

THE SHANGAAN



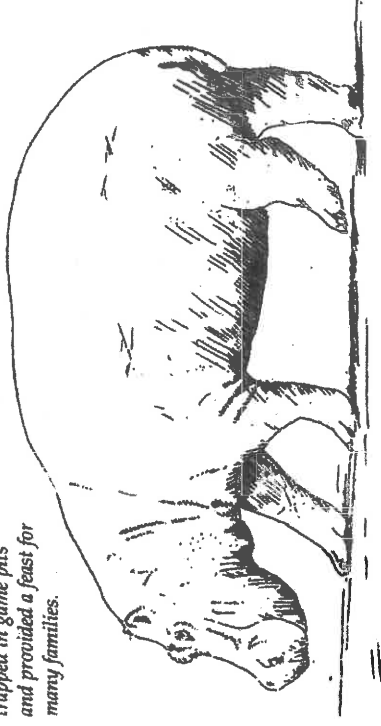
HISTORY AND TRADITIONAL CULTURAL PRACTICES



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The Hippopotamus was trapped in game pits and provided a feast for many families.



ECONOMIC LIFE

The Shangaan economy was generally more variable than that of other bantu-speaking peoples of the Southern African region. They were predominantly agriculturalists who cultivated sorghum and maize as well as vegetables. They had unique crop planting techniques which involved the making of small holes in the soil into which seeds were dropped after hoeing. This differed from the other Nguni people who simply scattered seeds over the fields after ploughing or hoeing. The women, after contact with other tribes, learnt pottery and metalwork.

The Shangaan kept cattle, goats, sheep, poultry and later, pigs too, but the presence of numerous large predators, as well as tsetse fly, in the lowveld probably made keeping livestock extremely difficult. The Shangaan were also keen fishermen, using hook and line and various trapping methods. Intrepid hunters of most wild animals, the Shangaan used assegais, sticks and dogs and constructed game pits to capture large animals like Elephant and Hippopotamus. This legacy of expert hunting ability explains the extraordinary tracking abilities of many modern Shangaan, a talent now widely utilised in the wildlife tourism industry. The Mozambique Tsonga were well known as traders and these activities continued after the Zulu conquest, even including a trade in slaves with the Arabs.

FOREWORD

This pamphlet is aimed at providing a brief overview of the history and traditional lifestyle of the Shangaan people. Today, as we approach the 21st century, these traditions and customs play an increasingly minor part in the lives of these people, as they become integrated into the melting pot of South African culture.

"Strictly speaking the tribal people of Southern Africa have ceased to exist as such. The great changes that have occurred on the sub-continent in the last few centuries have inevitably ensured that the inhabitants have also changed: from living in a traditional way on the land, they have become peasant farmers, migrant labourers and westernised townsmen. Their former political and economic systems have virtually disappeared, their religious beliefs have been influenced and their culture modified by prolonged contact with the West."

Martin West, Abantu, Struik Publishers 1976

CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS

HOMES

Traditional houses were typical thatched rondavels. Overlapping roofs, supported by poles, formed verandah shelters. The peak of the thatched roof was bound into a traditional cylindrical knob.

DRESS

Dress is of mixed Zulu-Swazi style. Shangaan women formerly wore tanned and softened skins but later a characteristic knee-length skirt of striped blue material edged with white beads. Beadwork, wire bracelets and anklets were typical. The men wore a skirt consisting of a series of 'tails' made of strips of animal skins. The characteristic tribal mark was a pierced ear lobe, which may have been associated with early initiation rites, or the mark of subjection imposed by the Nguni. Women also cut patterns into their cheeks, chin and forehead to create scars. This practice is known as scarification and was used throughout Africa as a means of reducing one's value as a prostitute for the Arab traders. Today, scarifications on the face and body may be regarded as signs of beauty.

FAMILY LIFE

Childhood followed the pattern of other African peoples. Children learnt by example and were integrated into daily life as soon as they were able. Girls helped around the home while the boys herded the animals, first the goats and then, when they were older, the cattle. As adulthood approached, the boys would enter the initiation lodge where they were circumcised after undergoing great hardships. The girls were also initiated to marriageable young women by a ceremony that involved the scarification of the face and arms. After initiation, a period of freedom for courtship followed. Marriage involved a contract between sets of relatives so once partners were chosen, the young man told his family and a go-between would visit the girl's village to make arrangements. If the match was approved, the girl's parents provided a feast for the messenger and he in turn gave them presents. This signified that the betrothal was complete. On occasion, the young man and woman would knot together tall grasses, often at a crossroads, as a symbol of their love. The customary *lobola* or dowry of the groom to the family of the bride was negotiated. This would take the form of cattle, other livestock, or even tools, baskets and beads. Once accepted, a feast was provided by the bride's family, a goat was sacrificed,

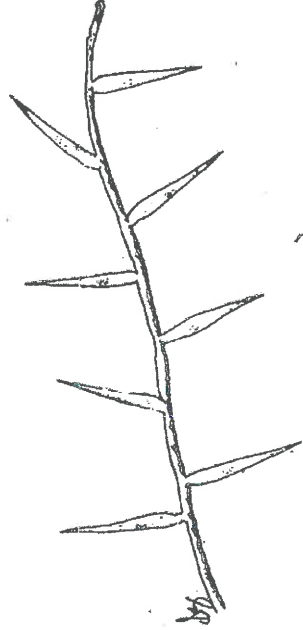
ORIGINS OF THE SHANGAAN PEOPLE

It is believed that the ancestors of the modern Bantu-speaking peoples of southern Africa arrived in the region nearly a thousand years ago. For some eight centuries, relative peace and stability ensued as hundreds of small clans established themselves in the hills of the area today known as Natal and Zululand.

In the late eighteenth - to early nineteenth - centuries, one of the larger clans, the Mthethwa, entered Zululand from what is now called Mozambique. Led by Dingiswayo, they embarked on a process of empire building which was eventually exploited by Dingiswayo's successor, Shaka - king of the Zulu, in order to turn his clan into a nation. After the particularly bloody defeat of the Ndwandwe clan by Shaka's army, three leaders, each with a small following, headed northwards surprising and conquering the peaceful Tsonga people. One band, under the leadership of Shoshangane, remained among the Thonga and the Ndawu (today known as Vandzawu), while the other two fought their way north of the Limpopo River.

Shoshangane established an empire which became known as Gaza after his royal lineage. The Tsonga, ruled by the royal house of Gaza, became known as the maShangana or "Shangaans" after the founder of the empire. Gazaland was the last surviving black empire in southern Africa, falling to the Portuguese only in 1895. After this collapse, many Shangaan fled west into the Transvaal where today they inhabit mainly the southern lowveld areas. The Ndawu people fled north-eastward and settled in the region now known as southern Malawi.

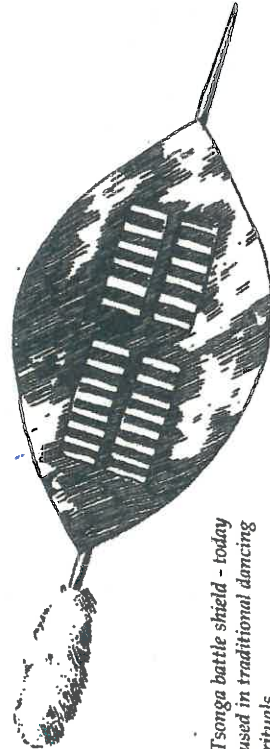
Essentially, the Tsonga/Shangaan tribe has been a unification of the Thongas and Ngunis led by Shoshangane. This unification explains the tribe's traditional norms and language.



TRADITIONAL POLITICAL SYSTEM

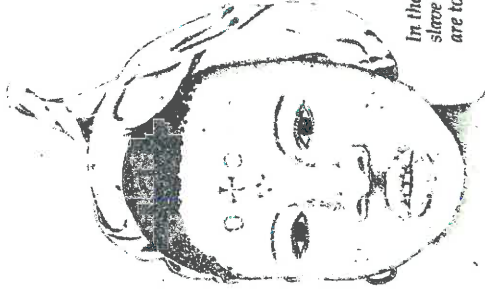
Prior to the Zulu conquest, the political system of the Tsonga consisted of a grouping of independent chiefs each with his own court of about three thousand people, comprised of about one hundred family units or kraals. The Zulu brought a centralised system and a hierarchy that included village headman, local chiefs, and the paramount or king at the top. Judicially there was the king's court where, assisted by councillors, he was free to dispense punishments ranging from a simple fine to death. The councillors, usually elders, served as advisors. A number of contemporaries were chosen to act as messengers who maintained contact between the king - who lived in his own village - and the rest of the territory. When the king died, his death was kept secret for up to a year before his successor, who had been living in another village, was presented to the people. This was done at a large assembly where there was an opportunity to proclaim or dispute the new king's accession. Succession was unusual in that it went to the dead chief's surviving brothers - in turn - who would rule until office was returned to the first chief's eldest son. If the dead king had younger brothers, the process could take a very long time and there were occasions when such a brother tried to pass kingship onto his own son rather than to his nephew.

Militarily, the Zulu influence prevailed. Instead of local units made up of kinsmen, the age-regiment system, was adopted. This arrangement of the army along the lines of age, rather than old allegiances, ensured a unified fighting force by neutralising the built-in antipathy between supporters of different clans. It also preserved allegiance to the king alone.



Tsonga battle shield - today used in traditional dancing rituals

accompanied by a prayer to the ancestors to ensure that their favour was bestowed on the match. The new wife would then, with a show of great reluctance, leave her family and return to her husband's home to settle down permanently. The new wife would remain a junior member of the new household, under her mother-in-law's direction, until the birth of her first child established her properly. Polygamy was permitted. The husband's acquisition of a second wife would further secure the first wife's position. The first wife's younger sister was the preferred choice for a second wife.



In the past intended as scars to deter slave traders, scarifications on the face are today regarded as signs of beauty.

RELIGION & ANCESTRY

The Shangaan believe in a remote Supreme Being but this god is more vague than that of most African peoples. Far more relevant were the powers of the ancestors who were believed to have considerable effects on the lives of their descendants. They appeared mainly in dreams but sometimes manifested themselves as snakes. Some spirits were also believed to live in certain sacred woods where ancient chiefs had been buried. Each clan had several of these burial grounds. The ancestors were propitiated by prayers and offerings, which ranged from beer to animal sacrifices. Offerings were made by the eldest male of a group in times of trouble or in cases of illness, and on special occasions such as marriage. Care was taken to please the ancestors, as restless ancestors could cause troubles. Children were named after their ancestors to ensure the continuation of family names.

MEDICINE & WITCHDOCTORS

The Shangaan were renowned herbalists. The knowledge of herbs for the curing of illnesses was inherited and demanded a long apprenticeship. Herbalists would wear the medicines on their person, in gourds, and in the form of beads and seeds.

Important matters were regularly decided by consulting 'the bones'. These were collections of carved ivory blocks, cowrie shells and the knuckle bones of animals. They were thrown by a person called a diviner or witchdoctor onto a goatskin mat and read according to their position on the mat relative to the position of the bone representing the client. In this way, a diviner could predict troubles and their causes and probe the strange ills caused by restless ancestors, jealous enemies or covetous relatives. Ancestors would have to be appeased by offerings, and human enemies tackled through the sorcery they had evoked by employing witchdoctors. The further diviners travelled from home, the more power and influence they acquired both while travelling and when they returned. Black magic consisted of practices in which wizards and witches misled innocent people and was a crime in the society.

ART & CULTURE

Music and dancing are a feature of Shangaan culture, and the people are well known for their dancing prowess. The men perform a muscle dance in which the muscles of the body shiver and jerk to the rhythm of the music. The women shake their shoulders and flick their hips - the effect of which is enhanced by their short but full skirts. Musical instruments are varied and include drums, flutes and trumpets. In years gone by, each village had a large ceremonial drum which was beaten on important occasions: Trumpets were most often made from the horns of Sable Antelope, while flutes were made from the tibia of goats or small antelope, or from reeds. The hollowed out shell of a monkey orange fruit forms a basic wind instrument.

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

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