

Africana Folklore



The African Diaspora

The African Diaspora Map — I
Based on research by Joseph E. Harris

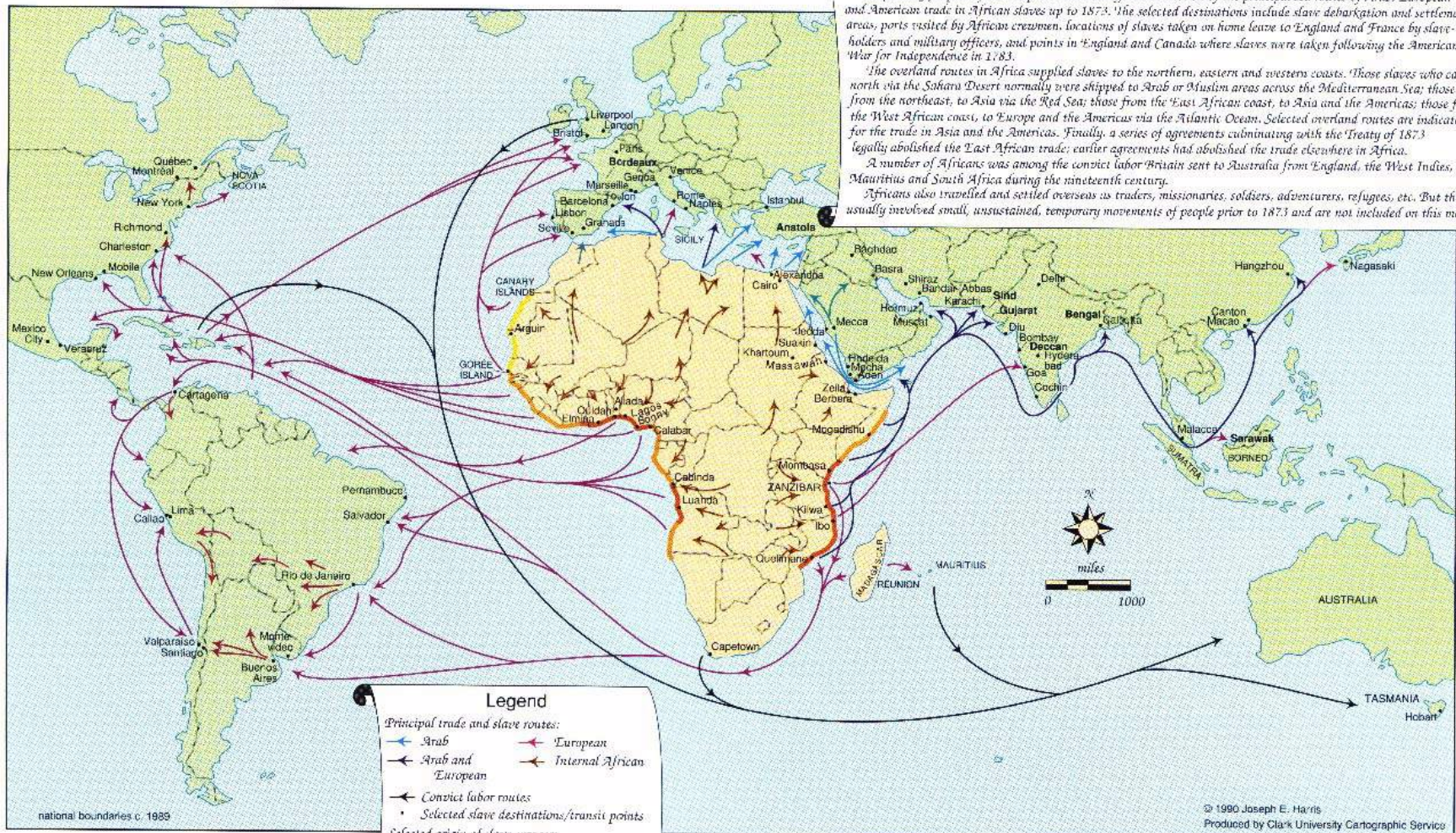
Scope of the Dispersion to 1873

The primary purpose of this map is to show the general direction of the principal sea routes of Arab, European and American trade in African slaves up to 1873. The selected destinations include slave debarkation and settlement areas, ports visited by African crewmen, locations of slaves taken on home leave to England and France by slaveholders and military officers, and points in England and Canada where slaves were taken following the American War for Independence in 1783.

The overland routes in Africa supplied slaves to the northern, eastern and western coasts. Those slaves who came north via the Sahara Desert normally were shipped to Arab or Muslim areas across the Mediterranean Sea; those from the northeast, to Asia via the Red Sea; those from the East African coast, to Asia and the Americas; those from the West African coast, to Europe and the Americas via the Atlantic Ocean. Selected overland routes are indicated for the trade in Asia and the Americas. Finally, a series of agreements culminating with the Treaty of 1873 legally abolished the East African trade; earlier agreements had abolished the trade elsewhere in Africa.

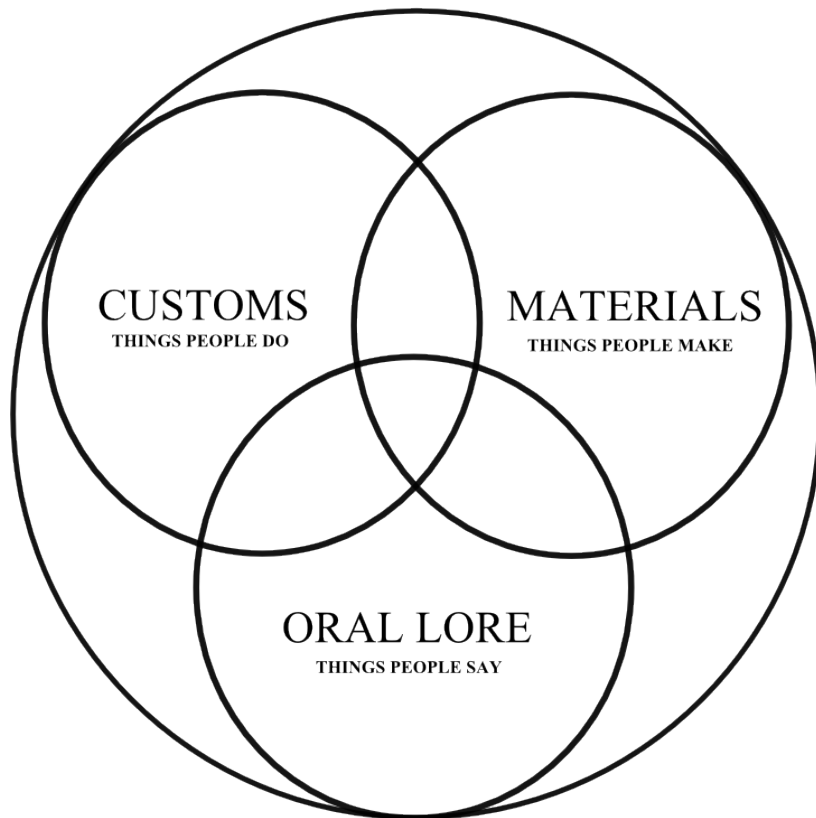
A number of Africans was among the convict labor Britain sent to Australia from England, the West Indies, Mauritius and South Africa during the nineteenth century.

Africans also travelled and settled overseas as traders, missionaries, soldiers, adventurers, refugees, etc. But these usually involved small, unsustained, temporary movements of people prior to 1873 and are not included on this map.



What is Folklore ?

FOLKLORE



ELEMENTS

Folklore is the traditional art, literature, knowledge, and practice that is disseminated largely through oral communication and behavioral example. Every group with a sense of its own identity shares, as a central part of that identity, folk traditions—the things that people traditionally believe (planting practices, family traditions, and other elements of worldview), do (dance, make music, sew clothing), know (how to build an irrigation dam, how to nurse an ailment, how to prepare barbecue), make (architecture, art, craft), and say (personal experience stories, riddles, song lyrics). *American Folklore Society*

Examples of Oral Lore

Folktales

Animal tales, fables, fairy tales

Myths, epics, creation and origin stories

"Pourquoi" tales, explanation stories

Legends, hero tales, saints' legends

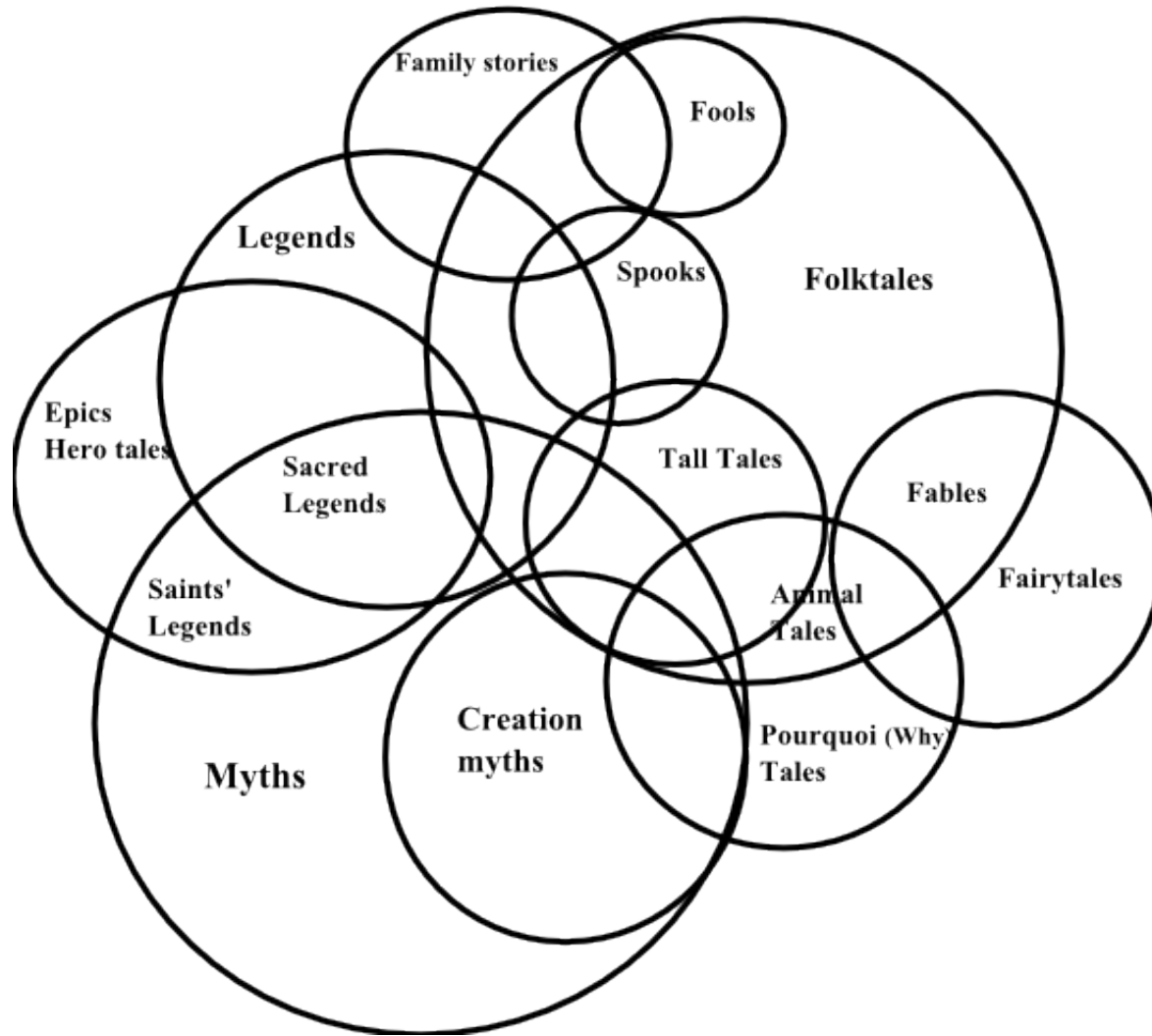
Oral histories, family histories

Trickster tales, ghost stories

Jokes, riddles, prayers, proverbs, sayings

Folk poetry, folk songs, ballads

Types of Tales



Examples of Customary Lore

Birthdays, anniversaries, holidays

Carnivals, festivals, marriages, funerals

Courtship rituals, rites of passage

Superstitions (ex. putting on lucky socks)

Games, sports, dances, practical jokes

Body Language (ex. thumbs up)

Folk medicine and healing

Graffiti, deejaying, break-dancing



Examples of Material Lore

Folk Architecture

Folk art

Clothing, cloths, costumes

Folk Crafts

Food lore

rice and beans

sweet potato pie

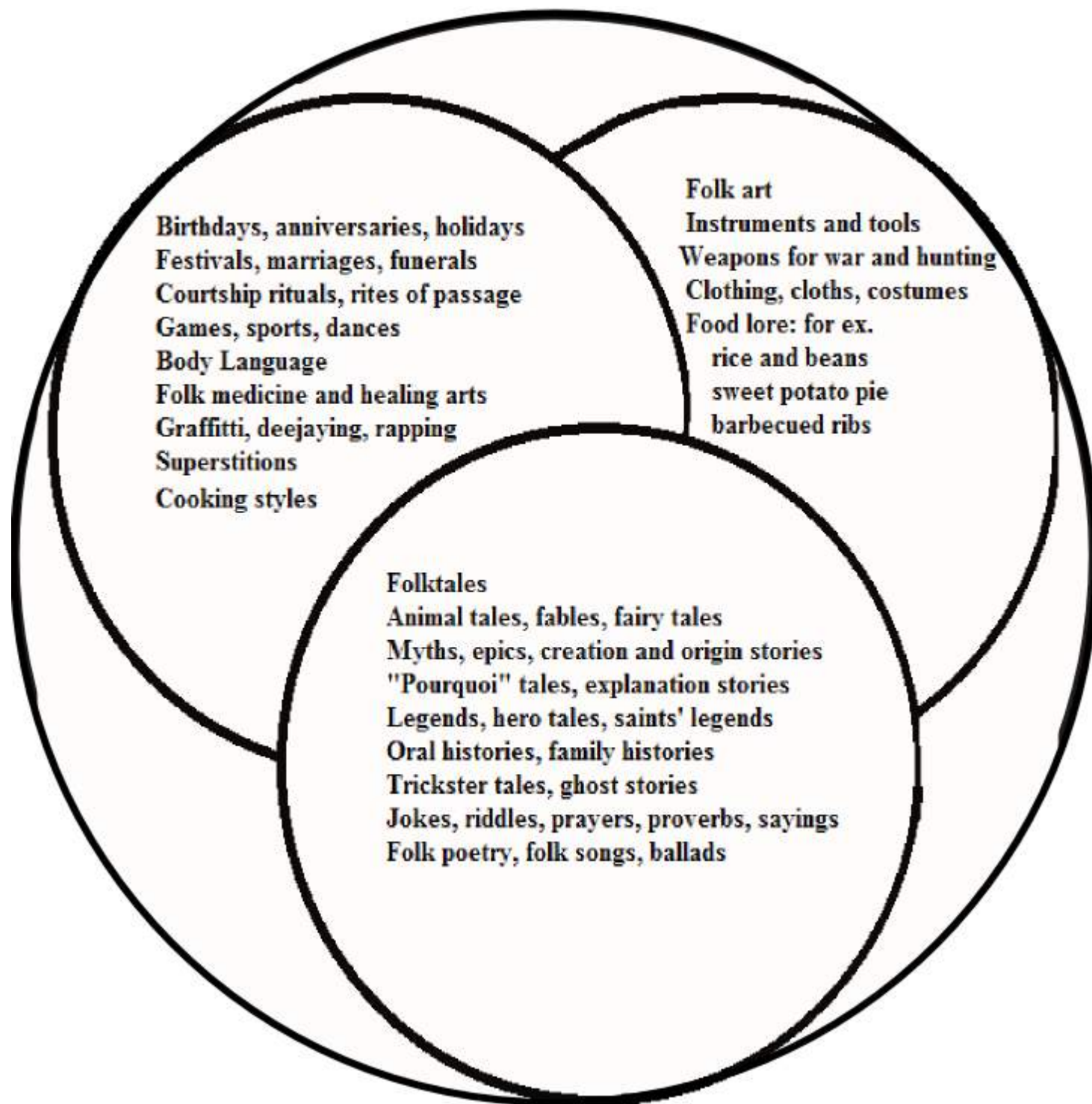
barbecued ribs

pasteles

Weapons for war and the hunt

Africana Folklore





Africana Folklore

A definition: Africana folklore is the folklore produced from the dynamic interactions among peoples in Africa and in the African Diaspora. It is a cultural legacy practiced by people who inhabit regions in the diaspora and have contributed to its creation.

"American fairy tales and folklore are Indian and African."

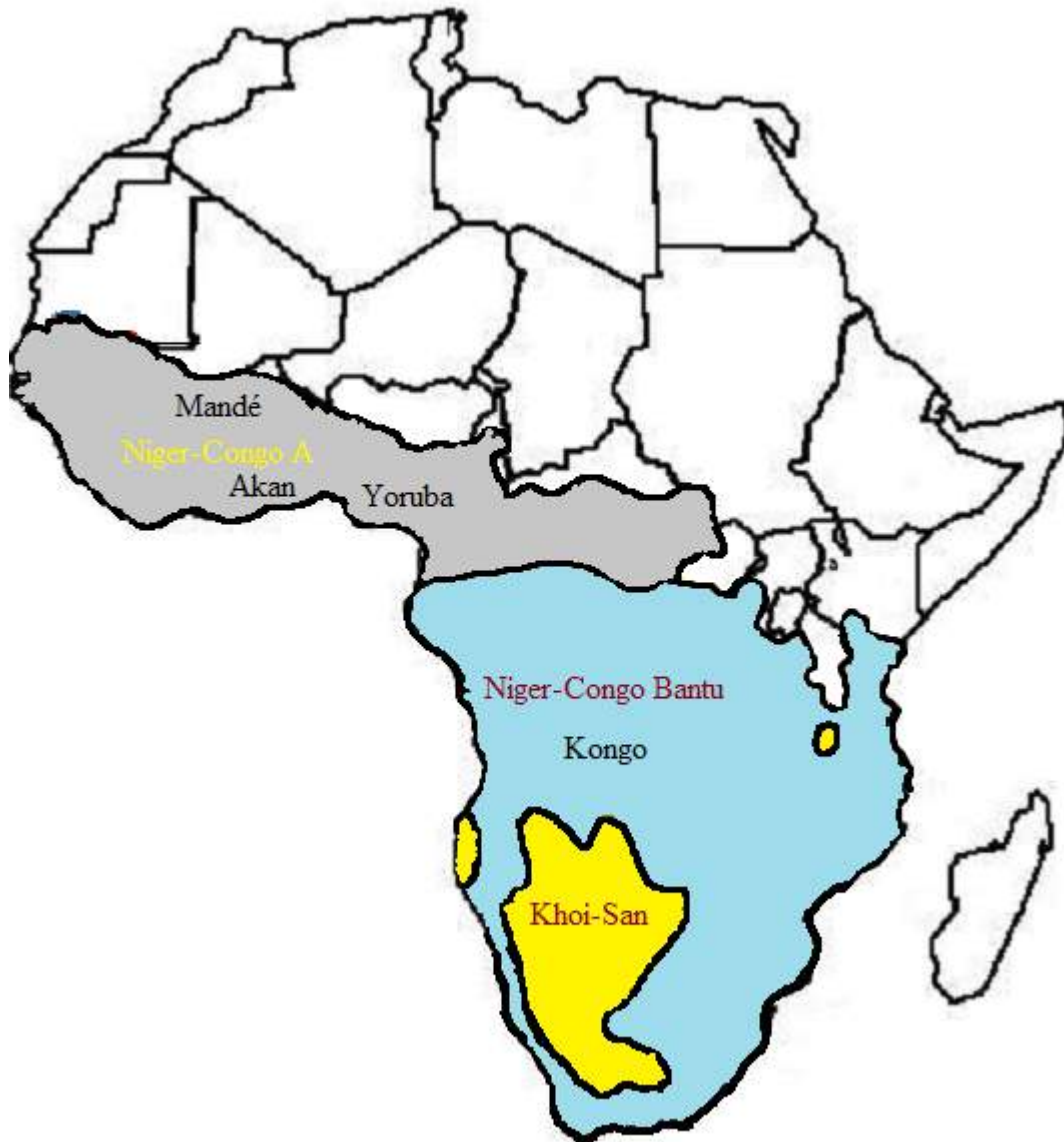
W.E.B. DuBois

Africa



- These are the current boundaries for the nations on the African continent. However, these nations and boundaries have not always existed. These boundaries often artificially separate people in ways that were unknown before European powers divided the continent among themselves. The current national boundaries reflect that.

African Language Groups



- African peoples can also be categorized by the language groups to which they belong.
- These groups also share cultural similarities that cross national boundaries.
- Our focus will be on some of the major ethnolinguistic groups illustrated on this map.

Describing African Peoples

The term “tribe” has often been used to describe the various African peoples and their societies. The word comes from the Latin *tribu*, “one of the three political/ethnic divisions of the original Roman state.”¹ When used in reference to Africans, Native Americans, and other non-European peoples, it has often carried the sense of primitive, disorganized, superstitious and inferior cultures. Though the Romans divided themselves into tribes, the French, English and Spaniards saw themselves as nations with clear national borders. Geographical location does not define being English or French, however. A French person in London is not English, though through political and other means he might become a legal citizen. Political identity is not the same as ethnic identity.

There is no consensus on what comprises ethnic identity, but it always refers to a person's perception of membership to a group that shares a similar language, history, place of origin, and culture. It can also involve the sense of being a member of a particular race or religion or be part of an extended family.² Both senses are often combined, but complications arise.

Ethnicity is not static; it is dynamic and flexible, especially when peoples and cultures collide and interact. When Europeans arrived, African ethnicities were as complex as those of any other group of peoples. Europeans brought their ideas of nationhood with them to Africa. For example, mistaking the title of the ruler, *ngola*, for the name of the country, the Portuguese called the place Angola, and we continue to use the name today. The national boundaries that exist today were created by the Europeans who drew the political maps. However, the African peoples in those regions had been organized into ethnic groups for hundreds of years, with each ethnic group having spheres of political and cultural influence unrelated to the divisions created by European colonizers.

Hundreds of ethnic groups, each with their own distinctive language or dialect and culture, inhabit West and Central Africa. Some ethnic groups are separated by geographical boundaries, such as forests, rivers or mountains, or they are separated by political borders that have been imposed by colonial powers. In many cases, these groups live alongside each other. The languages these groups speak can all be grouped into larger language families because they share common histories, and the speakers in these language groups share similar cultures.³



Illustration 1: Approximate distribution of Niger-Congo and Bantu languages

1 See http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=tribe&searchmode=none

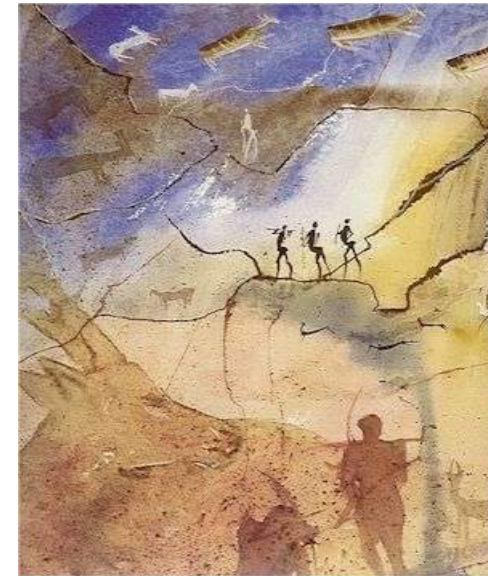
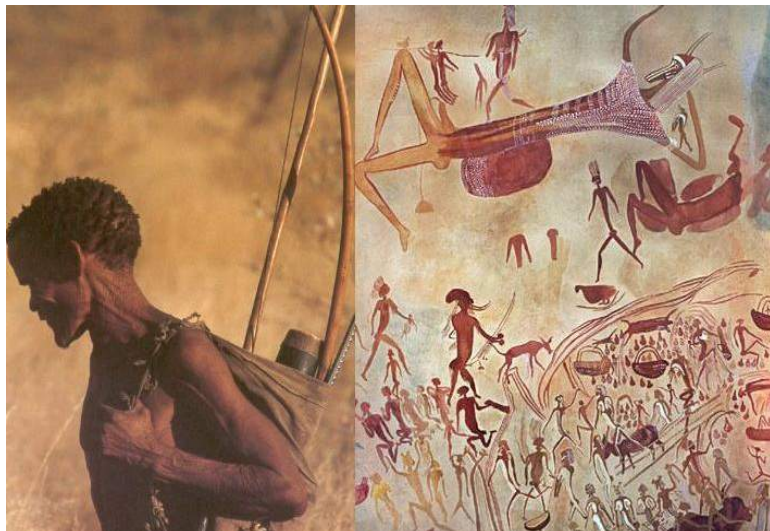
2 Phinney, J. (2003). Ethnic identity and acculturation. In K. Chun, P. B. Organista, & G. Marin (Eds.), *Acculturation: Advances in theory, measurement, and applied research* (pp.63- 81). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

3 Map the major African ethnolinguistic groups: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Africa_ethnic_groups_1996.jpg

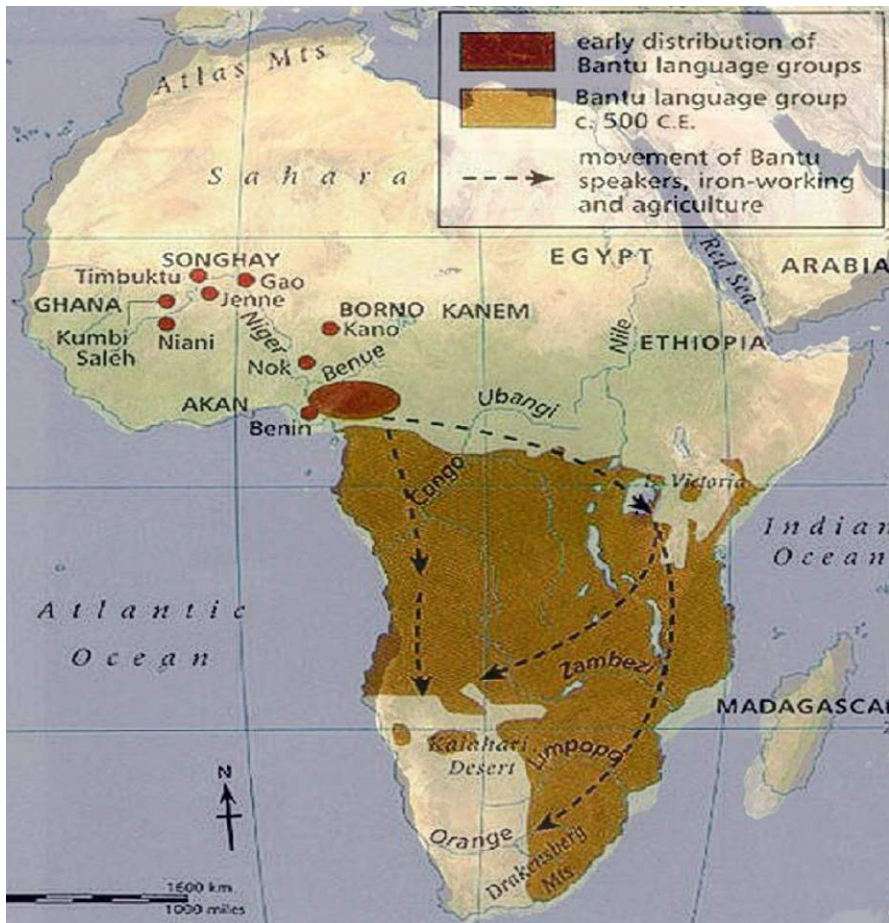
The Khoi-San



The Khoi and San peoples of Namibia, Angola, South Africa, and Botswana are a division of the Khoisan ethno-linguistic group and are close relatives of the neighboring San people. When European settlers arrived at the Cape in the 17th century (1652), the Khoi people had lived in the region for 30,000 years. The Khoi and San have survived by hunting and gathering as well as practicing pastoral agriculture.



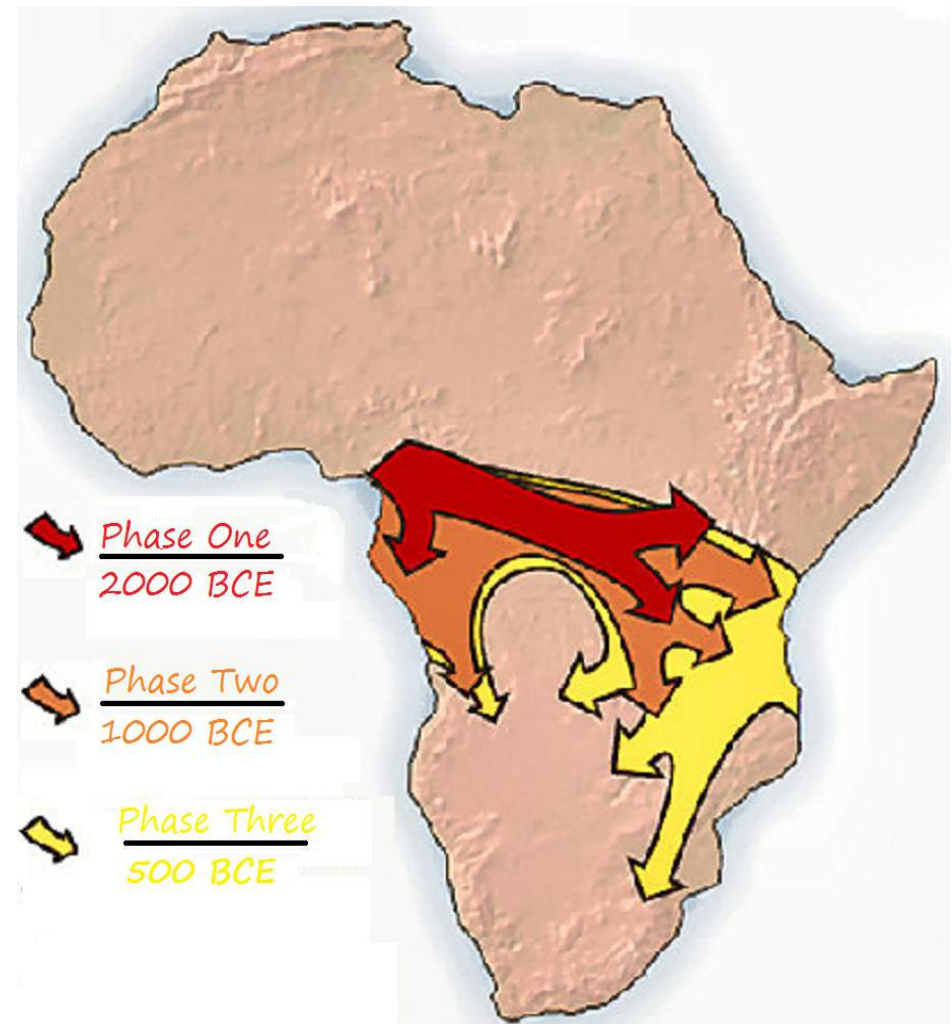
The Bantu Expansion



- The term Bantu actually refers to over 400 different ethnic groups in Africa, from Cameroon to South Africa. Bantu-speaking peoples do not refer to themselves as Bantu. “Ntu” means person in most of their languages, and “ba” signifies a plural. The term was coined by European linguists to describe peoples with remarkably similar cultures.

Phases of Bantu Expansion

- The accepted theory today is that the Bantu first originated near southeastern Nigeria and Cameroon, then spread across Africa as far as the Zambia area.
- During the second millennium BCE, perhaps due to the desertification of the Sahara, overpopulation or some other external factor, they expanded into the rainforests of central Africa.
- Around 1000 years later they began a second expansion to the south and east. Sometime in the first millennium, new agricultural techniques and plants were developed.



Effects of Bantu Expansions

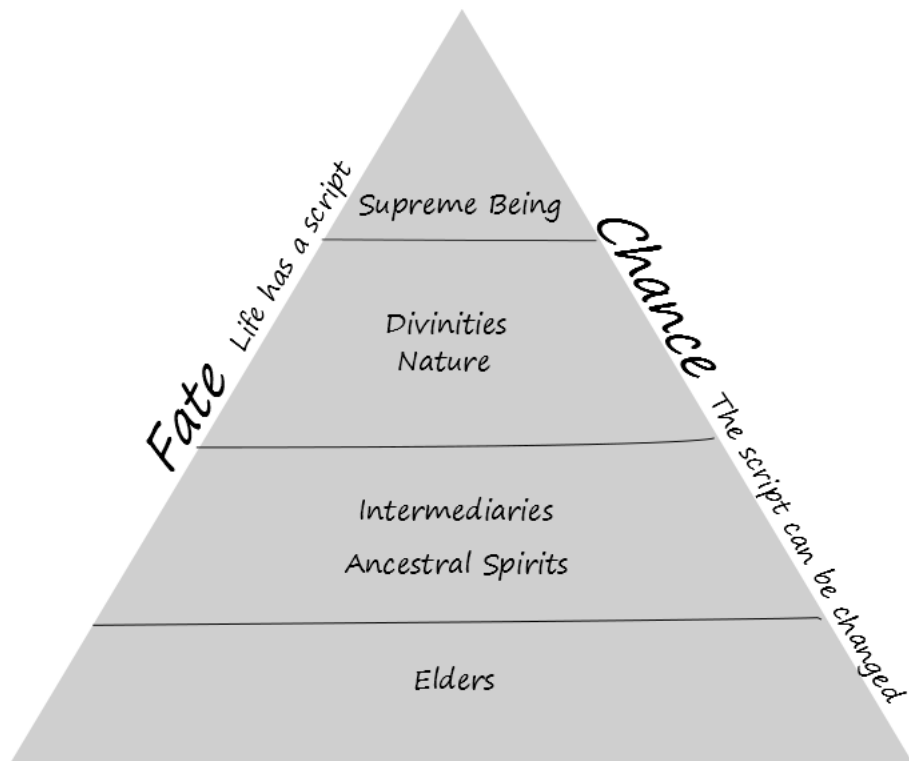
- Whatever the reason Bantu speakers left their original homelands, they took their folklore, culture, and technologies wherever they went.
- They brought their language, stories, customs, religious beliefs, reverence for ancestors, new farming and herding techniques, new crops, pottery making, musical instruments and the technology to manipulate and create iron tools for farming, hunting and warfare.
- Their shared language allowed them to pass along share methods of treating diseases and customs.
- Language and oral tradition allowed Bantu peoples to transmit knowledge and wisdom and outcompete other peoples. Eventually, the Bantu became the dominant culture in much of Africa.
- The spread of Bantu peoples also brought them into contact with people who had useful knowledge to share. Grains such as rice, millet and sorghum had been cultivated in southeastern Africa for centuries. In addition, they began to domestic more types of livestock.



Characteristics of Bantu Belief Systems

Fundamentals of African Belief Systems

Order of Beings



- In addition to their new technologies, the Bantu peoples brought their forms of social organization.
- This included a reverence for ancestors and the belief in divinities.
- This resulted in many similarities among the belief systems of Africans in the regions where Bantu peoples proliferated.
- There were also similarities in religious practices that are still common today.

Bantu Technology and Crafts



Illustration 3: Iron-working



Illustration 5: Benin bronze



Illustration 4: Clay pottery



Illustration 6: Music and oral culture



As yet, there is no single explanation why the Bantu left their original homelands. Possible factors that might have pushed them were: over-population, the desertification of the Sahara, conquest or the human desire for exploration. Whatever the reason, Bantu peoples took their culture, their technology, and their folklore wherever they went. They brought their language, stories, customs, religious beliefs, reverence for ancestors, farming and herding techniques, new crops, pottery making, iron tools for hunting and warfare, music and musical instruments, as well as methods of treating diseases, and customs.

Language and oral tradition allowed Bantu peoples to transmit their knowledge and materials. This encouraged trans-continental commerce. The ability to smelt and forge iron allowed them to create superior agricultural tools and weapons of war. Stories and rituals accompanied the technologies. Before crops were planted, rituals had to be performed to satisfy the spirits of agriculture. According to the legends of the Bambara people, the antelope spirit, the Chi Wara taught the people how to cultivate the land. Thus, before the annual rains, a male and female dancer from the Chi Wara society enter the fields with sticks imitating the motions of digging to the beating of drum. The male Chi Wara headdress represents the sun, and the female Chi Wara headdress symbolizes the earth. A fawn carved on the back of the female represents human beings, and the fibers on the headdresses represent water.



Illustration 2: Chi Wara wearers during ritual

The spread of Bantu peoples also brought them into contact with peoples who cultivated different, even more successful crops. These were grains, such as rice, millet and sorghum, that had been cultivated in the southeastern parts of Africa for centuries. They also discovered new animals to domesticate, such as sheep and cattle. With these new techniques, Bantu peoples continued to expand, even returning to areas they had left.

Increased food production led to larger villages which, in turn, led to even denser congregations of people and the need for greater organization. The great sub-Saharan African kingdom of Ghana⁴ emerged around 400 to 900CE. As the regional power, Ghana controlled the trade routes in iron, copper, gold and agricultural goods.

During this period, Islamic armies invaded and began to dominate commerce in the region. Some African societies converted to Islam; others resisted. Yet, Muslim culture would play a critical role in the region's as well as European and American history, and African Muslim rulers would become among the most renowned and celebrated persons in Africa and the world.

Today, elements of Bantu and Niger-Congo language have made it into English, and other European languages: banana, goober, gumbo, yam, chimpanzee, impala, conga, kalimba, bongo, mambo, marimba, rumba, samba, tango, Hakuna matata, Kwanzaa, and safari are all words with Bantu origins.

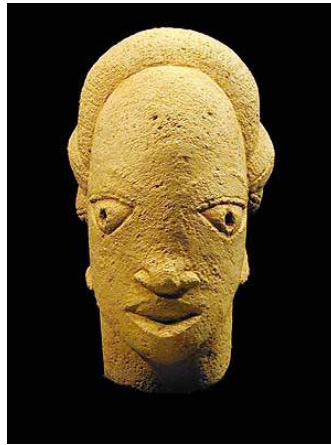
⁴ This present day nation of Ghana uses the name of the ancient Ghana empire, but they are not the same.

Nok Culture



- Nok culture appeared in present day Nigeria around 1000 BCE and vanished around 300 CE. Nok culture was considered to be the earliest sub-Saharan producer of life-sized Terracotta. It also has been suggested that the Nok culture eventually evolved into the later Yoruba culture of Ife based on similarities seen in the artwork from these two cultures.
- Smelting and forging of iron appears in Nok culture at least by 550 BCE and possibly earlier.

Nok Art and Technology



Nok furnace

The Zulu

One of the most renowned of the Bantu-speaking peoples are the **Zulu** (Amazulu), who share the region with other peoples, such as **Shona**, Ndebele, **Xhosa**, and **Sutu**. The Zulu people have stories of a supreme being (Unkulunkulu), the “**ancestor**” whom they consider the creator of all things.

As in other Bantu belief systems, the supreme deity is not worshiped directly. The legends say that: “Unkulunkulu is no longer known. It is he who was the first man; he broke off in the beginning. We do not know his wife; and the ancients do not tell us that he had a wife.”

“Unkulunkulu”

The old men say that Unkulunkulu was the “first out-comer,” for they say he came out first. They say he is the Uthlanga [reed] from which all men broke off. The old men just say that Unkulunkulu is. He made the first men, the ancients of long ago. When the ancients of long ago died, there remained those who had been begotten by them, their sons, by whom we hear that there were ancients of long ago who knew the breaking off of the world.

They did not know Unkulunkulu; they did not see him with their eyes; they heard it said that Unkulunkulu was. He came out where men broke off from Uthlanga. He begat the ancients of long ago; they died and left their children; they begat others, their sons. They died; they begat others; thus we at length have heard about Unkulunkulu. It was our ancestors who told us the accounts of Unkulunkulu and of the ancients of long ago.

“Tell me if at the present time there are any who pray to Unkulunkulu?”

“There are none. They pray to the Amatongo; they honor them that they may come and save them.”

“Who are the Amatongo?”

“The Amadhlozi are men who have died. When they have died, they change again, become Amatongo, and crawl on their belly, and so the old men call a dead man so changed an Itongo. It is called a snake; Inyandezulu is the name of the snake.”

* Adapted from “Unkulunkulu; or the Tradition of Creation as Existing among the Amazulu and other Tribes of South Africa” in The Religious System of the Amazulu by Henry Callaway. [Springvale, Natal, 1870].

* * *

A Zulu Legend

Shaka Zulu

In the 19th century, a young warrior named Shaka used innovative weapons, strategies, and tactics to lead the Zulus (the “people of the heavens”) to dominate southern Africa. From a group of 1,500, he eventually commanded more than 250,000. During the 1820s and 1830s, the Zulus aggressively attacked and defeated other tribes in their area. Shaka’s success was due to his brilliance and ferocity. He molded Zulu society around warfare.

Inter-tribal warfare left the peoples of the continent weakened and more susceptible to colonial domination. Conflict between the Zulu and the British and Dutch increased as the British began to want to exercise more control. During the 1870s, the British used political pretexts to order the Zulu army to disband. Predictably, the Zulu chief, Cetshwayo, refused. In response, the British army marched into Zululand. The Zulu, with vastly inferior weapons, managed to win several battles, most notably defeating the British at the Battle of Isandhlwana, killing 1500 soldiers in the process. It remains one of the greatest victories of Africans over European armies in sub-Saharan Africa.

Once the British reinforced their troops, however, the Zulus were defeated at the Battle of Ulundi in 1879. Seeing his people facing starvation, the Zulu king ordered his warriors to stop fighting. The British divided Zululand into 13 small states which only encouraged further disputes among the chiefs, and eventually led to civil war. In 1887, the British declared Zululand a colony.

Despite his reputation as being a bloodthirsty killer, Shaka the Zulu king continues to be a legendary example of African resistance to colonization. His bloody tactics have been condemned, but they were revolutionary.



1824 artist's impression of Shaka with long throwing [assegai](#) and heavy shield. No known drawings exist of Shaka done during his lifetime.