

Modern day visitors to Zululand, especially in remote rural areas, soon become familiar with Zulu customs, especially beer-drinking. The pastime has little to do with becoming drunk; its origins lie in the tradition of drinking beer to communicate with the dead. The custom of beer-drinking remains common and is not openly discussed with Europeans – Zulus believe others would disapprove of the activity, which commences with the head of the *umuzi* served first and then guests. Zulus confirm that beer cannot be drunk in isolation as the drinker will always be accompanied by the spirits of the dead. Curiously, the Zulu term for the event is *ukudla*, although the term *iphathi* is more common today – probably from the English word ‘party’. Women do not participate, even though they make the beer.

Death has always been accepted by the Zulus as a stage in a journey. Their belief was that man originated from reeds; the first person, or God, was known as *Unkulunkulu* who brought people into the world by snapping off reeds. The belief even includes the white man - who arrived late to scrape the last piece of wisdom. Messengers bringing news of life came in the form of chameleons whereas death notices came from salamander lizards. Even in modern times, rural Zulus treat both creatures with apprehension and will immediately kill lizards. The reincarnation of the dead is believed to take place by a visitation of a snake, which always causes some concern, not only because of their venomous nature. The Zulu theory of death is adapted from the folklore of the Khoikhoi people, that *Unkulunkulu* decreed that all men must die.

A Zulu custom that was later to be feared, misunderstood, and which tended to give many a Boer trekker and British soldiers sleepless nights, was the Zulu post-battle cleansing tradition of disembowelling the enemy, usually with a knife-like weapon – rarely the assegai. The custom of disembowelling a fallen enemy, *qaqa*, was standard practice and was directly related to the Zulu view of the afterlife and its relationship with the world of the living. Part of this ritual involved slitting open the stomach of the slain enemy. To the Zulus, it was essential that those slain in battle or clan disputes had to be ritually disembowelled to free any incarcerated spirit and to protect the victor from absorbing any bad spirits previously possessed by their victim. Under the African sun, any corpse will quickly putrefy and the gases given off by the early stages of decay cause the stomach to swell. In Zulu belief, this was the soul of the dead warrior vainly trying to escape to the after-life. The victor was obliged to open the stomach of his victim to allow the spirit to escape, failing which, the victor would be haunted by the ghost of his victim, who would inflict unmentionable horrors upon him, including causing his own stomach to swell until, eventually, the victor would go mad. As a final cleansing rite, usually after local skirmishes, the victor then had to have intercourse with a woman, not his wife, before returning to his clan. This practice ensured that any remaining trace of evil spirits would be left with the woman, leaving the victor clean and whole to return home. It also ensured that post-battle, the impi would rapidly and enthusiastically disperse from the battlefield for the purpose of religious cleansing. Zulu warriors were only accorded any real status when they had ‘washed’ their spears in the blood of a defeated enemy.

Mehlokazulu kaSihayo, son of Sihayo and an attendant of King Cetshwayo, was present at Isandlwana with the iNgobamakhosi regiment. In his account of the war, which was recorded by the British in September 1879, he made various references to the subject of stripping and disembowelling the dead:

As a rule we took off the upper garments, but left the trousers, but if we saw blood upon the garments we did not bother. All the dead bodies were cut open, because if

that had not been done the Zulus would have become swollen like the dead bodies. I heard that some bodies were otherwise mutilated. (1)

At Isandlwana, some bodies were disembowelled immediately. Trooper Richard Stevens of the Natal Mounted Police survived the battle and recorded his shock of the practice,

I stopped in the camp as long as possible, and saw one of the most horrid sights I ever wish to see. The Zulus were in the camp, ripping our men up, and also the tents and everything they came across, with their assegais. They were not content with killing, but were ripping the men up afterwards. (2)

One aspect of Zulu ritual that did result in mutilation of the dead was the removal of body parts from a fallen enemy that could be added to the ritual medicines used to prepare the Zulu army before a campaign. These medicines were known as *intelezi*, and were sprinkled on the warriors by *izinyanga*, war-doctors, before the army set off on campaign. (3) Parts from a dead enemy, especially one who had fought bravely, would be an enormous boost to Zulu morale thus ensuring supremacy in battle. Since a number of *izinyanga* accompanied the army that triumphed at Isandlwana, they would certainly have taken the opportunity to collect the raw materials for such medicine from dead soldiers. These mutilations included the disarticulation by the Zulus of dead soldiers' jawbones for trophies, complete with beards. Facial hair was relatively unknown to the warriors and the luxurious beards worn by the soldiers fascinated them. Despite the soldiers' deep-seated fears that these mutilations were carried out before death, and therefore amounted to torture, there is no evidence that this was the case. Interestingly, post Isandlwana, the practice of shaving became widespread throughout the British army. Soldiers accepted the necessity of dying for their country but were reluctant to be disarticulated after death on the battlefield. The gulf of cultural misunderstanding was so wide that, after Isandlwana, any Zulu who fell into British hands was doomed.

Over the years, little has changed with regard to traditional Zulu family ties and responsibilities. Many modern Zulu values and traditions can be traced back through time and many of these traditions still hold good today. For example, fathers always had an obligation to their children for shelter, clothing, protection, discipline, teaching, being responsible for their wrong-doing while in his care, monitoring their relationships, provide his son's lobola and wedding, and ensure good relationships with his child's in-laws. The granting of honorific names, *isibongo*, is still current across Zululand and remains a paternal responsibility. *Isibongo* stems from the time of King Dingiswayo who was appropriately known as *the lion* and *Zwide the crocodile*. Modern Zulus retain the tradition by having more conventional European honorific names – which can be more easily recognised by Europeans.

Mothers had different obligations. These include; protect the unborn and co-operate in her giving birth, care for and protect the child, ensure the child is educated, teach female children household duties, monitor her children's relationships and prepare the wedding beer, provide after-wedding care and offer assistance and advice for the birth and care for her grandchildren for the whole of her life. Since the time of Shaka, when a woman first had powerful influence in all matters, it has been the woman who has been the more stable element in such relationships within families, villages and tribes, a position that has not been relinquished in modern times.

Sons and daughters reciprocate by recognising their parents' authority. After school in rural areas boys still rear the sheep and cattle and build huts for their fathers – daughters look after any small children and then assist the mother with her household and pastoral duties. As boys grow up they assume responsibility for the homestead and cattle. When full grown, sons

living at the family homestead must pay their earnings to their parents as a ‘down payment’ towards their *lobola*. Sons, in particular, must care for their parents – and in the case of the infirm or elderly parent, take them into their own homes until their death. Although marriage is still a different concept from European marriage, there are strong responsibilities on both sides. Traditionally, a husband had to accept all acts and responsibilities of his wife –who until recent times had no legal position. He had to provide the land for his wife to cultivate their food, maintain his wife with her living essentials and enable her to have his children. He was required to treat her fairly, support her in disputes and be responsible for her debts. Since the emancipation of Zulu women, women could jointly decide their children’s welfare and when a husband was absent at work, the wife would assume all home responsibilities. Today, modern Zulu women have equal rights in law though many still hold and practice traditional values. In the many rural areas, most Zulu traditions continue to be followed closely.

When pondering or commenting upon Zulu superstitions or beliefs, I am not going to trespass on controversial ground by trying to come to any conclusion. I therefore exercise some caution, not least because I have yet to find a Zulu belief that cannot be equated with its equivalent in recent European culture. There are numerous medical conditions where Zulu medicine is proven to be as efficacious as our belief in the power of certain foods, placebos or acupuncture and counselling. In the case of disasters, major or personal, people of the first world frequently resort to prayer whereas the Zulu believes such events are caused by the ‘devil’ manifesting itself, quite illogically, in another person – who must be ‘smelled out’ and punished. Europeans are blessed with an education that enables scientific solutions to beliefs, usually involving fear, hope or ignorance; the Zulu relies on the *sangoma*, diviner or herbalist to come to terms with the medical or spiritual problems and the club, spear or AK47 is there for retribution. (4)

References.

1. *Natal Mercury* 27 September 1879.
2. *Natal Colonist* 17 April 1879
3. The practice of modern white armies pre-battle, where they are joined in prayer by army chaplains, could be described as a similar ritual.
4. Today, the favoured tool for retribution is the handgun or the ubiquitous AK47.