

JD1 Brief History

JD1.1 Overview

This brief history draws heavily on information supplied by Manton Hirst of the Amathole Museum.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE OF THE EASTERN CAPE

Although largely of Xhosa origin and thus related by blood ties to the people east of the Great Kei River, the people of this region have an own historical experience sufficient to mould a national consciousness peculiar to themselves. The name "Xhosa" as used here refers specifically to the Cape Nguni tribe of that name. There are many other tribes in the south-eastern coastal area loosely known today as Xhosa or Xhosa-speaking peoples. This followed after the Xhosa tribe's tongue was developed as a written language and used as a medium of instruction in schools, thereby ousting the other Cape Nguni dialects from prominence.

According to oral tradition, that section of the Nguni peoples destined to become known as the Cape Nguni tribes migrated southwards from the Great lakes region of Central Africa, and by the middle of the seventeenth century had settled in the coastal region of what was previously called Transkei. This evidence is supported by records of Portuguese survivors of shipwrecks on this coast. Historians have ascribed the southward movement of the tribes to mutual strife and pressure by stronger groups for living space, which in the pastoral cultures of the Nguni peoples largely meant grazing land.

Trek into the region (former Ciskei)

The Xhosa were the first of the Cape Nguni tribes to cross the Kei River. This westward movement accelerated in 1702 after the death of Chief Tshiwo and the ensuing struggle for the leadership. Further splinter groups of the main Xhosa tribe followed some 30 years later.

The historical split in the Xhosa tribe occurred in 1740 however, at the time when its paramount chief – living in the former Transkei – was Phalo.

Phalo's heir from his Great house was Gcaleka, while his eldest son from the Right-hand House was Rarabe. Although Rarabe was the elder, it was Gcaleka, from the Great house, who was the rightful heir to his father's position according to Xhosa custom.

Gcaleka attempted, however, to usurp his father's chieftainship while his father was still alive. Rarabe supported his father's cause and although he had the smaller following among the tribesmen, won the conflict.

Rather than place his father, Phalo, in an invidious position, Rarabe decided to seek out a new home for himself and his people, and accordingly moved across the Kei.

(His father, who feared for his life if he remained in Transkei without Rarabe's protection joined him there.)

The westward move across the Kei was not, however, a simple emigration, since the land was already occupied by the Khoi Hottentots. After a fierce battle against the Hottentots Rarabe emerged victorious and entered into negotiations with the Khoi leader's widow, whose husband had been slain in the fight. For a great number of cattle he purchased a tract of country between the headwaters of the Keiskamma and Buffalo rivers, including the Amatola Mountains.

The Xhosa tribe was thus split into two separate and distinct parts, creating a schism that has persisted to this day.

The Khoi who had been defeated by Rarabe were later assimilated into the Xhosa fold, so that even today Ciskei has Khoi clans like the Sukwini and Gqwashu, who regard themselves as Xhosa.

Confrontation with Whites

The stage was now set for the next turbulent scene in history, namely the confrontation between the westward moving tribes and the White settlers who were penetrating the sub-continent in an easterly direction. Isolated contacts had been made earlier, but the main meeting between the two peoples' vanguards took place in 1752, along the Great Fish River.

In a bid to defuse the potential for confrontation, the then Dutch East India Company administration at the Cape of Good Hope laid down a policy of isolation, non-intervention and stopped the custom of bartering cattle with the Xhosa. In 1778 the Great Fish River was declared the boundary between the Whites in the west and the Xhosas to the east.

The battle lines were thus drawn for what was to be a century of border wars between the two pastoral cultures, which were both in search of additional grazing land. Stock theft on both sides was commonplace and reprisal raids followed with monotonous regularity. Nine full-scale frontier wars are recorded between 1779 and 1878, in which the borders between White and Xhosa territory changed repeatedly and the area of the former Ciskei came to resemble a patchwork of Black and White-owned land.

The Fish River remained the boundary between the Whites and the Xhosa till after the Fifth Frontier War when the Xhosa were driven back to the Kei River, and the Keiskamma River was seen as a suitable boundary. The Gqunukhwebe tribe, the most militant tribe, had to relinquish its territory between the Fish and the Keiskamma rivers. A neutral no-man's-land was established between these rivers.

An important event took place at the end of the Sixth Frontier War in 1835, through which the composition of the population was significantly altered.

The British colonial forces had crossed the Kei to attack the Gcaleka chief, Hintsu, for having helped in raids on White farms. A group of several thousands of people who had fled before the reign of terror of the Zulu Tshaka (to the north, in Natal) had found asylum (though coupled with serfdom) with Hintsu, and come to be known as the amaFengu (homeless wanderers), which name was corrupted by Whites to Fingo. A number of Fingo chiefs used the attack by the Colonial forces as an opportunity to

seek release and the protection of the Cape Government. As a result of this some 17 000 Fingo were led out of Transkei by the missionary Ayliff on the authority of Sir Benjamin D'Urban, Governor of the by then British-held Cape, and settled around Peddie in the then neutral zone between the Great Fish and Keiskamma rivers.

Administratively, the area between the Keiskamma and Kei rivers was in 1835 proclaimed a British province, under the name of Queen Adelaide Province, with Black tribal and White farming areas. A year later the name was changed to British Kaffraria, with King William's Town as capital. Resident chiefs were allowed to rule their territories in the traditional manner, under the supervision of British magistrates. It was the idea of the administrative head of the province, Colonel Harry Smith, to anglicise British Kaffraria, and the reserve of each chief was given the name of an English county.

Shortly afterwards the raids began again and the Seventh Frontier War broke out in 1846. The Gqunukhwebe of Khama, who had trekked to Lesotho in 1843 and helped the British in the war, were rewarded with land at Kamastone in the district which is today Hewu. After the Eighth Frontier War of 1850-53, Khama's Gqunukhwebe tribe was settled in the present-day district of Middledrift. The Fingo, of whom a further 7 000 were brought back from Transkei, received land at Lessyeton, Kamastone, Oxkraal and Windvogelberg. An area west of Indwe was set aside in 1852 for the Emigrant Thembu and all the other land occupied by them was confiscated.

In 1853 the Amatola Mountains area (Royal Reserve) was forbidden to the Xhosa. The area, now known as Keiskammahoek, was gradually populated by Fingo from 1854. The Fingo also settled in locations in the vicinity of Middledrift and King William's Town.

The Xhosa-Fingo numerical ratio was further affected by the well-known cattle killing episode of 1856-57, in which the Xhosa chiefs ordered their subjects to kill all their livestock and destroy all their grain supplies. These orders, it is said, were based on the prophecies of a 13-year-old girl, **Nonquase**, that this sacrifice would lead to the colonists being expelled from the land. The ensuing starvation cost the Xhosa an estimated 25 000 lives. Today the Xhosa and Fingo are roughly equal in numbers, and most of the cultural differences of a century ago have been blurred by the passing of time.

As a result of the Ninth Frontier War of 1877-78 the Ngqika and the Gwelane, both sub-groups of the main Rarabe tribe, lost their land in the present-day districts of Catcher and Stutterheim. The Gwelane and other small Xhosa groups were settled in Kentani and Idutywa and the Ngcangathelo of Ngonyama, a sub-tribe of the Rarabe, who remained loyal, were rewarded with land at present-day Alice.

After this final frontier war the Black areas between the Great Fish and Kei rivers were mapped and demarcated, and it is the boundaries thus fixed which remained largely intact until the mid-1970's.

The area is thus steeped in the history of the great valour shown by Black and White alike in the frontier wars – a part of their joint heritage. Today's understandings by both for the other's role (and indicative of their will to forgive) is graphically illustrated by the return of Chief Maqoma's remains to the land of his birth with full honours from the South African authorities. Chief Maqoma, champion of his Xhosa people's fight to retain their land, and scourge of the British colonial authorities during the Fifth to Eighth Frontier Wars (1818-1850), died in 1873 during his imprisonment on Robben

Island. The authorities asked the British Government in 1978 to return his remains to the land of his birth, since it was the British who had taken him away. When the request was refused, the RSA Government placed a warship at the then Ciskei's disposal for the purpose, and the bones of Maqoma were conveyed home with all due respect for ceremonial re-interment by his tribe.

Thus, out of the crucible of history and admixture of various bloods, was formed the people of the Eastern Cape: a blend of Xhosa who are removed by more than two centuries from the Xhosa east of the Kei, and Mfengu (Fingo) of Zulu origin, who have now abandoned their former separate annual celebrations in a conscious move towards unity and nation building, plus the small Khoi (Hottentot) element mentioned earlier as having been absorbed in the Xhosa group, and a small South Sotho group.

The people of this area have cultural traditions rooted in this continent, but as with most of the peoples of Africa, they have over the past few hundred years rubbed shoulders with other African and non-African peoples, including (largely) the Dutch and British settlers in South Africa who, while hailing from beyond the oceans, are now also people of Africa.

JD1.2 Beliefs and Customs

Religion

In the case of the people of this area, religion over the past 200 years generally moved away from the traditional ancestor propitiation, to acceptance of the Christian faith, though largely with a local stamp.

Traditional organisation

The traditional organisation into families, clans and tribes is based on the early Xhosa system, but Western influence has obviously changed this, particularly in the urban areas.

A number of family or clan kraals were under the control of a headman, and several headmen in turn under that of one of the chief's counsellors. At the apex of the hierarchical order was the tribal chief, who was accorded great respect, and his counsellors, appointed for their personal qualities. Chiefs were considered the fathers of their people, custodians of the tribal territory, the maintainers of law and order, the procurers of rain, the regulators of the harvest, and the mediators between tribesmen and the ancestral spirits.

The chief was thus the subject of great loyalty and the most important force in unifying the tribe. Despite this the chiefs were seldom despots. Although chiefs are usually wealthy men by virtue of their position and through gifts, fines and confiscations, the greatest quality of chieftainship was, and is, generosity. The chief is morally bound to use his wealth for the good of his people, particularly the poor.

This tribal system, while obviously moderated by urbanisation and familiarity with modern western systems, is still the basis of rural society, and the chiefs play an important role in the system of democratic government which has been, or is being developed since the overthrow of the apartheid regime.

Before the arrival of the Whites and for some time thereafter, the Xhosa lived a culturally distinct way of life. Until today, their way of life and many customs are typically their own, although Western influence is perceptible. Many traditions are still maintained to a varying degree, although they are often adjusted to present circumstances.

Today polygamy has declined considerably amongst the Xhosa, but it was generally practised in the past. Each wife in the polygamous homestead had her own hut. The name of the hut was indicative of the wife's status. The houses were arranged around a central point, the cattle kraal. Opposite the opening of the cattle kraals was the great house (*indlunkulu*) from which the heir was to be born. Next in rank was the right-hand house (*indlu yasekunene*) and some tribes also had a left-hand house (*indlu yasekohlo*).

Attached to the first-mentioned two houses were minor or supporting houses arranged around the cattle kraal. The right-hand house was to a large extent independent and when ample land was available, often broke away to form a new tribe or part of a tribe.

Each tribe embraces a number of clans consisting of people with the same clan name (*isiduko*). The clans do not necessarily form geographically cohesive groups but may be scattered over the tribal area. Marriage between members of the same clan would be incestuous and is therefore prohibited. The Xhosa are patriarchal i.e. they inherit their father's name and belong to his group.

From child to adult

The individual growing up in Xhosa society passes through a series of distinct stages, each of which ascribes a particular status and role to the individual. Broadly speaking these stages are birth, infancy, weaning and early childhood, childhood to puberty, initiation, marriage and adulthood. Passage through these stages is invariably marked by some form of ritual, but since the passage from childhood to adulthood is regarded as most important, the rites marking this phase of growth are given prominence.

Adulthood is specially conferred upon the individual and is not necessarily associated with the chronological age of the individual in the case of males it is conferred through the rite of circumcision and rounded off by marriage. In the case of females the puberty ceremony (*intonjane*) does not confer full adulthood but it is intended rather to make the girl aware that she can bear children and is therefore marriageable. In both instances isolation, adherence to taboos and the imparting of some kind of instruction regarding the individual's new status and expected roles are key observances.

Marriage

The traditional Xhosa marriage was and is a prolonged transaction between two families. It starts with the parents of a girl seeking a husband for their daughter, and a young man seeking a wife. After the initial negotiations, and once an agreement is reached, a master of ceremonies (*uNozakuzaku*) is appointed by the parties concerned to carry on negotiations until they terminate in marriage. Betrothal is marked by the handing over to the bride's parents of a beast. There is no stated age when betrothal may take place. It is a verbal agreement between the young man and the girl's parents. Security for giving effect to the promise of marriage is in the form of cattle. If the marriage takes place these cattle are counted into the *ikhazi* (dowry cattle) and so become part of the lobola cattle (bride price).

After all the preliminaries have been arranged, a bridal party is chosen to accompany the young bride to her prospective husband's home for the marriage ceremony. The subsequent procedure is prolonged and marked by many ceremonies including dancing, feasting and the handing over of the lobola cattle, sheep or goats.

When newly married, the young wife has no house of her own. She lives with her mother-in-law, but sleeps in a separate hut with her husband. The young couple cannot leave the father's kraal unless the husband has a younger brother to take his place and look after the interests of the parents. A new name is given to the young wife by the male members of her father-in-law's family.

Although all the traditional marriage rites are no longer practised universally in the region, the lobola custom is still widespread, but money has replaced cattle to a large extent.

Rules of conduct

Conduct towards the in-laws is largely determined by the *hlonipha* customs. *Ukhlonipha* means to show respect by avoidance. A woman has to show respect to her father-in-law and his brothers, her mother-in-law and all the wives of her father-in-law. This means that she must cover the upper part of her body below the shoulders, cast down her eyes and not eat in their presence, amongst other things. She is not allowed to pronounce their names, or even words that contain certain syllables of their names. Some of these taboos fall away on the birth of her first child. In the same fashion a newly married man must show respect to his parents-in-law and to certain people related by marriage. Apart from these prohibitions there are other taboos that may differ in detail from tribe to tribe.

The kinship system is based on classification. Relatives, to whom the same rules of conduct, more or less, are applicable, are grouped together and addressed by the same name. The father and all his brothers are all *uBawo*, but the words *omkhulu* (great) or *omncinci* (small) are added to distinguish between the father's elder and younger brothers.

European influence has to a remarkable extent left its mark on the terminology Xhosa relationships. Terms such as *uSisi* (sister) and *uButi* (brother) are generally used today.

Traditional economy

Traditional agriculture in Ciskei is communal in the sense that the land is held, in trust by the chief, for the tribe. Every household is entitled to a fairly small allotment of arable land, as well as to a residential site.

It was formerly not customary to slaughter cattle, sheep or goats for day to day use. Cattle or goats were killed when a sacrifice or ceremony required it or when a visitor of rank visited the kraal. In accordance with the generosity of the Xhosa, a fire was kindled in the cattle kraal whenever an animal was killed for eating, and all who lived in sight of the smoke considered themselves invited to partake of the meal.

Traditional authorities

A number of kraals were usually under the control of a headman, and several headmen were under the control of one of the chief's counsellors (*amaphakathi*). At the apex of the hierarchical order was the chief of the tribe.

In the execution of his duties the chief was assisted by his counsellors who were appointed by virtue of their intelligence, personality and loyalty. As head of the tribe the chief's person was sacred and protected by magical and religious precautions.

Normally the chief's wealth was made up of cattle inherited from his father, received from other chiefs as inauguration offerings at his installation, furnished by rich subjects, or obtained by way of fines and confiscations.

In times of famine the chief's grain pits and herds sustained the tribe. All visitors and those gathered at the chief's Great Place for court cases were provided with milk and food.

JD1.3 Language and Cultural Aspects

Language

The Xhosa language of the great majority of the population of the area derives its name from King Xhosa, who ruled the Xhosa nation in around 1535. Xhosa is one of the four Nguni languages, the others being Zulu, Swazi and Ndebele, and of these Xhosa is closest to Zulu. The standard Xhosa spoken here is the Rarabe (sometimes referred to as the Ngquika) dialect. Basic Xhosa words comprise some 60 percent of the total of the present-day language, the remainder having been borrowed from the San (Bushman), Khoi (Hottentot), Afrikaans, English and Mfengu languages. The typical click sounds in the Xhosa language were derived from San and Khoi. The names of agricultural implements, articles of clothing and household furniture and appliances were borrowed mainly from Afrikaans, while technological and commercial terms were borrowed largely from English. The Mfengu dialect also considerably enriched Xhosa.

Literature

Closely associated with the consciousness of a nation is its literature – including oral history. For over a century people of the Eastern Cape have been producing written works of literature, but even before the introduction of writing by Christian missionaries in the early nineteenth and the spread of literacy, oral legends were widely current. Literature can exist without the aid of writing and, in fact, such traditions of literature, transmitted by word of mouth, did exist in the Eastern Cape and persist right up to the present day.

Early missionary activity, the foundation of Lovedale and its dominant influence in education and especially in encouraging the production of written literature, together with the persistence of the oral traditions, provided a solid foundation for the early and rapid development of literature in Eastern Cape region.

There are many forms of oral traditions current among the Xhosa-speaking people. Two of these traditions, both age-old, are particularly prominent: folktales (*iintsomi*) and poetry (*izibongo*). For generations Xhosa women have enthralled their children and grandchildren around the hearth at night with tales of encounters between boys and girls and such fabulous creatures as talking snakes, singing birds and giants. These stories are not intended merely to entertain; they introduce the youngsters to Xhosa customs and traditions, and exhort them to conform to accepted social practices.

The one figure in Xhosa society who is acknowledged as a man of literary talent is the *imbongi*, the poet. Many of the people produce poetry, but the *imbongi* is an official poet, widely known and recognised as such. He is attached to a chief and produces poetry about the chief and his ancestors, about important visitors and about current events. His performances do not depend on books or writing, for he recites his poetry orally before an audience and very often composes it on the spur of the moment.

The greatest *imbongi* was Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi (1875 – 1945), who is still remembered for many outstanding performances. Among the more experienced oral poets are S M Burns-Ncamashe, Max Kamile, KH Billie and Benjamin Hoza.

Many of the literary figures of succeeding generations were educated at Lovedale. Much of their writing was based on Western literary models or had an explicitly Christian theme. The first Christian poet known to us by name and the first poet to use traditional forms for Christian themes was Ntsikana.

Among the earliest writers of note who devoted themselves to Christian themes was Tiyo Soga (1829-1872). Soga's great contribution to literature was his translation of the first part of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Like Soga, William Wellington Gqoba (1840-1888) was educated at Lovedale. His two long poems, a discussion between Christian and Pagan and a debate on education, demonstrate the influence of Soga's translation of Bunyan. Although his poems refer at times to Xhosa traditions and use Xhosa expressions, they are, like Soga's writings, thoroughly Christian in form and spirit and Western in inspiration.

In the following generation, John Henderson Soga (1859-1841) completed the translation begun by his father of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, published other translations and also composed a number of hymns. Walter Benson Rubusana (1858-1916) was educated at Lovedale and later wrote a number of mainly religious tracts and articles. Rubusana earned an honoured place in literature for his collection of traditional *izibongo*, as well as a mass of poetry and historical data published in early journals.

The greatest literary figure whom the area has produced is undoubtedly S E K Mqhayi. Pre-eminent as an oral poet, Mqhayi was also a prolific writer. He was the author of numerous essays and articles, and published translations, biographies, two collections of poetry and two outstanding novels. Another prolific writer was G B Sinxo, best known as a novelist but also a writer of plays and a collection of poetry.

Arts and Crafts

The traditional arts and crafts take the form largely of dress, and house decoration, and the making of useful objects.

The potter's art was a practise that as fairly widespread, but wood carving was not much in evidence, no doubt due to the scarcity of large trees. Iron working was known, but as iron is not found in the area, it had to be obtained elsewhere through barter.

The main traditional weapons made were throwing spears, clubs and oval cow-hide shields. The curing of hides and skins reached an advanced state.

Grass weaving is also well established, in the form of mats, baskets and traditional beer strainers.

Beadwork has been developed into a highly artistic tradition, and included in the adornments made are pieces containing messages in their design. For example, marital status can be thus indicated, or messages of love conveyed.

Art in the form of paintings and sculptures as known in European and oriental society hardly existed, but due to the influence of Western culture it is now taking root.

Symbols

The **blue crane**, or "*Indwe*", has immense significance for the Xhosa People. When a man distinguished himself by deeds of valour, or any form of meritorious conduct, he was often presented by a chief with the feathers of this bird. Aubrey Elliot in his book "The Magic World of the Xhosa" notes:

"In the days of their frontier wars against the White man (the 18th and 19th centuries) the Xhosa armies were known as the Warriors of the Blue Crane Feathers because their leaders and distinguished soldiers wore feathers from the blue cranes in their hair".

After a battle had been fought and won, the chief would organise a special ceremony known as "*Ukundzabela*" – a ceremony for the heroes. It was at such gatherings that warriors and counsellors were awarded feathers. Counsellors who were honoured by being presented with *Indwe* feathers were known as men of *Ugaba* (trouble) – it was in times of trouble that these men reinstated peace and order.

The **shield and assegai** are articles used by the Xhosa for preserving peace and order and are also used in times of war.

The "**kierie**" is a symbol of authority and denotes the power which is vested in the chiefs.

The **head of an ox** is reminiscent of Ntsikana, the Xhosa prophet who had a favourite ox among his herd. It was he who prophesied the arrival of the settlers, their religion and money. The ox also symbolises wealth and is significantly important in traditional ceremonies.

Umgwashu, or **milkwood tree** as it is commonly known, is of particular significance to the Fingo people. These trees are found in the Peddie area and it is near there that the Fingoes entered into a covenant to show allegiance to God, to educate their children and be loyal to the Government. Every year the Fingoes gather under the *umgwashu* to observe this covenant.

The **Leopard** indicates chieftainship – power and vigour. When a chief is installed a leopard skin is draped over his shoulders at the ceremony.

Song

The song ***Nkosi Sikelel'i Africa*** was composed by a teacher at a Methodist mission school on the Witwatersrand in the last years of the previous century. He was Enoch Sontonga, a Xhosa member of the Mpinga family within the Tembu tribe. Enoch Sontonga had a gift for song-writing and constantly composed pieces, words and music, for the use of his pupils at public entertainments. He wrote these down by hand in Tonic Solfa on odd sheets of paper and eventually compiled them into an exercise book with a view to printing them. He died before his ambition to print was

realised. In later years the poet S E Mqayi added seven stanzas to Sontonga's first stanza and refrain.

JD1.4 History of Bhisho

Bhisho (formerly spelt Bisho) lies just 3km east of King William's Town. It is the provincial capital of the Eastern Cape, having previously been the capital of the Ciskei homeland during the apartheid era.

Bhisho, which means Buffalo in isiXhosa, named after the river that runs through it, has some of the most spectacular views of the Amathole (Amatola) mountain range.

Today Bhisho is one of the newest urban centres of the Eastern Cape, having only been established in the 1970s and 1980s. Built outside King William's town, the architecture of Bhisho derives its style from the post modernist idiom favoured by architects at that time.

During the demise of apartheid it became infamous for the Bisho Massacre on 7 September 1992, when 80 000 people marched on the town calling for the removal of Ciskei leader Brigadier Oupa Gqozo. The defence force opened fire on protesters at the sports stadium, killing 29 and wounding 200. The massacre came at a critical time following Nelson Mandela's release from prison in 1990, threatening to halt negotiations towards democracy which was achieved in 1994.

In the words of Ronnie Kasrils, Minister of Water affairs and Forestry, who in an address in 1999 during his visit to Bhisho said:

"It was...just after 12 on one such hot, sunny day, when 80 000 of us came over the hill from King William's Town, saying 'no more slavery'. The police helicopter was high in the sky. Gqozo gave the order of the apartheid masters from that building (the present legislature) to open fire and our people's blood was spilled, blood that nourishes the tree of freedom."

Bhisho is now the capital of the Eastern Cape.

JD1.5 Conclusion

It should be obvious to any reader of this report that the people of the Eastern Cape have a long and rich cultural history and this truncated history cannot do justice to this richness. It serves merely to introduce the reader to the people of the area and, hopefully, to whet the appetite for more. Competitors are invited to consult the Select Bibliography in the following section **JD2** that follows.
