

Zulu Cultural Traditions

Enduring Understandings:

- Zulu culture has rich traditions that are still practiced today.
- Dance, art, music, clothing styles, and language are an integral part of the Zulu heritage.
- *Sangomas* (traditional healers) and medical doctors often work together, bridging the divide between the traditional and the modern, to effectively fight HIV/AIDS.
- The Zulu celebrate important stages of life through rituals and ceremonies.
- The damage that apartheid has inflicted upon South Africa will take many years to repair, but the country has already made great strides in building national unity.
- Modern Zulus understand both worlds—the traditional and the modern—and adapt to each as needed.

Essential Questions

- What is the effect of the clan being the primary social structure of Zulu life?
- How do colors and patterns of art and clothing carry symbolic meaning?
- What is the process of becoming a *sangoma*?
- What are the primary Zulu rituals and ceremonies? What are their meanings?
- What are some lasting effects of apartheid?
- How have Zulus enriched modern South African life? How have they adapted to it?

Notes to the Teacher:

This lesson will give students a broad picture of Zulu culture. Working in small groups, they will move around to six stations, read the information on the handouts, study objects you have assembled, and answer discussion questions from the handouts. This gives each of the students time to process what may be a lot of new information—through reading, hands-on physical exploration, and speaking and listening in their small groups.

Preparing the stations will take time, but is well worth the effort. In order to prepare the stations, you will need to print out sufficient handouts for the class and collect a number of artifacts. If artifacts are not available, you can download photos from the Internet for each topic and print them; you may wish to laminate them for repeated use. Websites that are good sources of information on Zulu culture are identified on page 104. Of course, using a search engine will also help you find relevant images.

DURATION OF LESSON:

Approximately three 45–50 minute periods.

ASSESSMENT:

Written answers, Handouts 1–6.

Observation of small groups at each station.

Class discussion.

ARTS AND COMMUNICATION STANDARDS

Indicators addressed by this lesson:

STANDARD 5. Knows a range of arts and communication works from various historical and cultural periods.

LEVEL IV (9–12)

2. Understands the relationship between a given culture and its artistic forms (e.g., social, cultural, ecological, economic, religious, and political conditions that influence the function, meaning, and execution of works of art; ways in which recognized artists recorded, affected, or influenced change in a historical, cultural, or religious context)
5. Knows art forms that reflect cultural elements of the local community (e.g., folk art, utilitarian objects, community environment (landscape and architecture), works of local professional artists and craftsmen)

MUSIC STANDARDS

Indicators addressed by this lesson:

STANDARD 7. Understands the relationship between music and history and culture.

LEVEL IV (9–12)

3. Knows various roles that musicians perform (e.g., entertainer, teacher, transmitter of cultural tradition) and representative individuals who have functioned in these roles

HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING STANDARDS

Indicators addressed by this lesson:

STANDARD 1. Understands and knows how to analyze chronological relationships and patterns.

LEVEL IV (9–12)

2. Understands historical continuity and change related to a particular development or theme.

BEHAVIORAL STUDIES STANDARDS

Indicators addressed by this lesson:

STANDARD 1: Understands that group and cultural influences contribute to human development, identity, and behavior.

LEVEL IV (9–12)

1. Understands that cultural beliefs strongly influence the values and behavior of the people who grow up in the culture, often without their being fully aware of it, and that people have different responses to these influences.
7. Understands that family, gender, ethnicity, nationality, institutional affiliations, socioeconomic status, and other group and cultural influences contribute to the shaping of a person's identity.

Materials needed:

Prepare six classroom stations ahead of time, each with as many of the following materials as possible. See the Notes to the Teacher, earlier, for resources.

Station 1: Zulu Family Life

- **HANDOUT 1: ZULU FAMILY LIFE**
- Art supplies to sketch a traditional Zulu home
- Photos of traditional Zulu homes

Station 2: Zulu Language and Arts

- **HANDOUT 2: ZULU LANGUAGE AND ARTS**
- Ladysmith Black Mombazo on compact disc, and CD player
- Zulu-style artisan products, such as beaded accessories (available in many museum gift shops in the U.S.). Alternatively, an art teacher may consider purchasing beads and teaching the class to create a Zulu-style bracelet or necklace.
- Photographs of traditional Zulu attire (see links to sources, below, under “Additional Resources”; note the frequent partial nudity of unmarried Zulu women).

Station 3: The Zulu *Sangoma*

- **HANDOUT 3: THE ZULU SANGOMA: TRADITIONAL HEALER**
- Book: *Zulu Shaman: Dreams, Prophecies and Mysteries*, by Vusamazulu Credo Mutwa (2003)
- Photographs of Zulu *sangomas*
- Local barks and herbs known or believed to have medicinal properties (Teachers may assign students to find and bring these items to class.)

Station 4: Rituals and Celebrations

- **HANDOUT 4: ZULU RITUALS AND CEREMONIES**
- Traditional Zulu blanket
- Photographs of Zulu ceremonies

STATION 5: The Zulu in Context

- **HANDOUT 5: THE ZULU IN CONTEXT**
- Maps of South Africa showing the changing geopolitical configurations of the country, from pre-apartheid to modern-day provinces.
- Photograph of the new South African flag
- Demographic statistics about South Africa

Station 6: Zulu Tradition in Transition

- **HANDOUT 6: ZULU TRADITIONS IN TRANSITION**
- A *toyitoyi* (war chant, and now a cry of freedom) recorded on audio CD or DVD

Procedure:

1. Divide the class into six groups and assign each group to a different station. Direct students to pick up the handout for their station and read it silently. Give them time to study the materials at the station. Then have them write down answers to the discussion questions on their handout, sharing ideas among their small group. If time permits, have them do the additional activities on the handout at each station.
2. After 20–25 minutes, or when you gauge that most groups are finished, direct them to move on to the next station, and repeat the process, using fresh copies of the handouts.

3. After each group has completed all the stations, have them come together as a class for a general discussion. (Sitting in a circle for this can work well.) Pose the discussion questions aloud now for the whole group; the number of questions you use will depend on the time you have available. Have students use the notes they made as small groups. Make sure to get a variety of small groups involved on each question, since they might have had different answers.

SUGGESTED ANSWERS TO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Family Life

- Family and friends praised Musa for being a good provider and a strong, responsible man. What evidence does the film give that Musa did not feel ready to become a man? *(During his return to the village, he asked his grandmother for permission to visit the inkosi. The grandmother replied, “Does a man need to ask permission?” Musa’s dream was of a safe green play space where he could continue to be a child. He and T eventually found this at the orphanage.)*
- How and why did Musa’s rural home structure differ from the traditional Zulu home? *(Musa’s hut contained the remnants of what used to be many huts and families within a clan. Most of the parents died from HIV/AIDS-related illnesses; the oldest healthy female was left to take care of more children than she normally would have cared for.)*
- How does Musa recreate a sense of family in Johannesburg? *(Answers will vary.)*
- Many Zulu men, such as Thandi’s father (Uncle Majola), have left rural areas for the city in search of gainful employment. Based upon the film, how might the mass exodus of heads of households impact individual roles in today’s rural Zulu families? *(Answers will vary.)*

2. Language and Arts

- What is a likely reason that isiZulu is so widely spoken in South Africa’s major cities? *(Like the people, the Zulu language is related to other Nguni ethnic languages. This means that it is related to Xhosa, Ndebele, Swazi, and others, and hence, speakers of these languages can understand Zulu. The Zulu were the first of the Nguni populations to settle and form a tribe in South Africa; this may give them relative cultural and linguistic influence over other Nguni groups.)*
- What symbolism might be attached to the bracelet that Thandi gave Musa? *(On his wrist it was a reminder of unfinished business, such as purchasing the cow and finding Uncle Majola. Once it fell off, the bracelet became a symbol of good luck; not long after it fell, Musa found a new home at the orphanage.)*
- Discuss and describe the village chief’s attire as shown in the film. *(Answers will vary.)*

3. Zulu Sangoma

- How did Musa break with tradition during his return home trip? (*Musa went to see the traditional leader, who was not expected to receive him, and asked him to speak out about HIV.*) How were his actions received by his intended audience? (*The inkosi, or leader, refused Musa's request.*)
- Why was beating the drum for HIV a fundamentally countercultural action? (*Shame and silence are the traditional coping mechanisms for illnesses believed to be caused by the ancestors; HIV was therefore never to be discussed.*)
- Overall, did the film *Beat the Drum* support or refute the importance of *sangomas* in HIV prevention efforts? (*Sangomas, as well as traditional leaders, were considered important in HIV prevention because communities listened to them. However, the film made a clear statement that the typical remedies of the sangomas—in this case animal sacrifices and bone casting—did not help prevent HIV. Further, the film spoke to the deleterious economic impact that adherence to such traditions could have on already impoverished Zulu communities. Indeed, the loss of the cow posed great hardship for the family, and Musa's father died anyway.*)
- Are there any parallels between Western religious customs and the practices of Zulu *sangomas*? (*Answers will vary.*)

4. Rituals and Celebrations

- Did Musa go through a rite of passage? If so, how would you describe it? (*Musa became the man of his house when his father was dying. He proved his manhood through providing for his grandmother and for his cousin Thandi.*)
- What parallels can you draw between traditional Zulu ceremonies and typical rites-of-passage ceremonies practiced in the U.S.? (*For example, sweet-16 parties, Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah, first communion, dedication, baptism, confirmation, college graduation*)

5. Zulu in Context

- Was there evidence of apartheid's legacy in Musa's family? If so, what? (*Yes. Uncle Majola and Musa had to leave their village to find work in Johannesburg because there were few jobs in the rural area.*)
- Can you relate any U.S. experience to that of apartheid? If so, what? (*The apartheid system was similar to the United States' Jim Crow segregation system before the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.*)

6. Zulu Tradition in Transition

- How do you imagine Musa felt going from a quiet rural area to a busy city center? (*Answers will vary.*)
- How well did he adjust to his new environment? (*Musa probably felt overwhelmed during his first nights in Johannesburg. His upbringing made him focused; although in Johannesburg he interacted with gangs of street children, he did not become violent like them.*)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

A. Print resources:

Mathabane, Mark. *Kaffir Boy: An Autobiography—The True Story of a Black Youth's Coming of Age in Apartheid South Africa*. New York: Penguin-Putnam, 1989.

Mandela, Nelson. *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela Tag*. Back Bay books, 1995.

Carter, Jason. *Power Lines: Two Years on South Africa's Borders*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2003.

B. Internet resources:

1. Zulu family life:

KwaZulu-Natal Department of Economic Development and Tourism:

<http://www.warthog.co.za/dedt/tourism/culture/family/structure.htm>
www.helweltrust.co.uk/
<http://home.hccnet.nl/h.molenaar/Photo/ZAF2/ZAF2.html>

2. Zulu Language and Arts

IsiZulu software and fonts:

<http://www.worldlanguage.com/languages/Zulu.htm>

African music videos: <http://www.michiv.de/>

General websites on Zulu culture:

<http://www.drakensberg-tourism.com/zulu-culture-traditions.html>
<http://www.cyberserv.co.za/users/~jako/lang/zul.htm>
<http://my.cybersoup.com/vusezakithi/izilimi.html>
<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/zulu.htm>
<http://www.warthog.co.za/dedt/tourism/culture/clothes/women.htm>
<http://www.warthog.co.za/dedt/tourism/culture/clothes/men.htm>

3. The Zulu Sangoma

<http://www.eshowe.com/article/articlestatic/8/1/20/>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sangoma>

<http://www.saexplorer.co.za/general/photo.asp?Photo=zuluSangomas>

<http://www.clicks.co.za/clicks/Article.aspx?aid=151>

4. Rituals and Celebrations

<http://www.kzn.org.za/kzn/news/283.xml>

<http://www.eshowe.com/article/articlestatic/24/1/20/>

http://ejmas.com/jalt/jaltart_Coetzee_0902.htm

<http://www.warthog.co.za/dedt/tourism/culture/warriors/stick.htm>

5. The Zulu in Context

The South African flag and demographic statistics:

<https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/sf.html#People>

6. Zulu Traditions in Transition (Urbanization)

http://www.queensu.ca/samp/migrationresources/Documents/Posel_have.pdf#search=%22urbanization%20in%20South%20Africa%22

<http://www.pbs.org/journeypolplanetearth/hope/alexandria.htm>

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/wideangle/shows/southafrica/photo.html>

C: Films

Cry Freedom!

U-Carmen eKhayelitsha

The Power of One

Cry, the Beloved Country

A Dry White Season

Sarafina!

Long Night's Journey Into Day: South Africa's

Search for Truth and Reconciliation

Nelson Mandela—Journey to Freedom

Frontline: The Long Walk of Nelson Mandela

Girls Apart

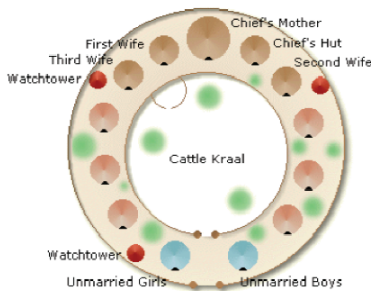
Information about these and other films, including how to order them, may be found at

<http://www.globalexchange.org/countries/africa/southafrica/films.html>.

HANDOUT 1 ▶ P. 1 Zulu Family Life: The People of Heaven at Home

At first glance, life in Musa's village appears filled with death, grief, and poverty. Yet a fuller picture of Zulu culture reveals a rich, vibrant set of traditions that are still practiced today. The Zulu tribe is often associated with strength, ethnic pride, and great leadership. Zulu military, social, and political history includes such figures as Shaka Zulu, a leader of the Zulu as they developed into a powerful nation; Ndlela kaSompisi, a key general to Shaka; Mangosuthu Buthelezi, founder and leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party; and King Goodwill Zwelithini, current king of the Zulu nation.

The Zulu people of South Africa come from the Nguni ethnic group of eastern and southern Africa. According to ancient Zulu history, their founding ancestor Malandela, his wife Nozinja, and their family first settled at the White Umfolozi River more than a thousand years ago. The word Zulu means Heaven, and was the name of Malandela and Nozinja's second son. The various clans now known as the Zulu nation became a united tribe through a series of military conquests between the late 18th century and the mid-20th century. Today, the Zulu are the most populous of all black South African tribes, comprising approximately 11 million people.



The clan is the primary social structure of traditional Zulu life. A clan is made up of a chief (*Inkosi*), his mother, the chief's wives, and their children. Each clan has one married male and often several wives. The number of wives reflects the wealth and importance of the husband. As sons marry they begin their own family units. Social rank within the clan, sex, birth order and age define the types of interactions that clan members have with one another. Traditionally, Zulu females are considered inferior to their male counterparts. Inheritance and kinship follow the male bloodline. Women are expected to walk behind their

husbands, and sons take their meals before daughters. Yet women's household contributions are highly valued within the Zulu clan. For example, upon marriage a husband compensates his bride's father for the loss of her labor. Zulu families give greater respect to older ages and higher birth orders—that is, those born before others. Marriage order within polygamous households is also important. The first wife often helps to choose her husband's other wives, and she serves as a leader among the group.

The physical organization of the clan *umuzi* (compound) reflects the social status of each person within the family. As shown in the graphic, the chief's mother and his first and second wives have huts closest to his. Adolescent children live apart from each other and from their mothers. Like

HANDOUT 1 ► P. 2

Musa's hut, a traditional Zulu home, is made of dried earth, stones, and grass; it also has a thatched roof. Family members sleep on individual grass mats on the earthen floors.

Household responsibilities within the rural context reflect the traditional sex, rank, and age roles of the Zulu *umuzi*. The *umuzi* chief is the primary decision-maker for all family matters, although his mother and first wife exert significant influence over household affairs. The chief has sole claim to all *umuzi* property, including ownership rights over all *umuzi* residents. Each wife is expected to raise her children, farm, cook, clean, and prepare food for the chief. Daughters are charged at an early age with fetching water and firewood, and eventually helping their mothers with daily chores. Sons are initially responsible for tending to the animals, as depicted in the film; each hut within the *umuzi* has its own herds. During adolescence, sons begin taking on head-of-household responsibilities in preparation for their future roles. In *Beat the Drum*, Musa's initiation into manhood occurred early because his father was dying. Once he became a man, Musa set about providing for his family—earning money to replace the family cow and finding Uncle Majola.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Family and friends praised Musa for being a good provider and a strong, responsible man. What evidence does the film give that Musa did not feel ready to become a man?
2. How and why did Musa's rural home structure differ from the traditional Zulu home?
3. How does Musa recreate a sense of family in Johannesburg?
4. Many Zulu men, such as Thandi's father (Uncle Majola), have left rural areas for the city in search of gainful employment. Based upon your knowledge from the film, how might the mass exodus of heads of households impact individual roles in today's rural Zulu families?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY:

Using information from the film *Beat the Drum* and photographs, make a sketch of a traditional Zulu home, or kraal.

HANDOUT 2 ▶ P. 1 Zulu Language and Artistic Expression

One of the most noted aspects of Zulu culture is creative expression. Dance, art, music, clothing styles, and language are an integral part of the Zulu people's rich heritage. The Zulu language, *isiZulu*, is best known for its use of clicking sounds. IsiZulu is one of 11 nationally recognized languages in the Republic of South Africa; however, it is the country's most widely spoken language, especially in metropolitan areas. Like most sub-Saharan African languages, isiZulu stems from an oral tradition; it first took written form in the early 19th century, when Christian missionaries created an isiZulu translation of the Bible's Old Testament.

In isiZulu, an introductory conversation between two people might begin something like this: "Sawubona. (Hello.)" "Sawubona. Kunjani? (Hello. How are you?)" "Ngiyaphila. (I'm fine, thanks.)" "Ngubani igama lakho? (What is your name?)" "Ngama lami ngu Janice. (My name is Janice.)" "Ngiyajabula ukukubona, Janice. (Pleased to meet you, Janice.)" "Ngama lami ngu James. (My name is James)..." IsiZulu is often mixed with English in urban areas. In *Beat the Drum*, for example, Musa's friends T and Nobe used Zulu words such as *sawubona* and *yebo* (yes) in their everyday speech, although neither person was ethnically Zulu. The Zulu also use language symbolically. A Zulu infant's name is often related to the circumstances of the child's birth. At times, animals have symbolic names as well. In the film, Musa's cow is named Khalazome, which means "crying." After the cow's death, Musa comments that the cow's tears are now all dried up, much like his own.

Zulu traditional music is well known around the world for its wide range of tones, soothing melodies, and masterful use of harmony. Zulu traditional music, such as the Mbaqanga and Maskandi styles, often includes storytelling, and instrumental and vocal elements. One of the most popular traditional instruments is the guitar, which musicians pluck instead of strum. The music of world-renowned Ladysmith Black Mombazo exemplifies the evolution of Zulu music over the past 40 years. Zulu traditional music has also influenced more contemporary musical genres, such as the popular *kwaito* music of black South African youth culture. (*Kwaito* is not exclusively Zulu; it is a mix of house, hip-hop, reggae, ska, and traditional South African music. However, Zulu language is often used in *kwaito* lyrics.)

The artwork of the Zulu people is colorful and diverse. Female artisans are known for skillful basket weaving, beaded jewelry, and figurines. Red, green, yellow, blue, black, and white are the most common bead colors used in Zulu traditional jewelry; they are also the colors of South Africa's flag. Male artisans are equally talented wood carvers. Wooden items range from animal figurines, such as lions and elephants, to chess sets, tables, chairs, and decorative masks. As in most African art, the colors and patterns of Zulu artwork have symbolic meanings, sending messages from creator to recipient. In the film, the red and white beads of T's "chastity" bracelet represent love and

HANDOUT 2 ► P. 2

purity, respectively. When Zulu art is given as a gift, the giver will usually place the palm of his or her left hand under the right forearm; this is a sign of respect and assures the recipient that the gift is harmless.

Traditional Zulu clothes are made of animal skins and dried grass. Clothing styles are symbolic of social status. Young, unmarried men wear calfskin coverings from waist to knee; the Zulu call the rear part of this apron *iBeshi* and the front part *IsiNene*. Older, married men wear coverings down to their ankles. Only married men may wear calfskin headbands, and only highly ranked men wear leopard skins. Many men wear bands (*amaShoba*) made of animal skin on their upper arms and on the lower part of their legs. Unmarried women wear grass skirts that are sometimes embellished with beads. Engaged and married women also wear grass skirts and they cover their breasts. Unlike unmarried women, engaged and married women allow their hair to grow; sometimes, hair is elaborately fashioned into a hat using cotton and grass.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is a likely reason that isiZulu is so widely spoken in South Africa's major cities?
2. What symbolism might be attached to the bracelet that Thandi gave Musa?
3. Discuss and describe the village chief's attire as shown in the film.

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY:

Listen carefully to the music that your teacher has left at this station, keeping it soft enough so that you do not disturb other groups. Examine the photographs of traditional Zulu clothing.

HANDOUT 3 ▶ P. 1 The Zulu *Sangoma*: Traditional Healer

In *Beat the Drum*, Nobe Lebeso used Musa's drum to summon his neighbors to the local church. In his village, Musa's drum was a symbol of manhood. In traditional Zulu culture, the drum is also the key tool used by Zulu spiritual healers—known as *sangomas*—to summon a clan's ancestors. The *sangoma* is a spiritual expert, proficient in the physical, psychological, and social facets of healing. Not all traditional healers within Nguni cultures are *sangomas*; however the Zulu regard the *sangoma* as their highest living form of spiritual leadership. Both men and women serve as *sangomas*, although it is likely that the majority of Zulu *sangomas* are women.

Becoming a *sangoma* is a multistep process. First, one must be called by one's ancestors. Signs of calling can range from persistent physical or mental illness to evidence of consistent bad luck. A *sangoma's* training period (*thwasa*) may last for a number of years. The trainee, or *twasa* (meaning "blossom"), initially wears white and has limited interaction with the community. During this stage the *twasa* increases in humility. The end of this stage is signified by the ritual sacrifice of a divinely appointed goat, which the *twasa* must correctly identify. In the second stage, having entered into communion with the ancestors through blood sacrifice, the *twasa* now wears red and learns the art of divination. The third and final stage of *thwasa* is completed through a second blood sacrifice, typically of a cow.

Zulu *sangomas* have three main ways of divining the causes of spiritual problems: channeling, casting, and interpreting. Channeling involves intense ritual dancing and entering into a trancelike state. During the trance, the called-upon ancestor speaks directly through the *sangoma* to address the client's spiritual problem. The second technique, casting of specific and symbolic items (animal bones, plant seeds, and other natural elements), is one of two indirect means of communication that ancestors use to speak to a *sangoma's* client. Zulu believe that ancestors direct the pattern in which cast items fall. In *Beat the Drum*, the *sangoma* cast bones to determine the cause of the deaths in Musa's family. She concluded that Musa's father had angered his ancestors and that an animal needed to be sacrificed to appease them and stop further death. The third technique is the interpretation of dreams. Here the *sangoma* uses either her dreams or the client's to understand the nature of the problem.

The *sangoma* uses animal sacrifice and traditional medicines known as *muti* to heal her clients. Enema-based *muti* are commonly used among the Zulu to heal infant children. *Sangomas* often work under a shroud of secrecy, in traditional healing huts called *ndumbas*; however, as shown in the film, many activities such as casting and animal sacrifices take place in full view of concerned community members.

HANDOUT 3 ► P. 2

More than 70 percent of the KwaZulu-Natal population is reported to use *sangomas*, either for initial diagnosis and treatment or to supplement modern healthcare. In the past, traditional African healers were incorrectly referred to as “witchdoctors” by their western counterparts. Today, public health experts have come to appreciate the healing properties of plants used in *muti* and the *sangoma*’s holistic approach to wellness, as well as the access and influence that *sangomas* have within their communities. In today’s South Africa, *sangomas* and medical doctors often work together, bridging the divide between the traditional and the modern, the spiritual and the empirical, to effectively fight HIV/AIDS. In the film, Musa’s own understanding of Zulu culture is transformed by his experiences in Johannesburg. So it is that Nobe actually beats the drum to summon community members *and* ancestors to combat HIV together.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How did Musa break with tradition during his return trip home? How did his intended audience receive his actions?
2. Why was beating the drum for HIV a fundamentally countercultural action?
3. Overall, did the film *Beat the Drum* support or refute the importance of *sangomas* in HIV prevention efforts?
4. What parallels, if any, can you draw between American customs and Zulu *sangoma* practices?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY:

Write a letter to the editor of a South African newspaper explaining whether or not you think that *sangomas* can be helpful in the fight against AIDS.

HANDOUT 4 ► P. 1 Zulu Rituals and Ceremonies

The Zulu celebrate important stages of life through rituals and ceremonies. Rite-of-passage ceremonies are a key element of birth, adulthood, marriage, and death in Zulu society. The Reed Dance Festival (called *Umkhosi woMhlanga*) is an annual, four-day rite of passage for young Zulu women. Every September, by invitation only, more than 10,000 young Zulu women gather at the king's palace. The Reed Dance Festival is a solemn occasion attended by many visitors from around the country. Only unmarried virgin women (*izintombi*) may take part in the ceremony. The *Umkhosi woMhlanga* serves many purposes: Participants pay respect to the Zulu king, learn how to interact with potential suitors, and reaffirm their commitment to Zulu traditions.

The Reed Dance Festival is a celebration of Zulu womanhood; in recent years, because of its emphasis on abstinence from sex until marriage, the ritual has also been used to reaffirm the Zulu commitment to HIV prevention. At the height of the ceremony, each girl selects a reed, walks in procession before the king, and places the reed at his throne to honor him. The king then makes a speech and gives a collective name to the group of maidens. Before the end of the ceremony, some maidens will successfully negotiate suitors through their fathers; all of them, however, will be prepared for future marriage.

Another important rite of passage is the Stick Fighting (*Umsiza*) ceremony for young Zulu men. In ancient times, experienced warriors used sticks to train young warriors (*amabutho*) in combat techniques. The *Umsiza* is often part of a larger rite-of-passage ceremony; a successful fight is proof that a boy is ready for manhood. In stick fighting, opponents strike at the other's head and knees. The first to draw blood is usually declared the winner; victors must tend to the wounds of their defeated opponents. Typically, stick fights are nonfatal and last for one minute. Contestants are warned not to use their sticks to stab their opponents. However, if a stick fighter is killed during a match and both fighters have followed the rules of engagement, the Zulu will not hold the surviving fighter responsible. Today, stick fighting is a popular form of sport among rural Zulu boys; it also serves as a mediation tool between disputing Zulu men. Zulus used sticks for warrior training; in battle, they used spears and attacked in formations, called phalanxes.

Once prepared for adulthood, young Zulu women and men are expected to marry. Engagement and marriage in traditional Zulu society involve the entire family. Fathers arrange the terms and timing of marriages. They also have significant control over whom their children marry. The traditional Zulu wedding ceremony is a third significant rite of passage, for the couple and for their family clans. The ceremony can take many forms, but often includes a few key elements. First, the groom's family gives a *lobola* to the bride's father. The *lobola* is an agreed-upon number of cattle, sum of money, or other thing of value that the father of the bride takes in exchange for the loss of his daughter's household labor. Second, the groom's family slaughters an animal to mark the

The Zulu in Context

The Republic of South Africa is the southernmost nation on the African continent. It is bordered by Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Swaziland. South Africa is known throughout the world for its gold and diamonds, beautiful grasslands, snow-capped mountains, and diverse wildlife. It is one of Africa's most popular tourist destinations. South Africa's population is made up of four major ethnic groups: black South Africans (79%), white South Africans (9.6%), "Coloureds" (the mixed race group that accounts for 8.9% of the total population), and Asian Indians (2.5%). (Indians were originally brought to East and southern Africa as indentured servants.) The Zulu people make up a fifth of South Africa's population of 44 million. Afrikaners are one of two major groups of white South African populations. The second are largely British descendants. The Coloured population is composed of all mixed-race persons from any combination of parentage. Coloureds historically have cultural and linguistic ties to Afrikaners—Dutch descendants in South Africa and architects of apartheid. Many have black African and white Afrikaans ancestry.

In today's largest South African cities, people of all ethnic backgrounds live, work, and play together. Yet life in other areas still reflects patterns of ethnic separation established under apartheid. During the 1940s, South Africa's ruling National Party created laws to separate each of the country's ethnic groups from one another. This system was called apartheid, an Afrikaans word that means "apartness." Whites, Indians, Coloureds, and blacks (subdivided by tribe) were forced to live only with members of their respective ethnic or racial groups. Although among the last to settle in the region, the architects of apartheid believed that South Africa rightfully belonged to whites. Supporters of apartheid used arguments of racial superiority to discriminate against all nonwhites. In 1950 blacks were sent away from prosperous lands and forced to live in the arid Bantustans (homelands) of Transkei, *Bophuthatswana*, Venda, and Ciskei, where they had few resources. Musa's village in *Beat the Drum* is located in a former Zulu *Bantustan*.

Apartheid lasted 40 years; throughout its history, however, many South Africans worked hard to dismantle it. Former President Nelson Mandela, the late Steven Biko, and Zulu leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi are some of the many anti-apartheid activists of the 1960s and '70s. In 1973, South Africa's mineworkers went on strike, effectively bringing gold and diamond production to a halt. This mass effort became the catalyst for reforms in the apartheid system. The anti-apartheid student uprisings of 1976—originating in the town of Soweto—incited widespread unrest and violence. Negative international press and economic sanctions eventually persuaded the National Party to begin dismantling apartheid. The system officially ended in 1989.

HANDOUT 6 ▶ P. 1 From Village to City: Zulu Traditions in Transition

Like many other Zulus, Musa grew up between two worlds. In the film, we first encounter Musa in the village at his mother's grave. Later we find him making a new home in the city. Although Musa has been raised in a traditional Zulu village, he dresses according to modern trends. The image of Musa in urban attire against a rural backdrop demonstrates the influence that Western and native South African cultures have on each other. It also reflects the modern Zulu's ability to understand both worlds, and to adapt to each as needed.

One important impact that urban life has had on Zulu tradition is changing the structure of the family. For example, although common in rural households, polygamy is not common among urban Zulus. Yet Zulu traditions have also influenced South African urban culture. The urban Zulu experience was for many decades characterized by resistance to apartheid. The Zulu used their traditional war chant, the *toyi-toyi*, in protest marches; the *toyi-toyi* is now known around the world as a cry for freedom. Likewise, African gold miners adapted traditional Zulu dances, sometimes creating new ones (such as the bull dance) to amuse themselves.

The city of Johannesburg (or *Jo'burg*), which becomes Musa's second home in the film, has long been at the center of South Africa's social transformation. Johannesburg's population reflects the tremendous cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic diversity of the country. Johannesburg is the capital of Gauteng province, located more than 400 kilometers from Musa's KwaZulu Natal homeland. Residence in Johannesburg was restricted to whites, Indians, and Coloureds under apartheid. The area designated for Africans (although no longer restricted to Africans) was southwest of Johannesburg; the black townships were therefore collectively known as *Soweto*, meaning "southwestern townships" of Johannesburg. Like Musa, many rural Zulu who migrate to Johannesburg find their first homes in Soweto.

As shown in the film, urban life in South Africa can be difficult. Zulu migrants traveling alone, like Musa, often find that they lack the social networks they had in their rural settings. Migrants with few skills may find employment as manual laborers. (Black miners lived in urban barracks, away from their families. The mining migrant labor system had a negative impact on South Africa's rural black families.) Educated Zulu migrants, however, often attend college. Zulu university students today make up a significant part of South Africa's student body and often find well-paid professional jobs in the city after graduation.

The youngest migrants, however, have few options. The HIV/AIDS crisis has placed a particular burden on rural children. In the wake of their parents' deaths, many children are forced to migrate from home and fend for themselves on the difficult city streets. While some, like Musa, resort to

HANDOUT 6 ▶ P. 2

doing odd jobs to survive, many others, like Musa's friend T, engage in gang-related criminal activities. This wide range of examples from the urban Zulu experience demonstrates that necessity and new opportunity have converged to transform the social possibilities of South Africa's major cities.

Note that patterns of urban transformation for the Zulus are not peculiar to them, but, in fact, occur within all other black South African groups. All have been similarly disenfranchised and all experience the process of social resistance, resilience, and rejuvenation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How do you imagine Musa felt going from a quiet rural area to a busy city center?

2. How well did he adjust to his new environment?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY:

Write a journal entry in which you describe a time you found yourself in a new and perhaps unsettling situation. How did you respond?