Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

SOUTH AFRICA - ZULU G21

In the nineteenth century the Zulus were a large kingdom that covered much of South Africa. They are still the country's largest ethnic group but for much of the twentieth century they were victims of apartheid. This meant, that amongst other things, they were not allowed to vote or live in certain areas purely because of their skin colour. It was not until 1994 that everyone in South Africa was finally allowed to vote equally. In 2009 a Zulu, Jacob Zuma, was elected the President of South Africa.





Above: Jacob Zuma



In this box are pieces that would have been worn by Zulus. Many Zulus have moved into towns to look for better-paid jobs but a large number still live in their traditional way. The clothing is distinctive, as are their baskets and metalwork.

Necklace

Traditional Zulu women wear necklaces like this. They make beaded work for themselves that send messages to their lovers. They are often called 'love necklaces' but they are also used to express anger. The way the different coloured beads are placed beside each other can make special messages.







Women also give finished work to men. The man will only wear beadwork given to him by an unmarried girl. Wearing a piece of work from a girl implies they are courting, so he never accepts a piece from a relative. To wear something made by a sister would suggest they were together!

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Necklace



The necklace is made from beads of different sizes. Imagine trying to thread the very small ones!



It is very important that the main colours are yellow and red. The girl is sending a message by placing these two colours beside each other. These messages are very personal and the colours give a general idea of what is being expressed. The only people who would know their true meaning are the girl who made the beads and the man they were intended for! It is a silent note to her boyfriend or husband. It might not be a very nice message! Yellow and red put together is generally a message that the girl is very angry with him.

Bead anklet



This is made by a Zulu man's girlfriend to be worn around the ankle. He would not make the beaded anklet himself. It would make a rustling sound as he walked or danced.

Bracelet



To wear this bracelet the hand has to first go through the yellow and blue loop. Then the red and black beads would be wrapped around and clasped on.

Beads such as these were often taken as souvenirs. The British conquest of Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries resulted in many travellers bringing gifts back to Britain.

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Necklace





Each of the beaded colours used by the Zulu's has a meaning. Red can show a passionate love or anger. The black beads can mean sadness or marriage. A happy homelife or being lovesick are represented by the green beads. Yellow can be fertility or hatred and white means purity.

Bangle



The bangle has been made by twisting metal wire into tight shapes. Look at how small the knots are. There was no machine to make these, each one is made by hand.

It has been in the Museum's collection for over fifty years. Many British museums became full of items from parts of the Empire. They were brought home to show people in Britain how other cultures lived.

Zulu doll



Fertility dolls are given to young Zulu girls. They look after the doll, often dressing them until they have their own child. Having a child is one of the most important moments for a Zulu woman. If the doll is damaged it is thought to be bad luck and something might happen to any babies they give birth to.





The doll represents a married Zulu woman. The headdress represents the woman's hair, which is swept back as a sign that they are married. The doll is also completely clothed, another sign that it represents marriage. Traditionally Zulu tribal women left their chest uncovered until they had a partner.

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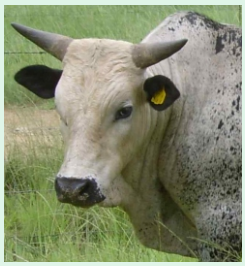
Beaded horn



This horn comes from the Nguni cattle. It has been covered with decorative beads and made into a container. Can you imagine what a Zulu would keep in it?



The cattle's skin is black and white. They also have different horn shapes - this one is quite curved but others are straight.



Cattle is very important to the Zulus. When a man marries he must give some of his cattle to the bride's family as a dowry. It is definitely a case of the more the better! This is because the number he owns acts as a sign of his status. Cow hind traditionally provided Zulu warriors with a shield. At the Museum of Reading there is one on display. A photograph of the Zulu shield is on the right.

Rush mat



Grass has many uses to the Zulu. It is used to make rush mats, sleeping mats and baskets. This is a small rush mat, probably made for tourists.

The rush mat is usually placed in the hut for sitting on. They are often presented to a couple as wedding gifts.

Women make the rush mats. It is not an easy job to do. Look at the all the twisting and twirling that has been done to the grass. This is before the woman has threaded all the colourful beads into specific patterned triangles. The triangle is significant to the Zulus. It represents the family, with each point symbolising the mother, father and child.





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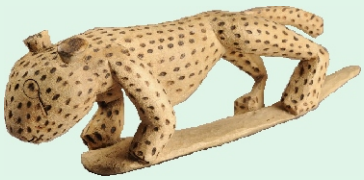
Cheetah



This carved cheetah looks friendly but in reality it is a skillful hunter. Its physique means it can run at up to 70 mph - as fast as a car. It can only do this in short sprints because the strain on the body creates a lot of heat.



Cheetahs attack their prey, which could be as small as a rabbit or as big as an antelope, by sneaking up close. Then, in a quick burst, it chases after it. The victim is grasped around the neck to choke it. After this it will rest, before eating as much as it can. Unlike most other big cats, such as lions, it will not stay for long with the dead animal. Despite its speed it is not very strong and so if another animal came to compete with the cheetah for food it would probably lose.

Cheetahs are often confused with leopards. They are distinguishable from leopards by their tear stained eye. This model doesn't show that on the animal. The Zulus, however, tell a story of why the cheetah came to have tear stained eyes.

The cheetah's tears

A wicked and lazy hunter was sitting under a tree. He could not be bothered to hunt and wanted someone to provide the meat for him. Then he noticed a female cheetah sneaking up on an antelope. She sprang forward and chased the antelope until she caught it.

The hunter watched the cheetah take the food back to her three cubs. He had a wicked idea. If he could have one of the cubs then he could train them to hunt for him! He waited until the Mum left her cubs to find a watering hole. Then he picked up his spear and went over to the cubs. They were so young that they were not scared of the hunter and did not run away. The hunter suddenly thought that instead of taking one cub he should take all three. Three cubs hunting would surely be better than one.

The mum returned to find her cubs gone. She was broken-hearted and began to cry and wail. The tears that ran down her cheek stained her skin black. Her wailing was so loud that an old and wise man came to see what was wrong. He realised that she had lost her cubs. When he found out that the lazy hunter had stolen them he became angry. Not only had the hunter stolen the cubs, he had broken the traditions of the tribe - that a hunter should use his own strength and skill. He told the village elders what had happened. They banished the lazy hunter from the village and the wise man recovered the cubs. He took the cubs back to the cheetah. But the long crying had stained forever the cheetah's cheeks.



