

ISIXHOSA

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

The fact that isiXhosa is one of the eleven official languages in South Africa has given it prominence. The very fact that the first part of the multi-lingual national anthem of South Africa is Xhosa has gone a long way to encourage people to learn to speak isiXhosa and to be able to sing the anthem entitled in Xhosa: 'Nkosi sikelel'iAfrika' (Lord bless Africa)

In the Eastern and Western Cape Provinces, where a great number of speakers communicate in isiXhosa, the proceedings in parliament are conducted in English and isiXhosa, with Afrikaans as the third language in the Western Cape. The government of South Africa is working with the Pan South African Language Board and the Department of Arts and Culture to promote the widespread recognition and use of isiXhosa as well as other African languages that have been marginalized in the past. The cornerstone of the culture of amaXhosa is respect, and it is embedded in their traditional religion. The cultural language and dress forms of respect have drawn interest from a number of sociolinguistics scholars.

The diversity of South African cultures is recognized by the national broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Co-operation, whereby cultural activities of all peoples are publicized. The National Heritage Day is a public holiday that was set for strengthening people's respect and admiration for culture in South Africa.

When an umXhosa introduces him/herself s/he gives her/his name, surname and clan name. A clan name is usually the name of a common ancestor of a group of families. So families that share a common clan name are related to each other even if they do not have the same surname. Two people may have one common surname and not be related to each other, but if they have a common clan name they are related. AmaXhosa regard the clan name as more important than surname, such that a married woman never changes her clan name although the surname is changed to that of the husband's.

AmaXhosa give names that have special significance to their children. A child born during a year of copious rains, drought, war, famine, etc. will be given a name that has reference to such an event. Parents also make their good wishes and feelings known by giving their children names reflecting their hopes.

STUDYING ISIXHOSA IN THE U.S.

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

Indiana University
Michigan State University
University of Wisconsin-Madison



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A XHOSA WOMAN IN TRADITIONAL ATTIRE

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE
RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

WHY STUDY ISIXHOSA?

IsiXhosa is a very beautiful language with unique and striking features. People throughout the world are fascinated by the clicking sounds that occur in isiXhosa. A number of students have put forth a variety of reasons for studying the isiXhosa language in the United States. Some have research interests, while others are interested in studying about cultures of South Africans. The rich history of amaXhosa (people who speak isiXhosa) has gripped the interests of many a student who has heard of names and phenomena like Nongqawuse, who was at the center of what became known as The Xhosa National Suicide and Enoch Sontonga, who composed the famous national anthem - Nkosi Sikelel'iAfrika. A number of people want to study isiXhosa simply because it is the home language of one of the world's best statesmen – Mr Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela.

A knowledge of isiXhosa enables one to communicate easily with speakers of other Nguni languages: isiZulu, isiNdebele and isiSwati. So learning isiXhosa can actually be a gateway to speaking four South African languages. IsiXhosa is one of eleven official languages of South Africa, and it is the home language of people settled over a vast area of the Eastern and Western Cape Provinces – an area stretching from the Indian Ocean in the East to the Atlantic Ocean in the West. A number of development projects and industries that are funded by overseas company are situated in the area occupied by amaXhosa, so a communicative competence in this language puts research workers in very good standing. A knowledge of isiXhosa comes in handy in Gauteng Province, the richest, busiest and most prosperous province in South Africa, because the majority of people in that province speak a Nguni language.

Foreign diplomats, business and education directors, international aid workers, missionaries, volunteers of the Peace Corps, etc. benefit greatly from a knowledge of isiXhosa because they can communicate with more than 70% of the South African community.

Included in the isiXhosa lessons are skills for making jewelry and other isiXhosa artifacts from beads. Students also have fun learning how to sing Mirriam Makeba's famous click song:

'Uqongqothwane' With the move towards globalization, the importance of empowering oneself with communicative competence in many languages cannot be overemphasized. Learning how to speak isiXhosa will improve any student's chances of participating in the global village that is our world.

WHO SPEAKS ISIXHOSA?

PEOPLE AND HISTORY

The majority of isiXhosa speakers live in the Eastern and Western Cape Provinces of South Africa. There is a great number of isiXhosa speakers in the Gauteng Province and an insignificant number in the Northern Cape . Altogether there is a total number of about 7 million isiXhosa speakers in South Africa.

AmaXhosa, the people who speak the Xhosa language, are said to be descendants of an Egyptian king named Nuto, who lived about the 3rd century AD. (Soga. 1954) History has it that king Nuto had many sons from his many wives, some of whom moved towards the South in search of better grazing land for their growing herds. In these series of slow migrations, the people fanned out into the subcontinent and settled in large groups – each group consisting of a number of tribes. Within these groups or tribes there emerged young men with excellent leadership skills. Such leaders would organize hunting expeditions whereby both males and females participated –males to hunt, females to cook.

One of these groups, the Nguni, settled on the south-east African coast. It was amongst this Nguni group that two brothers, Zulu and Xhosa emerged. They moved further towards the south, always hunting and herding cattle. So, even though Xhosa was not meant to be a chief, his hunting parties urged him to form a separate group from his brother's, and so he became their chief. Thus, the two descendants of king Nuto, Zulu and Xhosa, found themselves separated by hunting strategy and ideology, but united in blood. Hence to this day the amaZulu and amaXhosa people have almost identical languages.

The nation of amaXhosa is made up of many groups, commonly known as tribes, who all speak isiXhosa with a few differences in their vocabularies and structure. Such groups include: AmaHlubi, amaMfengu, amaBhaca, amaBomvana, amaMpondo.



Young Xhosa woman grinding maize in a village in South Africa



Children playing along the road near Queensland



A Xhosa woman in native attire near Queensland



A teacher teaching Xhosa culture to a child