

SHONA

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Shona is one of the national languages in Zimbabwe. The other is Ndebele. As already stated it is also spoken along the borders of Botswana and Mozambique. Shona culture emphasizes the extended family. No one lives for himself but for the family. This is seen through the way they help each other do field work through "nhimbe". Their lives also evolve around the spirits of their ancestors and in each area, a day of rest is set aside each week on which no one is allowed to do any work in their fields during the planting season. This day – known as "chisi" – is declared by the local big spirit (mhondoro/gombwe) of the area. The Shona motto is "One for all and all for one."

"Hunhu" is regarded as the crucial element of what makes a person. This word refers to a person's character, spirituality, sense of responsibility and disposition. One's "hunhu" determines how one is regarded in society. One is either respected or considered an outcast depending on his "hunhu."

An interesting aspect of the Shona culture is the diglossic nature of their language. They have a "low" variety that is used for everyday speech and a "high" variety that is reserved for use when they pray to their ancestors. The "high" variety is rich in proverbs and has a vocabulary of its own. Traditional prayer is usually accompanied by the clapping of hands with the leader kneeling and the rest of the people seated. The major ceremony is called the "bira". The "bira" is usually performed during weekends and lasts the whole night. People drink traditional beer brewed by women who have reached their menopause. They sing and dance to the "mbira" and drums and consult with their ancestors who speak through mediums.

To the Shona, children and cattle are their treasure. A man is not a man unless he has children and cattle. The more he has of each, the more of a man he is.

But the culture of the Shona is changing due to westernization and the influence of Christianity. The Shona are slowly but surely losing some of these values especially in the urban areas.

STUDYING SHONA IN THE U.S.

Below is a list of some of the universities in the United States that currently offer Shona. For more information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC website, located at <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu/>

Michigan State University
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

WHY STUDY SHONA...CONT'D

The "mbira" musical instrument is a product of Zimbabwe linked to spiritual world of the Shona. Its appreciation requires a knowledge of Shona.

Zimbabwe is a great country to tour because it has one of the seven wonders of the world - the Victoria Falls. It also boasts the Zimbabwe Ruins and various game reserves. Last but not least, there is the captivating, tranquil and picturesque Eastern Highlands.



NATIONAL AFRICAN
LANGUAGE RESOURCE
CENTER (NALRC)

701 Eigenmann Hall, 1900 East 10th Street
Bloomington, IN 47406 USA
Telephone: (812) 856-4199, Fax: 8128564189
Email: nalrc@indiana.edu
Website: <http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu>



A ZIMBABWEAN WOMAN IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE
RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

WHY STUDY SHONA?

Language reflects a people's culture and history. Studying Shona, therefore, means that one is immersed in the culture, history, present and future of the Shona people.

Before 1929, when C.M. Doke was commissioned by the then Southern Rhodesia government to study and document the languages spoken by the indigenous people of that country who lived in the area that stretched from the central province northwards, eastwards and south-eastwards, Shona did not exist as a language. The people who lived in these areas called themselves the Zezuru, Karanga, Manyika, Korekore, Ndau, Budya, Kalanga, Teve, Danda, Karombe and Tavara according to the language they spoke. In 1931 Doke presented his findings to the government in his 'Report on the Unification of the Shona dialects' and thus the Shona language was born!

Shona is spoken by over 75% of the 12 million people that live in Zimbabwe (the former Southern Rhodesia). Zimbabwe gained its independence from Britain in 1980 and changed its name from Rhodesia. The name Zimbabwe is derived from Dzimbahwe (houses of stone) which was the citadel of the Munhumutapa empire and was situated in the southern part of the country. Shona's diverse culture made up of the different dialects is also a rich field of study.

For political scientists, historians, sociologists, understanding the problems in Zimbabwe hinges on understanding the language and culture of the Shona. Understanding and interpreting the current land question, which is at the centre of Zimbabwe's socio-political problems, needs an appreciation of the strong link between the land and the people in Shona culture. This can only be achieved by learning the language. For sociolinguists, borrowing and code switching are areas that will prove very fruitful to study. For one to be able to carry out studies in these areas one needs to learn the language. The Midlands Province can be of special interest for such studies as Language Contact since the people here speak both Shona and Ndebele!

You have heard of Oliver Mutukudzi, Thomas "Chimurenga" Mapfumo and Mbuya Stella Chiweshe - all famous singers! They have introduced the music of Zimbabwe to the world making Zimbabwe part of the global village. To appreciate fully their music one has to study Shona. Zimbabwe Shona sculpture is world famous and therefore to know more about it requires a knowledge of Shona!
(continued on back panel)

WHO SPEAKS SHONA?

PEOPLE AND HISTORY

The majority of the people in the Masvingo, Harare (the capital), Mashonaland East, Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland West, Manicaland and Masvingo provinces of Zimbabwe speak Shona. These are 7 out of the 10 provinces in the country. Nearly 10 million people speak Shona in Zimbabwe. The language is also spoken in neighboring Botswana and Mozambique by small pockets of Shona people. Shona is also spoken as a second language by speakers of the other indigenous languages in Zimbabwe as the colonial education policy required that it be taught in all black schools in the country.

The Shona are well known for their great Munhumutapa (Monomotapa) Kingdom which is linked to the Great Zimbabwe Ruins. They are also well known for their work in stone and wood sculpture. Their work has been exhibited all over the world. Some of it is displayed at the main airport in Atlanta and showrooms all over the world. Besides working in stone and wood, the Shona are also fine copper and gold smiths.

Despite moving to urban areas, the traditional Shona people maintain constant contact with their rural home. Deep down, they are agricultural people and they pride themselves as "sons and daughters of the soil." This comes from their tradition of burying the umbilical cord (once it drops off a new-born baby) in the soil at the entrance of the hut they cook in - the kitchen. They also connect to the land through their ancestors. They always refer to their home areas as "Kune makuva amadzitateguru angu" - (The place where my ancestors are buried.) The Shona are a very spiritual people and respect the spirits of the departed. The traditional Shona people may appear to be Christian but they also pray to their ancestors. They visit both the traditional healer (n'anga) and the hospital when they are sick.

The Shona are a paternal society and the concept of a nucleus family is strange to them. They believe in the extended family. Although the Shona are a paternalistic society mothers are treated as "holy". If one ill-treats or beats his mother then one will experience misfortune until one is cleansed through a ceremony called "kutanda botso." The extended family is further extended through the "mutupo" or totem and no people of the same totem can marry.



A man is playing the mbira.



A woman is cooking sadza over an open fire.



A traditional healer or diviner.