

A Life Dismembered

7. Swaziland 1974

I mentioned earlier how, at the end of my first year of teaching in the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, I was transferred from Lesotho to work at the Swaziland campus. Swaziland – now eSwatini – is a small kingdom wedged between South Africa and Mozambique. Like Lesotho, it had Independence thrust upon it in the 1960s by a British government desperate to decolonise. Unlike Lesotho, it was a traditional society whose king expected to hold absolute power. But the British insisted on setting up a parliamentary democracy. Reluctantly King Sobhuza II gave way and organised an election. Parties were represented on the ballot paper by drawings of animals: the King's party naturally took the lion, while the main opposition party was given a reindeer (so the story goes). Anyway, the royal party won by a landslide, and Parliament soon decided to abolish itself and hand power to the King, where it has remained ever since. I remember going to a government compound to take a driving test, and found a large board gathering dust at the back of the storeroom used as a waiting room. I turned it round: there were all the constituencies listed, ready for election results to be chalked in.

But King Sobhuza, then the world's longest-reigning monarch, was universally admired, and ran a benevolent dictatorship without any significant opposition – I imagine Heaven must be organised along similar lines. He was a modest man. It's said that when a South African journalist went to interview him, he found the gates of the palace open and unguarded. There was no answer at the front door, so he walked around the building and found the King squatting on the back *stoep* spooning baked beans from the tin.

The Royal Family are the Dlaminis, a name shared by a large chunk of the population. The next most prestigious surname is Mhlanga, meaning Reed, so I started there with an unearned level of respect. The country's main day of celebration is the Reed Dance Festival, at which each year the King selects a new wife from a line of bare-breasted young debutantes. A royal custom which King Charles should think of adopting – though it might not go down well with the Great She-Elephant (the Swazi title for the Queen Consort). It also caused problems when Sobhuza died and a successor needed to be chosen.

Another Swazi custom the UK would do well to adopt, is that the actual date of each festive holiday is only decided by the King's sangomas (traditional medicine men) a few days beforehand. I don't know how they determined the most auspicious day: astrology, chicken entrails – or perhaps they just listened to the SABC weather forecast, because every festival occurred in glorious sunshine.

Despite being the smallest country in Africa, there are three distinct geographies: the High Veldt, which can get frost in winter (of course, the British set up the capital here); the Middle Veldt, a sub-tropical paradise of bananas, pawpaws and pineapple fields; and the Low Veldt, dry, dusty and malaria-ridden. The UBLS campus was outside a small village called Kwaluseni, in the Middle Veldt. I absolutely loved it; I'll write about life and work there another time.

The country's economy was closely tied to South Africa's. When I started there, the South African Rand was used, though later Swaziland introduced its own currency, the lilangeni (plural emalangeni), illustrated with those bare-breasted Reed Dancers:

<https://www.banknoteworld.org/swaziland-1-lilangeni-banknote-1974-p-1a.html>

King Sobhuza risked incurring friction with apartheid South Africa by allowing ANC activists safe haven in the country (provided they didn't use it as a base for violence). In appreciation of this role, the jazz pianist Abdullah Ibrahim named one of his albums 'Blues for a Hip King'. An important contribution to the economy was tourism, partly of white males from South Africa seeking a bit of inter-racial intimacy. So where did UK expats go when they wanted respite from the staid British society? Across the border into Mozambique, and its laid-back capital Lourenco Marques. But that's another story...