

## EXHIBITION SCRIPT

### TSWANA CULTURE

#### INTRODUCTION

##### The Historical Background

The Tswana, are a group of people who had split from the Bantu-speakers of the East African lake region and migrated to the south into the borders of the Kalahari, where they encountered the Bushmen. These were the earliest inhabitants of the country, living a nomadic way of life as hunter-gatherers and are now practically extinct.

The Tswana group are a linguistically and culturally homogeneous population, which constitute the western group of the Sotho people. They are now, living in eastern and north-western Botswana and in their South African 'ethnic homeland', Bophuthatswana, as cultivators, commercial livestock farmers and urban commuters. They are Christians and traditionalists, some spending their lives as migrants in the mining and manufacturing industries of South Africa, whereas many are unemployed.

The main aim of this paper is to describe the traditional social systems of the Tswana group, the political, social, and economic system and their religious beliefs. It also attempts to analyze the material culture of the Tswana, while the impact of Western civilization and Christianity is discussed.

#### POLITICAL STRUCTURE

The political community of the Tswana is hierarchically arranged with power and wealth concentrated in the hands of the chiefs. It is divided into three classes and these are; classes of royalist (these are descendants of the chiefs of the ruling family), commoners (include those who had long been absorbed by the chiefdom) and 'strangers' (members of refugee communities). The first two classes are generally regarded as 'true' members of the community and it is from these two classes that council members and members of general assembly are elected. Although the class of 'strangers' is allowed to participate in the general assembly, they seldom command as much influence as other classes.

Within each class there are further distinctions. Among the royalist, the more closely a man is related to the chief, the higher is his rank. Whereas among commoners and 'strangers', the status is determined by such factors as political office and family connection. However, the system of ranking is not rigid. Commoners who show loyalty to the chief may receive promotion by being a headman of new wards. Wealthy men may obtain personal followers by lending out cattle. Also, people with outstanding personal qualifications of special kind, usually gain prestige and therefore become influential in public affairs. Today, educated people and church officials also, have acquired special authority, regardless of their hereditary status. The incorporation of traditional institutions into modern government has led to the structural transformation of the Tswana chiefdom, as a result the political dimensions of office of the chiefs has been eliminated and their

function became as purely as administrative.

### **SOCIAL STRUCTURE**

It is in the village context that the principles of the social structure are expressed. The Tswana community comprise of separate and politically independent chiefdoms. Each chiefdom has its own territory and derives its name from the former chief or the traditional founder of the royal family. The territory of the chiefdom is dominated by its densely populated capital, in which most citizens live. They hold pastoral and agricultural land in the surrounding hinterland, where the satellite villages are situated and organized into districts under recognized headman.

Each individual, in the Tswana chiefdom, belongs to a household unit which is either monogamous or polygamous or made up of other dependant. Each household has its own small compound, consist of one or more huts, which are used only as bedrooms and stores. Most household activities take place in the open court yard. In polygamous households, each wife has her own compound, field, cattle and domestic utensils and they are ranked in order of betrothal, the first wife being senior to others. Her eldest son is heir to the status and unallocated property of the father. In nowadays, owing to the spread of Christianity and other external influences, polygamy is relatively rare and modern households are consequently smaller than before.

The Tswana community is a patrilineal society, made up of families, whose men are all descended agnatically from a common grandfather by whose name the group is commonly known. And they are ranked according to their relative birth status, the first one holding the position of family group elder, while others collectively constitute a ward. The ward is the focus of social and economic life of the Tswana society. It include members of related family groups and families of unrelated dependant. Thus, every chiefdom has incorporated immigrants groups from other chiefdoms, sometimes as separate ward under their own leaders. The senior group of related families provides ward headman, whose duty is to maintain law and order. He also deals with all family affairs, its important domestic events and activities of its component households. The internal ward relationships and those across local division are expressed by kinship and affinity terms. Kinship terms are extended even to more distant relatives so that everybody is brought within circles of kin. Marriage between close relatives is prohibited but, on the other hand, marriage with first cousins is encouraged. Preference is given to marriage of cross cousins, especially on the mother's side, failing which, any more remote relative may be chosen. Most men, however, marry women to whom they are not related at all and according to Tswana law, no marriage is considered valid unless bride wealth is given. Today, bride wealth has now been abolished in most other Tswana communities, especially by Christians, though is still given by other people.

### **ECONOMY**

(a) Land:- The Tswana are a very self-supporting group. Each household produces its own bulk of food, chiefly by raising crops

and breeding livestock. They built their own homes and make their own clothing and household goods. All these are made from locally available material. But contact with white people introduced new commodities of different kinds, most of which are purchased from traders. As a result, new standards of wealth evolved and money has become the principal medium of exchange. Despite these changes, most Tswana still depend mainly upon the land for food and many raw material. Land is controlled by the chief with the help of his advisers. Once the land has been allocated to household heads, it becomes his property and the unallocated portion of land is used as communal property for grazing, hunting, gathering and water rights. Although powers of the chiefs are eliminated, the right to administer titles to arable land still remains the chief's most important prerogative.

(b) Agriculture:- is the principal source of subsistence, essentially carried by women. The main crop grown was sorghum which is now replaced by maize. In addition to sorghum, vegetables like pumpkins, potatoes and a variety of gourds and fruits are also grown, though in very small quantities. Agriculture is carried on mainly at the fields, which are located outside the villages. In larger Tswana communities, most families have more than one field for cultivation and they are situated in different localities to overcome the hazards of an uncertain rainfall. The cultivation season starts in November and most families move to their fields and remain there until the harvest. The men help by clearing the fields, while women and girls do the weeding with hoes. When the grain is first sprouting and crops ripening children help scaring birds away. When the grain is ripe, it is harvested by hands and threshed on a specially prepared floor of hard earth with heavy wooden flails and transported to home on sledges or wagons, where it is stored in the granaries and in very large baskets.

During cultivating seasons the chief would perform rain-making ceremonies, which are now abandoned and replaced by an annual Church 'day of prayer for rain', introduced by missionaries. Among the Tswana, ploughing may not start until the chief has given permission and after the work has been done on his fields. Today, as a result of incorporation of the Tswana into the South African economy and the impoverishment of the rural areas, which had forced many adults to migrant labour, the Tswana households became severely disrupted as economic and social units. Thus, migrant labour has had many negative effect on Tswana life, living many families with great difficulties in making ends meet.

(c) Animal Husbandry:- The Tswana are also pastoralist and more importance is attached not only to cattle, but also to goats and sheep. Cattle are not merely a source of food, in terms of milk and occasionally meat, but their skin provides them with clothing material, shields, bags and many more. Social importance is acquired through ownership of cattle and a man's wealth is estimated by the size of his herds. Cattle, and sometimes sheep, are given as bride wealth. Cattle, as well as, sheep and goats, are standard medium of exchange. Sheep and goats are often killed for eating or sacrificed to ancestral spirits. The Tswana keep their livestock in non-permanent cattle posts several miles away from the villages,

where they graze freely upon the available pastures. Owing to scarcity of water, good pasture areas could not be used during dry seasons. Livestock is generally concentrated near bore holes, dams, wells and standing pools near the river, and at night they are kraaled to prevent them from straying. When the rains come they are moved away and left unattended.

(d) Hunting:- hunting is all the year round activity, carried by men and boys. The main instruments used for hunting are spears and arrows and dogs are useful in the tracking of the animals and pursuing them until exhausted. Men usually carry guns and other weapons, which they used both for protection and killing the animals. The hunting of fur-bearing animals and sometimes big game provide the Tswana with meat and skin and it cost them weeks in the veld to hunt the animals. The meat is dried and sold in the village. In the past, men were hunting freely without any restriction, but in nowadays, game hunting may not be carried without permit. Meat has also become scarcer owing to the diminution of game, although it can be bought from butchers. Despite imposed restrictions, hunting still remains an important pursuit almost everywhere.

(e) Food Gathering:- Apart from the production of food and hunting, the Tswana also place more reliance on the daily gathering of a great variety of wild plants, fruit, vegetables and honey. These foods form a high proportion of the general food supply. Gathering of food is basically carried by women, helped by their children. Men also do so when out in the veld.

(f) Exchange and Trade:- The Tswana produced great bulk of goods both for themselves and trade, which took the form of barter. Thus, all goods were bartered for one another and in some instances their relative value was stabilized, whereby hoes and spears, for example, worth a goat each. In times of crop failure, grain is sought out from other communities, though there is little inter-community trade. Even today, food and livestock are still often obtained by barter, although in most villages there are now also butchers, restaurants and trading stores. All these demand payment in cash. Some household goods, too, are still supplied directly by their makers, but many can be obtained only by purchase from trade stores and some Tswana people are involved in business. The local goods are also purchased for export and these include, in nowadays, hides and skins of domestic animals and livestock.

## **MATERIAL CULTURE**

### **ART AND CRAFT**

(a) Clothing :- In the past, all clothing was originally made from the skins of wild and domestic animals, but imported varieties are nowadays preferred. Women and older girls wear large aprons in front and a skirt at the back. Small girls, on the other hand, wear a tiny apron of fringes made of skin, while babies stay naked. Men and youth wear a loin-skin passing between the legs and tied round the waist. They sometimes wear skin cap or grass hats, while karosses and sandals are often added. Small boys wear a flap, barely covering the genitals. The style of garments vary according to age and social status of both men and women. In addition to everyday clothing,

certain professions or occasions demand special costumes for the main participants. For example, chiefs are distinguished by a cloak of leopard skin, diviners and herbalists wear elaborate costume such as cap of a baboon skin. Ornaments such as necklace, bangles and anklets, made of beads, copper wire or woven grass are worn by everybody.

The availability of western manufactured goods has, in nowadays, influenced clothing perhaps more than any other aspect of material culture. The old costumes are rarely seen or neglected in favor of western type clothes.

(b) Household Utensils:- The Tswana produced a great variety of household goods. These include sewn baskets, mats, beer strainers, all made of glass or reeds. Clay pots for cooking, holding water and beer; the iron blade hoes, axes, spears and knives; skin bags, milk - pails, milk - sacks; wooden spoons, wooden stools, food bowls, mortars, porridge stirrers, and calabash cups, bottles and scoops. Today, all these are still often seen, but many are being replaced more and more by imported material such as metal plough, hoes, axes, spades, cooking pots, buckets, enamel basins and many more. Owing to the spreading of the new material goods, there are very few people than before engaged in the manufacture of specialized art. New forms and skills have been acquired with the contact of white people.

(c) Music Instruments:- Like all the South African Bantu, the Tswana are also vocalists and instrumentalists. Their musical instruments include dancing-rattles, worn either on the ankles or shaken by hand, conical wooden drums with single heads of skin pegged in position and they are beaten by women, while men play reed-flute. Both instruments are used mainly for ceremonial purposes, though they may be used at ordinary dances. The animal horns with an opening made in the side, immediately below the solid tip, are used as signal trumpets. Whistles, made of a simple stopped pipe of reed, bone or horn are played, especially by boys.

## **RELIGION**

Belief in ancestral cult is the most important part of the traditional religion, but most Bantu communities now, profess Christianity. The old custom of burying a dead body in the cattle kraal, wrapped in an ox-skin, is abandoned. Instead, people use coffins and bury their dead in communal grave yards. Christianity introduced a new set of religious beliefs to the Tswana. As a result, many public rituals performed to the ancestors are abandoned and the solidarity of lineages is undermined. Traditional ceremonies for birth, death are replaced by baptism, confirmation, communion and rainmaking ceremonies are replaced by special day of prayer for rain. However, people still believe in the survival of the dead and they acknowledge their continued interests in the fortunes of their living descendants. Each family believe to be held under the direct guidance of its own agnatic ancestors, who reveal themselves through dreams or by interpretations of the diviners. They still practice the old customs forbidden to them by the church, though secretly. Thus, they still worship their ancestors and also acknowledge those of the chief by proprietary offerings where beer is made and animal slaughtered.

## EXHIBITION PLAN

### **PANEL TOPIC PICTURES**

1. A brief history of of George Frederick Janse van Rensburg George Frederick Janse van Rensburg
2. Geographic area Geographic map
3. Political structure A small group of males sitting on the chairs under the tree in the court yard
4. Social structure Rural households
5. Economy Granaries, grain storage basket, cattle and women threshing the mealies
6. Material culture Woman making clay pot, man weaving a grain basket, young girl on everyday clothing, man playing music
7. Religion Diviner carrying a kwas, divining bones and divining mat
8. The Bushmen Males hunting the game, women and children relaxing under the tree

### PANEL TEXTS

#### PANEL ONE

#### HEADING: A BRIEF HISTORY OF GEORGE FREDERICK JANSE VAN RENSBURG

This valuable collection of Tswana and Bushmen artifacts was donated to radio Tswana by George Frederick Janse van Rensburg. He collected the items in Botswana. They are of great value as collector's items as they are rarely made and used these days.

George Frederick Janse van Rensburg was born on 13 December 1909 on a farm in the Vredefort district. In 1934 he matriculated in Johannesburg at the Hoërskool Mynskool. After matric, he worked on a gold mine for two years. From 1937 - 1962 he was employed by the Public Works Department in the former Protectorate of Bechuanaland. During this time, he learned to speak Tswana fluently and passed three Tswana exams with honours.

Mr Janse van Rensburg joined radio Tswana, a branch of the SABC, as a Junior Production Assistant in 1962 and was a loyal member of the staff until his death in 1970.

**CAPTION:**

1. George Frederick Janse van Rensburg

## PANEL TWO

### HEADING: GEOGRAPHIC AREA

The Tswana group, which constitutes the western group of the Sotho-speaking people, is defined according to certain linguistic and cultural characteristics. Today, the majority of Tswana-speakers live in Botswana and the north western parts of South Africa, their ancestors having migrated to the region centuries ago. While many Tswana-speakers still live in traditionally structured rural communities, others live with their families in urban areas or as migrant labourers in the mining and manufacturing industries of South Africa.

### CAPTION:

1. Map showing the areas where the principal Tswana groups have settled.



### PANEL THREE

#### HEADING: POLITICAL STRUCTURE

Like all political systems, the Tswana political structure has a complex and dynamic history. The hierarchical Tswana political communities are often, but not always, based on the principle of common descent. Nevertheless, hereditary status is not the only basis for political position, with church leaders and the highly educated, for example, often achieving a high social and political status.

The historical processes of political breakdown and formation have often resulted from disputes of succession. Furthermore, the struggle for control of resources, made scarce through the particularities of colonial rule, has intensified such developments. A layering of political legitimacy, status and power exists, with local and regional customary political systems often co-existing with national political institutions.

#### CAPTION:

1. Political disputes between parties and discipline often took place in the court yard.

## PANEL FOUR

### HEADING: SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Patrilineal kinship systems played an important role in the traditional social structure of Tswana communities, which were established around hereditary chiefdoms.

Marriage could be either monogamous or polygamous, with polygynous unions supporting a number of households, ranked in order of marriage. The household comprised the smallest social unit. Owing to the spread of Christianity, economic circumstances and other influences, polygamy has become far less common.

Migrant labour and trends towards urbanization have significantly affected traditional social systems.

### CAPTION:

1. Rural Tswana households

## PANEL FIVE

### HEADING: ECONOMY

Despite the large-scale land dispossession of Black Southern Africans, epitomized in South Africa's 1913 Land Act, land plays a significant role in Tswana economic, political and social life.

Rural land may be allocated to specific community members for household use, or may be used communally. Access to land is necessary for agriculture, gathering, grazing and hunting, all of which contribute to economic survival, as well as for business and residential purposes.

Many Tswana men from rural villages have turned to migrant labour, mainly in the mines, to supplement homestead incomes based on subsistence farming.

In the towns and cities, Tswana workers can be found in both formal and informal employment in all industrial sectors.

### CAPTION:

1. After harvest the grain was threshed and stored in granaries and in very large baskets. Social importance was acquired through ownership of cattle, and a man's wealth was estimated by the size of his herds.

## PANEL SIX

### HEADING: MATERIAL CULTURE

In the past, all clothing was made from the skins of wild and domestic animals, but imported varieties are nowadays preferred. In addition to everyday clothing, certain professions or occasions demanded special costumes for the main participants, like chiefs and diviners.

Household utensils included sewn baskets, mats, and beer strainers, all made from grass or reeds. Clay pots for cooking, holding water or beer, iron hoe blades, axes, spears and knives were also produced. Today these are being replaced more and more by imported items. New forms and skills have been acquired through outside contacts.

The Tswana musical instruments included dancing-rattles and conical wood drums with a single head of skin. A variety of wind and string instruments were used, usually by men. Though some instruments were used to provide entertainment, they were mainly used for ceremonial purposes.

### CAPTION:

1. Clothing was made from the skins of animals. Household utensils included clay pots, beer strainers and sewn baskets, and a variety of musical instruments were produced.

## PANEL SEVEN

### HEADING: RELIGION

Although the dissemination of Christianity, which is wide-spread amongst Tswana-speakers, introduced a new set of religious beliefs and rituals, a closer examination shows continuities as well as breaks in the development of religious beliefs. The idea of a supreme being or God, for example, was not unfamiliar to the Tswana, who had traditionally recognized a powerful spiritual force, Modimo. This force was accessible through the ancestors, and religious beliefs are often still centered around revering the ancestors.

Another example of a continuation of ritual practices through a major transition in religious beliefs is that of rain-making. A number of rituals concerning rain-making pre-existed the introduction of Christianity. Some of these were recorded as still being practiced in the mid-1970s. Many contemporary Christian congregations have now specifically taken on the role of praying for rain.

Other important ritual events include initiation, marriage and divination rites.

### CAPTION:

1. Diviners still play an important role in Tswana life.

## PANEL EIGHT

### HEADING: THE BUSHMEN

The Bushmen are the oldest living inhabitants of South Africa. Archaeological excavations have revealed aspects of the early Bushmen social and economic life, such as the clothes and weapons used, and the food they preferred. A degree of insight into the complex social structure which characterized their way of life has also been gained.

Owing to contact with the Bushmen on the borders of the Kalahari, a mutually beneficial relationship between these groups developed. The Tswana supplied protection and items of material culture, while the Bushmen, in turn, supplied meat, skins and other products of the hunt.

It is often said that the Bushmen people have virtually become extinct. As a general statement this is not true, since there are still many people of Bushmen and mixed descent who live in less habitable areas such as the Kalahari and adjacent areas in Namibia. Smaller numbers of Bushmen and people of partly Bushmen descent live in the Karoo, where they live a transitory life associated with sheep farming and other activities.

### CAPTION:

1. Hunting was mainly carried out by men, while women and children gathered wild vegetable food.

**PANEL NINE**

EXHIBITION COMMISSIONED BY:SABC - SILVERTON

RESEARCH, TEXT AND SELECTION  
OF PHOTOGRAPHS AND ARTIFACTS:National Cultural History  
Museum

ARTIFACTS DISPLAYED FROM:George Frederick Janse van Rensburg  
collection

PHOTOGRAPHS PROVIDED BY:National Cultural History  
Museum and SABC

EXHIBITION DESIGNED AND  
EXECUTED BY: National Cultural History Museum

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## CAPTIONS - DISPLAY CASES

### DISPLAY CASE - ONE

1. Baby carrying skin (thari) was used by a mother to carry her on her back when she does all her ordinary household work.
2. Beaded apron and a skirt worn by young girls.
3. Necklace made from ostrich egg-shell beads, also worn by young girls around their neck or waist.

### DISPLAY CASE - TWO

1. A cloak and
2. A hat are special traditional costumes worn by chiefs.

### DISPLAY CASE - THREE

1. A shield made from skin and
2. A wooden spear are carried by chiefs on special occasions.

### DISPLAY CASE - FOUR

1. Wooden bowl
2. Calabashes
3. Broom
4. Wooden spoons
5. Porridge stirrers (lefetlho)  
These are a variety of household utensils produced by Tswana people.

### DISPLAY CASE - FIVE

1. Skin blanket
2. Mortar (kika) and pestle (motshe) were used for the grinding of grain or maize.
3. Adzes were used in the manufacturing of wooden utensils.  
\* Very large grain basket used as a storage.

### DISPLAY CASE - SIX

1. Clay pots were manufactured by women specialists.
2. Beer strainers (motlhotlho) were woven by women from rushes of fibre, and used for straining beer.

### DISPLAY CASE - SEVEN

1. Guitar
2. Rattles
3. Musical bow
4. Musical horn  
\* Musical drum  
The Tswana used a variety of musical instruments in combination with vocal performances.

### DISPLAY CASE - EIGHT

1. Grain basket
2. Large wooden bowls (mogopywana) were used to carry food for the girls in the initiation school.
3. Neck rings were worn by girls of the initiation school, as an indication of their status.
4. Belt was worn at special ceremonies and dances.
5. Bracelets (ditilwana) worn by girls of the initiation school around their wrists, ankles and legs, just below the knees.



6. Necklace with sharp horns.

DISPLAY CASE - NINE

1. Clay pots are used for various purposes such as brewing, storing beer and water, as well as serving side-dishes.
2. Samples of clay material that are used in the manufacture of clay pots.
3. Wooden spoons are used for stirring food when cooking, stirring beer, dishing up food and eating.
4. Walking sticks
5. Folding chairs

DISPLAY CASE - TEN

1. Calabashes were used for serving beer, water and food.
2. Sour milk bag were used for making sour mild.
3. Wooden pails were used for milking

DISPLAY CASE - ELEVEN

1. Divining bones (ditaola)
2. Snuff-boxes
3. Kwas
4. Horn for medicine  
Divination tools used by diviners in times of crisis to determine the source of the problem.

DISPLAY CASE - TWELFE

1. Sandal (serampheetshane) made from skin.
2. Horn
3. Bow and arrows were used for hunting large game.
4. Bag for carrying arrows.

DISPLAY CASE - THIRTEEN

1. Necklace
2. Skirt and apron  
These were worn by women and girls.

## SOURCES CONSULTED

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