

TSONGA

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

The name Xitsonga can be assumed to be derived from the word “vutsonga”, a place occupied by Vatsonga in Mozambique before the arrival of Soshangana. Shangaan is also sometimes used by a certain portion of the speakers mainly who are decedents of Soshangana. It should however be stated that this is not an official name of these people. The name Shangaan can be traced to the Shaka Zulu of Kwazulu-Natal who subjugated many clans including Vatsonga in the nineteenth century, but communities who stem from clans that were never subjugated do not accept this name. Linguistically the languages are similar but culturally there is slight difference between the Vatsonga and Machangana. However, the official language for both these groups is Xitsonga.

It is believed that ancestors of Shangaans, who now primarily inhabit an area in Southern Mozambique, originated farther North nearer the more central part of Africa. More recently, the Shangaan came into their present area from further south, as Soshangane fled with his people from Zulu King, Shaka, during the Mfecane. In Mozambique, the name of the people and their language is Machangana (Muchangana – sing.). Traditionally, Vatsonga have been agriculturalists and to a lesser degree, pastoralists. Vatsonga were among the first to be used as laborers in the diamond and gold mines of South Africa.

In contemporary times, many of these people have contributed to the arts and development of the whole Southern African region. Like many other African people, Vatsonga practice syncretic religion; a belief in both their traditional religion and Christian practice.

STUDYING TSONGA IN THE U.S.

Please contact the National African
Language Resource Center, or check the
NALRC web site at
<http://www.nalrc.indiana.edu/>



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A TSONGA STUDENT DRESSED UP FOR A
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WHY STUDY TSONGA?

Tsonga, or Xitsonga belong to the Bantu branch of the Niger-Congo languages. Designated as one of the 11 official languages of South Africa since 1996 (Act 108 of 1996). Xitsonga is officially at par with other major South African languages such as Isizulu, Isixhosa, Afrikaans, Tshivenda, Isindebele, Sesotho sa leboa, Isiwati, Setswana, Southern Sotho and English. Xitsonga draws its uniqueness from the fact that it is used by sections of people in South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. Knowledge of this language opens many opportunities across the Southern region given the language's transnational character.

Xitsonga is the spoken language of nearly 2 million people in South Africa, some 1.5 million in Mozambique, over 100 000 in Zimbabwe and a few thousands in Swaziland and Zambia.

Students and scholars of History and the Social Sciences will also find it rewarding to learn Xitsonga because like any other African language spoken in South Africa, it spreads across the Southern African region tied to the great Mfecane that shaped the region's demographics.

WHO SPEAKS TSONGA?

According to Xitsonga linguists, Xitsonga is an all-inclusive name for the Tshwa-Ronga or Tonga Group of Bantu languages. These dialects or languages are spoken in South Africa and parts of Southern Mozambique, Swaziland, Zambia and Southern Zimbabwe. Most of the Xitsonga dialects are mutually intelligible and the three major ones are Xirhonga, which is spoken in the Gaza province of Mozambique with smaller concentrations in Inhambane, Maputo, Manica and Sofala. Xitshwa/Chihlengwe is spoken in Zimbabwe and in Mozambique; Xitsonga is spoken in South Africa. In South Africa, Xitsonga is spoken mainly in Limpopo province where speakers are populated in the former Gazankulu homeland and Gauteng province. In South Africa this language is a language of secondary education, public broadcasting and other public media.



Shangaan women in traditional dress



Selling wares at an open market



Tsonga students in Grahamstown, South Africa
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