

Episode 55: Swaziland Reed Dance

Summary

Nick and Wendy went to Swaziland for one reason: to see the annual Reed Dance. In this conversation they talk about this spectacular African festival.

Transcript

Nick: Wendy and I are continuing our trip in southern Africa and this time we're coming to you from Swaziland and we're going to talk about an amazing festival that we saw while we're in Swaziland.

But before we start, I'd like to remind you that you can get a special deal of ten U.S. dollars in italki credits with your first purchase by going to <http://go.italki.com/englishin10minutes>. Studying with native-speaking italki teachers is already more affordable than schools, tutors and software, and the special offer makes it even cheaper!

Alright, so moving on to Swaziland. Actually we weren't even going to go to Swaziland.

Wendy: No. We were in South Africa and we were planning to go directly to Mozambique from South Africa. We had considered Swaziland, we'd read a little bit about it, but there was nothing that really grabbed our attention, nothing that really looked like something that we just had to see there, so we thought, 'Oh, it would be better to just move on to another country that we know more about and know that we do want to visit.'

Nick: Right, because Swaziland is a very small country. Umm, it's more or less contained within South Africa. It does share a border with Mozambique as well. Umm, but yeah, it's a small country and, you know, if you spend a lot of time in South Africa, perhaps it doesn't have too much to offer by itself.

Wendy: Right, because you can go on a safari there but we had already been on a safari in South Africa. So it has a lot of the same attractions and we didn't think there was anything really compelling¹ drawing us to Swaziland, until we found out about the Reed Dance.

¹ compelling: convincing, forcing you to watch/attend

Nick: OK, and so basically the day before we were going to go to Mozambique, we were told by a South African that there was this Reed Dance festival in Swaziland. And we didn't know anything about it, we'd never heard of it. Umm, and so we said, 'OK, well, let's go and check it out.'

Wendy: Yep, and that was a very good decision, I'm glad that we did that. Umm, it was actually a much bigger event than I had imagined and much bigger than, uhh, this person had told us. We had asked him a few questions about the event. I'm not sure that he had ever been there himself, he just knew about it kind of second-hand². Umm, so, he ... for example, I asked him how many women are involved - and I'll explain a little bit, uhh, in a minute about what happens, but it's women and girls who are dancing in this event - so I asked him how many and he said, 'Oh, maybe four hundred, maybe more, it depends on how many want to come.' Well, it turns out that there were a hundred and twenty thousand girls and women at this year's Reed Dance.

Nick: Right, so slightly more than four hundred.

Wendy: Yeah, just a little more. So it was the biggest festival that I've ever seen, of that kind - the biggest traditional festival. I mean we have seen dances and other types of celebrations in Africa before, but nothing on this scale.

Nick: OK, so we arrived in Swaziland last Friday, and we'd been told that this festival was going to be on the Saturday, but in fact it was going to be more on the Sunday and then the biggest day was the Monday. And so we spent four nights in Swaziland, basically just to wait for this festival.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: And so the Sunday and the Monday are the two biggest days, it's actually an eight-day festival, I think.

Wendy: Right.

Nick: Umm, but there's really two major days and even within the two major days, there's this one major day which was, uhh, on the Monday, and that's the second last day...?

Wendy: Yes.

Nick: ... of the festival.

Wendy: The seventh of the eight days. So it does go for eight days - the whole celebration - but the actual dancing is on day six and seven. And on the other days, they're doing other kinds of activities.

² second-hand: from someone else (in this case; it can also mean used clothing or other used items)

Nick: And so this day six and day seven, they're the days that we went to see the festival. So on day six, what happens?

Wendy: Well, uhh, so you have women and girls from all over the country, and also a few from outside the country as well, because the ethnic group Swazi, uhh, not everyone who is part of this ethnic group lives in Swaziland. There are also Swazis who live in South Africa and, I believe, in other neighbouring countries as well. So a few of them come and participate in the festival and then you have, uhh, girls and young women from every corner of Swaziland, uhh, coming to the royal residence, where the Queen Mother lives. And what they do is they go out into these reed beds and they cut reeds³ - these long reeds that they then carry back with them to the Queen Mother's residence. And they leave them there for her, and this is a form of tribute labour, so, uhh, these reeds will be used to repair the Queen Mother's house or perhaps not the house itself but the kinds of fences that go around the royal residence. And so you can imagine a hundred and twenty thousand girls and women, they are able to carry back a lot of reeds and this is very helpful for the Queen and the rest of the royal family. And so it's to pay tribute to the Queen. It's also meant to preserve the girls' chastity⁴, because all of the girls are virgins. They have to be, uhh, unmarried, uhh, they have to not have had any children and they have to be virgins in order to participate in the Reed Dance. And so it's a way to encourage them to abstain⁵ from having sex before marriage, so that's a big part of the purpose of the festival.

And then there's also another, uhh, aspect that is not necessarily an official part of it, but often the King will choose a wife for himself from among the women who are participating. And the King currently has, I believe, fifteen wives, so I'm not sure if he chose another one this year or not. We were told that his mother, the Queen Mother, had prohibited him from choosing from another wife 'cause she thought that he was abusing his powers and that fifteen was more than enough already, and that he didn't need any more wives. I think that's probably a good call.

Nick: Yeah it's also funny that even the King has to answer to⁶ his own mother...

Wendy: Yeah.

³ reeds: long, thin plants that grow in water and swampy areas

⁴ chastity: virginity

⁵ abstain: not do something that seems desirable

⁶ answer to: obey, do what the other person says. If using the verb *answer* simply to refer to someone responding to a question, there is no *to*, e.g. His mother asked him a question, and he answered her.

Nick: ...in that way. But in fact the Queen Mother has a lot of power within Swaziland. It's (she's) not just the standard mother of the King, umm, because she served as a kind of regent⁷, uhh...

Wendy: Right.

Nick: ...at one point, prior to that, prior him taking power for himself. So she has, yeah, she has more power and more respect and this kind of thing than standard mothers of Kings, I suppose.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, I think that's fair to say. So on the sixth day, the girls return from the reed beds and they deposit their reeds at the Queen Mother's residence and then they perform the first dance of the two days of dancing. And this takes place inside a stadium that's actually a private stadium that belongs to the royal family. So it's inside their royal residence. This is one of the very few times of the year that the royal residence is open to the public. Normally it's closed to the public, but on this special day - the two days of the Reed Dance - everyone can come to the stadium and watch the girls dance. And so that's what we did.

Nick: Right, so those are people from Swaziland and also, uhh, foreigners like us who either happened to be there⁸ or who had come especially for it. Although it's a bit hard to plan a trip around this festival, even though it's a famous festival within Swaziland, because they don't announce the dates until quite late.

Wendy: Yeah. So it's always around the same time of the year, usually late August or early September, but you don't know exactly what dates until, maybe just a few weeks before the event.

Nick: And so for the rest of day six and then for all of day seven, it was about watching these girls dance, and they're all in groups from their various villages or wherever they happened to come from. And then each group is dressed in a slightly different way, umm, they're dressed in traditional clothing. It's very colourful clothing. There's a little bit of a catch⁹ to it, though.

Wendy: Right, you mean that they're topless?

Nick: Yeah, I don't think that we would exactly say topless, but they're bare-breasted.

Wendy: Right, so they're not wearing any kind of top, any clothing on the upper part of their body.

⁷ regent: a person who assumes the role of a King or Queen if the real King or Queen is too young to rule. It's often the mother of the monarch.

⁸ happened to be there: there by accident or luck, with little or no planning

⁹ catch: a twist or oddity that should be mentioned

Nick: And so there's a hundred and twenty thousand of them and they're all dancing like that and it's a pretty amazing spectacle.

Wendy: It is, yes. And they're singing and chanting at the same time, singing different songs. And, yeah, it is spectacular. I've never seen so many people dancing in one place before. Umm, so it was fabulous. Now, I will say day six and day seven, to me, seemed largely the same. We kept hearing from locals, 'Oh, day seven is the big day. That's when you really have to go. If you want to go on day six, OK, go ahead, but day seven is really where it's at¹⁰.' To me it seemed like they were both pretty much the same, the girls did pretty much the same thing on both days and I think the number of girls participating was about the same on both days. But day seven was obviously much more important for the local people, there was a much larger crowd attending. The King was there - the King was there both days - but, umm, he actually came out on the field, on the stadium field, and walked around, and everyone ran around him trying to get photographs of him, it was a bit chaotic. Umm, so, yeah, we might not have understood all of the minute details and particularities of what made that day seven important, but just to see the whole spectacle was really amazing.

¹⁰ where it's at: the best part or place

Comprehension Questions

1. What do the girls and young women do with the reeds that they collect?
2. Why does Wendy think that the King didn't choose a wife this year?
3. What are the most noteworthy features of the clothing that the girls wear?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. I wasn't planning on meeting up with her, but I just _____ when she arrived, so we ended up having a drink together.
2. Women should _____ from drinking alcohol while they are pregnant for the health of the child.
3. The Catholic Church encourages people to maintain their _____ until marriage.
4. I don't have all the details of the accident because I only heard this information _____ from someone else.
5. In the ancient Mediterranean world, a lot of writing was done on papyrus, which is made from _____ that grow in Egypt.
6. Engaging with _____ content in your target language is one of the best ways to maintain your motivation in language learning.
7. He gave me the phone for free but there's a _____: you can receive calls but, for some reason, you can't make them.
8. The wife of the dead king served as _____ for her young son, but when he came of age, she didn't want to hand over control of the kingdom to him.
9. As the president, he doesn't have to _____ anyone. Whatever he says, goes.
10. The nightclub on the main street was the best one in the city for years, but the new one that just opened on the other side of the river is _____ now.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Would you be interested in going to Swaziland to see the Reed Dance? Why or why not?
2. What do you think about the King of Swaziland having fifteen wives? Should this be allowed?
3. Do you have traditional festivals in your own country? What are they like?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. They leave the reeds at the royal residence for the Queen Mother.
2. She said the King's mother had forbidden him from taking another wife because he already has too many wives.
3. The clothing is very colourful, and it doesn't cover the upper part of the girls' bodies (so they are bare-breasted, or topless).

Exercises

1. happened to be there
2. abstain
3. chastity
4. second-hand
5. reeds
6. compelling
7. catch
8. regent
9. answer to
10. where it's at