NOT FOR PUBLICATION

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

PBM - 27
Racial Peace
in Swaziland

c/o Michael Pennington
5, Elm Street,
Houghton, Johannesburg
August 29, 1954

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue,
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

"Not long ago an expert came from Britain to tell us to import exotic bulls from outside Swaziland and breed them with the local cattle if we wanted to improve our Ngune herds. We did it, although the idea turned out to be a dismal failure. For one thing, the Swazis were suspicious of these strange bulls and wouldn't bring their Ngune cows to be serviced. And, another thing, the exotic bulls got sick and died, largely because their coats were so long that we couldn't get rid of the ticks.

"So we dropped that scheme, and our veterinary officers suggested building up a herd of good Ngune bulls and using them to improve the general standard of Swazi cattle. Well, they went out, loaded with cash, to buy bulls from the Swazis. After a few weeks they came back, still loaded with cash, but with no bulls. The Swazis wouldn't sell.

"Then the veterinary officers asked us to try to buy the bulls for them. Two of us went out with a bag full of money and a couple of small lorries, camping overnight. For the first few days it looked as if we weren't going to get any bulls either. Then, one morning, I was sitting beside the road waiting for the lorries when an old Swazi came up and sat down with me. 'Why do you want to buy our bulls?' he wanted to know.

"I explained that we wanted to improve the Ngune breed. 'But,' he said, 'you brought the new bulls to improve our cattle. Why do you need our bulls?'

"I told him the sad tale of the experiment--how it had been a failure and we had decided to use Ngune bulls instead. 'We told you that the foreign bulls would not do for Swaziland before you brought them here,' he reminded me.

"'Yes,' I said to him, 'you told us. And now we have found that you were right and we were wrong. That is why we are trying to buy your bulls.'

"'You admit that you were wrong?' he said.

"I told him how the exotic bulls got sick and died. He nodded his head in sympathy--there's no greater catastrophe to a Swazi than the loss of cattle. 'Then,' he said, 'give me the money and you may have my bulls.' After that we didn't have any trouble buying all the bulls we needed--in a week we had more bulls offered to us than we had money to pay for them. The old Swazis must have spread the story of our talk."

This story, although a simple one about cattle, contains many of the elements of the good relations that exist today in the British Protectorate of Swaziland between the Swazis and the British administrators. It shows the Swazi's love of cattle, his independence (in refusing point-blank to sell his bulls) and the results obtained by an administration that is not afraid to admit to the Swazis that it makes mistakes.

It was told me by J. F. B. Purcell, the District Commissioner of the Mbabane District. He is a stocky, bearded man with a warm voice who wears soft, furry tweeds and a neatly-tied four-in-hand marked with golden symbols of his London club. His office is at the back of the Mbabane Native police station overlooking a thatched building which houses

the Native court and, beyond that, a sunny valley. It's dark in the office--and with the stuffed heads of kudu and impala on the walls and a stack of rusty assagais in one corner you feel back in the easy-going, comfortable days of Empire.

Purcell adds to the atmosphere. He is full of stories of his early days in Swaziland when he was a young colonial officer and his only problems were an occasional ritual murder or a difference of opinion with Sobhuza II, Paramount Chief of the Swazis. As he sits, puffing his pipe in the cool shadow, he seems so unrushed and at ease that you're likely to forget lunch.

He told the cattle story during a discussion of race relations with a nervous young administrator who came to Swaziland in the days of the Labour Government in England. "When I came out," Purcell said, "it was a much easier matter, dealing with the Swazis."

"What do you mean?" said the nervous young man. "The Swazis are much more cooperative today than they were 15 or 20 years ago. Why, in 1930 I understand there wasn't a single grass strip for soil conservation in the whole Protectorate."

"That's not what I mean," Purcell said. "I mean that they were much more unsophisticated in those days. They didn't worry then about grass conservation strips because they were able to grow plenty of food for their families without them. Today, with progress, they're beginning to think in terms of cash crops and the law of supply and demand. Don't misunderstand me. I'm not against progress. But the Swazis have absorbed so much from the white man that they have worries they never had in the old days. That's what makes them harder to deal with."

This snatch of conversation is typical of many I've had since I came to Swaziland a little more than a week ago. It's typical in that all the conversations I had seemed to swing, sooner or later, to the amazing fact that race relations in Swaziland are peaceful. It's as though the peace has happened unexpectedly, like a lump of gold in the bottom of an alchemist's garbage pail. Like the alchemist trying to remember just what it was he threw in the garbage pail, the administrators in Swaziland are trying to figure out just what it was that caused the Swazis to look upon the British as partners and friends.

I drove into the Protectorate from Portuguese East Africa where I had gone to try to find out why there seemed to be no racial squabbles between the Portuguese and the Natives. I wondered if the Portuguese solution might work in South Africa or the Central African Federation. What I found was disappointing. The main reasons behind Mozambique's racial peace are apparently a lack of detribalization and urbanization among the Natives and the liberal use of a paddle with holes bored in it by the Portuguese. The Portuguese have not found a solution to the problems of progress; they have merely found a way to slow progress among Africans almost to a standstill. "We finish the trouble before it is able to begin," a Native Affairs Department official told me in a broken mixture of French and English.

When I first arrived in Swaziland I thought that the Protectorate's solution might be explained by a similar lack of progress. I suggested this to H. D. G. Fitzpatrick, director of rural development. His answer, typically, was a roar of laughter. "Swaziland covers 7,600 square miles," he said. "Half of it belongs to Swazis. Just look at these figures." He flipped through a pile of stapled mimeography and pulled out a sheaf labeled MEMORANDUM ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT: SWAZILAND.

"Here it is," he went on. "In 1948, there were only 50 or 100 acres under grass strip conservation. In 1953 there were 143,000 acres of Swazi land under organized conservation. Last year we spent £130,036 of Colonial Welfare and Development funds on the Swazis. Add to that £7,593 of our own funds, and you come up with quite a bit of progress. It's not your ruddy Union type of conservation, either, where some conservation officer stands over a poor coon farmer with a sjambok (heavy, rhinocerous-hide whip, noted for deadliness) and says 'get cracking on that grass stripping, my boy.'

"It's taken us a long time to get where we are with the Swazis--and the thing that makes me boil is the way some of these Jo'burg 'experts' come along and tell us it's impossible to get Natives to practice conservation voluntarily because they're too conservative and can't possibly understand it. Why, if a Swazi farmer plows into some of his grass stripping, we don't punish him. He's pulled into a Native court by his chief or one of the head men and he's given a £10 fine or a nice stretch at hard labor by a Swazi magistrate. We've even reached the point where we're about to have the Swazis ask us to introduce improved methods of animal husbandry--culling, selective breeding, destruction of poor stock--the lot. You ask a Zulu in a Union reserve to destroy some of his cattle and see what kind of response you get."

Fitzpatrick almost waxed poetic in his description of the Swazis' agricultural advancement, but in the course of his talk an odd fact emerged--Swaziland became a British Protectorate as long ago as 1903 but it was not until 1949 that the Swazis began to adopt methods of agriculture that went beyond mere subsistence, peasant farming. To understand this long gap a short glance at Swazi history is helpful.

The Swazis are a branch of the main body of Bantu who supposedly moved south along the east coast of Africa in the sixteenth century. They settled in what is now Swaziland in about 1750 and lived as cattle-herders and warriors until the white men began to appear in large numbers in the middle of the nineteenth century. Then it was that the Swazis made a decision that probably saved them from annihilation. Instead of making war on the Europeans who came to Swaziland, the Swazi chief, Mbandzeni, did his best to keep the white men happy, granting concessions to land, mineral rights, grazing rights, timber rights, railways and trading. By the time of the Anglo-Boer War he had conceded every concedable right to every conceivable bit of land in all of Swaziland. Some land was conceded two or three times over in Mbandzeni's attempts to avoid a war which could only end in defeat for the Swazis.

After the Boer War Swaziland became a British Protectorate. Control of purely Native matters, except criminal trials and disputes arising out of Christian marriages, was left in the hands of the Swazi hierarchy, consisting of the Paramount Chief, the Queen Mother and a council of sub-chiefs and elders. A commission decided that Mbandzeni's concessions were valid, but ordered the concessionaires to return one-third of their holdings to the Swazis so that the Swazis could feed themselves. Since that time the Swazis have bought (and the British Government has bought for the Swazis) enought land so that today the Natives own about 51 per cent of the Protectorate.

The change from the defunct Transvaal Republic to the British Colonial Office made no difference to the Swazis. They went on in the same old way as peasant farmers, raising just enough to feed themselves and their cattle and not giving a hoot about raising a surplus for outside sale. Cattle were still the primary indication of wealth, with wives a close second. Therefore the cattle were not slaughtered for meat or sold for profit, but were kept near the home kraal like a big, black

Buick in the tenement-lined streets of Philadelphia's Negro districts. Drop-in-the-bucket efforts were made to stop the steady wash-off of topsoil during the rainy season, but no one paid particular attention.

In 1921 Sobhuza II, present Paramount Chief of the Swazis and eighth in direct hereditary succession to the first chief, took over his duties. In some ways, Sobhuza is progressive. He believes in soil conservation, improvement of Ngune cattle herds and development of Swaziland's mineral rights. But he is also shrewd enough not to go the whole hog. He has not adopted trousers in place of the traditional Swazi split skirt; he still wears feathers in his long hair; and he has the proper number of wives--about 15--to satisfy the rural Swazi that the chief is a wealthy man. This mixture of primitive and modern has been a big help to the British--it meant that Sobhuza was modern enough to recognize the benefits of modern agriculture and at the same time respected enough by his people to be able to convince them that conservation was not merely a European trick.

In 1949 Swaziland began to take the financial vitamin pills dispensed by the Colonial Development and Welfare Fund. At the same time Sobhuza was given full control over Swazi affairs in the form of a written proclamation and the power of the Native courts was extended to include all disputes between Swazis. The stage was set for a full-scale attack on primitive farming.

Both Purcell and Fitzpatrick were prime movers in soil conservation and, in a small way, had converted a few progressive Swazi farmers during the quiet days of the early '30's. Now they were given free rein, with plenty of money in back of them and plenty of territory to cover in front. It is to their everlasting credit that they did not plunge in with a great, all-encompassing campaign right from the start. Instead, they began with a small area, planting grass strips between lengths of plowed ground. Before they took a step, they very carefully explained what they were doing to the local Swazi farmers--telling them how the strips would hold back the water and keep the land from washing away.

When it became obvious that the first pilot scheme was going to be a success, teams of agricultural men moved into the other areas, explaining as they worked. By the end of the 1949 season, 5000 acres of Swazi land had been protected against erosion by the grass strips. The Inner Council, the body of older Swazis that acts as Sobhuza's cabinet, approved further projects for the following year.

"There was the usual protest from a small group of farmers that the scheme was costing them land," Fitzpatrick said, "and a bit of a howl from the lazy fellows who thought it involved too much work, but on the whole it caught on very well. After four years--in 1953--the Paramount Chief issued a proclamation making it an offense to interfere with the strips. Now we've reached the stage where we don't have to worry about the scheme any more--we've got so many requests from Swazi farmers for us to survey their fields for grass strips that our stripping crews are working at top speed all the time."

These facts about progress were easy to pick up--after the first day of talk with Protectorate Government men at Mbabane I had enough progress figures to fill a stenographer's notebook. The question in the conversations after that was why? I had several answers thrown at me--the Swazis are easy to deal with, the country is small enough for close personal contact between government and governed, the Swazis live cheek-by-jowl with European farmers and copy European farming methods, Sobhuza

is a Native with European ideas--all of which were, to a greater or lesser extent, accurate. Purcell's answers, however, seemed to go farther than most.

"I think it's a matter of trust," he said. "Not that I believe the Swazis trust us completely in everything--it's Swazi policy not to trust Europeans--but I do believe they've reached a point where they trust us not to cheat them or take advantage of them.

"This trust didn't spring up, all of a sudden, in 1949, you understand. It has grown up since the days of the concessions, before the Boer War. The Swazis say, and I think they're sincere, that they never meant to give the actual land away--what they gave away was a temporary right to use the land. After the Europeans took the land and then claimed to own it absolutely, the Swazis, and probably other tribes, lost whatever faith they had had in the word of the Europeans.

"Even after Swaziland became a Protectorate they didn't get all their land back--only one-third of it--and for that reason it was a long time before a Swazi would listen to a Protectorate official with anything but suspicion. But after many years of British administration which accomplished nothing at all and didn't try to accomplish anything, the Swazis became more content with the status quo and the barriers between them and us began to drop. They even made up a legend about the silhouette of Victoria you see in the mountains between here and Bremersdorp. They say that as long as Victoria is there in the mountains, the Swazis will keep their land.

"A lot of visitors have told us what a shame it is that we've had to wait so long to get the cooperation of the Swazis--but I think the fact that we have waited so long is the reason we've had any cooperation at all. And the wait, plus the facts that we've diddled Swazi custom as little as possible and have given the Swazis jurisdiction over themselves may well be the reasons that we've not had any serious agitation or a Swaziland branch of the African National Congress growing up. The Swazis have learned two important things in the past 50 years--that they can say 'no' to us and that we will not force any legislation on them without their consent. Now that they know we will not carry on any program when they say 'no,' they don't say 'no' as often.

"I think that perhaps the biggest difference between us and the Union is that up until now progress has been slow and it hasn't caused any serious changes in the Swazis' way of life. We've been able to let them work out their own problems with as little interference and unnecessary help from us as possible. For instance, by not nagging at them about soil conservation, they finally came to us and asked us to help them with it.

"And, another thing, they don't seem to think of us as ordinary white men any more. Perhaps we've been around so long we've practically become Swazis. I remember, a few months ago, driving from Pigg's Peak to Mbabane when I saw a Swazi standing beside the road. He was a tall fellow, very erect, and I thought there was something familiar about him. As I passed he saluted and I saw that it was one of the men I had with me in the Army. I stopped the car and he got in. After a few miles we got to talking, mostly about farming and the land, when he asked me, 'When are you going to give us rifles to drive out the white men?'

"That startled me a bit because this particular Swazi had always seemed a placid

sort and I asked him why he wanted to drive us out. 'Oh,' he said, genuinely surprised, 'we do not wish to drive you away. You work the land and help us to work the land. We want to drive out the men who do not use the land themselves and keep us from using it.' It turned out that he was talking about the South African sheep farmers who own large tracts of Swaziland and use the land as winter pasture, leaving it idle in the summer months. In my Swazi friend's mind, that sort of fellow and his District Commissioner didn't even exist together as white men.

"I believe that by going slow we've reached the state of affairs where the Swazis actually believe--although they'll never admit it--that we are just as interested in their homeland as they are. Perhaps it is a shame it's taken so long. But the results have been worth the wait."

A few days later, as I was watching a Native Court in session, I was introduced to the 'Eye,' the Swazi who acts as liason officer between the Administration and the Paramount Chief. After a few minutes' conversation, he invited me to an exhibition of Native dancing the following day.

"I'd like to come very much," I said. "I don't think I've ever seen any Swazi dancing."

"Oh," said the Eye, "it will not be Swazi dancing. Swazi dancing requires large numbers of dancers and is only done on religious or ceremonial occasions. Tomorrow you will see Sebacla, the dancing of the Amabacla Tribe of the Cape Province which is very active and needs only small teams of dancers."

"Isn't it a bit unusual," I asked, "for one tribe to dance the dances of another?"

"Perhaps," came the answer, "but when there is no fear that we will lose our own dances, then we enjoy learning the dances of others."

Purcell, who was with me, grinned from ear to ear at this.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that the Swaziland system would work, unchanged, in South Africa or the Central African Federation. It's much too late to give the Natives 50 years to absorb western ideas and to learn to trust the Europeans who are their masters. It would mean tearing down the factories and filling up the mines and starting from scratch. But there are some facets of the Swaziland administration that should, logically, work just as well outside the borders of the Protectorate. The Native Courts, for instance, where a Native magistrate is responsible for punishing a Native criminal for committing a crime against another Native, should function as smoothly in Sophiatown as in Mbabane.

And it would help race relations tremendously in the Union and the Federation if a Native knew that if he said 'no,' someone would pay some attention to him.

Sincerely,

Peter Bird Martin

Peter Bird Martin

Received New York 9/8/54.