Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

SOUTH AFRICA - ZULU G21/A

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

Zulu girls spend much of their time sitting in groups and making intricate beadwork. They then give the finished pieces to boyfriends and husbands.





The beadwork is not only for decoration. The colour and arrangement of the beads are very important. Each colour and shape conveys a hidden meaning. The necklaces have been called 'love letters' but they are also used to send out angry messages. Red beads can mean either a strong love for someone or they could represent anger. Such huge contrasts make it difficult to interpret the pieces of work. The only people who would truly know their meaning is the girl who made the beads and the man they were intended for!



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Necklace



The man only wears 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!



Like the other necklaces, the coloured beads give a mixed message. The black can mean sadness or marriage whilst green shows a happy homelife or that they are lovesick.

Necklace



This necklace has beads and seeds on it. The deep red coloured seeds come from the coral tree. Small holes are drilled through them so that they can be threaded onto the string. It takes a lot of work and needs a great deal of skill!

The beads create a diamond shape for the main decoration. A diamond is made from two triangles joined at the base. The triangle is significant to the Zulus. It represents the family, with each point representing the mother, father and child. When it is in a diamond or an hourglass shape it shows the coming together of two families. This means the wearer is married.



This particular necklace is for a female. When men are married the diamonds join at the point to form an hourglass shape rather than at the base as they do here.

Right: The married man is wearing a necklace with the beads in the shape of an hourglass.

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Armband





Imagine trying to thread all those small beads onto the string!

This beaded piece would have been worn on the upper arm of a Zulu man. Any accessories, such as an armband, reflect their status. In the village men usually wear light clothing. An umutsha made from animal hide covers the front and back like a loincloth. However, as more Zulu men move into towns they increasingly wear suits or jeans.

Ishoba



The ishoba was used by the Zulu sangoma. Sangomas have an important role in the village. They heal, direct rituals and narrate the village history. The sangoma speaks to the spirit of the ancestors if there is a problem. They will then be told what has angered the spirits and what needs to be done to resolve this. In many ways the sangoma acts as translator for the village. They interpret dreams, illness and misfortune and then set out to remedy them.



The ishoba is shown being used on the left. It is usually made from cow hair. Instead of cow hair this has been made from palm leaf, probably for tourists.

Necklace



This type of necklace is called an ujiza. It is different from the other necklaces because the beads are wrapped around a tube. A woman wears this when she accepts a man to be her husband. The necklace has blue and white beads intertwined, it signals the wearer is in a relationship.