INTRODUCTION TO THE NGONI SPIRITUAL WORLD

Umkulomqango God – the Great Spirit (Umkulu Ikakulu)
- He is the creator of all things (Umnikazi we zinto zonke); the source of all power (Uluhlanga);
  the giver of rain; the giver of health and strength; the giver of success in war; the deliverer
  from pestilence

Amadlozi
- They are the direct ancestors of the paramount (Inkosi), clan (Chibongo), house (Indlunkulu),
  and family group
- They are the guardians of the whole nation, clan, family group

People pray to them at the time of the Incwala or first fruits war, epidemics, droughts, the illness of
the paramount or of someone from the royal clan, or any other important issues touching the clan or
the house.

The Ngoni believe they cannot approach God and their ancestral spirits except through their cattle.

THE MASEKO NGONI

GOD (UMKULUMQANGO) AND ANCESTORS (AMADLOZI)

God (Umkulumqango)

The Maseko Ngoni view God as the source of everything, the creator of heaven and earth, the owner
of everything that exists. He is the ultimate source of power, wisdom and knowledge. He is the great
spirit, the one in heaven, the one who is above. His power is particularly seen in sending rain, in
delivering from drought and pestilence. He is the giver of strength and health, the guarantor of
success in warfare. Because he is linked to the sky, his personality is perceived as male. He is the
father of humankind. He is unseen and therefore unapproachable directly. The Ngoni do not speak
much about Him as He is not one of their acquaintances. Because of His position as Lord of the Sky
it would be bad manners to speak of Him. One has to safeguard His integrity and His honour.
People acknowledge that He is there in the sky but know little about him: they are content with living
under his rulership.

They can communicate with him only through those they know and who are in closer contact with
him. The king is the child of the sky and is in a better position to speak to the Father than his own
children. The king, because of his position can influence God. However, as long as he is alive, his
power is limited. Those who are endowed with full power and influence are those who have
preceded him, have died and are now with Him - they are the ancestors of the king, the amadlozi.
This closeness is not only reserved to the spirits of rulers but also those who are responsible for
founding clans, villages and families. These are also called amadlozi. They are the go between God
and the people, they carry people’s word to Umkulumqango and return with a reply.

The Ancestors (Amadlozi)

The Maseko Ngoni believe that the ancestors who are nearest to the living generations in time, whose
names are known, have less power than those remote generations, whose names have been forgotten.
In the same line of thought, The Great Spirit (Ukulungqango) possesses more power than any other
being. He is removed in time, no one knows his genealogy. He cannot be addressed directly.
Similarly the remotest ancestor of the king whose praise names are also unknown cannot be directly
addressed either. It is the privilege of the direct ancestors of the king whose names, genealogies and praise names are known, to be addressed directly and correctly. The entire nation can count on them and use their influence with remoter and more powerful royal ancestral spirits and with the Great Spirit Himself.

The same applies to the clans and the families. They also have their own lines of spirits, dating far back to their origin. These spirits, in succession carry their messages until they reach their respective unknown ancestors who in turn have the duty to take the message to God. The amadlozi are rarely involved in the times of plenty and prosperity, they are usually called upon in times of danger and crisis.

The spirits of the former kings are implored at the time of war, epidemics, drought and serious illness of the living king or one of the leading members of the royal family. The first fruits ceremony (incwala) is the occasion to request from them good health for the king and the entire nation. The spirits of the clans and families are addressed when there is trouble in the clan or sickness in the families.

The Ngoni believe that the human spirit has a continued existence after death. His existence is related to the place where he has dwelt, the kingdom he belongs to, the people who were in his family and clan, and the cattle which belong in his house and village. This “continued existence” is not automatic. It is linked to the correct performance of the burial rites and the observance of stages of mourning and the deliberate “bringing back” of the spirit to the village where it is guarded and honoured after the final mourning ceremony is over.

NGONI CREATION MYTH

The Ngoni – formerly Nguni – emigrated from southern Africa (Natal and Swaziland). They left their homeland before the Zulu and the Swazi kingdoms took final form. The Nguni, who changed their name to Ngoni after crossing the Zambezi, are an offshoot of Zulu-Swazi. Their traditions contain many myths of origins, or creation myths. Following is one that comes from a Zulu background.

The Conception of the Universe

God the lord of the sky (Inkosi Yaphezulu ) lived in the sky which was thought not to be too far above the clouds. As the clouds came down, God came nearer. He moved as he wished, closer or further away from the earth. As the great one came nearer to the people, they knew they had to stay indoors or keep quiet.

The sky was believed to be an immense blue rock. It stretched from one end of the earth to the other. The great vault of rock rested on the edges of the world. From beneath, four bulls carried the flat earth on their horns. When one of the bulls shook its head the earth also shook and earthquakes occurred.

In-between the sky and the earth were the sun and the moon. Both moved along their respective paths beneath the blue rock that made the sky. The stars were little holes in the sky that allowed light to filter through at night.

Above the floor of the sky there was a herd of cattle. When the cows were in a hurry to go grazing they trampled through the mud. Their hoofs would sometimes go directly through the blue rock sky and cause the appearance of falling stars. The Milky Way was conceived as the main entrance for the cattle enclosure. Undoubtedly, God the lord of the sky was the supreme owner of these herds.
The original fall

Once upon a time God (Umkulumqango) was sitting outside his house when one of his servants reported to him that a young, mischievous man was riding Umkulumqango’s favourite white ox. This was not the first time, and the boy seemed more and more incorrigible. The Inkosi decided to send this boy down to earth in order to prevent him from causing trouble in the sky. The young man was brought before the Inkosi who ordered that a hole should be opened in the floor of the sky. Through this hole, the first man would be lowered to the earth.

The Creation of Man

This being done, God himself tied cattle intestine (ithumbu) around the waist of the boy and lowered him down to the earth. When the boy reached the ground he looked around and saw all the surrounding beauties. He wanted to explore these wonders, but he felt he was not free; he was still tied by the naval cord (inkaba). Taking a nearby reed the boy cut off the cord that bound him to the sky. In this way he was made free, though a piece of cord remained hanging from his waist. One moon later God decided to find out how the boy was doing on earth. The hole was reopened and God looked through. He saw the boy lying under a banana plant looking thin and weak. God became very sorry to see his son in this condition. He asked himself if the boy missed anything – water, food, shelter, etc.? Why was his son suffering? Umkulumqungo concluded that his son, being young and alone, needed a companion.

The Creation of Woman

Umkulumqango decided to give the boy a wife. Calling for the most beautiful girl in the sky, God told her to leave her village and go to live on earth in his son’s village. This would make his son happy and remove his loneliness. In addition, everyone would know that this boy on earth was his son.

Taking the same cord, God tied it round the waist of the maiden and lowered her down to the earth through the hole in the sky. As she touched the ground she saw a young man sleeping under a banana plant. The young man woke up; seeing the woman he was amazed! He found her beautiful and fair! “Where could such a present come from?” he wondered. He knew that it was from his father, the Inkosi of the sky, giver of all the beautiful gifts. The young man was grateful. He took, once more, a reed and cut off the cord that bound the maiden. Like the young man, she was made free. God pulled the cord into the sky and closed the hole so that people on earth could no longer look up into the heavens. Similarly, those from above could not peep down on earth in order to witness their reproduction (work of creation).

So this is the story of how the first man and the first woman were put on earth. They are known as Amazulu – ‘the people from the sky.’

Interpretation of the Creation Myths

The Zulu myth reveals many aspects of Ngoni culture. God is seen as the “Inkhosi ya Makhosi,” the lord of the lords, the lord of the sky and the father of the universe. God is seen as the supreme authority; this validates the Ngoni political system. The Ngoni paramount is also called the “Inkhosi ya Makhosi”. He is considered to be God’s son. At the moment of his coronation the paramount inherits divine kingship. The title of “Amazulu” confers on the Zulu, the ancestry of the Ngoni, a divine origin.
God, as the supreme authority over the sky and the earth, owns cattle and servants; this validates the economic and social organization of the Ngoni society. Their economy was based on a pastoral life that required the acquisition of domestic slaves and cattle.

Viewing God as the father of the first man, and the provider of a wife for his son, validates the prominent role of the father in the Ngoni patrilineal system. In punishing his son by sending him down to earth, the disciplinary and educative functions of the Ngoni father are clearly demonstrated. In showing pity for the unhappy state of his son, the binding duty of the Ngoni father to provide a bride for his son is emphasized. In requesting the maiden to leave the sky and join her husband on earth God validates the Ngoni virilocal marriage.

The fact that God, lord of the universe, sends forth the first man and the first woman to the earth validates marriage and sex according to the Ngoni customs.

God is the father of both the sky and the universe. In a way God is the father of twins: the sky is the first born, the earth is the second. Sky and earth are like husband and wife. The sky is like a father who fosters life. The earth is like a mother who nourishes and nurses her children (Abanthu). From this perspective, God is the originator of human marriage of which the first couple is the model. Their sexual life and subsequent propagation of children is a privilege. They are to imitate the example of the twin children of God, the sky and the earth. Nothing should interfere with their relationship and sexual life. In an Ngoni family, once a new home has been created through the ritual process of marriage, parents are not to interfere with the life of their children. Incest is forbidden and avoidance between in-laws is strictly prescribed. The first humans free themselves from the sky by cutting the cord. The reed used for cutting the umbilical cord is the very instrument the Ngoni employ in the birth rite for separating mother from child. Within an Ngoni patrilineal system, the bond between the mother and the child is explicitly diminished in order to emphasize the importance of the father as head of the family group and the sole owner of the children. The cord that links the child to the mother is cut off with a reed at birth. In contrast, the creation myth stresses that the cord that links the child to the father is symbolically cut at the time of marriage through the gift of ‘lobola’ – the bride price and the other marriage arrangements.

Moreover, our story insists that the cord is made of cattle bowels. This emphasizes the identity of the Ngoni as cattle people, while again exhibiting the systematic omnipresence of cattle in their beliefs and rituals. This is particularly epitomized in the fact that the intestines and the gall bladder are indispensable accessories during the burial of an Ngoni paramount, for and wedding ceremonies. The ceremonial war dress of the Maseko contains a form of bead work which, in representing the navel cord, stresses the link between father and child.

Another Ngoni tradition traces the origin of humankind to the bed of reeds. The reed bed has the innate power to multiply and regenerate itself. In the first myth, people come from the sky. In this myth, they come from the earth (the bed of reeds). Reeds are connected with water, fertility and rebirth. Reeds are the carriers of water; they are compared to the father in the Ngoni society, who is the carrier of semen and children. Umkulunqango, the Lord of the sky has given to humankind the power to multiply and continue living like reeds. He told man to do his work of propagating life, and the woman to give birth. This power of fertility is, for the Ngoni, God’s great power in man. This power involves feelings, emotions and passions. Ngoni society exalts potency and love. But nonetheless stresses that the good and the continuity of their society depend, above all, on the control and regulation of this potency. This is expressed in customs concerning exogamy: the choice of non-related marriage partners, child spacing, etc.

Reeds are extensively used in the rituals of the Ngoni family life. The sleeping mats are normally made of reeds, and at birth a splinter of reed is used instead of a knife for separating the child from
the mother. At Incwala, the First Fruits ceremony – when the king symbolically provides rebirth for his people and the Inanusi (king’s diviner) guarantees the well-being of the king – all the participants carry reeds. During acts of divination, the Inanusi utilize a reed as a divining rod. At weddings the women dance Msindo with a reed in hand. When a girl or a married woman longs for her absent boyfriend or husband, she consoles herself or voices her complaints on a mouthbow (Nkangala) or a flute made of reeds. In all of these examples, reeds are used in a ritual context that stresses transition, fertility and rebirth.

Moreover, the Ngoni family and political system give absolute priority to the role of the father, and to the king, who is seen as the father of the nation. The father is the reed that carries water. He is the head of the family, the giver of children and status to the wife, the exclusive owner of children. He is indeed the ‘knife’ that cuts the child from the mother.

**HISTORY AND GENEALOGY OF THE MASEKO IN MALAWI**

The first and most ancient names to be remembered in the Maseko genealogy are those of Msizi Nobulako, who was a *mlumuzana* (village headman) in southern Africa around 1800, and Goqueni, who succeeded Msizi Nobulako after his death. Both died in the south, and no details of their lives have been documented except that Ngwana succeeded the position of Goqueni. The history of the central kingdoms of the Ngoni starts with the name of Ngwana. This leading Swazi headman had given hospitality to Nyaba, one of the three generals who joined forces against Shaka Zulu (1787-1828). Ngwana’s good deed provoked the anger of Shaka Zulu who was soon on his way to eliminate them all. Ngwana and his people decided to leave Swaziland and flee to the north in 1828. He was on his way to the Zambezi when he died in 1841. Magdlena briefly succeeded Ngwana as regent. Becoming regent in 1942, it was Mgoola who brought the Maseko into Malawi.

The Maseko arrived near the Domwe Mountain, close to Dedza, around 1845. Mgoola died at Domwe and was succeeded the same year by the rightful heir, Mputa, son of Ngwana. In 1846, Mputa led the Maseko across the Mangochi plain to Songea in Southern Tanzania. There the Maseko encountered another Ngoni group under Gama Zulu, which had come earlier, via the west, with the Jere group and had settled in the region. Mputa fought and conquered this Gama group, called the Makwangwala. Subdued, the Gama group reluctantly accepted Maseko rule.

In 1856, Mputa was involved in a military operation near the Ruhaha (or Lichiningo) River and needed to take refuge in one of Gama’s villages. While there Mputa was murdered by one of Gama’s men. Following his death civil war broke out between the resurgent Gama and the Maseko. Eventually the Maseko were forced to depart from Songea and return to Malawi. In that same year Chidyaonga, the brother of Mputa, became regent. Chikuse, the legitimate heir, was too young to succeed. Chidyaonga led the Maseko back to Domwe across Mozambique. Chidyaonga reached Domwe around 1868-70. There he helped the Maseko to resettle and rallied them behind his nephew, Chikuse, who was by then old enough to take over the throne. Although Chikuse was not born in the big house, as the rule of succession required, Namlangeni, the big wife of Mputa had only a daughter called Manga. Chikuse, who was the son of the next wife, was adopted by the big house and reared by Namlangeni herself.

Chidyaonga died in 1878 and was succeeded by Chikuse. Chifisi, Chidyaonga’s son and Chikuse’s cousin shared some responsibility in the ruling of the Kingdom together, though Chikuse carried the power of the title of Paramount. Chifisi’s help was short lived, and he soon sought to make a throne for himself. Removing himself from Chikuse’s jurisdiction, Chifisi raised his own army and became a threat to Chikuse. Chikuse died in March 1891 and was succeeded by his son Gomani I (Chathamthumba - Chikuse) in the same year. Chifisi died in August 1891, and was succeeded by the fifteen year-old Pasekupe, who became known as Kachindamoto I Dzithenga. Gomani and
Kachindamoto fought numerous wars against each other. In 1894 the British forced them to reconcile and accept a peace treaty. Zones of influence were established. The colonial office granted the Lakeshore area to Kachindamoto, thus enabling him to establish his capital near Mtakataka.

Meanwhile, Gomani Chikuse received the Ntcheu region, where he opposed the British for imposing taxes on the people, and the missionaries for settling in his area without formal permission. Before he could assemble troops he was defeated and taken prisoner. Following a mock court trial, British personnel executed Gomani near Dombole mission on 27th October 1896. At his death, his son Zitonga (later called Philip), was only two years old. The regency was taken by Gomani’s brother, Mandala, and Namlangeni (Mputa’s head wife). In an effort to tighten supervision, the colonial government forced the Maseko to establish their administrative headquarters at Mpira, behind Ntcheu boma.

After the Portuguese-Nyasaland border was established, dividing the Ngoni territory into two; Mandala and Namlangeni fled to Mozambique and were refused entry back into Malawi. In Mozambique they tried unsuccessfully to raise an army; they were later imprisoned and subsequently died. The heir, Zitonga, was cared for by the great Mulumuzana Chakumbira Mpala Ndau, who hid the child from the British.

After World War I, the Maseko transferred their capital from Mpira (Ntcheu) to Lizulu. This is where the young Gomani, Zitonga, was brought up in secret. After having received a European style education from Mr. Walker, a family friend, he became Paramount of the Maseko in 1921, taking the name Gomani II. His position as Paramount was only recognised by the colonial government in 1933.

By 1899 Kachindamoto, the Paramount of the Lakeshore was in serious trouble. Ndindi, his brother, had accused him of murder at the office of the boma in Dowa. In September of that year, British soldiers came to arrest Kachindamoto in his capital. He escaped to the hills, but eventually the soldiers caught him and put him in a cage with the intention of bringing him to Zomba for trial. Kachindamoto continued to resist, got hold of a bayonet and committed suicide.

After his death, the succession dispute was settled and Ndindi was rejected as regent in favour of Dzinthenga’s elder sister, Nyatei. She had suffered a lot under Ndindi, and had escaped from him with the legitimate heir, Abraham, the son of Dzinthenga who was about seven years old. She then became the regent and led the Kingdom until 1912 under the name of Bambo (Mr.) Nyatei. In 1912 Abraham was enthroned as the new Paramount, Kachindamoto II, in the presence of the Governor General, Mr. Alpin. He ruled until his death in 1931.

In 1933 Matapira Kummaani, the younger brother of Abraham, was chosen over Samson, the eldest brother, because of better leadership qualities. Matapira was enthroned as Kachindamoto III. Abraham’s son was bypassed as his big wife had no son – only a daughter. The following year Nyatei died. Matapira continued to rule until his death in 1954. The throne remained vacant until 1956 when Samson was finally enthroned as Kachindamoto IV. It is noteworthy that with the enthronement of both Matapira and Samson, there was a major shift in the Ngoni rule of succession in favour of a Chewa pattern. Samson died in October 1976. After a delay of two years Enock Zonyera, son of
Abraham through a junior wife, was chosen to be Kachindamoto V. Oscar, son of the big house, was bypassed due to lack of suitable qualities. Zonyera ruled until 1987, the year of his death.

The next Paramount was to be chosen from Matapira ascendance. Justino, his son from the second or third junior wife, was selected, as his sons from the big house were already dead. At that time Justino was about to be pensioned from the railways in Limbe where he had worked for decades. His enthronement was delayed until 1988. Ruling as Kachindamoto VI, Justino depended upon his councillors following a paralysing stroke in 1999 that ended up with his death in July 2001. After completing the commemoration rites after Justino’s funeral, there were rumours that Thereza, the daughter of Samson was to be the next paramount. It took more than 2 years for the Ngoni Kingdom of Kachindamoto to come to an agreement to support a woman as a paramount. Thereza was educated and worked at the theological college of Zomba. The only male eligible to the position was judged inapt to carry the paramouncy. Finally, Thereza was hurriedly enthroned as Kachindamoto VII in the month of February 2003, at the peak of the rainy season.

NGONI RULE OF SUCCESSION

The Paramount

Infallibly the Paramount was chosen according to patrilineal rule. He had to be the son of a former paramount and he had to belong to the big house (first son of the first wife). Each wife had a recognised position and rank of her own. Rank was formalised by the exchange of cattle.

This rule was sometimes bypassed, and adoption into the big house was practised. Through this legal adoption the son of a junior wife would then have equal rites to the first son of the big house. Another common practice was to overlook the rank or pedigree of the candidate in favour of personality and character traits suitable for the position. In such cases, the legitimate heir would be bypassed and a brother with more favourable leadership characteristics would be promoted to the throne. Sometimes this was done with the explicit wish of the late paramount who nominated his favoured successor before dying. All of these irregular practices made succession to the paramouncy very difficult and often unclear. The principle was straightforward, but the practice gave rise to numerous conflicts and divisions as the complex history of the Gomani and Kachindamoto Kingdoms clearly illustrates. The choice of the daughter of the paramount as queen is a recent development that has no precedent in Ngoni history, although several times in the past, the sister of the king has been put into the position of regent due to the lack of any suitable male candidates.

The Regent

When the king died his office was suspended and it was automatically the role of the regent to take over his position. Usually the regent was a brother of the dead king. He could hold this post for days, months or years depending on the circumstances. The provision for a regent allowed for a period of delay before announcing the succession of a king. During this period the regent was responsible for continuing the work of the king; for consulting with the leading clan heads about the successor; and for caring for the elected heir until he comes of age.

NGONI BIRTH RITES

Pregnancy

When an Ngoni wife was aware that she was pregnant she did not tell her husband. She hid her condition from him as long as possible. A woman’s saying was, “Men are like children. They are not
able to understand pregnancy matters.” Men accepted this fact as normal. They concentrated on their political role and fought wars leaving the women to tend to domestic affairs.

Ngoni culture also forbade the wife to tell her mother-in-law about her condition. As a result, she had to rely on a woman friend, often a co-wife or servant of the household. This woman had the task of informing the mother-in-law, who played an important role in the upbringing of the child. The pregnant mother continued performing her domestic duties until the last minute. She would not show fear as the pregnancy developed.

1st Ritual: Delivery

The delivery was in the hands of senior women. They knew when the labour was near and they took charge of the preparations. First they took out of the house all the husband's belongings; his clothes, axes, spears and shields; then all good or new mats, pots and baskets, for fear of them being stained by birth. Only old mats, clothes and pots were used for labour. The house was seen as unclean and it was forbidden for the husband or other men to enter. The mother-in-law was in charge of the operation, together with the co-wives of her husband’s brothers or the widowed sisters of her husband.

Only old women took an active role in the delivery. All the same, younger women could assist and encourage the mother to be. At the delivery she was made to sit on a mat and lean her back against the knees of an assistant. The experienced midwives were in front of her ready to receive the child. Even if the mother was in great pain she was not supposed to cry or to complain. The other women encouraged her, wiped her face or gave her water to drink.

All these women, together with the mother to be, co-ordinated their efforts and in due time a healthy baby was born. Then the placenta was buried in a hole in the floor of the hut. The baby was washed by a senior woman and oiled with castor oil. The navel cord was tied with thread, then the baby was given thin porridge of fried and ground finger millet to eat and to throw up. This was understood as a purgative rite to get rid of mucus in the stomach. Then a tiny bit of sour milk curds was put into the baby’s mouth. The mother was washed, covered and left to rest. The old women went to burn the old mat of delivery, and thus, the house was cleansed. A fire in the middle of the room was rekindled in order to warm both the mother and the baby who were seen as ‘cool’. Finally the mother washed her breasts with warm water and helped her child to suckle.

2nd Ritual: Uncleanliness

In the Ngoni understanding, all that surrounded birth was seen as ritually unclean; the hut, the belongings inside it, the mother and the child. If the mother had to leave the house and go to the toilet, she had to cover herself with a skin or cloth from head to foot and avoid meeting anybody. She was not allowed to cook; the food was prepared by her mother-in-law. The dish she used was washed separately. She was not allowed to use her hands to eat; a wooden spoon was provided. This spoon was also washed separately.

During this period of seclusion one of the senior attendants slept in the hut with her. No other young children were allowed to sleep inside though they could come in and see the baby for a short time. All men over ten years of age were strictly forbidden to come near the house. The husband slept in the boy’s dormitory or in the house of one of the women attendants. Food for other members of the family was not brought into the house for fear of being polluted; it was served at the gate of the kraal where men gathered to eat.

3rd Ritual: Purification
The ritual cleansing of the hut and its occupants took place in different stages. At the time of the bringing out of the child the hut was swept, the floor was smeared anew with fresh and wet cow dung. Through this ritual the house was made safe for the husband to sleep in.

The items removed before birth were brought back and the husband was allowed to return and sleep inside, but on a separate mat on the right side near the fireplace. If the child was the first born, the father’s return was delayed until a senior woman had finished instructing the mother on how to care for the child. The falling off of the navel cord was a signal for the baby to come out into the open and be presented to the village. Women used to hasten the falling of the navel cord by applying to it a medicine made by burning a maize cob and reducing it to ash, mixed with castor oil and the juice of a bitter fruit. The medicine was applied with a feather.

4th Ritual: The Coming Out Ceremony

Once the navel cord had shrivelled and fallen off, the baby’s head was shaved. Ritually, the mother also shaved a little hair around her temples. She washed and anointed herself with sweet smelling leaves. She also anointed the baby with oil, dressed him with beads and came out of the house to sit on a new mat outside. The coming out used to take place in the late afternoon, ten to fourteen days after the birth. By then the men had come back from work and were ready to salute the stranger. The husband and his brothers were the first to do so. The first time they saw the baby they brought small presents: chickens, baskets of flour and strings of beads, which were tied around the waist, wrists and ankles of the baby.

During the ceremonial performance, the senior men of the village stayed by the gate of the kraal. Once the cattle had been brought back and the gate closed, the grandmother carried the baby to the gate and presented it to the senior men as the one who would be herding the cows in the future. In return, the elders offered small presents.

After the presentation of the child to the father, to the father’s brothers and to the elders, the baby was given a name. It was up to the father’s father to do so if it was a boy. After discussing the issue at the kraal gate, the grandfather came into the house, called the mother of the child and spelled out the name; usually one related to the circumstances surrounding the birth. This personal name did not mean much to the Ngoni and was rarely used in social life. They preferred the clan name.

5th Ritual: The Carrying Skin (Mberekoko) Ritual

At the time of the naming, the father or, more often the father’s father, gave a carrying skin to the mother to help her carry the child. The skin was that of a goat or a small calf. The skin was cleaned, scraped and was softened by rubbing in fat. Some of the meat from the animal was given to the mother and the child. The rest was eaten by the men of the house.

The carrying skin belonged to the child rather than to the mother. It was more often used by the nurse girl (Alezi) who was in charge of the baby during the day time, relieving the mother allowing her to cultivate and fulfil other domestic tasks. The nurse girl was chosen by the grandmother from among her servants’ daughters. Each baby was allotted to a particular girl. This type of infant care was a particular feature for the Ngoni. The girl was usually in her teens and unmarried. She was supervised by an old woman from the grandmother’s household. The nurse girl took care of the baby from the early morning until nightfall, bringing it back to the mother to suckle at regular intervals. She stayed around the house with the baby, at hand, in order to help in domestic duties like preparing the meals. She ate with the mother and other women of the household. At night she went to sleep at the house of the old woman who supervised her together with the other nurse girls.

6th Ritual: Visit to the Mother’s Home

Several weeks after the birth, senior women would judge whether the child was strong enough to undertake the journey to the mother’s home. It was a custom according to the patrilineal lifestyle of
the Ngoni to pay an official visit to the mother’s family and show them the baby. Even if the child belonged to the father’s family, it was courtesy to visit the in-laws and strengthen the bonds between the two families.

Word was sent in advance by a messenger from the husband’s village to announce the visit and to give them time to prepare the welcome. The mother-in-law led the cortege to the wife’s home. On arrival they were welcomed by the wife’s mother and father and other relatives. A mat was spread outside the biggest house; the young mother and the baby were given a place of honour together with the mother-in-law. The father and his male relatives came to salute the child and to give him presents of beads. If the mother’s father owned a lot of cattle, he killed one of them and a feast was prepared. After the feast meat was given to them to take back home as a present for the child.

After this formal visit had taken place the young mother was free to visit her former home more often, and to receive her own relatives in her husband’s village.

**PUBERTY RITES**

**Girls’ Puberty Initiation**

Among the Ngoni there was no circumcision school and no public initiation rite. The puberty rituals were a private and personal affair. When a girl had her first menstruation, she told one of her age mates who informed the girl’s grandmother. The grandmother kept the girl inside the hut during that time, and taught her how to wear a cloth whenever menstruation occurred. She was also told to sleep in a different part of the hut, separated from the children, and to wash on her own, away from the younger girls.

This time of seclusion which lasted from a few weeks to three months, consisted in different degrees of physical endurance tests, instruction in traditional hygiene, in the facts of life and in the correct behaviour towards senior people with great emphasis on submission to authority. At the end of her first period, she was escorted in procession to the women’s bathing place by her father’s sisters and his other female relatives. There her face and body were painted with white flour. The white on the body and face of the initiate signified their spiritual and physical separation from the community.

At the river the girl was made to take off her clothes and sit in shallow water, facing south-east, the ritual position adopted in all Ngoni crises of life and death. On the bank, the women stood in silence and watched the girl splashing herself and trying to control her shivering until she was allowed to come out and was given clean clothes to put on.

Back at the grandmother’s house, the women sat on the veranda, the girl in front of them, legs folded on the side and head bent in a respectful attitude. There her father’s sisters continued with a short instruction reminding the girl to conceal her condition whenever subsequent periods occurred, reminding her above all of her new status.

After her return home the girl’s parents were informed and so was the head of the village. Semi-public rejoicing followed. From now on, she no longer belonged to the age set called Mabuthu, but to that of the Izintombi or Anamwali. At this stage, she came under the close supervision of the older women who had the special task of caring for those who had passed puberty.

These women gave them further instructions in personal hygiene and in sexual matters. They also had the duty to periodically examine the girls to find out if they were still virgin. Virginity was indispensable for marriage. They also taught them self-control, modesty and vigilance. Practical training by adult women was also provided on how to cook, to dress and to behave. The standards expected of them were high and exacting.

**Boy’s Puberty Initiation**

When a boy reached his first nocturnal emission, his age mates informed an older boy in the boy’s dormitory (Lawen). He told him to go at once to the river before dawn and bathe. He was to do this every morning. The use of cold water was believed to give strength, virility and control of the sexual
The boy was also instructed by the older boys of the Laweni on how to behave with other boys, with elders and with women. This stage was called Ukuchayiwa Nga Manzi - “to be beaten with water”. This stage was dealt with, within the Laweni and was not reported to the elders. Later, when the boy’s voice started changing, his father would inquire whether his son had passed puberty. Then he would find a man who knew the Uludengele medicine. The father would kill a goat and the medicine man would take some of the unchewed cud from the stomach and mix it with the bitter Uludengele root and put it in a pan over the fire. The ritual took place near the kraal gate or near the parent’s hut; the father and other male relatives were present. When the mixture was boiling, the boy was told to dip the tips of his fingers in the pan, one after the other, and lick each one quickly. At the same time he kept jumping over the fire and striking his elbows against his sides. Senior men watched intently all through the performance because they believed that the mixture not only helped physical strength, but also prevented impotence. This last rite also recalled the rite of purification the warriors underwent having killed in battle. Through this rite the boy cleanses himself from evil and expresses his innocence. When such a rite was performed for the heir of the chief, it was followed by a war dance in the cattle kraal, surrounded by the warriors. In this case they did not use a goat for making the medicine, but a bull.

The Laweni (The Boy’s Dormitory)

Around the age of seven years, boys joined the boy’s dormitory. The determining sign for joining was the appearance of the second teeth. Before that the boy slept in his grandmother’s hut. It was up to the father to judge if it was time for his son to stop playing and to be involved in something useful like herding the goats or calves. Besides being the concern of the father, it had to be a personal decision. It meant leaving the warm care of the grandmother, the free play around the hut of the mother and the prepared meal provided for him. Laweni life was rigorous. It was dominated by the senior boys living in the dormitory. The younger ones were at the mercy and often the slaves of the elders. They had to clean the hut, fetch water and firewood and keep the fire going, even sometimes steal food from their mother’s stores. They were beaten if they were slow or careless or were tempted to speak about what was going on in the Laweni. On the one hand, a boy who did not belong to the Laweni, was mocked by the other boys and considered a child. On the other hand, once a member of the Laweni, he would be disciplined into obedience by threats and beatings. The age range within the dormitory varied between seven and seventeen years, until they joined the army or formed a new regiment.

The boys belonging to families owning cattle, even from aristocratic backgrounds, had the duty of herding cattle. This was hard; they had to wake before dawn, open the kraal gate and take the cattle to the water. They had to milk the cows and carry the milk in heavy wooden containers. They had to take the cattle to pasture, sometimes for long distances during the dry season. They had to return them to the kraal in the evening making sure that none were missing. The boys also taught each other to fight with sticks and knobkerries (Izinduku), to wrestle, to catch mice and small birds, to use the knobbery, catapults, bows and arrows. They also had to fetch wood and water, keep the fire going and sweep the hut. Laweni life was on a democratic style, nobody could withdraw from any activity on any account. The fact of living and sleeping together taught them to live in a community and square up their own character and become more sociable. In this way, the Ngoni chiefs kept the boys busy and trained them to be responsible. In the evening the older boys showed interest in listening to court cases near the kraal which they discussed amongst themselves afterwards. They also observed from a distance the elders making mats, baskets and carvings that they could practice whilst herding.

Due to the various activities of Laweni life, the boys soon took more interest and a bigger part in adult occupations, and as a result, they developed leadership qualities and personality. This was also the formative period when a boy’s capacity to succeed his father in a position of authority was carefully observed and judged.
The Ngoma Dance

In the social life of young people the Ngoma dance played an important part, especially during the period after the harvest and before the next rains. The youth organised themselves on a village team basis. The boys practised their dance outside the cattle kraal in the evenings, with the girls doing their dancing by themselves as a rule. At some special occasions, Ngoma competitions were organised between different villages. The dancing was done in the kraal where the adults gathered to watch and to judge. The co-ordination of the line of boys, and the girls behind them required assiduous practice in order to achieve harmony and steady beat of the feet. They also needed inventiveness and creativity in order to improvise their own warrior costumes for such occasions, or real determination to make their own genuine war dress as the adults wore. The entire exercise was part of their development; it contributed to raising in them a sense of initiative, discipline, creativity and above all personality (Ubuntu).

Umsindo (Pre-marriage Rite)

Between the private puberty rite and her marriage there was formerly a time span of five to ten years. A high born Ngoni girl had to go through a pre-marriage ceremony, the Umsindo. Marriage would normally follow immediately afterwards. The ceremony was only held for girls of high rank. The ritual was a public declaration, that the girl for whom it was performed, had been examined and found to be a virgin. This ritual was never held for a girl who had lost her virginity. The rite was meant to emphasise the social rank and the wealth of the girl’s father, for only rich people could afford to hold an Umsindo ceremony.

This ceremony began with the senior women of the girl’s home sending for her father with these words: “This child has now grown up. She is ready for the preparations to enter adulthood.” The ceremony was called “The seclusion in the house as if fasting”. The girl with her companion spent two or three days in the hut, hidden behind upright mats, curved so that no one could see round them. They were naked except for long, soft leather cloaks worn over one shoulder and tied under the right arm. During this seclusion the food was brought to them by a senior woman who also instructed them. During this time the girls were hidden away from the village, while women cooked large quantities of meat and brewed beer for the guests.

When the girl and her companion emerged from the hut of seclusion they were fully dressed in short leather skirts cut in a circular pattern and long leather cloaks trimmed with a fringe of tiny bells or small copper beads. The girl for whom the ceremony was performed wore strips of meat strung together like beads hanging over her chest. The fat from the kidneys was twisted into a necklace and the skins of cow tails were worn hanging from the waist, one in front and one behind. For the first time her hair was combed in the Isihlutu hair-style specially reserved for adult women. Dressed in this special attire, the girl sat on a new mat, or skin in front of the house of seclusion. Her relatives offered her presents, often in the form of strings of beads, and also gave her advice. At the close of the ceremony the skins and the fat used for ornaments were burned by the stream and the ashes swept into the water, as at the time of the funeral rites.

The entire ceremony was accompanied by Umsindo songs which were meant to reveal sexual matters using allusive language in order to disguise and veil the content. Besides being instructions in sexual matters the Umsindo songs referred to well-known events in Ngoni history. Others warned against jealousy when living in a polygamous household.

The Umsindo ceremony was a way of asserting the girl’s membership to her own family and village. For an Ngoni woman of high rank the Umsindo ceremony made her aware of her own importance and position and at the same time validated the announcement that the girl was now ready for marriage. Soon after this, marriage negotiations and a full marriage ceremony followed.

RITUALS OF MARRIAGE
Marriage Proposal

A young man who wished to marry would start courting a girl from another village. If they liked each other they would agree to marry. The young man would then inform his father’s brother, who would in turn bring the news to the boy’s father, and the entire family group. This uncle would act as a go-between for the marriage. At the father’s request he would be sent to the girl’s village. There, he would meet with the girl’s uncle and discuss the proposal with him. After his departure the girl’s uncle would bring the matter to the girl’s parents. The girl would be consulted on whether she consented to the marriage.

Some days later the boy’s uncle would pay a further visit to the girl’s family in order to receive the answer. After their discussions, he would return home and bring the news to the family.

The Snuff Box Ritual and Lobola Arrangement, “Gwati”

A few days later the boy’s uncle would return to the girl’s village with a beast called “The Snuff Box”. This was a gift from the boy’s father. On this mission, he would be accompanied by distant relatives, but none from the immediate family circle. On arrival the beast would be slaughtered and prepared for the betrothal feast.

Through this ceremony, the girl’s parents and other relatives would acknowledge that they “have snuffed” or that they have agreed. From that moment on, the girl would be called a daughter-in-law. Her father and his brothers would then decide the amount to be paid for the Lobola (bride price). They would inform the boy’s parents on the number of cattle they wanted. (From 1930 - 1935 a girl of royal clan was worth 15 heads of cattle, while a girl of another Swazi clan was worth between 3 and 9 heads.) The cattle would be transferred before or immediately after the marriage feast. Then it was the initiative of the girl’s parents to fix the date for the marriage ceremony, Mtimba.

The Mtimba Ceremony

The main ceremony (Mtimba) used to start with the preparation of the girl in her own village (Ukuconga). From that moment on the girl was called Umlobokazi, the bride. In the kraal, a group of leading women together with her grandmothers and aunts, instructed her on how to behave in her new home. They told her: “My child, we are putting you out of our family. We are handing you over to other people. You were free; now your freedom is over. You will be under other people. Where you are going you will meet with a lot of difficulties. They might blame you for things you have not done. Be patient”.

During these instructions the girl cried and so did her mother. The morning before leaving home, the girl was dressed with freshly prepared skins, her hair was arranged in a chignon, Isihlutu. A goat’s gall bladder was tied onto her head-dress to signify the brooding of the ancestors over her. Another gall bladder from a cow was attached to her elbows.

The Marriage Cortege

The weeping bride was accompanied by her age mates, whose heads and faces were covered with dangling beads forming a veil, and other female relatives to the bridegroom’s village as they sang Uyeni songs and moved their shoulders as if they were shivering. Some young men would drive a bullock (Mcando) ahead of the cortege, as a present from the bride's parents. This animal would be kept in the bridegroom’s mother’s herd.

The entry of the bride’s party (Ukugandisa) was the first time that the parents of both families had met as a group. As the bride’s procession waited at the gate of the kraal they sang Mtimba songs. In reply, a senior member of the husband’s family sang a praise song to the bride’s clan. While the bullock was being driven inside the kraal the bridal party started dancing. The old women of both
families were involved in conversations in which they exhibited the pride they felt in their own families.
The men met in the kraal, while the bridal party, heads down, began to sing. The head woman from the bride's village would come forward, kneel down and present to the Induna of the husband’s village a basket containing snuff boxes and beads. She also said “My child has now left her home. She has no more a father. We expect you to look after her as her own father”. The Induna promised to do so under the condition that she would respect the owner of this house and except to be under her in all things.
After these words the men took snuff while the bridal party continued singing Uyeni songs in a sitting position (Umbedlo). As they sang they shivered. At night time they entered the house with mats and the bride slept on them. The other women of the party slept elsewhere, as did the bridegroom. Next morning the crowd started dancing into the kraal, while the cattle where being slaughtered for the feast.

The Solemn Entry Into The House And The Marriage Consummation

During the dance, a leading woman from the husband’s village took the bridegroom’s spear and gently touched the bride on the shoulder. At this gesture the women’s party turned their backs and showed their grief at her leaving them for good. The dancing was interrupted shortly for the feast of meat and beer, then resumed until the evening when the bridal party took the bride into her husband’s house.

The Deflowering Song

The following morning, once the bride had woken up, she stood at the door post and called out the praise names of her father. She sang the deflowering song (Ummekizo) as her husband stood in the doorway, behind her, and sang with her. Then she took a gourd of water and went into the kraal. In silence, she washed her husband’s hands, mouth and eyes. This marked her first public service to the new family, after the consummation of the marriage. After witnessing this event, the bridal party went home still singing their Uyeni songs.

The Last Instruction Of The Bride

Two days later, towards the end of the main ceremony, the bride was re-instructed by the husband’s relatives. She sat on a mat and her in-laws dressed her Isihlutu, anointed her with oil and clothed her in fresh skins and new beads taken from the store of her new family. At the same time advice was given to her; she was especially told to avoid selfishness and quarrelling and also told to be friendly to everybody.

The Probation Period

During the following period she was under severe trial. Her behaviour was carefully watched. She showed shyness and a fear of making mistakes. She spoke little, ate little of her food her mother-in-law sent her and she often cried remembering her home. Among other trials she had to fetch huge bundles of wood and lay them down gently in front of her mother-in-law without dropping any. Such trials were called “Umlobokazi”, “watching the new life”. Thirty to forty days later she was told that she was now free, she could go anywhere and talk to anybody. She could help her mother-in-law to fetch firewood and lighting the fire. A pot was given to her to fetch water and an axe to cut wood.
The climax of this progressive integration was reached only when her mother-in-law gave her the Indlekuza bead. This meant that from now on she could speak and eat in front of her parents-in-law.

The Integration Of The New Life - Ukupekisa Umlobokazi Ritual
The integration process reached its culmination after two or three months, through the ceremony called “Ukupekisa Umlobokazi”. This was the ritual of making a fire in her new house and cooking food for her husband. A woman from her father-in-laws (Gogo) house appeared in the doorway of the new wife’s hut carrying three hearth stones. She fetched firewood, kindled it and began to boil maize. The astonished new wife was expected to cry because she was from now on turned away from her mother-in-law’s cooking place and put out of her house. The maize cooked on this first fire in the new hut was regarded as having been cooked by the bride, and was divided into portions and brought to each section of the village. Meanwhile the young wife sat nearby, downcast, showing conventional signs of grief. Nevertheless she was so excited that as soon as she could, she went to her own family to inform them of the news. Her parents would respond to the in-law's kindness in acknowledging their daughter's ability to cook food for her husband, by preparing a feast that their daughter would take back to them.

**The Assimilation Into The New Life**

All of these ceremonies and exchanges emphasised the Ngoni conception of the marriage contract and its binding nature. They underlined the severance of the new life from her former family and her gradual assimilation into her mother-in-law’s family. This assimilation became final after the bearing of the first child. In giving a grandchild to her husband’s parents she reached her full status as a wife, even though she was still considered a stranger.

**Development Of The Married Life**

When she had reached some seniority she was treated with respect. She had considerable authority over her daughters and her younger co-wives but could never compete with her husband’s sisters and his mother; who expected to exercise authority over the children and to arrange the ceremonies connected with birth, puberty and marriage. Nevertheless within her own house she remained dedicated to her husband as the provider of food and the affectionate mother of her children. As a senior woman, her authority was further reinforced through the organisation of women’s labour in household work and cultivation. Her authority in domestic affairs covered her own household. Women and girls were attached to her household as servants beside her co-wives of junior rank. There she had the duty to supervise cultivation, harvest, beer brewing, replenishing the stock of cloth, ornaments, beads, baskets and mats. All that was part of the wealth of her house was under her direct control and authority.

**NGONI CHIEFTAINSHIP**

The ascension of the Paramount to the throne has five main steps:

1) The decision as to who is to succeed to the throne is made by senior men and women.

2) The installation (Kuimika) of the new successor by crowning him with the NYONGO (gall bladder)

3) The instruction given by senior men and women.

4) The administering of medicine to strengthen the new paramount.

5) The burning of the NYONGO after 2-3 months of the new Paramount’s rule.

**Selection of the new Paramount**
Some weeks after the burial of the paramount a group of elders gather in the house to discuss the succession to the throne. They propose different candidates eligible for the position in the royal lineage and on their ability to rule. After discussions they come to a final agreement on the successor. On the day agreed the people assemble at the royal village near the kraal. A senior man proclaims “Do you hear? Your new king is so and so”. People answer back “Bayete” followed by a thunder of beating shields.

**Enthronement-Crowning with the Nyongo**

On the day of enthronement, or the day before, a herd of cattle will be slaughtered. The gall bladder is removed from one of the animals and is inflated to be fixed on the head ring of the new paramount. This bladder signifies that the spirits of the former Paramounts take special care of the new king and “broods” over him during the period of his transformation into a king.

In the Kachindamoto kingdom, the enthronement is performed near the lakeshore, where Chifisi, the first paramount in the Kachindamoto lineage, arrived with his Maseko group. In the past an essential part of the installation was the test of endurance. The new paramount was made to stand on one leg. This was referred to as ‘Kuimika’ or ‘to erect the chieftainship’. The new king had to stand on one leg supported by his spear with the other foot flat against his knee and the shield against his body. This position was particular to the Maseko incumbent to the throne. They had to remain motionless throughout the advice given to them during the ceremony. The candidate who failed the test was disqualified as weak and unsuitable for ruling the kingdom. This test has now been modified with the chief just standing on a skin representing the kingdom during the advice. During this ceremony the candidate was accompanied by a man chosen from one of the Maseko twin clans (Ngozo, Nzunga or Phungwako) who entered the paramouncy with him. His role was to be the personal companion of the king from the time of his ascension until the time of his death. He was referred to as his ‘shadow friend’.

**The Royal Shadow**

When the new Maseko paramount acceded to the throne, he is washed with royal medicines called tonga. Another man from the Ngozo, Nzunga or Phungwako clan had to undergo the same ritual washing with him. This man had to enter the paramouncy with him and was bound to him until his death. That is why he was called The Royal Shadow. He was like the shadow of the Inkosi; he was with him in everything. Their relationship began at the time of the accession of the new paramount and lasted until the king’s death. During the cremation of the king, the Ngozo man had to leap into the funeral pyre and die with the king. Many heads of cattle were sent to the Ngozo family from where the shadow friend came in order to compensate the family for its service.

After the enthronement of the king, the shadow friend did everything with the paramount. He washed with the same royal medicine; he drank beer with him and ate with him. He stood with him on all important occasions such as at the sending out of the army and the judging of cases. He slept in the king’s own house until the king got married. Ultimately, he was cremated with the king at the time of his death. The Ngozo boy was of one blood with the Maseko paramount. They had a joking relationship so he could be truthful to the king without upsetting him. Because of their ritual relationship they complemented and supported each other completely. He was a friend, a brother and a companion.

It seemed as if the royal shadow was created in order to strengthen the king by giving him a second self; not only did he share the bright side of royal life, but also in his insecurities and worries. The king had the stressful duty of using his power and medicines to protect the land and make it fertile, to strengthen the army and give health and prosperity to his people. No one else in the royal family shared these dangers more closely than the shadow friend. His relationship to the king was providing profound understanding and support based on a long lasting companionship. He “sat or stood” next to
the king: this was how his role was defined, as the highest position and status in the kingdom after the king. This position not only meant honour and recognition but also sharing in the dangers of paramountcy. Intermarriage between Ngozos and Masekos was always forbidden.

The institution of the royal shadow came to an end with the arrival of the Europeans. The Ngozo man who acted as the shadow on the accession of Chikuse did not die on his funeral pyre. When Chikuse’s son Gomani I was installed as Inkosi, an Ngozo boy entered chieftainship with him and stood with him in the smoke of the Tonga when the army went to war. Gomani I was killed by the British and there was no royal ritual at his death, no cremation in a stream in which the Ngozo man could share. The royal shadow retired in those troubled days to his father’s village, where he died in 1937. No Ngozo man stood in this relationship to Gomani II at his accession in 1933.

Instructing the new Paramount

Once the new paramount is back in the royal village (Inkosini) he is taken to one of the elder’s house for instruction from the men and women. They say “today you stand alone, look after your people as your father did before you. If a man has wronged you forgive him...” The instructions remind the new paramount as to the scope of his power and authority. At the same time they warn him against being a cruel despot. Such instructions go on for hours while outside the crowd dance Ligubo.

Administration of Medicine

Another essential part of the enthronement is the strengthening of the new paramount with medicine. In the past the Tonga medicine was the national treasure of the Ngoni, it was believed to give them protection. Therefore, the new paramount was washed in the cattle kraal with this medicine. It was whipped into foam and mixed with sea water. Together with the new paramount his ‘shadow friend’, who also entered the paramountancy with him, was similarly washed. This medicine protected the king from evil influences and made him strong to rule the kingdom. After the ritual washing they both purified themselves with cow dung. Nowadays the ritual washing is not conducted in the same way and the recipe for the Tonga medicine has been forgotten. Nevertheless at some level a ritual washing takes place. The second part of the strengthening ceremony is done by mixing medicine with the meat - formerly this medicine was Tonga. The cattle slaughtered for this occasion have to be ritually eaten. The new king and his friend partake in this feast of communion with their ancestors. This meal ensures the ancestral protection of the new king.

After the fortification with the ancestral medicine the paramount is thoroughly instructed into his role and is given a period of probation. This marks the end of the coronation ceremony.

Burning of the Nyongo – Confirmation of the Position of the King

Two to three months after the rite of installation of the king, the people gather once more at dawn near the lake at the place where the enthronement was held. This brings the installation of the king to completion. This ceremony is called ‘burning off the Nyongo’. The gall bladder has now shrunk and become deflated. Brooding is terminated at this point because if it continues it leads to madness. At this stage the intimate condition experienced with the ancestors is replaced with a fruitful togetherness and partnership at a healthy distance. This ensures the energy of the king is focused totally towards ruling the people.

A piece of broken pot (phale) is used for burning the dried Nyongo. This broken pot is linked with birth and death rituals and symbolises the ancestors as the beginning and the end of life (if the cremation of the king is in the past). Burning is a typical Ngoni way of cleansing and restoring life. This new beginning is highlighted by having the ceremony at sunrise.
After the nyongo has been consumed the fire is quenched with beer. Beer puts the spirit at rest. It also unifies the living and the dead. Unity buries any disputes from the past.

Once the fire is quenched the broken pot is turned upside down and is broken to pieces with the handle of the hoe. A shallow hole is dug and the broken pieces of the pot and the ashes are buried. This is a metaphor for removing the past and initiating a new beginning.

After leaving behind the past disputes, an elder stands near the symbolic grave and recounts the Ngoni history. He recalls the migration from Swaziland up to where they established their kingdom. He explains its further development to the present paramount, who will ensure the continuity of this legacy. After recalling with vigour and pride the history of the kingdom, the elder invites the group to forget about the mistakes of the past and to start looking forward to the future. He also encourages collaboration with the new paramount in order to bring their history to further glory. Then the group moves in to the village. There they share beer together, as a symbolic enactment of the unity they have prayed for by pouring beer over the fire and forgetting the past. At this point, the paramountcy is now a reality, and the new king has shown through his few months’ probation that he is capable of ruling the kingdom. The support of the people is required that he may continue.

After having pledged their unity, the people return to the Inkosini - the royal village where they have left the paramount in seclusion. All the way home they dance the Ligubo war dance. On reaching the king’s house, the elders proceed with their advice. “Long live the king”. Over the following months, the elders will continue to observe his behaviour in order to be in a better position to help him with advice that can strengthen his reign.

FUNERAL RITES FOR THE MASEKO PARAMOUNTS

The funeral rites for the Maseko Ngoni Paramounts varied over the centuries. Before 1891 the Ngoni Paramounts were never buried. They were cremated. We know that the Paramounts who left their homeland - Swaziland, and came to Malawi were cremated. We also know that Mputa, the first paramount who led the Maseko across the Zambezi, brought them to Domwe and later died in Songea in Tanganyika, was cremated. His son, Chikuse, who left Domwe to set his capital at Lizulu, was the last Maseko paramount to be cremated in the above mentioned date.

The rite of cremation involved the damming of a river and burning the body of the deceased paramount in a seated position on a pyre which was built on the dry river bed. After the cremation the river was reopened and the ashes were released with the running water. In such a way the land was fertilized and the people strengthened. While the body was being cremated, the successor of the paramount stood in the smoke in order to receive the spirit of the previous paramount.

After 1891 the Paramounts, both from Gomani stock and from Kachindamoto’s were no longer cremated but buried according to the Ngoni fashion in a sitting position (maliro a tsonga). The rite documented below originates from the end of last century, till about 1930. With the advent of Christianity and modernization many details of the ritual have been modified and new rites have since been introduced.

The ritual consists of three main parts:

1. The burial proper
2. The first shaving ceremony, the day after the burial, and
3. The last shaving ceremony, 6 to 12 months later.

When the paramount becomes ill a diviner is consulted and usually makes a sacrifice to the spirits of the king’s ancestors or calls on a medicine man for treatment. If in spite of all these procedures the
king dies, his death has to be announced at the edge of the village with these words “lzulu lidilikile” “The heaven has fallen down”. Then messengers go to all village chiefs and counsellors to inform them about the bad news.

The corpse of the Ngoni king is prepared in a sitting position (maliro a tsonga) to signify that the warrior does not sleep. Moreover the foetal position evokes the process of rebirth. At the time of death, before the body cools down, the legs are bent and drawn up towards the body. The arms are folded and crossed on each side of the face, holding the head. The corpse is wrapped in the hide of a newly killed animal from the king’s own herd. The skin is called ‘chidawa’. Then the corpse is seated on a flat stone and propped in the corner of the house. The gall bladder (nyongo) of the same animal is inflated and attached on to the forehead of the dead king, together with the fat surrounding the kidneys. The fat is called ‘mseso’. It forms a sort of head ring or a crown that reminds the king’s ancestors to look after him. At this critical moment one of the cattle from the herd is sacrificed to them so that they may look after him during the process of rebirth as a kingly ancestor.

The ‘nyongo’ or the inflated gall bladder is a key symbol for the Ngoni. It is seen as the vital organ of the animal; the dwelling place of the ancestors, just like the cattle kraal or the shrine. All of those have only one entrance and no exit. They are as dark as the womb in which the ancestors form the unborn child. It is also in the darkness of the womb that they are going to preside over the rebirth of the dead king already bent in the position of a foetus. The gall bladder tied to the head of the dead king symbolises that the ancestors are near, that they are with him, and that they are brooding over him. Their closeness makes his transformation effective and his rebirth possible.

The grave is dug next to the cattle kraal where the ancestors reside. It is a circular pit with a small side chamber where the body is to be placed in a sitting position. In the floor of this chamber, a stone is buried. It is surrounded with red clay from a small anthill called Chiuni. The Paramount’s body will be put on top of these highly symbolic objects. The stone is a replacement for the shadow friend, the Ngozo companion of the king who was buried with him as his “pillow”. In former days when cremation was practiced he had to jump into the funeral pyre with the king. The red clay from the Chiuni symbolises the throne of the Paramount. As the king goes to his ancestors he takes his throne with him. The body is facing southeast the direction of the Ngoni homeland. The spirit of the dead king is in this way linked to his Maseko ancestors from Swaziland. The grave is about three metres deep and about two metres wide.

A second circular pit used to be dug near the funeral grave for burying the king’s personal possessions. When the graves are ready, the wives of the paramount carry his possessions such as shields, skins, pipes, wooden headrests, snuff boxes, regalia and weapons to the second pit where they are to be buried close to the king.

The king is mourned by a great crowd of people. In the past the people came armed with their spears and shields. They marched with their shields held high over their heads, meaning peace. They advanced and retreated, keeping up a continuous mourning cry of “Bayete” in order to show respect to their king. The Ligubo dance is an essential part of the Ngoni mourning ritual. People mourn in the shade of trees while the body is prepared and laid in state inside the royal house. Ligubo is a particularly meaningful symbol of unity and of communion with the ancestors of the clan. When Ligubo is sang the ancestors are made present. They are in the midst of the community and share their grief.

Inside the house, the body lays in state in one of the corners. He is surrounded by grieving relatives and officials. The warriors in regalia sit next to him while the women folk and the widows sit a little further away.
The Maseko Ngoni do not wash the dead body for fear of washing away the brooding of the ancestors over him. They only wash the face of the corpse with a mixture of water from the lake (the Ngoni point of entry), and red clay from an ant hill called ‘chiuni’. The washing is not done with the hand but with a special type of grass called ‘Gama’. The reason for this rite, imported from the South, has now been forgotten.

After the women have taken the king’s possessions to the second pit they come back to their respective houses and put on their mourning dress. They wear skins, sometimes turned inside out, to show their grief. They come out of the houses in single file and crawl to the grave on their hands and knees. As soon as the corpse is brought out of the house and placed in the grave, the women withdraw. Complete silence is kept at the moment the corpse is lowered into the grave and the pit is filled up. The warriors stand in a circle around the grave with their shields over their heads. This gesture shows to their ancestors that they are at peace with one another, they are united.

The leading members of the Swazi aristocracy are always buried at the edge of their own kraal. The day after the burial the cattle fence is extended in order to incorporate the grave within the kraal. In this manner the cattle can walk over the grave or lie on it. The grave is therefore identified with the kraal and the cattle herd. There is a strong affinity between the ancestors, the kraal and the cattle herd. This is where the ancestors live and manifest themselves and take care of the spirit of the dead king. The fact that the cattle walk over the mound of the grave makes it flat and conceals the grave.

Once the grave is part of the kraal the female relatives gather around the dead king’s house and they shave each other’s hair to signify that the brooding of the ancestors has ceased and that a new start in life is about to begin. The male relatives do the same near the cattle kraal. After the shaving both groups go to the river to burn their hair and wash themselves. In this way they remove the defilement of death and purify themselves before eating the sacrificial roasted meat meant to bring the new spirit into communion with the ancestors. They also plead for his eminent return in their mist as a protective spirit while at the same time they build up future links with the spirits who have joined the ancestors. Through this they bring together in common actions those who have encountered the loss of one of their members.

After the shaving of the women folk, the widows of the king remove their ornaments and replace them with beaded strings symbolising grief. They also put on their heads a mourning cap made from grass or sisal. They show in this way the profound grief they have for their husband.

The mourning hats and the strings are called ‘zitambo’. They are plaited with grass or sisal and dyed black to express grief. Today these grass hats have been replaced by black scarves. These mourning head dresses are worn for the duration of the prescribed mourning period - between six months to a year. In former times the widows were not entitled to wash and anoint themselves during this period. They had to symbolically identify with the putrefying body of their husband and were denied the right of being attractive and of pleasing men during that period. Remarriage was only possible once the mourning time was over. The last shaving ceremony marked the lifting of these taboos. Then the mourning cap was removed and burned and the widows were free to marry.

As soon as the shaving and the ‘zitambo’ ceremonies are over, one of the cattle from the herd is offered to the ancestors. The animal is ritually killed with a spear in order to restore normal relationships. Ritual killing is a sort of confession of hatred, suspicion and hidden guilt. It is like a cleansing rite where the meat is roasted before it is ritually eaten by all. As the fire eats the meat and fat through roasting; the ancestors, the giver of fire and heat consume the smell of the meat and so partake in the feast. Through this conviviality they reside once more in the homestead and resume their blessing to the group. In the same way the community pleads for the reintegration of the spirit of the dead king and its welcome among the hierarchy of royal ancestors.
Six to twelve months later a diviner is consulted and the day for the second shaving ceremony is fixed. This rite will mark the end of the mourning period for all and the return home of the spirit of the dead king. Through this last ritual the king’s spirit finds a final lodging and becomes a new protective ancestral spirit for the entire kingdom. Every morning before dawn the men go to the edge of the forest to sing ‘ligubo’ war songs. They are calling back the spirit from the bush and are keeping in touch with him. In this way they prevent him from going too far away.

A few days before the beginning of the last shaving ceremony a new fire is made for brewing the beer required for the ritual. An elder takes the fire sticks and kindles the fire in accordance with the traditions. The women fetch the fire for their homes and start brewing the beer.

When the beer is ready an elderly woman fills a calabash with beer and places it where the corpse was sat upright before the burial. This is an offering to the spirit of the king. Other gourds of beer are taken into the house. There, the elderly woman who had to guard the spirit of the king from the time of death until now by sleeping inside the funeral house, consumes the beer during the night in order to enter into communion with him.

The next morning the Ligubo is danced at the edge of the kraal close to the grave. Then one of the cattle from the herd is driven into the kraal as an offering to the ancestors of the king. The ancestors are formally addressed by the elder with these words: “You who died in the village of so and so before we left Swaziland! You who were buried in the kraal of so and so! Here is your animal! We are your children! Show us that you acknowledge our gift!” As soon as the animal urinates, it is understood that the gift is agreeable to the ancestors. Then the animal is slaughtered and the meat is taken back to the house for the night. It is left in a sacred place, the ‘indlunkulu’, for the ancestors to lick. The next morning the meat is roasted in the kraal. A portion of the roasted meat is brought into the house of the widow of royal blood chosen to be the guardian of the kings on their way home. It is served in new baskets called ‘nsengwa’. This offering is made to the ancestors of the Maseko Paramounts as a prayer for the safe return of the king’s spirit. This ritual ensures that the new ancestor is recognised and welcomed.

Near the king’s mother’s house the women cut the strings of their ‘zitambo’ and unravel the threads of their mourning hats. They shave each other’s hair once more and the hair and the threads are heaped near the kraal. The men shave as well. A small lock of hair is cut first, then the whole head is shaved. This ceremony concludes for the Ngoni the mourning period.

As soon as the women are through with shaving, one of the senior women leads the others in procession to the stream. Each one carries a handful of hair and threads. As they pass near the fence that surrounds the house or near the roof they pull a handful of grass which they take with them to the river. There by the stream they heap the grass together and light a fire on which their hair and threads are burned. They tend the fire until only the ashes remain. They stand erect behind the fire facing the stream except when bending down to fan the flames.

As soon as the fire is dead the women sweep the ashes into the stream leaving behind no trace. When this is over the women move a few meters up stream. There they wash themselves and also their clothing. The men have a similar ritual a bit further upstream. Shaving, burning and washing are for the Maseko Ngoni a necessary act of purification for anyone who is related to the deceased by bond of kingship or marriage. Through ritual cleansing the bond of unity between the community and the ancestors is renewed. The symbolic release of the ashes in the stream recalls the rite of fertilizing the land when in earlier days the corpse of the king was cremated. Moreover the rite of cleansing puts an end to grief freeing the widows and making them eligible for remarriage.
After the cleansing rite, the sacrificial meat is roasted as in the first shaving ceremony the day after the burial. It is served in the wooden ceremonial bowl called the ‘ingcwembe’. Everyone has to partake in this sacred meal that transforms grief into joy. It also celebrates the return of the spirit of the deceased king as a benevolent ancestor. In giving him a guardian and by putting up a feast for him, the people shout that they care for him, they call on his name. They recount that the spirit of the king will do the same for them.

The Mchakhetha - Ngoni memorial tombs

The memorial tombs of the Ngoni are called Mchakhetha. They are normally circular structures made of bricks and cement in the shape of a ziggurat. Sometimes a wooden cross was placed on top if the chief was a Christian. They are of recent introduction, a sort of modern adaptation of European tombstones. They are dedicated to eminent members of the Swazi aristocracy and are often built outside or at the entrance of the village. They are seldom erected on the actual grave site since most of the Ngoni rulers are buried inside the cattle kraal. At the time of their inauguration one of the cattle from the herd is slaughtered and beer is brewed and the warriors dance Ngoma and ligubo.

NGONI RAIN RITUALS

When carrying out sacrifices for rain to the spirits of the paramount, the Ngoni drove a black ox without spots to the Kraal in the late afternoon. They chose a spokesman to address the ancestral spirits. He stood in front of the beast in the Kraal and told the spirits that it was their bull. They had to eat the meat and tell God (Umkulunqango) that the people needed rain. The community sat outside the Kraal, quietly looking on. Women stayed at home inside their houses and the paramount in his hut as if mourning. When the beast urinated it showed that the spirits had heard and a messenger came to inform the paramount.

Next morning the animal was killed in the Kraal. While the flaying took place, all the huts of the chief’s wives were smeared with dry cow dung on the floors and on the smooth place outside the doors. This was a sign of purification and desire for renewal. The meat was cut into two parts and taken into the chief’s hut and left all night at the back, so that the spirits might lick it. Next morning the meat was cooked in the Kraal and made ready. The big Induna called the people into the Kraal and divided them into companies according to their sections and head villages. The meat was given to the headmen of each village who divided it among their groups. When everybody had finished eating, one of the leading men stood up and began to praise the spirits using his titles and praise names (Izitokozo). The rest stood up and shouted, Bayete! Then they began to dance a war dance and were soon forced to stop because of the pouring rain.

NGONI DANCES

The Ngoma Dance

The Ngoma dance is a male and female ceremonial dance. No weapons such as spears and shields are used for the Ngoma. Knobkerries and flywhisks are used instead. The movement is that of vigorous stamping of the feet for men and leisurely circumnavigation of the men by the women. No musical instruments are used for this dance except for bells (manjereneza) which are tied to the to the ankles of the men and which rattle at every stamping meant to wake up the spirits, and the loud hand clapping of women which marks the rhythm and follows the stamping of the men’s feet. Formerly, the Ngoma was danced when the warriors had returned from battle and came to celebrate their victory at the king’s kraal. Today, since the Ngoni have been pacified, the Ngoma is still danced at the funeral commemoration rites, at celebrations for the harvest and at any other ceremonies that involve beer drinking. The songs tell of the Ngoni history, their migration and the prowess of their
past. Other songs focus on the Ngoni values and virtues, while others stress the importance of beer and cattle.

**The Mthimba or Uyeni Dance**

The Mthimba or the Uyeni Dance was a women’s dance, which was part of the marriage ceremony proper. The young girls who accompanied the bride performed it. The girls who performed the Uyeni wore beads across their bare chests. They put on their head a small beaded square to which was attached strings of dangling beads forming a veil that covered the head, the face and the neck. The maidens carried small ceremonial shields and reeds in their hands. They shook their shoulders as they were shivering during their dance. The songs followed the sequence of events of the marriage ceremony, e.g. the dressing of the bride, the procession of the bridal party, the gifts, the deflowering rite etc. Their tone was one of sadness as they reflected the inner feelings of the bride leaving the home of her parents and going into exile and her husband’s family. Sometimes these feelings were expressed with images from their own Ngoni history, e.g. the exodus of the tribe and their crossing of the Zambezi. Today, the Ngoni and the Chewa have extensively intermarried and those patrilocal marriages are on the decline. Very few weddings are performed following the Ngoni traditions. The Mthimba or the Uyeni dance is very seldom performed. When it is, only a few songs are remembered and usually they have been translated in Chewa idioms and language.

**Msindo Dance**

The Msindo or the Umgonxo dance was formally performed by women at the pre-marriage rite of daughters of rich and important people who belonged to the Swazi aristocracy. Their songs were used in a marital context and had reference to the genital organs and to sexual intercourse which were expressed in a veiled language and allusive terms. These ceremonies used to stress the virginity of the girls and emphasise the social rank and the wealth of their fathers. Some of the Msindo songs were meant to recall the major events of the Ngoni history. Others were pieces of advice given to discourage women to give way to jealousy within a polygamist household. The women danced in a circle with a reed in their hand. The reed symbolised the beginning of humankind which the girls who went through this rite, experienced. Today, due to the intermarriage within the Ngoni group, the Swazi aristocracy is hard to identify. These premarital rites have died out completely and so have the songs that accompanied them. Whenever the Msindo dance is performed it is in a different context. The songs, which had a sexual overtone, have been forgotten. Those dealing with history and general behaviour have been retained, but in a Chichewa form as the Ngoni group absorbed more local people into their society.

**The Ligubo Dance**

The Ligubo is a war dance, which characterised the Ngoni as a nation under arms, in the past. The Ligubo dance provided the warriors with the right drilling and necessary discipline for joining the army. It was mainly danced before the warriors went to fight (Imigubo) or at their return from the war (Imhubo). It was performed once the fighters had put on their war dress and was equipped with their spears and shields. They gathered at the king’s village where the army was mobilised. The accompaniment of alternated stamping of the feet and the knocking of the shields either with the spears or against the knees produced a rhythm that excited the men for war. The women joined them and accompanied them to the gate of the village. They danced in front of the warriors facing them, carrying small sticks and small shields and co-coordinating their steps with a rhythmic jerking of the right arm and neck.

At the death of a king, the ligubo dance was the only acceptable rite of mourning for an Ngoni. To mourn in an Ngoni way was to take part in the ligubo dance. Today, it is rare to see the ligubo performed since war rituals have disappeared and the death of a paramount is a rare occurrence.
Occasionally, it is danced for an aristocratic wedding in which the warriors accompany the groom. At the funeral of the paramount chief’s elder sister (by the same mother), ligubo is also performed. At these occasions, every now and then, one of the men leaps out in front of the group, jumps high in the air, brandishing his spear and shield and sings his own song. This is called the ligma, the dance of an individual warrior.

The content of most of the ligubo songs delivers warnings of the elders to the warriors in matters of warfare. They encourage fighters to keep determination and discipline in the fight to pursue the enemy and capture their cattle once the war is over, to be aware of revolt and treachery in the army, and to believe in the superiority of the weapons and their fighting skills. Other songs talk about death as the lot of every man, even those of the highest rank. Nobody can escape the grave; death leaves the village in despair and the community helpless.

Interestingly enough, none of the ligubo songs have been translated into the local languages; they have been preserved in their original Chingoni.
NGONI WOMEN’S DRESS

Hair Style

The social position of women from Swazi stock was easily distinguishable by their hair. Women who approached the time of marriage were entitled to wear the “Isihlutu” hair style. They did not shave their hair except if they became a widow, they washed it carefully, oiled it with “Ipehla” (liquefied butter), and combed it; plaits of grass were formed in an upwards position to the top of the head in a kind of chignon which was called the “Isihlutu”. They decorated the hair do with strings of beads dangling from thorns stuck on top. Narrow bands of beads (Intuyeya and Isincwayo) put in layers were tied around the knot. To this bead-work leopard or lion claws were added for women of royal rank. The Isihlutu had to be done every two or three days, for royal women it was done every day. Old women had a different hairstyle called the “Umzozo”. The hair was kept short, and was oiled and perfumed; it was not combed upwards, but pressed down and tied with blades of grass.

Ear Piercing

Ear piercing was practised for both men and women before puberty. The piercing of the ear symbolised the opening of the ear of the mind, meaning that a grown person is someone who is able to listen. When that person reached adulthood the hole in the ear was adorned with large ear plugs or earrings.

Clothing and Ornaments

Royal women used to wear coils of brass wire (Amasongo) and strings of beads (Izipote) around their necks, arms and ankles. Their clothing consisted of kilts of soft dressed leather (Isidwaba) that covered them from the waist to the knee. Sometimes these kilts were beaded, and a beaded apron was added to the front or to the back. Royal women put on in addition to these large quantities of beads and wire. A piece of soft leather, cape-like (Ingcayi), was fastened on the left shoulder and reached below the knees. The edge of the cape was decorated with brass beads or brass bells (Mgomani). In later days the leather cape was replaced by a dark, often blue, cotton cloth. Such a cloth is still used for dancing the Ngoma.

THE MASEKO CEREMONIAL DRESS FOR MEN

At the turn of the century, after the British had established the “Pax Britannia” the Maseko had become more settled and were less involved in war and raiding. Consequently the war dress fell into disuse. Nevertheless the ceremonial attire for the performance of the Ngoma dance was preserved and used for a variety of celebrations. It became a symbol of Ngoni identity in familial and national rituals. The Chewa themselves who lived close to the Ngoni villages have been inspired by the Ngoni regalia. Their Gule Wamkulu costume today bears many features of Ngoni ceremonial dress, e.g. kilts, leglets, armlets, headdress etc.

The Headdress (Nyoni)

Nowadays the headdress (nyoni) is made of feathers from various birds. Finch, crane and raven feathers have been practically replaced by the ostrich and peacock feathers imported from South Africa. Even local birds feathers (including the chicken) can be added. Nevertheless the dominant colour remains black to which a few other more colourful feathers are added, to display pride. Status
can no longer be distinguished by the headdress, their intricacy today reveals more about the skill of their maker. The head ring as described below is long since gone. It has been replaced by a circlet of palm leaves woven into a ring that is covered with colourful skins such as those of a leopard, serval, genet or civet. This is called ntini. Such rings are used by senior men in the framework of rituals. The rosettes of clipped feathers remain an important ornament completing the nyoni. Often several feathers tied to the end of a pointed stick are inserted into the centre.

**The Kilt (Chibbiya)**

The kilt (chibbiya) is made of twisted straps of skins made to look like dangling tails. The most common skins used for making them are baboon, mongoose and genet. These tail-like strips are stitched together on a belt in several layers, one longer than the other. They roughly cover the area from the loins to the knees. The top layer which is the most visible is made from genet and blue monkey tails. Ornaments made of beads are stitched on to these. The waist of the kilt is decorated with a succession of grass rings, covered with soft calf skins known as makhonyezani.

The sexual parts are covered by the njobo, a heavy tassel-like bundle sporran of twisted baboon and genet skins. This tassel is fixed to a heavy piece of leather, which is attached to a large navel-like object made from grass or sisal coiled into a heap. This navel is completely beaded into an intricate design. It is called the mkanda wa njobo. Two long strings fall from the centre like an umbilical cord. These stings are also beaded on four edges. They may convey the following part of the Zulu Creation Myth: man comes from the sky and separated himself from Heaven, by cutting the rope of intestine cord tied around his waist with a reed. From a practical point of view, the weight of the beads keeps the sporran down and prevents exposing the sexual organs while dancing. The njobo may have developed from the penis bag well known amongst the Nguni.

**Other Ornaments**

Long white goat beards or cow tails are attached to the wrists and the arms, at both the biceps and the elbow and also to the legs, above each calf. These are called the machowa. Sometimes twisted strings of beads called zipote are fixed above the armlets as ornaments.

Thick, black woven ropes made of wool called chikhwi hang over the left shoulder and are passed under the right arm. A second rope goes over the right shoulder and under the left arm. Both ropes cross on the chest and the back of the dancer. Before the Ngoni left the South these ropes were made of twisted calf or lamb skins and were worn in the same fashion. They probably signified different ranks within their hierarchy. Today these have become mere ornaments, their meaning is unknown locally. Woven wool ropes have replaced the leather ones. Moreover these ropes are decorated at regular intervals with sections of beadwork. Beautiful figures of triangles and lozenges in bright colours decorate them.

The white belts made of goat skins worn by the warriors, have been replaced by a very elaborate belt made of beadwork of 15 - 20 cm wide called chihata. The belts cover the belly and hide the belly button of the dancer. These belts are made by the wives of the dancers. The choice of colour and pattern of the beads is an expression of the depth of their feelings and love for their husband. It is an art of which they can be proud.

The ankles of the dancers are embellished by a string to which metal bells (majerenjeza) are tied to highlight the sound made by the stamping of the feet of the dancers. This rattling noise emphasises the rhythm as the Ngoni never use drums in their dances. The Nguni, the ancestors of the Ngoni, inherited this instrument from the Bushmen and the Hottentots, their neighbours. The original bells were not made of metal but the shells of wild fruits.
Besides these various ornaments, the Maseko complete their ceremonial dress with many strings of beads worn around the neck and criss-crossing the chest. These strings of beads are often adorned with duiker horns or the teeth of warthogs or other animals.

**Accessories**

**The Fly Whisk (Lichowa)**

The Ngoma dance is performed with a flywhisk (lichowa) in the right hand. These flywhisks are made of wild animal tails like those of the wildebeest. Today cow tails are used instead since these wild animals have vanished. Flywhisks are identified with prestige and authority. The handle of the fly whisk is sometimes carved in the Ngoni style with geometrical patterns or with the bust of a man or a woman and at times an animal representation. Part of the handle is woven with copper wire into a geometrical pattern or decorated with strings of beads.

**The Knobberrie (Chibonga)**

The dancer carries a knobberry club in his left hand. The ceremonial knobberry is carved with a large round or oval shaped head. The stick of the club is often arched and decorated with grooves encircling it. The head of the knobberry is embellished with small, almost wart-like protrusions that symbolise cattle heads which are used as bride price. Sometimes these protrusions are not carved but the same effect is given to the knobberry by planting nails with big heads in a similar pattern.

**MASEKO WAR DRESS**

**The Head-Ring (Cidlolo)**

When a warrior reached marriageable age, he was entitled to public recognition by wearing a head-ring or cidlolo. The head-ring was a sign of his superior status and new dignity. The head-ring in those days was made from grey elastic latex, which came from insects’ nests, and was combined with fat and ground charcoal. The mixture was cooked, pounded and worked into a coil that was moulded onto a rope of palm fibre that was sewn into the hair. Finally, black, soft and warm latex was applied to the ring, which was then rubbed with grease and polished with a pebble to give it a shine.

**The Headdress (Nyoni)**

The senior warriors had a headdress of their own. It was made of a bunch of black feathers sewn together and attached to an animal skin, which looked like a lion’s mane that stuck out beneath the head-ring onto the neck. Another skin, which was cut in strips, hung over their foreheads and their eyes. The addition of a crane’s tail onto the skin on their forehead indicated a warrior of higher rank and status. The junior warriors, who were not yet able to wear the head-ring, had their heads completely covered with fur. Rosettes of feathers (inhunu) were worn on the side of the head, but were clipped short so they did not obstruct their vision. The headdress worn on the top of the skin was an ensemble of black feathers from either ravens or finches. Sometimes soft porcupine quills were sewn on the skin as an alternative to feathers.

The idea behind the headdress (nyoni) was to make the warriors look like wild beasts, thereby terrifying the enemy. The word nyoni in the Zulu tradition refers to a bird of fire (nyoni yezulu) sent by the Lord of the Sky, in the form of lightning. This fearsome bird hid in the great clouds of thunder and nobody dared look at it lest he encounter death. This stork-like bird bred heat, famine and death and killed like lightning. Soldiers who died in battle were never brought back to their
home for burial as it was considered an evil death, comparable to being killed by lightening. The feathers of the Ngoni headdress identified the warriors to birds of fire and death.

The Maseko Ngoni war dress combined both birds’ feathers and the fur of wild animals. This combination of materials did not only identify them and make them synonymous with the danger of the sky but also the dangers below in the form of wild animals that live in the bush. The mere appearance of the Ngoni was enough to convey the hostility of both worlds and let their enemy experience dread and fear. Moreover the Ngoni war medicines convinced the warriors of their invincibility and strengthened their courage and combativeness. The hemp which they smoked and snuffed stimulated the wildness of their behaviour, in keeping with their appearance. In front of such a sight the enemy was left with only one alternative: to run away and escape.

Ornaments

The Ngoni pierced their earlobes and inserted pieces of carved ivory, bone or wood as ear rings and ear plugs (izicazo). These ornaments added to the frightening appearance the warriors strove for.

On their arms and legs they wore skins of long, white goats’ hair as armlets, wristlets and leglets, known as machowa. Sometimes they were also made with white cow tails. Around their chest they wore white belts made of goatskin (chihata) and around their loins, both front and back, they wore whole skins made from calves (ibeshu). The hairy side was facing outside as a sporran frontal cover (izinene). Sometimes other hides were tied onto the back of the ibeshu, to give the appearance of the tails of wild beasts (izinkondo).

The Weapons

The long throwing spear used in the time of Shaka Zulu was discarded and replaced by a short assegai (uhkhonto). This spear had a short shaft and a wider oval shaped blade. There is little evidence of the existence of these shorter spears in Malawi. They are not common among the Ngoni of the Central Region any longer as war practises have disappeared. Nevertheless long throwing spears have remained an important feature in hunting.

A taller shield was promoted by Shaka, it covered the entire body. The shield (chishango) is used today in the Ligubo war dance. Among the Maseko it is barely a metre high. They are made of cow hides which have been stretched, pegged and dried over night. They are softened by burying them under manure in the cattle kraal before cutting. Slits are made for the supporting sticks and the tuft made of genet skin is placed at one end (ndoma). Goat skins are used for the distinctive shield pattern. The colour of the shield varied according to the different regiments. A smaller version of the shield is still in use by the women for their ceremonial dance of the Msindo.

The knobberry (chibonga) has a large plain head on a handle and was an important weapon used in war. It has remained as part of the Ngoni hunting kit. The knobberry is occasionally used in the Maseko ceremonial dance of the Ngoma. Usually they are decorated and carved with more refined skill (see section on ceremonial dress).

NGONI MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

Igubu

The Ngubi is an Ngoni musical stringed bow to which a calabash is tied to resonate the sound. This instrument was commonly used in the Northern and Central Kingdoms. It is played by a male soloist, who presses the opening of the calabash against his chest with his left hand while his right hand
strikes the string with a small stick. The bow is held in a vertical position and the pitch is altered by the fingers of the left hand pressing the string in order to vary the tones and express sadness, such as at the time of a burial.

**Mkangala**

This is another typical Ngoni instrument which consists of a stringed bow made of a bent stick or a reed with a string of ox tendon stretched across it. One end of the bow is held by the player’s lips, the mouth acting as the sound box, while the other end is held with the other hand. The string is twanged with the thumb of the right hand and notes of a different pitch are produced by pressing the fingers of the left hand on the string. The mkangala is played by girls and young women whose boyfriends or husbands are on a journey away from home. This instrument is played in solitude as a remedy to stress and sadness. It is not meant to be heard by others. The player externalises her feelings of loneliness by composing her own songs.

**Lipenga or Mphalasa**

This instrument is made of an animal horn, preferably a kudu horn. It produces a deep fundamental sound used for spreading messages far away and for honouring a chief. It is played at a time the chief has to make a new fire, e.g. when the village moves to another site, or after the death of a chief, the new chief has to re-light the fire to symbolise that he gives life to the village.

**Mkwendo**

This instrument is particular to the Matengo tribe that accompanied the Maseko on their way back from Songea in southern Tanzania. The Mkwendo is a hollow bamboo on which grooves are cut, and slits are made for the sound to be heard. A wooden stick or another piece of bamboo is rubbed up and down the grooves to produce a sound accompaniment. The size of the bamboo pipe differentiates the tones of the various instruments. These are played by both men and women as they sing and dance together. Originally the Mkwendo was a mourning dance, performed at funerals while the dancers accompanied the mourners to the grave and back to their homes after the burial. Usually the songs of the Mkwendo are meant to express the good deeds of the departed and the hope of meeting with the living again in the hereafter.

**FURNISHINGS**

**The Ingcwembe - The Ritual Dish**

Meat, when roasted for the various rituals was served on a special wooden dish, oval with rounded ends and supported on sturdy legs. The outside of the dish was often decorated with pokerwork forming a bull’s head. The bull was particularly meaningful; when one of these animals was stabbed it was consecrated to the ancestors. When its meat was roasted and shared amongst the community in the Ingcwembe, the ancestors ate with them and gave their blessings to all those who resided in the homestead.

**Umcamelo - Head Rest**

The Ngoni head rests were carved in wood with the top part gently curved to support the head of the sleeper. They were low and small, touching the neck from the ear to the shoulder. They were used by both sexes as a sort of pillow and were particularly helpful to women who had to protect their elaborate hairstyles while sleeping. These head rests were never displayed in public and were essentially for private use. In the old days a young bride would give one of these to her future
husband as part of her dowry. After a lifetime of use these head rests became so identified with their owner that they were usually buried with them. The Ngoni head rests were often carved in a Bovine shape since cattle are paramount to them in terms of wealth and ritual. It is through their cattle that the Ngoni have proximity to their ancestors and communicate with them. The bull representation on some of the head rests is obvious. At times they are carved in a very realistic way, others are more stylised with the head being omitted. Their shape is that of a body supported by four legs, the tail protrudes and a truncated leg under the belly suggests the sexual organ of the animal. For the Ngoni the bull is a powerful symbol of masculinity, virility and strength. It is little wonder that these objects were often part of the marriage chests at the time of the wedding. They conveyed to the husbands who received them a unique message of love that confirmed in them their virility.

**BEER BREWING**

Beer brewing is a very complex activity among the Ngoni. It is the responsibility of the senior women who have long experience in the field. The ingredients of maize and millet have to be prepared following the ancient recipe of their forefathers. The women have to pound the maize or grind it on a big stone (Mbokhoto). They have to sprout the maize and finger millet (Lipoko) for the fermentation. In the past the fire had to be produced from the male and female fire sticks (Uzwati). For days they have to cook the maize flour with water in a large clay pot over a trench dug in the ground outside the house in the Bwalo. After they have brewed this mixture to the first stage, they obtain a sweet beer with low alcohol content. A portion of it is kept for the children. The larger quantity is once more put over the fire and the ferment of maize and millet is added. The following day the beer has reached its potency and has the correct thickness and flavour.

Before the beer is poured into calabashes (Izigubu) it has to be put through the strainer made of woven bamboo (Kape) so that it can be appreciated by all the guests. Beer is of great social importance for the Ngoni. No ceremony is complete without it. Beer is ever present at all ceremonies marking the different stages of life, e.g. wedding, commemoration of death, etc. Beer was also a necessity for the celebration of national events such as the Incwala, the coronation of the king, etc. Moreover, beer in the mind of the Ngoni people is linked to friendship, hospitality and reconciliation.

**BEADWORK**

The use of beads as a personal adornment in Southern Africa goes back a long way. The early beads were made of wood, shells, quills, metal, etc. The glass beads were introduced by the Arab traders as early as the 11th century. The Maseko Ngoni inherited the tradition of beadwork from the Swazi. Extensive use of beadwork is particular to them and to the Central Kingdom. Men’s regalia for the Ngoni incorporates a lot of intricate beadwork in the form of Chihata, Chikwi, Zipote. Beadwork used by women today is rare, apart from a few necklaces and bracelets. In the past, they were a very important part of the women’s dressing habits. Bead ornaments were used for distinguishing status and stages of life among them. Certain colours of beads would express loyalty or would decorate royal insignia, crown or royal garments. Certain types of beadwork on a special type of apron, cape or kilt would signify that a woman is married or is a virgin. White beads for instance would express a state of liminality as for the case of an initiate (to puberty) a bride or a diviner. Black beads were worn by married women who would wear fewer beads so as not to attract attention. However, their beaded aprons were longer than those of the girls, reaching as far as the knee. Beads were also used to show off wealth; they were seen as a form of currency or a commodity that could be displayed at important rituals or festive occasions. Beads were also used to express a woman’s feelings. The different colours could evoke certain feelings and used in different patterns had a symbolic meaning. For example, a woman would express her feelings for her husband by the design she made on the Chihata which he would wear in the Ngoma dance. Her husband would perceive her message and
also the people who saw him wearing the belt could know how she felt about him. Among the range of colours used white was the dominant one - white meant love, purity. Light blue meant longing, desire, happiness; dark blue - truthful heart; yellow - wealth; red - intense passion, jealousy; pink - royalty, poverty; green - youth, growth or sickness; black - darkness, disappointment, sorrow, gloom and misfortune. Not only the choice of colour of beads provides a form of expression, but also the choice of motif, e.g. triangle, diamonds, chevron, etc. The two predominant designs are the triangle denoting maleness and the diamond denoting femaleness. A triangular shape one above the other in an hourglass design could mean that a man is married, and two diamonds in a line could mean that the woman is married. Unfortunately most of these meanings have been lost over the years. Today they are simply qualified as “Ziphathi” meaning decoration.

THE PLAN OF A NGONI VILLAGE

In the olden days, the layout of an Ngoni village was most typical; it resembled those from the Swazi and the Zulu, their homeland. However, the trans-Zambezi Ngoni made few modifications dictated by their new environment; for instance, the bee-hived houses were replaced by huts covered with a conical roof more adapted to the heavy rainfall of Malawi. All villages followed a similar plan, including the royal village. They differed in size, depending on the importance of its owner. The traditional ground plan of an Ngoni village was on the open end of the horseshoe formation. The position of the houses within the village reflected the hierarchy of its inhabitants and their position with regard to the persons in authority – family head, village headman, or the king.

The royal village was normally larger. It was sub-divided into small hamlets called ‘Izigawa’ which were under the responsibility of the ‘Izinduna’. This particular pattern of settlement remained fairly common until the 1930’s. It was soon to be replaced by the modern village laid out in lines and streets instead. The royal village was always made up of three categories of people, the mothers of the paramount, his wives and the Izinduna and their families. Similarly, an ordinary village would lodge the mothers of the owner, one of his father’s widows, his wives and his Induna on which the family depended for protection and service.

The most important hut in all these villages was the ‘Indlunkulu’. Positioned at the top of the kraal, this is where the mother of the owner of the village lived. On either side of the ‘Indlunkulu’ were the houses reserved for the wives. Often the big wife’s hut was on the right side, the right being identified with succession. This is where the heir to any position was brought up. The huts on the left side were called ‘Gogo’ houses. They belonged to the owner’s father’s widows, who had a more ritual function as they officiated at the religious ceremonies. Behind the ‘Indlunkulu’ stood the huts of the owner’s married sons and those of his brothers who chose to live with him. These were called the ‘Gigodlo’. On either side of the ‘Gigodlo’, behind the Big House or the ‘Gogo’ houses was the ‘Lweni’, the boy’s dormitory, where all the boys of the village received their military training. On either side of the kraal stood the Indunas’ houses, who were the protectors of both mothers and wives of the owner of the village. At both sides of the kraal entrance stood the houses of less important families. These were called the horns. These huts were inhabited by servants and workers of the village. Sometimes they were the descendents of captives who had been assigned to a particular house.

INSIDE THE NGONI HOUSE

The Ngoni House was originally a circular shape, and was surrounded by a veranda. The veranda was partly fenced around the back, which was used for storage and a space for sitting in the shade. The floor was well polished and shone; this was done by mixing clay graphite and cow dung. The huts of important men or women were surrounded by a high reed fence with a narrow opening. This was designated as the “Bwalo”. The roof was conical, thatched with grass and neatly trimmed at the
edges. Often the roof was decorated with cow horns from the peak downwards in four lines above the doorway. These were the horns of animals slaughtered at a ritual celebration. They reminded the ancestors of the work the family did on behalf of the household. Inside the house, framing the doorway were the two main door posts, smooth and well polished with regular handling (Chiputu - Inkhothamo). This was the privileged place of the ancestors, and as a mark of respect to them one should not stand in the doorway. Inside the rafters of the roof, opposite the doorway were maize cobs, millet heads and pumpkin seeds which were kept for the next sowing season. They were put there so that the shadow would bless them as one entered the house. The central posts holding the roof were linked to the rafters to form a rack for storing gourds and dried vegetables kept for the sowing season. In the centre of the floor was the fire place used for heating the house and for cooking. The three rounded hearth stones were used for supporting the pots. The ancestors also liked that place for warming themselves and were also believed to eat the scraps and leftovers in the pots around the fire. Against the back wall of the house was a slightly raised platform called the “Unsan - Kumyendo”, where pots used for holding water, grain, beans or fresh beer were stored. This was normally a darker and cooler part of the house, and was seen as sacred. Here the ancestors of the family were seen as particularly close, and so it was here that the offerings were made. Here the meat used for rituals was stored overnight. Sacred objects of value were kept here, such as baskets “Nsengwa”, ritual spears and snuff. It was here that the ancestors were supposed to lick the food put away for them.

**THE SET-UP OF THE NKOSINI AT MTAKATAKA**

The Nkosini of Kachindamoto was very much modelled, at the beginning of the 20th century, on a modern linear village with a main street leading to the Inkosi’s house. All along this street leading towards the Paramount’s house stood other huts that belonged to the family and the entourage of the king (see the description of the Ngoni village). Each of these was protected by a high fence of reeds. Each courtyard touched the other; the back of the courtyard also touched the fences of the next line of houses behind the first. All of those fences had secret openings leading to the next. Integral communication was for the dwellers, but difficult or impossible for the stranger; it looked like a labyrinth. Consequently, the Nkosini (an enormous village estimated in 1903 to have 15,000 inhabitants), was compact and secure. Security was further reinforced by numerous villages built all around the outskirts of the Nkosini which acted as a fortification.

The south end was protected by the villages of Mathemba and Chabwera and the north end by Kanzingeni. The western side was sheltered by the villages of Luwimbi, Kanzati, Chambwini and Njoka, while the eastern side was covered by the villages of Mbandabanda, Tidyenawo, Balala and Mayola. Each village was built in the manner described above. The fences surrounding each hut were continuous to each other and to the next village. In this way the stranger and the enemy “Maliwongo” would be fooled. The Mtakataka area where the Nkosini was built has, over the years been greatly affected by the change in climatic conditions. The important rivers that passed nearby have been subject to a number of changes in their courses. Land was washed away and floods forced villages to move. Within a short period the entire pattern described above was disrupted, entire villages looked for better ground to settle, better land to farm and slowly as war became more and more a feature of the past the Ngoni forgot about their former pattern of settlement. In the 1950’s the Nkosini itself was forced to move to a safer place as a flood invaded the royal village. Today the set up of the Nkosini is totally unrecognisable.

**THE INCWALA – THE FIRST FRUITS CEREMONY**

The first-fruits ceremony (Incwala) was of greatest importance among the Swazi. The Maseko took it with them when they left the south. Due to the change of environment, and to the integration of many new clans into their ranks as they progressed north, the Maseko modified substantially the Incwala. For the Swazi, it is not primarily a first-fruits ceremony; but a ritual dramatization of the
role, the growth of their king as the image of the kingdom. As the years went by, the king had to break off the old year and open the new through the celebration of the Incwala. He was the new rising sun who strengthened the earth and guaranteed continuity to his kingdom. The first-fruits were an essential part of this, since the fertility of the land and potency were the prerequisite of social continuity. But the Swazi Incwala was a far more complex, lengthy and elaborate ritual divided into small and big Incwala which had its focus on the person of the king as the political, social, religious and mystical centre of the Swazi and around which everything else in the kingdom found its meaning. After the Maseko group left their homeland, they wandered for decades through Mozambique and Zimbabwe, under different kings and regents, before reaching the Malawi borders. They never settled for long. Moreover they fought and incorporated into their ranks a vast number of strangers of non-Swazi stock. By the time they reached Malawi and started establishing the central kingdoms, the Incwala had lost its relevance and was more or less abandoned. In the 1930’s no one alive had seen the ceremony and the Incwala songs had long been forgotten. Their subsequent divisions into several factions made the power of the king as the centre of unity less obvious. In the Northern Kingdom, the Jere Ngoni who were somehow more homogeneous kept the practice for a longer period. Mr. Chibambo was privileged to document it in the 1920’s. Even today the kingdom of Mpezeni in the eastern province of Zambia just outside the Malawi border still celebrates it annually.

The ritual started in the middle of the month of January (Intokoni) and lasted about two weeks. It began when the moon was full and went on until the next new moon appeared. In accordance with the Swazi mentality, ceremonies that were generally performed when the moon was full, enhanced status. Ceremonies that were celebrated when the moon waned into darkness involved seclusion. Our Ngoni Incwala incorporated both aspects in one single ritual. With the full moon, the powers of the king were acknowledged by all who were to celebrate the Incwala. Called by him when the moon decreased, died and reappeared the king underwent seclusion, death and rebirth and with him his kingdom. For the Ngoni, the moon which was perceived as female, died periodically and her death led to fertility. The first-fruits were collected and the medicines prepared at the time of the full moon. The sun, being the opposite, was male and crossed the sky in a regular path twice a year. The solstice was the time of the rebirth of the king. All of these phenomena had a bearing on human destiny and that of the kingdom. During this particular period, people were told to sing and dance exclusively Incwala songs. Any other types were forbidden until the day of its closing. The full moon was the time when the young men were sent out to pick up the first ripe fruits from the gardens. The owners of any fields were not allowed to touch the first-fruits until the ceremony was over. The boys uprooted stalks of maize and pumpkins. They also looked for wild fruits like bitter gourds called ‘Igumuzo’ which were used for making dogs fierce for hunting and sharpened their sense of smell. Such fruits would stir up power, increase strength and quicken the smelling of evil for the king when these were mixed with the first-fruits. The bitter gourds also remained green for a long period. To the Ngoni this suggested continuity. Their bitterness evoked the enemy the king had to stand up to. These different ingredients were subsequently prepared and mixed. Tonga medicine was also added to the concoction, which was secretly fed to the king at a later stage of the ceremony. The inability of the paramount to eat the first-fruits mixed with medicine would bring imminent disaster on the king himself and on his people.

At the beginning of the month of February, called Incwala, the crop was ripe. This was the time for the Inkosi to proclaim the opening of the Incwala ceremony. Each household in the villages brewed large quantities of beer. The first day of the brewing, the Incwala dance started. Each one put on a special dress proper for his rank and for the occasion. Men were prohibited from carrying spears at this time of peace. All danced with reeds and shields in their hands instead. The reeds evoked the beginning of time when humankind came from the reed bed and the fertile pool. The dancing with reeds suggested the rebirth of the king and the kingdom. The dancing was done in two separate camps facing each other; men facing the women. The dancers bent their bodies backwards and
forwards and moved their necks and their shoulders as if they were erupting from primal waters. During this entire period, men, women, children and youths went about their respective work with the Incwala song on their lips. As the moon waned, the king was secluded in the house; he was mourning and fasting. Fast, sexual abstinence, mourning and silence were also imposed on his subjects during the time of seclusion. Inside the hut, the king was kept naked, except for the cover of his foreskin. This was a form of supplication. The paramount underwent a sort of death and rebirth; his powers had to be symbolically reborn. His body was painted with black, red and white medicines. Around his loins black medicine was painted. Black medicine was supposed to stir up supernatural powers in him and help him to forget the past. White medicine gave him the whiteness of the newborn child and released those powers for the good of his people. Red medicine likened him to the fiery sun, to the fertile blood of menstruation that leads to pregnancy and makes the child strong, the kingdom healthy. By daubing his body with these three colours of medicines, the king was symbolically reborn together with his people. He was also made fierce and terrifying. He was in this way fortified against evil influences coming from outside and also from within. A ritual washing with Tonga medicine, the famous strengthening medicine of the Maseko, followed this seclusion. The foamy potion made him shine anew besides washing away the sins and the weaknesses of the nation. It was only at this stage that the king could eat the first green crops and the green gourds (Igumuzo) mixed with Tonga.

The end of the Incwala was marked by the throwing of the Igumuzo fruits among the dancers; then people began to disperse and go home still singing. On their way they cut the new stalks of maize and picked the pumpkin leaves signifying that the new crop was now set free. From now on people were protected against the power of the new crop which they could safely eat. They were also purified, strengthened and renewed. They went home with the promise that all evil, pestilence, sickness and disease were averted from the entire nation. Health, prosperity and success against their enemies were now guaranteed.

With the opening of the new crop also the New Year opened full of promises and blessings from their ancestors. Their king, together with them had undergone their annual rite of passage. As the new moon grew, they were strengthened in their hopes. Their return from the capital renewed their sense of unity and their concern to maintain and protect it. Through the celebration of the Incwala, they had become convinced of the proximity of their ancestors and their close mystical link with the person of the king on whom they depended for further blessings.

**NGONI MEDICINE**

**Diviners**

In the days of Mputa (1840-1850) there was a woman diviner called Nandumbu, from the Swazi clan. She went northwards with Mputa to Tanganyika as his diviner (*inanusi*). She had dreams or visions during the night and in the morning as she came out into the open space in front of the Paramount’s hut, she danced a little with a reed. As soon as the paramount saw her dancing he came out towards her. She spoke to him alone: she told him her dreams.

Then the people would gather and become silent. She would lift her stick high with an outstretched arm. The paramount would then inform the people about what she had told him in secret. Once the crowd had heard, everybody knocked their sticks on the ground and said: ‘*eeel!*’ At times of war, for example, she would advise the paramount not to go fighting, for the people would meet bad luck and be killed.
Such diviners were common in those days, they acted as advisors to the king (*inkosi*). They could be male or female, depending on the choice of the ancestor who required them as their servant. Ngoni society today no longer knows of such diviners who advised the king.

The initial calling of a diviner took the form of sickness, and severe pain was experienced in their body. These symptoms could not be treated with medicine as the ancestors forbade it. Instead, a sacrifice had to be made to them; a goat had to be slaughtered. Its gall bladder played a particularly important role. The liquid contained in the gall bladder was sprinkled over the patient’s head, shoulders and back. Then the bladder was inflated and put on the head of the patient. The fixing of the gall bladder to the patient’s head indicated the brooding of the ancestors over that person.

During the period that followed the call, the patient was subject to trauma, confusion of the mind and dreams. Such dreams were often related to water pools and ancestor snakes like the python. All of these experiences were leading the patient towards the prospect of rebirth, to break away from the old life and start a new life as a diviner. As soon as the patient accepted the call they had to be trained by an experienced diviner. In the process of this training the health of the patient would be restored, but above all it would introduce them to the knowledge of divination and make them sensitive to the closeness of the spirits without becoming mentally disturbed. The novice was also trained to perform a trance dance, a dance that was specific to diviners, and in this way the ancestors would manifest their powers. During this dance the diviner had to hold a divining reed in their hand. In the Ngoni Myth of Origin, the reed, which penetrates the earth, causes the conception of mankind. Reeds are carriers of water and are thought to be the birthplace of humans in general and of the diviner in particular. It is the duty of the ancestor to preside over the diviner’s rebirth. In connection with the symbol of water and fertility the novice would wear shells and would paint his body with white clay, thus identifying himself with the whiteness of the ancestors. Around their necks and wrists they would wear necklaces and bracelets made from python vertebrae. Through this snake the ancestors made their secrets known to the diviner and gave life. In their hands, diviners carried a black fly whisk for sprinkling medicine. This flywhisk conferred dignity and power on him or her. This special tool was used for smelling out wrong doers and sensing evil. Calabashes and horns containing protective medicines and decorated with beads were carried by the diviner. White beads were preferred for decorative purposes as they identified the diviner with the spirits. For this same reason they wore white beads around their arms, ankles and in their hair.

The chosen person was tied by numerous food and sexual taboos in order to keep in tune with the spirits. The brooding of the spirits prevented the diviner from cutting their hair and sometimes from cutting their nails. As part of their regalia they wore animal skins, as the spirits spoke through the skin of the animal, which had been slaughtered for them. After the novice had gone through the initiation rite, which marked the end of his training he would come out in full attire, ready for his work as a diviner (*inanusi*) at the court of the king.

**Tonga Medicine**

In the central kingdom of the Maseko Ngoni, there was a division of authority between the Maseko and the Phungwako clans. It was said that the Maseko took the power (Bayete) while the Phungwako took the medicine (Tonga).

For the Maseko Ngoni the Tonga was a collective name given to all royal medicines used at different times and for different purposes. It was above all the medicine for the protection of the Ngoni people of which the paramount was the head and the embodiment. The Tonga protected the paramount at his accession, as much as it protected the army in time of war and the people in their quest for land. The diviner had the reputation of going ahead of them with the Tonga.
Tonga in Chingoni means rod-brass. It was equated to power, health and strength. The ingredients of the Tonga were all taken from a sheep: its horn, its blood and its fat and a lion’s rib was added. In the old days sea water was also added. It was made by a specialist in a secret place that nobody was allowed to divulge. The specialists who made the Tonga were those who killed the sheep and ate the meat. This meat was not eaten in any normal way, neither in the house nor by women. It had to be eaten without greed, wasting nothing. They had to finish it quickly. Once they had finished, they could not sleep in their house with their wives, they had to sleep where the Tonga was made. They did not sleep on mats but on grass for the entire duration of its production.

The Tonga medicines were used at the accession of the paramount in order to strengthen him. In time of war it gave protection to his army, at the time of conquest it was a way of removing fear. At the first fruits ceremony (Incwala) it was a means of assuring health and strength to the paramount, and through him to bring fertility to the land and the crops and health and prosperity to the Ngoni people.

**NGONI WAR RITUALS**

**Enlistment**

From the age of 21 to 26 years the boys left the herding and the Laweni. They took their shields (Amahawu) and their spears and gathered together near the Kraal where they began to dance the Ligubo war dance. They marched and shook their shields and spears near the gate (Lisango). They moved as if they were running after the enemy, retreating and defending themselves. Through this gesture they showed to the village that they were not boys anymore but young men eager to become warriors. In this way they were asking to be admitted to the status of grown men. With the agreement of the elders they were formed into a new regiment (Libandla) and they were given a senior man (Induna) to lead them.

**Mobilisation**

When the army was summoned to the king’s quarters, the warriors gathered section by section. Each detachment sang its own song (Mahubo) as it arrived at the Kraal of the Inkosi. At their arrival, each section took their place. A herald shouted: “Uyezwa na? -Do you hear?” “Utsho njalo yenkosi uti ayigube! - Thus says the king, let them dance!” Each section then started dancing Ligubo. The women joined in the dance with their little reeds in hand. After the dance they all retired to their own villages and prepared the provisions and the snuff. They had to return on an agreed date.

When that day had come they gathered again and brought their dresses and food. They dressed in the Kraal and stood according to sections, in a close order, shields and spears raised above them. The Induna addressed them and told them of the enemy they were to attack and the plan of campaign they were to follow. Soon after they started to march out of the Kraal one by one. They were not allowed to go back to their houses to say goodbye. It was believed that if they did so, they would never come back alive. Nobody stayed at home, they all slept at the communal shelter, for fear of bringing bad luck to the regiment. Even the paramount slept out. The next morning the army went out accompanied by the old men who gave the warriors warnings on the way. They accompanied them for some distance and then came back to the village. When the army went out, two sections were detached to guard the village.

**Approach and attack**

When the army went out it marched very slowly and halted for the night. All the sections kept together as ordered by the war Induna. Scouts led and showed the way. The army had provision carrier-boys, girls or sometimes women. A section of the army walked behind them in order to protect them.
When the army came near the enemy stockade, the leaders ordered the warriors to sit down and rest before the attack. They snuffed and smoked hemp in order to find heart and remove the fear of facing the enemy. Once the army had rested two leaders of different divisions told the warriors to start dancing their own praise dances. After the dance and the call of the Induna, each section began to rush forward with noise and whistling. The warriors stood in crowds near the stockade and surrounded it. Normally they stood in the formation of a young crescent moon or the horns of a bull. They whistled and blew their horns to frighten the enemy. “Utsho njalo yena uti aziphebeni! -Thus it is said, let the bulls fight!” At this call they ran to the stockade with one heart and with incredible noise. After a short silence a voice said: “Nginga pakati: kuti loko. -It’s me inside, of such and such village.” The man who was the first to enter the stockade would name his village. Once the army was inside, the warriors asked the name of the one who had entered first and of those who helped him. These were the heroes who were to be reported to the Induna and to the paramount for receiving a reward. All that was inside the stockade, cattle, goats, sheep ... belonged by right to the man who had entered first. The paramount also had a portion of everything taken.

Return from War

On their return all who had dipped their spears in the blood of the enemy, had to carry with them their belongings even if they were useless. This was to fulfil a taboo they had: at the time of purification, once back in the village, they would have to burn what was useless and keep what was worth something. On the way home, they looked for animal bones, burned them and ground them to dust. They also made charcoal dust. On the day of the arrival into the village, they painted their faces and bodies with that dust, blended together in order to purify themselves from the kill. Just before the arrival, messengers were sent to the Izinduna and to the paramount with the news of the victory. The names of the dead in battle were also sent. Those affected by those deaths were not allowed to grieve. When the section marched into the village the first to leave were the last to enter. The army never entered the Paramount’s village in the afternoon, but always in the morning before midday because it took a long time to give a report of the battle.

As they entered the village, each company sang its own song of praise, covering their heads with their shields and spears. As they came closer to the gateway, those who had not blooded their spears danced first outside the gate; only those who had killed could enter and dance in front of the paramount and the headmen. Inside, before them, they sang and danced their own praise songs. The dance was interrupted by the war cry of the Induna, who began to tell the story of the battle. He mentioned the section which had first entered the stockade and the name of the hero who had made the first kill. The names of all those who had made a kill were also mentioned. Each of them had to come out of their rank and show themselves to the paramount by executing a short dance. In the name of the king, an Induna was chosen to thank all the army (Kudumisela Impi).

Demobilisation and Purification

Once the ceremony was over the warriors went to their villages to remove their war equipment and put their shields on the bed stand. Then they sat down by the big house and were greeted by their wives, parents, children and friends. If any of their colleagues died in the battle, they went to pay their respects. For those who had done a kill or helped, there was a special purification ceremony that lasted 4 to 5 days. A mixture of ground bark and water was put on the fire. When the medicine started boiling the men came to lick it. First they dipped one hand and then the other. The first lick they spat out, then they swallowed some and stuck their palms on their knees and on their elbows. They jumped from side to side of the frying pan and said “Po!” meaning to drive away the spirits of the enemies they had killed.
Early in the morning they went to the river to wash away the pigment from their bodies. They were still wearing the clothes of the men they had killed, which showed that they were not yet totally purified. They did not live with their wives nor touch their children. When they returned from the river, they tried to remember and repeat the last words of their enemies. Back in the village they took some more medicine and rubbed themselves all over with lime. On the last day they went to the river to bathe once more. Then they burnt all they had been wearing of the enemy. Some good items were kept, like clothes, ivory bracelets, bows and spears. When all the rituals were completed they were considered to be clean and apt to resume normal life.

Decoration of the Heroes

After the warriors had spent some time in their villages, they were called once more to the Kraal of the paramount. There they were expected to dance Ligubo. Bulls were killed for them; one for each section. They danced for the king during the preparation of the meat and after the meal. The dancing was interrupted and the heroes of the sections were presented with the horns of the bulls killed for their section. The horns were to be worn hanging on the neck or on the shoulders of the hero. The man who wore the horns and danced with them was known as a man of value. Shields of fine skins were also offered by the paramount to famous warriors. As the heroes danced in front of the king with such decorations, the crowd acclaimed them by beating on their shields.