



Decolonising Governance: Indigenous Political Structures and Modern Statecraft in Africa

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Abstract - This paper examines the relationship between indigenous political structures and modern statecraft in Africa through the lens of decolonising governance. While colonial and postcolonial states often framed indigenous institutions as either obstacles or relics, chiefs, councils, and communal assemblies remain active sources of authority across the continent. Drawing on case studies from Ghana, South Africa, and Botswana, the paper argues that hybridity—not opposition—is the defining condition of African governance. In Ghana, chieftaincy has been stabilised within a constitutional framework, while in South Africa, traditional authority remains contested within a rights-based order. Botswana, meanwhile, illustrates a celebrated hybrid through the kgôti system, which combines cultural legitimacy with democratic deliberation. Comparative analysis highlights both the promise of indigenous institutions in anchoring legitimacy and the risks of exclusion, patriarchy, and elite capture. The paper concludes that decolonising governance requires a critical reconstruction: one that preserves cultural rootedness while addressing inequality and strengthening accountability. African experiences of hybrid governance, it argues, challenge universalist models of democracy and suggest a pluralist rethinking of legitimacy and authority in the twenty-first century.

Keywords - Africa; decolonisation; governance; hybridity; indigenous political structures; democracy; state legitimacy.

I. Introduction

African states are often judged against political templates inherited from colonial rule or borrowed from Western models of liberal democracy. Yet beneath these imported structures lie enduring indigenous systems of authority—chiefs, councils of elders, lineage-based leadership—that continue to shape political life in profound ways. To speak of “decolonising governance” is therefore not to imagine a wholesale rejection of the modern state, nor a romantic return to precolonial traditions, but to confront the layered and sometimes uneasy coexistence of these systems. This paper argues that indigenous political structures remain adaptive sources of legitimacy and authority, and that their critical integration into contemporary state institutions offers a more grounded pathway to democratic accountability. At the same time, it cautions against uncritical celebration: indigenous systems carry their own hierarchies and exclusions. The task, then, is to recognize hybridity as the lived reality of African governance while asking what elements of tradition can be reworked to serve the demands of an inclusive and democratic future.



Scholars of African politics have long debated the place of “traditional authority” in modern governance. Early postcolonial leaders often viewed indigenous institutions as obstacles to national unity or modernisation (Mamdani, 1996), while more recent scholarship has emphasized their resilience and adaptability (Ray & van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, 1996). Decentralisation reforms in the 1990s, for instance, brought chiefs and customary councils back into the orbit of the state, raising new questions about legitimacy, accountability, and representation (Logan, 2013). Postcolonial theorists, meanwhile, have challenged the assumption that liberal democracy is the only valid model of political organisation, urging closer attention to local epistemologies of power and authority (Mbembe, 2001; Wiredu, 1996). Yet much of this discussion has been polarised: either casting indigenous structures as relics of the past, or romanticising them as authentic alternatives to imported systems. This paper builds on these debates but seeks a different route— one that highlights hybridity as the defining condition of African governance and asks how indigenous and modern institutions interact, overlap, and reshape each other in practice.

At stake are not only questions of political form but also of legitimacy and survival. Across the continent, states face crises of trust in electoral systems, weak accountability in centralised institutions, and violent contestation over authority at the local level. In many cases, indigenous political actors—chiefs, elders, lineage heads—remain central to everyday governance, mediating disputes, controlling land, and providing a moral anchor for community decision-making (Englebert, 2002). Their persistence suggests that African governance cannot be understood solely through the lens of imported state institutions, nor can democratic futures be charted without grappling with the authority these actors command. At the same time, indigenous institutions are neither static nor purely traditional: they evolve, negotiate, and sometimes conflict with the state, creating hybrid arrangements that challenge neat categories of “modern” and “traditional.”

This paper therefore pursues three aims. First, it examines the historical and contemporary roles of indigenous political structures in shaping African governance. Second, it interrogates the possibilities and limits of integrating these institutions into modern statecraft, with particular attention to legitimacy, accountability, and inclusivity. Third, it contributes to wider debates on decolonisation by considering what African experiences of hybrid governance can teach us about the diversity of democratic practice globally. To do so, the paper focuses on comparative case studies—including Ghana, South Africa, and Botswana—while drawing on broader regional examples to highlight variation. By situating these cases within both theoretical debates and lived practices, the paper argues that decolonising governance requires not a simple rejection or revival, but a critical rethinking of how authority is distributed, legitimised, and exercised in Africa today.

Historical Context of Governance in Africa

The interaction between indigenous political structures and modern statecraft cannot be understood without reference to the colonial encounter. Far from being swept away by conquest, indigenous institutions were profoundly reshaped and embedded into colonial governance. This legacy continues to structure postcolonial politics, shaping both the authority of chiefs and the legitimacy of the modern state.



One of the most consequential transformations came through the system of indirect rule. In British territories, especially in West and Southern Africa, colonial administrators sought to govern vast populations with minimal resources by ruling through chiefs and local authorities. Lord Lugard's blueprint in Nigeria—later replicated elsewhere—depended on codifying customary law and vesting chiefs with powers they had not always possessed (Lugard, 1922/1965). The result was a paradox. On the one hand, indirect rule gave chiefs unprecedented authority, often backed by colonial police and courts. On the other hand, it froze fluid traditions into rigid hierarchies, turning negotiable customs into state-enforced laws (Mamdani, 1996). Where chiefly structures were weak or absent, colonial regimes invented them, creating “traditional” rulers who were as much products of colonial engineering as of local lineage (Rathbone, 2000).

French colonialism followed a different logic, aspiring to assimilation rather than indirect rule, yet even in French territories, customary authorities were harnessed to the colonial state in practice (Young, 1994). Across empires, then, colonialism reconfigured indigenous political structures into subordinate but indispensable arms of governance. The colonial order also created what Mamdani (1996) called the “bifurcated state”: a dual system in which urban populations were governed by civil law and rural populations by customary law. Chiefs became custodians of “custom” in the countryside, while cities were ruled through modern bureaucracies. This division entrenched unequal citizenship. Urban Africans were subject to European-style administration but denied full political rights, while rural Africans were governed as “subjects” under customary authority.

This bifurcated system institutionalised the divide between what Peter Ekeh (1975) later described as the “civic public” and the “primordial public.” The colonial state became the site of extraction and coercion, while the local community remained the site of obligation and moral authority. The legacies of this division persisted into independence, shaping how Africans related to state institutions versus indigenous authority.

At independence, African leaders faced the question of what to do with indigenous institutions. Some, like Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, saw chiefs as obstacles to modernisation and sought to curtail their power (Rathbone, 2000). Others, like Botswana's Seretse Khama, chose to incorporate chiefs into the new order through advisory bodies like the House of Chiefs (Sharma, 2000). In South Africa, the legacy was more fraught: apartheid had co-opted chiefs as administrators of “homelands,” tainting their legitimacy in the democratic transition (Oomen, 2005). Across the continent, chiefs remained too deeply rooted to be abolished, yet too politically charged to be embraced uncritically. Postcolonial states therefore experimented with different strategies: constitutional recognition, administrative incorporation, or attempts at marginalisation. Meanwhile, state institutions themselves were often weak, over-centralised, or distrusted, making the legitimacy of indigenous structures all the more significant (Englebert, 2002).

Today, the legacies of colonial indirect rule and postcolonial adaptation continue to shape governance. Chiefs allocate land in Ghana, deliberate in *kgôti* assemblies in



Botswana, and preside over contested customary courts in South Africa. Citizens move fluidly between indigenous and modern institutions, appealing to whichever forum offers the best chance of redress. The interaction between political structures and statecraft is therefore not a historical residue but a contemporary reality. By situating Ghana, South Africa, and Botswana in this historical trajectory, the case studies that follow highlight both continuity and transformation. They show how colonial inventions of “custom” have been reworked, how bifurcated authority persists in new forms, and how the postcolonial project of nation-building continues to grapple with the place of indigenous legitimacy.

II. Methodological Note

This article adopts a comparative case study approach to explore the interaction between indigenous political structures and modern statecraft in Africa. The choice of cases—Ghana, South Africa, and Botswana—is deliberate rather than exhaustive. These three countries illustrate distinct trajectories of state–tradition relations: Ghana represents a stabilised accommodation, where chieftaincy is constitutionally recognised but contested in practice; South Africa illustrates a contested incorporation, in which traditional authority is both constitutionally protected and challenged within a rights-based framework; and Botswana offers a celebrated hybrid, where the *kgôti* system of communal deliberation is widely viewed as a model of legitimacy and participatory practice. Taken together, these cases form a spectrum of interaction that allows for analytical comparison across different political and historical contexts.

The analysis draws primarily on secondary sources: historical monographs, legal scholarship, political science research, and anthropological studies. While no single methodological lens can capture the full complexity of governance, synthesising across these literatures allows for both historical depth and comparative breadth. In addition, survey data, especially from Afrobarometer, provides insight into contemporary public attitudes toward traditional authority and state institutions (Logan, 2013).

The purpose of this methodological strategy is not to offer a comprehensive survey of all African states but to use carefully selected cases to illuminate wider dynamics. As George and Bennett (2005) argue, case studies are particularly valuable for theory-building when they are chosen to represent variation along key dimensions. Here, the dimension of interest is the degree of incorporation and contestation of indigenous authority within modern statecraft. By placing these cases in dialogue, the article aims to move beyond description toward conceptual and theoretical insight.

Finally, the article adopts a critical rather than normative-comparative stance: it does not evaluate African states against a singular standard of liberal democracy, but asks how different historical legacies and institutional arrangements generate forms of hybridity, legitimacy, and contestation. The methodological aim is therefore explanatory and interpretive, foregrounding African experiences as sources of theoretical insight in their own right.

Theoretical Framework: From Dualism to Hybridity



Any effort to think about “decolonising governance” in Africa must be grounded in the intellectual traditions that have grappled with the legacies of colonial rule. Several frameworks have been especially influential in explaining the enduring tensions between indigenous authority and modern state institutions. This section highlights three main strands: the dualist models of Ekeh and Mamdani, postcolonial theories of hybridity and entanglement, and normative approaches that explore how indigenous traditions might inform democratic reconstruction.

Ekeh and the Two Publics: Peter Ekeh’s classic essay “Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa” (1975) remains a starting point for understanding the fractured moral order of African politics. Ekeh argued that colonialism created two distinct spheres of public life. The primordial public was rooted in ethnic, kinship, and communal ties; here, obligations were binding, morality was enforced, and loyalty was strong. The civic public, by contrast, was the domain of the colonial state and its successors; here, obligations were weak, corruption was tolerated, and citizens felt little moral investment.

Applied to governance, this framework helps explain why indigenous institutions like chieftaincy or councils of elders command deep loyalty and respect, while state institutions—parliaments, bureaucracies, and courts—are often viewed as corrupt or alien. Citizens feel morally bound to contribute to their communities, but not to the state. This dualism provides a useful entry point for the present study: indigenous authority operates largely within the primordial public, while modern statecraft is situated in the civic public.

At the same time, Ekeh’s framework is not sufficient on its own. The separation between the two publics is rarely clear-cut. Chiefs may participate in constitutional courts, while state officials mobilise ethnic networks for support. The cases of Ghana, South Africa, and Botswana show that the publics often overlap and intermingle. Thus, rather than treating Ekeh’s model as a static description, this study uses it as a historical baseline—one that helps explain the moral tension but requires updating in light of contemporary hybridity.

Mamdani and the Bifurcated State: If Ekeh focused on moral dualism, Mahmood Mamdani’s *Citizen and Subject* (1996) addressed institutional dualism. Mamdani argued that colonialism created a bifurcated state: in urban areas, Africans were treated as “citizens” governed by civil law, while in rural areas, they were treated as “subjects” ruled through customary law and chiefs. This system of “decentralised despotism” entrenched the power of chiefs as local enforcers of colonial authority, while denying most Africans access to meaningful citizenship.

Mamdani’s framework highlights why traditional authority remains so central: colonial rule embedded chiefs within state structures as indispensable intermediaries. The persistence of bifurcation is visible today. Chiefs continue to govern land and community life in rural areas, while elected officials dominate urban politics. In South Africa, for instance, the recognition of traditional courts alongside constitutional rights reproduces this dualism, while in Ghana, the constitutional enshrinement of chieftaincy stabilises but also perpetuates it. Like Ekeh, however, Mamdani’s binary can be



limiting. It risks framing citizens and subjects as mutually exclusive, when in practice, people inhabit both roles. A Ghanaian may vote in parliamentary elections while simultaneously appealing to a chief for land or dispute resolution. This study therefore extends Mamdani by asking not how bifurcation persists, but how it evolves— how subjects and citizens merge in hybrid arrangements that both empower and constrain.

Hybridity and Entanglement: To move beyond dualism, postcolonial theorists such as Achille Mbembe and Homi Bhabha emphasise hybridity. Mbembe (2001) describes African states as characterised by “entanglement”—overlapping temporalities and institutional logics where the modern and the traditional, the colonial and the postcolonial, coexist in messy interdependence. Bhabha (1994) similarly speaks of a “third space,” where cultural and political forms merge to produce new hybrid practices.

This perspective is crucial for the present study. The Ghanaian chief who sits in a constitutionally recognised House of Chiefs, the South African king who contests state legislation, or the Botswanan kgôti that combines deliberation with custom—all represent hybrid spaces where indigenous and modern logics meet. Hybridity reframes Ekeh’s two publics and Mamdani’s bifurcated state not as fixed categories but as evolving entanglements. Governance in Africa is not neatly split between tradition and modernity but constituted through their constant negotiation.

Consensus Democracy and Decolonial Critique: African philosophers such as Kwasi Wiredu (1996) have urged scholars to look beyond imported models of adversarial democracy. Wiredu’s notion of consensus democracy, inspired by Akan traditions, emphasises deliberation and compromise rather than majoritarian competition. This provides a normative lens for thinking about how indigenous traditions might enrich democratic practice. Botswana’s kgôti system, with its participatory deliberations, resonates strongly with Wiredu’s vision.

Yet decolonising governance must also confront the exclusions embedded in tradition. Scholars such as Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí (1997) have shown how gender hierarchies in many African societies were reshaped but also reinforced by both colonial and customary systems. Sabelo Ndlovu- Gatsheni (2015) similarly emphasises that decolonisation is not only institutional but epistemic: it requires freeing political imagination from both colonial categories and uncritical romanticisation of the past.

Conceptual Framework: Decolonising Governance, Political Structures and Modern Statecraft The call to “decolonise governance” is not a simple demand to discard inherited state institutions or to restore a romanticised precolonial past. Instead, it signals a deeper intellectual and political task: to question the dominance of Western liberal-democratic models as the only legitimate template for organising political life, and to ask how African experiences and traditions might provide alternative ways of grounding authority, legitimacy, and accountability. Decolonisation here is understood less as erasure and more as rebalancing—disrupting the inherited hierarchy of political forms in which “modern” institutions are assumed to be progressive and “traditional” ones backward.



Indigenous political structures are best understood as historically rooted systems of authority—chieftaincies, councils of elders, clan-based leadership, and consensus assemblies—that long predate colonial rule but were reshaped by it. Far from being static, these systems have adapted to changing contexts, sometimes accommodating the state, sometimes resisting it, and often providing everyday governance in ways formal institutions cannot. To call them “traditional” risks mischaracterising them as relics; they are better seen as living institutions that evolve alongside the state and continue to carry cultural legitimacy within their communities.

Modern statecraft, by contrast, refers to the formal institutions—parliaments, courts, bureaucracies, electoral systems—established during colonial rule and retooled in the postcolonial era. These institutions embody the logics of centralisation, bureaucratic rationality, and electoral competition that define the global language of governance. Yet their legitimacy is often fragile in African contexts, precisely because they are perceived as externally imposed, alien to local histories, or disconnected from the social worlds they are meant to govern.

The notion of hybridity provides a useful lens for analysing how these two domains interact. As Achille Mbembe and others have argued, African states are not defined by a neat opposition between the “traditional” and the “modern” but by their entanglement. Chiefs may sit on local development committees, parliaments may legislate on matters of customary law, and communities may appeal to both courts and elders in resolving disputes. Hybridity here is not a mark of institutional weakness but a sign of creative adaptation. The challenge, then, is not whether indigenous and modern systems can coexist—they already do—but how their coexistence can be harnessed to produce governance that is more legitimate, inclusive, and accountable.

At the same time, decolonising governance requires a critical stance. Indigenous political structures carry their own exclusions, often privileging male elders, hereditary elites, or dominant ethnic groups. Any project of integration must grapple with these tensions: how to preserve cultural legitimacy while addressing the demands of gender equality, human rights, and broader democratic participation. This is why “decolonising” must not be read as a simple valorisation of the indigenous, but as a critical reconstruction of authority that honours historical depth while reimagining political futures.

The terms political structures and modern statecraft are central to this study, yet they carry different meanings across disciplines. Before turning to case studies, it is important to clarify how they are used here and why their interaction is so significant for understanding governance in Africa. Political structures refer broadly to the patterned ways in which power, authority, and decision-making are organised within a society (Almond & Powell, 1966). In the African context, indigenous political structures encompass precolonial and evolving forms of governance such as chieftaincies, councils of elders, lineage systems, and communal assemblies. These institutions were not uniform across the continent but reflected diverse histories, ecological settings, and cultural practices (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard, 1940).



What unites them is their grounding in communal legitimacy. Chiefs derive authority from lineage and ritual, councils of elders deliberate in ways that embody collective memory, and assemblies like the Tswana kgôti function through public participation. Such structures often combine judicial, legislative, and executive functions, and their endurance speaks to their embeddedness in social life (Ray & van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, 1996).

Importantly, these structures are not static survivals from the past. Colonialism reshaped them—codifying flexible customs into rigid hierarchies, inventing “chiefly” powers where none had existed, and embedding them into the machinery of indirect rule (Rathbone, 2000). Postcolonial states further transformed them, sometimes marginalising, sometimes rehabilitating them. For this reason, the term indigenous in this paper signals not timeless authenticity but political institutions with deep historical roots that remain significant in contemporary governance.

The term statecraft refers to the practices and strategies by which states govern populations and territory. In the African context, modern statecraft refers to institutions and techniques introduced or consolidated under colonial rule and retained in postcolonial governance. These include parliaments, constitutions, courts, bureaucracies, and electoral systems—features associated with the Weberian state and liberal democracy (Weber, 1978/2019).

Statecraft is more than institutional design; it is also about the logics that guide governance. Colonial rule emphasised centralisation, bureaucratic rationality, and control over populations, often privileging extractive over participatory purposes (Young, 1994). Independence did not sweep away these logics. Many postcolonial states inherited the coercive apparatus of colonial administration, while simultaneously adopting global norms of sovereignty, electoral democracy, and development planning (Bayart, 2009). In practice, modern statecraft in Africa has often struggled with legitimacy. As scholars such as Englebert (2002) argue, state institutions are frequently perceived as external impositions, disconnected from local norms of authority. This disconnection helps explain the persistence of indigenous political structures: they offer legitimacy and accessibility where state institutions fall short.

Intersections and Tensions: By clarifying these concepts, the stakes of the paper become clearer. Indigenous political structures are community-rooted, historically resilient forms of authority. Modern statecraft is the inherited framework of formal institutions and bureaucratic governance. Their coexistence is not simply oppositional but entangled: chiefs sit in constitutional houses, parliaments legislate on customary law, and citizens move between communal and state forums to resolve disputes.

This paper therefore treats political structures and statecraft not as binaries but as overlapping systems whose interaction defines African governance. To decolonise governance is to critically negotiate this interaction—recognising the legitimacy of indigenous authority while reforming both it and state institutions toward greater inclusivity and accountability. This framework sets the stage for the empirical analysis. By tracing how Ghana, South Africa, and Botswana negotiate these theoretical tensions in practice, the paper aims to show that decolonising governance is less about restoring



a lost order than about critically reconstructing authority in ways that are both culturally grounded and democratically accountable.

Case Study: Ghana – Chieftaincy and the Modern State

Ghana represents one of the most prominent examples of how indigenous political authority has been institutionalised within a modern constitutional framework. The chieftaincy institution is explicitly recognised in the 1992 Constitution, which both affirms its cultural significance and restricts chiefs from direct involvement in partisan politics (Boafo-Arthur, 2003; Ray & van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, 1996). This dual arrangement underscores the ambivalent place of chieftaincy: protected as a symbol of continuity and legitimacy, yet kept at a distance from the formal arena of competitive party politics.

Historically, the British colonial strategy of indirect rule entrenched chiefs as intermediaries, transforming fluid and negotiable traditions into rigidly codified structures of authority (Lugard, 1965/1922; Rathbone, 2000). After independence, Kwame Nkrumah sought to curtail the power of chiefs, seeing them as obstacles to national unity and modernisation (Boafo-Arthur, 2001; Rathbone, 2000). Yet successive governments were unable to marginalise chieftaincy, given its enduring legitimacy among local populations and its role in land allocation and dispute resolution (Ubink, 2008).

Today, chiefs remain central to Ghana's governance landscape, especially in land management. Approximately 80% of Ghana's land is under customary tenure, controlled by chiefs and traditional councils (Ubink & Amanor, 2008). This provides cultural rootedness and accessibility but also generates tensions around accountability, corruption, and elite capture (Ubink, 2007). Chiefs are respected as custodians of tradition and moral authority, yet their authority is contested when land allocation processes are opaque or skewed toward political elites.

The Ghanaian case therefore illustrates what might be termed a “stabilised accommodation” between indigenous structures and statecraft: chiefs are constitutionally safeguarded, widely respected, and practically influential, but their legitimacy is conditional on reforms that address generational divides, gender exclusion, and accountability deficits (Logan, 2013; von Trotha, 1996).

Case Study: South Africa – Tradition and Constitutional Democracy

South Africa presents one of the most complex experiments in integrating indigenous authority into a modern democratic framework. The 1996 Constitution, hailed as one of the most progressive in the world, enshrines liberal democratic rights while also recognising the role of traditional leadership (Republic of South Africa, 1996). This dual commitment reflects the tension between acknowledging indigenous political traditions and upholding universal principles of equality and rights. Traditional leaders are granted recognition under Chapter 12 of the Constitution, and their role is further defined in legislation such as the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act (2003). Chiefs, headmen, and kings are positioned as custodians of custom, land, and community identity, but their authority is circumscribed within the framework of constitutional democracy (Williams, 2010).



The inclusion of traditional authority in post-apartheid governance was not accidental. During the apartheid era, the regime manipulated traditional leadership through the “homeland” system, co-opting chiefs into enforcing segregationist policies (Ntsebeza, 2005; Oomen, 2005). This left many communities deeply ambivalent about the legitimacy of their traditional leaders. At the same time, traditional institutions retained cultural significance, particularly in rural areas where they often provided continuity and social cohesion (Claassens, 2011). The post-apartheid settlement therefore had to balance these competing legacies: acknowledging the persistence of tradition while preventing its abuse in ways reminiscent of apartheid’s manipulation.

In practice, the integration of traditional authority has generated both opportunities and disputes. Traditional leaders play a significant role in land administration, particularly under communal tenure, and often mediate local disputes (Ntsebeza, 2005). They provide a sense of continuity with cultural traditions, helping ground the state in local legitimacy. Yet these roles have come into conflict with constitutional principles, especially regarding gender equality and democratic participation. In some communities, women’s land rights remain tenuous under customary law, clashing with constitutional guarantees of equality (Claassens & Ngubane, 2008). Moreover, the hereditary nature of chieftaincy and kingship sits uneasily with democratic ideals of representation and accountability.

Tensions have been most visible in debates over the Traditional Courts Bill, which sought to formalise the role of chiefs in dispensing justice. Critics argued that the Bill risked entrenching patriarchal and authoritarian practices, undermining constitutional rights and excluding vulnerable groups from fair recourse to justice (Claassens & Ngubane, 2008). Supporters, by contrast, defended it as a recognition of indigenous dispute-resolution mechanisms that are accessible and legitimate in rural areas (Oomen, 2005). The controversy revealed the difficulty of harmonising customary authority with constitutional democracy: both claim legitimacy, but from different sources.

South Africa’s experience underscores the double-edged nature of integrating indigenous structures into modern governance. On one hand, traditional leaders embody forms of authority that resonate with local communities and can enhance the state’s reach in rural areas. On the other hand, their persistence raises critical questions about rights, representation, and the limits of cultural recognition. Unlike Ghana, where chieftaincy has been largely stabilised within the constitutional order, South Africa illustrates the unresolved tensions that emerge when universal rights frameworks intersect with contested traditions. The South African case therefore highlights a central challenge for decolonising governance: how to honour cultural legitimacy without undermining democratic inclusivity and equality.

Case Study: Botswana – The Kgôti as Hybrid Democracy

Botswana is frequently cited as one of Africa’s most stable democracies, and part of this stability lies in its ability to integrate indigenous institutions into modern statecraft (Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2003; Holm, Molutsi, & Somolekae, 1996). Central to this integration is the kgôti system, a traditional public assembly where community members gather under the authority of chiefs (dikgosi) to deliberate on matters of local



concern. The kgôti operates both as a customary court and as a space for participatory decision-making, rooted in principles of consensus and open dialogue (Sharma, 2010). Rather than disappearing after independence, the kgôti was incorporated into Botswana's governance framework and continues to function alongside parliamentary democracy (Ntsebeza, 2005).

Colonial rule in Botswana, then the Bechuanaland Protectorate, altered but did not dismantle traditional structures. Unlike territories subjected to more intensive colonial administration, Bechuanaland experienced relatively limited intervention, leaving chiefs with considerable authority (Mgadla & Campbell, 1989). At independence in 1966, Botswana's leaders—many themselves connected to chiefly families—chose not to marginalise traditional authority. Instead, they constitutionally recognised it through the House of Chiefs (later renamed the Ntlo ya Dikgosi), an advisory body to parliament (Republic of Botswana, 1966/2016). While this body lacks legislative power, it provides chiefs with a formal voice in national governance, institutionalising the link between indigenous authority and the modern state (Parsons, 1990).

The strengths of this arrangement are notable. The kgôti embodies participatory ideals that resonate strongly with democratic theory: it allows ordinary citizens to speak, question leaders, and deliberate openly in a communal setting (Maundeni, 2004). Chiefs serve as mediators and custodians of custom, helping to maintain social order and legitimacy at the local level. Scholars often highlight the kgôti as evidence that indigenous African traditions of consensus and collective deliberation can be aligned with democratic practice, offering an alternative to adversarial, majoritarian models imported from the West (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997; Good, 2002).

Yet Botswana's hybrid model is not without its limitations. Chiefs, though influential, remain hereditary figures, and the kgôti is not always equally accessible to women or youth (Molokomme, 1991). Some critics argue that the advisory role of the House of Chiefs has become largely symbolic, with limited impact on national policymaking (Sharma, 2010). Moreover, as Botswana's society becomes increasingly urbanised and modernised, the relevance of chiefly authority is shifting, raising questions about whether the kgôti can adapt to new social contexts (Ghazvinian, 2002). At times, chiefs have also clashed with the central government over land allocation and resource management, highlighting tensions within the hybrid system (Good, 1999).

Despite these challenges, Botswana demonstrates the possibility of integrating indigenous and modern institutions in ways that enhance rather than undermine state legitimacy. The kgôti system, while imperfect, provides a space for democratic deliberation that is culturally resonant and accessible, helping bridge the gap between state authority and community life. Unlike the contested role of chiefs in South Africa, or the carefully cordoned constitutional recognition in Ghana, Botswana's model illustrates how indigenous institutions can be reimagined as complementary to modern democratic structures. For advocates of decolonising governance, it offers a concrete example of how hybridity can be institutionalised without collapsing into either authoritarianism or tokenism (Good, 2002; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

Comparative Analysis: Patterns of Hybridity



The experiences of Ghana, South Africa, and Botswana reveal different pathways through which indigenous authority and modern statecraft coexist in Africa. Taken together, they underscore that hybridity is not a deviation from “proper” governance but a defining feature of African political life (Mbembe, 2001; Bhabha, 1994). Yet the forms hybridity takes vary widely, shaped by historical legacies, constitutional design, and ongoing struggles over legitimacy and rights (Ekeh, 1975; Mamdani, 1996).

In Ghana, chieftaincy has been stabilised within the constitutional framework. Chiefs are formally recognised, their role in land administration is institutionalised, and their non-partisan status preserves them as figures of community legitimacy (Boafo-Arthur, 2003; Ubink, 2008). Here, hybridity is managed through careful boundary-setting: chiefs are part of governance, but fenced off from electoral competition (Ray & van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, 1996). This arrangement has lent durability to the institution but also exposed contradictions around accountability and inclusion, particularly with respect to gender and hereditary succession (Ubink & Amanor, 2008; von Trotha, 1996).

South Africa illustrates a more contested form of hybridity. The constitutional order simultaneously guarantees liberal rights and recognises traditional leadership, producing ongoing tensions when customary authority conflicts with democratic principles (Republic of South Africa, 1996; Williams, 2010). The disputes around the Traditional Courts Bill epitomise this friction: while some see traditional justice as legitimate and accessible, others view it as patriarchal and authoritarian (Claassens & Ngubane, 2008; Ntsebeza, 2005; Oomen, 2005). Unlike Ghana’s relatively settled compromise, South Africa’s model reveals the fragility of coexistence when two sources of legitimacy—constitutional rights and customary authority—pull in opposing directions (Logan, 2013).

Botswana presents a more celebrated hybrid. The *kgôti* system embodies participatory ideals that resonate with democratic theory while remaining deeply embedded in cultural practice (Maundeni, 2004; Sharma, 2010). The advisory role of the House of Chiefs symbolises a formal recognition of tradition within the modern state, without threatening parliamentary sovereignty (Parsons, 1990; Republic of Botswana, 1966/2016). While the *kgôti* has its limitations—hereditary leadership, gender exclusions, and declining relevance in urban contexts (Molokomme, 1991; Good, 1999)—it demonstrates how indigenous deliberative practices can complement democratic institutions rather than undermine them (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997; Good, 2002).

Across these cases, several patterns emerge. First, indigenous authority persists not as a relic but as a living institution, continually reshaped by colonial, postcolonial, and contemporary pressures (Rathbone, 2000; Mamdani, 1996). Second, legitimacy is a recurring theme: chiefs and customary leaders often enjoy trust that state officials lack, but this legitimacy can be undermined by corruption, exclusion, or state co-optation (Logan, 2013; Ubink, 2007). Third, hybridity is inherently uneven—sometimes stabilising (as in Ghana), sometimes contested (as in South Africa), and sometimes celebrated (as in Botswana). Finally, the cases highlight the normative challenge of decolonising governance: how to preserve the cultural legitimacy of indigenous



authority while reforming its exclusionary aspects, ensuring that hybridity does not entrench inequality but fosters accountability and participation (Wiredu, 1996; Oyěwùmí, 1997; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

The comparative picture suggests that there is no single “African model” of governance waiting to be uncovered or restored. Instead, there are multiple experiments in negotiating the relationship between indigenous and modern institutions (Ray & van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, 1996; Mbembe, 2001). These experiments reveal both the creativity and the difficulty of building political systems that are at once culturally rooted and democratically accountable. In this sense, the project of decolonising governance is less about recovering a lost past than about navigating the messy, contested terrain of the present—where legitimacy is drawn from both tradition and modernity, and where the task is to balance them in ways that serve inclusive political futures (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

Normative Discussion: The Promise and Limits of Decolonising Governance

The comparative cases suggest that indigenous political structures remain powerful sources of legitimacy in Africa, but their integration into modern statecraft is far from straightforward. Decolonising governance, if taken seriously, requires more than recognising chiefs in constitutions or granting them advisory roles. It calls for a critical rethinking of what legitimacy, accountability, and democracy mean in contexts where indigenous and modern systems are inseparably entangled (Mamdani, 1996; Wiredu, 1996; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

One promise of indigenous institutions lies in their capacity to anchor authority in cultural familiarity. Chiefs and customary councils command respect that elected officials often struggle to secure, particularly in rural areas where state institutions may appear distant or corrupt (Logan, 2013; Ray & van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal, 1996). Their proximity to communities allows them to mediate disputes swiftly, administer land, and provide a sense of moral continuity (Ubink, 2008; Oomen, 2005). These functions are not trivial; they speak to the everyday realities of governance, where the authority of the state is often precarious. In this sense, decolonising governance entails recognising that legitimacy cannot be transplanted wholesale from external models but must resonate with local histories and practices (Wiredu, 1996).

Yet there are sharp limits to what indigenous authority can offer. Traditional systems are often hereditary and patriarchal, privileging male elders and excluding women and youth from decision-making (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Claassens & Ngubane, 2008). In some cases, chiefs have been implicated in corruption, land grabs, or elite capture, undermining the very legitimacy they are assumed to carry (Ubink & Amanor, 2008; Good, 1999). Customary courts, while accessible, may reproduce social hierarchies that conflict with constitutional principles of equality and fairness (Ntsebeza, 2005). To romanticise these institutions as inherently democratic would therefore obscure the inequalities embedded within them. A genuinely decolonising project must confront these exclusions head-on, rather than sidestepping them in the name of cultural authenticity (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).



The key challenge, then, is how to reform indigenous structures without erasing their legitimacy. One possibility is to draw selectively from indigenous principles—such as consensus-building, community accountability, and deliberation—while adapting them to contemporary democratic

norms (Wiredu, 1996; Maundeni, 2004). Botswana's *kgôti* offers a glimpse of this potential, though it remains imperfect (Sharma, 2010). Similarly, mechanisms could be devised to open chieftaincy institutions to greater gender and generational inclusion, ensuring they evolve rather than ossify (Molokomme, 1991). Another pathway lies in strengthening the accountability of traditional leaders within constitutional frameworks, so that their authority is not unchecked but balanced by rights-based protections (Williams, 2010; Ntsebeza, 2005).

At a broader level, the project of decolonising governance is also about epistemology—about expanding the range of political models considered legitimate. African experiences of hybrid governance suggest that democracy need not be defined exclusively in terms of adversarial elections and liberal institutions (Mbembe, 2001; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997). Participatory assemblies, consensus mechanisms, and culturally grounded forms of legitimacy may enrich global understandings of democracy (Wiredu, 1996). However, these contributions will only carry weight if they are critically assessed, rather than celebrated uncritically (Good, 2002; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). Decolonisation must be understood as both recovery and invention: recovering suppressed traditions of political thought, while inventing new forms that address contemporary demands for inclusion, rights, and accountability (Oy  w  m  , 1997; Wiredu, 1996).

III. Conclusion

The project of decolonising governance in Africa cannot be reduced to a binary choice between indigenous tradition and modern statecraft. The cases of Ghana, South Africa, and Botswana show that the two are already deeply intertwined, producing hybrid arrangements that are at once creative and contested (Boafo-Arthur, 2003; Oomen, 2005; Sharma, 2010). Chiefs preside over land disputes while constitutions enshrine liberal rights; communal assemblies deliberate even as parliaments legislate; legitimacy flows both from ancestral authority and from electoral mandates. These entanglements are not signs of political weakness but reflect the layered realities of African governance (Mamdani, 1996; Mbembe, 2001).

What emerges is a paradox. Indigenous structures provide cultural legitimacy and community rootedness that modern institutions often lack, yet they also carry exclusions—gender hierarchies, hereditary privilege, elite capture—that sit uneasily with democratic equality (Claassens, 2011;

Ubink, 2007; Ntsebeza, 2005). Modern state institutions, for their part, promise universal rights and formal accountability but struggle to command trust or reach into the everyday lives of citizens (Logan, 2013). The challenge is not to choose between them but to reimagine their coexistence: to preserve the legitimacy of indigenous authority while reforming its inequities, and to strengthen modern institutions without



severing them from the cultural landscapes they govern (Wiredu, 1996; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

Decolonising governance, then, is less about restoration than reconstruction. It is about acknowledging the vitality of indigenous political traditions while refusing to romanticise them, and about adapting democratic ideals to African realities without treating them as foreign impositions (Good, 2002; Oyěwùmí, 1997). If pursued critically, such a project could yield models of governance that are at once more legitimate, more inclusive, and more resilient than either imported liberal institutions or unreformed traditional hierarchies on their own.

The wider implication is that African governance does not merely lag behind some universal standard of democracy. It offers lessons of its own—about hybridity, about the coexistence of different sources of legitimacy, about the importance of grounding authority in cultural forms that people recognise as their own (Mbembe, 2001; Comaroff & Comaroff, 1997). In this sense, Africa's political experiments are not peripheral but central to rethinking democracy in the twenty-first century. To decolonise governance is to accept that democracy itself must be plural, drawing strength from diverse histories and traditions, and capable of being remade in more than one image (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015).

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