

ZULU CULTURE

LOCATION

Today there are about 3 million Zulus, who mostly live in the Natal Province of South Africa. This area is sometimes called Zululand, and has a very warm climate.

HISTORY

The Zulu started as a clan that belonged to a larger group of people called the Nguni. The Nguni migrated south from central East Africa in the 16th century to the Natal region. As they settled the Zulu built beehive shaped grass huts to live in.

The Zulu people believe that they are the direct descendents of a chief called Zulu (which means heaven in the Nguni language). After the death of Zulu, his descendants called themselves abakwaZulu (people of Zulu). The Zulu people also call themselves Abantsundu, which means "brown people".

By the early 19th century the Zulu had become the strongest military force in southern Africa (under the leadership of the powerful but violent Shaka). They raided and killed many neighbors and took their land, goods and women. Soon after this, however (around 1830), they had to face the growing colonial presence of the British, who wanted to control the entire southern part of Africa.

It was not the first time that Europeans had seized control of land in Southern Africa. The first white Europeans arrived in 1488. Many whites (English, Dutch, German and French) went to the nearby Cape of Good Hope to settle starting around 1600. There, the Europeans imported slaves to work for them and a society was created of free whites and blacks with very few rights. Many white settlers did not like British rule, however. They called themselves Afrikaner or Boer (the Dutch word for farmer) and used their own language, called Afrikaans (which resembles Dutch). The Afrikaners and English fought for power for many years.

After much tension between the Zulu people and the Europeans a war broke out in 1879. Though the Zulus had some success in driving back the British in the very beginning, the superior weapons and horses of their enemies led to the rapid defeat of the Zulu. The last military attempt to keep their land free of the British took place in 1906.

After the British defeated the Zulu and the other native peoples of South Africa a period of British white colonial domination began. The Union of South Africa was created in 1910, and South Africa thus became officially independent. Afrikaans became the dominant language. Whites had all the power and wealth in this new nation and the black population became second class citizens with almost no political power. In 1948 a racist government came into power that started the practice of Apartheid. New Apartheid laws soon made Zulus and other blacks (as well as other ethnic groups) officially inferior to whites, and kept the different groups completely separate. During the Apartheid period the Zulus tried to resist the domination of the whites in every aspect of life, but they had little power to live the lives they wanted.

Since the transition to democracy in 1994 (when Nelson Mandela became president), and the end of Apartheid, the Zulus have struggled against the new South African government for the right to run their own affairs. This has led to a lot of violence in the last ten years.

RELIGION

The Zulu religion is based on the creator god Unkulunkulu and the worship of ancestors. The creator god is almighty, but has little to do with everyday affairs. The spirit world, on the other hand, is always present in traditional Zulu religion. It is believed that when a person dies this person's spirit will watch over the others from this spirit world. People can come into contact with the spirit world and one's ancestors during special ceremonies.

The spirits of the ancestors like to be remembered. People make offerings (like beer and meat) to the spirits to show them that they have not been forgotten. Because it is so important to honor the spirits there are many rituals in Zulu daily life that are meant to please the spirits. According to the more traditional Zulu belief all misfortune is due to evil magic or to spirits that have been offended. Another important part of Zulu religion is cleanliness. People will bathe up to three times a day.

At the end of the 1700s, missionaries attempted to convert the Zulus to Christianity (mostly Protestant); due to the Zulus' strong beliefs and community, this has only been partially successful. Many Zulus today practice a type of religion that is a mixture of Christianity and their own traditional religion.

SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS

In the past centuries the Zulus preferred to live in homesteads (a group of huts called kraals) instead of villages. The huts in the homestead formed a circle. There was a cattle pen in the middle of the circle where the Zulus kept their livestock. Traditional huts were built by using small trees with grass mats on top. The floor was made of clay and cow dung that was rubbed hard into a smooth and shiny surface.

Traditional Zulu society has chiefs and a king. Several homesteads were traditionally run by one chief, who made the important decisions. There was one Zulu king who represented all the Zulus. He played an important role in the politics of the Zulu territory throughout history and has represented his people internationally. Today, Zulu kings are still respected but this traditional power structure clashes with the central and democratic government of South Africa.

The Zulus who live primarily in the rural part of South Africa tend to raise cattle and also grow corn and vegetables (such as corn, beans, yams and millet). The men and boys have been traditionally responsible for the herds of cattle, goats and sheep, while the women have been responsible for the planting and harvesting of crops.

Men play the dominant role in Zulu families. The men own the huts, make the decisions, receive visitors and go to war. They are also allowed to have more than one wife. When they are young, girls learn to cook, plant crops and take care of the children. After marriage, Zulu brides traditionally move in with their husbands and their husbands' families. The husband and his family give the bride's family some cattle as a gift in return. In the past, the only way to inherit property was through the father. Mothers are primarily responsible for their children, but children tend to grow up with a large number of other people who are all seen as family.

The Zulus who live in urban areas are still suffering from the history of Apartheid. They have a hard time competing for jobs and most do unskilled labor (men) and domestic work (women).

CULTURE

The Zulus have close ties to other Nguni people such as the Swazi and Xhosa, and their cultures are quite similar. Zulus speak the KwaZulu language, which is a mixture of several other languages.

Traditionally men and women are involved in different types of arts and crafts. The Zulu women are best known for their beadwork and basket making, while men are known for their wood carvings and for the objects they make out of animal skins.

Poetry has long been an important art form among men. The poems of the past praised kings and national heroes. Poems today are often more political and talk about the history of Apartheid and Zulu life today. Story-telling and riddles have also always been popular forms of entertainment.

