

Ndebele in zimbabwe



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Ndebele in Zimbabwe The Ndebele people are dispersed widely across Zimbabwe and South African's Transvaal Province and is descendents of the same tribe as the Zulu and Xhosa people. The history of the Ndebele people can be traced back to Mafana, their first chief. Mafana's successor, Mhlanga, had a son named Musi who, in the early 1600's, decided to move away from his cousins, later became the Zulu nation, and to settle near the hills of Gauteng where the capital of Pretoria is located.

After the death of Chief Musi, his two sons quarreled over the position of chief and the tribe divided into two sections, the Manala and the Ndzundza. By the mid 19th century two other factions, led by other sons, then broke away from the Ndebele core. These groups were later progressively assimilated by the Sotho groups undergoing considerable cultural and social change. Later, the descendents of Manala and Ndzundza maintained a cultural identity and retained language which was closer to the Nguni language.

In 1883, during the reign of the Ndebele chief Mabhogo's, war broke out between the Ndzundza and the South African Republic, also known as the Boer. Occasionally, Mabhogo's warriors stealthily past enemy lines undetected to retrieve food and water. However, after two women of the tribe had been ambushed and tortured, one of the women revealed the Mabhogo's whereabouts. After the defeat of Mabhogo's military, the tribal structure was broken up and the lands were confiscated as the people became indentured laborers.

Despite the breaking down of the tribe, the Ndebele retained their cultural unity. In 1923, they were able to purchase some land and began to regroup.

In the mid-1970 the South African Government established the 'homeland' of Kwa-Ndebele. Both southern group's fashioned beadwork in which the Ndebele cultural are famous for, but the Ndzundza are also noted for their elaborate wall paintings. Ndebele arts have been widely illustrated, especially from their wall paintings. For over a hundred years, the Ndebele have decorated the outside of their homes with designs.

The elaborate homestead decorations, consisting mainly of geometric forms painted in a variety of colors dates back from 1945. Commercial produce pigments or various earth tones in the area are used. The importance of the wall paintings to the Ndzundza probably relates to its rough history, which has a strong sense of deprivation and self-awareness of their descendents. Ndebele women traditionally adorned themselves with a variety of ornaments, each symbolizing her status in society. After marriage, dresses became increasingly elaborate and spectacular.

In earlier times, the Ndebele wife would wear copper and brass rings around her arms, legs and neck to express their loyalty and faithfulness to her husband. Husbands used to provide their wives with rings; the richer the husband, the more rings the wife would wear. She would only remove the rings after the death of the husband. The rings are believed to have strong ritual powers. Today, it is no longer common to wear these rings permanently. In addition to rings, married women also wore neck hoops made of grass twisted into a coil and covered in beads, particularly for ceremonial occasions.

A further outstanding characteristic of the Ndebele is their beadwork. As Ndebele society became more westernized, the artist started expressing this

change in society through their paintings. Many Ndebele artist have now extended their work into the interior of homes. Ndebele artists also produce other crafts such as sleeping mats and neck hoops. Neck hoops are made by twisting grass into a circle, binding it tightly with cotton and decorating it with beads. To help preserve the grass a keep its shape, the hoop is boiled in sugar water a left outside in the heat for a few days.

Beadwork is a hundred and fifty year old art among the Ndebele, and plays an important role in tribal custom. Beadwork is more than just an art form to the Ndebele people, is an essential part of their culture and ethnic identity. Beads are used to decorate the body, ceremonial objects and items of clothing. Among the Ndebele, beadwork is worn exclusively by women, for whom the different beadwork or garments serve an identification of status. It is an important part of their rituals and ceremonies, which mark important events in family life, from a birth of a child, to marriage, to burial.

As time consuming beadwork can be for the Ndebele people, a bride may work for 2-3 years to present to their future in-law family. The evolution of beadwork over the decades tells a story, in pictures and symbols, of a tribe that refused to die. Fertility is a major importance to the Ndebele people. A fertility doll is made for the bride by the maternal grandmother and is ritually presented to her when she enters her home after the wedding ceremony. Custom has it that, after the birth of the third child, the fertility doll must be given away, or destroyed, because it is considered unlucky to keep it any longer.

Each doll is unique as the patterns from one doll to the next are different in pattern, style and color. In addition to strengthening the Ndebele culture

identity, the beaded dolls are now an important source of income for most Ndebele as it continues to be an export item. Ndebele art has always been an important identifying characteristic of the Ndebele and has a cultural significance that serves to reinforce the distinctive Ndebele identity. Ndebele artist demonstrated a fascination with the linear quality of elements in their environment.

Painting is done free hand although the designs were planned before hand. The symmetry, proportion and straight edges of Ndebele decorations were done by hand without the help of rulers. Ndebele women were responsible for painting the colorful and intricate patterns on the walls of their houses. After the establishment of Kwa-Ndebele there was a sharp drop in the number of decorated homesteads. In the desert the overcrowded shelters are built from metal sheet and cardboard which makes it difficult to provide a painting surface.

However, this Ndebele art form began to take international attention in the 1980's and early 90's with publications of illustrated books on the subject. Promotions from individual artists like Esther Mahlangu created her version of wall painting on canvas and can be seen in a number of international exhibits. Bibliography E. Schneider: *Paint, Pride and Politics: Aesthetic and Meaning in Transvaal Ndebele Wall Art* (diss. , Johannesburg, U. Witwatersrand, 1986) <http://www.sokwanele.com/pdfs/BTS.df> " Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace. A report on the disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands 1980-1989" M. Courtney-Clarke: *Ndebele: The Art of an African Tribe* (New York, 1986) [excellent pls] R. Rasmussen: *Ndebele Wars and Migrations, c. 1821-1839* (diss. , Los Angeles, UCLA, 1975)

R. Rasmussen and S. Rubert: Historical Dictionary of Zimbabwe (diss. , Lan Hamm, MD, 2001, 3ed.) 10 Key Words Beadwork Paintings Variety of colors Earth Tone Kwa- Ndebele Geometric Ndebele dolls Symmetry Rituals/Ceremonies Ornaments