**Source: http://www.everyculture.com/wc/Rwanda-to-Syria/Zulu.html**

**PRONUNCIATION:** ZOO-loo

**LOCATION:** KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa

**POPULATION:** 9.2 million

**LANGUAGE:** IsiZulu; Zulu; English

**RELIGION:** Mixture of traditional beliefs and Christianity

**1 • INTRODUCTION**

For many people, the Zulu are the best-known African people. Their military exploits led to the rise of a great kingdom that was feared for a long time over much of the African continent. The Zulu are the descendants of Nguni-speaking people. Their written history can be traced back to the fourteenth century.

In the early nineteenth century a young Zulu prince, Shaka, came onto the scene and welded most of the Nguni tribes into the powerful Zulu Kingdom. Shaka ruled from 1816 to 1828, when he was assassinated by his brothers. During his reign, Shaka recruited young men from all over the kingdom and trained them in his own novel warrior tactics. After defeating competing armies and assimilating their people, Shaka established his Zulu nation. Within twelve years, he had forged one of the mightiest empires the African continent has ever known.

However, during the late 1800s, British troops invaded Zulu territory and divided the Zulu land into thirteen chiefdoms. The Zulu never regained their independence. Throughout the mid-1900s they were dominated by different white governments, first the British and later on, the Afrikaner. The Zulu have endeavored to regain a measure of political autonomy, both before South Africa's first democratic election in 1994 and in the subsequent period to the present. They have been unsuccessful, however, with both governments.

**2 • LOCATION**

The 9 million Zulu-speaking people live mainly in KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa. Some are also scattered throughout the other provinces. KwaZulu-Natal borders on Mozambique in the north, Eastern Cape in the south, the Indian Ocean in the east, and Lesotho in the west. The capital city is Pietermaritzburg. KwaZulu-Natal is semi-fertile with a flat coastal plain, highlands to the west, and numerous rivers and streams. The subtropical climate brings lots of sunshine and brief, intense rain showers.

While many Zulu still live in traditionally structured rural communities, others have migrated to urban areas. However, links between urban and rural residents remain strong. A mixture of traditional and Western ways of life is clearly evident in the lives of almost all Zulu people.

**3 • LANGUAGE**

The dominant language in South Africa is isiZulu. In KwaZulu-Natal, the most frequently spoken languages are Zulu and English. Zulu is idiomatic and proverbial and is characterized by many clicks. The Zulu language is characterized by *hlonipha* (respect) terms. Addressing those who are older than oneself, especially elderly and senior people, by their first names is viewed as lack of respect. Therefore terms like *baba* (father) and *mama* (mother) are used not only to address one's parents but also other senior males and females of the community.

**4 • FOLKLORE**

Among the Zulu, the belief in [ancestral spirits](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Veneration_of_the_dead.html) ( *amadlozi* or *abaphansi* ) has always been strong. These are the spirits of the dead. The Zulus recognize the existence of a supreme being. *UMvelinqangi* (One Who Came First) or *uNkulunkulu* (Very Big One) is God because he appeared first. This supreme being is far removed from the lives of the people and has never been seen by anyone. No ceremonies are, therefore, ever performed for uMvelinqangi. Zulu people believe that the spirits of the dead mediate between uMvelinqangi and the people on earth.

Zulus believe in a long life that continues after death. Getting old is seen as a blessing. This is based on the myth that long ago people did not die but rather lived for years. The Creator did not think that people should die. He, therefore, called a chameleon and said, "Chameleon, I am sending you to the people. Go and tell them that they are not to die." Although the chameleon was very slow, the Creator did not mind. He waited for the reply. However, after walking a long distance, the chameleon saw wild berries and decided to stop and eat them. It told itself that the Creator would not see it. Unfortunately, the Creator saw it and became very angry. He called a lizard, which came swiftly. The Creator told the lizard to go and tell the people that they are to die. The lizard sped off, passed the chameleon on the way, and delivered the message to the people. After a long time, the chameleon appeared, breathing heavily, and delivered its message. The people were very angry and said to it, "Why did you waste time? We have already received the lizard's message!" Thus, growing old among the Zulu is seen as a special privilege from the Creator. Elderly people are believed to be sacred, and are thus are always respected.

**5 • RELIGION**

Ancestral spirits are important in Zulu religious life. Offerings and sacrifices are made to the ancestors for protection, good health, and happiness. Ancestral spirits come back to the world in the form of dreams, illnesses, and sometimes snakes. The Zulu also believe in the use of magic. Anything beyond their understanding, such as bad luck and illness, is considered to be sent by an angry spirit. When this happens, the help of a diviner (soothsayer) or [herbalist](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Herbalist.html) is sought. He or she will communicate with the ancestors or use natural herbs and prayers to get rid of the problem.

Many Zulu converted to Christianity under colonialism. Although there are many Christian converts, ancestral beliefs have far from disappeared. Instead, there has been a mixture of traditional beliefs and Christianity. This kind of religion is particularly common among urbanites. There are also fervent Christians who view ancestral belief as outdated and sinful.

**6 • MAJOR HOLIDAYS**

The Zulu recognize the national holidays of the Republic of South Africa. In addition, they celebrate Shaka's Day every year in September. This holiday is marked by celebrations and slaughtering cattle to commemorate the founder of the Zulu Kingdom. On this important day, Zulu people wear their full traditional attire (clothing and weapons) and gather at Shaka's tombstone, kwaDukuza in Stanger. This is a very colorful day attended by both national and international dignitaries who represent their governments. *Izimbongi* (praise-poets) sing the praises of all the Zulu kings, from Shaka to the present king, Zwelithini.

**7 • RITES OF PASSAGE**

Among the Zulu, birth, puberty, marriage, and death are all celebrated and marked by the slaughter of sacrificial animals to ancestors. Birth and puberty are particularly celebrated. To Zulu traditionalists, childlessness and giving birth to girls only are the greatest of all misfortunes. No marriage is permanent until a child, especially a boy, is born.

The puberty ceremony *(umemulo)* is a transition to full adulthood. Nowadays it is performed only for girls. It involves separation from other people for a period to mark the changing status from youth to adulthood. This is followed by "reincorporation," characterized by [ritual killing](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Human_sacrifice.html) of animals, dancing, and feasting. After the ceremony, the girl is declared ready for marriage. The courting days then begin. The girl may take the first step by sending a "love letter" to a young man who appeals to her. Zulu love letters are made of beads. Different colors have different meanings, and certain combinations carry particular messages.

Dating occurs when a young man visits or writes a letter to a woman telling her how much he loves her. Once a woman decides that she loves this man, she can tell him so. It is only after they have both agreed that they love each other that they may be seen together in public. Parents should become aware of the relationship only when the man informs them that he wants to marry their daughter.

**8 • RELATIONSHIPS**

In contrast to their known warriorism, the Zulu are very warm and amicable people at a personal level. *Ubuntu* (literally, "humanness," "good moral nature," "good disposition") shapes the everyday life of the Zulu people. This comes from a notion that a human being is the highest of all species. There are hundreds of proverbs written about ubuntu. These proverbs relate to the treatment of people, good and bad behavior, pride, ingratitude, bad manners, moral degeneracy, conceit, cruelty, obstinacy, pretense, helping others, and so forth.

*Sawubona* is usually enough of a greeting for strangers, but a formal greeting is more appropriate for those who are familiar. The formal greeting includes a three-times handshake, while asking about the well-being of the person and his or her relations *(Ninjani?)* . Taking leave involves the standard *Sala/Nisale kahle* (Remain well), and the other person responds by saying, *Uhambe/Nihambe kahle* (Go well). It is customary for juniors and the young to initiate the greetings when they meet their seniors and their elders.

**9 • LIVING CONDITIONS**

In South Africa, living conditions cannot be divorced from local politics. Conditions for the Zulu are similar to those of other black people. Zulu in most of the rural areas do not have adequate basic services such as electricity, clean water, formal housing, transport, hospitals, or clinics. Urban Zulu live in the so-called black townships and the areas fringing industrial cities. Their living conditions are, at least, better than those in rural areas. They constitute the Zulu middle class; their lifestyle is usually no different from that of other Western urbanites. Since the education available in rural black schools is inferior, the people in these areas are not equipped to migrate and seek a better life in the urban areas. If they migrate, most end up in the poor areas fringing cities.

In the rural areas of KwaZulu-Natal, a typical Zulu homestead will be circular and fenced, with a thatched-roof house.

**10 • FAMILY LIFE**

The Zulu term for "family" *(umndeni)* includes all the people staying in a homestead who are related to each other, either by blood, marriage, or adoption. Most rural households comprise extended families, brothers with their wives, unmarried sisters, children, parents, and grandparents all staying together in the same homestead. As a sign of respect, parents and elders are not called by their first names; instead, kinship names (surnames) are used.

The Zulu family is [patriarchal](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Patriarchy.html); a man is both the head of the family and the figure of authority. It is not unusual for young men to have as many girlfriends as they wish. If they can afford it, they can take more than one wife when they decide to get married. Traditionally, women were not supposed to go out and work, since they were a man's responsibility. Nowadays the status of Zulu women is slowly improving with more women receiving an education.

Marriage is exogamous; marriage to any person belonging to one's father's, mother's, father's mother's, and mother's mother's clan is prohibited. If it happens, the *ukudabula* (literally, "cutting of the [blood relationship](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Consanguinity.html)") ritual is performed.

**11 • CLOTHING**

Today, the everyday clothing of a Zulu is no different from that of any modern urbanite. Traditional clothing, however, is very colorful. Men, women, and children wear beads as accessories. Men wear *amabheshu* , made of goat or cattle skin, which looks like a waist apron, worn at the back. They decorate their heads with feathers and fur. Men also wear frilly goatskin bands on their arms and legs. Women wear *isidwaba* , a traditional Zulu black skirt made of goat or cattle skin. If a woman is not married, she may wear only strings of beads to cover the top part of the body. If she is married, she will wear a T-shirt. Zulu only wear their traditional clothes on special occasions, such as Shaka's Day and cultural gatherings.

**12 • FOOD**

The rural Zulu economy is based on cattle and agriculture. Consequently, the main staple diet consists of cow and agricultural products. This includes barbecued and boiled meat; *amasi* (curdled milk), mixed with dry, ground corn or dry, cooked mealie-meal (corn flour); *amadumbe* (yams); vegetables; and fruits. The Zulu traditional beer is not only a staple food but a considerable source of nutrition. It is also socially and ritually important and is drunk on all significant occasions.

Drinking and eating from the same plate was and still is a sign of friendship. It is customary for children to eat from the same dish, usually a big basin. This derives from a "share what you have" belief which is part of *ubuntu* (humane) philosophy.

**13 • EDUCATION**

Illiteracy (inability to read and write) is high among most black South Africans. However, education is slowly improving with the new government. Before, children went to school only if their parents could afford to send them. Schooling started at seven years of age and continued until about twenty-four years of age. Since education was not compulsory, pupils could take their time to finish matric (high school). Passing matriculation (graduating) was and still is regarded as a high achievement by the whole community. After matriculation, those parents who can afford it usually send their children to college.

Education and raising a child is like a cycle among the Zulu. Parents spend all they have to raise and educate their children. In turn, the children take care of their parents and their own children when they start working. A person who breaks this cycle is viewed as a community outcast, one who has forgotten about his or her roots.

**14 • CULTURAL HERITAGE**

The Zulu are fond of singing as well as dancing. These activities promote unity at all the transitional ceremonies such as births, weddings, and funerals. All the dances are accompanied by drums. The men dress as warriors, wave their clubs, and thrust their cowhide shields forward.

Zulu [folklore](http://www.everyculture.com/knowledge/Folklore.html) is transmitted through storytelling, praise-poems, and proverbs. These explain Zulu history and teach moral lessons. Praise-poems (poems recited about the kings and the high achievers in life) are becoming part of popular culture.

**15 • EMPLOYMENT**

In the past, only able-bodied men were supposed to work. Before the 1970s, especially in rural areas, being able to send a written letter and get a reply meant that a young boy was ready to go and look for work. Now Zulus want to complete their high school education. In the mind of the Zulu, work should benefit either one's parents or children and siblings. The first salary (or the bigger portion), therefore, is usually given to parents in return for blessings.

**16 • SPORTS**

Soccer is very popular for both young boys and men. Children learn the game by watching their older brothers play. Whenever boys are together and not engaged in some household or school activity, they play soccer. Young boys, especially those who live next to big rivers, also compete in swimming. Girls, if they are not at school, are expected to assist their mothers in the house. However, they can play games once they have finished their chores. One popular game played by girls, especially in rural KwaZulu, is *masishayana/maphakathi.* Two girls stand opposite each other, usually not more than 165 feet (50 meters) apart. Another girl stands between them, facing the one who is holding a tennis ball. The idea of this game is to try to hit the girl standing in the middle while she tries to avoid being hit. If the ball hits her or touches her clothes, she is out. Being able to avoid being hit ten times earns the girl a point. Having the most points means winning a game and becoming the best player in your circle of friends. One sport which is participated in by both girls and boys is track and field, an organized school sport.

**17 • RECREATION**

Ritual ceremonies also serve as part of the entertainment and recreation for the whole community. Zulu custom does not mandate formal invitations to gatherings where food will be served, such as weddings and birthday parties. The Zulu believe that food should be shared. Therefore, uninvited arrival at a celebration is an honor to the host. These celebrations include singing and dancing.

Television is very popular among urban Zulu households. Owning a television set is a luxury for rural Zulu since very few rural areas have electricity. Those who can afford to go to the movies do so. For urban teenagers, American youth culture, especially clothing and music, is very popular. Among adults, *stokvels* (voluntary or common-interest associations) provide financial assistance, friendship, and recreation.

**18 • CRAFTS AND HOBBIES**

The Zulu, especially those from rural areas, are known for their weaving, craftmaking, pottery, and beadwork. Women and children weave everyday-use mats, beer sieves, and baskets for domestic purposes. They also make calabashes (decorated gourds used as utensils). Men and boys carve various household objects and ornaments from wood and bone. These include headrests, trays, scrapers, household utensils, and chairs. Beadmaking is mainly women's work because beads are believed to be a way of sending messages without being direct.

**19 • SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

The Zulu terms *ubuntu* and *hlonipha* summarize everything about human rights. However, it is evident that some individuals in Zulu society, particularly women and children, enjoy fewer human rights than others.