

Globethics Repository



Christianity in Swaziland (90)

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see <https://www.globethics.net>. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see <https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy>.

Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Nyawo, Sonene
Publisher	Regnum Books International
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-07-14 00:41:16
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/166440

(90) CHRISTIANITY IN SWAZILAND

Sonene Nyawo

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct 1970 2025
Christians	1,046,000	87.6%	1,283,000	89.2%	1.4%
Independents	572,000	47.9%	694,000	48.2%	1.3%
African initiated	558,000	46.7%			
Protestants	144,000	12.1%	205,000	14.3%	2.4%
Pentecostal	35,400	3.0%			
Anglicans	24,800	2.1%			
Evangelical churches	23,400	2.0%			
Holiness	19,200	1.6%			
Methodist	12,300	1.0%			
Lutheran	9,400	0.8%			
Adventist	8,100	0.7%			
Roman Catholics	56,000	4.7%	60,000	4.2%	0.5%
<i>Pentecostals/Charismatics</i>	597,000	50.1%	700,000	48.7%	1.1%
<i>Evangelicals</i>	137,000	11.5%	206,000	14.3%	2.7%
adherents of traditional African religions	118,000	9.9%	120,000	8.3%	0.1%
Muslims	7,800	0.7%	9,000	0.6%	1.0%
Baha'is	5,400	0.5%	6,300	0.4%	1.1%
Hindus	1,800	0.2%	2,100	0.1%	1.0%
people professing no religion	14,200	1.2%	17,800	1.2%	1.5%
Total population	1,193,000	100.0%	1,438,000	100.0%	1.3%

Source: Centre for the Study of World Christianity (CSGC), Boston, Gordon-Conwell TS

Early Beginnings

The advent of Christianity in Swaziland begins with a dream. King Somhlolo dreamt of strange people that had long hair hanging down from their heads, resembling tassels. They emerged from the sea, carrying two objects, a *umculu* (scroll) and a *indilinga* (round object/coin).¹ The King was instructed by a voice in the dream that he should accept the scroll and reject the round object, and also not to hurt these people.² It is on record that King Somhlolo had heard, from his representatives at the Zulu court, that the son and heir of

¹ Sonene Nyawo, "The Early Encounter between Swaziland and the Western Missionaries: The Establishment of the Evangelical Church in Swaziland, 1982-1950." M.A. Thesis, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg (2004), 81.

² Joshua Mzizi, "Church and State in Swaziland is Somhlolo's Dream a Scandal for Swazi Hegemony" in Religion and Politics in Swaziland, ed. Simangaliso Kumalo (Bloemfontein: SUN Media, 2013), 236.

Sekonyela, chief of the Mantatees, had been instructed by the missionaries, and was staying with them at the Mpharane mission station.³ Sobhuza then decided to send a delegation to Mpharane to request a missionary to reside at his royal kraal and instruct his son and successor Mswati. 'It was just before taking this decision that the Swazi King had had his dream of the *umculu* and the *indilinga*.⁴ Unfortunately, because of financial constraints, the missionaries could not attend to Sobhuza's request promptly. Nonetheless, on his death bed, the dying king made his son and successor promise that he would pursue his father's vision.⁵ The Swazi accepted this dream as a revelation by national ancestors about the unknown future of the nation in the midst of some external threats.

The Realisation of the King's Dream

In pursuit of this historic dream, young King Mswati II, after his installation as King of Swaziland, sent his two headmen, Majuba Mndzebele and Mkonkoni Kunene, in 1838 to fetch the missionaries to bring the *umculu* to Swaziland. The Swazi generally longed for the missionaries because 'they heard that the missionaries were white people who were preaching the Word of *Mvelinchanti* (God), and they evidently took it from the *umculu*'.⁶ After a considerable delay, in 1844, the Wesleyan Missionary Conference, held at Grahamstown, accepted King Mswati's request, and decided to send missionaries to Swaziland. Eventually, the Rev. James Allison and the Rev. Richard Giddy, with two Basotho evangelists, decided on an exploratory visit to Swaziland before establishing a permanent settlement. They got a friendly reception from a gathering of 'notables' at Lozitha Royal Palace which included the young King Mswati II, Queen Mother Tsandzile, the King's uncle Prince Mbukwane, and about 200 chiefs and Tindvunas.⁷ At the King's instruction, they were designated some land at the southern portion of the Swazi domain, known as Dlovunga. Having received orders to help the missionaries in any way possible in the construction of the buildings, the local people completed a chapel and a large house for living accommodation, surrounded by a high fence, within a week. Also, they laid out a garden where they planted 150 fruit trees.⁸ The two white missionaries ultimately left for South Africa, taking along with them two young Swazi men, Job and Barnabas, to be trained as teachers. The entire scenario of the first missionaries coming to Swaziland leads Kasanene, amongst other scholars, to the conclusion that 'unlike the most African countries, missionaries did not come to Swaziland on their own initiative; they were invited by the Swazi authorities and received an enthusiastic welcome when they arrived. All this was because of Sobhuza's dream'.⁹

While Allison was in South Africa to raise enough funds for the second expedition and final settlement amongst the Swazi, Job and Barnabas, who had graduated as teachers and African evangelists, became aggressive in the task of converting the Swazi to Christianity and teaching them to read and write.¹⁰ However, the lifestyle of the converts who accepted Christianity soon changed, and they were estranged from the rest of the community: 'they changed their way of dressing, those who had been polygamous chased away all their wives except one, they did not take part in beer parties or other traditional gatherings, and they boycotted Swazi national ceremonies and rituals.'¹¹

³ Rogers Cazziol, *A Comparative study of Christian Missions in Swaziland*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Natal, 1989, 96.

⁴ Cazziol, *A Comparative Study of Christian Missions*, 96

⁵ Loskini Mabundza, *The Influence of Christianity on the Swazi*. M.A. Thesis, Canadian Nazarene College, 1976, 37.

⁶ James Matsebula, *A History of Swaziland*. Cape Town: Longman, 1972, 16.

⁷ Cazziol, *A Comparative Study of Christianity on the Swazi Missions*, 98.

⁸ James Matsebula, *A History of Swaziland* (2nd edition), 1987, 35.

⁹ Peter Kasanene, *Religion in Swaziland*. Braamfontein: Skotaville, Publishers, 44

¹⁰ Matsebula, J.S.M., *A History of Swaziland*, 36

¹¹ Joshua Mzizi, "Impediments to Religions Tolerance in Swaziland: A Historical Survey" in *UNISWA Research*

The smooth progress of missionary work was disturbed by some internal disputes within the royal family over some royal cattle.¹² Three rebellious chiefs and some people within the Kunene clan fled to the mission station seeking refuge, and Allison refused to surrender them to Mswati's commanders. On 14th September 1846, the mission station was attacked, but with Mswati's orders not to harm the missionaries or any of the assistants, they were spared.¹³ However, this caused terror amongst the people and an estimated 1,000 Swazis fled to Pietermaritzburg following the missionaries; hence the area became known as Mahamba or 'the runaways'.¹⁴ This voluntary flight put an end to mission work in Swaziland for at least 35 years,¹⁵ while Mswati II was King.

The Establishment of Early Mission Churches in Swaziland

It was during King Mbandzeni's reign, beginning in 1880, that Christianity made inroads in Swaziland again. Under pressure from the concessionaires, Mbandzeni realised the importance of the education once offered by the missionaries. On his own initiative, in May 1880, he invited the Rev. Jackson to Swaziland to build a mission station at Usuthu in Luyengo that would have educational and industrial buildings. His sole aim was to send his nine children for an education. With the invitation of the Rev. Jackson, 'doors were once more opened for missionary competition, and a scramble for Swazi souls began'.¹⁶ Amongst these missionaries were the Rev. Msimango and the Rev. Mangena, Swazi ministers who had fled from Mahamba mission for the Wesleyan Methodist Church. In 1887, the Berlin Lutheran Missionary Society followed, but 'did not commence active missionary work until 1902 when they were joined by the Rev. Johannes Mndziniso, a Swazi Lutheran Church Minister'.¹⁷ In 1890, the South African General Mission (the present AEC) began its work in Bethany, under the Rev. Dudley Kidd and John Baillie. The Scandinavian Alliance Mission (SAM) which gave birth to the Evangelical Church came next, led by Miss Malla Moe and started work at Bulunga in 1892. The Church of the Nazarene began planting churches in Swaziland about 1911 when Harmon Schmelzenbach arrived at Endzingeni. Roman Catholicism began in 1913, with the arrival of Servite missionaries who established a mission in Mbabane. All the western missionaries that settled in Swaziland pioneered formal education in Swaziland and their first priority was to establish schools for Swazi children and also health facilities for the people. They used education as the most effective tool for evangelization.¹⁸

After the formation of mission churches, there were many Pentecostal and charismatic churches that mushroomed, together with Zionist churches that blended Swazi traditional understanding with Biblical teachings. Very soon, even though Swaziland was not an officially Christian nation, everyday practices point to Christianity's overriding popularity. Most Swazis identify themselves as Christians, a claim easily seen by even a brief time spent in the kingdom, where many churches populate town and countryside and the media produce a ubiquitous background of gospel music, preaching and instructions on living a godly

Journal, Vol 12 (1998), 43-54 (47).

¹² Matsebula, *A History of Swaziland*, p.16. When Malambule handed the reigns of government to the young Mswati, he appropriated some of the royal cattle for himself and hid them. When Mswati found this out later, he sent his men to demand the return of the cattle and to punish Malambule. Malambule fled with his brothers Ndlela and Fokotsi to the south of the country to seek refuge among the Kunene clan. When Mswati sent his regiments to attack this clan for giving protection to the refugees, they fled to the mission station.

¹³ Kasenene, *Religion in Swaziland*, 45.

¹⁴ Matsebula, *A History of Swaziland*, 36.

¹⁵ Kasenene, *Religion in Swaziland*, 46.

¹⁶ Kasenene, *Religion in Swaziland*, 47.

¹⁷ Kasenene, *Religion in Swaziland*, 47.

¹⁸ Sonene Nyawo, "Multi-Faith Religious Education in Swaziland: A Response to Globalisation." A paper presented at the Annual BOLESWA TRS Conference, University of Swaziland, Kwaluseni, 27th February-1st March 2010, 4.

life.¹⁹ Likewise, the International Religious Freedom (IRF) report,²⁰ Religious Intelligence Country Profile²¹ and similar aggregate reports assume a Christian majority, suggesting that about 40% of the population affiliate with syncretistic indigenous Christian Zionist churches, 20% are Roman Catholic, with other Christian denominations including Anglicans, Methodists, Evangelicals and new Pentecostal-charismatic style ministry churches making up 30%. Less than 10% of the population consists of Muslims, Jews, Mormons and Baha'is.

Christian Ecumenical Organisations in Swaziland

The high proliferation of churches in Swaziland eventually resulted in doctrinal differences, hence the establishment of ecumenical organisations that aimed to reconcile the divided Christian churches and forge real unity. As rightly noted by Amanze, church unity in the ecumenical context does not necessarily entail uniformity of doctrine, worship and governance. Instead, it denotes unity in reconciled diversity in which there are neither fierce divisions nor paternalistic relationships among the different Christian denominations.²²

There are therefore three ecumenical church bodies in Swaziland, namely, the Swaziland Conference of Churches, the Council of Swaziland Churches, and the League of African Churches. The three ecumenical organizations have had different aims and objectives since their establishment. The Swaziland Conference of Churches (SCC) was formed in 1929 by individual European missionaries belonging to the numerous mission churches and agencies that had set up mission stations in Swaziland. The overriding aim of SCC has been to foster and promote co-operation and fellowship among the various mission churches engaged in Christian evangelism in Swaziland.²³ SCC experienced a split in 1976 when liberal member churches withdrew their membership to form the Council of Swaziland Churches (CSC). While the Swaziland Conference of Churches aims primarily at church planting and the conversion of non-Christians, the Council of Swaziland Churches strives to address social concerns in Swazi society, such as poverty, underdevelopment, and social injustice.²⁴

Unlike SCC and CSC, which were founded by former mission churches, the League of African Churches in Swaziland (LACS) was formed by King Sobhuza II (1889-1982) in liaison with African clergy belonging to African Independent / Initiated Churches in the early 1940s. The King and leading African clergymen created LACS mainly in response to concerted attempts by the then British colonial government – in collusion with some European missionaries – to ban Zionist Christian Churches in Swaziland.²⁵ Given Sobhuza II's pioneering, legitimizing and mentorship role in the formation and consolidation of the

¹⁹ Sonene Nyawo and Casey Golomski, C. "Christians' Cut: Ecumenical Perspectives on Male Circumcision in Swaziland's HIV Epidemic." A paper to be presented at an Ecumenical Conference, hosted by The Journal of Southern African Studies, University of Botswana, 2015, 4.

²⁰ International Religious Freedom (IRF) Report: Swaziland. 2012. Washington: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State. www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012/af/208202.htm, accessed 12 February 2015.

²¹ Religious Intelligence Country Profile (2011) <http://web.archive.org/web/200806261100027> [accessed 10 September, 2014].

²² James Amanze, *The Origin and Development of the Ecumenical Movement in Botswana: 1965 – 1994*. Gaborone: Department of History and the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Botswana. (1994), 56.

²³ Cazziol, *A Comparative Study of Christianity on the Swazi Missions*, 98.

²⁴ Ndlovu Hebron, *The Royal Easter Ritual and Political Actions in Swaziland*. Ph.D Dissertation, McMaster University (1994), 87.

²⁵ Nyawo, Sonene, Hebron Ndlovu, David Nhlabatsi, and Patrick. Mkhonta. *The League of African Churches in Swaziland: Challenges and Prospects: A Study Commissioned by the University of Swaziland*. Kwaluseni: University of Swaziland (2011), 24.

organization, the constitution of LACS recognizes Ingwenyama (the King) of Swaziland as its lifelong Patron, and provides that the annual meeting of LACS be held at [Lobamba] Ludzidzini Royal Residence.²⁶

Sundkler, in his survey of the history of Zionist and Apostolic churches in Swaziland confirms that LACS was the brainchild of King Sobhuza II who spearheaded its formation in order to unite the Indigenous African Churches, especially the Zionist churches which were notorious for being disorganized and prone to proliferation.²⁷ The King also sought to protect LACS from all possible threats. The aims of LACS are to promote fellowship and unity among African Initiated Churches as well as to forestall further proliferation of African Initiated Churches in the country. Since its inception, LACS has been credited with rendering unequivocal support for Swazi cultural nationalism; it fully supports Swazi sacred kingship and other sacred traditions such as the sacred *Incwala* ceremony²⁸, while the SCC and the CSC shunned or adopted a critical stance toward them²⁹

Sundkler further notes that LACS reciprocated the King's intervention on its behalf by creating the annual Good Friday Ceremony in which all Christians belonging to Indigenous African Churches celebrate the Easter Ceremony with the King, the Queen Mother, and members of the Swazi royal family and senior politicians. The observation that the most notable achievement of LACS has been the creation of the Good Friday Ceremony is also shared by Kuper (1986),³⁰ Cazziol (1987)³¹ and Kasenene (1987).³²

In conclusion, Christianity in Swaziland came by royal invitation, and it spread after the death of King Somhlolo through missionary expansion and African initiative. As a result, Swaziland built its socio-economic and political ideology upon culture and the Bible; thus making culture and religion an intricate and intertwined web.

Bibliography

- Amanze James, *The Origin and Development of the Ecumenical Movement in Botswana: 1965 – 1994*. Gaborone: Department of History and the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Botswana, 1994.
- Cazziol, Rogers, *The Swazi Zionists: An Indigenous Religious Movement in Southern Africa*. Kwaluseni: University of Swaziland 1987.
- Kasanene Peter, *Religion in Swaziland*. Braamfontein: Skotaville, Publishers, 1993.
- Kuper Hilda. (1986). *The Swazi: A South African Kingdom*. New York: Holt.
- Matsebula James, *A History of Swaziland*. Cape Town: Longman, 1972.
- Matsebula James, *A History of Swaziland* (2nd edition), Cape Town: Longman, 1987.
- Mzizi, Joshua, 'Church and State in Swaziland is Somhlolo's Dream a Scandal for Swazi Hegemony' in Religion and Politics in Swaziland, ed. Simangaliso Kumalo Bloemfontein: SUN Media, 2013.
- Mzizi, Joshua, 'Impediments to Religions Tolerance in Swaziland: A Historical Survey' in *UNISWA Research Journal*, vol 12, 1998, 43-54.
- Nyawo Sonene and Golomski, Casey. 'Christians' Cut: Ecumenical Perspectives on Male Circumcision in Swaziland's HIV Epidemic.' A paper to be presented at an Ecumenical Conference, hosted by The Journal of Southern African Studies, University of Botswana, 2015.

²⁶ Nyawo, Ndlovu, Nhlabatsi, and Mkhonta. The League of African Churches in Swaziland, 16.

²⁷ Sundkler Bengt, *Zulu Zion and Some Swazi Zionists*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1976), 75.

²⁸ Incwala is a national rite of passage celebrated annually around December and January. It is sacred and spiritual festival which acts as culmination of the Swazi system of beliefs regarding the veneration of the Ancestors as part of national life.

²⁹ Rogers Cazziol, *The Swazi Zionists*, 54.

³⁰ Hilda Kuper *The Swazi: A South African Kingdom*. New York: Holt (1986), 220.

³¹ Rogers Cazziol, *The Swazi Zionists*, 47.

³² Peter Kasenene, "Ecumenical Progress in Swaziland." PhD Thesis, University of Cape Town (1987), 68.

- Nyawo Sonene, 'Multi-Faith Religious Education in Swaziland: A Response to Globalisation.' A paper presented at the Annual BOLESWA TRS Conference, University of Swaziland, Kwaluseni, 27th February-1st March 2010.
- Nyawo, Sonene, Hebron Ndlovu, David Nhlabatsi, and Patrick. Mkhonta. 'The League of African Churches in Swaziland: Challenges and Prospects.' A Study Commissioned by the University of Swaziland. Kwaluseni: University of Swaziland 2011.
- Sundkler Bengt. *Zulu Zion and Some Swazi Zionists*. Oxford: OUP, 1976.

Thesis and Dissertations on the subject

- Cazziol. Rogers. 'A Comparative study of Christian Missions in Swaziland.' PhD., Thesis, University of Natal, 1989.
- Kasenene, Peter. Ecumenical Progress in Swaziland. PhD Thesis, University of Cape Town, 1987.
- Ndlovu. Hebron. 'The Royal Easter Ritual and Political Actions in Swaziland.' PhD., Dissertation, McMaster University, 1994.
- Nyawo, Sonene. 'The Early Encounter between Swaziland and the Western Missionaries: The Establishment of the Evangelical Church in Swaziland, 1982-1950.' M.A. Thesis, University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2004.
- Mabundza, Loskini, 'The Influence of Christianity on the Swazi.' M.A. Thesis, Canadian Nazarene College, 1976.

Online Articles

- International Religious Freedom (IRF) Report: Swaziland. 2012. Washington: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, U.S. Department of State. www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012/af/208202.htm, accessed 12 February 2015.
- Religious Intelligence Country Profile (2011) <http://web.archive.org/web/200806261100027> [accessed 10 September, 2014]