



40,000 NAKED VIRGINS

Swaziland's Umhlanga Reed Dance

Once a year, young Swazi girls and women celebrate their chastity, honor their Queen Mother and participate in a weeklong ceremony that finalizes its events with a two-day display of pageantry and tradition.



The media rumor mill churns about the intended purposes behind the performance of the Reed Dance. Many stories have portrayed the event as a corralling of the virgins within the country to be displayed like show-cattle for the King to choose, should he see something he likes, as a bride. Being there was slightly different. It seemed more like a gathering of friends and loved ones, to dance, show respect to their cultural traditions, and honor themselves as both beautiful and chaste women of Swaziland.





The Umhlanga, or Reed Dance, honors the country's Queen Mother (otherwise known as the Ndlovukazi, meaning she-elephant) and celebrates the chastity of the young women in the country. Tens of thousands participate in the week-long event; the last two days of which are the only two open to the public. From what I've been told, the entirety of the ceremony does not have to be completed by those who choose to participate [and yes it is voluntary, as the announcer frequently emphasizes through the loud speaker during the festivities]. A portion of the ceremony requires the girls to hike to a riverbank some 70 kilometers away, gather reeds and return them to the doorstep of the Queen Mother in order to help repair some of the traditional structures within the royal compound. When the ceremony was originally adopted by Swazi people in the 1840's from the Zulu-speaking Ndwandwe clan, the women had to walk to and from the riverbank with no assistance. Today however, the traditions have been modified slightly, allowing the girls to be shuttled to the riverbank after walking half of the distance; upon retrieving the reeds they again are allowed to be shuttled back half of the distance. They are given a full day to rest, and the final two days are filled with pageantry, music and dancing in front of both the Queen Mother and his highness, the King. During these final days, the girls adorn their traditional dress and drop the reeds in front of the palace, moving and chanting with their sacred offerings to the kingdom. The march to the arena displays 40,000+ women in perfect step with one another, stomping and singing to the beat of their own march. The King oversees the festivities from a private area in the risers, and once the seemingly never-ending line of girls ends, they position themselves into concentric circles layered deep into the field. Toward the completion of the event, the King honors the maidens and shows his appreciation for their loyalty by walking through the circles with his entourage, bowing in front of each group of girls. It has been rumored in the media that the dance is often where the King chooses a new bride; while it is not the cultural significance of the ceremony, current King Mswati III has chosen at least three of his current brides from the dance.

Women from all over the kingdom, come together to participate in the Umhlanga Dance. They range dramatically in age; in a single line a 4-yr-old with tassels dragged behind her that are longer than her legs; women standing on either side ranging from pre-pubescent teens applying hot pink lipstick, to women well into adulthood poised with the confidence of age. The girls are dressed in varying versions of the traditional wardrobe of Swazi women; royals are clearly marked with red feathers emerging from their headdresses shining like rubies when hit by the sun. Large white shells wrapped around a woman's neck signifies she is a daughter of the sitting King. There are sources that discuss the enrollment of the girls as a draft-like experience, some families being fined for keeping their daughters from participating in an event that honors the tradition of their country; they fear it shows disrespect or even contempt for the kingdom. The other discussion surrounding the dance implies that these women are being displayed for the King to choose from. Day 1 of the two-day pageantry didn't give the King much interaction between the women, other than a seat observing from a distance and a final bow to the maidens as the day concluded.



HIV/AIDS has ravaged the people of Swaziland, which holds one of the world's largest infected rates per capita in the world. A believed 26% of the population is infected by the disease. Some sources report up to 40% of the population has been affected, but numbers, as most facts about the small country, vary source to source, and mouth to mouth. Some 80,000 children are believed to have been orphaned in the wake of such a crushing infection rate. Upon entering the border, you are greeted with a box of complimentary condoms; safer sex practices have long been struggled with in the kingdom to help with the crisis. In 2001, the King invoked a new ordinance stating that it was now illegal



for those under the age of 18 and unmarried to engage in any sexual acts. They were to wear tassels in accordance to the law; a promise ring of sorts to the king and the law. Efforts continue to keep the people of Swaziland safe, and bring down the number of those affected and lost to the disease.

Meet King Mswati III



The current King of Swaziland has been slammed in the media as being a King of Excess during a time of country-wide economic turmoil. His lavish spending's and lifestyle only befitting a king has been criticized publicly and constantly talked about by those in-country seeking a democratic solution to the state of the kingdom. Ruling since 1986, Mswati III became the youngest monarch in the world when crowned at the age of 18. Currently married to 15 women, and the father of 25; maintaining a royal kraal of 13 palaces and the royal fleet of top-of-the-line cars (even a \$17 million private jet), there are those who wonder whether the tolerance for such excess will last much longer. Being here and talking to locals, it seems most wouldn't question the respect they are to give their king; as well as the traditions held by the country that continues to be governed as an absolute monarchy.



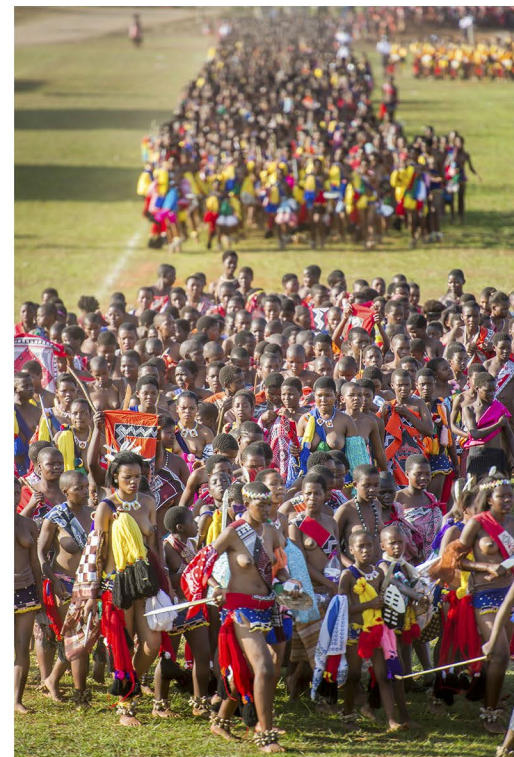
During the festivities of the Umhlanga ceremony, appearances from the King and his interactions with locals resulted in fanatical appreciation that would rival and mimic the reaction of fans to the Beatles getting off their tour bus in '64. You do not want to step between a young girl and her opportunity to meet the King face-to-face. Media was dually informed of the privilege and honor we were being given to step near their king.



Over the speaker system in the stadium there was a constant commentary identifying the dances, the songs, and the cultural significance of the day's events. They were broadcasting the nation's beliefs in a way that was reminiscent, for me, of the rituals and beliefs of the Catholic Church; like during the Liturgy of the Eucharist when you say, "It is right to give Him thanks and praise"... no question, no alternative. It is so. The Kingdom, in that sense, is not much different than back home, than the churches many of us grew up attending, or still do. One portion of the big-brother-Swazi-announcement was that young women are better off being trained as mothers early on. As they said this, the first group of maidens marched in front of the King, who was positioned in the stadium to open the second day's events. The group seemed to consist of only ages 10 and under; babies, in the eyes of anyone I know from the U.S. But it would appear that to the Swazi people, the earlier the better, and all ages are considered women. The announcer may have worded the idea with more grace and ere of legend or cultural significance than how I may have at it, but the principle still applies. Start your mothers young; not mothers in the western idea of the word, but as their queen is called their "Queen Mother." She is the woman who shares the leadership with the King and oversees a nation as her own. It is a position of respect, owning of authority, confidence, competence, and strength. So the Swazi people start all their children young; boys included.



One important role during the Umhlanga dance is the position of guards to the maidens. They oversee, participate, and protect the sacred process. Who said a man couldn't mature at any age? I know 30-year-old men with less confidence and purpose than this little guy.



Most of the maidens walked with swords; royalty usually wielded the real deal, while many others used lookalikes. These signified the knives that were used in the cutting of reeds; those reeds to be delivered to the Queen Mother's palace on the first day of pageantry.



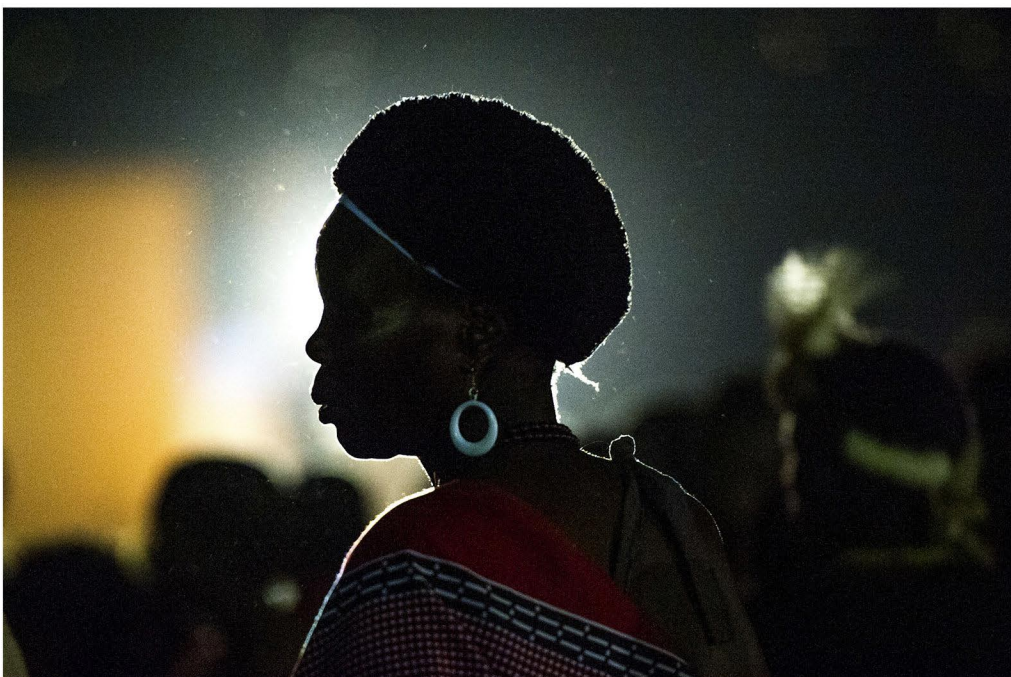
From what we've been told, the Reed Dance historically has 40 to 70 thousand maidens at the most. Recently, we're told more than once the numbers reached well over 100,000. "Too many," says a guard at one of the camps closer to Piggs Peak, Dlamini. This number of maidens has never before represented the kingdom, and "How could we know why?" says the guard.



All we know for now is that as the years go on, the maidens add to their numbers. Whether for tribute to the king, their country, their sisters, themselves, or for the hell of a good time; we have witnessed a display of enthusiasm for country that need prove itself to no outsider.



Behind every man, stands a great woman. In Swaziland many live and support polygamy; the king himself has an unknown number of wives. Five were present during the Umhlanga and swept onto the field to greet their daughters. When asked if these were all of the king's wives, a guard to the king confirmed that these were his brides and that many more existed, but were not present. When asked how many more there were, he replied: "more than I could count!" The number seems inconsequential to the people of Swazi. The wives themselves were creatures of mystery, to an onlooker at least. Their presence was shrouded with composure and elegance that would befit a king's wife. The group of them swept back off the field once they had shown their appreciation to their daughters, hardly making a wrinkle in the day's events.



The further away from the Kings Valley we venture, the easier the facts are to sort out. Many, if not most, of the maidens participating in the Umhlanga, do so voluntary; "it is for their culture," says an anonymous source whose sister was in attendance. The idea of marching to honor the country and their history as a nation seems too romantic to pass up. HOWEVER, perhaps there's truth in the saying: devil is in the details. If an eligible maiden (eligible meaning that she does not have children, and is not married or engaged to another) chooses not to participate, the king's messengers (or Indvuna) arrive at the home of those refraining involvement to collect one cow. If the family doesn't have a cow, they must give a donation in the equivalence to the price of the animal. The number varies, but an average estimate for a cow here in Swaziland is around 3,000 rand.



Umhlanga ceremonies are not only practiced in Swaziland. Traditional ceremonies like this occur just beneath Swazi, in South Africa, as well. The girls participating are distinguished by their variations on traditional dress which represent the regions they traveled from. The maidens of Swaziland come from four main regions: Lobombo, Hhohho, Manzini and Shiselweni. But women from other parts of Africa travel long distances to appear in the ceremony, just as Swazi girls travel to South Africa to participate in their Umhlanga. It is an opportunity for the girls of the country and surrounding areas to celebrate their culture, and perhaps find a husband. The rumors that the ceremony is for the King to pick a new bride are not considered to be true in the eyes of the people of the country, however it is a possibility. The true finale to the Umhlanga happens the day after the two public days. At that time the King acknowledges the maidens loyalty and gives them his blessings. Should the king want to make one of the maidens in the ceremony a new bride of his, he need only to point at her. With that, guards will collect her from the crowds and take her off to the palace, where she will be made a fiancé. To ensure fertility, the finances that are chosen by the king are only made brides if they "fall pregnant." The king does have his pick of the crop. It would seem there is nothing he wants that his title cannot get him; especially brides. It was rumored that one of his younger brides was taken, unlawfully, by guards of the king while she was walking home from school. After days of panic, her mother was informed that she had been retrieved to perform royal duties for the king, and that she could not see her. A few days later the woman's daughter was announced as the king's new fiancé. Once a woman is chosen by the king, and the relation is made public, there is no law that can interfere.

Throughout Swaziland, there are bulletins posted with large, pink block lettering publicizing major events, or stories from within the country. The first one we saw read: SWAZIS CONFESS TO LOVING SEX The second: 11 MAIDENS DEAD Not for a few days did we learn what happened. As I said early, the original procedure in gathering the reeds for the ceremony was to walk the nearly 70 Km to the river bank and cut them down; once gathered they walk the 70 Km back to the camp and rest for one full day before presenting them to the Queen Mother. Now the women walk no more than 30 kilometers, where they are picked by either open-backed



trucks, or large buses, and driven straight to the riverbank. Once they have finished collecting the reeds, they walk back another 30 kilometers, where they are then again picked up and driven the remainder of the hike and delivered at camp. No doubt this hike is still impressive. Tragically this year, two open backed trucks carrying maidens on their way back to camp collided. The first number we saw was 11 dead. After that we heard it was only 9. But the next day a bulletin read, "30 maidens dead." As of a few hours ago the latest number released was 50. After making our way out of the valley and into the hills of Piggs Peak, we met a guard that told us three of those women were from his town; in fact his sister had participated in the ceremony and he was worried that she would be among the dead. She was safe, but the tragedy has been felt throughout the kingdom.



Carrying 40lbs of water on her head while walking up a steep cliffside, I said to the woman:
"You are so strong."
She stopped and looked at me:
"I am Swazi."