



SERETSE KHAMA

BORN 1.7.1921
DIED 13.7.1980

ADMITTED TO
THE INNER TEMPLE 1946

FIRST PRESIDENT OF
BOTSWANA (1966-1980)



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PROFILE

Seretse Khama, a member of the Inner Temple, was born on the 1st of July 1921 in Serowe, in what was at the time the British Protectorate of Bechuanaland. Serowe was the capital of the Bamangwato people, of whom Khama's father, Sekgoma Khama, was the chief; his own father, Khama III, was their king (kgosi). At the age of four, after the deaths of his grandfather and father, Seretse Khama became king in turn, with his uncle Tshekedi Khama as his regent and guardian. After obtaining a BA degree at Fort College, University of South Africa, Khama was sent to England in 1945 to continue his education.

Khama studied law for a year at Balliol College, Oxford, before joining the Inner Temple in October 1946 and studying to become a barrister. In 1947 he met Ruth Williams, a clerk in the claims department of Lloyd's of London, at a London Missionary Society Dance; they fell in love, and after a year's courtship Khama wrote to his uncle in September 1948 announcing his intention of marrying Ruth on the 2nd of October. Tshekedi was outraged and asked the London Missionary Society to intervene and prevent the marriage, but Khama instead brought the planned wedding date forward to the 24th of September. Opposition mounted - the vicar who was to conduct the ceremony referred the couple to the Bishop of London, who told them he was not prepared to allow the wedding to take place in church without the approval of the British government. Ruth became estranged from her father and her employers threatened her with redundancy. However, the couple persevered and married at the Kensington Register Office on the 29th of September 1948.

Khama's uncle, on learning of the marriage, demanded its annulment and Khama's immediate return home. A full tribal assembly (kgotla) was called when Khama returned, and he was attacked for breaking tribal custom and defying his regent's command. A large majority of the tribe condemned the marriage and resolved that Williams should be prevented from

entering the Bamangwato Reserve. Nevertheless, Khama refused to back down, and further kgotla meetings led to the tribe agreeing to recognise him as kgosi. His uncle went into voluntary exile, and Ruth Williams Khama joined her husband at Serowe.

However, there was further opposition facing Khama. South Africa, which bordered Bechuanaland, had banned interracial marriage, and its government was not prepared to allow a neighbouring country to be ruled by a black leader with a white wife. The British government was warned that the all-white electorate in South Africa would not elect the pro-British opposition party if Britain allowed such a state of affairs in its protectorate. Britain, which relied on South African gold and uranium, barred Khama from the chieftainship, and suppressed a judicial enquiry which had concluded (despite being set up to prove the opposite) that he was fit to rule. Khama and his wife were exiled, and in 1952 the Conservative government declared this exile to be permanent.

International press coverage, a public outcry and demands for Lord Salisbury, the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, to resign, led to the decision in 1956 to allow the couple to return to Bechuanaland as private citizens. In 1961, Khama founded the nationalist Bechuanaland Democratic Party, which won the 1965 elections. Khama pushed for the country's independence, and on the 30th September 1966 became the first President of the new Republic of Botswana. He served in this position until his death in 1980.

Sir Seretse Khama was appointed KBE in 1966. He was the Chancellor of the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland from 1967 to 1970 and received honorary degrees from Fordham University, the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, and City University. He was a Grand Commander of the Order of the Lion of Malaŵi, Royal Order of Sobhuza II Grand Counsellor, Honorary Fellow of Balliol College, and holder of the Nansen Medal for exceptional services to refugees. He and Ruth had one daughter and three sons, one of whom, Ian, is the current President of Botswana.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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