

# Swaziland Newspapers in Indigenous Languages

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## Abstract

The paper discusses the history of newspapers that are in indigenous languages in Swaziland and looks at the role that they play in informing society. It argues that the newspaper is the main means for making people get involved in governance because it makes people know what is happening around them. It states that there is reason to study closely why newspapers that are in SiSwati, the indigenous language have a problem in Swaziland. It discusses newspapers from as way back as 1934 to the present. The problems that the research reports include lack of a readership, lack of interest among reporters to do journalism in SiSwati, poor translation and lack of government support. The newspapers that are included in the study include *Izwi LamaSwazi*, *Tikhatsi*, *Intsatseli*, *Umbiki*, and *Umgijimi*. Based on the stipulations of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, it is obvious that more concerted effort is needed in producing newspapers in SiSwati. This problem should not just be the problem of media houses alone.

## Introduction

Newspapers are very important in society because they help people to know about themselves. In Swaziland there has been a continuous production of newspapers in the English language. These are mainly the *Times of Swaziland* and the *Observer*. Other newspapers which came up such as the *Swazi Mirror* quickly disappeared. While some of the English newspapers have disappeared it is not because of lack of a supportive readership. It is the siSwati newspapers that have had to discontinue because they were not being bought. The issues that have to deal with newspapers that are in indigenous languages need to be investigated because they are important to language planners.

The South African Pan African Language Board makes a remark that SiSwati is well represented on radio, while it does not have newspapers. This is an important observation. It needs to be qualified by research which gives information on why there are no newspapers in this language. This is what this paper seeks to do. It aims to look at the history of these newspapers and the problems that they have encountered.

Fasold argues that the media is a domain of language use that needs to be studied because it affects how people get news. In a country like Swaziland where issues of democracy are being dealt with one of the issues we need to look at is language policy and planning. We need to study the problems that cause inequality of availability of news to the people of Swaziland in both official languages. We need to study why it is difficult to get news to people in SiSwati, the language of Swaziland.

Smith (1997) argues that newspapers are useful because they help readers to 'navigate their daily lives.' They help them to get a picture of the way the institutions that run their lives work so that they can influence what is going on. She also says that they inspire a

new outlook because of the stories that are written in them. She mentions a number of disadvantages as well. She argues that they can have a negative effect when they turn human beings into statistics in their compilation of figures and even generalize the experiences of people and thus distract them from a clear focus. They may also create consumers out of people and sometimes harm people by sacrificing what is important by propagating what is popular. It is the advantages of the newspaper that we want to assume not being able to read news in one's language affects.

It is important to look into the history of newspapers in general in order to focus the study. What Smith (1997) says is true if we look at the first newspapers in western countries. They were published so that people can know what was happening in the government. The earliest newspaper known to westerners is the *Acta Duirna* which was posted daily in a public place by the order of Julius Caesar in Rome (Needleman and Otis, 1939). It was produced so that it could inform citizens of current events. In 1562, in Venice, the *Natize Scritte*, also called the *Gazetta* was posted. A small fee was charged to readers by the government. This marked the beginning of the publication that people paid money for so that they could read about their society. In England news sheets appeared irregularly during the reign of Elizabeth the First. This was a time when national development in England was taking a new turn, in ways that are similar to the step that was taken by Swaziland and other colonized countries at independence. The need to create what is national was there. The areas of education and general literacy issues had to be attended to. The times demanded that people be informed about what is happening in their own country. They had to be participants in the making of society by taking part in their governance as active citizens. This is why newspaper sheets had to be produced. They were government attempts to reach out to people so that they know what is happening in their own country. The voice of the nation could not be a collective voice if only the rulers were talking to themselves without the people knowing what decisions are taken. The following table shows these news sheets.

**Table 1: Newsheets From England's Past**

TITLE	Editor	YEAR
The Weekly News	Nathaniel Buttler	1622-1641
The Intelligencer	Roger L'Estrange	1633
The London Gazette	The Secretary of State	1666
The Athenian Gazette	John Dunton	1690
The Daily Current		1702-1735
The Guardian	Steele	1713
The Englishman		1713-1715
The North Briton	John Wilke	1752

The list that we have here is very short. A more comprehensive list of newspapers can be found on the website of the International Coalition of Newspapers. From this list it is obvious that newspapers came up as soon as the printing press was invented. They would

last for some years and then be discontinued. This history of the English newspapers can be said to be similar to the history of newspapers in Swaziland. It is a history that has been turbulent. Needleman and Otis (1939) argue that there were courants, duirinals and newsheets during the civil war in the seventeenth century, some of them lasting years and others a much shorter time.

The history of newspapers in Swaziland reveals that like in most of the Southern African countries, the earliest newspapers or newsletters were published by the missionaries in order to further the work of the gospel. Umphaphamisi and Umshumayeli were among the earliest monthlies that circulated in Swaziland. These were printed by the Nazarene Church in order to send news to ministers who were preaching in the church. They were printed in Bremersdorp, which is now Manzini. Umphaphaminis still exists to this day.

**Table II: A List Of Newspapers In Indigenous Languages In Swaziland**

TITLE	TYPE	YEAR
Izwi LamaSwazi	Weekly	1934
Umbiki	Weekly	1970
Tikhatsi	Daily	1990-2006
Intsantseli	Daily	2000
Umgijimi	Daily	

### **Izwi LaMaSwazi 1934**

The newspaper was published in Zulu because at this time siSwati was just spoken and not written. The orthography of the language of Swaziland has come up as a post-independence initiative. The few people who could read the local language had been to the few missionary schools that taught Zulu even though they spoke siSwati as a home language. The Times of Swaziland, the only English newspaper at the time, was funded by the colonial settlers. Most of the news in it was about the settlers and their activities. This made Swazi people realize that there was a need for a newspaper that serves the Swazis.

The Newspaper, Izwi LaMaSwazi came up as the only newspapers that was owned by Swazis and also meant to serve them. Its title, which in English means, "Voice of the Swazis," makes it clear it was a paper that came up to create the voice of the people of Swaziland. The newspaper did not last for a long time. It stopped circulating the very year it started. Its main problems were not just financial, but also distribution and serving a population that had a low literacy rate and also too poor to afford newspapers.

### **Umbiki**

Umbiki was a government supported newspaper that was the brain child of King Sobhuza II, who felt that educated and uneducated Swazis had to read about Swaziland and create a national discourse in both the official languages of Swaziland. Since the Times of Swaziland served people who could understand English, there was need for a newspaper that could be read by the majority that did not speak English.

This newspaper was published by the Swaziland Information Service, the national body that is responsible for the news in the country. The newspaper was delivered to the

people free of charge. It operated for two decades. It reported mostly the news on radio and gave the nation a detailed version.

The reasons why it stopped have to do with the logistics of its publication. Since the Swaziland Printing and Publishing Company, which was the main publishing company which produced Umbiki was sold to Websters, which is a private company, the newspaper could not continue. The Swaziland Printing and Publishing company relinquished the responsibility of publishing the newspaper and ended up just publishing the national gazette and other programs for national events.

Besides the fact that Websters bought the Swaziland Printing and Publishing, there had always been other problems that were part and parcel of its production from its inception. One of these has to do with its distribution. Since it was distributed through District Commissioners' offices and Senior Regional offices, it did not get to its targeted audience in the manner it had been meant to. Very few people go to such offices. Even though some stores were willing to keep the paper on their counters, it became clear that this was also not the best way to get it to people.

Stewart Tsela, an official of Swaziland Information Services, who was involved in the production of the newspaper, pointed out that another problem was the fact that there were no reporters who were good at writing SiSwati news. This issue goes back to the need for teaching Siswati reporting and Siswati journalism in Swaziland and other African countries. Most of the journalism is done in English. There is need to expand the understanding of journalism which is in African languages.

This lack of interest in reporting in SiSwati and African languages in general is also one of the causes of there being a poor readership or as Stewart Tsela put it, "lack of interest in reading SiSwati news." He argued that at the moment reporters do not want to write news in SiSwati because they even look down on the assignments they are given. They think being given assignments to write in English is superior.

Stewart also argued that there was a chance to revive a newspaper that was government supported after the newspaper had stopped, but the authorities decided that there be a government newspaper called Swaziland Today. What was the budget for Umbiki in Swaziland Information Services ended up being used for this publication which publishes issues on politics in Swaziland. These are issues which could be covered by the newspapers which are in English. What this means is that government needs to recognize that not having a SiSwati newspaper is not good for the country and reconsider reviving Umbiki. It may still have to be sold for less, but it is a necessity. This might also mean subsidizing the commercial newspapers if they are in SiSwati because they are doing a service to the larger population which cannot afford to buy the more expensive newspapers.

### **Tikhatsi**

This is a SiSwati newspaper which was published by the Times of Swaziland from 1990 to 2006. The objectives of its production were to get news out to the Swazi community in the indigenous language SiSwati. The Times of Swaziland, a private organization that produces the English paper, felt that there was an unrepresented population that did not speak and read English and therefore needed to have access to the news that is published. The newspaper had a staff that was around 12 people which was responsible for translating news into SiSwati. The newspaper was produced for almost two decades. It had to stop

because of costs. The readership was much smaller than that of the Times of Swaziland. While the daily publication of the Times was thirty thousand newspapers, that of Tikhatsi was only four thousand. The company eventually felt that it was not making money. Other problems were that the newspaper did not have any adverts, so it did not make any money. The lack of journalists who write in SiSwati meant that some of the journalists who were producing the news for The Times of Swaziland, the English paper had to do translation of their news into SiSwati. This turned out to be a very exhaustive exercise.

According to Martin Dlamini, one of the employees of The Times of Swaziland, there was an attempt to get the Ministry of Education to help in maintaining the newspaper. The then Minister of Education, did not comply with the proposition to pitch in on helping the newspaper survive.

### **Intsatseli**

This newspaper was produced by the Swazi Observer, a semi-private company, that is subsidized by Tibiyo TakaNgwane, a publicly owned organization that holds monies of the Swazi nation that are held in trust for the nation by the King. This newspaper ran for several years and stopped around 2000 when the Observer closed. It produced the same news that was in the Swazi Observer in SiSwati. Reporters translated the news from English to SiSwati.

Problems that were cited by Alec Lushaba, an employee of the Swaziland Observer were that there were distribution challenges. As an employee he felt that the newspaper was not well distributed in the rural areas where most of the people who cannot read English were. It was just delivered where the English newspapers were delivered. Mr. Lushaba also cited poor translation as one of the problems. He felt that reporters are not trained in translation, hence they do not do a good job. Lushaba also felt that the readership was low because the everyday practices of Swazis do not necessarily involve reading and writing.

### **Umgijimi**

This newspaper was the brain child of the late Dr. Sishayi Nxumalo. It only survived for a few months and had to close because it did not make a profit. The logistics of its production were not well thought out. While producing newspapers may seem to be a business there are many marketing issues that are involved. For a paper to survive it must have a readership. The readership picks up slowly. Major investments have to be made into producing a newspaper. One individual cannot succeed. There is need for making sure that capital is available to keep going whilst the readership picks up.

### **Implications of The Lack Of Newspapers in Indigenous Languages**

There is a need to make information available in African languages to people. News is vital for people if they must engage in democracy. The role of African languages in the daily lives of African people was expressed in the Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literature as:

1. African languages must take on the duty, the responsibility, and the challenge of speaking for the continent.
2. The vitality and equality of African languages must be recognized as a basis for the future empowerment of African peoples.
3. The diversity of African languages reflects the rich cultural heritage of Africa and must be used as an instrument of African unity.
4. Dialogue among African languages is essential: African languages must use the instrument of translation to advance communication among all people, including the disabled.
5. All African children have the unalienable right to attend school and learn in their mother tongues. Every effort should be made to develop African languages at all levels of education.
6. Promoting research on African languages is vital for their development, while the advancement of African research and documentation will be best served by the use of African languages.
7. The effective and rapid development of science and technology in Africa depends on the use of African languages and modern technology must be used for the development of African languages.
8. Democracy is essential for the equal development of African languages and African languages are vital for the development of democracy based on equality and social justice.
9. African languages, like all languages, contain gender bias. The role of African languages in development must overcome this gender bias and achieve gender equality.
10. African languages are essential for the decolonization of African minds and for the African Renaissance.

The issue of the use of indigenous languages and their promotion is also well articulated in the UN declaration of the rights of indigenous people. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of indigenous people which was adopted by the General Assembly Resolution 61/295 on 13 September, 2007 states clearly how issues of the media and indigenous people and their languages should be approached. Article 16 has two subsections which state that:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to establish their own media in their own languages and to have access to all forms of non-indigenous media without discrimination.
2. States shall take effective measures to ensure that State-owned media duly reflect indigenous cultural diversity. States, without prejudice to ensuring full freedom of expression, should encourage privately owned media to adequately reflect indigenous cultural diversity.

It is a fact that all these declarations support the use of indigenous languages by the people of Africa, which includes Swaziland. The media houses have tried to provide news in SiSwati in Swaziland. The people on their own cannot do much.

It is obvious from the way things are in African countries that the media is not owned by indigenous people. It can never be owned by indigenous people. The media in most African countries is owned by private companies and as such the indigenous people in countries in Southern Africa do not have much of a say on the availability and unavailability of news in indigenous languages. The companies seek to make a profit. The people who read the newspapers in indigenous languages are poor and cannot afford newspapers, let alone food. This has created a situation where the issue of newspapers in indigenous languages has never been addressed by the main readers of these news, the people who speak indigenous languages.

In debates on language planning one of the most important issues is making sure that information is available to all people in a language they can understand. This is a development issue, and not just an economic issue of how much it will cost. In countries where indigenous languages are official languages development issues and economic issues all come to one thing, that there is need for both. However, the issue of the availability of news in indigenous languages still lags behind the other languages like English, French and Portuguese. This is because rigorous language planning still needs to be done, especially by the educated people who speak the languages like English, French and Portuguese.

Most of the debates on language planning have been focused on how to empower indigenous languages in Africa. The language planning process has been debated and very little has come of these debates because the national policies have not taken cognizance of the fact that development in African that is not in indigenous languages will never really be development because the majority of the people will be excluded from it. It is through the understanding of the importance of the availability of ideas, and availability of information in indigenous languages that there can be improvement. African countries need to engage the issue of empowering African languages in all domains. The domain of the media is one such domain.

The issues of language planning models and how to go about making sure that language planners are making informed decisions on how to ensure that all people are getting information in languages that they understand does not get addressed in situations where the models are created by people who do not live with the problems which are faced by the indigenous people. Models that have to be used are those which seek to foster empowerment of languages in the society as a whole. Language planners who propagate the integrated approach to language planning have suggested ways that could be useful in empowering indigenous languages. They have discussed the tackling of extralinguistic issues such as making sure that the languages are developed in all spheres. This importance of African languages cannot be emphasized when there are no newspapers in these languages.

At the present moment the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been translated into SiSwati (Mordaunt, 2008, p21). While there may be moves to make documents like the constitution and human rights documents available in SiSwati when the news on their availability is in English, the majority of the people who read these documents do not even get to hear that they are there. Democracy in Swaziland also means that news must be available in SiSwati. We need to allow people to develop in the areas of reading and writing by making sure that the news is available to them in the languages they speak.

## Conclusion

The problems that are faces by newspapers that are in SiSwati, the indigenous language of Swaziland are many. While the problem of a low readership looms bigger than all of them it is obvious that there has been very little government support for these newspapers. It is when there is a proper language policy that makes a concerted effort to support these newspapers that they can survive. This problem is tied to the need to provide reading materials in SiSwati in order to make sure that the language grows. The effort to help the people of Swaziland to get news in their language is tied to the language policy issue. The media companies have taken the initiative to produce news in SiSwati and failed. Without government support these newspapers cannot sustain themselves. Media houses have failed to get funding even after requesting assistance from the people who are in government. Swaziland is a signatory to the United Nations Charter on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This means that there should be a concerted effort to address the issues that are stated in the Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in its entirety. There is need to do research on how to produce and market newspapers which are in indigenous languages and also to engage researches in ways of understanding the sociology of reading of Swaziland's households so as to find ways to promote the newspapers which are in indigenous languages. It is when these languages are promoted in higher education, in schools, at work, in commerce and all spheres of life that they will take off. Journalism in SiSwati needs to grow to a level where reporters will be proud of reporting and writing news in SiSwati.

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