

SWAZILAND

Tradition and Change
in a Southern African Kingdom.

Alan R. Booth

Profiles / Nations of Contemporary Africa

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Jacket photos (*clockwise from upper left*): Swazi man combining in his dress the traditional and the modern; Usutu Pulp Company Ltd. mill and timberland; a roadside food market; a Swazi homestead near Mahlanya. All photos by the author.

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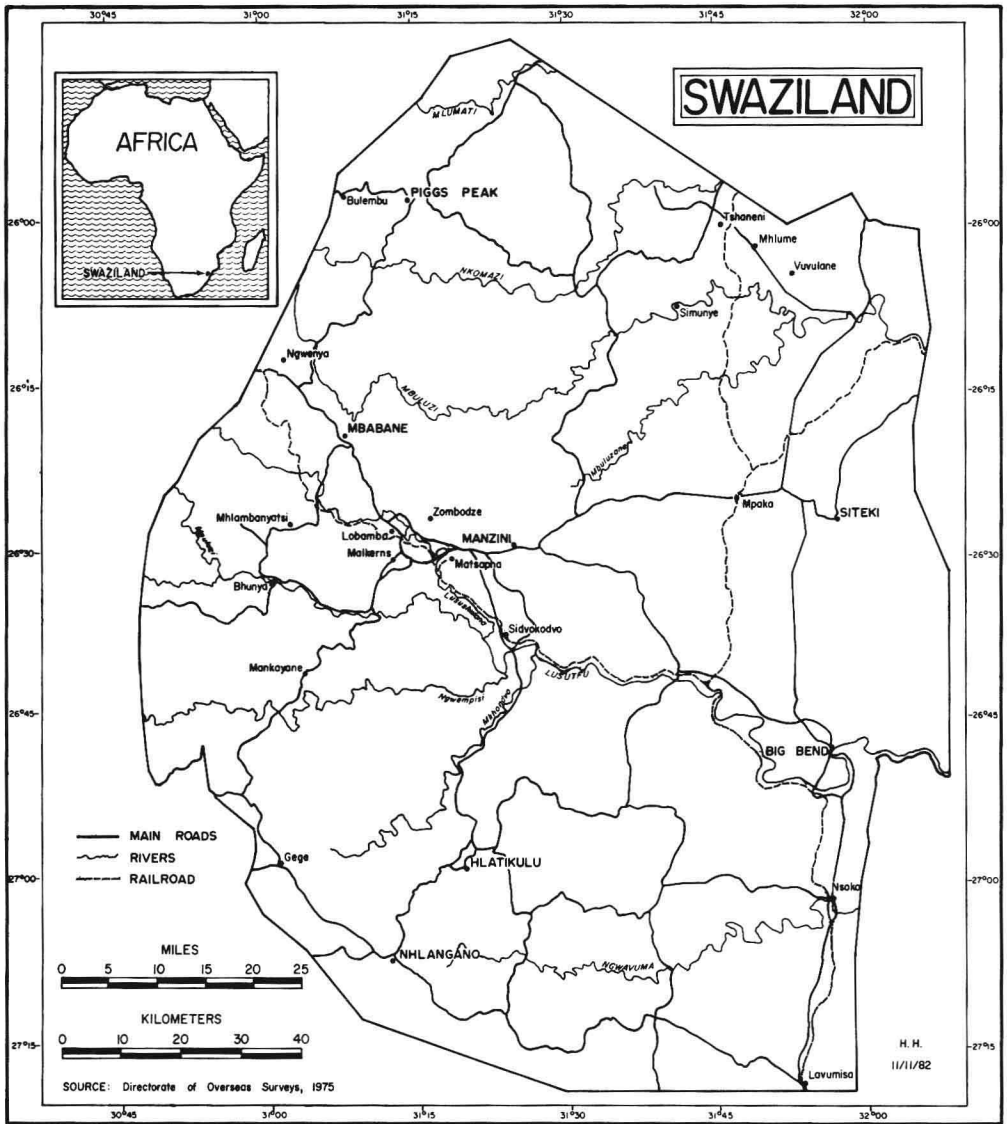
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Alan R. Booth



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Introduction

Swaziland is a small kingdom situated in southeastern Africa, lying between the Republic of South Africa and Mozambique. Although the area it occupies is modest (slightly larger than the state of Connecticut), it is strategically located in a region of great conflict. That, and its wealth of natural resources, make it far more important in the subcontinent than its size would indicate.

Swaziland's position in the region has always had a central effect on its history. It lay across the major migration route of Bantu speakers from central into southern Africa in prehistoric times; these migrants were the ancestors of Swaziland's present population. In the early nineteenth century the wave of movement was reversed, and Swaziland was forced to defend itself against the threat of invasion from the south in the aftermath of the Zulu wars of expansion. At the end of that century the threat came from the west, as the Transvaal's ambitions for access to the sea and the Europeans' appetites for Swaziland's resources turned the country into a pawn in the "scramble for Africa" and eventually into a British protectorate.

In the 1980s Swaziland must look to all four compass points in attending to its future. From the north and east, the African National Congress (ANC) uses Swaziland as an infiltration route from Mozambique into South Africa. To the east and west Swaziland seeks more land and to the east, access to the sea, a prospect being held out to it by South Africa in return for considerations as yet unspecified. To the south, Swaziland's historic enemies, the Zulus, warn that if that happens at their expense, blood will flow.

So it may come as a surprise to the casual reader to learn that Swaziland is essentially a peaceful and conservative country whose people, for all their proud military tradition, for the most part quietly pursue the good life. A major theme of modern Swazi history, this reader will discover, is the efforts of the government and the citizenry to deal peaceably and



Mbabane, 1908 and 1983 (*opposite page*). 1908 photo from the Swaziland National Archives; 1983 photo by the author.

wisely with the facts of their geographic position and abundance of resources and the greed that those resources have excited in others.

In truth, Swaziland is an extraordinarily rich and beautiful country. Parts of it are as lush and well watered as any in the world, and beneath the ground lies a wealth of certain minerals. Soil fertility was the basis for early Swazi prosperity in grain and cattle, and that prosperity was what first excited the attention of the Europeans, the pastoral farmers of the eastern Transvaal. Boers were followed by British prospectors seeking their fortunes in gold and tin in the 1880s, and the rush for concessions changed the complexion of Swaziland forever.

The agrarian cornucopia that Swaziland has become in this century was largely the result of the European expropriation of the better lands after the Boer War and application of water engineering to them. The latter undertaking was a post-World War II phenomenon that resulted in Swaziland's abundance of sugar, citrus fruit, and other export crops grown in irrigated fields. Commercial forestry was also launched by Europeans on Swazi-forfeited land after World War II, and timber became the kingdom's largest export earner after sugar. Exploitation of minerals—*asbestos*, iron, and coal—was also foreign controlled.

Agricultural and mining investment was followed in the 1970s by large-scale capitalization of light manufacturing and service (mainly tourist)



industries, the result of an aggressive government policy to establish a commercial base for the economy. Parastatal corporations were established and a tax policy formulated to make such investments attractive, and they have been very successful. In 1977 Swaziland's per capita gross domestic product (GDP) stood at E 404 (\$580) per annum,¹ placing the kingdom twelfth in the World Bank ranking of fifty-four African countries.

But not everyone is rich. In fact Swaziland is not much better off than most Third World countries in its attempts to industrialize and become commercially successful in the world marketplace. International capital invests where it finds cheap labor and investment concessions. Swaziland, in responding to those market forces, had by the early 1980s paid a heavy price in terms of an economy heavily dependent on foreign capital and a badly skewed income distribution.

Data on incomes are inadequate, but those available point to the conclusion (as outlined in a 1977 International Labor Office study) that "despite [Swaziland's] apparent prosperity, poverty affects a large proportion of the population." Rural Swazi income, it reckoned, ran to about E 53 per year; urban area income was closer to E 506. Non-Swazis averaged E 1,782 per year. Unemployment, which two decades previously had been largely unknown, by the late 1970s had reached a level (particularly among the educated) at which governments begin to worry about social stability. Finally, amidst the agricultural abundance, the report concluded, "The proportion of families not able to satisfy the minimum required levels of nutrition were in the neighborhood of 44 per cent in urban areas and 65 per cent in rural areas. The income of an average household falls short

of the minimum amount needed to meet its basic needs by about 33 per cent in rural and about 12 per cent in urban areas."²

Much of this book deals with the causes of these imbalances and their details and investigates some of the alternatives open to the new generation of Swazi leadership now coming to power. In neither its findings nor its conclusions does it make a claim to objectivity; few, on the other hand, will find it doctrinaire. Either position would be a disservice to the reader. But the heat of the debate over the condition of the Third World and its causes and remedies effectively invalidates the middle of the road position in any account such as this. The point of view that informs these pages is that, put simply, there is an economic basis to the scheme of things, and one ought to remember that—although not that alone—when reconstructing the past or describing the present. And one ought to be able to heed the historian Geoffrey Barraclough's warnings against the "obsession with causality" and "neurotic absorption in questions in motivation"³ while still recognizing that people and nations have interests to promote and that history is made when they act on them.

The pages that follow draw liberally from what is known as "underdevelopment theory" in their assessment of the past hundred years. That thesis applied to Africa sees the colonial period as the incorporation of peripheral societies into a burgeoning world capitalist economy whose need for expansion began to touch the continent (which had previously experienced only unequal trade, slave trade, and plunder) in the mid-nineteenth century. The goal of the colonial powers, the extraction of surplus from the peripheral countries for the benefit of the metropolises, had previously been carried out by armed enforcement of trade disparities, which had been far more cost effective than actual occupation. But when, in time, European rivalries in Africa necessitated such occupation, the enormous costs involved demanded that the exploitation of the colonized be legitimized and enforced. Systems were devised, based commonly on taxation and the expropriation of land, that delivered up capital's requirements—forced labor, enforcement of contracts and property rights, and so on—all previously unknown in the newly colonized societies.

During the 1880s the discovery of vast quantities of gold in South Africa made it a classic theater for regional underdevelopment. This was true in part because low-quality and deeply embedded ore made gold mining easily the most capital- and labor-intensive of all industries. The generation and reproduction of a cheap and reliable labor force thus became a cardinal basis for British colonial policy in all of southern Africa, including Swaziland. The architect of that policy, Sir Alfred Milner (high commissioner for South Africa from 1897 to 1905), worked from a vision of "a self-governing white community . . . supported by a well-treated and justly governed black labour force from Cape Town to Zambezi."⁴ How that policy—stripped of its Kiplingesque rhetoric—affected Swazi society thenceforward is described herein.

Dependency theory, companion to the concept of underdevelopment, holds that when the high costs of colonial rule dictated that the rulers