

Ønulf Gulbrandsen (2012), *The State and the Social: State Formation in Botswana and Its Precolonial and Colonial Genealogies*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn 2012, ISBN 9780857452979, 343 pp.

The considerable political stability Botswana has shown since achieving independence in 1966 has occasioned both positive political comments and controversy regarding the evaluation of this accomplishment and drawbacks. However, Botswana also presents a fair number of analytical challenges, including (i) the seeming success in overcoming a potential resource curse in the wake of the discovery of diamonds shortly after independence, (ii) the balancing of ethnic connotations in an independent state with a much more complex ethnic make-up than may appear at first sight, and (iii) the successful control over chiefs who at independence could well have been thought to enjoy quite a few strategic advantages over those in charge of central government.

In tackling these and other issues in a study that extends up to 1990, Ønulf Gulbrandsen is able to draw on more than three decades of social anthropology research in Botswana as well as research on a number of Tswana *merafe* (polities; sing. *morafe*) by eminent anthropologists such as Isaac Schapera and the Comaroffs. Such work can provide a rather sound basis for studies concerning continuities and breaks in the institutions of precolonial chiefdoms, colonial Bechuanaland and independent Botswana. Accordingly, this work also offers a solid grounding for Gulbrandsen, whose central research question considers how a “strong” state came about in Botswana and how (following Deleuze and Guattari, *The Thousand Plateaus*) “rhizomic structures” were avoided; these structures, which are continuously generated in “war machines”, fall outside the state’s capacity of control and absorption and lead to a dissipation of power and a plurality of contenders for control. In Gulbrandsen’s view, the ruling elite in Botswana has sustained an apparatus of “capture” by building alliances that strengthened the central state, not least at the expense of *dikgosi* (chiefs).

Significantly, this realignment did not come as a consequence of the diamond bonanza. Rather, Gulbrandsen’s persuasive argument suggests that the ways in which the proceeds from diamond mining were used to strengthen the postcolonial state have to be accounted for by pre-existing structures and strategies conceived by central actors on that basis. He further highlights the precolonial roots of the *merafe*, while detailing incisive changes.

Gulbrandsen sees some of the decisive features rooted in nineteenth-century Tswana social and political structures and practices. These concern, in particular, the interrelated forms of chiefly rule with “royal towns as profound manifestations of civic order” (31), which were based on the control

of large cattle herds, as well as the institutional set-up of royal villages made up of *kegotla* (wards), which, in turn, consisted of a small number of agnatic, exogamous descent groups. This structure prevented the formation of large descent groups characteristic of “other Southern Bantu polities” (37). It further eased the absorption of both members of vanquished groups and refugees from the upheavals that took place further east. Gulbrandsen stresses in particular that “networks of crosscutting loyalties” facilitated “the ruler’s exercise of checks and balances of power” (37).

This brings into focus the personalities of the *dikgosi*, and Gulbrandsen stresses their decisive influence, using as reference the major *merafe* of Bakwena, Bangwaketse and Bangwato. He traces the chiefs’ comparatively ready acceptance of Christianity and, even more importantly, of British colonial protection (1895) as an element within a considered and rather skilful strategy in the conjuncture of the late nineteenth century. In this way, they staved off the threat of expansion both from the Boer South African Republic to the southeast and from German South West Africa. The three decisive *dikgosi* secured a rather distant form of colonial control which accorded to the rulers opportunities to consolidate their position; still, incorporation into an expansive South Africa remained a threat for several decades. Overall, the relationship between the *dikgosi* and the colonial administrators was marked by a “mutuality of dependency” (75) during the colonial period (1895–1966), which also played out in an array of conflicts recounted by Gulbrandsen. In these conflicts, however, *dikgosi* were not necessarily pitted against the colonial administration in any straightforward way. Factions within the *merafe* as well as church interests were also involved. Above all, the British recognised eight *merafe* as legitimate and thus predicated basic givens that were also to influence the state of Botswana after independence.

From the medley of interests, new groups of young educated people emerged. This process gained momentum after 1945 and, in particular, with the rise of African nationalism and the wave of decolonisation that swept the northern portion of the continent. As *dikgosi* tried to retain control, conflict resulted with these politically minded, entrepreneurial upstarts. Moreover, they were trusted as mediators to the outside commercial and political worlds and thus came to bypass the *dikgosi*, whose post-independence project of tribal-based federalism was being countered by a republican, democratic nation state. In a way, these criss-crossing contradictions and conflicts coalesced in the “Ngwato Political Crises” (87), which were triggered when the heir apparent of the largest Tswana chiefdom, Seretse Khama, married an English woman. Again, the opposing forces in the ensuing conflict were ambiguous, both in themselves and their alliances. The colonial power sided with Ngwato traditionalists. However, Seretse Khama’s genealogical legiti-

macy and charisma as a “modern man” (92), also appealed to some of the aristocracy. Eventually, Seretse Khama emerged as the country’s first president and champion of a republican, clearly anti-racist option; he was the founder of the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP), which has governed ever since independence.

The process of writing the Constitution was marked by *dikgosi*’s efforts to secure themselves a say under the new dispensation, on the one hand, and insistence on the majority principle and equalitarianism as a prerequisite of republicanism, on the other. The latter prevailed, thus effectively marginalising the *dikgosi* in a largely ceremonial House of Chiefs, while the Chieftainship Act eventually accorded the chiefs the duties of “civil servants” (101). At the same time, the BDP followed a strategy of systematically incorporating, and thus co-opting, the *dikgosi* into the independence dispensation. As Gulbrandsen stresses, the success of this strategy hinged largely on the prestige and authority of Seretse Khama as the central figure.

However, successfully instituting a state “based on Weberian ideals of legal-rationalism” (107) did not and still does not imply an absence of different sources of legitimacy. Rather, as Gulbrandsen shows extensively, “the rulers of the postcolonial state drew significantly upon indigenous ideas, practices and institutions of authority” (ibid.). Yet the main reason offered by Gulbrandsen for the emergence of a strong state in Botswana, which was able to avoid the pitfalls of the resource curse and the widespread consequences of a “politics of the belly” (Bayart), is the conjuncture of social, institutional and economic processes. According to this construct, the common orientation towards and concern with cattle raising helped to forge a fusion of elites, which was further enhanced by access to the European beef market and a flow of aid and experts. All this was used judiciously to create a reasonably consolidated state before revenue from diamond mining started to flow in earnest. The author does not deny the serious effects of this tremendous resource flow – which included a thrust of serious elite differentiation, while funds were also used for popular education and infrastructure.

At the same time, “traditional” structures and practices were not simply phased out by the political marginalisation of chiefs. There have been serious challenges when *dikgosi* have tried, with a measure of success, to mobilise their *merafe* against the state and its legal system – as in the case of corporal punishment. Also, chiefly courts appear as venues where reconciliation prevails over formal legal concerns and punishment. In this way, cohesion is enhanced at both the communal and societal levels. Generally, Gulbrandsen sees “the modern state [...] appropriating [the] symbolic wealth and the discursive field of the *kgotla*” (187), which is the public space of the assem-

bly of (male) members of a ward or a *morafe*. Arguably, Gulbrandsen's most fascinating chapter details the ways how, in the eyes of many – if not most – Batswana, the (ostensibly) apolitical space of the *kgotla* takes precedence over formal state institutions and more conventional electioneering. In fact, Gulbrandsen primarily attributes the BDP's long-term predominance to its mastery of *kgotla* discourse, expounding the perspective of development that has been conveyed by the state and the ruling party. This, in his view, has enabled the BDP to stave off a series of rather serious challenges by older or emerging opposition parties. Stability of BDP rule is further enhanced by biopolitical strategies in the fields of medicine and, in particular, dealing with the HIV/AIDS pandemic, to which Gulbrandsen devotes a special chapter.

Gulbrandsen is far from presenting the Botswana experience as an unblemished success story. He assigns a specific chapter to the problem of non-Tswana minorities. While he pictures their situation in a more benign light than have others, he especially brings out the class dimension of increasing social inequality that characterises Botswana as well as other countries in southern Africa. A much more daunting topic is approached in Gulbrandsen's last chapter, which relates the stark rates of inequality to pervasive allegations of occult practices for the acquisition and maintenance of power. These claims are connected to a series of disappearances of young girls, whose bodies have allegedly been used for magic purposes. Such rumours, at the very least, articulate perceptions of the "abuse of power" (310) that arise under the social dynamics described. At the same time, traditional discourse is harnessed in such cases to a critique of the "greed for wealth and power" seen as widely prevalent amongst the ruling circles. In closing, Gulbrandsen, for all his impressive arguments on the stunning stability of the state in Botswana, sums up that nation's "dubious character" as combining a mighty "capacity to capture the population" with a reliance "on subtle tactics, repressive practices and structures of domination" (317). One of the remarkable strengths of this important book is its connecting of these observations with a long-term perspective, tying traditional practices and institutions into the context of a finely grained analysis that does so much more than simply assert the longevity of "tradition".

■ Reinhart Köbller