



## Towards Unpacking the Origin and Development of Eswatini (Swazi) Irredentism

Hlengiwe Portia Dlamini\*, Manka'ah Mafor Awasom-Fru\*\*,  
Lenhle Precious Dlamini\*\*\* and Sirri Awasom-Fru\*\*\*\*

### Abstract

This article sets out to examine the origin and development of Eswatini irredentism in southern Africa as a neglected theme in African scholarship. Eswatini irredentist disputes, albeit unresolved, have been a subject of mere peripheral allusion in southern African scholarship. The global importance of irredentism as a phenomenon in international relations since the end of the Cold War makes this study imperative. How the smallest and landlocked state on the Southern African mainland can audaciously and persistently make territorial claims against its giant South African neighbour is intriguing, paradoxical and worth investigating. The study methodology involved the use of archival documentation, newspaper articles, government gazettes, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). This study revealed that Eswatini irredentism is ethnic nationalism *par excellence* and its roots were nurtured by the imperial order and South Africa before Eswatini's independence. After independence in 1968, Eswatini irredentism blossomed on historical and ethnic foundations, and was tolerated and fanned by South Africa as a strategy of surreptitiously establishing an Eswatini Bantustan for the resettlement of ethnic Eswatini people and other blacks. The post-apartheid South African governments did a volte-face and rejected persistent Eswatini irredentist claims *in toto* nourished by the Sobhuza Testament.

**Keywords:** apartheid, Eswatini irredentism, Eswatini Bantustan, post-apartheid South African governments, Sobhuza Testament

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\* University of the Free State, South Africa. Email: [hlingoline@gmail.com](mailto:hlingoline@gmail.com)

\*\* Uppsala University, Sweden. Email: [awasommanka94@gmail.com](mailto:awasommanka94@gmail.com)

\*\*\* University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Email: [dlenhle@yahoo.com](mailto:dlenhle@yahoo.com)

\*\*\*\* Balsillie School of International Affairs, Canada. Email: [sirri\\_fru@yahoo.com](mailto:sirri_fru@yahoo.com)

## Résumé

Cet article vise à examiner l'origine et le développement de l'irrédentisme d'Eswatini en Afrique australe en tant que thème négligé dans la recherche africaine. Les différends irrédentistes de l'Eswatini, bien que non résolus, ont fait l'objet d'une simple allusion périphérique dans la recherche sud-africaine. L'importance mondiale de l'irrédentisme en tant que phénomène dans les relations internationales depuis la fin de la guerre froide rend cette étude impérative. Comment le plus petit État enclavé du continent d'Afrique australe peut audacieusement et constamment revendiquer des territoires contre son voisin géant sud-africain est intrigant, paradoxal et mérite d'être étudié. La méthodologie de l'étude comprenait l'utilisation de documents d'archives, d'articles de journaux, de gazettes gouvernementales, d'entrevues approfondies et de discussions de groupe. Cette étude a révélé que l'irrédentisme de l'Eswatini est un nationalisme ethnique par excellence et que ses racines ont été nourries par l'ordre impérial et l'Afrique du Sud avant l'indépendance de l'Eswatini. Après l'indépendance en 1968, l'irrédentisme de l'Eswatini s'est épanoui sur des bases historiques et ethniques, et a été toléré et attisé par l'Afrique du Sud comme une stratégie d'établissement subreptice d'un bantoustan d'Eswatini pour la réinstallation des Eswatiniens ethniques et d'autres Noirs. Les gouvernements sud-africains post-apartheid ont fait volte-face et rejeté les revendications irrédentistes persistantes de l'Eswatini dans leur ensemble nourries par le Testament de Sobhuza.

**Mots-clés :** apartheid, irrédentisme d'Eswatini, bantoustan d'Eswatini, gouvernements sud-africains post-apartheid, Testament de Sobhuza

## Introduction

This article attempts to explore the origin, development and persistence of Eswatini irredentism in Southern Africa as a neglected theme in southern African scholarship. The Kingdom of Eswatini is the smallest state in southern Africa, with a land area of just 17,364 square kilometres and a population of 1,5 million (2020). It is a landlocked country that is almost entirely surrounded by South Africa with a small remaining section bordered by Mozambique.<sup>1</sup> Since independence in 1968, the Eswatini monarchy has been engaged in a continuing effort to redefine the boundaries of Eswatini as a result of irredentist efforts to achieve what Esterhuysen (1982:181) dubbed 'Greater Swaziland', at the expense of giant South Africa,<sup>2</sup> which has a population of over 58 million people and a total land area of 1,213,090 square kilometres. This irredentist tendency poses a problem in international relations because it is a direct challenge to the international principle of *uti possidetis juris*,<sup>3</sup> which rejects any changes in colonially inherited boundaries.

Eswatini irredentism is an exceptional and puzzling phenomenon in African scholarship because of the miniscule size of the country and its relentless persistence to date.<sup>4</sup>

Eswatini's irredentist disputes, albeit unresolved, have not received scholarly attention beyond mere allusions to their existence. The global importance of irredentism as a phenomenon in international relations since the end of the Cold War (Cederman, Rüegger and Schvitz 2019) makes this study imperative. How the smallest and landlocked state in southern Africa can audaciously and persistently make territorial claims against its giant South African neighbour since independence is intriguing, paradoxical and worth investigating.

### **Conceptualising Eswatini Irredentism and Methodology**

Modern usage of irredentism 'denotes territorial expansion based upon ethnic, national or historical rationale' (Ambrosio 2001:2). Irredentism is conceptualised in this article as the attempt made by a sovereign state to 'redeem' territories and peoples it considers its own from another state (Hutchinson 2019; Kolstø 2019; Carment and James 1995; Chazan 1991). It is the effort 'made by existing states to annex territories of another state that their co-nationals inhabit' (Ambrosio 2001:2). Irredentism is constructed on the nationalist belief that a territory belonging to another country should be annexed for reasons based on ethnicity and history. Irredentism can be contrasted to territorial expansionism in that irredentism claims to take back land that 'rightfully' belongs to a nation, whereas expansionism advocates annexation regardless of whether the territory belonged to the nation in the first place or not (Kulczycki 2016; Smith *et al.* 1998).

Irredentism represents one of the causes of inter-state conflicts in Africa (Ogbu and Olakunle 2019; Twagiramungu *et al.* 2019) and Eastern Europe after the Cold War (see Ambrosio 2001), and this phenomenon makes nation-building seem a continuous process after independence. That is why Kromm (1967:359) observes that most nation-states are teleological entities in theory, because 'they have an ultimate goal' of changing and expanding their territory beyond the colonial borders and 'they exist in order to achieve it'. This is true of the Kingdom of Eswatini, whose goal since independence in 1968 has been to bring all the Eswatini peoples in southern Africa<sup>5</sup> into a single nation-state under the Eswatini King, the *Ngwenyama* (meaning 'lion'), and the Queen Mother, the *Ndlovukazi* (meaning 'she-elephant').

The methodology for this study is qualitative: we used archival documentation, government gazettes, newspaper articles, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). We cross-checked sources

against each other to validate them. Archival sources covered a wide range of issues on Eswatini irredentism but newspapers and oral sources were useful in filling gaps of the more contemporary periods of Eswatini history not (yet) available in the archives. Oral sources were vital in this study in giving us an insight into the royal ideological and policy penchant for irredentism.

We selected participants on the basis of their knowledgeability, availability and willingness to participate in the study using the purposeful sampling technique (Palinkas *et al* 2015). We depended on ten participants from both Eswatini and South Africa, all aged between fifty and seventy-five years. We constituted three focus groups of five to seven participants and used English and SiSwati as convenient working languages. Oral data was collected between November and December 2019. In keeping with ethical guidelines (see Walford 2005), we obtained the consent of participants and guaranteed to respect their privacy and confidentiality by pledging not to disclose their identity given the sensitivity of border issues.<sup>6</sup>

### **Statement of the Research Problem and Research Questions**

Scholars have not explored Eswatini irredentism in any detailed and comprehensive manner beyond simply alluding to it. They tend to provide an uncritical narrative of South Africa's 'acceptance' of Eswatini's insistence on correcting the poorly demarcated colonial boundaries that balkanised the Kingdom of Eswatini during the colonial era, without situating the phenomenon within the appropriate irredentist theoretical framework (Ndlovu 2018; Griffiths and Funnell 1991). There has been no scholarly endeavour to explain South Africa's enthusiasm, after Eswatini's independence in 1968, for contemplating the unconstitutional transfer of swathes of territory to Eswatini, a foreign state, and its subsequent change of mind in 1982.

How can Eswatini irredentism and South African tolerance thereof, and its persistence in the post-colony, be explained? Why did South Africa flip-flop on the question of Eswatini irredentism? These questions point to the fact that Eswatini irredentism, which has largely been ignored, needs a more thorough scholarly investigation to unveil its contours, logic and prospects. Irredentism has gained increasing importance in international relations since the end of the Cold War and this justifies the study of Eswatini irredentism as an important phenomenon in Africa.

This article is premised on the following research questions:

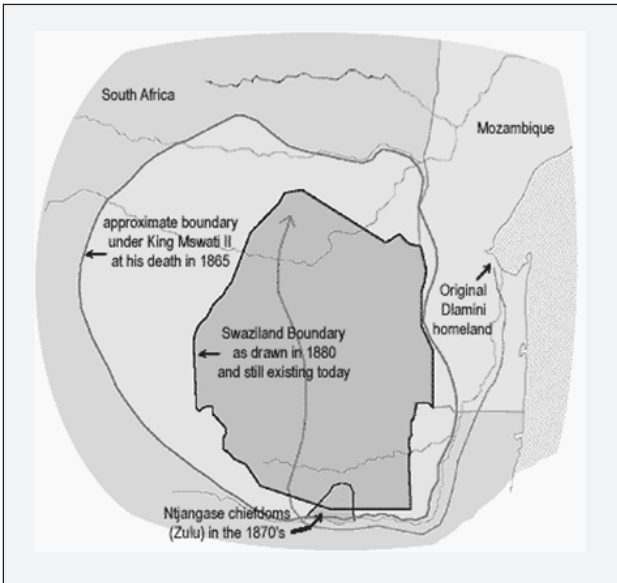
- What were the colonial circumstances that favoured the development of Eswatini irredentism?
- What triggered Eswatini irredentism after independence in 1968 and why was it tolerated by apartheid South Africa?

- Why did the post-apartheid regimes totally reject Eswatini irredentism and why did the Eswatini monarchy persist in making irredentist claims the cornerstone of its foreign policy towards South Africa?

## Colonial Background to the Rise of Eswatini Irredentism

### *The dismantling of the Eswatini kingdom*

The Eswatini kingdom is the handwork of a succession of Dlamini kings,<sup>78</sup> of which the greatest, according to anthropologist Hilda Kuper (2018:17), was Mswati II (1840–1868). Under Mswati II's reign, the Kingdom of Eswatini attained its apogee, stretching from the area between the Crocodile River in the north and the Pongola River in the south, and between the Lebombo Mountains in the east and the boundary on the eastern Highveld in the west. The colonial encounter with the Kingdom of Eswatini resulted in its territorial shrinkage because of the manoeuvres of the Boers and the British in the nineteenth century (Map 1).



**Map 1:** The Boundaries of the Kingdom of Eswatini fixed by European Conventions in the 1880s

#### Key

 The stretch of Mswati II's kingdom

 The reduced size of Eswatini after European boundary demarcation

Source: Extracted from Maps of Swazis in Southern Africa, <https://images.search.yahoo.com/search/images>. Accessed 20 March 2020.

The Boers and the British signed a succession of conventions and treaties with the Swazi monarchy, defining the country's boundaries. Suffice to state that the Pretoria Convention of 1881, for instance, recognised self-government for a section of the Eswatini kingdom, which the Boers had annexed and renamed as Transvaal, today's Mpumalanga Province.<sup>89</sup> This convention endorsed Eswatini's territorial losses in the Transvaal, which represented the districts of Ermelo, Lydenburg and Klein Vrystaar, the River Pongola and the Tongoland area.

Britain and the Boer (Transvaal) Republic signed the London Convention in 1884, which confirmed Eswatini's boundaries (Stevens 1963: 328). The Anglo-Portuguese treaty of 1891 fixed Eswatini's border to the east at 26°51', which involved ceding a small portion of Eswatini territory to Portuguese Mozambique (Stevens 1963:328).

Eswatini was declared a British Protectorate in 1903 following the defeat of the Boers in the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902). The precolonial Eswatini kingdom was therefore divided into three parts under different administrations: the first was the reduced Kingdom of Eswatini under the Eswatini monarchy, which became a British Protectorate; the second was the section of Eswatini under South Africa; and the third was the section of Eswatini under Portuguese Mozambique (Stevens 1963: 328). The result of these imperial territorial manoeuvres was that a substantial population of the Eswatini people ended up residing outside the Kingdom of Eswatini in South Africa. This colonial truncation of the Eswatini Kingdom is considered illegal from the Eswatini perspective and constitutes the basis for contemporary arguments for the restoration of Eswatini's original historical borders.<sup>9</sup> It was possible to make these arguments because the Eswatini people preserved their unity and national identity before independence despite colonial manoeuvres.

### ***The Imperial and South African Factor in keeping Eswatini Unity and National Identity intact before Independence***

The powers of the Eswatini monarchy were left largely intact after the successive encounters with colonialists because of their collaborationist attitude. The Eswatini traditional warriors assisted the British to defeat ethnic groups like the Pedi, who were troubling them. As payback, the British did not dismantle Eswatini leadership in the way they subjugated the Zulu under the Natal colonial government (Kuper 2018).

The London Convention of 1884, which confirmed the reduced size of the Eswatini kingdom, did not stop the Eswatini king from exercising his royal influence over all his people in South Africa. Of great significance

to the development of Eswatini unity under their king was Article 2 of the 1884 Convention, which empowered the Swazi monarch, King Mbandzeni (1875–1889), and his successors, to continue to manage Eswatini native affairs and to appoint Eswatini chiefs in places where Eswatini people were located in South Africa (NAR, UK: FCO 141/17462, Forced eviction 1912–58). The free hand of the Eswatini king to manage the affairs of Eswatini peoples in South Africa was further strengthened by the South African Union Constitution, which allowed the Eswatini traditional authorities to continue exercising their influence in South Africa as if the two territories were one.

From the beginning of the 1910 Union of South Africa, the incorporation of Eswatini and the other High Commission Territories into South Africa was envisaged. This incorporation clause seems to have made the South African authorities believe that Eswatini would ultimately be integrated into South Africa. Given that Eswatini was literally encircled by South Africa and there was no frontier divide between the two countries, the Eswatini monarch was allowed to continue to rule the Eswatini people in South Africa without any obstruction. It was the exclusive responsibility of the Eswatini monarchy to appoint Eswatini chiefs in South Africa to manage native affairs.<sup>10</sup> South Africa and Eswatini were in theory one country and the Eswatini people in the two countries were one under the *Ngwenyama* and the *Ndlovukazi*.

The loyalty of the Eswatini people in southern Africa to the *Ngwenyama* and the *Ndlovukazi* of the Kingdom of Eswatini was impeachable. Kuper summarised this situation in the 1930s as follows:

...outside the territory in Barberton, Carolina and Piet Retief Districts [in South Africa] are large groups of [Eswatini] loyal subjects who inform their king, Sobhuza, of any important events, occasionally send him tribute, receive emissaries from him, ratify the appointments of their local chiefs. (Kuper 1947:1–2)

All Eswatini people in South Africa and the Kingdom of Eswatini periodically met at the Royal Kraal in Lobamba (Eswatini) to participate in the annual December and January *Incwala*, or First Fruits Ceremony, in honour of their king,<sup>11</sup> and the August and September Umhlanga Reed Dances,<sup>12</sup> in honour of their Queen Mother. Both ceremonies took place at the traditional and spiritual capital city and residence of the Queen Mother at Lobamba in the Kingdom of Eswatini (see Ebewo 2011; Kuper 1972). These unbroken traditional and historical linkages perpetuated a strong bond between Eswatini people inside and outside the Eswatini kingdom and sustained the spirit of the Eswatini nation.

## **Eswatini Independence and the Development of Eswatini Irredentism**

Britain pushed ahead with the independence agenda for the Kingdom of Eswatini in the 1960s at the expense of its incorporation into South Africa, as had been originally envisaged by the 1910 South African Union Act. Britain, therefore, issued Diplomatic Note No 170 of 5 May 1967 to the South African government concerning the finalisation of the boundary between South Africa and Eswatini. King Sobhuza II was worried that any move to establish definitive boundaries with South Africa, as the British wanted, would result in the loss of swathes of the Eswatini territories to South African control (NAK, DO 1019/147, Boundaries between Union of South Africa). He requested the South African government to hold the matter in abeyance for a better solution. Eswatini gained independence on 6 September 1968, with the South Africa-Eswatini boundaries dissecting the Eswatini nation.

An important item on King Sobhuza's agenda after Eswatini attained independence was the adjustment of the boundaries between his country and South Africa in order to incorporate ethnic Eswatini in South Africa into his kingdom. Sobhuza, like the Somalis in the aftermath of their independence,<sup>13</sup> ensured that a provision was entrenched in Eswatini's independence Constitution for the retrieval of its territories lost during the colonial era. The Constitution of Eswatini Statutory Instruments 1968, no. 1377, Chapter I (2), S. 15 stated:

The territory of Swaziland [Eswatini] comprises all the land that immediately before 6 September 1968 comprised the former Protected State of Swaziland together with such *additional land as may from time to time be declared to form part of Swaziland with such other areas as may from time to time be declared by Act of Parliament to form part of Swaziland* [our emphasis].

In its Chapter V, S. 42, the 1968 Constitution stated: 'The State shall endeavour to settle the "land issue" and the issue of land concessions expeditiously so as to enhance economic development and the unity of the [Eswatini] people.'

While recognising the boundaries of independent Eswatini as corresponding to the Eswatini Protected Territory under the British rule, the Constitution also left the door open for additional territories to be incorporated into Eswatini through the Act of Parliament. This constitutional clause was of high irredentist value because it implied that Eswatini's colonially inherited boundaries were not definitive and were



susceptible to further modifications for ethnic and historical reasons. The provision in the independence Constitution targeted Eswatini people who had been separated from the Kingdom of Eswatini by colonialism, who could return to the motherland at some future time.

King Sobhuza II's ambition to acquire South African territory after independence on ethnic and historical grounds represents Eswatini irredentism *par excellence* because it involved a call for the union of Eswatini people in the Kingdom of Eswatini with those of South Africa who had been partitioned by the colonial order. This act challenged the colonial status quo. Walter S. Jones (1996), in his seminal essay on *The Logic of International Relations*, asserted that the occurrence of irredentism can be located in the demarcation of boundaries, which ignored the natural cohesion of ethnicities or groups. He stated that political lines or boundaries designed during the colonial period were often not congruent with ethno-geographic regions and this explains the whole story of imperial boundary-making in colonial Africa in which peoples of the same ethnic stock were arbitrarily separated. Sobhuza II's ambition was to rectify what he considered 'a fatal historical error' of separating his people and placing them under different colonial administrations (NAK, DO 1019/147, Boundaries between Union of South Africa; Interviews, Eswatini and South Africa, November/December 2019).

There was nothing exceptional in Africa about the Eswatini situation of having its people balkanised and placed under different nation-states. Scholars of boundary studies in Africa (Austen 2001a; Jones 1996; Asiwaju 1984) have posited that Africa's colonially inherited boundaries are generally arbitrary and artificial. Despite the recognition of this fact, African leaders appeared to have been powerless before the problem in the aftermath of independence. Ralph Austen (2001a) noted that:

...whatever the grounds upon which colonial maps were drawn, it [was not] easy to propose an alternative cartography [after independence] which would better suit the natural or historical features of Africa, whether the landscape and indigenous states or ethnicity, now recognized as a fluid and often arbitrary set of markers....

In the face of this difficulty, African leaders, from the beginning of the independence period, decided that the only borders in Africa that should be recognised, and within which the new nation-states should function, should be the colonially inherited borders. The principle of retaining colonially inherited boundaries was accepted by the leaders of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) at their 1964 meeting in Cairo and enshrined in

Article 2 of Resolution 16(1). The OAU stipulated that Africa's borders constituted a 'tangible reality' and African leaders pledged 'to respect the frontiers existing on their achievement of national independence' (OAU, Charter of the OAU).

The key international principle that framed the position of African leaders on post-independence boundaries is the *uti possidetis juris*, or the 'intangibility', principle (AUBP 2013:9–10; Lalonde 2002; ICJ 1986:567).<sup>14</sup> This principle simply means that colonially inherited boundaries are unchangeable. Boundaries inherited from the colonial period must be retained as *faute de mieux*. Brownlie, a leading authority on African boundaries, underscored the importance of respecting the colonial status quo as follows:

If the colonial alignments [boundaries] were discarded, alternative alignments would have to be agreed upon. Such a process of redefinition would create confusion and threats to the peace. Even if the principle on which revision was to be based were agreed upon, there would be considerable difficulty in applying the principle to the ethnic and tribal complexities of African societies. (Brownlie 1979:123)

The respect of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each African state was echoed as safe political ground for all independent African states and was endorsed by the United Nations. On attaining independence in 1968, Eswatini became a member of the OAU and the UN, meaning it had subscribed to the principle of *uti possidetis juris*. What was King Sobhuza II to do vis-à-vis the new international order in which independent Eswatini found itself?

It is essential to understand that the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, or 'intangibility', of colonially inherited boundaries does not preclude African states from adjusting their international boundaries, as long as this is undertaken by mutual agreement. Eswatini and South Africa were free to adjust their borders as they wished if this was done mutually. Since international boundary adjustments are the sovereign responsibility of nation-states, any definition, clarification or maintenance of a boundary must be agreed by the concerned parties in order to be legally valid (Chukwura 1975:56). Any work on the physical definition of a boundary that is undertaken without the direct or indirect consent of a neighbouring state or the other party may not prove to be legally valid and can provoke conflict (AUBP 2013). Eswatini and South Africa engaged in bilateral talks after Eswatini's independence to achieve land adjustment in favour of Eswatini; this was legal and not contrary to the spirit of the *uti possidetis juris* as long as both parties consented to such a deal.

## **South Africa's Concessions to Eswatini Irredentist Claims During the Apartheid Era**

South Africa conceded to Eswatini irredentist claims during the apartheid era because this fitted its apartheid ideology of establishing Bantustans. The geographical location of Eswatini in the belly of South Africa meant it could be accommodated perfectly in this project. The Bantustanisation, or homeland, policy was a central element of the apartheid system, which involved the permanent removal and separation of the black people in South Africa from white areas, and confining them in enclaves referred to as Bantustans, or homelands. These Bantustans were to be nominally independent in the long run and were to serve as labour reservoirs, housing the unemployed and releasing them when their labour was needed in white South Africa (Evans 2012; Guelke 2010).

Once a Bantustan was established and granted nominal independence under its African ruler, its designated citizens would have their South African citizenship revoked. This would be replaced with the citizenship of their homeland and they would no longer be legally considered South African citizens (Evans 2012). Each Bantustan would constitute a nominal state with its own political system and economy, and would rely on its own labour force. These autonomous states would then co-exist alongside white South Africa in a spirit of friendship and collaboration.

Eswatini had the potential to be a model Bantustan, because of the Africanity and prestige that King Sobhuza II enjoyed among the black Eswatini people, its geographical location as a landlocked enclave inside South Africa, and the prospects of expanding it to receive more blacks. South Africa therefore set to transfer swathes of its territory surrounding the Kingdom of Eswatini with predominantly Eswatini ethnic groups to King Sobhuza II. Under this agreement, Eswatini would more than double in size and would emerge as an enlarged Bantustan for the reception of other black South Africans. The establishment of an Eswatini Bantustan was an essential component of the project of building the apartheid edifice of the separation of races (Booth 2019; Rak 2017; Stevens 1972:98–100). When South Africa was pursuing its Bantustanisation policy in the 1970s and early 1980s, the independent Kingdom of Eswatini was part of its calculation. The South African government declared four of the Bantustans 'independent': Transkei, 1976; Bophuthatswana, 1977; Venda, 1979; and Ciskei, 1981. South Africa was as frantically committed to surrendering large parts of its territories to Eswatini to create an Eswatini Bantustan as King Sobhuza II was to incorporating the Eswatini people of South Africa into his kingdom since they constituted an ethnic continuum.

In diplomatic terms, South Africa wanted to demonstrate to the international community that it had a black ally in the Kingdom of Eswatini and was co-operating with its leadership to address longstanding border issues. James Hall (2005:1) wrote:

Desirous to show the world it had an ally in a black African state; Pretoria cooperated in the border adjustment issue [with Eswatini]. The plan was to make [Eswatini] a kind of 'Bantustan'; 'a homeland' where all South African Swazis would become citizens, wherever they lived in South Africa. As was the case with other tribal homelands of the time (which were never recognised by the international community), this would have made South African Swazis legal aliens in the country of their birth, and would have made it easier for authorities to control their travel, employment and residency.

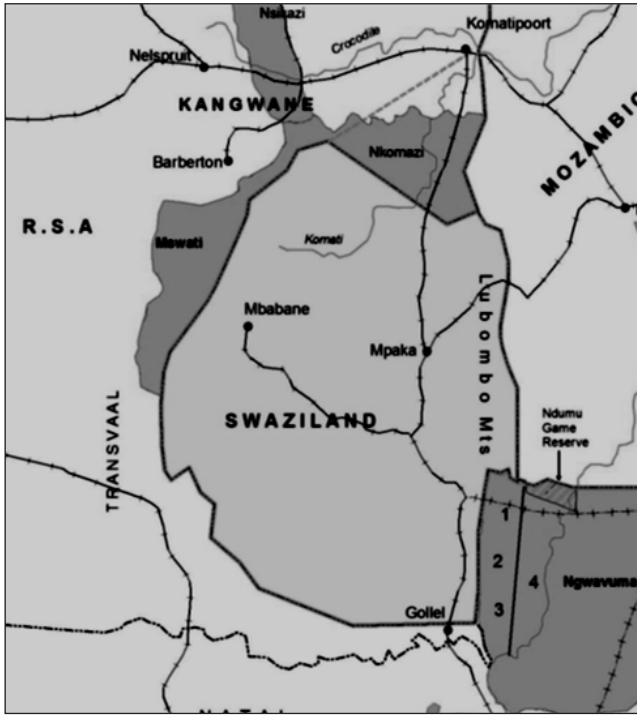
South Africa would proceed to dump ethnic Eswatini and other blacks into the Eswatini Bantustan after establishing it. This was the real purpose of South Africa's planned transfer of portions of its territory to Eswatini.

This type of land transaction was not something that could be conducted openly without raising questions from the critical South African public and the international community. The land deal was popular with the Eswatini monarchy because it involved the aggrandisement of the size of the Kingdom of Eswatini and they did not see any problem with that (Interviews, Eswatini and South Africa, November/December 2019). But in South Africa, it could not be popular because any political act of the apartheid regime was treated with scorn and suspicion, nationally and internationally. The South African public was unlikely to endorse the transfer of any part of South African territory to another sovereign without asking questions.

The apartheid regime preferred to handle the land deal secretly with the Eswatini government. The secret negotiations, which started in earnest after Eswatini's independence, culminated in round table talks in July 1981 between the representatives of the two governments. The South African territories envisaged for transfer to Eswatini were located on the north-western, eastern and western parts of Eswatini (NAK, UK: FCO 58/2849, Possible border adjustment).

The north-western territory included the KaNgwane Bantustan located in South Africa's Mpumalanga Province to the west. KaNgwane had 385,000 hectares and extended up to 40 kilometres from Eswatini's west to the north-east border, fitting like a cap over the country's northern area. The eastern section comprised Ngwavuma, which lies to the east in present-day South Africa between the Lebombo Mountains and the sea. Ngwavuma is about 413,200 hectares. If handed over to Eswatini, this territory would once again reunite geographically the Kingdom of Eswatini

with the Indian Ocean. Eswatini would no longer be a landlocked country, but would encompass what is now South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal province, south of the Mozambique border to Lake Sibaya. The western section is the Nsikazi area, a 65-kilometre by 30-kilometre curved strip of land which is not contiguous with Eswatini or the other disputed lands. The strip extends north from White River in South Africa's Mpumalanga province (NAK: UK: FCO 58/2849, Possible border adjustment).



Map 2: Swatches of South African territory agreed to be ceded to Eswatini in 1982

- South African territories to be ceded to Eswatini
- Towns
- River
- International boundary
- Provincial boundary
- Proposed boundary 1880
- Railways
- Projected railways
- R.S.A. Republic of South Africa

Source: Adopted from Griffiths, I. and Funnell, D. C., 1991: 53

Under the land transfer deal, Eswatini, with a population of about 650,000, was to absorb about 854,000 more persons from the KaNgwane Bantustan, plus about 96,000 from the sparsely populated Ngwavuma (Republic of South Africa Census of Population 1980; Ndlovu 2018). It was estimated that the total number of people largely of Eswatini ethnic extraction to be incorporated into the Kingdom of Eswatini was approximately one million, which was more than the population of Sobhuza II's Eswatini (Republic of South Africa Census of Population 1980; Ndlovu 2018). The colonial-era territorial gerrymandering had left more Eswatini people outside Eswatini than within it.

An international agreement between the governments of South Africa and Eswatini relating to boundary adjustments on the basis of historical and ethnic grounds was finally reached on 28 April 1982. In the preamble of the agreement, it was stated, *inter alia*:

Whereas both governments are aware of the national, cultural and historical affinities which linked all Swazi [Eswatini] people, and

Whereas both Government acknowledge that the people of Swazi origin who are today citizens of the Republic of South Africa were deprived of Swazi citizenship by an accident of history, and

Whereas the Government of the Kingdom of Swaziland [Eswatini] desires to unite the Swazi people;

In terms of the Agreement the two governments agree that the international boundary between the Republic of South Africa and the Kingdom of Swaziland [Eswatini] would be adjusted so as to include into the territory of the kingdom of Swaziland the areas of KaNgwane and Ingwavuma. (NAK, DO 1057/159)

Following the initialling of the agreement, the governing National Party of the Republic of South Africa, at its annual congress in 1982, defended the agreement with Eswatini on the basis that the proposal thereof was twofold, namely:

- (a) To rectify an historical error by finally determining borders which previously existed on a doubtful basis for once and for all and also thereby bringing together a hitherto divided nation, together[sic] in one state; and
- (b) The unification would indemnify the South African Government from creating an independent Swazi state in the Republic of South Africa, apart from the Swazi state in Swaziland. (NAK, DO 1057/159)

In June 1982, an agreement was finalised with the South African government under which thousands of square kilometres of South African territory would be ceded to Eswatini. The South African government clearly stated that this would enable the creation of an 'Eswatini state'. The 'Eswatini state' was

a euphemism for an Eswatini Bantustan, like its counterparts established in the 1970s and 1980s in South Africa. The land deal was gazetted in the South African Gazette of 18 June 1982 and became public.

Almost immediately, the proclamation met a furore of opposition, which ended up in the courts, which declared the land transfer illegal (SARS/DSG: 1983). The South African judiciary killed the land transfer deal in which the South African and Eswatini governments had invested so much since independence.

King Sobhuza II died on 21 August 1982 after the collapse of the land deal. His funeral ceremony took place on 3 September 1982. It was a mammoth crowd-pulling event, bringing to the royal headquarters regional dignitaries and Eswatini people from inside and outside the Kingdom of Eswatini (Matsebula 1983). The grandiose funeral impacted heavily on the royal house, which felt the necessity of continuing relentlessly with the union of the Eswatini people as a way of honouring Sobhuza's life struggle. The royal house conceived a project, known as the Sobhuza Testament, aimed at continuing Sobhuza's struggle for the reunification of the Eswatini people, which was essentially irredentist since it challenged the colonial frontier status quo. It was believed that the Sobhuza Testament had to be followed to guarantee the wellbeing and continuity of the kingdom (FGD: Eswatini and South Africa, November/December 2019). The renewed fortitude of the royal house to pursue the Sobhuza Testament was not met with enthusiasm from South Africa, owing to a shift in its focus to the tumultuous political developments related to the moribund apartheid regime (Clark and Worger 2016). Eswatini had to wait for a black majority government to resolve the border adjustment problems with South Africa.

### **Eswatini Irredentism in the Post-apartheid Era**

When the ANC assumed power in April 1994, King Mswati III welcomed this development with optimism because Eswatini had previously contacted the exiled ANC government in Lusaka and they had promised to resolve the border disputes once in power (NAK, CO 1048/707...). But the issue of ceding South African territory to a foreign country was not something easily contemplated by any democratically elected government because of its unconstitutionality and unpopularity with South Africans. Border adjustment was a political liability for any government, and the ANC rejected it on the grounds of its unconstitutionality and non-conformity with the doctrine of *uti possidetis juris*.

Eswatini did not agree and was bent on obtaining its territories from South Africa in line with the Sobhuza Testament. It did so by constituting a

succession of five-yearly renewable Border Restoration Committees with the task of negotiating the return of Eswatini's territories.<sup>15</sup> The South African government and media considered the establishment of these successive committees, with their avowed aim of retrieving 'Eswatini lost territory' from South Africa, as an overt act of aggression and provocation, and a *casus belli* (FGD: Eswatini and South Africa, November/December 2019).

The Eswatini government confronted the first black majority government of President Nelson Mandela with the border adjustment problem for consideration. Discussions resumed at various levels, culminating in a state visit of King Mswati III to South Africa in November 1995. The Eswatini monarchy indicated that its government had appointed a Border Restoration Committee to look into the matter of restoring Eswatini territory that was attached to South Africa, and requested the South African government to set up a similar committee. The two border committees would then enter into negotiations in an endeavour to overcome the border adjustment impasse between the two countries (NAK, DO 1057/159, Boundaries of Swaziland). The Eswatini government duly informed its South African counterpart of its own members of the Border Restoration Committee and requested the South African government to do so also and indicate a suitable date on which the first meeting of the two committees would take place. South Africa failed to establish any border adjustment committee.

In 1996 Eswatini renamed its Border Restoration Committee the Border Adjustment Committee, with Prince Khuzulwandle as its chairman (NAK, CO 1048/706). The name change from 'restoration' to 'adjustment' was informed by the South African government stance that it was impossible to restore traditional African nation-states to their original boundaries without redrawing the entire political map of the continent and creating unprecedented chaos. Eswatini therefore took a more moderate position, requesting simple 'adjustments' of its boundaries with South Africa to make the reunification of the Eswatini people a reality (NAK, CO 1048/706). South Africa simply ignored all correspondence from Eswatini related to the border adjustment issue. Hall (2005) noted that Prince Khuzulwandle expressed disappointment with South African president, Thabo Mbeki, for his snobbism, 'in a rare display of public pique for royal diplomats, who are usually noted for their discretion'.

South Africa finally decided to meet with its Eswatini counterparts on 7 November 2005 at Ezulwini, in Eswatini, to look into the border adjustment issues. The head of the South African delegation, Dr Mathews, stated that an adjustment of colonially inherited borders was not feasible and that South Africa would disappear as a nation-state if it had to concede



territories to its neighbours on ethnic and historical reasons. He stated that both Eswatini and South Africa were once conquered and the agreements, which were internationally binding, were signed by the conquerors. The two countries should work towards achieving greater integration within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) framework (NAK, CO 1048/705...). South Africa's emphasis was on regional integration rather than border adjustment, meaning that the two states were miles apart over the border adjustment issue.

During the next border adjustment meeting between South Africa and Eswatini, on 17 February 2006, Prince Khuzulwandle insisted that South Africa should consider adjusting its borders and read out the position of King Mswati III. The statement read:

This... is a brief account of ... [Eswatini's] case on the question of the [Eswatini]/South African boundary line. *The position of His Majesty's Government is that the two countries do not have an agreed boundary line. The existing so-called boundary line is not acceptable to [Eswatini] as it was never formerly determined in accordance with acceptable international norms.* In any event, the existing boundary line leaves a whole chunk of territory outside the lawful control and jurisdiction of the [Eswatini] Government. It also has rendered a large portion of the [Eswatini] people separated from their main stock in [Eswatini]. (NAK, CO 1048/707)

South Africa simply reiterated that it was not prepared to revisit the boundaries inherited from colonialism but was interested in discussing regional co-operation and integration with Eswatini.

Before assuming her position as the African Union's Commission Chairperson, South African Minister of Home Affairs, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, visited Eswatini on 16 September 2012. She warned African countries to avoid starting new conflicts by attempting to correct the mistakes made by the colonial powers in the creation of borders between states. Dlamini-Zuma emphasised the importance of resolving border disputes through negotiations and within the context of international law. She pointed out that the founding fathers of the OAU had deliberated at length and resolved that the borders between African states should be kept the way they were at independence (Simelane 2014).

The Eswatini government ignored Dlamini-Zuma's admonition and went ahead to appoint members of the country's Border Adjustment Committee in 2013 after the expiry of the mandate of the previous one. The appointment was interpreted as Eswatini's determination to stubbornly pursue its ambition of recovering from South Africa its territories lost during the colonial era. Titus Gwebu, of the South African newspaper, *The Sunday*

*Independent* (9 November 2013), reiterated the position of South Africa vis-à-vis the Eswatini land claims. He wrote:

...the [Swazi] Border Adjustment Committee...is tasked with obtaining large sections of South Africa for incorporation into Swaziland [Eswatini]. *South Africa has never acknowledged the Swazi King's territorial claims to Mpumalanga and KwaZulu Natal* [our emphasis]. King Mswati wants to control all areas in Mpumalanga where Swazis reside and wants to extend Swaziland eastwards to the Indian Ocean, taking all of KwaZulu Natal that's in the way. Political observers feel that Swaziland is more likely to be incorporated into South Africa one day than King Mswati's is likely to double his realm by expanding into South Africa....

Two main issues arise in this submission: first, South Africa's non-recognition of Eswatini's territorial claims; second, the prospect of South Africa's total ingestion of Eswatini as a long-term project.

A new Eswatini Border Determination Committee was appointed in 2018 after the expiration of the mandate of the old. The committee was renamed the Border Determination Special Committee (BDSC) to emphasize the point that its objective was to determine where the actual borders between Eswatini and South Africa should be (*Eswatini Sunday Observer*, 4 March 2018). The Eswatini monarchy was, in essence, pursuing the Sobhuza Testament regardless of whether South Africa listened to it or not.

## **Conclusion**

We have explored the origin and evolution of Eswatini irredentism as a field of scholarly endeavour that has been marginally addressed by scholars. That a minuscule landlocked state like Eswatini consistently and vociferously made territorial demands on its gigantic, more populous and economically vibrant neighbour, on which it depends almost entirely for its survival, might beggar the imagination and comprehension of many scholars. What therefore could be the origin and real motive of Eswatini irredentism? Some scholars have posited that most irredentist disputes have their origins in the struggle to control vital resources and peoples (see, for instance, Kamazima 2017; Yoon 2014; Assal 2006; Mbembe 2000). This is plausible.

But Eswatini irredentism is far from being economically motivated. It falls within the category of ethnic nationalism—the desire to incorporate Eswatini peoples based in South Africa into the Kingdom of Eswatini for ethnic and historical reasons. This is similar in certain respects to irredentism in Eastern Europe, where Serbia and Croatia embarked upon irredentist projects following the collapse of the former Yugoslavia. Serbia attempted

to detach Serbian nationals from both Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina in order to create a 'Greater Serbia'. Similarly, Croatia struggled to annex Croatian regions of Bosnia-Herzegovina into 'Greater Croatia' (Ambrosio 2001:2). The basis of this expansionism was clearly ethnic.

Eswatini irredentism is built on a complex of imperial factors that conspired to keep the colonially balkanised people of Eswatini as a united bloc under the Eswatini monarchy before independence. The unbroken unity of the Eswatini people during the colonial era served as a springboard for post-independence Eswatini irredentism.

After independence in 1968, Eswatini irredentism flowered on a solid foundation and apartheid South Africa attempted to exploit it by framing it within the logic of territorial apartheid in the shape of its Bantustanisation policy. South Africa was on the path to establishing an Eswatini Bantustan by subscribing to King Sobhuza II's quest to create a 'Greater Eswatini' when demonstrations and the courts torpedoed it in 1982. King Sobhuza II's death in 1982 and the tumultuous developments related to the demise of apartheid in South Africa compounded Eswatini's irredentism, but these developments did not signal its end.

Post-apartheid South Africa rejected it *in toto* on the grounds of constitutional and international law and opted for greater regional integration. This was unacceptable to the Eswatini monarchy, which was determined to pursue its irredentist ambitions. The monarchy was fired up by the Sobhuza Testament formulated after the king's death. This testament was an oath taken by the Eswatini royal house to honour King Sobhuza by fighting for the unity of the Eswatini people to ensure the continuity of the nation and the appeasement of the ancestors. Post-apartheid Eswatini irredentism is therefore simply an act of fealty to King Sobhuza II's dream of establishing a 'Greater Eswatini'.

There is room for border scholars to explore how to establish a compromise between the South African quest for greater regional integration and Eswatini's ambition to create a 'Greater Eswatini'. The way out might be to study whether the Eswatini-South Africa border divide serves any purpose at all and who really benefits from it.

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## Notes

1. Eswatini shares 70 per cent of its borders with its giant South African neighbour while the remaining 30 per cent is shared with Mozambique.
2. The irredentist policy of claiming territory in South Africa for Eswatini on historical grounds is not popular with public opinion in Eswatini as expressed in the media. It is interpreted as an exercise in futility and a waste of tax payers' money. Eswatini irredentism is therefore sensitive and interviewees preferred to remain anonymous lest they would be perceived as anti-monarchist.
3. For more on the principle of *uti possidetis juris* see Busquets (2020) and Shawt (1997).
4. On 13 March 2020, Prince Guduza, the Chairman of the Eswatini Border Determination Special Committee (BDSC), a body officially constituted by King Mswati III to negotiate the return of 'Eswatini territory in South Africa', announced that the issue was a national priority. He brandished maps of precolonial Eswatini that showed that South Africa's administrative capital of Pretoria and large portions of the Gauteng, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal Provinces belong to the Eswatini nation (*Times of Eswatini*, 15 March 2020). He insisted that South Africa should return these territories to Eswatini on justifiable historical and ethnic grounds.
5. Eswatini irredentism vis-à-vis Mozambique is not developed in this paper because it was never vigorously pursued owing to the Portuguese presence and the emergence of new identities among the Eswatini people of Mozambique.
6. The royal pursuit of territory from South Africa is unpopular with private media, civil society and the underground People's United Democratic Movement (Pudemo). People do not want to be associated with the border problems for fear of being labelled as belonging to the opposition, with implications for their privileges and security.
7. The Eswatini kings descended from the Dlamini family line. The people of Eswatini are one of the Nguni groups that constituted part of the great Bantu migrations into southern Africa. Under the Dlamini family, the Eswatini people moved down the east coast and settled around Maputo in Mozambique. The Dlamini dynasty traces itself back to King Dlamini I (also known as Matalatala) (c. 1435–1465). Since the genesis of the reigning Dlamini dynasty in the Kingdom of Eswatini, power has always been shared by the Queen Mother and the King. Ngwane III is often considered to be the first king of modern Eswatini; he ruled from 1745 to 1780 (Kuper 2018).
8. Transvaal territory, in what is today the Mpumalanga province in South Africa.
9. It is acknowledged that the term 'original borders' is problematic because traditional African borders were fluid and constantly changing owing to migration dynamics and other domestic and inter-group changes. By 'original borders' we refer to the size of the Kingdom of Eswatini under King Mswati III.
10. This practice continued into the postcolonial era (Farwell 1976, Feinstein 2005, confirmed by anonymous interviewees). Some of these interviewees accompanied the *Ngwenyama* to South Africa for the installation of Eswatini chiefs.
11. The annual December and January *Incwala* ceremonies.

12. *Umhlanga*, or the Reed Dance ceremony, is an annual Swazi and Zulu event. In Eswatini, tens of thousands of unmarried and childless Swazi girls and women travel from the various chiefdoms in the whole of southern Africa to the Ludzidzini Royal Kraal at Lobamba to participate in the eight-day event (see Ebewo 2011, Mabuza 2007, Kuper 1972).
13. Before them, in 1960, the Somali irredentists had made provision in their Constitution for the return of all ethnic Somalis outside the fatherland. The people of Somalian ethnic extraction stretch into the sovereign neighbouring states of Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti. The Somali people were divided by the colonialists like the rest of the African continent. Independent Somalia was unwilling to recognise the political boundaries drawn by the colonialists. Under Siad Barre's regime, the Somali flag had a five-pointed star, representing the northern and southern regions of the Somali Republic and the 'unredeemed territories' in Kenya's North-Eastern Province, Ethiopia's Ogaden Province and Djibouti (Thomson 2000: 23; Paola 1999: 104).
14. Its full Latin form reads: *uti possidetis juris, uti possidetis juris* which translates into 'as you possess in law, so you shall possess in law'.
15. The border restoration committees were established successively from 1994 to 2003, 2003 to 2008, 2009 to 2013, 2013 to 2018 and 2018 to 2023 (see Appointment of Special Committee to handle matters relating to Adjustment to the Boundaries between Swaziland and the Republic of South Africa and Mozambique, done on 6 March 1993 by Mswati III, Legal notice No. 155, 1st September 1995); Proclamation No. 8, 2003, The Establishment of the Border Determination Special Committee; Swazi Government Gazette, Vol. XLVII (no. 50), June).

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