

## **Late Stone age to early Iron Age**

Zimbabwe has a rich human history that dates back many thousands of years. Archeological records clearly show that people lived in Zimbabwe since approximately 25,000 BCE. Earliest Human Societies (25,000 BCE – 500 CE) The earliest known inhabitants of Zimbabwe were ancestors of the Khoi-San peoples who still live in parts of Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa. Indeed, archeological evidence suggests that the Khoi-San peoples lived in parts eastern and southern Africa as long ago as 50,000 BCE. This period in the human history of southern Africa which continues until approximately 100 BCE is known as the Stone Age.

- The earliest inhabitants of Zimbabwe were hunters and gatherers.
- All of the food they consumed, and the tools and shelter they made, came from the animals they hunted, plants (seeds, fruit, edible roots) that they gathered, and natural resources provided by their immediate environment—trees, grass, rocks, etc.
- These early inhabitants of southern Africa lived in small groups that often moved from place to place.
- Hunting and gathering requires frequent migration from one location to another in search of fresh supplies of food.
- Living in small groups is ideal for migratory hunting and gathering.
- Much of what we know about the early peoples in Zimbabwe comes from our knowledge of the contemporary Khoi-San peoples in southern Africa. However, these early inhabitants of Zimbabwe also left important archeological artifacts.
- Among these artifacts are stone tools and weapons and marvelous paintings which can be found on cave walls and in rock shelters throughout Zimbabwe and Southern Africa.
- Archeologists and historians believe that cave paintings by the early Khoi-San represent the importance of animals and hunting to the early southern Africans.
- Note how realistic the representations of animals are, while the representations of human hunters are more abstract.
- Dancing is a common representation in cave paintings. Experts believe that dance had ceremonial importance in preparing hunters for the hunt.
- The ancestors of the Khoi-San peoples continued to live in what is today Zimbabwe up until approximately 1000 CE.

### **After living in this area for approximately 25,000 years, why did they move away?**

- The answer lies in the arrival approximately 2000 years ago of new groups of people migrating from north of the Zambezi River. Bantu Migrations, Societies and Kingdoms (0 CE – 1800 CE) Archeological evidence suggests that approximately 2000 years ago new groups of people began to arrive in Zimbabwe from the north.
- Although numerous groups of people migrated into Zimbabwe from the north over a period of 1500 years, these migrations are often lumped together and referred to as the Bantu Migrations.

- Today, over 100 million people comprising many different language and ethnic groups in Central, East and Southern Africa historically belong to the Congo-Niger (Bantu) language group which originated, historians think, in west-central Africa (current day Cameroon, Central African Republic and the Congo.)
- Early in the last century scholars who studied these migrations referred to the larger language group as Bantu speakers, since 'ntu was the shared word for a person (Muntu: person; Bantu: people).,
- . The Bantu-speaking migrants were significantly different from the original inhabitants of southern Africa.

The most significant difference between the new arrivals and the original people of Zimbabwe had to do with four important skills that the new- arrivals brought with them:

\*\*\* domestication of animals

\*\*\* cultivation of crops

\*\*\* smelting and making tools and weapons from iron and other metals

\*\*\* pottery (particularly the making of pots)

Why were these skills so important? How did they impact the way of life and history of the peoples who lived in Zimbabwe at this time?

### **Domestication of animals**

- The earliest Bantu- speaking migrants knew how to domestic and raise animals. As they migrated southwards they brought with them chickens, sheep, goats and dogs.
- Around 1000 CE a later group of Bantu speaking migrants introduced domesticated cattle.

### **Food Production**

- Cultivation of Crops: The early Bantu-Speaking migrants had the skill of cultivation Archeological evidence suggest that the earliest migrants brought with them seed and root crops, the most important being millet, cassava, and sorghum
- Food Production . Upon arrival in southern Africa they were able to “domesticate” local varieties of wild fruits and vegetables

### **Iron smelting**

- Another very important skill that the early migrants brought with them was the ability to mine, smelt, and make tools and weapons out of iron and other metals

### **Pottery**

- Pottery, most specifically the ability to make durable, fire-treated, pots was an important skill that the early Bantu-speaking migrants brought with them as they moved into southern Africa. Unlike the other three skills listed above, the benefits of pot-making may not be as evident.

- In combination, these skills provided the new-comers with the ability to prosper and grow as communities in the southern African environment.
- Agriculture and iron-working allowed the Bantu-speaking migrants to produce sufficient food to become stationary—to stay in one place. Moreover, unlike hunting and gathering societies, agricultural communities were not restricted to small groups; the size of a group was primarily dependent on the amount of food the community could produce. As will be described below, larger stable agricultural communities developed into important kingdoms that flourished in Zimbabwe between the 12th and 19th centuries CE.
- Historians refer to this process as political centralization or the development of centralized kingdoms. In telling this story it is important to remember that while the environment of this area was generally hospitable to farming communities, the region has a history of un-reliable rainfall. Throughout the past two millennia periodic droughts, sometimes lasting for three or four years, have caused great devastation, including the weakening of strong kingdoms.

### **Pre- Colonial Political Systems .**

The growing numbers and spread of Bantu speaking communities throughout the area between the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers had a devastating consequence on the indigenous hunting and gathering peoples of this area. The two groups were able to co-exist for some time, but by the sixth century CE, approximately 500 years after the arrival of the first Bantu speaking migrants, competition for land and water sources became so great that the less well organized and more poorly armed hunter and gathering groups were forced to move to the semi-arid and arid locations to the south west, areas that were not attractive to their agriculturalist neighbors (current day Botswana and Namibia). Although small remnants of these communities remained in south west Zimbabwe up until the 19th century, most the hunting and gathering communities had moved out the area by 1000 CE.

The Rise and Fall of Great Zimbabwe By the 10th century CE much of the high and middle veld area between the Zambezi River in the north and the Limpopo River in the south was occupied by agriculturalist communities that had moved into Zimbabwe as part of the on-going Bantu migrations. These communities prospered grew on the fertile and relatively well-watered high-veldt areas. This environment was supportive of the development of larger communities that led, as mentioned above, to a process of political centralization or kingdom building.

The changing social and political environment in Zimbabwe also facilitated economic specialization and diversification. Remember, the early farming communities were subsistence communities This meant that each farming family in a normal year produced only enough food for their own subsistence or survival throughout the year— including stored food for the dry season. However, by the 10th century CE the farming communities, making use of the supportive physical environment, and their on-going development of new skills, were able to produce agricultural surpluses—that is, more than they needed for their own subsistence.

Economic Specialization and Diversification , the ability to produce a surplus of food on a regular basis allows and supports the development of specialized occupations that are not related to food production. These new specialized jobs or occupations often enriched the community and may facilitate the process of political centralization. How so? Two quick examples. The production of surplus food freed up farmers who had good skills as metal-smiths to become full-time metal-smiths. They no longer had to spend time growing their own food since their communities were producing a surplus of food that they could obtain through exchanging iron tools for food. The ability to work full time at iron-smithing provided more time for improving skills that resulted in both better quality tools and weapons and a more abundant supply of iron implements. In turn, this resulted in larger and stronger communities and the need for rules to regulate behavior and individuals in authority to enforce rules and maintain order.

A second example. The production of surplus food and the ability, for example to produce good quality iron implements, provided communities with items that they could trade (exchange) with other communities for goods that they may not have. There is significant archeological evidence that suggests that as early as the 10th century CE agriculturalist communities in Zimbabwe were exchanging food and iron products with other communities that may not have had access to iron ore, but who lived near salt pans. They exchanged salt—a necessity—for iron tools or food items that they could not produce. The development of trade supported the development of political systems that were necessary for orderly and safe trade, while at same time trade helped new rulers become more important and powerful as a result of their control of the trade between communities.

Great Zimbabwe, which developed in the 12th century CE, was the earliest of the centralized states to develop in all of southern Africa. Given its importance in the history of southern Africa