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978-1-107-66730-3 - The Swazi: An Ethnographic Account of the Natives of the Swaziland Protectorate

Brian Allan Marwick

Excerpt

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTORY

DISTRIBUTION AND NUMBERS, ETC.

Swaziland is 6704 square miles in extent, and the native population according to a census in May 1936 was 153,270. There are, however, a great many Swazi living outside Swaziland in the adjoining districts of the Transvaal, that is, in the Barberton, Carolina, Ermelo, Piet Retief and Wakkerstroom districts. According to a Petition to the Union Parliament¹ in March 1932, there were 60,000 Swazi living in the Transvaal. These natives owe allegiance to the Paramount Chief of Swaziland, and it is still a matter of grievance to Swazi of Swaziland, that the boundaries of the territory were not extended by the Royal Commission of 1881 to include them.

The country of Swaziland lies between the eastern slopes of the Drakensberg mountains, which form the eastern border of the Transvaal, and the low-lying lands of northern Zululand and Portuguese East Africa.

It is bounded on the north, west, and south by the Transvaal, and on the east by Portuguese East Africa, and Thongaland, now part of the Natal Province.

The territory is divided geographically into three longitudinal sections of equal breadth running from north to south and known locally as the high, middle and low veld. The low veld is the least thickly populated.

A little more than one-third of the territory, that is approximately 774,000 morgen (a morgen is approximately 2.11 acres), is Native Area and as such reserved by law for the

¹ Petition of the Swazi Tribes of the Eastern Transvaal to the Union Parliament, 25th March 1932.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

THE SWAZI

sole and exclusive use of the natives of Swaziland. The natives purchased for themselves 32,440 morgen from Europeans, which land is now, to all intents and purposes, Native Area. The remainder of the territory is owned by Europeans.

About 83 % of the Bantu population lives on the Native Areas and the remainder on European-owned land.

HISTORICAL

A certain amount of historical matter concerning the Swazi people, based on material collected by Sir de Symons Honey, one-time Resident Commissioner of Swaziland, is to be found in the Official Year Books of South Africa.¹ The Reverend A. T. Bryant has collected much interesting material regarding the origin and early growth of the Swazi nation.² He points out that many of the present clans are of Sotho origin and were in occupation when the Swazi proper entered the country. These clans have been assimilated into what is now known as the Swazi people.

The Petition of the Swazi Tribes of the Eastern Transvaal to the Union Parliament, March 1932, shows that the following Swazi clans came into the country with Sobuza I (Somhlolo) and formed the nucleus of the Swazi nation, namely: Mamba, Madvonsela, Simelane, Mabuza, Shabalala, Motsa, Mavimbela, Mdluli, Matsebula and Ngwenya. Of the incorporated tribes the following are the most noteworthy, namely, Gama, Magagula, Maseko, Mnisi, Tabetse, Sifundza, Malindza and Bembe.

Fortifications of stone erected by these early Sotho clans are still to be seen in the mountains north of the Usutu River.

The completeness of the incorporation of the Sotho clans can be appreciated from the fact that the chief of the Gama clan is in charge of one of the burial places of the Swazi kings—namely the one at Dlangeni near Mbabane.

¹ *Official Year Book of the Union of South Africa*, vol. III (1910–18), and also vol. xv.

² *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal* (London, 1929).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTORY

3

The history of the establishment of the Gama clan in Swaziland is interesting. It is claimed that the first Gama (Maphalala) came from the Eastern Transvaal in pursuit of an eland (*mphofu*) which he succeeded in killing at the Ntondoze mountains. The eland is said to provide an important ingredient for medicine for doctoring armies, and it was in order to make this kind of medicine that Maphalala Gama was chasing the animal. He skinned it and hung the meat up in a tree. While he was resting nearby, local women who were collecting firewood spied the meat and were moved by their desire for some of it to make overtures to the hunter. The outcome was that he was given asylum among the local natives, who were specially glad to have him because of his ability to make medicine for the armies. He eventually married one of the women.

His two sons Njelu and Mafu established an even wider reputation for ability to doctor armies. The Swazi army was suffering severely at the time from inability to make sustained marches, so Sobuza, who had heard of the fame of these people, called in their services and gave them a place to live in near his headquarters.

Their function came to be regarded as so important that the king was anxious for their safety when he was being pressed by the Zulu. He therefore sent them out of reach of the hostilities. They were moved from place to place, eventually settling at Dlangeni where their descendants still live and exercise the function of custodians of the royal graves. As such they were instructed never to leave the place. Even if the country were conquered by a foreign people they were to remain to look after the graves of the dead kings.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The literature on the Swazi is woefully deficient in quantity, and no systematic attempt has been made faithfully to record their laws and customs, either as a means of assisting the machinery of government, or as a contribution to knowledge of primitive people who still retain their original culture in

1-2

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Brian Allan Marwick

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4

THE SWAZI

a form as yet comparatively slightly modified by the impact of European civilization.¹

The ethnographic material which has been published concerning the Swazi is fragmentary and scattered through various journals. Dr J. A. Engelbrecht's on the marriage customs of the Swazi² is a valuable contribution and will be discussed in detail in dealing with the question of marriage. He has also produced a number of annotated Swazi texts³ which, apart from the ethnographic material they contain, are interesting for the attempt which the author has made to reproduce the spoken Swazi language in writing. Apart from this there are no books in the Swazi language. Zulu grammars and readers are used throughout the schools, and even the newspaper, which affected the name of *Izwi lamaSwazi* ('The Voice of the Swazi'), was printed in Zulu. Dr P. J. Schoeman has contributed some useful notes on various Swazi customs,⁴ and Dr P. A. W. Cook a description of the *Incwala* or First Fruits Ceremony.⁵ Dr Cook has also recorded and translated the *tibongo* (praises) of some Swazi chiefs.⁶ A short article containing fragmentary notes on Swazi customs has been contributed by P. J. Coertze.⁷

Apart from the historical material already referred to, there is very little else published on the Swazi. Consequently the bulk of the information in this book has been culled by the writer direct from native sources during his work among them as an administrative officer and during nearly six weeks' special field work among them in July and August 1934.⁸

¹ Since this was written (1934), Miss H. Beemer has been engaged in an intensive fieldwork study of Swazi culture under the auspices of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures.

² *Annals of the University of Stellenbosch*, vol. viii, sect. B, No. 3 (November 1930).

³ *Ibid.* vol. viii, sect. B, No. 2 (November 1930).

⁴ *Annale van die Universiteit van Stellenbosch*, Jaargang ix, Reeks B, Afd. 3 (April 1931).

⁵ *Bantu Studies*, vol. iv (1930).

⁶ *Ibid.* vol. v (1931).

⁷ *Tydskrif vir Wetenskap en Kuns*, vol. ix (1930).

⁸ For the literature published since this book was written, see Appendix I.

Cambridge University Press

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Brian Allan Marwick

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Chapter II

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

TRIBAL STRUCTURE

It has been said that the Swazi number 153,270 souls in Swaziland and about 60,000 in the Transvaal. These people are known collectively as *emaSwazi* or *Ebantfu ba kwa Ngwane*, and recognized as a distinct national entity. It is necessary to examine the features which define that nationality, and mark off the Swazi people from any others.

King

The official head of the Swazi nation is the king, or, as he is now known, the paramount chief. Among his people he is referred to as *Ingwenyama* ('lion') or *Inkosi* ('king' or 'chief'). The main significance of his office in the national life is that he is the symbol of the corporate unity of the Swazi people, in very much the same way that the King of the United Kingdom is a focus for the national spirit of the people of the British Empire.

A detailed analysis of the powers and functions of the paramount chief will be undertaken in considering the political organization of the nation. In the meantime, it will suffice to say that his functions and powers show him to be, in fact as well as in theory, the central figure of the nation. His functions have legal, ceremonial, religious and economic aspects. For example, he has the power to make rain for his people and is the chief performer in the annual national festival of the First Fruits (*Incwala*).

The *Ingwenyama* is still a force in the affairs of the nation after he is dead, because he passes to the realm of ancestral spirits and continues to influence the life of his tribe.

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Brian Allan Marwick

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6

THE SWAZI

Queen mother ('Indlovukati')

The mother of the paramount chief is called *Indlovukati* ('she-elephant'). She is also a person of outstanding importance in the tribe, and takes an active and prominent part in governmental affairs. She is the 'mother' of the tribe, and has the custody of the rain-making medicines. Whenever the paramount chief is unduly intractable, councillors will appeal to the *Indlovukati* to intercede and reason with him.

In the Petition of the Swazi Tribes of the Eastern Transvaal to the Union Parliament,¹ the following statement appears:

The Swazi Constitution provides for a dual monarchy. Two sovereigns, the son and his mother, must reign together over their people, each sovereign being in every sense independent and absolute in power. Each holds a superior court of his own and through this Court is allowed by the nation to exercise full jurisdiction and authority over all the affairs of his people. This delicate machinery functions without any friction between the two Courts because the Constitution provides that the King's Court shall be presided over by the senior ministers from the Queen's Court, whose chief duty always must be to keep the business and policy of the two monarchs in close harmony and in good grace for the good of the country.

The following also appears:²

After the death of the King, the kraal³ loses all its importance as the Queen takes full charge of all the affairs of the nation alone, and rules until she shall be required to hand over to the new King and Queen.

Councils

The paramount chief is assisted in the administration of the affairs of the nation by two national councils. In the first place there is a Privy Council (*liqoqo*) composed in theory of the wisest men of the nation. Beyond this there is the *libandla* or general council which represents the nation (*ilive*). It consists of all chiefs and able men of the nation and it deals with purely national matters.

The territory is divided up among chiefs who are responsible to the king for the peace, order and good government of their

¹ *Op. cit.* p. 3.

² *Ibid.* pp. 3-4.

³ I.e. the king's village, which is the administrative capital of the nation.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

7

respective areas. These chiefs are members of the general national council and therefore in theory represent, in national matters, the voice of their followers. These chiefs have *tindvuna* who assist them in matters of administration and they also have their own privy and general councils. Finally there are the village heads in charge of their own respective villages.

The constitution, powers, functions and duties of the various portions of the governmental machine will be dealt with in discussing the political organization of the nation.

Name

The tribe, as has been mentioned already, is known by the name *emaSwazi* or *Ebantfu ba kwa Ngwane*, the latter being the older form and meaning 'the people of Ngwane'—the founder of the nation. Mswazi was a later king who was successful in expanding the nation by making considerable territorial conquests. It is apparently from his time that the people came to be known as *emaSwazi*. Bryant says:¹ 'All members of that nation—of whatsoever clan—were now indiscriminately christened, first of all *aba-kwa-Sobuza* (Sobuza's people) after their common conqueror, and subsequently in the completed nation *amaSwazi* (the people of Mswazi) after their common sovereign.' He omits to mention the use or origin of the term *aba-kwa-Ngwane* which is still very frequently used. For example, in addressing a number of people, the words *Nina ba kwa Ngwane* ('you of Ngwane') would invariably be used rather than *Nina emaSwazi*. A Swazi will also refer to his country as *kwa Ngwane* rather than *eSwazini*.

There is no totemic symbol of the unity of the tribe. Indeed, in common with the other Bantu tribes of the south-eastern littoral of South Africa, there seems to be no trace of totemism among the Swazi, even in vestigial form.

Territory

Territorially the *emaSwazi* are a homogeneous group with their national administrative headquarters at Lozitha (or

¹ *Olden Times in Zululand and Natal*, p. 332.

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Brian Allan Marwick

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8

THE SWAZI

Lozithehlezi), the paramount chief's principal residence. The capital of the nation is, however, not the paramount chief's village but that of the queen mother. It is at this latter place (now Loŋamba) that meetings of the national general council are held and the great annual festival of the First Fruits celebrated.

The artificial boundary between the Transvaal province of the Union of South Africa and Swaziland has led to the isolation of about 60,000 Swazi from active participation in Swazi national life, but the isolation is not complete as these people are still attached by strong bonds of sentiment.

Membership

Membership of the nation is attained by birth or incorporation. Many of the conquered Sotho clans gave allegiance to the earlier kings (*ukukhonta*) and assumed Swazi nationality.

At the present time aliens may, with the permission of the paramount chief, settle in Swaziland and assume Swazi nationality.

Language

The language spoken in Swaziland is very closely similar to *isiZulu*, but there are features in it which mark it off, if not as a distinct language, then at least as a distinct dialect.

Except for the Swazi texts by Engelbrecht to which reference has already been made,¹ Swazi has not been written.

Physical features

Physical type varies fairly considerably in Swaziland, in skin colour, stature, and facial characteristics, which is not surprising in view of the numerous sources from which the present members of the Swazi nation are recruited. In spite of his earlier warlike existence, the Swazi is, on the average, smaller than the Zulu and lighter skinned.

¹ P. 4.

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Brian Allan Marwick

Excerpt

[More information](#)

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

9

Archdeacon (now Bishop) C. C. Watts has the following to say of the Swazi:¹

Like all Bantu peoples, they are of negro origin, but with an admixture of Arab and other Asiatic blood. This is shown most clearly in the shape of their skulls, which are much shorter and have a loftier and squarer forehead than those of the negro, and by the teeth, lips and nose, which are often of distinctly Arab type. Indeed it is no unusual thing to find a Swazi who might be a woolly haired Arab, while some of them are copper-coloured and others are jet black.

TERRITORIAL ORGANIZATION

Local grouping

Having now considered the tribal structure, the next stage is to consider the local grouping of the people.

No large towns like those of the Betšwana are now found among the Swazi. Formerly, however, it was necessary in the interests of self-protection to live together in large communities. Continual warfare and the presence of wild animals rendered it politic for the natives to live together. The community would probably consist of numerous unrelated families. When life became more secure, the separate families began to scatter all over the available country, and nowadays even a son is somewhat loth to remain at his father's village once he has married. The reason for this scattering apart is that the people wish to live as near as possible to their pastures and fields. Also they believe that domestic happiness can best be achieved by having one's family separated from those of one's fellows.

Village or 'umuti'

The village, kraal (Afrikaans) or *umuti* (Swazi) (plural *imiti*) is the unit in territorial organization, and consists on the average of three or four dwelling huts with one or more store and cooking huts attached to each. These *imiti* are scattered widely over the country, the factors determining the locality chosen being the availability of good grazing for stock and of arable land for gardens and proximity to water for domestic

¹ *Dawn in Swaziland*, p. 15.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

purposes. As a result the more fertile valleys are dotted with native gardens, while large areas of arid land carry a very small population, owing to the difficulty of watering stock and of obtaining water for household purposes. This, of course, is particularly true of the low bush-veld area.

In any case the villages are never erected immediately next to the water supply, and consequently water has to be fetched in receptacles from distances ranging upwards from an eighth of a mile. The reason for this is not primarily to avoid contamination of the water supply. The supply is rarely fenced in, and animals have ready access to it. The natives prefer the higher and drier ground, and in malarial districts there is a desire to avoid the heavily insect-infested low-lying areas.

In the higher areas river beds are avoided because of the cold during winter. The floor of a Swazi hut is of pounded earth, and though extremely resistant, is not entirely impervious to damp. If the site for the village is too low the floors may be affected by dampness (*mncitsi*), and in addition the grain pits would be sure to be damp and would therefore spoil the stored grain.

Of course the site would be chosen having regard to weather conditions, for example the village would be put in a spot where it would be protected from storms and the prevailing winds.

In the village a man normally lives with his mother, his wives, their unmarried children, and sometimes with his married sons and their children.

To each village are attached gardens and pastures. Each married woman is given a plot of arable land for the cultivation of which she is responsible. The plots of the various wives need not adjoin, and may be at varying distances from their homes. During the day the cattle and the other stock are taken out to graze on the communal grazing grounds where all the herd boys of the locality congregate and play together and share the task of herding. The cattle are apportioned to the various houses (*tindlu*) in the village, but nevertheless they graze together on ground which is shared