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A History of Swaziland

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Introduction

The Kingdom of Swaziland—known as Eswatini since 2018—is a land of deep-rooted tradition, vibrant culture, and complex history. Tucked between South Africa and Mozambique, this small nation has witnessed an extraordinary journey from ancient human habitation to the forging of a modern state. Its story weaves together strands of prehistoric settlement, African migrations and kingdoms, encounters with colonial powers, and the enduring significance of monarchy and tradition in an ever-changing world.

The history of Swaziland is as rich as it is intricate. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that humans have inhabited the region for hundreds of thousands of years, leaving behind stone tools and ancient mines that point to early innovation, trade, and societal organization. Over time, waves of Bantu-speaking peoples brought their languages, cultures, and political structures, eventually giving rise to the Swazi identity we recognize today. Central to the Swazi historical narrative are the mighty figures of the Dlamini dynasty, whose leadership and vision transformed splintered clans into a united, resilient kingdom.

Swaziland's encounter with European powers in the nineteenth century signaled the beginning of an era rife with challenges and opportunities. The granting of land and mining concessions, jockeying between Boer and British ambitions, and the imposition of colonial rule reshaped the country's economy, politics, and society. The Swazi monarchy and people faced the erosion of their autonomy, yet managed to preserve distinct elements of culture, governance, and identity, adapting to the tides of change while laying the foundations for future self-determination.

The move toward independence in the twentieth century was neither smooth nor inevitable. It involved resistance, negotiation, and adaptation, as the Swazi monarchy—embodied in figures like Sobhuza II—sought to recover lost lands, defend traditional authority, and reconcile modern political realities with age-old custom. The achievement of independence in 1968 marked both a break from colonial rule and the continuation of a monarchy-based order, as the nation charted its own course in a world of shifting politics and fast-paced development.

Today, Eswatini is defined by both its continuity and its contradictions. As Africa's last absolute monarchy, its political system balances modern institutions with traditional structures, sparking ongoing debates about democracy, governance, and the rights of citizens. While the economy has developed on the backbone of sugar production and other industries, poverty and inequality remain persistent concerns. Traditional ceremonies such as the Umhlanga and Incwala are vital threads in the fabric of

national pride even as new generations grapple with globalization, education, and technology.

This book explores these many facets of Swaziland's past and present. Through twenty-five chapters, it provides a detailed and nuanced account of the kingdom's formative events, key personalities, and central themes. From the earliest traces of humanity to the ongoing debates and hopes that shape Eswatini today, this history seeks to illuminate a land whose past continues to shape its future.

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CHAPTER ONE: Early Human Settlement in Swaziland

The landlocked kingdom of Eswatini, cradled by the dramatic landscapes of Southern Africa, holds within its soil and rock shelters a story far older than the Swazi nation itself. This is a narrative etched in stone tools, ancient mining shafts, and the faint echoes of the earliest human footsteps. Before the arrival of the forebears of the modern Swazi people, this region was a stage for hundreds of thousands of years of human activity, a testament to the deep roots of humanity on this continent.

Evidence of human habitation in the area now known as Eswatini stretches back into the mists of the Early Stone Age. Along the banks of rivers and nestled within the Lubombo ridges, archaeologists have unearthed stone tools and implements, some suggesting a presence here as early as one million years ago. These artifacts, handaxes and other tools, bear a striking resemblance to those found in the African Rift Valley, a region often considered a cradle of human evolution. While no hominid fossils have been discovered in Eswatini itself, largely due to the geological lack of limestone rocks needed for fossil formation, the tools provide a tangible link to these incredibly early periods of human history.

As the millennia turned, the Middle Stone Age dawned, roughly between 200,000 and 150,000 years ago, coinciding with the emergence of anatomically modern humans. Tools characteristic of this period are widely scattered across Eswatini, indicating a more widespread presence of early *Homo sapiens*. These were hunter-gatherer societies, adept at surviving in the diverse environments the region offered. Their lives would have been intimately connected with the rhythms of nature, following game and gathering edible plants across the varied terrain of mountains, valleys, and lowveld.

One of the most remarkable testaments to the ingenuity of these early inhabitants lies in the Ngwenya Mine, situated near the northwestern border of Eswatini. Here, within the ancient Bomvu Ridge, lies what is considered one of the oldest known mining operations in the world. Archaeological investigations have revealed that as far back as 42,000 to 43,000 years ago, Middle Stone Age peoples were actively extracting ore from the earth.

Their target was primarily hematite, a mineral rich in iron, valued not for its metallic properties in this era, but for its vibrant red and sparkling specularite forms. This red ochre, known in Siswati as "libovu," was a crucial pigment used for a variety of purposes. While its exact uses tens of thousands of years ago remain a subject of study, across Southern Africa, ochre was employed in body painting, symbolic expression, and potentially even for practical uses like sunscreen or insect repellent. The mining tools discovered at Ngwenya, fashioned from dolerite, included specialized

choppers, picks, and hammers, suggesting a level of technological sophistication geared specifically towards extraction. Over 300,000 artifacts, including thousands of these stone mining tools, have been recovered from the site, painting a vivid picture of sustained activity.

The Ngwenya site shows evidence of mining activities occurring at different times, including the Lion Cavern and Castle Cavern, used for specularite and red ochre extraction dating back over 40,000 years. The sheer scale of some of these ancient workings is impressive; in one instance, an estimated 100,000 tons of material had been removed from a site by early miners. This wasn't just casual scraping; it was a significant undertaking that speaks to the value placed on these minerals and perhaps suggests early forms of trade networks, as Ngwenya ochre was transported up to 100 kilometers away. It challenges older assumptions that early communities relied solely on the most accessible, high-quality ochre, suggesting instead that cultural preferences, social networks, and symbolic meaning played a role in their choices.

Following the Middle Stone Age, the archaeological record in Eswatini around 20,000 years ago reveals the presence of people associated with the ancestors of the San hunter-gatherers. These communities, part of the wider group of indigenous peoples of Southern Africa often referred to as the Khoisan, were traditionally nomadic hunter-gatherers, their lives dictated by the movements of game and the seasonal availability of plants. They left behind a rich legacy, most notably in the form of distinctive rock paintings found throughout the western parts of the country. These artistic expressions, created using pigments like the red ochre from sites like Ngwenya, offer glimpses into their world, their beliefs, and their interactions with the environment and possibly other groups.

Archaeological sites such as Siphiso and Nyonyane shelters have provided dates that fall within the Later Stone Age, with occupation stretching from around 13,500 years ago to more recent times. These sites also indicate periods of abandonment, potentially linked to colder climatic phases when populations might have moved to warmer coastal areas before returning as the climate improved. The presence of these Later Stone Age inhabitants, the ancestors of the San, marks a significant period in the human history of Eswatini, a time dominated by hunter-gatherer lifeways before the dramatic changes brought about by the arrival of new peoples and technologies.

Even as the millennia continued to pass, and the world outside the region underwent significant transformations, these early inhabitants continued their way of life. Their deep knowledge of the land, its plants, and its animals was essential for survival. While often referred to collectively, these San communities likely comprised various clans and family groups, each with their own territories and traditions. Their history, like that of other indigenous hunter-gatherers globally, is one of adaptation and resilience in the face of changing environments and, later, the arrival of new populations.

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