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# Participatory Democracy in Southern Africa: Explaining Botswana's Exceptionalism

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**Abstract:** Botswana has had fair and stable elections since its independence in 1966. It has a relatively high standard of living, a relatively well-functioning welfare state, and relatively low levels of government corruption. Voter participation is among the highest in the world, topping 80 percent in the past elections. Access to education and healthcare is free to all citizens. How can we best explain Botswana's exceptionalism in the political, economic, and social realms, and what policy lessons does the case of Botswana contain? This article shows that it is Botswana's millennial tradition of direct village democracy, kgotla, that best explains its exceptional performance. I visited Botswana in May of 2023 to evaluate the importance of participatory democracy in Botswana and assess its explanatory power. When comparing local participation to other, potentially relevant causal factors, I find that local political participation provides the most robust explanation for good governance in Botswana. In Botswana, citizens are able to hold their elected officials accountable, learn how politics works by acquiring the necessary technical knowledge (techne) through participating in regular, monthly public assemblies, and, as a result, make better-informed political decisions.

**Keywords:** Botswana; good governance; direct democracy; participative democracy; decolonization

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## 1. Introduction: Botswana's Exceptionalism

At a time when a new wave of authoritarianism rolls over Africa, the democratic stability and exceptional democratic, economic, and social performance of Botswana poses the question of how this country in Southern Africa has been able to withstand most of the perils affecting many of its African neighbors. Botswana has had fair democratic elections since its independence in 1966 and has limited officeholding for the president to two consecutive terms (Mfundisi 2006). Freedom House ranks Botswana higher than most African countries.[1] Most remarkably, voter turnout has averaged at some 80 percent over past elections, among the highest in the world.[2] While these are very traditional indicators that do not fully capture Botswana's outstanding performance, particularly in the democratic realm, they nevertheless hint at the fact that Botswana is an extreme, maybe even paradigmatic case, as Botswana's democracy has not only been outperforming most African democracies; its citizen participation ranks top in the world (Lekorwe 2011). How can this be explained? This article argues that it is Botswana's ancient tradition of institutionalized, village-based, local direct democracy, *kgotla*, that accounts for its exemplary performance. All Tswana towns, villages, and city districts count on public forums, dikgotla (plural of kgotla), where average citizens meet regularly to debate public matters. Dikgotla thus function as decentralized public spheres, invigorating and legitimatizing Botswana's parliamentary democracy, as Jürgen Habermas (1985) as well as Mouffe and Laclau (1985) have argued. They also provide Botswana's democracy with a mechanism of direct participation and public deliberation, which, according to such authors as Bernard Manin (Manin et al. 1987), and Mansbridge (1980), Gutman and Thompson (2004), Michael Neblo (2017), and James Fishkin (2020), accounts for better-informed citizens making better decisions, ultimately providing democracy with legitimacy.

The fact that Botswana's deliberative democracy has not been included in comparative studies of participative, local, and direct democracy and has not been recognized as an exemplary, maybe even paradigmatic participatory democratic system raises questions about the continued importance of colonial analytical frameworks in the social sciences. Botswana's direct democratic tradition is more widespread than Switzerland's Landsgemeinden, now reduced to only two cantons or Vermont's townhalls, meeting only once a year. The citizens of Botswana, to the contrary, meet regularly, on average once a month, in their dikgotla to debate public matters and to hold their elected officials accountable. Analytical frameworks intend on analyzing political systems comparatively must be freed from colonial mindsets and should include the case of Botswana's kgotla democracy.

In May of 2023, I spent two weeks in Botswana searching for evidence that can explain Botswana's exceptionalism. I consulted local experts, mostly university professors, and asked average citizens of Gaborone, the capital; Modipane, a town of some 2000 inhabitants east of Gaborone; and Molepolole, capital of the Kweneng district, about their experiences with dikgotla and their local governments. On 12 May 2023, I observed a kgotla session in Modipane. I was also able to talk to two chiefs, from Modipane and Molepolole.

The questions driving my inquiry were: What makes Botswana different from similar African countries? Why and how has this country been able to avoid most of the economic, political, and social problems plaguing so many of its neighbors? The hypothesis I sought to assess was if Botswana's tradition and contemporary practice of direct democratic village assemblies, locally known as kgotla, can explain its political, economic, and social exceptionalism.

In this article, I present the findings of this preliminary, exploratory single case study of Botswana's participative democracy and its effects on the country's political, social, and economic performance. While I seek to assess the robustness of the causal relation between local deliberative forums and democratic, economic, and social outcomes in Botswana, my findings are limited by the scope of the information I was able to collect in only two weeks. I was not able to observe any dikgotla outside of the greater Gaborone region, for example in the west and north of the country. Some of these regions are more ethnically diverse than the Tswana-dominated south, so Tswana traditions might not be as effective there as they are in the country's south. The causal explanations I detect and propose thus require further testing in different regional settings—a task I hope to accomplish in future research.

## 2. Theorical Foundations

Representative democracy is in crisis almost everywhere in the world, leading some analysists to argue that looking for alternatives to representative democracy is an urgent task (Reiter 2017a). The general sense of many citizens of very different countries of the world is that political representatives "do not represent us" (Lessig 2019). The gap separating average people from the business of governing has led to political ignorance, alienation, the spread of conspiracy theories about what politicians *really* do, and extreme manipulation of public opinion. In the absence of active political participation, average people have become increasingly ignorant about politics and governance, and they have increasingly become victims of misinformation and manipulation by foreign and domestic agents interested in undermining political institutions and stability and democratic legitimacy.

What I sought to assess with my inquiry was if direct citizen participation in Botswana makes for active and knowledgeable citizens and holds the government accountable, and if Botswana's dikgotla democracy can explain its exceptional performance in the political, economic, and social realms.

In the democratic realm, the case of Botswana represents an alternative to purely representative democracy, as Botswana relies on a mixed system of governance, with elected officials conducting politics in a Westminster parliamentary system,[3] supplemented by a direct democratic political system that operates at the village and town district levels, where traditional public assemblies, dikgotla, serve as forums for deliberation and holding public office holders accountable. Presiding over each kgotla is a Kgosi, a traditional chief,

or, in larger towns with several dikgotla, a Kgosana, a subchief. Chiefs and subchiefs wield executive and judicial power at the local level. At the national level, chiefs come together in the House of Chiefs, the *Ntlo Ya Dikgosi*, to advise the government. They do not wield legislative power (Ifezue 2015).

In theory, direct democratic participation holds the promise of providing democratic legitimacy, as citizen preferences reach policymakers directly. Direct political participation educates citizens and potentially leads to qualitatively better political decisions (Fishkin 2020; Neblo 2017). Direct political participation fosters democratic stability as citizens experience a sense of empowerment and influence in governance (Bryan 2004; de Tocqueville 2003). As Frank Bryan has shown for town hall meetings in Vermont, direct political participation accounts for "real democracy" (Bryan 2004), i.e., a political system where average citizens are able to decide for themselves how they want to live and how they want to spend public money. Direct political participation not only breeds more political participation; it also leads to more participation in electoral politics (Bryan 2004). The causal mechanism linking political participation to democracy is deliberation, as explained by Bernard Manin:

It is, therefore, necessary to alter radically the perspective common to both liberal theories and democratic thought: the source of legitimacy is not the predetermined will of individuals, but rather the process of its formation, that is, deliberation itself. An individual's liberty consists first of all in being able to arrive at decision by a process of research and comparison among various solutions. As political decisions are characteristically imposed on all, it seems reasonable to seek, as an essential condition for legitimacy, the deliberation of all or, more precisely, the right of all to participate in deliberation. We must, therefore, challenge the fundamental conclusion of Rousseau, Sieyes, and Rawls: a legitimate decision does not represent the will of all, but is one that results from the deliberation of all. (Manin et al. 1987, p. 351f)

The opportunity to deliberate provides democracy with legitimacy. Deliberation is also the mechanism that allows citizens to form preferences, refine them, learn, and become stakeholders in their democratic system. Deliberation empowers. Jürgen Habermas makes a very strong case for deliberation to be considered as the foundation of democracy. He argues that a law is only legitimate insofar as all those who are potentially affected by it had an opportunity to participate in its crafting (Habermas 1992).

Robert Putnam (1993) established that civicness and active citizen participation can indeed account for "making democracy work." He showed that, for Italy, civicness, which he defines as the vibrancy of associational life, newspaper readership, participation in referenda, and the absence of patron–client relationships, accounts best for responsive governance. He also showed that the civicness of some Italian regions can be traced back all the way to medieval times.

Putnam (1993, 2000) thus provides a core component of the theoretical framework guiding this study, as he established the causal link leading from political participation and civic engagement to good governance. This causal link was first established by Alexis de Tocqueville in his analysis of American democracy (2003), based on empirical research conducted in the United States in 1835. To Tocqueville, it was particularly participation in political associations that best explained the stability and temperedness of US democracy. Judith Tendler (1997), who studied Brazil and hence a country more similar to Botswana than the US, reached a very similar conclusion to Tocqueville and Putnam, namely that "good government in the tropics" (the title of her book), is most likely to occur when active citizen participation is met by a government that is open to such participation and willing to implement the suggestions reaching it from below.

In the economic realm, Amartya Sen (1999) has convincingly shown that democracy and freedom contribute to economic performance. Unlike earlier authors associated with modernization theory, Sen sees democracy as a goal in itself *and* as a means toward economic growth and overall wellbeing. He argues: "The effectiveness of freedom as an instrument lies in the fact that different kinds of freedom interrelate with one another, and

freedom of one type may greatly help in advancing freedom of other types" (Sen 1999, p. 37). Democratic freedom allows people to become economically active. They use the freedom created by a democratic government to expand their economic activities, among other things, becoming economic agents and contributors to the gross national product. Acemoglu et al. (2001) and Acemoglu and Robinson (2010) and their collaborators have explained Botswana's economic success with its protection and respect for private property. They suggest: "The puzzle is why Botswana ended up with such good institutions". (Acemoglu et al. 2002, p. 3) These authors find that precolonial dikgotla were indeed at the root of having good institutions, as they allowed citizens to hold chiefs accountable. They quote Isaac Schapera (1956) to argue that among the Sotho and Tswana, traditionally, "all matters of public concern are discussed finally at a popular assembly" (Acemoglu et al. 2002, p. 10). Acemoglu and his colleagues find the final component explaining good institutions in Botswana in the tendency of Tswana tribes to integrate other groups into their institutional structures, not allowing them to develop separate states and thus avoiding the kinds of ethnic clashes that have obstructed economic development elsewhere.

The work of Sen and Acemoglu plausibly trace Botswana's excellent economic performance back to its deliberative traditions, i.e., to the existence of pre-colonial dikgotla.

Socially, active citizen participation and deliberation has been heralded as a way to avoid the antagonisms fanned by representative democracies, which tend to foster division, opposition, and polarization. Jane Mansbridge (1980) argued that deliberation can potentially lead to consensus, even if she is aware that deliberation must also allow for dissent. Bernard Manin et al. (1987) argued in a similar fashion that deliberation has the potential to broaden the minds of those participating by increasing their understanding and tolerance for other opinions and positions, overcoming the kind of antagonism fostered by representative democracy. Jürgen Habermas (1985) has argued that in the absence of a broadly shared belief system, legitimate political decisions must rely on rational argument, dialogue, and deliberation. He shows that language bears the inherent potential for us to understand each other's opinions. In short, at least in theory, public assemblies, where average citizens can meet and discuss public matters, not only create more democratic legitimacy, hold governments accountable, and contribute to the economic performance of a country; they also work against social division and political polarization as people learn to listen, understand, and tolerate the arguments and opinions of others. Lydia Nyati-Ramahobo (1999) has argued that dikgotla allow Botswana's citizens to come together on a regular basis to seek consensus. She finds that dikgotla are responsible for maintaining social cohesion in Botswana, even if she is critical of the lack of participation of women and youth in most contemporary dikgotla sessions. Francis Nyamnjoh (2014) has taken this critical perspective even further, arguing that many dikgotla are coopted by elites.

Despite these critical voices, the relative absence of ethnic conflict in Botswana is testimony to the success of dikgotla deliberative forums to forge a sense of community among a diverse citizenry. In the social realm, institutionalized local deliberative forums, known in Setswana as dikgotla, thus not only explain Botswana's exceptional democratic performance, but also its economic and social success.

In Botswana, citizens meet on average once a month in their local kgotla to debate political matters. They deliberate among themselves and at times request the presence of elected officials to hold them accountable. Regarding civicness and political participation, Botswana is thus among the most civic and participative countries in the world.

## 3. Design and Method

To assess the explanatory strength of village assemblies, dikgotla, as the key factor explaining Botswana's exceptional political, social, and economic performance, I conducted an exploratory case study (Reiter 2017b) grounded in a disciplined configurative single case study (George and Bennett 2005). George and Bennett (2005) show that such a design is appropriate when seeking to assess a hypothesized causal mechanism. This method is also suited to address causal complexity. Disciplined configurative case studies use

established theories to explain a case (Eckstein 1975; George and Bennett 2005), making it particularly relevant for my attempt to gage the causal strength of participative democracy, as it allows for a theoretically grounded, mechanism-based historical explanation. Despite their limitations in producing generalizations that apply to a broad range of cases (Kennedy 1979), disciplined configurative single case studies allow for an assessment of rich details about individual cases and for the assessment of a large number of potentially relevant variables (George and Bennett 2005). Inductive exploratory research, which steers away from formulating strong claims of objectivity and facticity, can discover and explore potentially relevant causal mechanisms in human affairs that are highly relevant and yet undetectable through confirmatory empirical research (Reiter 2017b).

The research question driving my inquiry was 'what makes the Batswana political system so different?' as well as 'how much can the practice of dikgotla explain?' To address these questions, I provide a description of contemporary dikgotla and its history. The argument I seek to validate, as stated above, is that Botswana's tradition and contemporary practice of direct democratic village assemblies can explain its political, economic, and social exceptionalism. I was particularly interested in Botswana's political success and its democratic culture, as I define democracy as self-rule based on popular sovereignty. I treat these two components as goods in and for themselves, not mere indicators of democratic governance. As explained above, given the widespread disenchantment with democracy worldwide and the current tendency toward rising authoritarianism and fascism (Stanley 2018), Botswana's kgotla democracy is potentially paradigmatic in that it points to a different, genuinely African way to empower citizens through direct participation at the local level. In other words, Botswana's political system potentially contains lessons for the world.

While in Botswana, I relied on observation and conversations with local experts and with regular Batswana citizens waiting to be attended by the local government officers. Overall, I was able to talk to twelve Botswana citizens for about 30 min on average, including four experts, most of whom were historians and active professors at the University of Botswana. I also talked to two local chiefs, Dikgosi, Kgosi Kgari Sechele III, the chief of the Kweneng district and the Bakwena people, and Kgosi Mokalake, the chief of Modipane. In addition, I spoke with six regular citizens of Botswana and residents of Molepolole. On Friday, 12 May 2023, I observed a kgotla meeting in Modipane and produced fieldnotes of what I saw and learned during my attendance. As most conversations were conducted in Setswana, I relied on the assistance of a local translator, Ms. Tsholofelo Mokgoabone. Her presence and mediation not only facilitated my understanding of what I heard, observed, and witnessed; it also eased my access, particularly with regular citizens.

The kgotla we observed on May 12 lasted from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. It was a special kgotla, convened by a member of the Botswana parliament.

## 4. The Evidence: Botswana's Participative Democracy

Botswana is about the size of Texas, with 2.5 million inhabitants. Botswana's education, health, and welfare services are exemplary, not just in the African context, but worldwide. The Botswana state offers free education (Pre-K to 12) to all its citizens as well as stipends to attend university, even if service coverage and efficient delivery is not even across all regions and ethnic groups. Health care is universal and free for all its citizens. Life expectancy at birth currently stands at 66 years, lowered by the relatively high HIV prevalence of over 20 percent. The Batswana welfare system, instead of providing aid for the needy, focuses on supporting the poor with land and livestock so that they can escape the poverty trap and become autonomous. The state provides every citizen with free access to a plot of land to live on and it provides them with livestock so that they can make a living. Botswana has not seen political violence since its independence. There also have not been any major social conflicts[4], and its economy has been steadily growing at exceptional rates, placing it among the fastest growing economies in the world (Acemoglu and Robinson 2010).

Botswana has a deeply ingrained culture of free speech and debate. The Tswana can look back at an ancient tradition of village assemblies, known as dikgotla in Setswana, the dominant language. Dikgotla are public meeting places centrally located in every Tswana village. According to Ngwena and Kgathi (2011), kgotla "is a place where rituals, trials, sentences and punishments and village level discussions are carried out. . . kgotla in Botswana [is] a formal public assembly associated with the institution of traditional leadership" (p. 250). For Constance Moumakwa, "The Kgotla as a traditional system was and still is an institution serving as a forum for policy formulations, decision making, including political and economic developmental activities and judiciary on litigations" (Moumakwa 2010, p. 3). According to Mogoposi Lekorwe, "The *kgotla* is a Twana traditional and respected place of assembly by the community and the chief to discuss issues concerning village administration, planning, and settling of disputes" (Lekorwe 2011, p. 384). Yonah Matemba (Matemba 2003, 2005) has offered a historical perspective on traditional leadership in Botswana, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the evolution of governance in Southern Africa, while Nic Cheeseman's (2015) research offers a critical assessment of perduring authoritarian tendencies in African politics.

My own approach to studying participative and direct democratic political institutions in Botswana is influenced by the pioneering work of such African scholars as Claude Ake (1991, 1993, 2001), George Ayittey (2006, 2016), and Kofi Abrefa Busia (2023), who have all argued that African democracy cannot be constructed by following European blueprints. Claude Ake (1991, 1993, 2001) emphasizes the need to recognize the distinct historical, cultural, and socio-economic factors shaping African democracies and advocates for a broader conception of democracy that encompasses economic and social dimensions. George Ayittey (2006, 2016) further strengthens this line of argument by emphasizing the importance of reviving and strengthening traditional African governance structures as a foundation for sustainable development and democratic governance. Kofi Busia (2023), in turn, has argued for African solutions to African problems. John Comaroff (1978) emphasizes the importance of understanding Tswana political processes within their historical and cultural context, rather than through the lens of Western models of governance. These assessments are shared by the prominent African philosopher Jean-Godfroy Bidima (1997), who has shown that in an African context, words spoken in public carry great weight and are deemed binding, particularly in societies with strong oral traditions. Bidima lays out a genuinely African way to achieve justice, consensus, and democratic legitimacy. His approach is similar to the emphasis given to deliberation by Western scholars and yet different in its claim that in Africa, the centrality of "palabre" is indeed foundational to all societies and not restricted to coffee houses or bowling alleys (Habermas 1992; Putnam 2000).

These insights about the importance of African traditions for contemporary debates about African modernity are supported by the work of such contemporary scholars as Janine Ubink (2008) and Keshav Sharma (2005, 2010). Particularly Janine Ubink's (2008) work on the revival of traditional local authority structures in Africa provides insights into the role of chiefs and their relevance in contemporary governance. In turn, Keshav Sharma's (2005, 2010) extensive research on local governance in Botswana sheds light on the functions and powers of traditional chiefs and their integration into the country's legal and administrative systems.

Some analysts of African politics have highlighted the elite control and one-party dominance characteristic of Botswana's representative system. However, these analysists of African politics examine the overall performance of Botswana's *representative* political system. They do not focus, and one is tempted to argue, they do not recognize, the importance of Botswana's village assemblies for the assessment of Botswana's unique democracy. Without considering dikgotla, Botswana's representative, Westminster-style democracy is indeed flawed, as such authors as Nic Cheeseman (2015), Cheeseman and Fisher (2019), Kenneth Good (1999), Good and Taylor (2008), Mogalakwe and Nyamnjoh (2017), and Makgala and Botlhomilwe (2017) have all highlighted. Furthermore, by discussing the role

of traditional chiefs without considering their embeddedness in and accountability to local deliberative forums, dikgotla, these scholars miss the one element that makes Botswana's democracy so unique and instructive. Certainly, Botswana is no paradise and its democracy remains imperfect. However, its strong and deeply rooted deliberative political culture makes it unique and deserving of our attention. While such scholars as Mompati and Prinsen (2010), as well as Mompati and Chebanne (2000), have highlighted the importance of Botswana's village assemblies for the preservation of Tswana culture, they fail to recognize the political implications and their relevance for democratic theory. Keitseope Nthomang (2007), on the other hand, recognizes the importance of village assemblies in Botswana for people-centered development, without grasping the broader significance of these assemblies for democratic governance. de Jager and Sebudubudu (2016, 2017), finally, find illiberal tendencies among Botswana's political elites, thus following the narrow analytical frameworks of Robert Dahl (1998) and other American democracy scholars who seek to understand democratic systems by examining political elite behaviors and attitudes.

However, democracy, when reduced to elections and elite rotation becomes merely a form of elite governance (Schumpeter 1942). Real democracy, as Frank Bryan (2004) has called it, should not be reduced to these two indicators and instead be measured by the degree of active citizen involvement and their direct participation. The more active and direct citizen involvement, the closer a system comes to achieving self-rule and popular sovereignty, which have been recognized as foundational to democracy ever since John Locke published his treatises, in (Locke 1689), and Jean Jacques Rousseau further elaborated on them, in (Rousseau 1762). Voting for political representatives is indeed unrelated to true democracy and might even be opposed to it, as such prominent authors as Hannah Arendt (1973) and Hanna Pitkin (2004) have argued. What makes Botswana's democracy so unique is not its representative political system or its political elites. It is the endurance, continued practice, and centrality of its decentralized public assemblies, dikgotla.

Furthermore, it strikes me as problematic when scholars, who are otherwise willing to recognize innovation and positive contributions amidst murky political systems in the US and Europe, seem unwilling to extend the same grace to Botswana's democracy. Coopting political and economic elites, high incidences of HIV/AIDS, one-party dominance, and ethnic strife in the north and west of the country between different San groups and the Tswana do not invalidate the importance and effectiveness of dikgotla. Despotic chiefs have sought to coopt, use, and circumvent their constituents, but dikgotla has limited the power of chiefs and held them accountable to ordinary citizens. What makes Botswana's case so exceptional is not the presence of chiefs, who are common all over Africa. It is the endurance and survival of a tradition of institutionalized local deliberation in their dikgotla.

## 5. Dikgotla

The chief of Modipane, Kgosi Mokalake, explained to me that Kgotla is the essence of Botswana as a democratic nation (Kgosi Mokalake, Modipane, 15 May 2023).

A historian and university professor of the University of Botswana explained that Kgotla is a village court and a meeting place. He also highlighted that kgotla is a special place where customary conflicts are resolved (9 May 2023, Gaborone).

Kgotla refers to a public meeting place, similar to the classical Athenian pnyx, located in the middle of every Batwsana town. There are many dikgotla in Botswana, too many to count. Each neighborhood has its own kgotla, typically represented by a round place, demarcated with a fence made of sticks or nowadays with a wall. Each big kgotla has its own chief, a Kgosi. Smaller kgotla have a sub-kgosi, called kgosana.

Dikgotla have been described by precolonial European visitors and travelers as early as the 1820s. Ornulf Gulbrandsen (2012) has highlighted that dikgotla were central to the formation of Botswana's contemporary political culture, as dikgotla are very old and precolonial.

The earliest account I was able to identify of general assemblies among the Tswana comes from John Campbell, who was an emissary of the London Missionary Society and

travelled through Southern Africa during the early 19th century. In his book *Travels in South Africa, Undertaken at the Request of the London Missionary Society: Being a Narrative of a Second Journey in the Interior of that Country*, published in 1822, he describes a general assembly. Under the headline "the substance of some speeches delivered during a General Meeting of Captains, held at Lattakoo a few days before my arrival" (Campbell 1822, p. 154), he asserts: "Such is the freedom of speech at those public meetings, that some of the captains have said of the King, that he stupefies his mind by smoking tobacco, and is not fit to rule over them." (Campbell 1822, p. 157)

Campbell's statement indicates that dikgotla were already established before the Tswana came under British colonial rule in 1885. There is every reason to believe that kgotla is indeed an ancient practice, representing a genuinely African model of participative, deliberative democracy based on the centrality of "Palabre" (Bidima 1997).

An elderly woman with whom I spoke in Molopolole, on 10 May 2023, explained to me that everything that is done around here emanates from the kgotla. She found that community members have a voice to say something in the kgotla. (10 May 2023, Molepolole)

The city of Molepolole, with some 73,000 inhabitants, is the capital of the Kweneng District, which has some 400,000 people, most of whom are of the Bakwena tribe. The Molepolole kgotla is thus the seat of the biggest kgotla in Kweneng and is also the seat of the Kgosi, the traditional chief. Currently, this role is fulfilled by Kgosi Kgari Sechele III, who explained to me that he is the Kgosi of the Bakwena tribe and of the Kweneng District, which is a big territory. He also told me that each village has its own chief, with different ranks. Kgosi Kgari Sechele III has a deputy, and a representative. Smaller villages have a Kgosana. (10 May 2023, Molepolole, Botswana).

Dikgosi and their staff work with elected councilors, who represent residential and voting districts. They share the same office space so that citizens have access to both the traditional chief and the elected city or district representatives. In Molepolole and Modipane, this office space is connected to the dikgotla.

On 12 May 2023, I observed a kgotla session in the village of Modipane, a village of some 3000 inhabitants, 25 km east of Gaborone. I wrote in my field notes:

> The kgotla session was vested in ritual and protocol. Formalities clearly mattered. The kgotla session started at 8:30 a.m. with a prayer and the singing of the national hymn, and it ended with another prayer. Between 80 and 100 people were present, about half of them women. Women sat separately from men. Most women were dressed in traditional dresses. Most men wore dress jackets. The local Kgosi was present and sat in a central place. Next to him sat a minister from the national government. Also present were several government officials, bureaucrats, and directors of different state agencies responsible for such issues as garbage collection, infrastructure, and health provision.
>
> I was told that I had to wear a jacket to attend and that no hats were allowed during a kgotla meeting. Women are not allowed to wear pants in a kgotla. They all came in dresses, some of them traditional. Nobody raised their voice during their speech. Nobody interrupted. Many people took notes of what was said. Only very few women spoke, but after two men had spoken, the MC said it is now time for two women to speak. Only after no woman wanted to speak was the next man allowed to speak.
>
> Most of the time was spent questioning the minister and the bureaucrats on what they had acted on since the last kgotla, how the public money was spent, and why certain things that had been asked for a while ago had still not been acted upon. The minister took notes of all points and questions raised and replied to all of them, explaining delays and announcing new projects, such as a hospital to be built next year.
>
> It was remarked that the president had still not visited the kgotla of Modipane—and the minister informed the people that the president plans to do so next month.

Party politics are not allowed in dikgotla. No party symbols, colors, or flags are permitted in a dikgotla session so that discussions remain focused on concrete issues and what to do about them. Garbage collection, new roads, new hospitals, and land disputes among neighbors were the most discussed issues in the kgotla I observed.

It became very clear that kgotla is serious business. People learn from the government and the government listens, and replies, to the concerns the people. I had never before seen such a close interaction between elected government officials and bureaucrats with average people, never witnessed a minister or MP so accessible to local citizens, taking their concerns seriously and responding to their complaints and critiques.

Free speech and respect were the hallmarks of the meeting, as anybody was allowed to say anything. I witnessed, maybe for the first time, government for the people, by the people, and with the people.

## 6. The Political Context

Dikgotla are a central element of democracy in Botswana today. They are now part of the government and represent the local branch thereof. It is where policies are proposed, explained, critiqued, and discussed. Dikgotla are spaces for deliberation and for government officials to be held accountable. Dikgotla are presided over by a Kgosi, a traditional chief, or a Kgosana, a sub-chief, in smaller towns and villages. Dikgosi have offices and staff that function as local government branches. They work together with elected councilors, sharing the same office and staff.

Dikgotla today no longer make national laws. Lawmaking, like in other representative democracies, happens in parliament. Westminster-style democracy is the legacy of British colonial rule. But in Botswana, Westminster-style parliamentarism is met with the ancient tradition of public deliberation, as conducted in the dikgotla.

In today's Botswana, dikgotla have been reduced to forums of public debate, with the main function to facilitate the access of the people to local government, for the government to inform the people, and for the people to hold their government accountable. Most dikgotla meet about once a month. Most meetings are among the people and their Kgosi.

As branches of the local government, the Dikgosi and Dikgosana function as local government officers, supported by staff, with whom citizens can resolve bureaucratic issues. The people I talked to in Molepolole waiting to be attended by the Kgosi's office were there to settle land disputes with neighbors, to finally secure a pension from mining work conducted in neighboring South Africa, to obtain a marriage license, and to receive assistance with insurance claims. While in Modipane, I also witnessed a woman in the process of bringing a criminal case against a police officer and a relative. To do so, she first sought to obtain a letter of support from her Kgosi.

If a Kgosi is unable to solve or address a case to the satisfaction of a citizen, he or she can take the case to the judicial system. Most minor cases, however, are resolved by the Kgosi and his or her staff. While Dikgosi are predominantly men, thus far four women have served as Dikgosi countywide (Matemba 2005).

The constitution of Botswana, passed in 1966, integrated the traditional system of Dikgotla and Dikgosi into the country's legal, judicial, and executive system, making local chiefs the local branch of government. As each Kgosi works around a kgotla, the Dikgosi become the connection between the people and the state through the kgotla.

There are eight traditional tribes, or ethnic groups, in Botswana. These are the Bangwato, Bakwena, Bangwaketse, Bakgatla, Barolong, Batlokwa, Balete, and Batawana. Each of these groups has a home territory. All eight principal tribes are represented in the *Ntlo ya Dikgosi*. In addition, there are 20 members from the districts of the north and northeast of the country and five members appointed by the President, for a total of 35 members. Beyond these eight groups, several smaller ethnic groups live in Botswana, some of which are not entirely integrated into the Tswana system of dikgotla governance. This is particularly true for some foraging and semi-nomadic San groups who live in the west and north of the

country. More systematic research should assess how Tswana political institutions fare in regions where the Tswana are not dominant.

In those areas of the country without a traditional and dominant ethnic group, Dikgosi are elected in the local dikgotla. Among the traditional eight districts, serving as a Kgosi is hereditary. The Dikgosi from these groups are of royal ancestry (Comaroff 1978).

After colonization, through the constitution of 1966 and several acts that followed, dikgotla and Dikgosi became anchored into the Botswana constitution.

Prof. Keshav Sharma, formerly of the University of Botswana, details the (n.d.) Chieftainship Act:

> "The Chieftainship Act lays down the functions and powers of chiefs at different levels of traditional structure and tribal rule. According to this Act, a chief is identified by the Kgotla in a customary manner and is appointed by the minister."
>
> (Sharma 2022, p. 5)

During the 1990s, several African countries recognized and strengthened the role of traditional chiefs and kings in their constitutions. Janine Ubink (2008) lists five reasons for this revival of traditional local authority structures in such countries as Mozambique, Ghana, Uganda, and South Africa: chiefs can deliver important services; chiefs can add legitimacy to governments; chiefs can serve as intermediaries between local communities and the government; governments rely on chiefs to harness the support of local communities; and governments rely on chiefs' cooperation to assert their power.

My research in Botswana clearly attests to all these functions. Unlike the assessment provided by Ubink (2008), however, in Botswana, these functions, while connected to the chief, truly emanate from the dikgotla.

According to Keshav Sharma (2005), local chiefs deal with some 90 percent of judicial cases in Botswana, thus constituting a central component of Botswana jurisdiction. Sharma explains that, "one of the most significant roles of the traditional leaders in Botswana is in the administration of customary courts. These customary courts are popular with the people in rural areas, as they are easily accessible, cheap, fast, and comprehensible. Customary courts remain significant in so far as these courts handle 80 to 90 per cent of civil and criminal cases in the country". (Sharma 2005, p. 122f)

When discussing local governance in Botswana, Sharma finds that, "Botswana has a commendable track record regarding the growth and functioning of local government in the African context. It has a conducive and enabling democratic political environment in which local government can develop. There is peace, stability, and the rule of law across the country. There is also freedom of expression, criticism, and opposition. Public participation in public policy making, development planning and implementation has grown steadily. Political leadership has demonstrated a commitment to promote decentralization as evidenced by the establishment of Presidential Commissions in 1977 and 2001. Local level political leadership has grown steadily. District Administration displays improved administrative capacities." (Sharma 2010, p. 137)

While the importance and centrality of chiefs and local governance is thus known and has been widely discussed in the literature, e.g., by such authors as Matemba (2003, 2005), Sharma (2010), Bako-Arifari (1999), Crowder (1978), and D'Engelbronner-Kolff et al. (1998), most of these authors focus on the role of the local chief in furthering local democracy. In Botswana, however, local chiefs, Dikgosi, cannot be separated from their kgotla, the village assembly. According to Mogopodi Lekorwe, "The *kgotla* has always been the central feature of Tswana society and has existed from time immemorial". It is an institution that dates back to the pre-colonial era. Thus, politicians in Botswana are of the view that the country's parliamentary democracy is anchored in the traditional political structures of the kgotla" (Holm and Molutsi 1989; Lekorwe 2011, p. 384).

## 7. Lawmaking and the House of Chiefs, Ntlo ya Dikgosi

Contrary to the widely discussed argument, presented originally by Mahmood Mamdani (1996), that in Southern Africa, British indirect rule gave local chiefs more power

than they'd ever had in the past, in Botswana, local chiefs were more powerful before colonization than they are now, as no other power existed outside or beyond the Dikgosi and the dikgotla (Ramsay et al. 1998).

However, Dikgosi were always controlled and legitimated by their constituents through their dikgotla. Before colonialism, the kgotla was the political forum for public deliberation and lawmaking. Once debated, laws were then enacted by the executive power, the local chief. Local chiefs did not become "despots" as Mamdani argues for South Africa, during colonial rule. Instead, in Botswana, with colonialism, they were reduced to become advisors to parliament.

Dikgosi are still powerful, respected, and important at the local village and town levels, but they have lost almost all their power at the national level, in the lawmaking process.

## 8. Alternative Explanations and Additional Factors

This article aims to demonstrate that it is Botswana's deeply ingrained democratic culture and its high level of direct citizen participation at the local level that accounts for its democratic stability and its exceptional democratic performance. However, before fully committing to dikgotla as the most salient causal mechanism at work, alternative explanations should be considered.

The available information about this country indicates a general sense of "good governance" and "prudent fiscal policy"[5] as the causes for its exceptional performance. If we accept that good governance and prudent fiscal policy can partially account for Botswana's economic performance, we must still ask what the causes for good governance and prudent fiscal policy are. Accountability is the most salient factor in explaining both good governance and prudent fiscal policy (Przeworski et al. 1999). The Botswana political system, in return, is held accountable through its public assemblies, which asks elected officials and even the president to render accounts in different dikgotla. Both good governance and prudent fiscal policy can thus be traced back to the vibrant political participation of Batswana citizens in their dikgotla. Dikgotla hold government accountable, enforcing good governance and a prudent fiscal policy (Acemoglu et al. 2002; Acemoglu and Robinson 2010).

Botswana has the richest diamond mine in the world, the Jwaneng mine. Revenues from this mine account for some 80 percent of foreign currency earnings and make up almost 50 percent of the country's revenue. Some 18 percent of Botswana's GDP comes from diamonds and diamond trading.[6] It might be argued that Botswana is performing so well, at least in the economic realm, due to its diamonds, which the country exploits in partnership with South Africa's De Beers in a 50% joint venture, where the Batswana part is owned and controlled by the government. However, as the body of literature on the resource curse has long established, resources, even if nationalized, more often than not lead to corruption and inflation (Auty 1993; Sachs and Warner 2001). Botswana's diamonds cannot account for its good economic performance, let alone its exceptional political and social performance. To the contrary, the fact that Botswana's diamonds have not produced a resource "curse" must be attributed to its good governance and the robustness of its democratic institutions, which, in turn, can be best explained with reference to its strong citizen participation, as argued above and demonstrated by Acemoglu and Robinson (2010) and Acemoglu et al. (2002) and their collaborators.

Almost every African village, no matter in which contemporary country, can look back at a millennial tradition of village democracy, mostly headed and controlled by traditional chiefs or kings. However, kingship is not the only way village life was and continues to be organized in Africa. In many places, villagers join in to discuss and decide on a collective course of action, and there is evidence of a continued tradition of such a practice. Claude Ake indeed argues that

> "Traditional African political systems were infused with democratic values. They were invariably patrimonial, and consciousness was communal; everything was

> everybody's business, engendering strong emphasis on participation. Standards of accountability were even stricter than in Western societies" (Ake 1996, p. 65)

Jean Philip Teffo (2002) has in turn argued that many traditional African political systems are 'communocracies,' characterized by broad communal involvement in political decision making. In Lesotho, citizens regularly gather in their pitsos in a very similar way to how Botswana citizens gather in their dikgotla, and Zambia has also been heralded by some (Burnell 2005) as exceptional.

What makes Botswana's dikgotla so special? The answer to this question is that while almost all African countries can indeed look back at a tradition of village democracy similar to the one practiced in Botswana, colonial rule has usurped this tradition, transforming many local chiefs and kings into what Mahmood Mamdani has called "local despots" (1996). Particularly in British colonies, indirect rule has de-democratized village assemblies while empowering chiefs and kings by integrating them into the colonial apparatus, using them as local administrators and tax collectors. Under indirect rule, local chiefs became local administrators of and for the colonial power, thus undermining and effectively ending local participatory assemblies in most African countries.

In Botswana, a lack of resources (diamonds were only discovered after independence, in 1967) has protected Tswana political structures from colonial and postcolonial interference. The Brits, instead of thoroughly colonizing "Bechuanaland," established it as a protectorate, allowing traditional political structures to prevail. Given that Bechuanaland was perceived by the colonizing powers as a barren land, unattractive and without promise, colonization and European settlement reached late, if at all. According to Thomas Pakenham, author of *The Scramble for Africa*, "Bechuanaland was mostly desert, with squabbling native chiefs, expendable" (Pakenham 1992, p. 378). Particularly the north of today's Botswana escaped major colonization and was thus able to maintain its own political institutions.

Postcolonial imperialism also did not affect Botswana the way it has other African countries, such as the Congo, where international companies, supported by their governments, heavily interfered in national politics. Botswana was largely left alone and was thus able to maintain its millennial direct democratic structures, at least at the local level (Kohli 2021).

Botswana, in other words, escaped the influence of imperialist powers to some extent, even if Great Britain made it one of its many African colonies. To rule the Tswana, the UK relied on indirect rule in Bechuanaland, limiting the amount of time, effort, and resources the UK spent there. However, the power of local chiefs did not increase during British colonial rule, as it did almost everywhere else in Africa (Mamdani 1996). To the contrary, Tswana chiefs lost the power of being independent sovereigns, held in check only by their dikgotla (Ramsay et al. 1998). They became subject to British colonial power in addition to being controlled by their own constituents. Very importantly, while British colonialism weakened the power of traditional chiefs, Dikgosi, it did not affect dikgotla, the village assemblies.

Overall, Bechuanaland escaped the kind of major imperialist interreference that other countries with more resources suffered. As a result, the Tswana were able to preserve many of their own political traditions of self-rule, direct democracy, and democratic participation.

Have other, similar countries that have also maintained village assemblies been equally successful? If my explanation holds, then such countries as Lesotho, which also counts on local village assemblies (*Pitso*), should be equally successful. However, it turns out that while Lesotho has Pitsos, Lesotho citizens do not feel empowered the same way the Batswana do. In a conversation with a Botswana citizen who is originally from Lesotho but has lived for over 20 years in Botswana she explained that to her, Botswana is unique. She told me that when she goes home, to Lesotho, she sees a vast difference. In her view, citizens have an input in everything in Botswana, but not in Lesotho (Molepolole, 5 May 2023).

Certainly, several factors contribute to Botswana's political, social, and economic success. However, as this discussion has shown, none of them can account for this success more than its tradition and practice of village assemblies, dikgotla.

## 9. Conclusions

Academics from the Global North have long analyzed and assessed the countries of the Global South. Such specialists as Jeffrey Sachs (2005), whose book promises *The End of Poverty* and has been endorsed by Bono, seem to have specialized on the problems of the world and how to solve them. By doing so, "development specialists" further consolidate the already broadly accepted assumption that there is a "Third World" that is inherently problematic and requires the help from the "advanced" Western world. Whether voluntarily or not, authors like Jeffrey Sachs contribute to upholding a colonial world order as they continue to frame entire continents as problematic and dependent on the aid and expertise of the Global North. Such a framing undermines the expertise and status of knowledge produced in the countries of the Global South. A decolonial approach to studying and engaging with the countries of the Global South demands a recognition not only of their problems, but also of their expertise, their innovations, and their creativity. This article applies such a decolonial framework to the study of Botswana's participatory democracy. I argue that Botswana is indeed among the most democratic countries in the world because of its vibrant civicness and ardent political participation, which is also responsible for its very high voting turnout and overall exceptional political, economic, and social performance. The causal link connecting dikgotla to these positive outcomes is clear, as dikgotla is a millennial practice whereas all other variables have come later.

Botswana's local, direct participatory system, its dikgotla, hold government accountable. Political stability in Botswana is secured through active citizen participation so that Batswana know and understand what their government does. Through dikgotla, Botswana citizens acquire and refresh their technical knowledge about politics and governance. As James Fishkin (2020) and Michael Neblo (2017) have shown, informed citizens make better political decisions. Dikgotla fights political alienation and furthers the political education and knowledge of Botswana citizens.

At the same time, state officials, both elected and bureaucratic, are asked to come to dikgotla and explain their actions. Politicians are asked by the people what they have acted on in parliament, and particularly how they have spent public money. Public officials attend dikgotla and explain themselves and their actions. They are made to respect dikgotla, just as average citizens are subject to sanctions in the case of disrespect. Dikgotla are vested in ritual and ceremony, making dikgotla sessions special and giving them an air of importance. Through dikgotla, government officials are held accountable.

In dikgotla, grievances are voiced, and conflicts are dealt with and settled where possible. Social conflict is avoided by addressing the problems of citizens. Sanctions and punishments are publicly debated and decided by the local chief. Citizens who are not satisfied with the ruling of a local chief have recourse to the national justice system, but in most cases, solutions are found locally. Because of dikgotla, many social conflicts are resolved at the local level and escalation is avoided. Dikgotla help keep social peace.

By holding government accountable, dikgotla are a strong force against corruption. Low levels of corruption among government officials, in turn, can partly account for good economic performance. Dikgotla incentivize good governance, and good governance, in turn, promotes economic growth.

Botswana's local direct democratic system, dikgotla, supplements its parliamentary system. While pure parliamentary systems, as well as presidential ones, all of which rely on political representatives alone, are in crisis everywhere, Botswana's political system has been not only stable, but extraordinarily successful in holding its government accountable, educating its citizens in political matters, avoiding social conflict, and, by actively fighting government corruption, securing exemplary economic growth.

Today, dikgotla are places to debate local issues, make local decisions, and hold traditional chiefs accountable. Before British colonization, which lasted from 1885 to 1966, however, dikgotla were the only legislative forums able to make laws, thus serving a similar function as the Athenian agora and pnyx of classical times.

British colonial rule has forced political representation onto Botswana's political system and pushed traditional rule, exercised by dikgotla and traditional chiefs who wielded executive and judicial powers, to the background. Representative democracy, however, since its very conception, has been a tool to secure elite rule while claiming popular sovereignty. As such, representative democracy serves mostly to advance the interests of elites, domestic and foreign. In Botswana, given the low level of interest of both British and later US political elites, elements of traditional direct and participative democracy were able to survive to this day, so that Botswana's contemporary political system consists of a mix of traditional African democracy and Westminster-style representative rule (Ifezue 2015). However, British colonial rule has meant that English traditions and customs have become normalized and elevated to the status of universal validity, whereas Tswana traditions and customs have become "customary" and now fall under "tribal" practices. This colonial framing prevails to this day. English traditions are no less customary and tribal than Tswana traditions. It is only through colonization that one became elevated over the other. English customary law is, however, ill-suited to address societal disputes in Africa.

Accordingly, further democratizing Botswana's political system implies further democratizing its own legal traditions instead of adopting British ones (Ake 2001). British representative democracy was never aimed at allowing for genuine self-rule or the direct or strong participation of average citizens. Traditional African democracies, to the contrary, were created to secure the direct political influence of their people, even if they contained some exclusionary components. However, as Bennet (2019) has pointed out, women held prominent societal roles and wielded significant political power among the pre-colonial Tswana. With the election of the first woman to the position of chief in 2003 (Matemba 2005), Batswana have already started a process of further democratizing their democratic traditions. As they continue to do so, they also lend strength to the argument advanced here that the future of Africa's democracies must lie in the democratization of their own democratic traditions.

While no single factor can explain all the positive outcomes, what sets Botswana apart from similar cases is the presence, and proper functioning of its village assemblies. Dikgotla are thus most likely the main causally relevant factor explaining Botswana's exceptional political, social, and economic performance. Good governance in Botswana is caused by dikgotla.

As most of the world's representative democracies are currently struggling to fend of political alienation, manipulation of public opinions, and corruption, Botswana offers important lessons for how to improve democratic performance and accountability. Lessons learned from Botswana's participatory democracy apply to all democracies.

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## Notes

1 https://freedomhouse.org/country/botswana/freedom-world/2020 (accessed on 10 September 2024).
2 https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/29/ (accessed on 10 September 2024).
3 Botswana's political system is not purely of the Westminster type. Instead, in Botswana, a Westminster parliamentary system is mixed with a presidential system.
4 The exception being the situation of the Khoisan people in the western part of the country, who have been displaced from their ancestral lands.
5 www.oecd.org (accessed on 10 September 2024).
6 https://www.statista.com (accessed on 10 September 2024).

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