

SISWATI

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

What can be termed standard Siswati has taken some time to evolve out of the Nguni, Sotho and Tsonga constituent language groups making up the Swazi nation as a language group. However, the standard is the closest approximation to what is spoken around the traditional royal capital of Lobamba in central eastern Swaziland. This is what is termed kutsefula. The Siswati dialect spoken in southern Swaziland, known as kuthithiza (because it has 'th' where standard Siswati has 'ts,' as in thatha/ tsatsa meaning "take") has a Zulu flavor. The kuyeyeza dialect, which has a 'y' where the standard Siswati has 'l' as in 'yayeya ya' for 'lalela la' "listen here," spoken in the Eastern part of the country, is much less spoken. As a matter of fact, it is virtually disappearing. But it must be stressed that these variations are only phonological.

The Swazi live in both rural and urban areas. Mention has been made of the Swazi's love of their cultural heritage. Indeed, the traditional royal capital of Lobamba at the foot of the Mdzimba hills, is a hive of activity in late July and late December when the Umhlanga Reed dance and the Lusekwane first fruits ceremonies are held.

The Swazi deity is Mkhulumncanti (the Ancient Great One) or Mvelinchanti (He Who Appeared of Ancient Times). He is described as Mlentengamunye, the One Legged One. He is too far removed to be reached and so ancestors are the most accessible way to commune with the unseen realm. Thus cattle or goats are slaughtered and traditional sorghum brewed and a feast held to appease the ancestors. One consults magicians or traditional diviners, tangoma/tinyanga in order to learn of his favor or disfavor with the ancestors, and what offering one should make to win their favor. However, a good many Swazi people practice Christianity alongside their belief in traditional spiritism.

Swazi celebration of Christmas has become synonymous with goat slaughtering. Swine is fast becoming another popular beast to slaughter for the Christmas feast.

STUDYING SISWATI IN THE U.S.

Please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC website at <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu/>



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MAIDEN BRAIDING ANOTHER GROOMING FOR A DANCE PERHAPS

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WHY STUDY SISWATI?

The Swazi people live in Swaziland and Mpumalanga province of South Africa. The history of the Swazi people can be traced back to the early 19th century when a Dlamini ruler with a following fled the Mfecane wars of Zululand to escape Shaka and settled in present day Swaziland. Through conquest and diplomacy he welded together different groups of people who had been destabilized by the wars of Shaka. The nation of the Swazi was thus born. Between the 1830s and 1903 when British colonial rule over the Swazi was formalized, the Swazi lost a lot of territory and people to South Africa so much so that when independence came in 1968, there were more Swazi speakers in South Africa than in post colonial Swaziland. King Sobhuza II, the longest reigning monarch in history, ruled the Swazi between 1921 and 1982 and was succeeded by his son, the current Swazi king, Mswati III.

The relations between the Swazi speakers in South Africa and those in Swaziland is very interesting. For example, Swazi speaking South Africans cross the border into Swaziland to celebrate the annual first fruits ceremony, whose leading priest is the Swazi monarch, as well as the Umhlanga Reed dance. As a matter of fact, some still recognize Swazi traditional authority. A significant number of Swazi work in South Africa and send home to Swaziland much needed revenue.

WHO SPEAKS SISWATI?

Why study Siswati? Well, consider this: the king of the emaSwati people, King Sobhuza II, who reigned between 1921- 1982, is the longest reigning monarch in history. Period. Secondly, the emaSwati/Swazi monarchy is one of the strongest monarchies in Africa today. The history of the ruling Dlamini dynasty, which has been reigning for over 200 years, is a rich study of the evolution of traditional pre-colonial political structures to the modern post colonial dispensation. In other words, if you wanted to investigate the validity of the dislocation argument between pre and post colonial culture, Swaziland would be an ideal area of research, and for that you would need to learn siSwati.

Note too, that if you have learned siSwati, you will be able to communicate with Zulu, Xhosa and Ndebele since these languages fall into the same language group of families, the Nguni languages which share syntactic and lexical affinities. Swaziland also has a very strong oral tradition which includes the imbongi, the royal praise poet, warrior chants, work songs, as well as folk tales that still fascinate scholars of oral traditions.

The fact too that Swaziland, the home of the siSwati speakers, is well known for the vibrancy of its cultural traditions such as the Umhlanga/ Reed Dance ceremony (and the the Lusekwane, both of which showcase precolonial national tribute labor and spiritualism,) is an added attraction for learning siSwati in order to be able to tap into this rich and resilient cultural heritage. The Umhlanga dance ceremony has attracted social scholars and has become an irresistible subject for print and photo journalism because of its carnival character.

As a country that is plagued by the twin scourges of HIV/ AIDS and poverty, Swaziland is hive of activity for UN agency and financial aid programs of countries like the US, Britain China, Japan and others. The activities of these stake holders and the impact of their programs is an important field of research. So if you want to undertake related research in the area, you need to learn Siswati.



Swazi young men and maidens dancing the traditional sibhaca



Dishing out food at esibuyeni (corralled living space)



Swazi young maiden