# THE XHOSA

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THE XHOSA

INTRODUCTION

The Xhosa, also often called the “Red Blanket People”, are of Nguni stock, like the Zulu. The name Xhosa is a generalised term for a diversity of proud clans, the Pondo, Bomvana, Thembu and the Xhosa tribe itself. Red and the orange of ochre were the traditional colours of the Xhosa, Tembu and Bomvana (“the red ones”).

The first group of early Nguni immigrants to migrate to South Africa consisted of the Xhosa, (made up of the the Gcaleka, Ngqika, Ndlambe and Dushane clans), the Thembu and Pondo. However, a second group of Nguni-speakers joined these tribes later. These were the tribes that Shaka, the Zulu king, drove out of Zululand. Some returned to Zululand when peace was declared, but those who remained became known as the Mfengu and were assimilated into the Xhosa nation.

The early immigrants formed the backbone of the Xhosa nation and have good reason to be proud. Not only were they to become the second largest group of Black Africans in South Africa but they were also the only ones that were never defeated or enslaved by any other tribe. They even repulsed the mighty Zulu chief, Shaka. Ex-President Nelson Mandela belongs to this ethnic group.

The Xhosa live mainly in the Eastern Cape Province (the former Ciskei and Transkei). The Kei (Great) River marks the boundary of what was once the southern border of the former Transkei. The Mtamvuna River, also called “the reaper of mouthfuls”, (when it overflowed its banks), marks the border between KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. South of this river lie the beautiful, rolling grass-covered downlands of the Eastern Cape. Characteristic of this area is its many rivers, rapids, waterfalls, deep gorges and alluvial valleys.

Along the East Coast, east of the present-day city of Port Elizabeth, patches of high forest abound on mountain slopes and in other scenic settings. The most notable of these is the Pirie Forest near King William’s Town. The forests of the Eastern Cape were the natural retreats of the Xhosa people during the many Frontier Wars that raged in this area. Some of the fiercest clashes took place here and the forests were left full of memories and spirits from these mighty battles. This was also the place where the great chief of the Xhosa, Zandile, was wounded and died, hidden beneath a blanket of leaves.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Historical evidence suggests that the Xhosa people have inhabited the Eastern Cape area from as long ago as 1593 and most probably even before that. Some archaeological evidence has been discovered that suggests that Xhosa-speaking people have lived in the area since the 7th century AD.

By the mid 17th century, the Thembu tribe was settled around the Nbashi River with the original Xhosa tribe settled in the vicinity of the Kei River and beyond. The senior Xhosa chiefdom was given respect and tribute but was not much feared. The senior chief did not have enough military power to make himself king of a larger centralised state. The chiefdom was further weakened when Rarabe, brother of the chief, Gcaleka, challenged his brother’s rule and was driven off with his followers. He was succeeded as senior western Xhosa chief by his son Ndlambe and later by Ngqika, his grandson, who took the chieftainship away from his uncle in 1796.
During the 1820s and 30s southern Africa was torn apart by violent wars between the different indigenous peoples, the so-called Mfecane/Difeqane (“The Crushing”). Two Nguni chiefs started these wars, Zwide of the Ndwandwe kingdom in the north of present-day Zululand (the area of KwaZulu-Natal lying north of the Tugela River) and Dingiswayo of the Mthethwa kingdom in the south. Refugees from both armies became new Mfecane tribes “on the march” and swept across the country crushing anyone who came in their path.

When the British came to the Eastern Cape, they tried to prevent military invention by adopting a treaty-state system. Treaties of friendship tied Independent African states such as Ciskei and Pondoland to Britain. However, the treaty-state system did not last very long and war soon broke out between the White settlers and the Xhosa tribes. An allied army of Ngqika-Xhosa, Gcaleka-Xhosa and Thembu defeated the British. However, this did not deter the British from annexing the Keiskamma territory, thus setting the scene for yet another war which would eventually escalate into a civil war between Gcaleka, the Xhosa chief and the local Mfengu tribe that lived amongst them.

In the wars against the British and colonial troops, two Xhosa chiefs, Sandile and Maqoma, emerged as strong leaders. After both had been defeated, Xhosa resistance crumbled and by the early 1880s, the last of the Nguni chiefdoms had been brought under colonial rule.

However, what really broke the Xhosa nation’s resolve was a disaster that occurred in the mid 1850s. A young girl by the name of Nongqause had a vision of the warriors of old rising up from the reeds surrounding a pool into which she was gazing. They had been purified of witchcraft and they encouraged her to tell the Xhosa people to also purify themselves by killing all their cattle, destroying all their grain and not planting any crops. This action would also help to get rid of the White settlers, since the old warriors themselves would come to drive them away. News of Nongqause’s prophecy, spurred on by the preaching of her uncle Mhlakaza, spread among the people like wild fire. In the aftermath, approximately 20 000 people died of starvation while another 30 000 were scattered among the white farmers in outlying areas where they sought work for food.

However, despite this disaster and the havoc it wrought on the Xhosa people, Xhosa culture has remained strong. Although their lifestyle has been adapted to the Western traditions, the Xhosa still retain many of their traditions and much of their culture.

There followed long years of colonial rule, efforts to create self-ruling independent states during the Apartheid years and finally, independence in 1994 when the Government of National Unity under the leadership of Nelson Mandela was born.
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE

Everyday life

The earliest Xhosa homesteads consisted of a circular frame of poles and young trees bent and bound together in the shape of a beehive and covered from top to bottom with grass. During the early 1820s, traditional construction methods changed and huts were built with circular walls of coated stakes interwoven with branches and having thatched conical roofs.

The individual huts that formed a homestead were usually built in a semi-circle around a circular cattle enclosure. Under the floor of the cattle enclosure, the Xhosas stored maize in bottle-shaped pits. The pits were well plastered and the openings closed with stones to prevent the maize from being spoilt. Although the maize gave off a bad smell and tasted sour, it was a good stand-by when food was in short supply.

The cooking areas, on the outside of the houses, were screened off and consisted of a clay oven for baking maize bread and some bins for storing corncobs. The area between the door of the main house and the opening of the cattle enclosure was always neatly swept and was called the courtyard. Here the chief would hold court cases.

Each homestead was an independent unit with its own livestock and lands.

The Xhosa people enjoyed physical closeness and mothers carried their babies on their backs, close to their bodies, from the moment the baby was born. The Xhosa home was usually quite small and the family members lived in close proximity to each other. Friends were automatically included as part of the community and the family.

The Xhosa had a deep sense of community and would extend a helping hand to anyone in need. The way in which food was cooked, on an open fire in a cast-iron pot, where everyone could come and help himself/herself, was indicative of their sharing nature.

Maize was the staple food. The Xhosa were also very fond of their beer, made from sorghum and maize.
Gender roles

Cattle always represented the wealth of a man and it was therefore the responsibility of the boys and the men to watch over and take care of the cattle. Women were expected to hoe the fields, carry out domestic duties and keep the family home in good condition. For relaxation, both men and women smoked pipes.

During the summer months most of the children ran around naked and, where possible, played in the water. Toys were often made out of clay, clay oxen being favourite playthings. Xhosa youths vigorously engaged in the national sport of stick fighting until after the initiation process when they were deemed adults. However, the different ages and sexes stayed within their own groups.
Personal adornment

For generations the Xhosa people have been referred to as the Red Blanket People. This was because of their custom of wearing red blankets dyed with red ochre, the intensity of the colour varying from tribe to tribe.

The different ways in which clothes and other accessories were worn signalled the status of the wearer. Unmarried women wore wraps tied around their shoulders, leaving their breasts exposed. Engaged women reddened their plaited hair, letting it screen their eyes, as a sign of respect for their fiancés.
Xhosa females always wore some form of headdress, as a sign of respect to the head of the family, either their father or husband. Older Xhosa women were allowed to wear more elaborate headpieces because of their seniority.

The various tribes had their own different forms of traditional dress and the colour of their garments and the adornments they wore denoted their tribal origins. The Xhosa tribe itself consisted of two major clans that could be distinguished from one another by their different styles of dress. The Gcaleka women, for example, encased their arms and legs in beads and brass bangles and some also wore neck beads.

Men often wore goatskin bags in which to carry essentials such as homegrown tobacco and a knife. Making the bag required great skill and patience as it had to be made from skin that had been removed in one piece, cured without removing the hair, and turned inside out.
ART AND CRAFTS

Other than the beadwork used for their traditional dress and their pipes made of clay, the Xhosa people were not really known for any other arts and crafts.

The girls of the family usually produced the beadwork, helping their mothers to make articles for themselves, their fathers, brothers and boyfriends. From time to time they were permitted to borrow these pieces and to wear them themselves.
Dancing formed an integral part of the Xhosa culture and was part and parcel of most of the rituals. Dancing was, for example, used in the “fattening of the maize” ceremony and as part of the ritual to ensure the fertility of a friend before she married or to restore her fertility if she had trouble bearing children after the marriage. Men and women and boys and girls did not dance in pairs. They lined up opposite each other.
SPECIAL OCCASIONS

Initiation

Before a Xhosa male was recognised as an adult with the right to marry, he first had to go through the initiation process and be circumcised. Until such time, he was regarded as a boy and irresponsibility on his part was expected and condoned. Only boys who were considered ready were allowed to undergo initiation.

The ceremony usually took place when the corn ripened, during the month of May. On the agreed day, the married women emerged at dawn and started building a grass hut for the boys. The boys waited in a secluded spot for arrival of the surgeon who would perform the circumcision. The boys were not allowed to utter any sound during the procedure.

After the wounds had healed, the boys undertook excursions into the bush where they hunted. A small boy from their village accompanied each. Sometimes they would be joined by one of the senior and respected men from the village, who would teach them how to behave like responsible adults. This teaching included the rules of etiquette, the laws of respect and how to honour the ancestral spirits.

At intervals, the young men staged dances, called Amakwetha, showing off their dancing skills while they proceeded from home to home. They disguised themselves in headdresses, wore heavy skirts of palm leaves and painted their bodies with white clay.
At the end of the isolation period, the initiates were marched down to the river to wash themselves. Upon returning, their guide then placed a piece of fat on their heads and smeared it straight down their bodies and across their shoulders, in the form of a cross. After this ritual, the boys wrapped themselves in brand new blankets and turned away from the hut, covering their faces. All their possessions were thrown into the hut and then set alight, to prevent witches from taking possession of these things. They were also forbidden to look back.

The amakrwala, as these boy-men were called, were then marched back to their parental homes where they were showered with gifts and a feast was prepared in their honour. After the feast was over, the young men went indoors where girls of their own age helped them to smear themselves from top to bottom with a mixture of oil and red ochre. Every day, for the following year, the boy had to refresh his red ochre. He also had to walk slowly to demonstrate his humility and to signify that he was still a “small”, unimportant man.

While the males of the tribe underwent their initiation, girls of the same age had their heads shaven and were dressed in a specific manner for a few weeks. When the male initiates emerged from their isolation, the girls were recognised as being of marriageable age.
Courtship and marriage

The traditional Xhosa was allowed to have more than one wife. Xhosa tradition made provision for a certain degree of contact and courtship between sweethearts but proper form demanded that girls remain virgins until they married. If a girl was not a virgin, her father would automatically receive less lobola (bride price) for her.

Traditionally, the groom-to-be would abduct the bride, with the approval of her family, and then marry her. Today, marriage only involves the exchange of valuables. The bride’s father pays a dowry to his daughter’s future in-laws and the bridegroom has to pay lobola for the bride.
BELIEF SYSTEM

The Xhosa people are traditionally ancestor worshippers but also believe in a creator who cares for them in the greater things in life and who protects them in extreme danger. The ancestral fathers, on the other hand, watch over the everyday lives of their descendants, their crops and their cattle. Among the Xhosa, old people are revered as spirits, and sacrificial offerings may actually be made to them while they are still alive.

The ancestral fathers also speak to their families in dreams. However, because not everyone is capable of interpreting these dreams, witchdoctors are called in to act as mediums. They are easily recognisable by their exotic regalia and they often wear white - a symbol of purity.

Death and burial are associated with many complex beliefs and rituals. The men of the clan always lead the funeral procession and the women follow behind. In the case of the death of the head of the family, cattle will be sacrificed and strict procedures followed, as he goes to join his ancestors and prepares himself to watch after the interests of the family that is left behind.

Today, many of the Xhosa-speaking people of South Africa are Christians, as a result of their early contact with European missionaries. However, their religion has become a unique blend of Christianity and traditional African beliefs.