasionally described extensively, typically in terms of changing customary practices under Western influence (e.g. Schapera, 1934). Yet, with change seen in the context of the short run, most such accounts appear as attachments to a study which is essentially based on a synchronic approach (J. L. Comaroff, 1984). Within such an approach, socio-structural transformations have rarely been an issue at all. Those anthropologists who have taken a long-term perspective have often done so by providing extremely valuable historical accounts (e.g. Schapera, 1942a, b; Wilson, 1969a, b). Over the past decade, however, there has been a major shift among anthropologists working on southern African societies towards a more systematic study of cultural and social transformations in the long term (e.g. H. Kuper, 1978; J. Comaroff, 1985; Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991; A. Kuper, 1987: 135 ff., 130 ff.; cf. Schapera, 1970; Wilmsen, 1989).
Principal sources on the southern Tswana (quoted after Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 127) include Barrow (1806: 309 ff., 404), Burchell (1824: II, 511) and Campbell (1822: I, 253 ff.).

There were a few Tswana meraxe which also grew during the eighteenth century. (For a comprehensive account with extensive bibliographical references see Legassick, 1969: 106 ff.).

See especially Schapera (1938a, 1940, 1947, 1953: 49 ff.).

In this article I use Setswana terms for king/paramount chief, that is, kgosi (pl. dikgosi); the royal office/chiefship, that is, bogosi; and tribe/state/nation, that is meraxe (pl. meraxe), because I feel that the Western terms are so loaded.

As far as contemporary sources go, they seem to support this assumption, e.g. see Moffat (1842: 248 ff.), Mackenzie (1971: 371 ff.).

In the case of the Ngwato and Tswana this system was developed further into what was called a kganelo system, which essentially meant that the kgosi was always entitled to reclaim all the cattle kept by the clien (Schapera, 1938a: 248 ff.).

An early observer noticed, 'the word kosi [kgosi] in the Setswana [Setswana] language signifies rich, and is by metonymy therefore used to imply a chief, as riches seem in all countries ... to have been the origin of power and importance ...' (Burchell, 1824: 272, cf. 347).

This examination draws upon the two major historical studies of the Ngwaketse: Schapera (1942b) and Ngqongqo (1977).

The historiographical sources for the following analysis of the Ngwaketse are Schapera (1942b) and Ngqongqo (1977), in addition to oral history obtained during my fieldwork among the Bangwaketse between 1975 and 1990.

Burchell notes that 'As a practical illustration of the extremely slow pace at which knowledge moves in these countries it might be remarked that the Bachapins [Bataping] are now the first to acquire the art of working in iron. The only blacksmith at this time at Litakun, was [one man]... who had very lately learned it by attentively watching the operations of the smiths at Meltta, the chief-town of the Nuvuketsies [Ngwaketse], where he had been on a visit to barter for ...' (1824: II, 597).

As Wilson has noted, 'the main distinction between the economy of the Sotho and that of their neighbours was the skill of the Sotho as craftsmen' (1969a: 143).

See Okello (1976) and Schapera (1980) (Kwenya); Parsons (1973a, b) (Ngwato); Tlou (1983) (Tswana); Shillington (1983) (southern Tswana).

'Charismatic' is the sense of being a prominent magician, as illustrated in an extensive contemporary account provided by Campbell (1822: 2, 310 ff.).

Among the Ngwato and Tswana royal cattle formed the basis of an even more powerful institution, controlled by the ruler, of what may be labelled cattle feudalism. That is, under the institution of kganelo (see Schapera, 1938a: 248) the loyalty of the political client (motlhanka) was strengthened by the king's right to withhold not only the cattle originally given by the king but the cattle of his motlhanka as well.

Yet, unlike the Bakwaiteng of the Bangwaketse, who easily accept a joke about their 'Bakgalagadi' origin, the Bakwaiteng of the Letlakeng readily conceive any hint of such a notion as a serious insult.

Recruitment to the regiment was based on the initiation ceremony of bogware, which was available to sons of full citizens of the meraxe only.

Mackenzie, for instance, remarks that 'While the Barangwato ... participate in the advantages of the trade recently begun with Europeans, they have lost property of many hundreds of pounds through the opening up of the waggon roads to the Lake [Ngami] and to the Zambezi' (1871: 130).

See Schapera (1970: 18–19); cf. Willoughby (1923: 99 ff.). Legislation is one of the principal tasks of dikgosi, based upon elaborate procedures of consultation and public discussion in the royal court. Law and custom form the legal baseline of the hierarchical judicial system which runs from the court of the descent group to the royal court. This highly formalised hierarchy of courts was well established before the arrival of the colonial power. (See Schapera, 1938a, 1943, 1970; cf. Roberts, 1985.)

Schapera (1943) has provided a detailed account of the laws (melo) established by the various Tswana dikgosi from the latter part of the nineteenth century onwards (cf. Schapera, 1947).

The best case reported by a contemporary observer is that of Khamis III of Ngwato (see Mackenzie, 1871: 417 ff.). Gasetswe of the Ngwaketse was under similar pressure, and he submitted after the death of his first wife (Schapera, 1942b: 22).
Professor Schapera (personal communication, 18 January 1991) confirms this interpretation.

The pre-colonial economy of these societies involved cultivation only at subsistence level and serf labour was exploited to a limited extent for this purpose. Mainly, the serfs contributed to their own reproduction as herdsmen and hunters by growing their own crops on a field at their master’s cattle post.

In a rejoinder to my earlier criticism of this claim (Gulbrandsen, 1987: chapter 11) the Comaroffs assert that the notion pertains to the Tshidi only (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1990: 212).

Among the Bangwaketse, at least, agnic lines also involve qualities of commensality and support (Gulbrandsen, 1987: chapter 7).

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THE RISE OF THE TSWANA KINGDOMS


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Abstract

While southern African polities are often considered as essentially fissionary in nature, this article gives emphasis to the equally important fusionary processes. Examining the rise of the north-western kingdoms, it is focused upon the accumulation of material and symbolic capital in the royal centres. Particular attention is paid to how the rulers exploited this capital in their efforts to amalgamate the power structures surrounding their offices. The accumulation of the royal capital is related to the kingdoms' interaction with the larger world, and it is argued that the rise of the north-western Tswana kingdoms—located on the edge of the Kalahari—might profitably be seen as localised culminations of regional processes, propelled by regional and global forces. Thus the present historical approach helps to demonstrate how these kingdoms gained strength by translating ever newer types of external forces into the constructive underpinnings of a central authority: the initial conquest and incorporation of local groups gave these polities demographic strength. By virtue of virgin pastures, copper production and the natural resources of the Kalahari the centre grew in wealth and strength, attracting foreign groups and incorporating
them politically through clientisation. These regional economic and ecological processes underpinned the growth of royal pastoral wealth and diversified the composition of the population, allowing the king to use particular cultural institutions to strengthen his internal control and military capacity. In particular, through several decades of military success from the later eighteenth century onwards, the resources and authority commanded by the king were institutionalised through a politico-administrative ward system.

It is argued that the progressive strength of these polities involved two types of dialectical transformation: first, a socio-political dialectic at work in the interaction between internal relations and external forces, by which the king translated cattle and people into political controls; and, secondly, the reproduction and strengthening of the symbolic capital vested in the royal ancestorhood, upon which the king’s legitimacy rested, was effected by the transformation of any successful ruler from being king to becoming a royal ancestor. Although the transformative operations of the rulers are thus emphasised, their successful agency in translating external forces into royal capital is attributed primarily not to their personal capacity but to the advantageous structural conditions under which they operated as the historical context evolved.

Résumé

Tandis que la politique en Afrique du Sud est souvent considérée comme étant essentiellement fissionnée par nature, cet article met l’accent sur les processus de fusion qui sont également importants. En examinant la grandeur des royaumes du Nord-Ouest, l’accumulation de matériaux et capitaux symboliques dans les centres royaux est aussi soulignée. Une attention toute particulière est prêtée à la manière dont les souverains ont exploité ces capitaux dans un effort pour amalgamer les structures du pouvoir environnant leurs fonctions. L’accumulation du capital royal se rapporte à l’interaction des royaumes avec le monde extérieur, et il est soutenu ici que la grandeur des royaumes du Nord-Ouest de Tswana, situés au bord du Kalahari, pourrait être profitabillement perçue en tant que ‘points culminants localisés de procédés régionaux’, propulsés par des forces régionales et globales. L’approche historique ici-présente contribue ainsi à démontrer comment ces royaumes ont gagné des forces en transformant des types de contrainte extérieure toujours nouveaux en des reprises en sous-œuvre constructives par une autorité centrale: la conquête et l’incorporation initiale des groupes locaux ont donné à ces systèmes politiques une force démographique.

En vertu des pâturages vierges, la production de cuivre et les ressources naturelles au centre du Kalahari se sont accrues en richesses et en forces, attirant des groupes étrangers et les incorporant politiquement à travers une ‘clientisation’. Ces processus économiques et écologiques ont étayé l’accroissement de la richesse pastorale royale et ont diversifié la composition de la population, permettant au roi d’utiliser certaines institutions culturelles pour renforcer son contrôle intérieur et sa capacité militaire. En particulier, à travers plusieurs décennies de succès militaire à partir de la fin du dix-huitième siècle, l’autorité du roi a été institutionalisée à travers un système de tutelle politico-administratif.

Il est débattu que la force progressive de ces systèmes a évolué en deux sortes de transformation dialectique: premièrement, une dialectique socio-politique à l’œuvre dans l’interaction entre les relations intérieures et les forces extérieures, à travers lesquelles le roi a transféré une autorité politique au bétail et au peuple, et deuxièmement, la reproduction et le renforcement du capital symbolique appartenant au lignage royal, sur lequel la légitimité du roi a été fondée, a été affectée par la transformation de n’importe quel souverain victorieux de son état d’être roi en celui d’ancêtre royal. Bien que les opérations transformatives des souverains soient ainsi soulignées,
leurs entremises ayant réussi à transférer les forces extérieures au capital royal ne sont pas en premier lieu attribuées à leurs abilités personnelles, mais aux conditions structurales avantageuses sous lesquelles elles ont opérées tandis que le context historique évoluait.

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For further information, contact:
Akinbiyi Akinlabi
Department of Linguistics
Rutgers University
18 Seminary Place
New Brunswick, NJ 08903
USA