

1. Description

1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family:

- Niger-Congo, Ndebele, Bantu

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com):

- ISO 693-3: nbl

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):

- between 24°53' to 25°43' S and 28°22' to 29°50' E (1)

1.4 Brief history:

- “The history of the Ndebele people can be traced back to Mafana, their first identifiable chief. Mafana’s successor, Mhlanga, had a son named Musi who, in the early 1600’s, decided to move away from his cousins (later to become the mighty Zulu nation) and to settle in the hills of Gauteng near where the capital, Pretoria is situated. After the death of Chief Musi, his two sons quarrelled over the chieftainship and the tribe divided into two sections, the Manala and the Ndzundza. The Manala remained in the north while the Ndzundza, also known as the Southern Ndebele, travelled to the east and the south. Both groups remained distinctly Ndebele.” (3)

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors: The Ndebele have been compared to the Pedi villagers, another group of inhabitants neighboring the Ndebele in the Morotse village in South Africa. When compared, the Ndebele have not been as influenced by missionaries. The Ndebele are seen as more “ethnic” In fact, their religion is not entirely centered around Christianity, as their neighbors, and their schooling system is less valued, youths leave school early to look for work:

- “...even when an Ndebele child does attend school, he or she will leave as soon as possible: if a girl, she will never truly regard herself as grown up unless she has worked as a domestic servant in Pretoria for a few years before returning to build a house: if a boy, he will get work so that he can buy an old car which will be parked in his parents’ plot and then left to rust.” (6p39)

1.6 Ecology (natural environment):

- Terrain: “vast interior plateau rimmed by rugged hills and narrow coastal plain” (7)
- Climate: “mostly semiarid; subtropical along east coast; sunny days, cool nights” (7)

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density: population size is around 640,000

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):

- Maize, sorghum, pumpkins, potatoes (1)

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

- Cattle, goats, pigs and chickens (1)

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?:

2.4 Food storage:

2.5 Sexual division of production:

- “In a pastoral society such as that of the Ndebele, men attended to animal husbandry and women to horticultural and agricultural activities except when new fields (amasimu) are cleared with the help of men who join in a communal working party called an ijima. Even male social age status is defined in terms of husbandry activities: a boy who herds goats (umsana wembuzana), a boy who herds calves (umsana wamakhonyana), and so forth. Men are responsible for the construction and thatching of houses, women for plastering and painting of walls. Teenage girls are trained by their mothers in the art of smearing and painting. Even today girls from an early age (approximately 5 or 6) assist their mothers in the fetching of water and wood, making fire, and cooking. Female responsibilities have arduously increased in recent years with the increase in permanent and temporary male and female labor migrants to urban areas” (1)

2.6 Land tenure: Land is tribal property, but can be distributed to families by the Chief:

- “Land was tribal property; portions were allocated to individual families by the chief and headmen as custodians, under a system called ukulotjha, with the one-time payment of a fee that also implied allegiance to the political ruler of the area. Since the formation of the KwaNdebele homeland, traditional tenure, controlled by the chief, has been reintroduced. The last-born son inherits the land, but married sons often build adjacent to their natal homesteads, if space allows it. In certain rural areas (e.g., Nebo), this form of extended three-generational settlement is still intact.” (1)

2.7 Ceramics:

- “Since precolonial times, Ndebele are believed to have obtained all pottery from trading with Sotho-speaking neighbors. The Tshabangu clan reportedly introduced the Ndebele to blacksmithing.” (1)

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

2.9 Food taboos:

2.10 Canoes/watercraft?

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f): Not found, but after her second or third menstruation she is isolated and prepared for her initiation into Ndebele society.

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

4.3 Completed family size (m and f): Family size typically consisted of three generations:

- “A single household may be composed of a man, his wife and children (including children of an unmarried daughter), wives and children of his sons, and a father's widowed sister.” (1)

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

- “Perhaps more than many other groups, Ndzundza men – especially those of chiefly background – continue to practice polygamy. Women must practice ukhlonipha (respect) towards their husbands and parents-in-law in particular, but also towards men in general.” (4)
- “Polygyny has almost disappeared.” (1)

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:

- “Bride-wealth consists of cattle and/or money (ikhazi). Marital negotiations between the two sets of families are an extended process that includes the stadial presentation of six to eight cattle and may not be finally contracted until long after the birth of the first child. Marital residence is virilocal, and new brides (omak jothi) are involved in cooking, beadwork, and even the rearing of other small children of various households in the homestead. Brides have a lifelong obligation to observe the custom of ukhlonipha or "respect" for their fathers-in-law (e.g., physical avoidance, first-name taboo). Fathers demand more bride-wealth for educated women.”(1)

4.9 Inheritance patterns:

- “Although the inheritance of land and other movable and immovable household assets are negotiated within the homestead as a whole, Ndebele seem to subscribe to the custom of inheritance by the youngest son (the upetjhana).” (1)

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:

- “The Ndebele respects his father and does not talk in his presence, nor joins in conversation unless addressed.” (10p250)

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):

- “The recent and contemporary practice of these marriage rules (...) places more emphasis on exogamy than on the repeating of marriage alliances over several generations which recurring cross-cousin marriage would facilitate. Informants stressed this too: ‘You may marry a father’s sister’s child, but it is better to marry an unknown person’. It is this practice of setting up new marriage links in each generation rather than cementing already-existing ones which could account for an impression I gained early on in fieldwork: in the core group of plotholding Ndebele who arrived early in the village, virtually every family has some kinship tie to all others. More important, (...) almost everyone in this group is related, at least by marriage, to [the] Chief.” (6p48)

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these “other fathers” recognized?:

4.14 What is the belief of the mother’s role in procreation exactly? (e.g., “receptacle in which fetus grows”):

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?:

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape:

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin):

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?:

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring:

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children?: See completed family size, the Ndebele live in households containing the generations, so its possible that the children would just stay in the house to be raised by grandparents, uncles and aunts.

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females:

4.22 Evidence for couvades: None found

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older):

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?:

- “The three-generational household enhances intergenerational contact; the absence of migrant mothers and fathers necessitates that grandparents care for children.” (1)
- “Contemporary Ndebele households are essentially matrifocal, and children interact with their fathers and elder male siblings only over weekends.” (1)

4.24 Joking relationships?:

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations:

4.26 Incest avoidance rules:

- “Marriages were only concluded between members of different clans, that is between individuals who did not have the same clan name. However, a man could marry a woman from the same family as his paternal grandmother.”(3)

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?: Yes:

- “Both urban and rural Ndebele weddings nowadays involve a customary ceremony (ngesikhethu) as well as a Christian ceremony.”(1)
- “The prospective bride was kept secluded for two weeks before the wedding in a specially made structure in her parents’ house, to shield her from men’s eyes. When the bride emerged from her seclusion, she was wrapped in a blanket and covered by an umbrella that was held for her by a younger girl who also attended to her other needs. On her marriage, the bride was given a marriage blanket, which she would, in time, adorn with beadwork, either added to the blanket’s outer surface or woven into the fabric. After the wedding, the couple lived in the area belonging to the husband’s clan.” (3)

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?:

- After marriage, “women retained the clan name of their fathers but children born of the marriage took their father’s clan name.” (3)

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?):

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)? :

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:

Warfare/homicide

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:

- “Except for the 1800s, the Ndebele as a political entity were not involved in any major regional conflicts, especially after 1883, when they lost their independence and had their land expropriated. Almost a century later, in 1986, they experienced violent internal (regional) conflict when a minority vigilante movement called Imbokodo (Grinding Stone) took over the local police and security system and terrorized the entire former homeland. In a surprising move, the whole population called on the royal house of Paramount Mabhoko for moral support, and, within weeks, the youth rid the area of that infamous organization. Royal leaders emerged as local heroes of the struggle.” (1)

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):

4.18 Cannibalism?

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:

- “the majority of Ndebele settlements in the pre-colonial era were small-scale, probably averaging from about fifty to two hundred people.” (9p608)

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):

- “Ndebele authority structures were similar to those of their Zulu cousins. The authority over a tribe was vested in the tribal head (ikozi), assisted by an inner or family council (amaphakathi). Wards (izilindi) were administered by ward heads and the family groups within the wards were governed by the heads of the families.” (3)

5.4 Post marital residence:

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex):

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:

5.8 Village and house organization:

- “The residential unit of each family was called an umuzi. The umuzi usually consisted of a family head (umnumzana) with his wife and unmarried children. If he had more than one wife, the umuzi was divided into two halves, a right and a left half, to accommodate the different wives. An umuzi sometimes grew into a more complex dwelling unit when the head’s married sons and younger brothers joined the household. Every tribe consisted of a number of patrilineal clans or izibongo. This meant that every clan consisted of a group of individuals who shared the same ancestor in the paternal line.”(3)

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens’ houses):

- “The homestead consists of a number of houses (izindlu) representing various households and centered around a cattle enclosure (isibaya). Other structures in the homestead include the boys' hut (ilawu), various smaller huts for girls behind each house (indlu), and granaries. Each house complex was separated from the other by an enclosure called the isirhodlo. This enclosure was subdivided along gender lines into a men's section in the front and a domestic (cooking) area (isibuya) at the back.” (1)

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

- Woven sleeping mats (1)

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:

- “Precolonial Ndebele homesteads (imizi) were organized along three-generational patrilinear agnatic lines. It seems that these might have extended into large localized lineages (iikoro) under the social and ritual leadership of the senior male member. During and after the indentured period, the three-generational homestead remained popular despite restrictions in size and number imposed by White landlords.” (1)

5.12 Trade:

- “Archaeologists believe that societies such as that of the Ndebele formed part of the wider pre-nineteenth century trade industry on the African east coast and had been introduced to consumer goods such as tobacco, cloth, and glass beads. Historians such as Delius (1989) believe that a large number of firearms reached the Ndzundza-Ndebele during the middle 1800s.” (1)

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6.0 Time allocation to RCR: It seems the Ndebele dedicate a large amount of time to ceremonies and rituals, it is the only way to pass through their culture and therefore they sometimes spend weeks preparing for ceremonies.

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): There are traditional healers in the Ndebele culture who heal all illnesses.

- “The Ndebele believe in the use of magic. Ill fortune such as bad luck and illness is considered to be sent by an angry spirit. When this happens, the help of a traditional healer is sought, and he or she will communicate with the ancestors, or use natural herbs and prayers to get rid of the problem.” (4)
- “Traditional healers were also seen as mediums, who could contact the ancestral spirits, [they] would throw a collection of bones down onto a mat and then read the future or cause of illness from the position of the bones.” (5)

6.2 Stimulants:

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):

- “The first initiation of the child takes place during the disposal of the placenta and the umbilical cord. The child is received into the community in which it is to live and as a new member it must be given a name for identification.” (11)
- Every four years there is an initiation rite, symbolizing the transition from childhood to adulthood for boys and girls. Boys are initiated around 18 years of age, when “a special regiment (indanga) is set up and led by a boy of high social rank. Each regiment has a distinguishing name. Among the Ndzundza tribe there is a cycle of 15 such regimental names, allocated successively, and among the Manala there is a cycle of 13 such names.” For the girls, they are adorned with jewelry and beadwork, but are “kept in isolation and are prepared and trained to become homemakers and matriarchs.” The end of the initiation ceremony symbolizes the conclusion of the initiation schooling. (3)

6.4 Other rituals:

- “The Ndebele people continuously placate the[ir ancestors] through sacrifice of goats and cattle or prayer using beer as an offering or libation.” (8)

6.5 Myths (Creation):

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games): Ndebele women are known for their painting, beadwork and crafts. The Ndebele society is actually highly regarded as an artsy culture.

- “Ndebele art has always been an important identifying characteristic of the Ndebele. Apart from its aesthetic appeal it has a cultural significance that serves to reinforce the distinctive Ndebele identity. The Ndebele’s essential artistic skill has always been understood to be the ability to combine exterior sources of stimulation with traditional design concepts borrowed from their ancestors” (3)
- “Present crafts include weaving of sleeping mats, sieves, and grain mats; woodcarving of spoons and wooden pieces used in necklaces; and the manufacturing of a variety of brass anklets and neck rings.” (1)
- “As Ndebele beadwork became one of the most popular curio art commodities in the period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, women also beaded glass bottles, gourds, and animal horns. The recent prolific trading in Ndebele beadwork concentrates on “antique” garments as pieces of art. Some women are privately commissioned to apply their painting on canvas, shopping center walls, and even cars.” (1)

6.7 Sex differences in RCR: In a girl’s initiation ceremony, the women:

- “sing, dance, and display traditional costumes as the men remain spatially isolated from the courtyard in front of the homestead.” (1)

6.8 Missionary effect:

- “Some Ndebele people converted to Christianity under colonialism and missionary influence. However, although there are many Christian converts, ancestral beliefs have not disappeared. Instead, there has been a mixture of traditional beliefs and Christianity.” (4)
- “Nineteenth-century evangelizing activities by the Berlin Mission did little to change traditional Ndebele religion, especially that of the Ndzundza. Although the Manala lived on the Wallmannsthal mission station from 1873, they were in frequent conflict with local missionaries. Recent Christian and African Christian church influences spread rapidly, however, and most Ndebele are now members of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), one of a variety of (African) Apostolic churches, or the Catholic church.” (1)

6.9 RCR revival:

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs: Ndebele believe their ancestors have some control of what happens to the living.

- “Ancestral spirits come back to the world in the form of dreams, illnesses, and sometimes snakes.” (4)

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people? No, but newborns are named after dead ancestors:

- “The name of one of his ancestors may be given to him as a memorial. This, in some cases, is to invoke the spirit of the ancestor so that it blesses the household. Some names may mark occasions while others describe the life in the home. Nearly all Ndebele names mean something or interpret an event that took place in the neighbourhood at the time of birth. It does not follow, however that if the child is given a religious name, he will later on become a medium or inyanga like his ancestor whose name he is called by. Love for the dead and the belief that they care for the living make them think of them and long to see them. So, if their names are given to their children, the better for their comfort and ‘hope’. Belonging to a family means living in close communication with the dead and the living. Belonging to a family, therefore, means belief in the living and dead as an entity.” (11)

6.12 Is there teknonymy? No

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)

- “Ancestral spirits are important in Ndebele religious life, and offerings and sacrifices are made to the ancestors for protection, good health, and happiness.” (4)
- “Traditional beliefs were centered on a creator god, Zimu, and ancestral spirits (abezimu).” (1)

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint: None found

7.2 Piercings: None found

7.3 Haircut:

- “A married woman always wore some form of head covering as a sign of respect for her husband. These ranged from a simple beaded headband or a knitted cap to elaborate beaded headdresses (amacubi).”(3)

7.4 Scarification:

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

- “Woman adorn themselves with brass neck rings as well as elaborate intricately beaded rings and ropes around the neck, legs and arms.” (2)
- “In addition to the rings, married women also wore neck hoops made of grass (called isigolwani) twisted into a coil and covered in beads, particularly for ceremonial occasions. Isigolwani are sometimes worn as neckpieces and as leg and arm bands.”(3)

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

- “The rings (called idzila) were believed to have strong ritual powers. Husbands used to provide their wives with rings; the richer the husband, the more rings the wife would wear. Today, it is no longer common practice to wear these rings permanently. [Isigolwani] are worn by newly wed women whose husbands have not yet provided them with a home, or by girls of marriageable age after the completion of their initiation ceremony. For rituals and ceremonies, Ndebele men adorned themselves with ornaments made for them by their wives.”(3)

7.7 Sex differences in adornment: The men of the Ndebele society are not as detailed or adorned.

- “A woman’s status in Ndebele society is symbolized by her adornments, which become more extravagant and impressive after marriage.” (2)
- There are also differences between boys and girls in the Ndebele society: “Boys usually ran around naked or wore a small front apron of goatskin. However, girls wore beaded aprons or beaded wraparound skirts from an early age.”(3)

7.8 Missionary effect:

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system:

- “Ndebele society is structured into approximately eighty patrilineal exogamous clans (izibongo), each subdivided into a variety of subclans or patrilineages (iinzelo or iikoro). Totems of animals and objects are associated with each clan.” (1)

8.2 Sororate, levirate:

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

9.1 Housing:

- “Their houses are built from mud and the decoration and art work on the outer walls are traditionally left to the women. The bright colourful symbols that decorate the walls represent a variety of personal expression such as values, emotions and self identity but never express religion and ritual. The designs are passed down by the mothers from generation to generation. Originally earth tones were used made from ochre and other natural pigments but the present day colours used are much brighter and colourful. However white is always used as the background.” (2)
- “Since the late 1800s, Ndebele have adopted a cone-on-cylinder type, consisting of mud walls and a thatched roof, while simultaneously reverting to a linear outlay, replacing the circular-center cattle pattern. In the current rural settlement pattern, the nuclear-family single house built on a square stand predominates, occasionally with provision for two or more extra buildings. A wide range of modern building material and designs have been introduced, including modern services and infrastructure.” (1)

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