

NDEBELE

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

As is the case with their Shona neighbors, Ndebele religion is generally syncretic, combining belief in both Christianity with traditional belief systems symbolized by the Njelele oracle in the sacred Matopos Mountains. Like the Shona, the Ndebele traditional religious system also acknowledged the supremacy of Unkulunkulu, or God, well before contact with foreigners.

In contemporary times, the Ndebele have produced some fine artists such as world-renowned dub poet Albert Nyathi, popular singer Lovemore “Majaivana” Tshuma, the sensational Sandra Ndebele, Black Umfolosi, and many others.

The Ndebele are also famous for their distinctive traditional dance routines and dress, fancy beadwork, and other artifacts. Traditionally, cultural ceremonies such as the annual Inxwala were held to unify the kingdom and cultivate a sense of identity. Ndebele dances, including isitshikitsha, imbube, mbaqanga, amantshomani and amabhiza, are very popular. Others, such as the ingwenyama and the ever-popular gumboot dance—evolving out of South African mining labor camps during apartheid—are also well-known. The gumboot dance involves rhythmic footwork, clapping and boot-slapping, sometimes accompanied by vocalizations, which has been emulated in the “step” phenomenon, popular on many American college campuses. Bulawayo, the Ndebele cultural center, is also home to the highly popular Inkululeko Yabatsha School of Arts (IYASA), which has thrilled audiences at home and abroad with its practitioners’ scintillating dance routines.

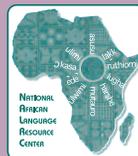
Ndebele people also enjoy participating in sporting disciplines such as soccer, rugby and cricket. Many people agree that former Coventry City striker Peter “Nsukuzonke” Ndlovu, a Ndebele, is the best senior player to emerge from Zimbabwe. He captained the senior national squad for a many years and enjoyed unprecedented success with the team. The second biggest soccer club in Zimbabwe, Highlanders Football club, is based in Bulawayo.

The majority of the Ndebele live in the rural countryside while the urban minority has strong ties with their rural places of origin -ekhaya-, their “real home”. Like many other African people, the Ndebele value extended family relations. Relations between the urbanites and their rural relatives are maintained through regular visits, especially during important public holidays such as Easter, Christmas or Independence Day, as well as through other modern forms of interaction.

The Ndebele society is traditionally patriarchal, although the mother-figure—the iNdlovukazi, or the Great Mother—holds a special position of power and prestige within the traditional family hierarchy.

STUDYING NDEBELE IN THE U.S.

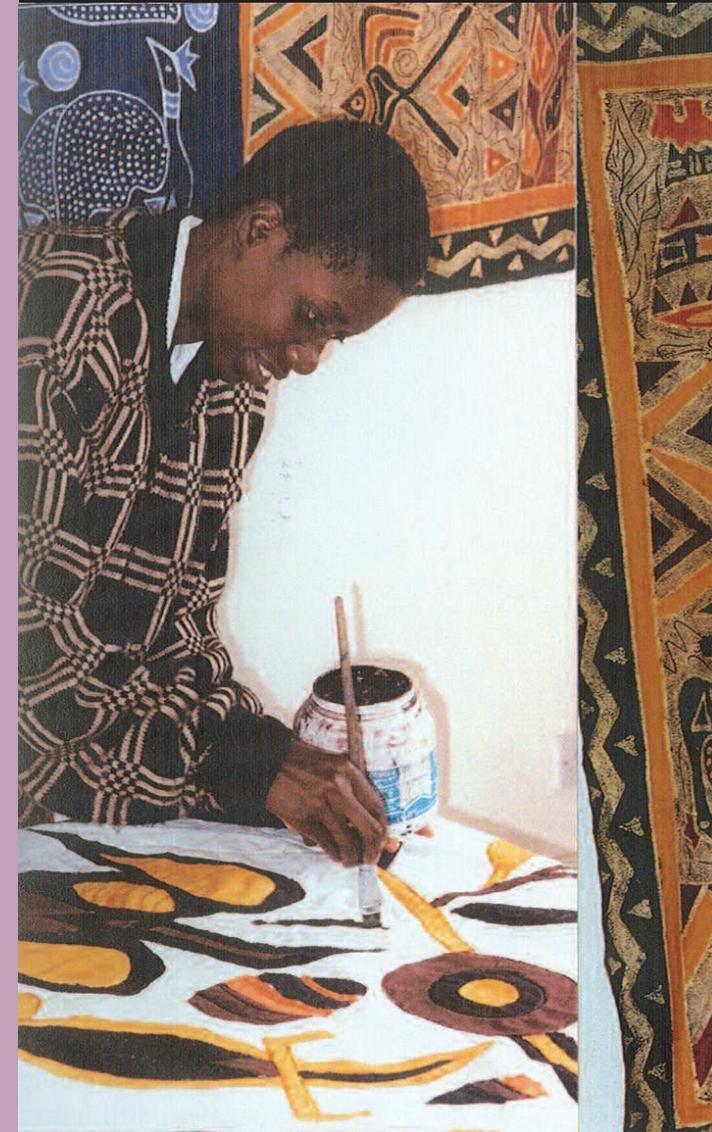
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NDEBELE SCULPTOR PUTTING FINAL TOUCHES TO HER CLOTH

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WHY STUDY NDEBELE?

Ndebele is the second largest language spoken in Zimbabwe. Most people in the Matabeleland North, Matabeleland South, and Midlands provinces of Zimbabwe speak this language. The Matabeleland regions in particular are of special interest to contemporary historians and archivists given that fascinating national monuments such as the Khami Ruins, the Matopos Mountains, Old Bulawayo Village, and other key attractions are located there. The Ndebele language has been taught in some Zimbabwean schools, especially in Matabeleland regions and the major cities. Students of the language can pursue it to the highest levels. In 2007, the Zimbabwean Ministry of Education, Sport, and Culture instituted policy to have the Ndebele language taught in all Zimbabwean public schools.

Additionally, linguists interested in the various facets of the Nguni language family, to which Ndebele belongs (other members of this family of languages are SiSwati, Sotho, Xhosa, Zulu, and others), examine this language in order to gain a better understanding of the spread of languages in Southern Africa. Scholars interested in the politics of the relations between African languages in pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial Africa would be interested in studying how the Ndebele language has grown and interacted with other languages within the Southern African region. Historians, anthropologists, and other social scientists are attracted to studying Ndebele since it sheds light on a fairly recent, yet pre-colonial, mass migration of people.

WHO SPEAKS NDEBELE?

Ndebele is spoken in the northern parts of South Africa, in eastern Botswana, and mainly in Zimbabwe, where it is spoken by the Ndebele people who comprise about a quarter of that country's estimated 12.5 million people. The variety of Ndebele spoken in Zimbabwe and parts of Botswana is sometimes called Northern Ndebele to distinguish it from the one spoken in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. While Northern Ndebele bears a

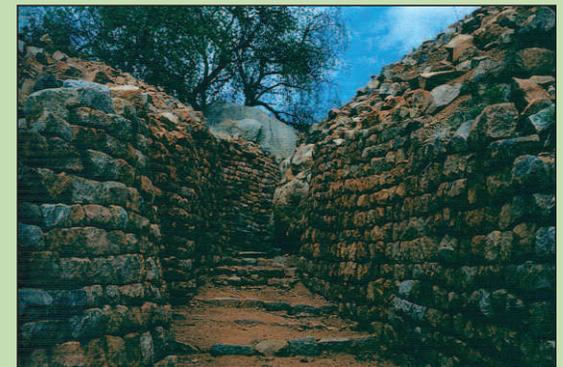
closer affinity to Zulu, both Northern and Southern Ndebele are Nguni languages and are mutually intelligible.

The city of Bulawayo—the heart of Ndebele language and culture—has provincial status on its own. It is in this historical city that the world-famous Amakhosi Theatre is located. Present day speakers of Ndebele are descendants of the people that King Mzilikazi brought with him in the mid 1830s from what is now South Africa. King Mzilikazi's migration into present-day Zimbabwe was part of the famous mfecane at the height of King Shaka's rule in Zululand. From the onset, King Mzilikazi's immigrants absorbed Kalanga, Tswana and some Shona groups. Mzilikazi first set up his headquarters at a place he named Mhlahlandlela, near Tswane (formerly Pretoria) in South Africa. He later moved the headquarters bearing the same name to Zimbabwe. His son, King Lobengula, later moved the Ndebele capital to kwaBulawayo (now Bulawayo), meaning "the persecuted one."

At its founding, the Ndebele state was composed of three levels of social classes: the Zansi, Enhla and Hole. The Zansi were the original followers of King Mzilikazi from Zululand. They were fewer in number, but they formed a powerful, upper-class section of the society, known as the Khumalo clan. Below the Zansi were the Enhla. These were people who had been conquered and incorporated into the Ndebele state during the migration into Zimbabwe. They comprised mainly people of Sotho, Venda, and Tswana origin and they were more numerous than the Zansi. The Hole formed the lowest but largest class in the kingdom. They were mostly local Shona-speaking peoples. There were two types of Hole. The first group comprised chiefdoms that were moved or voluntarily migrated into the Ndebele settlement. Examples of such people include the Nanzwa from Hwange, Nyai from Matobo, Venda from the Gwanda-Beitbridge area, and some Shona from western parts of Mashonaland. Some of these chiefdoms, unable to resist their marauding enemies, chose to go and live under King Mzilikazi. The youths of these chiefdoms were merged to form the Impande and Amabukuthwani military regiments, while the elders were given land to settle under one of their chiefs.



A young man playing the marimba



A view of the Khami Monument



Ndebele entertainers perform the gumboot dance