

The Swazi -- or, as they prefer to call themselves: the people of Ngwane (one of their early kings) -- are a small nation numbering about 250,000, occupying the small but beautiful country of Swaziland, which is situated in south-eastern Africa, between Mozambique and the Transvaal. They are closely related to other Nguni peoples such as the Zulu and Xhosa, and this is evident in their language, their music, and other aspects of culture.

Traditionally, sovereignty is vested jointly in the King and the Queen Mother. The basic unit of social life is the homestead, consisting of the separate beehive-shaped grass huts of a husband and his several wives, children, and retainers, arranged in the form of a circle around a central cattle-pen. Numerous homes of this kind, each with their gardens and grazing land, and within reach of a river, are scattered at intervals along the hill-sides, and over the bushveld plains and grassland throughout Swaziland. As with other southern Bantu peoples, the traditional economy of the Swazi is composite, comprising cattle-keeping -- which is the monopoly of men and boys -- and agriculture, which is women's work. Their long-horned cattle resemble those depicted on the walls of the Egyptian tombs and it is not difficult to imagine that these may be descended, at least partly, from those of ancient Egypt. Customs relating to their cattle suggest affinities with the so-called Hamitic peoples of north-eastern Africa, while the agricultural side of their economy is typically Negro. Physically, too, some degree of earlier assimilation between lighter-skinned Hamitic and darker-skinned Negro ancestry seems likely. Contact with Bushman and Hottentot peoples in the south has left its mark, notably in the adoption of 'click-sounds' into their language.

Unlike many other African peoples, however, musical instruments play a very small role in their culture, except for individual use of flutes and musical bows, and even these are very rarely found today.*

* These instruments have been described in P.R.Kirby's book:
The Musical Instruments of the Native Races of South Africa, Oxford, 1934.
 (Reprinted by Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, in 1953.)

Swazi music is predominantly vocal. The composer of a song is praised, but there are no professional song-makers. The names of composers who have contributed to the traditional repertoire are seldom remembered.

Communal dancing is an important feature of Swazi religious and social life, and for this purpose the dancers sing their own dance music. No drums or other instruments are used for accompaniment. The tempo is generally slow,