

# the tsonga

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## INTRODUCTION

According to early Portuguese accounts, the Tsonga people were already living in the central and southern areas of Mozambique, between the Indian Ocean and the Lebombo Mountains, during the early 16th century. Being fairly isolated, they lived a peaceful life in dispersed settlements, having some customs in common, but lacking a common political identity.

However, the arrival of the Nguni refugees rudely shattered this peaceful way of life. These refugees had been displaced from their KwaZulu-Natal homeland by Shaka, the Zulu king. They subsequently entered the interior of the country and migrated as far as Mozambique where they subjected the local Tsonga people to their rule. The Nguni group with the strongest influence over the Tsonga groups was the Ndwandwe or Shangaan under the rule of Soshangane. They were known to the local people as the Angoni and later as the Amashangana. This group eventually built up a realm that stretched from the Zambesi River to Delagoa Bay (the site of present day Maputo) and was known as the Gaza Kingdom.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1835, the Angoni leader, Soshangane clashed with the other two Angoni refugee leaders in Mozambique and drove them over the Zambesi River and back into South Africa. Soshangane ordered the local Tsonga captains to assist him but they refused. When they were informed of his victory over the other two Angoni leaders, the captains and their followers fled to the present-day Northern Province. More Tsonga refugees followed after the death of Soshangane when disputes over the chieftainship broke out between his two sons. They were later followed by a third group of Tsonga refugees who fled Mozambique when the Portuguese defeated the Shangaans led by Soshangane's grandson.

Some of these refugees settled in the North Sotho area of Tzaneen while others settled in the territory of the Lobedu people under Modjadji, the Rain Queen. Other groups settled in the Mpumalanga Province near the present-day Kruger National Park.

During most of the 19th century, the Tsongas made a good living from hunting elephants and selling the ivory to traders.



As the elephant population decreased, Tsonga hunters turned to hunting buck and other animals and traded the skins, furs and horns with other Black groups or traders. Venison and fish were also important parts of the Tsonga diet. Fishing was done in a rather unconventional way. Seasonal rains would turn dry riverbeds into raging rivers that burst their banks and small lakes would develop. As the summer sun dried these lakes, communities would wade through them, conical plunge baskets in hand to catch the fish.

At the end of the 19th century, the easy access to food came to an end.

Conservationists started to close down most of the area that was home to the Tsonga people, in order to establish the Kruger National Park and hunting and fishing became illegal. Today, one of the largest groups of Tsonga people still live near the Kruger National Park.

In the 1890's, farming areas in the Mpumalanga Lowveld were sold to speculators who then rented out the farmland to the Tsonga. However, after the area was cleared of malaria and sleeping sickness, the Tsonga lost their rented land and were forced to hire themselves out as farm labourers on the very farms that they had previously worked for themselves.

The community was disrupted once again in the 1960s and 1970s when the then government created a homeland for the Tsongas called Gazankulu. Many people were forced to abandon their homes and move to this area. The various social and economic problems experienced in these reserves made the people increasingly dependent on migrant labour. Men left their families to go and work in the mines while the Tsonga women worked as domestic servants in the towns and cities. This disintegration of the family caused many social problems such as child neglect, alcoholism, teenage pregnancies and AIDS.

# SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

## Everyday life

A typical homestead unit (a muti) consisted of a man, his wife or wives, their children and the families of their married sons. At first a married son would stay in his father's homestead but as the son acquired more wives, he would move out and establish his own homestead. The sons would usually extend their father's homestead or build next to it. Over time this practice resulted in the formation of clans.

The homestead area was usually circular and was ringed by a perimeter wall constructed of branches and tree stumps. The cattle byre (called the xivaya or tshanga) was in the centre of the circular area, directly opposite the main entrance. Strangers were expected to enter only through the main entrance, on the eastern side of the homestead.

The traditional Tsonga home had a cylindrical shape with earth walls and a conical thatched or reed roof. The home of the principal wife was directly behind the cattle byre and the homes of the other wives flanked hers.

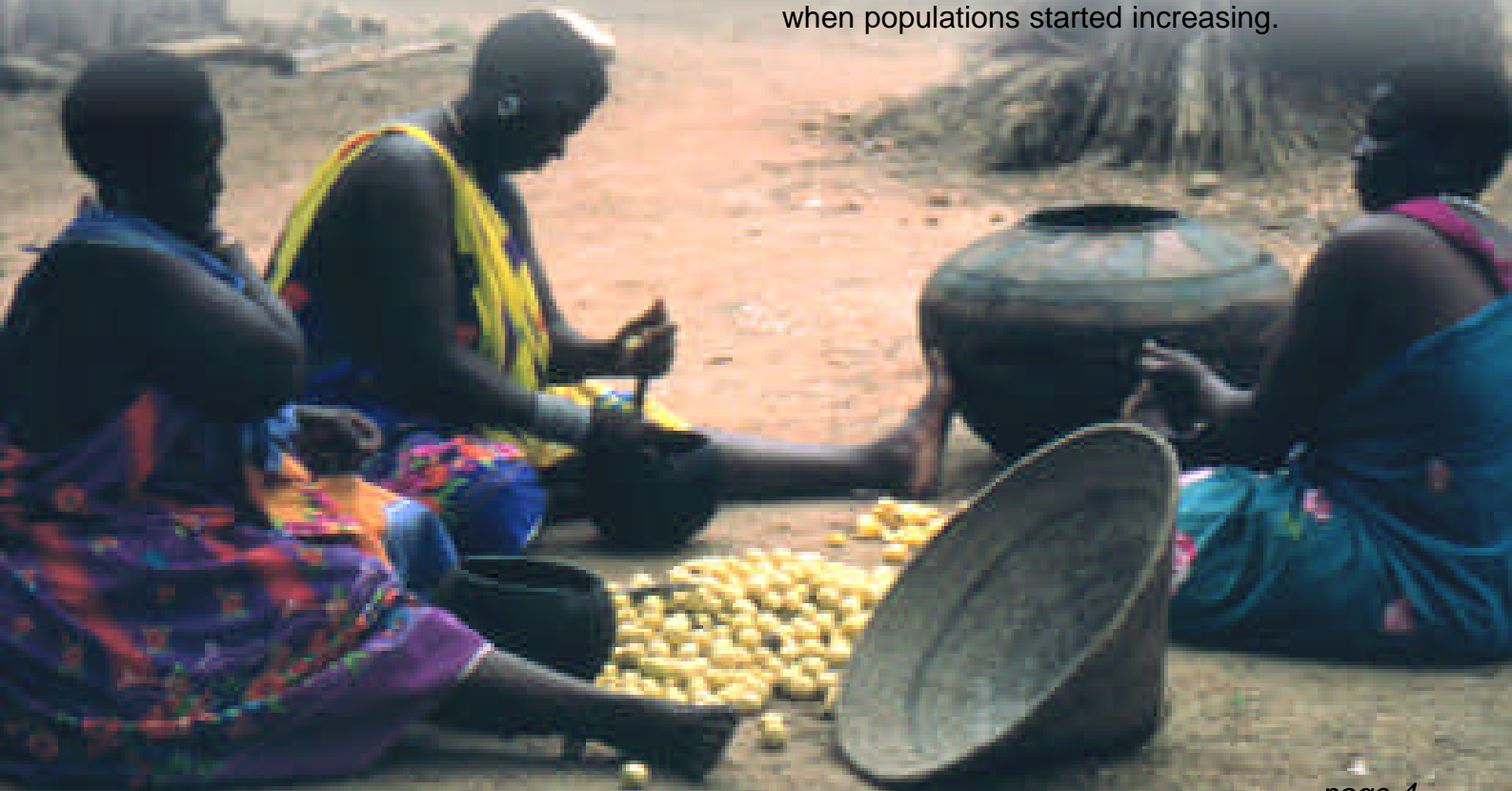
Each wife had her own cooking area and the senior wife also had her own granary.

The meeting place (huvo) was usually located under a tree and was enclosed with branches and tree stumps. The other special area used for sacrificial purposes, the gandzelo, could be located indoors or outdoors. The men used this area to discuss issues concerning the running of the homestead. Women and children were excluded from this area.

The Tsonga's main agricultural products were cassava (manioc plants), potatoes and sorghum, maize and fowls.

The Tsonga used slash-and-burn agricultural strategy. An area would be chosen, the natural growth chopped down and crops grown there until the land was no longer fertile. The process would then be repeated in another area. The initial clearing of the land was the responsibility of the men but from there on, the women would take over the agricultural duties.

As nothing was put back into the soil, the land around the homestead would steadily become depleted and useless for agricultural use and the homestead would be moved to more fertile areas. This competition for land led to some serious conflict, especially when populations started increasing.



## Internal political structures

The Tsonga chief (the hosi) and his council held final authority in the group. Chieftainship was hereditary and was usually bestowed on the oldest male member of the oldest lineage of the strongest clan in the group. Should the next in line be under age, his uncle, the younger brother of his father, would normally act as regent in his place until he was old enough to take over. However, the new chief had to be approved by the council.

The chief wielded power over all aspects of his followers' lives. He allocated land and approved the start of rituals such as initiation rites, harvest ceremonies and rain dances. The chief also mediated between members of his group and tried serious cases and appeals.

However, as European governments imposed their rule on all the indigenous groups, so the traditional political structures were destroyed and the power of the traditional chiefs diminished. When the Tsonga started experiencing serious social problems, the government did eventually

take notice. They tried to re-institute the power and influence of the chiefs in the traditional communities through legislation. In the 1950s, tribal authorities were harnessed to help control the Bantustan/Homelands administrations.

## Gender roles

Authority in the family rested with the father and his wives and children treated him with the utmost respect. Within the extended family, the wives were accorded rank and status according to the order in which they were married. The first wife therefore had the highest rank and was entitled to the respect of the other wives. Because of her rank, her children also enjoyed a higher standing.

Children's behaviour was governed by certain rules of conduct, obligations, duties, rights and privileges. Children start performing domestic duties at an early age, daughters helping their mothers with household duties and the younger boys herding the goats, while their older brothers took care of the cattle.



## Music and dance

Music has always been part of the Tsonga culture and they played stringed, wind and percussion instruments.

The stringed instruments included a notched vibrating bow (xizamba) that was played by holding the strings in the musician's teeth (for resonance) and simultaneously rubbing a stick with resonators around it, up and down the notches of the bow. The strings were usually made from bark or twine. The xitendze, a bow with a calabash attached to it to act as a resonator was also played. Another instrument was the mgangala, a hollowed-out reed bow that is plucked by the fingers. The xipendana, a wire-stringed bow with a thickened handle that produces sound when it is plucked with a flat piece of metal, was also very popular.

The wind instruments included a cross flute (xitiringo) with three holes, shepherd's pipes and a trumpet made from an antelope horn. The tambourine and the drum were used as percussion instruments. Diviners used to play a flat round tambourine while treating people possessed by evil spirits. Drums called ndzumba and xigubu were played at the initiation ceremonies of girls and boys respectively and a drum called the ngoma was played at festive dances.

As Tsonga music was adapted over the years, two instruments were added to the mix. One is a hand piano consisting of eight metal strips about 19 centimetres long and 1 centimetre wide, fixed over a low saddle on a piece of wood. The piano is played by stroking the metal strips. The other instrument is a type of xylophone with a wooden keyboard and a calabash resonator.



# SPECIAL OCCASIONS

## Initiation

As with many other African ethnic groups, adult status was traditionally attained only after children had gone through the initiation rites. Boys and girls were initiated in separate groups and were only allowed to marry after they had completed the rites.

## Courtship and marriage

In traditional Tsonga society, the process of choosing a partner was not a straightforward matter but had to be conducted according to certain rules. First cousins could not marry each other and child betrothal was not practised. However, a father could suggest suitable girls to his son.

When a young man became interested in a particular girl, he would send her a grass ring or a thorn to indicate that he wanted to marry her. If she were also interested in him, she would then send him a grass ring or thorn to confirm their relationship. The girl's father would then need to express his approval of the match formally by sending the girl's family a cow, symbolising that the agreement had been sealed. After this stage, two intermediaries who represented the families would conduct further negotiations.

The dowry paid to the woman's family is a practice that is still adhered to today. A Tsonga marriage is more than merely a relationship between two individuals but also cements a relationship between two families. The relationship that is established between the two families presupposes

responsibilities and rights that are binding even after the death of either spouse. The wife has an obligation to bear children. However, if a wife dies before bearing children, one of her relatives, for example a younger sister, must bear children on her behalf. In the same way, should a husband die, his relatives are expected to take care of his wife and where possible, to provide a younger brother to marry her and produce children, in his brother's name.

The traditional marriage ceremony included different rituals. When the girl left her home, a sacrifice was made and she would formally take leave of her family and their ancestral spirits. A "handing over" of the bride to her new family would follow this ceremony.



After the marriage ceremony, which usually took place at the homestead of the bridegroom, the couple was considered officially married.

The newly married bride would have to follow certain strict rules of behaviour and etiquette in her new home. She would stay in the home of her mother-in-law and help her with her daily domestic duties. Her mother-in-law would instruct her in the ways of her new family and she would have to observe certain rules of behaviour towards her father-in-law and his brothers.

After the birth of her first child, the wife would set up her own household but would still use her mother-in-law's cooking area. She would usually start to use her own cooking area only after the marriage of her husband's younger brother, when his bride would take over the role of the new initiate.

Once the young mother had set up her own household and had her own cooking area, she, her husband and child formed a family unit. At first they would still be part of the hus-



band's father's household, but when the husband married other wives, he would move out and set up his own household.

The relationships between families that originated with the marriage of two individuals would often be consolidated when the husband chose his subsequent wives from among the younger sisters of his first wife. The first wife, instead of being resentful, would sometimes insist that her husband acquire more wives since this would enhance her status in society and would also supply more hands to share the workload. The practice of multiple marriages resulted in nucleus families developing into economically functioning units in which each individual had their own role to play.

## HARVESTING THE CROPS

The harvesting of the crops was usually a social and co-operative event. The whole community would get together to harvest the crops of each member of the community in turn. The host would provide food and drink and harvesting would become a festive occasion.

## BELIEF SYSTEM

Many Tsonga people are Christians today, but traditional religious beliefs still have a strong following among the rural people.

The traditional religion centred on the belief in one supreme being who had created man and earth. Ancestor worship was an added feature of this belief system. The diviner/ traditional healer (called the nanga) played an important part in ancestor worship and was often consulted in times of need and to help direct the rituals that were performed during times of crisis.

The Tsonga believed that man had a physical (mmiri) and a spiritual body with two added attributes, the moya and the ndzuti. The moya was associated with the spirit, entered the body at birth and left it at death to join the ancestors.

The ndzuti was associated with the person's shadow and reflected human characteristics. Upon death, in the spirit world, it left the body. This meant that the spirit of the dead was imbued with the individual and human characteristics of the person. Inherent in this concept is not only the belief in life after death but also that the dead retain very strong links with the living.

Passing over into the spirit world was an important stage in the life of a Tsonga. Shortly after death, the members of the family performed a welcoming ceremony to help ease the passage of the dead person into the spirit world. The death of a member of the family also caused all the other members in the homestead to become unclean and they all had to go through ritual cleansing ceremonies.

These ceremonies were performed at different times of the day over the next few months.

During religious ceremonies the family gathered together at a special area to pay homage to the ancestral spirits. Food and drink was offered to the ancestors to thank them for providing for the people. Requests were also made to the spirits to intercede in specific problems. For more general purposes, the spirits could be approached in a more informal way, through prayer.

The existence of both good and evil spirits was integral to Tsonga beliefs. Good spirits brought rain and caused good things to happen, and evil spirits, controlled by sorcerers, caused great harm to the community.

Illness or persistent bad luck usually indicated the presence of baloyi (evil spirits) but occasional illness was accepted as part and parcel of everyday life. However, if the illness was serious or the cycle of bad luck persisted, a cure had to be found through divination. The diviner consulted the ancestral spirits by "throwing" the bones, shells or other artefacts and was thus able to determine the cause of the bad luck and suggest ways in which to get rid of the cause.

