The King Is King by the Grace of the People: The Exercise and Control of Power in Subject–Ruler Relations

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In the face of the dominating tradition of British structural functionalism, anthropological studies of political leadership represented an important move towards accounting for the dynamics of centralized, as well as accephalous, politics (for example, Barth 1959 and Bally 1970; cf. Schapera 1956). Moreover, in focusing upon political actors and, by extension, political relations, these studies necessarily took account of the role of the subjects. Yet, despite Gluckman’s innovative notion of “rituals of rebellion” (1954; cf. Beidelman 1966), the issue of political leadership has rarely focused upon the political dynamics of the ruler–subject relationship, examining the concerns and responses of those who more or less voluntarily subject themselves to an authority figure. Even such an important contribution as Succession to High Office (Goody 1966) completely ignores this issue.

Theoretically pertinent to the study of power in subject–ruler relations is Bourdieu’s suggestion that “if it is true that to delegate is to entrust a function or a mission to someone, by transmitting one’s power to him, the question arises as to how the delegate can have power over the person who gives him power.” In a true Durkheimian spirit, Bourdieu himself offers the following answer: “When a single person is entrusted with the powers of a whole crowd of people, that person can be invested with a power which transcends each of the individuals who delegate him” (1991:203, emphasis added). It is precisely here that the basic dilemma of power in subject–ruler relations lies: This asymmetric relation of power, essential to ensure forceful leadership, goes

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hand in hand with the problem of controlling the figure to whom the subjects give power.

Such controls might be established through the construction of offices, that is, the institutionalization of the limits of a ruler's authority. Yet such institutionalizations neither necessarily guarantee against the incumbent's abuse of power nor ensure the recruitment of an incumbent with the personal qualities and force required to activate the authority vested in the office to the common good. The North-Western Tswana (of the present-day Botswana), upon whom this article focuses, illustrate this problem perfectly, on the one hand by their strongly felt need for an effective ruler and on the other hand by a strong awareness of the need to place a check upon the powers entrusted to him as expressed by the proverb which has given this article its title. This article argues that the Tswana have held the hereditary principle of succession in high regard precisely because they were concerned with the personal character of their ruler, not in spite of it.

THE PROBLEM

In a cross-cultural perspective the problem of delegation varies widely according to the cultural context and sociopolitical setting. In relating the present case to this comparative issue, I have found Machiavelli's theories on the conditions for forceful leadership and popular control in certain medieval European contexts challenging.

The notion of Machiavellianism conjures up the stratagems of the author's imaginary prince. But Machiavelli was also engaged in devising a political system that guaranteed the citizens virtuous rule yet guarded against tyranny, oligarchy, or anarchy. Still, in this respect the personal factor in government remained essential to him, as epitomized by his concern with the selection and control of incumbents ensuring societal order (ordini). The significance that he attached to this issue follows from his general view of man: "In constituting and legislating for a commonwealth[,] it must needs be taken for granted that all men are wicked and that they will always give vent to malignity that is in their minds when opportunity offers . . . men never do good unless necessities drive them to it" (Discourses I:3). Thus, the force or virtue (virtù) of man, which Machiavelli considered to be essential to an effective government, must be subject to the appropriate sociopolitical structures in order to contribute to societal order and stability. He identifies three sociopolitical forms conducive to this end: principalities or monarchies; aristocratic rule or feudalism; and democracy. But all three have their drawbacks: "For Principalities easily become Tyranny. From Aristocracy the transition to Oligarchy is an easy one. Democracy is without difficulty converted into Anarchy" (Discourses I:2).

In principalities or monarchies, the person in power might pursue his own interest at the expense of the subjects. Aristocracies weakened any head of state, claimed Machiavelli, because they had independent resources and tended to form factions. That is, "they were not, as he saw them, a privileged class
inside the State so much as a privileged class against the state; they had rights of private jurisdiction and private war" (Plamenatz 1972:22). Since this privilege encouraged the nobility to insulate itself from the total order of the state, the state could never be powerful and stable. In democracies, the subjects might escape the controls of the rulers to such an extent that disorder prevailed, ultimately to the detriment of all. Machiavelli argued that there was a cyclic swing between good and bad governments, as the former carried the seeds of their own destruction. Stability would come only through “the blending of these estates” (Discourses 1:2), the Roman republic being the supreme example.

In particular, Machiavelli saw the hereditary principle of succession to high office as a permanent source of instability because in no way did it guarantee that forceful, or, in Machiavelli’s conceptualization, “virtuous” persons would be recruited as rulers. Certainly, in the opening of The Prince, Machiavelli suggested that, in hereditary states, people tend to take the rule of a particular family for granted. For the rulers of these states “are much less trouble to keep in hand than the new ones are; it is simply a matter of not upsetting ancient customs, and of adjusting them instead to new circumstances” (Prince:2). Yet this point remains undeveloped in The Prince, which is principally concerned with all the strategies a ruler must deploy in order to remain in power. In The Discourses, on the other hand, Machiavelli places particular emphasis on the limitations of hereditary rule: “A weak prince who succeeds an outstanding prince can hold his own, but a weak prince who succeeds another weak prince cannot hold any kingdom” (Discourses 1:19). For Machiavelli, the republic, in casu, the Roman Republic, was superior to hereditary principalities because two virtuous princes, of whom one immediately succeeds the other, do Great Things: and, as in well-ordered republics there is of necessity such a virtuous succession, their acquisitions and their increase also is great. When Rome got rid of her kings, with them vanished the dangers entailed by the accession of a weak or a bad king. . . [A] republic should be all the more successful, since thanks to its practice of electing its rulers, it has not merely a succession of two highly virtuous rulers, but an infinite number . . . and this virtuous succession may always be kept up in a well-ordered republic (Discourses 1:20, emphasis added).

In fact, Machiavelli even believed that the ruler of a republic might be given the powers of a dictator, when circumstances required, without running the risk of tyranny (Discourses:34).

The problems which Machiavelli attributes to hereditary principalities can certainly be traced amongst the Tswana kingdoms. Like other Southern Bantu polities, these kingdoms have been portrayed as characterized by disputes over succession (Schapera 1963); and concern has prevailed about the ruler’s potential abuse of power. Nevertheless, there was no call for constitutional changes before a republican system was imposed by Botswana’s independence (in 1966). Instead, the Tswana have idealized the principle of bogosi boa tsateleoa, ga bo loelo (man should be born for kingship, not fight for it). Moreover, the largely straight lines of succession to Tswana royal offices
according to the hereditary principle, for more than two centuries, indicate that this notion has been more than a celebrated norm (see Schapera 1984:303ff.).

This case represents only one example of the fact that hereditary systems have prevailed in the history of man and that the republics of Athens and Rome were unique until the rise of republics in Machiavelli's day, especially in Italy (the Venetian republic lasted longer than any we know of) and those in the wake of the American and French revolutions (Burling 1974:123ff.; cf. Pocock 1975). This case, thus, begs a question that Machiavelli patently ignored: What has made the hereditary principle of succession so attractive? It is, of course, beyond the limits of this article to do more than begin to resolve this large issue. For this purpose, the Tswana kingdoms seem to be one suitable starting point.

As the subsequent sections will show, the Tswana are entirely aware that a bad incumbent might turn the powers they vest in the ruler against themselves. This article argues that their strong adherence to the hereditary principle should be understood to a large extent in terms of this fact, rather than in spite of it. For by virtue of this principle, the ruler is intimately attached to his chief source of legitimate power and morality, the royal ancestry. Moreover, the hereditary principle is naturalized, pervading sociopolitical relations at all levels of society, and is essential for male self-esteem. Thus, the practice of this principle can be seen as a celebration of the all-embracing agnatic identity relations and, in particular, the royal ancestry that constitutes the moral source for the highly valued societal harmony known as kagiso.

Yet, however much the Tswana have appreciated the hereditary principle, its reproduction has certainly depended upon their ability to select and control their rulers. Similarly, although the power structures surrounding the North-Western Tswana royal offices were tremendously strengthened during the nineteenth century (Gulbrandsen 1993b), this did not guarantee a good and strong incumbent. In the latter part of this article I explain how the Tswana coped with this kind of problem in different historical contexts. Finally, I return to the issue of the republic and suggest why the Tswana readily accepted this mode of government when the republican state of Botswana was established.

**THE SOCIOPOLITICAL SETTING**

The problem that this article approaches thus does not address the broader question of the construction and formation of Tswana polities. I have dealt with this topic elsewhere (Gulbrandsen 1993b) and shall only briefly summarize some major features in order to situate the present issue in its sociopolitical context.

The precolonial Tswana of Southern Africa comprised a large number of kingdoms varying greatly in size, mainly located in what is now known as the Western Transvaal, the Northern part of the Orange Free State and Eastern and Northern Botswana (Breutz 1987; compare Schapera 1952a; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). As already indicated, I focus here upon the North-Western
Tswana and, in particular, the Ngwaketse of present south-eastern Botswana. I shall be particularly concerned with the precolonial era of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although the final section briefly discusses the Tswana kingdoms in relation to colonialism and the establishment of the Republic of Botswana.

One of the most striking manifestations of sociopolitical centralization among the Tswana was their exceptionally large royal towns (Gulbrandsen 1993b). For instance, according to one contemporary observer, the population of the Ngwaketse capital, already numbered tens of thousands around 1825 (Moffat 1942:406). Thus situated in the center of large, compact settlements, the Tswana polity (morafe, pl. merefe) was characterized by the ruler (kgosi, pl. dikgosi) who governed the society through a hierarchy of headmen and with the support of personal advisors and officially recognized councillors. The supreme authority of the kgosi was vested in the royal office (bogosi), which, according to indigenous notions, is anchored in the royal lineage (badimo ya kgosi). The ruler is granted custodianship of the national material and symbolic wealth of the bogosi. Although the kgosi’s decisions are acknowledged as final—lentswe la kgosi ke molao (the kgosi’s word is law)—it was imperative for a kgosi to consult with his people, because kgosi ke kgosi ka merefe (the king is king by the grace of the people). Among the Ngwaketse, for instance, the advisors (bagaholodi) assisted the kgosi, privately and informally, in recurrent decision making on minor issues or in the preparation of issues to be presented for public debate in the royal council (kgotla kgosing). When he had to establish a broader consultative basis, the kgosi first summoned his personal advisors, councillors, and various headmen. The meeting, known as a khuduthamaga (secret meeting), was generally held in the kgosi’s cattle kraal (adjacent to his kgotla) at night or very early in the morning. Thereafter the whole morafe was consulted in a lebula, a public meeting conducted by the kgosi in the royal court (kgotla kgosing).

Besides serving as the appropriate place for national ceremonies and gatherings, the royal kgotla thus constituted the forum for the kgosi’s conduct of political meetings and for the administration of justice in his capacity as the supreme judge. Those admitted to these councils were adult (that is, married) male persons but not women, young people, and subject peoples, the latter being considered non-Tswana, although incorporated in the morafe. The male domain of the kgotla was located adjacent to the cattle kraal, where the male ancestors were buried, in contrast to the female domain of the back of the courtyard (segotla). The kgotla was (and still is) culturally conceived as a source of “cooling,” a notion illustrated in the daily encounters in which the

1 Field work among the Ngwaketse and archival work in Botswana of totally twenty-seven months have been carried out in the period of 1975–92 (see Gulbrandsen 1994). Although the present work largely depend upon written sources, especially those of Professor Schapera (including unpublished manuscripts and notes), my insights in contemporary Tswana have been essential to the interpretation of these sources.
elders deal with conflict and tension and attempt to reestablish social harmony (kagiso).

Although only a small select group of elite men regularly surrounded the kgosi in his kgotla, the formation was, in principle, replicated in lower-level kgotlas, which meant that all adult men were expected to assemble regularly, at their respective local kgotlas in order to deal with disputes and communal affairs (Gulbrandsen n.d.). Thus, the morafe included—as is still the case—a hierarchy of assemblies. The lower-level kgotlas constitutes the public domain of the respective residential sections and subsections of a village—entities also denoted as kgotla. All villages are divided into such wards. They are composed of co-residential, agnostiically structured descent groups that are often unrelated by (agnatic) descent but often connected through intermarriage. The members of these groups are recruited on the basis of patrilineal principle of residence, a principle that, until Botswana’s independence, only the ruler (kgosi) could relax.

The wards were structured from above in the sense that, by the kgosi’s decision, descent groups could be divided and moved to another ward; or the kgosi could use such subdivisions as building blocks in creating new wards. Immigrants granted citizenship were assigned to one of the existing wards as a subordinate group, divided between different wards, or occasionally allowed to form a new ward, its leader receiving recognition as a headman (see Schapera 1984:91ff., 1952a). It is precisely these arrangements that served to counteract the formation of large, powerful descent groups and to amalgamate the power structures surrounding the royal office during the late eighteenth and, especially, nineteenth centuries (Gulbrandsen 1993b).

Thus, the North-Western Tswana kingdoms cannot be said to exemplify diarchical rule, with a balance of forces between the ruler on the one hand and a set of powerful leaders of corporate descent groups on the other. The Comaroffs give a similar account of the Southern Tswana polities of the first part of the nineteenth century (1991:131). Rather, the royal privilege of creating wards and appointing headmen in charge of them played an important part in preventing the formation of large, co-residential descent groups. A politico-administrative hierarchy thus emerged that was increasingly based upon the principle of delegation rather than decentralization: the heads of wards, sub-wards, and descent groups had capacity to make decisions, but it was based to a significant extent on the ruler’s authorization.

The exceptional capacity of the central power of these polities to develop political structures that effectively counteracted the formation of secondary power centers should be attributed to the peculiar system of cattle clientship. Unlike grain,

2 In a cross-cultural perspective, political centralization might be structurally constrained by powerful clan segments (for example, Southall 1956:252. cf. Kenny 1988:606). In Southern Africa such political constellations have manifested themselves among the southeastern Nguni-speaking peoples, while the Tswana and other Sotho-speaking peoples have been characterized by a much-tighter sociopolitical integration ensured by the rulers’ control over the tribal estate, that is, cattle and land (cf. Sansom 1974).
cattle was not distributed widely but formed an extremely important political resource in the hands of the ruler, who made the peculiar lending institutions (malrissa, kgamelo) as the means to make the most important political figures, headmen and leaders of immigrant communities into clients of the kgosi (see Schapera 1984:246ff.; Tiou 1985:87). This practice gained tremendous significance among the Northern Tswana during the nineteenth century.

The Tswana Ruler as Do-Gooder and Potential Sorcerer

The supreme authority of the Tswana kgosi is acknowledged by the saying kgosi ke modisa ya morafe (the king is the shepherd of the morafe). The kgosi is not only rich but ideally generous, the source of wealth for all. The kgosi is motswidinile (the one from whom good things come). The patriarchal character of the Tswana ruler is stressed in such proverbs as moja morago kgosi (the king eats last) and kgosi ke mosadi wa morafe (the king is the wife of the morafe). Wylie records that

early in the century . . . the chief [kgosi] dined daily in the open air, taking pieces of the boiled beef . . . distributing them in his fingers to each one of the dozen rich men who always accompanied him . . . . The ritual advertised before all villagers the mutual dependency and ideal solidarity of the richest men of the realm. The chief had shown himself to be “first among equals” and a guarantor of feasts (1990:32; compare Burchell 1824, II:449).

The kgosi used to control the tribal herd and a common granary, serving as the major source of concord and prosperity. In Tswana thought, tension and conflict are closely associated with destructive forces and ancestral punishment, manifesting themselves on the level of the morafe in severe drought and plagues, killing animals and children. A ruler should be wise and forceful enough to preserve societal order in accordance with ancestral morality and to defend the people against external enemies. He must ensure kagiso (societal harmony): Ra, ba bonolo ba sa tshedile ka bonolo jwa bone (the dwellings of fierce men become ruins in ashes, the meek live quietly by reason of their meekness) but kagiso ke go bona mabele (peace gives plenty of corn).

3 The notion of kgosi refers both to power and to riches (cf. Burchell 1824, II:272).

4 Such metaphorical notions, as indicated, have no connotation of the kgosi being, in any respect, a junior person. Rather, these usages metaphorically emphasize the kgosi’s obligations as a supreme caretaker and are deployed in particular contexts, in which the kgosi’s role as a motswidinile is at issue.

5 Similar cultural notions of a connection between harmony, order, and prosperity have been identified in such different contexts as Bali (Geertz 1980:48) and Tzecatec of Mexico (Nidaer 1990:1ff., cf. 201ff.). In Nider’s view, however, “harmony traditions stem from Spanish and Christian origin, an idea that leads me to propose that the uses of harmony are political” (1990:1–2). In the case of the Tswana there is no doubt that the notion of kagiso represents a useful tool for the powerful to retain political control. At the same time, it is certainly true that Christian missionaries preached the connection between morality, order, and prosperity. And there is ample evidence available to indicate that in this respect they perfectly matched the model held by the Tswana themselves: They frequently attributed (as they still do) their problems and perceived insufficiencies to their difficulty of living in peace with each other (for example, see Willoughby 1871:407–8; Lloyd 1895:176).
This concern with kagiso is connected with the pervasive horror of occult attacks, indigenously known as boloi (sorcery). Even the kgosi cannot easily escape them; on the contrary, he is believed to be a main target of powerful magic\(^6\) that aims to make him soft (*nolohala*), or, even worse, flat (*papetla*), so that he cannot oppose enemies within his morafe.

In order to fortify the royal office (bogosi) and his own person, the kgosi is entrusted with the most powerful doctors of the entire morafe. This protection is extended to his allies. Ideally the kgosi should distribute protective magic to the headmen, who pass it on to bolster the protective magic that their particular doctors give to ward headmen and heads of descent groups. Similarly, the most potent productive magic, especially the kind used to attract rain, is vested in the royal office (Schapera 1971).

But the Tswana recognize that the kgosi can turn his powers against his subjects. When I discussed this issue with Bangwakete elders, they often invoked the proverb that *kgosi thipa, e sego mo tootsi* (a king is like a knife that will cut the sharpener), saying that “we give force to the kgosi, you can say that we make him sharp. But we are never entirely sure how he will use it.” Another proverb *bogosi boa taga* (kingship is [often] intoxicating) was often related to the fear of the kgosi, arising from the control entrusted to him over the most powerful magic and magicians. This is, of course, especially the case in instances in which the kgosi is recognized as a powerful magician himself. The important thing is that the medicine (*ditlare*) is a highly ambiguous matter: It may be exploited for bad, as well as good, purposes, and its powers may be turned against the people. In explaining these matters, the Tswana will not merely resort to proverbial statements but will cite cases in which dikgosi have exceeded the limits of what they consider to be the legitimate use of power. In fact, it is difficult to identify any kgosi about whom no allegation of this kind will be raised. It seems that dynastic disputes and conflicts between dikgosi are notorious for giving rise to accusations of sorcery, as the following cases illustrate.\(^7\)

Sekgoma I, who had been kgosi of the Ngwato since about 1835, was forced in 1857 to surrender office when the rightful heir, his half-brother Macheng, returned from exile. Soon afterwards he fled to kgosi Sechele of Kwenae (1831–92). He did so, reported a correspondent of the vernacular journal, *Mokaeri oa Becuana* (May 1858), because he feared that Macheng might use it as an excuse for putting him to death.

Sekgoma enlisted Sechele’s support, returned home with the aid of Kwenae troops, ousted Macheng, and again became kgosi (1858). He does not seem to

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\(^6\) There is vast historical evidence indicating the extent to which accusations of boloi have been a significant aspect of dynastic disputes (for example, see Burchell 1824, II:439, 457, 551–2; Campbell 1822,II:166; Livingstone 1905,1:118, 137–8; Willoughby 1928).

\(^7\) These case records have been compiled by Professor Schapera, who kindly placed his draft of “Tswana Conceptions of Sorcery” at my disposal.
have remained grateful to his benefactor. At the end of 1862 his missionary, Roger Price, travelled south to buy provisions for a projected expedition. Sekgoma sent some men along with him. John Mackenzie, Price’s colleague, later wrote that those men had been

secretly charged by the old moloi or wizard (Sekgoma) to “loa” or “bewitch” the cornfields of Sechele. Mr. Price was entirely ignorant of their object, some lawful and plausible story having been told him by Sekhome as to their errand. Sechele caught these men, with all their charms, almost in the very act of bewitching his cornfields. Not withstanding the deception which had been practised on himself, Mr. Price interceded with the Bakwena for the wizards’ lives, and having obtained a promise that they would not be put to death, left them to their punishment, and went on his journey. The Bakwena conveyed the men, with their charms still in their possession, as far as the borders of Sekhome’s territory, when they mixed all the medicines together, and stripping the wizards, smeared their bodies with their own preparations, and set them free. The discomfited “baloi” were ashamed to go into the town, but turned aside to some cattle-post or village till they had removed all marks of such a deep disgrace. I afterwards questioned Sechele as to whether he believed in the potency of these charms to injure his crops. He replied in the affirmative (Mackenzie 1871:839-90).

At the end of 1864 Sechele sent a war party against the Ngwato, but it was easily repulsed. According to Mackenzie, who was present at the time, “Sechele had made the raid professedly to indemnify himself for losses and insults inflicted on him and his people by Sekhome, especially by the party of ‘baloi’ or wizards whom Sekhome had sent to wither up the corn-fields of the Bakwena” (1871:405-6).

Sekgoma subsequently quarrelled with his two oldest sons, Khama and Kgama, who had recently converted to Christianity, when they refused to assist at the traditional initiation ceremonies held when a new age-set was created in 1865. Having failed to subdue them by other means, he ultimately resorted to sorcery. Mackenzie writes:

Khame woke one night and was alarmed to find his premises lightened up as if on fire. On hastening outside he discovered the “baloi” or wizards at their enchantments opposite the entrance to his house. They were casting plant after plant, charm after charm, into the fire, mumbling and muttering their dark prayers and curses as an accompaniment. . . . The weird appearance of the old wizards, whose faces were lighted up by the flames of their fire, failed to strike terror into the heart of Khame. Advancing unobserved to the hedge of his yard, he suddenly raised himself within a short distance of the baloi. Surprised in their wickedness, these evil-doers fled panic-stricken from the scene, leaving their spells and charms hissing and cracking in the flames. Fearless of its powers to harm him, Khame now put out the fire and went again to sleep (1871:421-2).

Khama and Kgama were urged by their heathen followers to retaliate in kind, and, “by the employment of other baloi, counteract the mischief, which they had declared had already come upon him through the perseverance of Sekhome. ‘Unless you use these things also, the people will be frightened to remain with you. We are not afraid of Sekhuma but who can withstand the power of baloi?’” (1871:421-2, italics added.)
This ambivalent attitude towards the dikgosi, arising from the potentially dangerous powers entrusted to them, is pronounced even in praise poems. For instance, they often use the lion (tatu) in order to image the kgosi's force in both its positive and negative aspects. A praise poem for kgosi Tshekedi appreciates his challenge of the British administration at a time when the kgosi's authority was to be reduced:

When the tribes were gathered yonder,
and all the chiefs went to be shaved,
ours, he was not shaved,
ours did not have his hair cut,
Tshekedi it is who stays as he was.
A lion that limps is not worthy of a mane, if it's a coward it's not worthy of a crest,
but an all-powerful one can never be shaved.

(Schapera 1965:239)

But a subsequent passage reads:

Here at his home, Tshekedi is a man-eater,
here at his home he swallows people.

The lion attacks many cattleposts,
it attacks the cattlepost of the contentious.

(Schapera 1965:242)

Ambivalence towards the kgosi power is also expressed in the core ritual of the ceremony, as practised among the Bangwaketse, in which Tswana rulers are installed. The most senior paternal uncle of the kgosi-to-be holds a leopard skin in one of his hands and a spear in the other. He wraps the leopard skin around his shoulders (go apesa nkwe) saying, "The leopard has many colours, there are many spots. You are going to be responsible for not only one person, but for many people—just as there are many spots. As these spots have different colours, here and there, you are going to rule people of different characters. The white spots represent you as kgosi, meaning that you must be good-natured to the people. You are responsible to the morafe, and you must not have a hard heart." He is then given the spear (lerumo) and told, "You must be brave. This is a means of succeeding. You must be brave enough to pass sentences." A proverb expresses the same sentiment: motse ga se wa molamu. O bokwa lelhare (never use your spear in town, only drive it gently with the branch).

Yet another instance of ambivalence is provided by the Tswana attitude towards the mystical force which is believed to build up in the body of any

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8 The idea that white spots in the leopard skin represent the kgosi is extremely significant. Throughout Southern Bantu societies, white signifies fertilizing, cool forces such as rain, semen, and water (Kuper 1982:18). This kind of beneficent power is contrasted with red things that signify blood (especially menstruation), fire, and lightning. The kgosi, as a motswadinle, is expected not only to be a major source of fertility, of white conditions and elements that favour productivity, but also to counteract the destructive red powers.
9 Leopard skin is generally used among the Tswana, while the spear might be interchanged with an assegai, a club, or a battle-axe (Schapera 1984:60).
senior person, and the kgosi in particular, as he grows old. Its most apparent manifestation is the ability to curse, go husa. The fear of a kgosi casting a curse is particularly strong. For instance, Masellane (an early Kgatla kgosi) was abandoned by his sons when he was already very old. He called them back, and in the hearing of the people said to them: "ke le seke le rata kgosi e xola, xo xodile ana, xa le nke le thlwe le xeletwe ke kgosi epe moraxo ya me, ya re le fudaxa le mo lloxele" (Since you do not like a chief to grow old as I have grown old, you will never have any chief to grow old as I have grown old, so that you may abandon and leave him.) It is for this reason, say the BaKxatla, that, with only two exceptions, none of the many chiefs who followed Masellane had a long reign (Schapera 1934:297, cf. 1984:308).

Tswana cursing is also labelled boloi ba molomo (sorcery by the mouth). The use of the very word, boloi, suggests a semantic association with boloi ba ditlhare (sorcery by the medicine), which is condemned as entirely immoral and treated as a criminal act. Yet "sorcery by the mouth" is primarily handled by placating the person who made the curse in order to persuade him to withdraw it. The reasoning is that any punishment would be counterproductive, at least until the effects of the curse manifest themselves. At this stage the person may be dead, as in the case quoted above but may retain the curse as an ancestor. Even if the person is alive, court trial procedure and punishment depend heavily on whether the curse is considered a rightful exercise of authority. Accordingly, and this point serves as a conclusion of this section, the extent of uncertainty surrounding the force vested in the kgosi's body is determined by the people's conception of his personal character and morality.

TSWANA APPRECIATION OF THE HEREDITARY PRINCIPLE OF SUCCESSION

I shall now argue that the concerns about the ruler's potential abuse of power and acts of sorcery are closely associated with the Tswana's adherence to the hereditary principle of succession to high office. This principle is asserted by such notions as kgosi ke kgosi kaatswe (the king is king by birth) and bogosi bo a tsalae, ga bo loeloe (man should be born for kingship, not fight for it).

Certainly, dynastic disputes have been frequent (Schapera 1963), and the principle of primogeniture is open to negotiation (Comaroff 1978). Yet the sustained practice of the hereditary principle of succession in all these kingdoms is confirmed by the fact that the respective ruling families have been in power for several centuries. Only towards the end of the colonial period have there been signs of the Tswana questioning the principle. Of course, this might be because no other model of government has occurred to them or because they are so deeply embedded in their own sociopolitical structure that no initiative to escape it has been possible, for cognitive or political reasons.

A more fundamental reason can, however, be traced in the Tswana's pecu-
liar codification of a relationship between power and moral order, epitomized by a preoccupation with societal harmony (kagiso). Dynastic continuity, which of course presupposes practising the principle of hereditary succession, is conceived as essential in Tswana thought: It is only by virtue of practising this principle that it can be ensured that the ruler has access to the guidance, wisdom, and force vested in the most powerful ancestry.

The key issue is how a hereditary polity intrinsically characterized by dynastic disputes, often involving the deployment of sorcery and the creation of destructive “heat,” can be reproduced in a society that places immense importance upon harmony and “coollness,” especially in the centre of the polity. When I put this question to the Bangwaketse, all they have to say is that “we found it like this.” The system is taken for granted. When pressed, the Bangwaketse typically contrast the customary polity with that of the modern government: that is, the kgotla with the Freedom Square, the Tswana court with the magistrate court (Gulbrandsen n.d.). They emphasized that people are “fighting and shouting” in modern institutions, causing molelo! (fire!, that is a destructive heated atmosphere).

The continuity and legitimacy of the hereditary principle can be appreciated only if we realize how this principle is anchored in their cosmology. At this point it is appropriate to return to the role of the kgosi as a motswadinelé, and popular expectations of his ability to prevent national disasters. Such disasters are determined by forces far beyond the control of ordinary people. The royal ancestors (badimo ye dikgosi) may bless their society with rain but may equally hold rain back or send plagues and disease to punish departures from ancestral morality or social disruption. The kgosi’s major responsibility is to retain the moral order and thus to ensure royal ancestral support. Conversely, the supreme authority of the kgosi is based on his exclusive access to the knowledge (kitsho) and wisdom (botlhale) of the most senior ancestors, who are considered to be the most powerful (the relative strength of the ancestors reflects the seniority of their respective descent lines). The kgosi and only the kgosi can pray and make sacrifices to his ancestors on behalf of the entire population. Moreover, the royal badimo are believed to take an active interest in the rule of their descendants, passing on instructions to the dikgosi in their dreams. If they are satisfied with the rule of their heir, the royal badimo give him their blessings, indigenously known as masego (fortune, luck). A powerful kgosi who maintains societal harmony (kagiso) and thus ensures prosperity (kokotlegelo) is said to communicate well with his badimo.

The Tswana kgosi is thus seen as a mediator between the most powerful ancestorhood and the morafe, a capacity attributed to him because he is installed in the bogosi. In other words, the Tswana dikgosi are not given divine attributes in the sense that, for instance, the Shilluk and Swazi kings are. But, as the preceding section indicates, they do command superhuman powers other than those exercised by virtue of their access to the royal badimo. For instance, enemies, as well as the royal badimo, may cause drought
and plagues. The dikgosi are expected to have sufficiently strong charms to fortify the morafe or to gain access to powerful rain medicines (Schapera 1971). This does not mean, however, that the Tswana dikgosi draw their superhuman power from two radically opposing fields, conventionally conceptualized as religion versus magic (Durkheim 1964:42ff.). Rather, the magician and the badimo are different, yet complementary, agents of superhuman force. In times of crisis the Tswana find themselves required to draw upon all available measures. For instance, the rainmaker (moroka) will appeal for ancestral blessing in an attempt to add strength (nonoho) to the rain charms. That is why many Tswana rulers were keenly interested in adding the spiritual force of Christianity to their attributes as motswadintle (Gulbrandsen 1993a).

Supernatural forces are also related to social problems. Lack of social harmony may mean, say the Bangwaketse, that "we are not living in agreement with what we were told by the old people." This triggers dikgaba, which may be imposed by the ancestors when a senior person feels pelobothoko (soreness of heart), that is, he feels sad because he is ignored by his dependants and unable to exercise authority (cf. Willoughby 1928:194; Schapera 1934:298ff.). The kgosi represents the greatest danger of dikgaba because, when the kgosi gets distressed, the heat building up in his body is exceptionally dangerous. Moreover, a kgosi may take revenge on the people who undermine his authority when he becomes part of the royal ancestry.

In this cultural scheme, the badimo constitute a force working upon the incumbent of any senior position, counterbalancing personal tendencies to abuse power. The strong adherence to the hereditary principle of succession to high office follows from this: It is only from this principle that the royal ancestry can be culturally constructed and, thus in people's imagination, reify the moral source of good rule. In particular, it is only by putting the hereditary principle of succession into practice that the people can ensure that their ruler will mediate between themselves and the fountain of knowledge, wisdom, force, and blessings vested in the royal ancestry.

Ruling dynasties have of course strengthened the case for the hereditary principle by claiming divine selection and support. This is not peculiar to Tswana rulers or, for that matter, African kings in general, but is found in many centralized political systems (Frazer 1987; Kantorowicz 1957:314ff.; Hocart 1969:7ff., 1970:162ff; cf. Feeley-Harnik (1985). Yet, in a cross-cultural context, this idea is anchored in very dissimilar cosmologies and manifested sociopolitically in many different ways; and certainly the claim of divine support does not necessarily result in good government. Thus, Machiavelli on the one hand stresses the importance of religion in ensuring political integration:

there can be no surer indication of the decline of a country than to see divine worship neglected. . . . The rulers of a republic or of a kingdom, therefore, should uphold the basic principles of the religion which they practice in, and, if this be done, it will be easy for them to keep their commonwealth religious, and, in consequence, good and united (Discourses I:12).
For instance, Numa, one of the early rulers of the Roman Republic, turned religion as an instrument above all others for the maintenance of a civilized state, and so constituted that there was never for so many centuries so great a fear of God as there was in this republic. . . . [Religion] was among the primary causes of Rome’s success, for this entailed good institutions; good institutions led to good fortune; and from good fortune arose the happy results of these undertakings (Discourses I:11).

On the other hand, abuse is possible, and Machiavelli attributes the fall of the Roman polity to the corrupt exploitation of religion. And if religions attain an independent influence, they become politically dangerous and destabilizing. Thus, Christianity and, above all, the Christian Church has kept, and keeps, Italy divided. . . . For, though the Church has its headquarters in Italy and has temporal power, neither its power nor its virtue has been sufficiently great for it to be able to usurp power and become its leader. . . . The Church [thus] has neither been able to occupy the whole of Italy, nor has it allowed anyone else to occupy it (Discourses I:12).

A parallel can be found in the political difficulties arising in the wake of the establishment of missionary churches in the Tswana merafe (for example, Schapera 1958:8; Dachs 1972; Comaroff and Comaroff 1986; Chirenje 1987). But such difficulties were not inevitable, and several dikgosi successfully merged Tswana and Christian cosmology (Gulbrandsen 1993a). Socio-politically they amalgamated their power base by granting the missionary church a monopoly and attaching it to their office as a “state church.” By this venture they strengthened the ruling line’s claims to divine support and thus reinforced the hereditary principle.

REINFORCEMENTS OF THE HEREDITARY PRINCIPLE

There were a number of other processes by which the hereditary principle has become a pervasive element in the sociopolitical order of senior–junior relations. First, while Christianity has, at times, been exploited by groups who wanted to mobilize against the ruler, control over the ancestral religious order could always be monopolized by the ruler himself because he had a culturally recognized role as a unique mediator between the royal ancestry and the merafe. Conversely, the political force and strength of any ruler contributed to enhance the importance of the ruling line’s ancestry (Gulbrandsen 1993b) and, by implication, to reinforce the significance of the hereditary principle of succession.

Second, the significance of the hereditary principle is evident not only on the level of the ruler. As already indicated, the heads of wards, descent groups, and family groups are also mainly recruited according to the hereditary principle. Again, this principle is justified by the respective head’s mediating role with his ancestors. In other words, the cultural scheme underpinning the hereditary principle

11 In a preceding section (“the sociopolitical setting”), I pointed out that the kgosi is entitled to establish and reorganize wards and, thus, to appoint ward heads. However, once a ward is established, the person who is appointed to govern it is succeeded by his eldest son unless there are strong objections against it.
principle is reinforced by the fact that it is practised on all sociopolitical levels and, thus, experienced as meaningful and natural by everybody.

Third, in practising the hereditary principle of succession, the Tswana place strong emphasis upon primogeniture; indeed, the practice represents a celebration of agnatic seniority. Conversely, it can be argued that the cultural importance of the hereditary principle is closely related to the prominence given to the senior heir (moja boswa). Tswana personhood is socioculturally constructed within a matrix of senior–junior relations; virtually all the relationships of a community are based upon principles of seniority and what the Tswana term tshisimago, social respect, which includes elements of reverence and even fear. For men, the kgotla, above all the royal kgotla, is a major stage on which public relations of seniority are defined, where negligence towards seniors is punished, where disputes are settled, and where questions of rank resolved. Such questions are inherent in the political process of the kgotla, which, for instance, can reward a display of knowledge, wisdom, and oratorical skills by an increase in rank. The kgosi and, by extension, the royal ancestors constitute both the major symbolic representation of a hierarchical system and the ultimate political sanction of this order.

The latter effect is significant because the Tswana attach tremendous importance to agnatic rank and the attendant competition between close agnates on all sociopolitical levels. The pervasive character of such conflicts means that they contribute considerably to the activation of the kgotla, that is, precisely those fora in which senior–junior identity relations are most evidently exercised and sanctioned. Thus, agnatic rivalry involves a dual set of processes that reinforces the significance of senior–junior relations and, by extension, the hereditary principle of succession.

Finally, popular support for the ruling line was reinforced by the tremendous growth and successful strengthening of the North-Western Tswana polities (Gulbrandsen 1993b). Any attempt to challenge it, for instance, by bringing a junior line into the royal office, would subvert the cultural propositions upon which agnatic rank relations are founded. Although particularly important for the aristocracy, the existing order was also extremely important for leaders of immigrant groups.12 Within it, they could negotiate rank, becoming attached to the royal centre as political retainers through cattle clientship. Because the kgosi granted them prominence in the sociopolitical hierarchy as ward headmen and councillors of the royal kgotla, these leaders expressed their eminence in the idiom of agnatic seniority.

All this means that the kgosi was invested with symbolic wealth as the principal mediator between the living community and ancestordom. Above all, he was also instrumental, especially for the elite, in reproducing both the

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12 There were admittedly some few exceptions to this, in the case of large immigrant groups who wanted to insulate themselves from the supremacy of their host (e.g., see Schapera 1942). Yet this never represented any significant challenge, and it served to consolidate the North-Western Tswana polities (Gulbrandsen 1993b).
material and symbolic aspects of rank relations profoundly manifested in practicing the hereditary principle of succession. In other words, the hereditary principle featured prominently in an all-embracing sociopolitical order. It was thus reinforced by multiple processes springing from the people’s management of senior–junior identity relations in social contexts spanning from the patriarchal family group to the royal court.

**TSWANA METHODS FOR COPING WITH BAD AND WEAK RULERS**

Despite their appreciation of the hereditary principle of succession and however much power is vested in the royal office, the Tswana are quite clear that the hereditary principle does not always produce a good ruler. On the contrary, for reasons which should now be clear, they carefully assess the character of any heir to the royal office (bogosi). Thus, “uncritical acceptance of the system does not imply uncritical tolerance of every chief” (Schapera 1956:137). This practice is legitimated by a fundamental cultural distinction between incumbency and office (cf. Comaroff 1978). The ability to sustain the royal office despite occasional bad and weak rulers is asserted proverbially: “bogosi ga bo shwela rare, ke ngope tsa noka di wela di boyela” (the royal office cannot perish totally, the banks of the river weaken but later are strong again).

In the Tswana view, good and strong government depends upon the character (malibon) of the ruler. Character is so important that a bad character may be denied hereditary rights. This practice finds its justification in the mythological origin of the ruling dynasties of both the Kweni (see Willoughby 1928:228) and the Ngwaketse (Gulbrandsen 1993b), as expressed in their first fruit-ritual (go loma thotse, to bite the pumpkin).

A central aspect of this ritual was a nation-wide symbolic expression of rank. The most senior member of the morafe was given a slice of pumpkin. He would bite off a piece, spit it out, bite off another piece, chew it, then swallow it. This was then repeated by the man next in succession to the kgosi, and so on. The most senior member of the morafe, entitled to bite the pumpkin first, was not always the kgosi, however. Among the Ngwaketse there is general consensus that one of the ancestors of the kgosi, Kutonyane, was a junior brother to Kuto, whose senior descendants are recognized as the members of the most senior group in terms of social rank. The claim is that Kuto and his descendants had insufficient competence and strength to rule and that the royal office was left with their junior descent line. The seniority of the descendants of Kuto—in terms of agnatic rank—is acknowledged in the courtesy paid to the head of this descent group during public meetings in the royal court and, in particular, the ritual mentioned above. Yet the descendants of Kuto have never figured as politically significant in the Bangwaketse’s history and thus are not raised to a second political center. Certainly, they have helped to ritualize the significance of agnatic rank, an important cultural underpinning of the polity. But even in this sense their role
has been limited, as notions of agnatic rank have also been reinforced in a number of other processes (see above).

The standards by which a kgosi's character is assessed are essentially those used to evaluate any person's character.\textsuperscript{13} There are, however, specific traits which are relevant above all to a ruler. A kgosi should be strong and effective and thus enter a state of heat. But he should also be the principal cooling source. For instance, he should be brave enough to pass sentences in order to resolve severe conflicts, but at the same time he should not be cruel. Thus, the Tsawane expect the kgosi to have nonoho (strength, force) yet to be blessed with the ability to channel this strength through constructive intercourse with the people. Like other people, the kgosi is expected to be blessed by abilities (masego) which bring fortune through the support of his seniors, the royal ancestors. In accordance with the prevailing hierarchical scheme, both nonoho and masego are qualities which may be possessed by any member of the morafe; but, as the Bangwaketse say, "the kgosi is expected to have most of it, because he should have most of everything." Although nonoho is often referred to as a positive quality that ranges from physical force in the battlefield to personal integrity and strength in the conduct of the royal council, the Bangwaketse assert that in certain contexts it might also refer to a "warlike person."

This section invokes one of the most important Machiavellian notions, that of virtù. The extensive scholarly debate surrounding this notion perfectly illuminates the ambiguities of energy, strength, and vitality of will as a constructive force. Yet it is generally admitted that "the term 'virtù' has no ethical significance" (Walker 1975:100), and some authors go so far as to suggest that virtù is "technique pure and simple" (1975:100), the implication being that a ruler who turns himself into a tyrant need not have lost his virtù.\textsuperscript{14} The point to be

\textsuperscript{13} Concern with a person's character was evident throughout my field work among the Bangwaketse. The response, "it depends upon the character of the person," met many of my inquiries. They were, however, especially concerned about the character of people in authority and in particular that of the kgosi. This concern is reflected in the numerous metaphors, all referring to the heart (pelo), expressing notions about humanity and the character of a person. For instance, pelotswa (white heart, that is, a cool heart, meaning a good heart), ka pelo (with all my heart), bo pelo e lelale (have a strong heart, that is, being brave), bo pelo tebola (long-heartedness, that is, bravery), bo pelo tsheti (grey-heartedness, that is, greedy), go tshakwe pela (to wash the heart, used in connection with giving sweet things to an elder or basino—the sweet things are believed to wash away the bad things), thechabetsa pelo (to make the heart sleep, for example, to use medicines to pacify a person), pelo botho (pain in the heart, referring to both a sad and bitter person), iboho fosa pelo (make the heart bitter), olwaka pelo (a sick heart, referring to a mad person), usole pelo (useless person, referring to the competence of the heart), tiola pelo (shaken up!), mothele polo (a greedy, selfish person).

By striking extension, the quality of a person's relationship to other people is typically expressed in the idiom of blood (madi): madi a gwana (the blood coagulates, referring to unfriendly relations) and madi a ka ha a ulwane le yene (my blood does not agree with his) (cf. Setiloane 1976:41).

\textsuperscript{14} Thus, Machiavelli himself applies the notion of virtù in a wide range of contexts (for example, compare Discourses 1:56,1:58,1:12, and Prince 8; cf. Flamenz 1972:157–78).
stressed here is that human power is often seen as having a component of untaught nature. And, in Tswana thought, as well as in Machiavelli’s theoretical endeavour, the concern is to ensure that persons recruited to high offices have force, but the kind that is directed to advance the state’s strength and stability.

Inevitably, as the cases quoted below will demonstrate, cruel and bad rulers occasionally appeared. However, before I turn to the question of how the Tswana dealt with such rulers, it needs to be stressed that although the rule of primogeniture usually applied, it was readily open to manipulation in a polygynous context. That is, the ranking of the kgosi’s wives could be negotiated. In more general terms, John Comaroff has demonstrated how the manipulation of such rules among the Tswana people of Tshidi serves to establish the heir after his personal qualities have been assessed. Thus, the successful candidate becomes the rightful heir, and his mother’s status as his father’s principal wife is affirmed after the event. . . . By invoking the rules in this way . . . they resolve the fundamental dualism in their political ideology—i.e. the emphasis upon good government and the delegation of legitimacy to able men on the one hand, and the theory of ascription on the other (Comaroff 1978:16).

The possibility of bending the rules probably accounts for the fact that very few Tswana rulers have been considered so bad or weak that they were actually removed from the royal office. How they coped with such rulers is shown in the following three examples.

Motswasele of Kwena (c. 1807–22) was in power during a time when the North-Western Tswana were frequently at war with each other. Under his rule the Kwena were often defeated by the Ngwaketse, who were widely feared as the most powerful military force of the region, under the command of the warrior kgosi, Makaba II (see below). He was reputed to be an extremely bad kgosi, treating people harshly, “robbing them of their cattle and crops, and even their wives, and . . . ruthless in imposing death penalties” (Schapera 1965:127). Finally, the elite joined forces and plotted against him, having “him assassinated at a public assembly” (1965:127).

Sebego, son of the second-ranking wife of Makaba II, succeeded his father after he had died in battle with the Matabele, whose raids on the Bangakwetse had disrupted the entire society. He ruled the Ngwaketse around 1825 to 1844: “In 1830 Sebego and his people were attacked by Moselekate’s Tebele. . . . The Ngwaketse beat off this and later attacks, apparently made by small raiding parties” (1965:149). At the same time, Segothoane, the eldest living son of Makaba’s principal wife, gathered many of the Ngwaketse scattered during the war with Matabele; and he was finally joined by the eldest son of his eldest brother, Gaseitsiwe, that is, the legitimate heir to the bogosi. At this point a large number of the Bangakwetse joined with them. After the Matabele had left the Transvaal, Sebego and his followers returned to their
former home. Almost immediately after getting there, he was attacked and
defeated by Segotshane, whose men had now been armed with guns. In the
day, Sebegoe was left with only a small following. The Tswana explain that he
had shown insufficient strength. Although he had gained the reputation of
being a brave warrior, his power had a less acceptable side: he was also a cruel
kgosi “who wantonly killed some of his people” (Schapera 1965:149–51, cf.
1942:7ff.).

Macheng was the Ngwato kgosi’s heir but was captured by the Matabele
while quite young. Sekgoma (see above), the son of a junior wife of his father,
was therefore installed as a kgosi. Schapera relates that “Sekgoma was a
capable and energetic chief, who reunited the various groups into which the
Ngwato had been split after [his father] Kgari’s death and at the beginning of
1858 he was replaced by Macheng [whom a missionary had recently suc-
ceded in releasing from the Matabele]. Macheng’s despotic rule, based on
the Matabele pattern, soon offended leading members of the tribe. Sekgoma,
who had taken refuge with the Kwenka, was recalled, and easily succeeded in
ousting him and becoming a chief again (1859)” (1965:191–2).

These cases illustrate the significance of the saying, “the kgosi is kgosi by
the grace of the people” (kgosi ke kgosi ka morafe): Without their approval, he
is likely to be abandoned or even publicly assassinated. The ruler depended
upon more than military strength for his popular support, as illustrated when
the people deserted the harsh Sebegoe for a more attractive ruler.

The fact that only a few Tswana dikgosi became tyrants (badipa, sing.
modipa) is certainly attributable both to the selection mechanism and to the
threat of being deserted. Yet there were, of course, several rulers who from
time to time exhibited undesirable qualities, such as harsh judgements, poor
conduct in office, greed and selfishness. Apart from forcing a ruler to abdi-
cate, which, after all, rarely happened, what other measures could the Tswana
apply in order to control his behaviour? The most important one follows from
a certain cultural ambiguity surrounding the relationship between the kgosi
and the most senior elders of the morafe. For although these extremely impor-
tant men are subject to the kgosi’s final judgement, they are also often ad-
dressed by him, especially if he is still young, as “my fathers,” a title that
acknowledges an essential aspect of Tswana seniority: that is, experience
(twaelo). If the kgosi “ignores his advisors and headmen and relies upon
men of no standing; if he does not frequent the kgotla regularly and neglects
other tribal duties; if he assaults people freely, wantonly dispossesses them, or
is openly partial in his judgements, [or] dissipates money which should be
used for the benefit of the tribe” (Schapera 1984:85), this group comes togeth-
er to discuss the matter, after which they approach the kgosi, in confidence,

15 This does not mean that the kgosi expresses any political subordination to these elders; the
notion of “my fathers” is entirely a courtesy to acknowledge that these people are more experi-
enced and, in this sense, knowledgeable persons.
and present their grievances and advice. If this does not result in any significant improvement, the issue might be raised in the royal court, where the kgosi is subjected to castigation.16

If the misconduct mainly relates to his personal lifestyle, such as adultery, excessive use of alcohol, or other scandalous practices, his age regiment (nopaito) discusses the matter, and its senior members approach the kgosi in order to express dissatisfaction and to call him to account. Such an initiative springs from the self-respect that every regiment, and in particular the one headed by the kgosi, wants to retain.17

In addition to this, the Tswana idealize the kgosi as a forum for free speech, including criticism of the kgosi, if statements are made in a non-provocative form and a heated atmosphere is avoided. Within this framework of freedom and caution, the Tswana have developed a highly sophisticated political language to indicate dissatisfaction with their ruler, particularly in terms of proverbial metaphors. Amongst their vast repertoire of proverbs there are several that explicitly emphasize that the incumbent of the royal office is subject to the constitution, for instance: malao se fofu, o bile o tle o je mong wa one (the law is blind, it eats its owner).

Now, it is one thing to bring a bad ruler to account; it is another to ensure a strong “virtuous” (in the Machiavellian sense) government. In the case of the Tswana, historical accounts suggest variations in personal force amongst the dikgosi. And the presence of a less powerful kgosi has not always coincided with the strength of the polity. There are, however, practically no examples of dikgosi being forced to step down in favour of a more powerful agnate, the main reason probably being that such an ineffectual person would not have been selected in the first place. In theory an incompetent ruler could be abandoned by most of his people, who may move and attach themselves to a more powerful figure. Amongst the North-Western Tswana kingdoms there were certainly some instances of less forceful rulers, yet movements of this kind were extremely limited. On the contrary, there were instances in which the society grew in size and the polity increased its strength under such rulers.

A case in point is kgosi Gaseitsiwe, who ruled the Ngwaketse for forty-four years (1845–89). After the Ngwaketse had deserted the forceful but cruel Sebego (see above), they flocked to the young Gaseitsiwe, the senior heir to the Ngwaketse bogosi, who had joined the other major Ngwaketse section. He subsequently defeated Sebego and ruled a firmly united morafe until his death in 1889 (see Schapera 1942:9ff). This was a period of pressure from new foreign forces, the establishment of the British Bechuanaland Protectorate,

16 I have identified no other instance in which the senior members of the morafe unite against the kgosi. On the contrary, the prevailing feature in most historical accounts is that the political elite is divided. It is only in those instances in which the ruler is generally agreed upon as being highly destructive to the sustainability of the polity that they find a common interest in taking action.
17 Even as recently as a few years ago, such steps were taken against kgosi Seeppitsese IV of the Bangwaketse after he conducted his personal life and certain aspects of his office in ways which his age mates found disgraceful, that is, as affecting their collective honour.
and the arrival of vast numbers of immigrant communities. Although these highly demanding changes were largely tackled successfully, Gaseitsiwe was obviously not a forceful ruler; allegedly he had a strong inclination to drink alcohol (compare Schapera 1942:11ff.).

The increase in strength and size of Ngwaketse morafe during the reign of Gaseitsiwe, combined with societal stability, can be comprehended only if we consider the force vested in his court, rather than his personal capacity. At the outset the authority of Gaseitsiwe, who was recognized as the legitimate heir to the Ngwaketse bogosi, benefited from the legacy of his grandfather, Makaba II. In addition, the historical circumstances under which he ruled affected the royal kgotla favourably (Gulbrandsen 1993b:568). This was the peak period of fur and ivory trading and of immigration, resulting in material and symbolic wealth in the royal centre. Despite the existence of factions, members of the elite were encouraged to contribute collectively to the strength of the government and thereby enhance the wealth of the royal court, of which they were in turn the major recipients. The kgosi was embedded in a collective process of decision making and did not need to be a particularly creative or strong person, as long as he was able to attach himself to the most powerful faction and was bolstered by wise elders. (From their point of view, the kgosi, irrespective of his personal strength, personified, as I have explained, the royal wealth and the political arrangements through which their respective positions and properties were ensured.) Under the favourable conditions prevailing during the latter part of the nineteenth century, there was a powerful incentive to portray the ruler—strong or weak—as the epitome of national success, justifying him as the rightful heir of the hero kgosi, Makaba. Thus, Gaseitsiwe earned the posthumous reputation of being a good ruler, inspiring "the affection of people, who remember him as a gentle and kind-hearted man" (Schapera 1965:156).

The emphasis placed here upon the changing historical context invites one to compare Sebego and Gaseitsiwe. Evidently, during the highly turbulent years of Sebego's rule, with the Matabele's repeated attacks, there was considerable justification for exercising despotic rule. After all, many people tolerated Sebego for a considerable time. Yet, even in wartime (the most intense period being 1790 to 1840), Tswana societies were never as militaristic as those of the Matabele and the Zulu. It is true that during one of the most triumphant periods of any North-Western Tswana society, the ruler, Makaba II (1790–1824), used military force to successfully conquer all neighbouring kingdoms; yet, at the same time, he firmly established the civic institutions of his own polity (Moffat 1842:393ff.; compare Negoncgo 1977; Gulbrandsen 1993b). Makaba is currently viewed as a heroic ruler whose statesmanship and leadership in war have made the Bangwaketse extremely proud. When the

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18 As far as Gaseitsiwe's personal capacities are concerned, independent missionary sources support Schapera's suggestions (cf. 1965:156). I am referring here to missionary correspondence from the time of Gaseitsiwe (London Missionary Society, Incoming letters, Africa South).
Tswana moved into more peaceful waters in the second half of the nineteenth century, a warrior kgosi was not equally in demand, and a harsh regime was abandoned. Other personal qualities, such as the ability to deal in peaceful and constructive ways with traders, missionaries, and, subsequently, agents of colonial powers, proved much more important.

The most successful rulers combined these personal qualities and made use of them in different historical contexts. One of the most illuminating examples is kgosi Khama III of Ngwato (ruling 1872, 1875–1923). His accomplishments ranged from defeating the Matabele as the leader of his age regiment at an early stage in his career, to his successful diplomatic relations with the British during the final decades of the nineteenth century (see Mackenzie 1971; cf. Parsons 1973; Gulbrandsen 1993a:52ff.).

Under British colonial rule, some of the dikgos, such as Khama III, emerged as patently autocratic rulers, to the extent that the customary principles of consulting with people in the kgotla tended to be neglected. As long as the dikgos retained peace and order, the British did not care much, but concern arose amongst colonial administrators when the powers of the dikgos got out of hand. As one forceful Resident Commissioner confided to his diary (in 1929), "[the dikgos] practically do as they like—punish, fine, tax and generally pay hell. Of course their subjects hate them but daresn't complain to us, if they did their lives would be made impossible" (Rey 1988:4). Eventually legal provision, established in the form of a Proclamation,19 required the Resident Commissioner's approval of any successor. The kgosi's duties and powers were determined in considerable detail, and arrangements were made so that the morafe or the Resident Commissioner could depose a kgosi. However, the force of the dikgos and the standing of the indigenous order among the Tswana was such that the British found it necessary to modify these legal devices considerably after a few years (for example, see Hailey 1953; Gulbrandsen n.d.). And on the few occasions when they tried to dispossess a kgosi or interfere with matters of succession, the British met with considerable objections from the people.

FROM KINGDOM TO REPUBLIC

In 1966 the Tswana morafe of the then-Bechuanaland Protectorate became the dominant section of the new Republic of Botswana. One could interpret this transformation from the Machiavellian point of view as a victory of the republic over the hereditary principality. Now, if the hereditary principle of succession was so deeply rooted in Tswana culture, it might be asked why the people of Botswana, including the elite, greeted the establishment of a republic with considerable enthusiasm.

The decades preceding Botswana's independence (1966) were characterized by development optimism, a strong desire for economic progress, and

19 "Natives Tribunal Proclamation" (no. 75 of 1934).
the rise of an economic elite of commercial agro-pastoralists that only partially overlapped the traditional elite (Gulbrandsen 1994:ch 4). This elite of "new men" was central to the formation of the Botswana Democratic Party, which gained broad popular support largely because it promised economic prosperity for everybody. In its rhetoric the advantages of democracy and economic development were contrasted favourably with those manifestations of nepotism and autocratic rule that, as we have seen, had concerned the colonial government. The emerging elite argued that the new societal order would emancipate the people from all the restrictions the dikgosi imposed. The new government relaxed regulations concerning the production and consumption of alcohol. The dikgosi lost their power to mobilize the age regiments as a labour force; previously, it was complained, they had been compelled by the kgosi to work without compensation. Freedom of religion was declared, and the dikgosi's ban on independent churches was suspended. The custodianship of the tribal lands was transferred to the Tribal Land Boards, so that people, especially those who wanted to develop large farms, were ensured access to land. All in all, as the Vice-President put it, the goal was to end "the arbitrary decisions of the chiefs" (quoted after Werbner 1980:137).

Yet, at the same time that the ruling party confronted the dikgosi, it carried on considerable symbolic activity in order to ensure ideological continuity. Thus, the new government adapted the central Tswana concept of societal harmony (kagiso) to accommodate the new democracy, which was, in Setswana, expressed as "puso ya baho ka baho" (the rule of the people by the people)—paraphrasing and replacing the ancient principle of kgosi ke kgosi ka morafe (baho), that is, the king is king by grace of the people.

The success of this attempt to bridge patrimonial and republican systems may be attributed to the first president of Botswana, Seretse Khama, who vigorously advocated the new national objectives of economic and political development based upon the traditional principle of kagiso (Khami 1980:307). His party won a landslide victory. The tremendous political support that he enjoyed certainly reflected his ability to popularize the new programme, not only among those who already advocated modernization but among ordinary people as well. Particularly significant in the present context, as the senior grandson of Kgosi Khama III ("the Great"), he was the true heir to the bogosi of the largest Tswana morafe (Ngwato). The fact that he belonged to both worlds made his appeal to trust a constitution based upon Western legal principles more acceptable to the people. Tswana rulers are expected to adapt customary practices to a changing historical context, and there are many examples of the dikgosi being the leading figure in radical changes, such as their conversion to Christianity and the Christianization of national rituals

20 The significance of this point was indicated as late as 1980, the year of his death, when the then-Vice-President, a Ngwaketse commoner, took over as President of Botswana. There was considerable popular discontent with his lack of royal heritage, and it was often suggested that the severe drought of the 1980s was attributable to this fact.
(Gulbrandsen 1993a). Whether a kgosi responded to historical circumstances with radical decisions often depended upon a long-term maturation of the issue. Thus, just as the French revolution represented, according to de Tocqueville in *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, the conclusion of a societal transformation spanning decades, so the Tswana merane had been subject to fundamental processes of modernization for a long time (Schapera 1970; Morton and Ramsey 1987).

All in all, a societal order emerged that increasingly resembled that of the Roman republic more than that of precolonial Tswana. In Machiavelli’s view, the Roman Republic ensured a vigorous government, providing political stability and societal order (ordini) conducive to *vivere civile e libero* (Whitfield 1969:146; cf. *Discourses* I:7). Just as Machiavelli stressed the importance of liberty as a condition for the recruitment of virtuous leaders and, indeed, virtuous institutions, so progressive Tswana made the case for equality of opportunity. They used the doctrine of Western economic liberalism to claim a close link between individual achievement, societal prosperity, and social harmony. In doing so, they also appropriated the central Tswana notion of kagiso which connotes, as we have seen, ancestral support and blessing (masego).

Khama’s successful introduction of a constitution of the new national state, based upon principles fundamentally different from those of hereditary principalities, depended upon his ability to legitimate the national government to the people at large as an incorrupt motswadintle (the one from whom good things come) and, at the same time, to implement policies that facilitated both the traditional and new elite of large cattle owners in their ambitious economic pursuits (Colclough and McCarthy 1980; Gulbrandsen 1994).

The legitimacy of the republican state was never challenged by dikgosi during the preliminaries to the establishment of the constitution,21 nor has it been ever since. Yet the question of how much power should be transferred from the dikgosi to the new governmental institutions has been a central issue for the main opposition figure, Bathoen Gaseitsiwe.22 Together with various traditional leaders, Gaseitsiwe warned against the undermining of tribal authority structures.23 Referring to the rise of crime, excessive use of alcohol, children increasingly “abandoning the law of their parents,” and extensive problems of control over communal land, these leaders have made efforts to monopolize the symbolic capital vested in the Tswana political order. For example, they have asked how democratic the modern political institutions

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21 This is abundantly evident from the records of several meetings between the Resident Commissioner and dikgosi in 1962 and 1964 (reprinted in Parson 1990:407).
22 Kgosi Bathoen II, who had been ruling the Bangwaketse since 1928, abdicated in 1968 as a protest against the entailments of his powers. He became the leader of Botswana National Front and a Member of Parliament.
23 Most of the executive powers of the dikgosi were transferred to the new governmental institutions. Yet the dikgosi remained as presidents of the customary court and ritual leaders at the apex of the hierarchy of kin groups and wards. Some gained new powers as senior civil servants when they were co-opted. Moreover, the new parliament, modeled on Westminster, included a House of Chiefs, in which these leaders were given a platform.
actually are, rhetorically contrasting the “secret meetings” of the land board with the popular political assembly of the kgotla. The kgotla, in which kagiso resides, was contrasted with the verbal (and sometimes even physical) skirmishing of partisan political rallies. In particular, the hereditary principle was presented as preferable to the chaotic jockeying for power allegedly found in the modern political system: Non-elected leadership could be more effective, it was argued, because it could readily make unpopular decisions without fear of losing the next election.

Such arguments have received considerable popular sympathy, but they have had limited political impact, not least because, as mentioned earlier, no alternative political constitution has ever been proposed. This means that the traditionalist wing has, in reality, accepted the legitimacy of the republican constitution. All it has aimed at is to leave the dikgosi at the level of the merafe with sufficient executive powers to sustain their authority.

Although the dikgosi have been stripped of much of their previous powers, the traditional authority vested in their office has still, as we approach the twenty-first century, tremendous popular appeal. As I write these lines, the Ngwaketse morafe of South-Eastern Botswana is shaken by a bitter conflict surrounding the royal office: The central government has accused kgosi See-papitso (Batheen Gaseitswe’s son and heir) of misconduct, suspending him and apparently attempting to replace him with his eldest son, Leema. The morafe has, however, mobilized itself in what seems to be unanimous and strong support of kgosi See-papitso. Besides rejecting the allegations levelled against their kgosi, Bangwaketse spokespersons argue that Leema, who has spent most of his life in towns, is yet unsuitable to chair the royal kgotla and to assume presidency over the customary courts. In other words, in the face of a powerful government—which, by virtue of its constitution, has subjected the dikgosi to the state president—the Bangwaketse forcefully invoke the Tswana dictum of “kgosi is kgosi by the grace of the people.”

Although this case of popular mobilisation is exceptional, it perfectly illustrates how important these traditional authority figures still are. Thus, under the umbrella of the national state, the dikgosi feature prominently both as senior civil servants and as incumbents of hereditary offices—that is, offices which have retained much of their symbolic significance at the apex of the customary hierarchy of hereditary headmanships. The incumbents of these offices remain in charge of wards and subwards which still include the majority of the people, in spite of the fact that the national state rejected the dikgosi to enforce the rule of patrivirilocal residence. The esteem attached to this residence pattern epitomizes the pervasive significance of ranked agnatic identity relations and, by extension, the hereditary principle of succession.

24 Even many of those, especially people who have been successful in the “modern sector,” who spend most of their lives in urban centres, keep a standing in these sociopolitical entities by establishing a house in them.
This also means that while the dikgosi have been denied political control over the immense material wealth aggregating in the state treasury, they have retained the symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977:180) which is sustained by the popular attraction of the customary order. The government has to a great extent managed to co-opt the dikgosi and avoid the formation of secessionist power centers by incorporating their offices in government service (civil servants are denied participation in party politics). In fact, the exceptional sociopolitical stability of the parliamentary democracy of Botswana can, to some degree, be attributed to the continued significance of the customary order and its control by hereditary officeholders who have to a limited extent exploited only their outstanding position to challenge the government. Thus, although there are, as suggested, now dark clouds emerging, we have at hand so far a fairly successful marriage of a republican state and its subordinate hereditary principalities.

CONCLUSION

This article took as its point of departure Machiavelli's concern that to establish a virtuous government, a ruler must be recruited who has personal force (virtù) and who does not turn this force and the powers entrusted to him against his subjects but uses it to their benefit and to preserve political stability. Machiavelli found that the hereditary principle of succession to high office neither ensured a forceful leader nor prevented tyranny from arising.

However, Machiavelli did not consider the fact that the principle of succession has often been retained and even appreciated in spite of bad rulers and recurrent political instability. Indeed, in human political history, the hereditary principle of succession has been the most common way of recruiting rulers in preindustrial societies despite the problems of selecting and controlling a forceful leader. The fear and uncertainty associated with the Tswana rulers' exercise of power, discussed above, is just one African example among many. Patently, this range could have been extended much further to include, for instance, the problems surrounding the power of mana as exercised by Polynesian monarchs (compare Sahlin 1981:44–45; Valeri 1985:95ff.). The present article has illuminated ways in which the Tswana have attempted to resolve problems of this kind. In a comparative perspective, some measures used to control succession, such as those facilitated by polygamous royal marriages, occur far beyond the limits of the Tswana. Other measures, such as a ruler being called to account by the age sets, are certainly more culturally specific. All in all, measures which compensate for deficiencies of the hereditary principle and are sufficiently adequate to ensure its reproduction seem to have been developed in a wide range of systems.

The existence of such measures is, however, not enough to account for the appreciation of this principle in many societies. In this respect, the present case emphasizes the close link between the hereditary principle of succession
and the cosmological order. Certainly, the claim of divine support is not peculiar to the Tswana or Afrikan kingdoms; it seems important in a wide range of societies (for example, Frankfort 1965). However widespread such a claim is, the cultural construction of the link between the hereditary principle of succession and divine support varies considerably. In particular, while the legitimacy of European kings ("By the Grace of God") depended upon their intercourse with the Christian Church, the practice of the hereditary principle itself in the Tswana kingdoms and other kingdoms adherent to the notion of ancestral support (compare Frankfort 1965:299ff), has ensured that the ruler is conceived as the principal link to the supreme source of force, morality, and wisdom, that is the royal ancestry. Moreover, this cultural construction of the ruler’s legitimacy is reinforced by virtue of its embracement of all levels of the Tswana polity: The conceptual scheme by which people recognize the ruler’s attachment to the supreme source of ancestral morality and force, is naturalized by virtue of their own recurrent invocation of ancestors in their own lived-in universe of family and community relations.

The articulation of agnatic identity relations, pervasive at all levels of the morafe, involves a similar redundancy and, thus, naturalization of the hierarchical order. In this respect, the Tswana morafe contrast sharply with such politics as those of feudal Europe, where the ruling group constituted a culturally distinct and socially separate stratum (Bloch 1961:293ff.). With the exception of a thin stratum of interiorized servants, all the people of a Tswana morafe are embodied in a socially continuous patriarchal order which is culturally constructed in a uniform way at all sociopolitical levels from that of the elementary family group to the royal court. Even when stripped of much of its political content, as in the post-colonial context, the tremendous symbolic potency inherent in this order continues to engage people, retarding its erosion.

At the level of popular experience, this order provides emotional and social satisfaction. At the systemic level, Botswana’s political stability is certainly attributable to the fact that such a large proportion of the Tswana has remained attracted by, and identify with, the customary order. But this state of affairs relies on the dual loyalty of the dikgosi, both to the people and the government. As the most recent development in Nwaketse indicates, when the relationship between the kgosi and government comes under stress and the government decides to ignore the dictum that the “kgosi is kgosi by grace of the people,” claiming that “the kgosi is kgosi by virtue of the government,” it runs the risk that the people may mobilise to support what they regard as the epitome of their symbolic capital.

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