

# South African Shield and Assegai Spear

## ORIGINS

Date: Early 1800s

Place: South Africa

Materials: Wood, leather and steel



The complete set of spear and shield

Donated

By: Unknown

## DESCRIPTION

These objects can be classified as traditional Zulu items used for ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. The Zulu shield has always been handcrafted from cowhide, and have played a major role in the life of many Zulus. Accompanying the shield are the spears, the wider of which is known by the Zulu people as an "assegai." These weapons were altered by the legendary Zulu King Shaka in the early 1800s, which became a revolutionary change in warfare that existed in what is now South Africa. The Zulu shield has a 40cm core width and a bottom piece width, measuring at 7 ½ cm alongside a top width measuring the same 7 ½ which provides enough evidence to conclude that it is a large artifact that weighs 78.2 grams with a length of 112 cm. The small headed spear weighs 77.2 grams with a width of .5cm and a length of 157cm while the spear with the larger head has a blade that contains a width of 9 ½ cm with a length of 172cm.



The Wide Bladed Assegai



The assegai from above



Base of the shield

## CULTURE

**Description:** Long before the Zulu people were established as a nation, they lived as isolated family groups and living nomadic lives. The word “Zulu” means sky, deriving from the ancestor who founded the Zulu royal line in about 1670. Zulus were geographically located and originated in today’s South Africa. Zulus make up about 22% of 45 million South Africans. The largest urban concentration of Zulu people can be found in Gauteng Province, the largest rural population can be in their traditional territories of Kwa-Zulu-Natal. Whenever they moved around to accumulate livestock, they were divided into groups but managed to maintain a family network. The family was an extended one, largely self-sufficient with duties divided according to gender. Being that gender played a role in responsibilities, men were generally responsible for defending livestock while women had domesticated duties.

Political consolidation among the Zulu people began to take place the late eighteenth century. Powerful chiefdoms became more acceptable. There was a shift from a pastoral society to a more organized statehood. The changes that occurred to gain power took place through the nature of social, political and economic links between chiefs and their subjects. These chiefs demanded taxes from their subjects, acquired large armies to gain wealth and conquer neighboring chiefdom enemies.



*Caption:* Image of the South African Shield and Spear used by the Zulus.

**Use within Culture:** Shaka Zulu was the warrior king early in the nineteenth century that united various groups into a powerful Zulu nation. Shaka recruited young men from all over the Kingdom that were trained by his idea of warrior tactics. It is known for a fact that Shaka established a nation known to be one of the mightiest empires on the African Continent. King Shaka introduced new weapons to the Zulu people such as the “assegai”, these weapons gave Shaka’s warriors a tactical advantage over opponents. Shaka’s warriors were conditioned for war, and it is said that Shaka would make his troops go on fifty mile marches. This allowed them to endure difficult conditions that might occur during battle. A tactic used by Shaka was differentiating soldiers by colors depending on their rank which makes it easier for them to operate efficiently. The Zulu army was so powerful they defeated Great Britain. In the battle of Isandlwana African warriors resisted being colonized, by keeping their fighting force concentrated the Zulus captured victory.

**Report written by:**

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