Summary:
This study examines the land question in the North East District (NED) of Botswana using a political economy approach. In chapter one, I note that Botswana is scantily mentioned in the voluminous literature on the land question in Africa. This gives an impression that the country does not have any land question to talk of. Yet, the NED has a complex and complicated land question. I also emphasise that Botswana’s (tribal) land administration system has serious shortcomings. For instance, the Tribal Land Act (TLA) has been used by a few to accumulate chunks of land all over the country. There are unclear mechanisms to guard against this; the government admits. A political economy approach is the most suitable approach to investigate the land question in the NED. This approach has been used by scholars from diverse academic backgrounds in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Its crux is that the structures left by colonialism frustrate the implementation of just, pro landless and pro poor land reforms. Its proponents further argue that such structures aid the appropriation of land by a few elite at the detriment of the poor.

In chapter two, I review literature on the land question in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the former Soviet Union satellites. The emphasis on market-led land reforms (MLLRs) in Asia, Africa and Latin America has led to the marginalisation of the poor and landless. The lack of political power of the landless class makes it very difficult for them to bargain for better land reforms. As a result, the willing buyer, willing seller approach gives ‘veto powers’ to the landlords, who often sell poor quality land exorbitantly. The MLLRs, described as neoliberal land reforms, emphasise profit than social justice.

I also examine the politics and contradictions of the ongoing state sanctioned acquisition of the so-called idle and undeveloped arable lands/fields held mostly by the poor in Botswana. The state acquires the land and reallocates it to ‘committed farmers’. This elitist policy is consistent with what is going on in some African countries where the governments lease chunks of communal lands to foreign-owned agribusinesses under the pretext that the land lies ‘idle’. I argue that the concept of ‘idle land’ is problematic in African context. The two most elitist land reforms in Botswana; the Tribal Grazing Land Policy (TGLP) of 1975 and the Policy of Agriculture Development (NPAD) of 1991 are also examined. These policies appropriated about four million hectares of Botswana’s total land area of fifty-eight million hectares, and allocated them to few individuals under the pretext of improving range management.

In chapter three, I explain the research design and methodological issues of this study. I argue that a qualitative paradigm, as opposed to quantitative, is best suited for this study for the reasons that the politics of the land question in post-colonial Africa incessantly shift gears. Therefore, the use of a flexible
research design and qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, document analysis and group discussions help the researcher to deeply understand the socio-political contexts of the land question in post-colonial Africa. The collected data was analysed inductively.

In chapter four, I investigate the politics of the land question in the NED from a historical perspective. In the 1960s, the Botswana Peoples Party (BPP) advocated for the nationalisation of the land owned by the Tati Company and absentee landlords in the NED. The BPP held demonstrations against the exploitation of the Tati Company in and around Francistown. Fearing that the BPP was hell-bent in causing trouble by inciting the public, the British colonial administration welcomed the formation of the conservative Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) (the ruling party). Although the BPP has lost popularity in the national politics, some of its veterans still argue that the Tati Company should produce the receipts as a proof that it bought the land. Without the receipts, they argue that the land should be repossessed.

Similarly, politicians across the political divide have provided their views on the land question in the NED. Many of those interviewed argued that the land held by absentee landlords should be repossessed since, in some cases, the government does not know them. Some, however, maintained that the rule of law should prevail. This is the position taken by the government too. Villagers argued that there is no reason why the government should be respecting the property rights of the unknown absentee landlords. In 2003, the then Botswana National Front (BNF) politician, Robert Molefhabangwe, tabled a contentious motion, which demanded that the government repossess the land owned by the Tati Company and absentee landlords. I also present the views of the Tati Company on the land question debate.

In chapter five, I focus on the ongoing state-led land reform in the NED. In 2005, the government purchased about nineteen freehold farms/ranches to be redistributed to the landless. Though the government presents this land reform as redistributive, the facts on the ground point to the contrary. The purchased farms have slightly increased the share of the tribal land in this district. Yet, this reform has not fully benefited the people in need. For instance, the Tati Land Board (TLB) has leased chunks of land to few individuals. This policy is anti redistributive land reform. It concentrates land in the hands of a few.

I also contend that the district land use planning unit (DLUPU) recommended land use plans such as game ranching/farming and tourism related activities are anti redistributive land reform, and vague. Some people have ‘invaded’ the purchased farms cutting down live trees for firewood business. This land reform is mired in controversies. Thus, the purpose of buying the farms would not be realised unless the government revisits its redistribution plans. For instance, the TLA allows farmers from all over the country to utilise the purchased farms. As such, many have crossed from the central district into them.

In chapter six, I interrogate the role of the local authorities/institutions in this land reform. It is directly linked to chapter five. The District Administration Tribal Administration, North East District Council (NEDC) and the TLB are assessed. The central government liaises with the District Administration (the District Commissioner (DC)) to coordinate developments at the local level. I, however, show that the DC once complained of bloated bureaucracy with regard to how the buying and handing over of the farms to the TLB was done. Similarly, the consultations between the TLB and the NEDC especially with regard to the leasing of land to few individuals was found wanting. For instance, attorney Phazha Kgalemang, representing Butale Estate opposed to the TLB’s decision to lease land to Maano Syndicate, argued that the TLB had not properly consulted the NED.

The TLB struggled with evicting ‘prominent’ squatters. This shows that local institutions are manipulated by local elite at the detriment of the poor. Traditional leaders (diKgosti) feel that they have been sidelined in this land reform. They argue that even though they are members of the Land Board, their views matter less since they do not have voting powers. The ‘invasion’ of the purchased farms by Batswana from all over the country undermines their authority as the ‘new comers’ do not pay allegiance to them. The weak coordination amongst the local authorities led to poor execution of this land reform.

In chapter seven, I critique the ongoing massive arable land acquisition in the NED. I argue that this policy further complicates the land question in this district. The government acquires arable land for infrastructural development and villages’ expansions. The president is empowered by the TLA section 32 (1) to sanction tribal land acquisition. The problem is that in the NED there is virtually no alternative land for the victims of this policy. This disadvantages the residents of the NED mainly because the victims
cannot benefit from agrarian schemes introduced by the government to revamp the agrarian sector. Since land has symbolical and social value in the lives of Batswana, its acquisition has huge implications. Therefore, the priority when allocating new arable fields should be accorded the victims of this policy.

In chapter eight, I make general conclusions and recommendations. I also revisit my main findings and relate them to the theoretical perspective. I further suggest future research areas. I conclude that the land question in the NED of Botswana is extremely political and complex. I also remark that politicians have used it for political mileage since the 1960s. Thus, its analysis needs a political economy approach. It cannot be adequately discussed without relating it to what is obtaining elsewhere in Africa.