

## Introduction

*Zimbabwe's Cultural Heritage* is a collection of pieces on the culture of the Ndebele, Xhosa, Tonga, Shona, Kalanga, Nambiya and Venda ethnic groups in Zimbabwe. A brief historical background is given for each group, though the emphasis of this book is not on the histories of groups, but on their cultural practices.

Many of the pieces are adaptations of articles that appeared in the *Sunday News* of Bulawayo. In the early days of the author's work with the newspaper, extensive use was made of published sources. However, over the years this changed. This came about as a realization that what is published is already preserved and, therefore, priority must be given to capturing the fading memories of the elders. Scores of people have been interviewed for the material in this book. It is to them that we owe this collection. Sadly, some of them have since died, but their contributions continue to live on in these pages.

*Zimbabwe's Cultural Heritage* was born out of a desire to promote and preserve for posterity our nation's cultural traditions. The Rhodesian State, whose boundaries were spelt out in the 1889 Royal Charter granted to Cecil John Rhodes by Queen Victoria of England, embraced people who hitherto had lived apart. Consequently, the new state was characterised by a kaleidoscopic cultural landscape.

The colonising culture became the dominant culture. The subservient cultures began to incorporate elements from the ruling culture and underwent fundamental changes.

Despite the process of acculturation that ensued, the dominated cultures have some of their elements surviving to this day. This book seeks to capture the cultural practices before western culture impacted on them. Where some aspects of the indigenous culture have undergone change, this book seeks to highlight those changes and to explain the forces that have been at work.

The new Zimbabwean State has a variety of cultures, but it has inherited a legacy of a domineering culture. Most people would see merit in a nation that is characterised by an awareness and appreciation of the cultures of all of its groups.

In Zimbabwe today, there are common unifying elements of African culture. For example, the substance of religion is common to all African peoples. None of them communicated directly with God. Instead, they did so through a hierarchy of departed ancestors. Propitiation of the departed ancestors so

that they intercede with God on behalf of their living progeny places a two way communication system at the heart of African religion.

All the African peoples in Zimbabwe who apparently belonged to the Bantu race did not espouse separation of powers in their philosophy of governance. Religious power, political power, judicial power and, indeed, other forms of power tended to be fused in the same individual. Among the Shona there was some separation of the religious and political authorities. The two worked together and religious authority kept political authority in check. Thus political excesses were kept under control.

It is appropriate to give some indication as to how society was organized. The basic unit was the extended family. This was the working unit on a day to day basis. Members of the family worked together in all aspects of life. The males were the heads of families.

A group of families that shared the same totem constituted a clan. In general terms a totem related to some natural thing, for example an animal, bird or plant. A totemic animal was revered and members bearing a particular totem did not eat their totemic animal. Totems defined marital boundaries. In most cases there were no intra-totemic marriages.

Over a period of time, clans combined to constitute an ethnic group. This could also be referred to as a tribe. Such a group shared a common history, the same traditions and world view. They would also fall under the same political authority.

This book recognises the different historical paths followed by each ethnic group. For convenience and in recognition of the historical realities, the cultural heritage of each group has been given separately. It is acknowledged that not all ethnic groups have been covered. For example, the Sotho/Birwa of Matabeleland South, the Hlengwe and Shangane of Masvingo have not been included in this first volume. Nor has western culture been considered.

It is the author's hope that the project will expand and embrace the remaining cultural groups. It is also hoped that a deeper examination will be made of the cultural groups already included in this volume.

The book is intended for all those who are interested in the cultural practices of their own ancestors and the ancestors of others. Further, the various traditional cultural practices help to throw some light on current happenings. Why would a relation of a deceased woman dump her corpse on the doorstep of her husband? Why would the Tonga be more amenable to democratic practice?

The present, sculptured on the anvil of the past, fashions the future. We need

to understand our past in order to move with confidence into the future.

One distinct characteristic of the book is the use of words, phrases and expressions in indigenous languages. This was a deliberate strategy to capture the language that was contemporary to the times when the various cultural practices were in vogue. Translations of these names and phrases are given, or their meaning understood by their context. Where people or places have multiple names, a single version is used after the initial occurrence. A glossary is given at the end of the book for some common words.

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