

The influence of *botho* on social space in Botswana since independence

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Since independence, Botswana has developed from one of the poorest countries in the world to a middle-income country. In spite of rapid urbanisation and global capitalism, the ideology and philosophy of social interaction and ethics known in Setswana as *botho*, has unquestionably survived as a cultural construct. The most pertinent physical manifestations of *botho* are the *kgotla* (meeting place) and the family home. This article explores the current state of these institutions, once exclusively male and female spaces respectively, comparing how the spatiality of these architectural places has reacted to prosperity and change in rural versus urban settings.

Key words: Botswana, *botho*, Tswana architecture, *kgotla*

Die invloed van *botho* op sosiale ruimte in Botswana sedert onafhanklikheidswording

Sedert onafhanklikheid het Botswana ontwikkel vanaf een van die armste lande ter wêreld tot 'n middle-inkomste land. Ten spyte van vinnige verstedeliking en globale kapitalisme het die ideologie van sosiale interaksie en etiek, in Setswana bekend as *botho*, ongetwyfeld bly voortbestaan as 'n kulturele bobou. Die mees pertinente fisiese manifestasie van *botho* is die *kgotla* (versamelplek) en die familiewoning. Hierdie artikel ondersoek die huidige stand van hierdie instellings, voorheen uitsluitlik manlike en vroulike ruimtes respektiwelik, en vergelyk hoe die ruimtelikheid van hierdie argitektoniese plekke gereageer het op vooruitgang en verandering tussen landelike en stedelike omgewings.

Sleutelwoorde: Botswana, *botho*, Tswana argitektuur, *kgotla*

The term *botho* has recently become entrenched as a national principle in Botswana's Vision 2016, the country's economic and social development agenda for the 21st century. Mapadimeng (2009: 76) writes that "the first intellectual attempt to define and explain the *ubuntu/botho* culture" was in the 1960s and 1970s by the journalist Jordan Ngubane (1917-1985) as "A philosophy of life and the practice of being humane which gave content to life for African people long before the arrival of white settlers". Madipeng succinctly expands on this: "Its core defining values are respect, group solidarity, conformity, compassion, human dignity and humaneness, collective unity and solidarity, sharing, universal brotherhood, communalism, interdependence, and hospitality". A popular English translation is "a person is a person through other people" (Setswana: *motho ke motho ka batho*).

The aim of this article is to explore how the spatial patterns intrinsic to the two most entrenched physical manifestations of *botho*, namely the customary meeting place, the *kgotla*, and the family home, the *kgoro*, have been reacting to post-colonial socio-economic realities. The fact that the former was the exclusive domain of men in traditional society, and the latter, the domain of women, set against the background of gender equality and rapid urbanisation, add considerable complexity to the investigation.

Why not study the theme in my own country, neighbouring South Africa? After all, South Africa's Setswana speakers vastly outnumber the Setswana speakers in Botswana. The reason is simply that colonialism, and later apartheid (with its discriminatory economic, political and land policies), effectively prevented the existence of traditional villages, undermined cultural practices and severely curtailed the possibility of self-expression. In Botswana, on the other hand, not only did the customs prescribed by *botho* survive, but the Tswana also perpetuated their building traditions in rural villages. Some of these villages have since grown into towns.

Great Zimbabwe was at its height when, during the 14th century, the people known today as the Sotho-Tswana started settling in the north-western and western parts of present day South Africa. Over a period of nearly 600 years the settlements of the Tswana in particular changed from a pattern of dispersed homesteads to one of increasingly larger and denser villages, culminating in agro-pastoral towns with populations estimated by early 19th century travellers to be in the range of 10,000 to 20,000. Most were destroyed during the internal conflicts of the 1820s, known as the difaqane, particularly by the raiders of Mzilikazi, the AmaNdebele chief. By the time the Trekboer settlers moved into their territories, they had all but ceased to exist, and the stubborn survivors – staunchly resisting white overrule – moved further northwest into what became the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland in 1885. There was, however, a high level of missionary activities.

British interest in controlling Bechuanaland was motivated by the need for a corridor around the ZAR to connect the Cape Colony with Zimbabwe and Zambia as they are known today. The hot and dry country with prolonged periods of drought and its subsistence economy offered little for European exploitation. As a consequence, infrastructure development was largely limited to roads that enabled the few white settler farmers to move their produce to markets in neighbouring countries. The British did not build a single high school and even administered the Protectorate from Mafikeng in the adjacent Cape Colony.

Construction of Gaborone, the capital, commenced in 1964 and it was ready for the independence celebrations of 1966 when Bechuanaland was renamed Botswana. At that point, it was one of the poorest nations in the world. The subsequent discovery of huge deposits of copper, nickel, soda-ash and in particular, diamonds, resulted in a booming economy, further underpinned by a robust tourism industry.

The sustained economic success and concomitant infrastructure development is quite unique in post-independence sub-Saharan Africa where mismanagement and a disregard for the welfare of ordinary people have resulted in dependent economies and lack of infrastructure. It is widely asserted that this unique situation derives from the use of the concept of *kgotla* (consensus-based community councils), that is so entrenched that Botswana can claim to be Africa's oldest democracy (Denbow and Thebe 2006: 23).

A United Nations (2008: 19) report recently stated: “The development plans of Botswana have always been based upon the five national principles, which are Democracy, Development, Self-reliance Unity and *Botho*”. These principles have also been adopted in the *Long Term Vision for Botswana* (Vision 2016). *Botho* is widely understood as “a social contract of mutual respect, responsibility and accountability”, intrinsic to a philosophy – a world view – that demands interdependence, communalism and the subservience of the individual to the welfare of the community as a whole (University of Botswana 2012).

Botswana has a land area of 582,000 sq km of which an area of only approximately 34,000 sq km is inhabited by more than five persons per sq km, where the vast majority of its nearly two million citizens reside. Whereas about 80 per cent of the population are Setswana speakers, Botswana have traditionally dominated approximately 138,200 sq km adjacent to Botswana, in the North West province, where Setswana is the home language of 65.4 per cent of the people (figure 1).

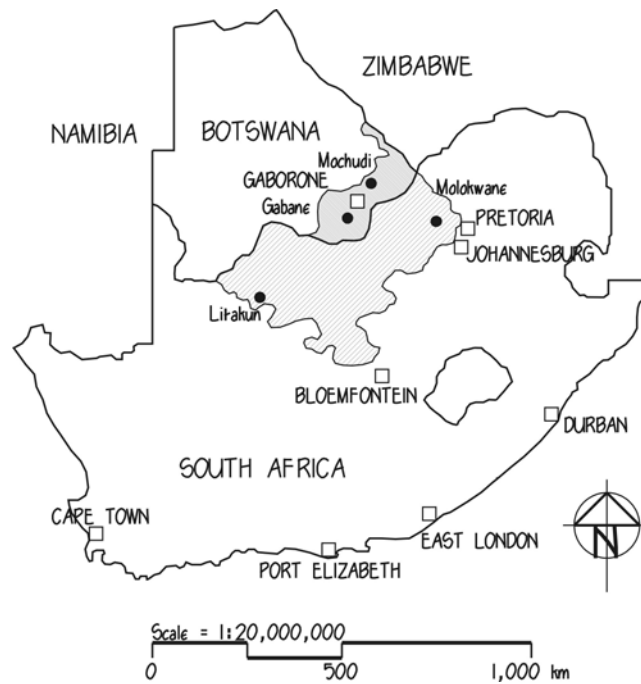


Figure 1
The traditional lands of the Tswana in South Africa and Botswana (drawing by the author).

Theory

Vision 2016 propagates the principle that “*botho* must permeate every aspect” of life in Botswana, and must be central to education, the workplace, national policy, as well as community and home life. Within this framework, following an introduction to Botswana, the concept of *botho* is first examined broadly, followed by overviews of the *kgotla* and the Tswana house in that order. In both instances, urban and rural precedents, as well as current and evolving gender roles in relation to traditional conventions, are compared.

The connected term Sotho-Tswana is often used because of the numerous commonalities in the language and customs, even when referring only to the Tswana. The early settlements are also uniformly described as Sotho-Tswana, but those described in this article are exclusively Tswana.

Focusing on the Tswana was not an opportunistic choice: Not only can the migrations of the Tswana and the evolution of their culture and building traditions be tracked over an uninterrupted period of nearly six centuries into the present; they also built the largest villages in pre-colonial southern Africa, allowing them to be studied in what may cautiously be qualified as urban settings.

Early origins

Samuel Daniell, in 1801, was the first European visitor to Litakun to record his observations. Also referred to as Dithakong, it was the capital of the Sotho-Tswana tribe known as the Bathlapin and was situated approximately 70 kilometres east of present day Kuruman. William John Burchell visited this area in 1812 and published a vivid, graphic and written account, entitled *Travels in the interior of southern Africa, Volume 2* (1824), devoting 242 of 619 pages to Litakun. This book is probably the most extensive and scholarly account of pre-colonial Tswana customs and

constructions and is still in print. He described Litakun as a collection of 30-40 little villages each centred on a chieftain and spread over an area of roughly 2.5 by 3.2 km. He estimated approximately 700 to 800 “circular huts” and a population conservatively estimated at “nearly 5,000 souls” (1824: 284). Burchell’s view from the entrance to Litakun illustrates the size and spread of the town (figure 2). It depicts the *kgotla* beneath the tree beyond the oxen and the chief’s dwelling to the left. From Burchell’s (1824: 514) description, it is evident that the layout and spatial relationships are not incidental, but the result of a ritualised, replicable process.

Burchell did not use the word *botho* once, but in a chapter *General Description of the Bachapins* (1824: 529-599) he writes extensively about codified rites and customs under headings that include “Government”, “Policy”, “Law”, “Nature of their chief’s authority”, “Women” and “Marriage”. He did not use the word *kgotla* either, but instead referred to the “*Móotsi*, or Public Enclosure, in which the Bichuānas usually assemble and hold their *píicho*” [*pitso* = Setswana for *kgotla* meeting] (1824: 371). He described it as a circular space 25 to 30 metres in diameter enclosed with a rough timber palisade and located close to the chief’s house. He notes that it was a “place of public resort for men, but not for women”. Burchell sketched “The Chief and his party, sitting in the *Móotsi*” (1824: 381) and also observed such enclosures at compounds of lesser households scattered throughout the village.



Figure 2
Entrance into Litakun by William Burchell (1824: 464).

Burchell (1824: 514-15, 521) was also the first to survey and draw bilobial dwellings and describe them as the domain of women (figure 3). He observed:

There is one quality for which the Bachapins, and probably the other tribes of Bichuanas are greatly to be admired, and in which they excel more than all the southern inhabitants of this part of Africa; the neatness, good order and cleanness of their dwellings.

All huts had outer circular fencing defining two courtyards. Huts were generally 2.5 to 4.0 m across while the chief’s hut had a diameter of approximately 5.0 m. The roofs of the larger houses were approximately 8.0 m in diameter and the space formed by the veranda, between the poles and the wall, provided shaded space (Burchell 1824: 518). Burchell was also the first to note the difference between the semi-private front lobe (he called it the “public section”) and

the private rear lobe. The wall inside the doorway that obstructed the view to the interior of the hut is also significant since this is not a standard configuration.

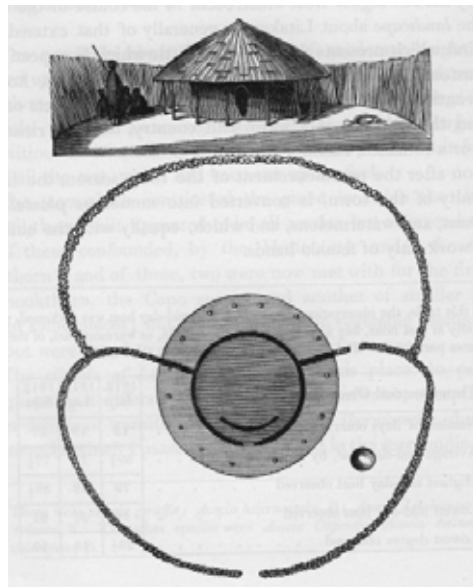


Figure 3
William Burchell's engraving of a bilobial homestead (Burchell 1824: 528).

Since Litakun was constructed with earth, grass, logs and reeds and all traces have vanished, its locality has not yet been identified. On the other hand, Kaditshwene, capital of the Bahurutshe, whose stonewall ruins were located by Jan Boeyens (2000), and described by Boeyens and Plug (2011), was visited by John Campbell in 1820; his depictions of the town and the chief's compound are well known (figures 4 and 5). Also known as Kurreechane, this large agro-town was situated 25 kilometres north-east of Zeerust, and approximately 40 kilometres from the Botswana border. The population was estimated by Campbell (1822: 277), in his *Travels in South Africa*, at approximately 16,000 people.



Figure 4
Kaditshwene by John Campbell in 1820 (source: Boeyens 2000: 11).



Figure 5
The chief's compound at Kaditshwene as depicted by John Campbell, 1820
 (source: www.kaditshwene.com).

Analyses of the ruins of Kaditshwene and other abandoned Tswana towns reveal a consistent pattern of connectedness and spatial relations between the chief's dwelling, his *kgotla* and its courtyard and ceremonial kraal, as well as the relationship of these to the other homesteads in the village (Boeyens et al 2011: 6). There is without doubt an intrinsic interrelationship between space and social organisation. Boeyens and Plug (2011: 7) state significantly that “the replacement of the cattle kraal by the *kgotla* as the public assembly area of the chiefdom marked the development of greater political complexity and the emergence of large-scale decision-making units”. He quotes the eminent Norwegian social anthropologist, Gulbrandsen: “the *kgosi* [chief] and his court, the *kgotla*, were the focal point of the state, politically, economically, ritually and spatially”. During the mid-1820s Kaditshwene – like all the stone-walled agro-towns – was destroyed in the *Difaqane*. The Bahurutshe never again built a town and today remnants of this tribe are still found scattered around Lehurutshe. Other tribes (Setswana: *morafe*) migrated to the region known today as Botswana.

Botswana

Comaroff et al (2007: 61) note that:

The overall design of Tswana towns remained fairly resilient throughout colonial Bechuanaland, their proportions changing relatively little with the passage of time. Even after the independence of Botswana (1966), the larger chiefdoms retained strong architectural traces of the past; they still do.

Mochudi, a large village founded in 1871, 37 km north of Gaborone, is the quintessential example. The capital of the Bakgatla, it has a population of approximately 40,000. Significantly, Seretse regards the Bakgatla “as the foremost custodians of the Setswana culture”. He notes that, although the Bakgatla were the first to build European-style houses “it is possible that the oldest buildings in Botswana are to be found in Mochudi” (2007). The legendary anthropologist, Isaac Schapera (1905-2003), wrote profusely on all aspects of Tswana life and visited Mochudi regularly between 1929 and 1950. His photographs of village architecture and scenes during that era have been ordered and edited by the renowned team of anthropologists, John and Jean Comaroff, assisted by Deborah James (2007) and is a precious source of information.

The Phuthadikobo Museum contains a fascinating exhibition of narratives, photographs and models depicting the development of the village from its founding. The morphology depicted in the late 19th century photograph of Mochudi (figure 6) is the same as that of Kaditshwene, but soon the geometry changed from circular to semi-circular, retaining the kgotla and cattle stockade in the centre (figure 7).

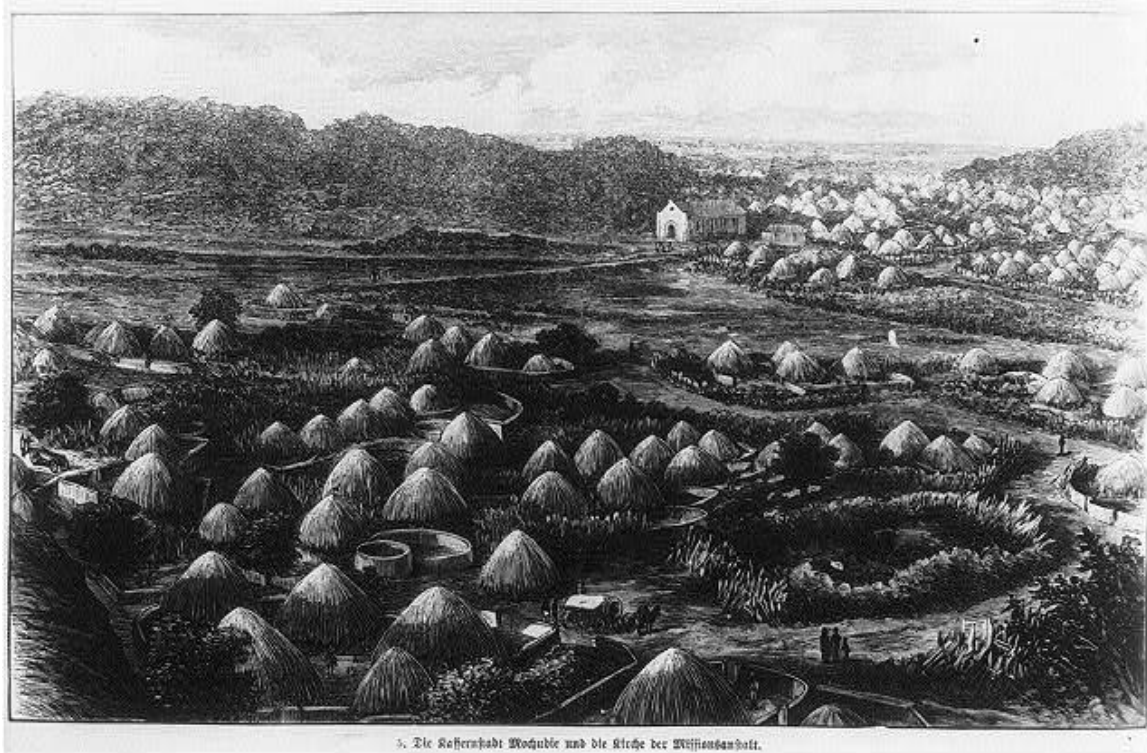


Figure 6

An image from 1899 entitled The Kaffrarian city Mochudi and the mission church (source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C.).



Figure 7

Kgotla and cattle stockade as centre of horseshoe-shaped cluster of dwellings (photograph by the author).

This pattern illustrates the most striking difference between rural and urban forms, and by implication, mode of social interaction. The layout of rural villages where people of kin are

neighbours is organic and based on choice and incremental growth. As Denbow and Thebe (2006: 92) explain: The “semicircular homestead-corral units were simply multiplied over and over again as the population grew”, adding that towns were laid out around the chief’s compound “in a specific order of seniority”, all linked by a network of pathways and open spaces. Furthermore, rural land is often still communally owned and the people living there are often related (Denbow and Thebe 2006: 102).

Until the mid-1970s the majority of Batswana peoples lived in thatched round huts (colloquially called *rondavels* in southern Africa) in traditional villages (Grant et al 1995: 33), but the urban population as a proportion of the country as a whole has been growing exponentially, from 9.1 per cent in 1971 to 54.1 per cent in 2001 (Gwebu 2004).

Rural form and relationships are in stark contrast to the situation in cities where the streets lie in a grid, lined with residential plots occupied by unrelated households. With *botho* based on communitarianism, is it not threatened by urbanisation? Of course! Many families, in fact, respond by regarding their “real homes” to be in a village, where they would often have a house and cattle (Denbow and Thebe 2006: 93).

Botho

Schapera was a prolific author and wrote extensively about every conceivable aspect of Tswana life. He never used the word *botho*, but his writings about initiation rites, cattle magic, medicines, sexuality, married life, praise-poems, rainmaking rites and land tenure – all highly ritualised and codified behaviour – describe in detail the essential elements of what is today widely recognised as the philosophy of *botho*.

There is currently a plethora of recent scholarly articles on *botho* and its Nguni equivalent, *ubuntu*. Current themes range from law and morality to education and economics, but literature on architecture in the context of *botho/ubuntu* is sparse. An immutable relationship, however, is not disputed and it is generally accepted that culture, simplistically defined as a particular community’s entrenched way of life, organises both people and space (Huntar 1992: 36), and that socio-cultural forces shape built form, spaces and their relationships (Rapoport 1969: 46). The point is that architecture is not universal and is not value-free. *Botho/ubuntu* constitutes a worldview that focuses on the wellbeing of the community, whereas Western ideology – that has been producing much of our built environment – stresses the rights of the individual. As Denbow and Thebe (2006: 42) succinctly explain: “The conceptual fields of African thought and cosmology do not always fit well in the categories familiar to westerners.”

The concept of *botho/ubuntu* is not limited to southern Africa. In fact, Metz and Gaie (2010: 274) use the term “Afro-Communitarianism” to describe similar philosophies found all over sub-Saharan Africa. As Jenkins (1991: 18) succinctly puts it: “In the African situation, group identity and relational obligations are paramount. In the West, things are very individualistic. Westerners believe in rights, not obligations.”

Debra Percival’s interview with the prominent Motswana architect Moleta Mosienyane (2009) on the Setswana use of space is particularly enlightening. She quotes him as saying: “Many Setswana concepts relating to space and place were embodied in the concept of *botho* – respect for the sanctity of the human being and a human beings connectedness to other people as well as the natural environment and the spiritual realm.”

Kgotla

The function, form and materiality of the *kgotla* depicted by Burchell – the enclosure of upright logs set into the ground serving as the open-air chief’s court – was not only transferred to present-day Botswana during the second half of the 19th century, but it is the most prevalent arrangement to this day (figure 8). Interestingly, it changed from a fully enclosed circle to a semicircle. And as Denbow and Thebe (2006: 90) confirm: “There was (and still is in rural villages) a specific relationship between the compound of the chief, the corral and the *kgotla*.” Many *kgotla* are situated in the shade of large trees, but Mochudi seems to have been one of the first to construct a canopy for the *kgosi* and his advisors (figures 9 and 10). More recently, many *kgotla* have been completely covered with the sides left open (figure 11).

Isaac Schapera’s seminal book of 1938, entitled *A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom*, a publication that has been reprinted many times, is still available and referred to in the customary courts of Botswana. He refers to the *kgotla*, no less than 75 times, as a place where disputes and transgressions are adjudicated. The *kgotla*, as the seat of customary law, is immutably embedded in Botswana’s legal system. Sharma (2004: 7) found that “The customary courts handle approximately 80% of criminal cases and 90% of civil cases in the country.” A United Nations (2002: 20) review describes the dispensation:

Botswana’s legal system is plural, comprising Roman-Dutch common law and statutory law, together with customary law ... The Roman-Dutch and customary law systems co-exist. ... Customary law is administered by the chief (*kgosi*), and cases are generally dealt with at the *kgotla*.

It is often claimed that the *kgotla* is largely responsible for Botswana’s rare (for sub-Saharan Africa) and relatively stable democracy. This notion is increasingly being contested since ethnic minorities and women are generally not allowed to attend *kgotla* meetings. In many instances where women are involved with hearings, they are represented by a man (Denbow and Thebe 2006: 92). This is changing very slowly. Mosadi Seboko of Ramotswa is the first woman *kgosi* in Botswana to serve as a village leader and representative to the House of Chiefs since 2000.



Figure 8
The *kgotla*, Kanye, Botswana (then Bechuanaland), by Gustav Fritsch, August 1865
(source: SUNScholar Research Repository, <http://hdl.handle.net/10019.1/4926>).



Figure 9
The *kgotla*, Mochudi, Botswana (then Bechuanaland),
by Isaac Schapera, 1929 (source: Comaroff et al 2007: 62).



Figure 10
The *kgotla* in Mochudi
(photograph by the author).



Figure 11
The *kgotla* in Gabane, a rural village south of Gaborone
(photograph by the author).

However, as Denbow and Thebe (2006: 224) explain, the *kgotla* is not only the venue for customary law. It is above all the “institution through which Tswana communities govern themselves in family and community matters, [as well as] the physical place where political discussions are held”.

Botswana’s Parliament, as an institution is, therefore, perhaps the ultimate embodiment of the idea of the *kgotla*. It consists of the National Assembly and the House of Chiefs. Whereas the former is the lower house consisting of elected lawmakers, the House of Chiefs is the upper house partly consisting of elected representatives and partly, the chiefs of the larger tribes inside Botswana. Christensen (2011), in his “Worldwide guide to women in leadership” (updated September 2011) lists fourteen women who have been appointed as ministers, assistant ministers and ambassadors since 1966. The first woman speaker was also recently appointed. Sikuka (2009) points out that the government is committed to a 50 per cent female representation in Parliament by 2015, a target it is unlikely to achieve. This is not so much because of systemic resistance, but simply because women do not seem very interested. With approximately 403,000 women registered as voters out of the total of 725, 000 voters (Sikuka 2009), they form a powerful force, and now have the opportunity to take advantage of the democratic benefits inherent in both and participate more actively in government.

Moleta Mosienyane (2009), whose firm designed the Parliament Building (figure 12), declares that his work is based on “the *kgotla* system”, explaining that it is an “imaginary space” where decisions are taken, and that the *kgotla* “fosters community”. He seems imply that the concept of *kgotla* bears much more relevance than just being the venue for customary law. Conceptually, it represents social space as the organisational focus of a building complex.



Figure 12
The existing Parliament Building by Mosienyane & Partners International, completed in 1994
(photograph by the author).

Tswana family home

Denbow and Thebe (2006: 141) very precisely explain the role of family in Tswana life:

The family household of husband, wife, and children forms the basic building block of Tswana society. Among the Tswana, groups of households, affiliated agnatically [relatives descended from the same man] around a kgotla and animal corral (kraal), are the grassroots, political and economic institutions that are organized into larger wards and sections that make up a morafe [tribe].

The family home, therefore, is patently not an isolated enclave. It is not only a domestic organisation, but also has spatial implications and relationships beyond that of the family home. As noted, the clustering of related families around their own kgotla – the essence of Tswana communal life – only occurs in the rural village.

In traditional Tswana architecture the *lelapa* (plural: *malapa*) is the equivalent of the living room, or as Walton (1956: 144) explains: “[A *lelapa*] is in fact the main living quarter of the wife and her family and the huts are used as sleeping rooms, store-rooms and fire-huts in inclement weather.” The Grants (1995: 14) point out that an individual house may have a small *lelapa*, while a large *lelapa* could incorporate several buildings. They also remind us that the word also means “a family, a home and a household”, and “the physical *lelapa* is an essential architectural feature because it binds together the component buildings comprising the traditional home”. A family dwelling in Gabane (figure 13) illustrates the two types of *lelapa* side-by-side, as well as the clustering of separate buildings.

Even within the traditional residential typology, new houses that are often “modern” constructions with concrete block walls and corrugated iron roof sheeting, usually share the perimeter of the family *lelapa* (figure 14). Interestingly, in both instances the *malapa* are physically defined complete with low walls, gateways and thresholds, but claim space in a larger demarcated territory. In both instances, the layering and hierarchy of spaces are very noticeable.

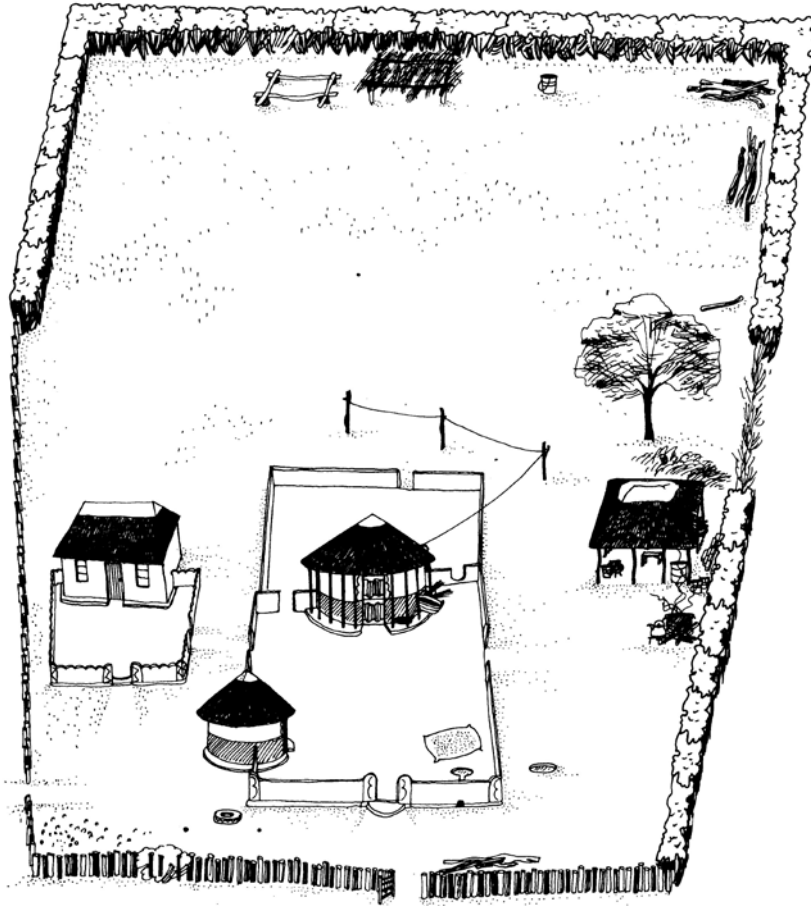


Figure 13
A contemporary village compound in Gabane, Botswana
(source: Larsson 1984: 157).



Figure 14
A family homestead in Mochudi
(photograph by the author).

Interestingly, because Bechuanaland was governed from Mafikeng in South Africa, there are only a few Victorian buildings still to be found (Denbow and Thebe 2006: 98). The result is that porches and the wrap-around verandas that were so eminently suited to the climate were never absorbed into the Tswana vernacular idiom, as the “modern” house above illustrates. To compensate for this, the owner built a thatched shading pavilion enfronting the *lapa* in order to achieve protected outdoor living space. The lack of integrated veranda is strange considering that the traditional Tswana veranda *rondavel* is much older than its colonial equivalent.

Grant and Grant (1995: 118) observe importantly that:

The home is traditionally the woman’s; it is her domain and it is her responsibility to maintain and decorate it. It is with good reason, therefore, that Batswana traditionally identify a home by the name of the wife and not by that of her husband.

In that capacity, women have been responsible for building and finishing the traditional earth-walled buildings in villages, with the men doing the thatching. They also decorated the walls. With the advent of concrete block walls and corrugated iron roof sheeting, men are now responsible (Denbow and Thebe 2006: 98). In a conservative society, this disempowerment inevitably reduces the status of women in the community. Moreover, the dilemma facing women goes deeper than being deprived of traditional responsibilities. Female-headed households now constitute approximately half of all households in Botswana (United Nations 2002: 5), yet women are not allowed to protect the interests of their families at *kgotla* meetings. This is problematic since a significant number of households are headed by females (Denbow and Thebe 2006: 22).

In addition, urbanisation is the cause of a host of other challenges. Foremost is the loss of the *lelapa*. Outdoor socialising around a fire is popular to this day, even in urban areas. The reason is not only the small living rooms, but certainly also the “cultural appeal” (Denbow and Thebe 2006: 97). The only solution is larger patios and balconies. South African speculative developers tend to apply minimum space standards and avoid transitional indoor-outdoor spaces, and unfortunately, those in Botswana seem to have inherited that attitude. Even in the Netherlands, a country with inclement weather, generous balconies are the norm most of the time.

Finally, people are customarily buried out of the family home, to where the corpse would have been brought the previous evening (Denbow and Thebe 2006: 185). This has consequences for planning. As Grant and Grant (1995: 40) put it: “All families need sufficient space for the large-scale social set pieces of marriage, death and remembrance, and for a playing area for children”. Again, these are not difficult to solve, but current forms and layouts of urban housing simply do not satisfy these needs.

Reviewing the issues

In spite of laudable progress and enviable prosperity, Botswana faces three serious problems, according to the United Nations (2002: 23). They are the high incidence of poverty and HIV/AIDS (Botswana apparently has the highest HIV prevalence rate in the world) and environmental degradation due to “unsustainable levels of natural resource utilization”, as well as “the consequences of global climate change”.

However, if the seven “pillars” of Vision 2016 can be achieved, Botswana will be transformed into a model state (United Nations 2008: 20). The seventh pillar is to build a united and proud nation, which means a society “under-pinned by resilient family values with a strong

sense of tradition and pride in its history”. In other words: A society sharing the common ideals, values and symbols of *botho*.

Botho is patently not exclusively a Batswana concept. Mapadimeng (2009: 76) uses the terms *ubuntu/botho* interchangeably, with *ubuntu* used in the Nguni languages (isiZulu and isiXhosa) and *botho* in the Sotho languages (Setswana, Sesotho and Sepedi). Even though the culture and its material manifestations survived in Botswana and there is a growing awareness of *botho/ubuntu* in South Africa, it is still under threat by what Mapadimeng (2009: 87) refers to as “global capitalism” and the resulting cultural “homogenisation”. There is abundant evidence of black people in influential positions who, rather than promoting the well-being of the community, exploit their positions to enrich themselves and their relatives.

Eighty per cent of the Batswana – the Setswana speaking portion of the citizenry – has been guided by *botho* while it has been the indisputable ideology of an integrated rural society. But can it survive in socially, economically and spatially fragmented urban landscapes? Can it survive as government policy as proposed by Vision 2012?

As Denbow and Thebe (2006: 93) write: “Even though they often incorporate traditional beliefs, the religious and worldviews of the Tswana are not static but undergo redefinition and transformation in the context of a changing world.”

A powerful Tswana faction who is debating exactly the same issues is the wealthy Bafokeng tribe, whose administrative capital is Phokeng, near Rustenburg in South Africa. In its quest to promote Tswana culture and “consolidate national identity”, it talks of “an *Afromodernist* culture under construction”, noting that the King’s mother declared that “Tradition is not static” and “Everyone has to adapt” (Comaroff et al 2009: 112-114).

The *kgotla* is perhaps the most important social space in Tswana society. Just like *botho*, the *kgotla* is not a unique Tswana institution either, and this system of assembly is variously known as *pitso* in Lesotho and *imbizo* in Zulu (Schapera 1937:177-184). Meetings take place under strict protocol of representation, precedence and procedure. The preceding illustrations provide evidence of a tentative evolution of its built form. And while it is recognised that the Tswana can adapt to various spaces, I believe much more research is necessary in order to reaffirm not only its desired physical characteristics (ambience, acoustics, privacy, sense of enclosure, sight lines, aesthetics, access control, seating, etc.), but also its aesthetic and symbolic qualities.

The fact that family homes are now increasingly situated in cities and far removed from the traditional territory of the clan undeniably threatens the traditional relationship between relatives. Having a home in the city and returning to a village home over a weekend partly compensates for this dilemma, but how many households can afford to maintain two homes and to travel regularly between them?

While arrangements to remain within the sphere of the clan are beyond the scope of this study, the architecture of urban housing is not. Rantao’s (2006: 21-7) highly informative book entitled *Setswana Culture and Tradition* contains a chapter headed “The role of manners in the Tswana homestead.” It describes a wide range of rituals and ceremonies, requiring very specific spatial patterns rarely found in speculative houses. Such shortcomings are particularly critical in townhouses and apartments which may not be expanded or altered. The problem is aggravated by the fact that the ritual of making a home is also a consideration.

Conclusion – the role of architecture

In traditional African environments, culture – as exemplified by a community’s way of life – is such a powerful force that behaviour shapes territory and space in an inseparable dynamic. *Botho* is such a culture, but adhering to its principles does not imply a nostalgic search for the past. Just as Muslim architects such as Rasem Badran incorporate principles of Sharia in a condition of modernity and progress, so does Mosienyane reinterpret the tenets of *botho* (figure 15): “In Setswana culture, each place, each space is influenced by spirituality, and this gives solidarity as well as protection of the environment, which is both cultural and natural”.



Figure 15
Interior courtyard of the Botswana Innovation hub
(source: www.mpidesign.com).

Moleta Mosienyane recognises that every form of social behaviour – particularly when ritualised – alludes to an associated ideal space, and that it is the responsibility of the architect to translate that into real space. However, several practical, cultural and economic obstacles are facing Botswana architects in this regard.

Designing a 21st century *kgotla* with which the constituency can associate is difficult enough and will require great awareness and sensitivity. The real challenge will be to define the contemporary house in its urban setting. Rolling out rows of terrace housing or blocks of flats in response to a housing shortage in cities is not the answer. The Tswana inhabitants cannot be expected to occupy these European dwelling types without severely compromising the fundamental tenets of *botho*.

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