



Ndebele Cultural Village
A HISTORY



BACKGROUND ON NDEBELE FAMILIES RESIDING AT ZEBRA COUNTRY LODGE

Koos Mahlangu (born 1932) – Is Chief of the Village since the opening in 2002. He has the power to rule the Village, and is the person who gives permission for visitors and performs as a dancer to welcome the guests. He is not allowed to talk to the guests directly.

Paulos Kgomo (born 1936) – is the messenger and right hand of the Chief. People need to tell him whatever they require from the Chief and he will relay it and answer them on behalf of the Chief.

Martha Mtsweni (born 1921) – This lady has 12 kids and is the oldest inhabitant of the Village! She was the Women's Chief from 1949 until 29/09/2002 and was then inaugurated as the Queen! She is allowed to rule and solve the problems of the women at the Village, as well as at her home Village. She still wears permanent rings of her marriage since she got married in 1943.

Letta Mthimunye (born 1959) – She is the only Sangoma (spiritual doctor) in the Village. She throws bones and tells people their problems and how to solve them. She uses traditional herbs to heal the sick, and calls upon the ancestors to advise what to do. She also entertains guests visiting the Village.

Other Ndebele's residing and working at the Village include **Martha Ntuli** (born 1943); **Sarah Jiyane** (born 1949) and **Sophy Masombuka** (born 1955).

Class Mtsweni (born 1974) – he acts as a son to the Chief, and is the Tour guide to guests visiting the village, showing them around and telling them about the History of the Village and Ndebele Culture.

HISTORY

The Ndebele people were originally an offshoot of the larger Nguni ethnic group of KwaZulu-Natal. They are thought to have travelled from Kwa-Zulu to the Gauteng region; The language amaNala and amaNzunza are related to that of the amaNdebele people of Zimbabwe. In the early stages of the history of the Ndebele people they went through tumultuous times. The history of the Ndebele people can be traced back to Mafana, their first identifiable chief. Mafana's successor, Mhlanga, had a son named Musi who, in the early 1600's, decided to move away from his cousins (later to become the mighty Zulu nation) and to settle in the hills of Gauteng near where the capital, Pretoria, is situated. In the mid-seventeenth century, the nation split over a succession dispute between his two sons, Manala and Ndzundza. Their king Musi died and a feud broke out between his two sons who quarrelled over the chieftainship. The tribe thus divided into two sections, the Manala and the Ndzundza. The Manala remained in the north while the Ndzundza, also known as the Southern Ndebele, travelled to the east and the south. Both groups remained distinctly Ndebele.

In the 1820's Mzilikazi, a Zulu general, fled from Tshaka, (king of the Zulu), with his army. They over-powered the Manala and decided to settle down with them near Basutoland (now Lesotho). After some time, Mzilikazi became afraid that Shaka would send an army after him. With a clever plan he lured the Ndebele men away, got the others together and killed them. He then took the women and livestock and moved northwards until he finally settled in Bulawayo in Zimbabwe - the origin of the Ndebele of Zimbabwe. This caused a huge decrease in the number of Ndebele speakers. Despite the disintegration of the tribe, the Ndebele retained their cultural unity.

In 1882, following friction with Voortrekker settlers over land and other resources, the Boer leader Piet Joubert led a campaign against the Ndebele leader Nyabela. Nyabela was imprisoned, finally being released in the late 1890s, and many of his people were indentured to white farmers.



During the apartheid era, Nyabela's successor as leader, Cornelius, moved with his people to a tribal "homeland" called KwaNdebele, which was given nominal self-government. Ndebele people are three tribes or nations of people living in South Africa and Zimbabwe; there are three main groups of Ndebele:

- The Southern Gauteng Ndebele, who live around Bronkhorstspuit
- The Northern Gauteng Ndebele, who live in Limpopo Province around the towns of Mokopane (Potgietersrus) and Polokwane (Pietersburg). They adopted the language and culture of their Sotho and Tswana neighbours. The new generation mostly speaks Northern Sotho.
- The Ndebele people of Zimbabwe, often called the Matabele

MURAL PAINTING TRADITIONS, TECHNIQUES AND SYMBOLISM

The culture of the Ndebele people is unique and they are well known for their artistic talent especially with regard to their colourful, rich mural paintings, painted houses and colourful beadwork. The Ndebele's essential artistic skill has always been understood to be the ability to combine exterior sources of stimulation with traditional design concepts borrowed from their ancestors. Apart from its aesthetic appeal it has a cultural significance that serves to reinforce the distinctive Ndebele identity.

Ndebele artists also demonstrated a fascination with the linear quality of elements in their environment and this is depicted in their artwork. Painting was done freehand, without prior layouts, although the designs were planned beforehand. It is women who have been the practitioners of the artistic forms that are such striking Ndebele cultural markers. In beadwork and wall painting, women have an outlet for the expression of their experience of the world, their aspirations, and their identity as individuals and as part of a group.

Mural painting has been passed on from generation to generation from mother to daughter. Each and every woman has her own style, meaning and knowledge base about the different things which they use in their lives, which are depicted on the walls. The first paintings imagery came primarily from the women's beadwork traditions that go back hundreds of years. The early paintings were geometric and primarily decorative. The "Ndebele Flower" symbolises a Ndebele Women's fertility. The razor blade pattern is used extensively as it is used in traditional hair shavings, beadwork, household tasks and traditional ceremonies.

Over the decades, the painters' style quickly developed and the artists began to incorporate imagery from their lives, particularly the details drawn from their work as domestic servants in white households in the cities. Everything has a meaning and an importance in the eyes of the artist. Electric lights, a house, a cell phone, swimming pools, multi-storey houses, telephones, airplanes, and water taps all appear prominently in Ndebele paintings. Artists have been quoted as saying that because they want these things for themselves, they paint them on their homes. Read literally, the symbols and designs in Ndebele wall painting reflect the aspirations of the painter, and ultimately, the community.

One form of early design was made with earth pigments, ranging from bright yellow to brown. The pigments were ground up and mixed with liquid to form a "paint" that was used to decorate door and window frames. The second form of early designs were made by dragging the fingers through wet plaster, usually cow dung, to leave a variety of markings, from squiggles and zigzags to straight lines. In this form of painting, the entire wall was divided into sections, and each section was filled in with contrasting finger paint patterns.

In the Ndebele belief system, it is only this older form of painting that has any spiritual significance, and is believed to be demanded by the ancestors to create cultural continuity. Some Ndebele claim that sickness and bad luck would come to those who did not recognize the ancestors. This form of decoration is still acknowledged by contemporary painters, who decorate the ground in front of a new wall painting with these older designs. In this way the artists acknowledge their ancestor's ways, blending the old with the new.

To begin a wall painting, the artists divide the wall into sections and then snap chalk lines diagonally across each section.

Next, the artists begin painting the black outline of the design for each section. Painting is done freehand, without a scale design layout. Neither rulers nor squares are used, and yet symmetry, proportion and straight edges are exactly maintained.

Then, the black outline is filled in with colour and white spaces offset painted areas. After the colour has been applied, the final step is to repaint or touch up the black outlines. The earliest paintings were done with earth pigments, whitewash and laundry bluing. Although commercial paints have replaced the older pigments, the artists still use chicken feathers as paintbrushes. Ndebele painters distinguish styles and origins among different forms of mural decoration.

The contemporary form of wall painting is a surprisingly recent phenomenon, and is linked to the history of the people.

Like the Ndebele culture itself, the style of wall painting is in a constant state of becoming : assimilating and appropriating from the long-held spiritual beliefs of the Ndebele people as well as influences from the more and more culturally dominant and technology driven west. Through their bold, geometric designs, the women artists of the Ndebele affirm the identity of the group, and proclaim their uniqueness to all who see their art.

Ndebele artists also produce other crafts such as sleeping mats and isingolwani. Isingolwani (colourful neck hoops) are made by winding grass into a hoop, binding it tightly with cotton and decorating it with beads. In order to preserve the grass and to enable the hoop to retain its shape and hardness, the hoop is boiled in sugar water and left in the hot sun for a few days.

A further outstanding characteristic of the Ndebele is their beadwork. Beadwork is intricate and time consuming and requires a deft hand and good eyesight. This pastime has long been a social practice in which the women engaged after their chores were finished. However, today, many projects involve the production of these items for sale to the public.



SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

Living among Afrikaaner farmers and Sotho neighbours, the continued cultural identity of the Ndebele was threatened. Those in the north increasingly adopted the Sotho language and other cultural traits. The southern Ndebele, the Ndzundza and Manala, by contrast, kept their Nguni language, persisted in ceremonials such as First Fruits rites and initiation, and made their particular identity highly visible in their homes and dress. Under the most extreme conditions of marginalization, significant developments in Ndebele painting emerged and flourished.

Ndebele authority structures were similar to those of their Zulu cousins. The authority over a tribe was vested in the tribal head (ikozi), assisted by an inner or family council (amaphakathi). Wards (izilindi) were administered by ward heads and the family groups within the wards were governed by the heads of the families.



The residential unit of each family was called an umuzi. The umuzi usually consisted of a family head (umnumzana) with his wife and unmarried children. If he had more than one wife, the umuzi was divided into two halves, a right and a left half, to accommodate the different wives. An umuzi sometimes grew into a more complex dwelling unit when the head's married sons and younger brothers joined the household. Every tribe consisted of a number of patrilineal clans or izibongo. This meant that every clan consisted of a group of individuals who shared the same ancestor in the paternal line.

HOMESTEAD

Historically each family used a single rondawel (round dwelling) for daily activities e.g. cooking and sleeping. There are specific rules and customs on entering the rondawel. There are specific areas for men and women. Presently the rondawel is used for traditional ceremonies and square houses have been built in the back for cooking and sleeping as the family grew. Modern houses are normally built at the back of the traditional rondawels - always symmetrical. Sometimes, make believe windows are painted on the walls to create a focal point and also as a mechanism to relieve the geometric rigidity of the wall design. Simple borders painted in a dark colour, lined with white, accentuated less important windows in the inner courtyard and in outside walls.

Traditionally the houses were painted in muted, natural colours extracted from nature – black from fire ash, white from stones, browns/yellows from cow dung. Pigments were often mixed with cow dung and water and then applied to the walls. The bright colours only came later, with the introduction of Western and Indian paint pigments.

The characteristic symmetry, proportion and straight edges of Ndebele decorations were done by hand without the help of rulers and squares. This presented the traditionally subordinate wife with an opportunity to express her individuality and sense of self-worth. Her innovativeness in the choice of colours and designs set her apart from her peer group. In some instances, the women also created sculptures to express themselves. The back and side walls of the house were often painted in earth colours and decorated with simple geometric shapes that were shaped with the fingers and outlined in black. The most innovative and complex designs were painted, in the brightest colours, on the front walls of the house. The front wall that enclosed the courtyard in front of the house formed the gateway (izimpunjwana) was given special care.

As Ndebele society became more westernised, the artists started reflecting this change of their society in their paintings. Another change is the addition of stylised representational forms to the typical traditional abstract geometric designs. Many Ndebele artists have now also extended their artwork to the interior of houses.

Each family has its own kraal for livestock. During traditional ceremonies the men eat and cook separately from the women. The sitting ledge or step inside the rondawels is known as “mosamo” and no women may sit upon it. Traditionally women inhabited the left side of the rondawel and men the right. The veranda or porch / courtyard at the front of the rondawel is the area reserved for non-family members, friends and extended family. Women may sit on the steps in the courtyard area. Only direct family members may go further into the homestead, unless specifically requested by the family. The “matouri” is the store-room of the rondawel, where mats, pots etc are stored.

The walls of the traditional rondawels are made from a lattice of poles and sticks which have been covered in mud and cow dung. The floors are also “cemented” with cow dung. It is said that “A big house must not be broken” – meaning that once the elders have passed away the house must remain and be maintained by the family. Should the rondawel/ home need to be demolished to make way for newer structures the family must visit the graves with gifts of beer and snuff in order to request the ancestor's blessings for the changes.

NDEBELE ARCHITECTURE AND SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

<u>APOKORWANA</u>	Eaves overhang
<u>AMAKAPA</u>	Roof
<u>AMAKAPA IBALELO</u>	Timber roof rafter
<u>AMAOPA</u>	Enclosed room located in the verandah
<u>AMATHURI</u>	Verandah
<u>IBADI</u>	Door
<u>IBALELO</u>	Used to signify a roof timber spanning from post to post, or from roof beam to roof beam, and could mean either a batten, or a ring beam
<u>IBODA</u>	The drum wall of a cone on cylinder dwelling
<u>IFESDIRI</u>	A window. The term has probably been derived from the Dutch “venster”, also meaning a window opening
<u>IKHUPHU</u>	The clay plaster on a wall
<u>IMBHEJUNI</u>	Decorative moldings or sculptures on a wall

MARRIAGES

In the old days parents were responsible for choosing a wife for their sons. A son has to return from an initiation school before the marriage Labola (dowry) could be paid. The value of the bride's Labola is calculated by the number of cows (usually 8) given to the bride's parents by the groom (current value in 2006 - R3000 per cow!).

Before a woman is married a “bukhazi” is performed; the bride-to-be goes into a smaller room/hut for a week before the wedding and the older women in the community coach her about her role as a wife and her duties as a married woman within the village.

TRADITIONAL INITIATION SCHOOLS AND CEREMONIES

Initiation is practiced in winter, every four years. The boys are taken to the bush for a period of two months whereby they learn the history, rituals, norm, takes place at the end of this period and the boy is initiated into manhood. The men then return to home and are ceremoniously welcomed back into the homestead in preparation for the welcome home ceremonies.

Girls practice their initiation schooling around the village for a period of one month. Celebrations differ from the men's initiation school ted. but the young girl's teachings are completed once they too have been initia

When the youth have completed their initiation, and return to the village, a bull is slaughtered for the male initiates and a cow for the female initiates, to welcome them back into the community.

Before a cow is slaughtered, the blood of a goat must “be thrown on the ground”.

NATURE

The Ndebele Culture is also closely linked with nature. The Morula tree produces a fruit, which is used to make traditional morula beer. The fruits drop from the trees in January/ February and the village and livestock are well fed.

MEETING PLACES

The men used to gather at a special place known as the “E bandla” (a meeting/Indaba place) to discuss important issues which affect the whole village. Women are not allowed at these meetings nor in these places. There is however, a place in the village, normally under a central tree, where the whole village meets to discuss certain issues. Women usually discuss issues whilst doing their daily tasks. Important decisions are left for the men to decide.

FOOD

Traditionally maize (corn) meal (known as “pap” or “mealiepap”) forms the staple diet, meats (chicken, beef, lamb, etc) and vegetables are added to the pap. A sauce or gravy is sometimes served with the pap. “Mala magodus” (mainly sheep tripe), chicken feet, and “ighlogo” (heads) from goats/ sheep/ cows are regular delicacies.

PERSONAL ADORNMENT

Ndebele women traditionally adorned themselves with a variety of ornaments, each symbolising 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, symbolising her bond and faithfulness to her husband, once her home was built.

She would only remove the rings after his death. The rings (called idzila) were believed to have strong ritual powers. Husbands used to provide their wives with rings; the richer the husband, the more rings the wife would wear. Today, it is no longer common practice to wear these rings permanently. In addition to the rings, married women also wore neck hoops made of grass (called isigolwani) twisted into a coil and covered in beads, particularly for ceremonial occasions. Isigolwani are sometimes worn as neckpieces and as leg and arm bands by newly wed women whose husbands have not yet provided them with a home, or by girls of marriageable age after the completion of their initiation ceremony.

Culmination of the marriage, which only takes place after the birth of the first child. The marriage blanket (nguba) worn by married women was decorated with beadwork to record significant events throughout the woman's lifetime.

For example, long beaded strips signified that the woman's son was undergoing the initiation ceremony and indicated that the woman had now attained a higher status in Ndebele society. It symbolised joy because her son had achieved manhood as well as the sorrow at losing him to the adult world.

A married woman always wore some form of head covering as a sign of respect for her husband. These ranged from a simple beaded headband or a knitted cap to elaborate beaded headdresses (amacubi).

Boys usually ran around naked or wore a small front apron of goatskin. However, girls wore beaded aprons or beaded wraparound skirts from an early age. For rituals and ceremonies, Ndebele men adorned themselves with ornaments made for them by their wives.

