Political changes from 1750 to 1835

* [](https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/img-28.jpg)

It is difficult to accurately track what happened during the process which has been called the Mfecane and which took place between 1750 and 1850.

A possible reason for this is that there are very few written accounts of the **mfecane,** which makes it very difficult to determine the reasons for the movement, or its course. The people who migrated used **oral history** to continue their beliefs, traditions and history. When a group was destroyed or scattered its oral traditions were lost. When it merged with another group new oral traditions were born to suit the changing make-up of society. Europeans also did not really interpret or understand the stories and lessons and so a lot of information on the mfecane is unconfirmed in writing. Most of the literature from the time came from white missionaries, travellers and government officials. The records are distorted as a result of misunderstandings and preconceived ideas about societies that were completely different from their own.

**Question**

1. Why is it so difficult to find out what really happened during the Mfecane? Try to find two people in your community and ask them what they know about the topic. How do their stories differ and why? (6)

**The Mfecane**

***Background***

The Nguni word mfecane means “crushing”. This shows how serious the upheaval among the Bantu-speaking groups in southern Africa was during the 1820s. The Sotho people call it the difaqane or lifaqane, which mean “forced migration” and “hammering”. Some tribes were scattered, others completely destroyed and new groups formed.



**The mfecane influenced southern Africa from the Cape Colony to Malawi. Source:**[**www.nationalgeographic.com/**](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=africa)

The mfecane spread its influence over an enormous area stretching from the Cape Colony to East and Central Africa. It came to an end in mid-1800s and for a short while, had some links with the **Great Trek**. These two **mass migrations** played a very important role in South African history.

**Question**

1. Why do you think the Mfecane was a “crushing”? (2)

**Factors that played a role in the Mfecane**



The drought that broke out in 1800 caused widespread loss of livestock and the Mahlatule famine. Thousands of people starved. Source: [act-intl.org](http://act-intl.org/images/w-photos/photo_2000/w-borenaboy.jpg)

In the late 1700's water became scarce in southern Africa and in 1800 a massive drought caused the **mahlatule famine**. During the 1700's Portuguese traders had brought maize to Africa, which replaced other grains as the staple for most people. Maize farming needed more water and when the drought struck thousands of people starved. This also caused conflict over cattle, grain and water, which eventually led to war. Violent competition among tribes in what is known as Mozambique today over ivory and other trade goods also contributed to the eventual chaos of the mfecane.

The competition between the tribes to supply Portuguese traders with goods inspired the **“amabutho”, a regimental system** where young men are absorbed into their tribe's military force according to age. Shaka Zulu refined this system and forged the strongest army in southern Africa.

***Causes of the Mfecane***

The mfecane was partly caused by changes in the Nguni groups that resulted in the development of the Zulu nation. Stronger leaders began to absorb weaker groups around them. Before this, problems between groups had been insignificant, but larger tribes meant larger conflicts. The Ndwandwe, led by Zwide, the Ngwane under Sobhuza and the Mthethwa under Dingiswayo changed the military, political and social systems of the southern African people completely. These changes led to Shaka Zulu’s rise to power and his dream of a Zulu kingdom, and his military drive through southern Africa.

Population growth and severe drought in the late eighteenth century caused societies to settle closer to each other. When maize arrived from the Americas through Portuguese traders in Mozambique, people realised that this plant was more nutritious than local plants and could feed larger groups of people, which also caused communities to move closer together. Ivory trade with the Portuguese in Delagoa Bay motivated people to move to the area south of Mozambique where leaders could control this industry. Land became scarce and farmers had reached the limit of usable land on the edge of the Kalahari Desert in the northwest and the mountains on the southern edge of the Highveld. Water became harder to find and rain was scarce.

The mfecane was caused by a number of inter-related factors including environmental and societal changes, as well as severe conflict and fear among the people of southern Africa. It affected the continent as far north as Malawi. It is difficult to say what the exact reasons for the migration were because this history went unrecorded.

**Question**

3) Explain how social and environmental events coincided to play a role in the Mfecane. (8)

4) Why was KwaZulu Natal so greatly affected by the Mfecane? (4)

***The effects of the Mfecane***

The Mfecane led to the loss of thousands of lives and destablised the region. Many tribes disbanded and the survivors formed new groups. Many people, like the Ngoni and Hlubi were forced to migrate while the Sotho people reformed to establish the country we know as Lesotho.



KwaZulu Natal was the part of South Africa that suffered most devastation during the mfecane. Source: [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com/WORLD/africa/9905/26/south.africa.01/s.africa.kwazulu.natal.jpg)

The area most affected by the mfecane and Zulu expansion was KwaZulu Natal. Refugee groups fleeing Shaka’s army caused destruction in the area, and this was followed by further devastation by the Zulu warriors. A large part of the population fled to the south and into Pondoland to settle for a while, causing disruption and power struggles in the area. As a result only the Pondo and the Bhaca, which was made up of many other group, remained. After Shaka’s death Nqetu of the Qwabe rebelled against Dingane and also fled to Pondoland where he defeated Faku, but was killed by Ncapayi.

The confusion led to many refugees settling among the Xhosa and Thembu as Mfengu along with the remainder of the Ngwani and Hlubi people. As the Mfengu became more independent they resented their obligation to their hosts, leading to more tension between the chiefdoms.

The migrations also resulted in the development of bigger and more centralised kingdoms and states that spread over larger areas. The Zulu kingdom created a sense of unity and identity among people of different tribes. Other kingdoms that came into being include the Swazi, Gaza, the Ndebele that replaced the Rozwi, Ngoni, Kololo and Lesotho. Great numbers of people were displaced and frightened communities left their own areas in places like the Orange Free State, Natal and the Transvaal. The vulnerability of the people that stayed behind caused them to welcome white people as allies against their enemies instead of seeing them as potential enemies that needed resisting. These areas offered space for white settlement when the dissatisfaction with British rule at the Cape and the desire for self -government inspired an emigration of white frontier framers away from the Colony, leading to the Great Trek.

**Activity**

1. What were the major results of the Mfecane? (5)
2. Explain why the Mfengu eventually became important allies of the British in defeating the Xhosa (3)

**The Ndwandwe kingdom, its rise and fall, and the Rise of the Zulu Kingdom**

The most prominent role players in the mfecane ruled powerful kingdoms in the area. Zwide of the Ndwandwe, Sobhuza of the Ngwane, who later became the Swazi, and Dingiswayo of the Mthethwa were deeply involved in the upheaval. Zwide and Sobhuza fought over land along the Pongola River and Sobhuza was defeated after which he led his people further inland to the area that is known as Swaziland today. After defeating Sobhuza, Zwide came into conflict with Dingiswayo over other resources like land and water.

Both kingdoms were run on military lines. Young men were grouped together in army regiments according to age. Dingiswayo led all his forces against Zwide in 1818 and was trapped and killed in an ambush, which caused the Mthethwa kingdom to dissolve and also paved the way for Shaka Zulu.

Shaka was one of the sons of Senzangakhona, a ruler of the Zulu people. As a young man he was a member of Dingiswayo’s army where he distinguished himself through his bravery. When Shaka's father died, Dingiswayo helped him to overthrow his older brother and become chief of the Zulu. Once he became leader he began applying new military strategies that he had developed while serving Dingiswayo. Eventually he became a famous military leader.

As the Mthethwa nation fell apart after Dingiswayo's death Shaka used the opportunity to defeat all the chiefdoms in the area, bringing the defeated forces into his fold and so creating a new kingdom. Zwide realised that Shaka could become a threat and decided to stop him, but was defeated in 1818 by the Zulu’s superior strategy and discipline.

The Ndwandwe left their homeland and regrouped. In 1926, under Zwide’s successor Sikhunyani , they challenged the Zulu forces again and were completely destroyed. By this time Shaka had created an army of 40 000 men who defeated and then robbed other groups for cattle and grain. These attacks were highly organised raids and all resulting booty became the property of Shaka.

Shaka was focused on expanding his kingdom and when he defeated a chiefdom the local rulers, or their family members, were left to control their tribes. Young men were taken away to become part of Shaka’s army and the development of his military system created a sense of unity among these men from independent communities. Although he only ruled for about a decade he merged nearly a hundred chiefdoms.

Shaka also maintained contact with Delagoa Bay in Mozambique and was interested in expanding the ivory trade in the area. A Portuguese delegation visited him in 1825. In 1824 English traders had also landed at Port Natal, which later became Durban, and he traded with them, and made use of their advice.

The Zulu nation covered the area marked in black on the map and migrations are marked in purple. The expansion of the Zulu kingdom forced thousands of people to flee before the might of Shaka. Source: [www.nguni.com](http://www.nguni.com/culture/virtualafrica/sageneral/mfecane1.jpg)

In 1828 Shaka’s mother died and after the mourning period he launched a campaign against all chiefdoms in the area between the Cape Colony and KwaZulu Natal. It seems that the campaign was not only an attempt to raid, but also to establish a trade route between his kingdom and the Colony. He sent a diplomatic delegation with one of his English traders, Lieutenant King, to open relations with the Governor of the Cape. When his delegation did not return from the Cape another English traders, Henry Fynn, convinced Shaka that the chiefdoms near the frontier were protected by the British. Shaka decided to turn his army around and moved north from his own kingdom to attack the kingdom in southern Mozambique. He intended to return the next year because he was determined to make contact with his British friends in the Cape. He stayed behind as his army travelled north and two of his brothers, Dingane and Mhlangane, took advantage of his followers’ unhappiness with his strict rule and constant warring. They conspired against him with Mbopha, an induna

While Shaka was meeting a delegation in his cattle enclosure, Mhlangane and Dingane assassinated him. Mbopha distracted the leader by abusing the delegation for being late and by driving them out of the enclosure, allowing Mhlangane to stab him in the back. Dingane joined his brother and together they killed him. At a later stage Dingane also killed Mhlangane and became the ruler of the Zulu.

**Questions**

1. Evaluate Shaka’s strengths and weaknesses as a leader. (10)
2. How did the typical social and political organization of African groups change during this period? (2)

The expansion of the Zulu nation forced the Ngwane to move north to form the Swazi kingdom. The Ndwandwe also moved north to establish the Gaza kingdom and in 1840 the Ndebele people moved to the area we now know as south-west Zimbabwe. The upheaval caused by these migrations contributed to the mfecane, which began around 1815-1817. The defeated forces in Shaka’s campaign caused more destruction than his own army because the refugees looted and pillaged wherever they went, reducing KwaZulu Natal and the Orange Free State to a wasteland and forcing the displacement of thousands of people.

**The Ndebele under Mzilikazi**

[Mzilikazi biography](http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/king-mzilikazi)

One of Shaka Zulu’s early allies during the establishment of his kingdom was Mzilikazi, chief of the Khumalo. Mzilikazi had broken away from the Ndwandwe to join Shaka before the conflict between the Zulu king and Zwide. The Ndebele migration was stimulated by the Mfecane and also influenced by the Great Trek.

As he had done with Zwide, Mzilikazi revolted against Shaka in 1821 and fled to the Transvaal Highveld with his Ndebele following. Initially they migrated to the northeastern Transvaal where they settled at the Steelpoort River. Around 1822 Mzilikazi and his army defeated the Pedi kingdom. The Ndebele took the Pedi cattle and their food stores, occupied their land and departed in 1823. From Pedi country Mzilikazi moved and settled near the Vaal River. He had defeated many Sotho groups and had absorbed them into his army. His following had grown a great deal, and it became necessary to establish a number of settlements for his forces. He used these settlements as bases for raids and could cover a very large area. In 1825 he attacked and defeated the Ngwaketse.

Mzilikazi's own outposts were attacked by the Taung who had forged an alliance with the Kora and Griqua. They were unsuccessful and the Kora were driven to the south of the Vaal River. Around 1827 Mzilikazi decided to leave his Vaal River settlement and move to an area between the Apies and Elands Rivers. In 1928 the Kora and the Taung attacked the Ndebele camp while most of Mzilikazi’s forces were campaigning against the Ngwaketse. They captured many cattle, but were ambushed by Ndebele forces while retreating, and the Ndebele took the cattle back. In revenge Mzilikazi sent a force in 1829 and finally defeated the Taung .

From 1830 to 1831 Mzilikazi’s forces in central Transvaal continued raiding the Tswana and he eventually attacked Moshoshoe’s stronghold at Thaba Bosiu, but was unsuccessful. In 1831 a force of around 300 mounted Kora and Griqua and several Tswana attacked the Ndebele and were relatively successful because they captured large herds of cattle. As with the previous Kora attack, they were surprised by Ndebele forces who not only took back their cattle, but also killed a large number of their force. The Kora-Griqua force may have been weakened, but they continued to actively harass Mzilikazi’s settlements.

When Mzilikazi heard of Dingane’s ascendancy to the Zulu throne he immediately feared attack. He moved his people further west and launched a series of very violent attacks against Tswana groups. He was attacked by Zulu forces in August 1832 before his plan could be completed and both sides suffered heavy losses. The battle was undecided and the Zulu forces retreated. Immediately after the attack Mzilikazi launched campaigns against the Rolong, Kwena and Ngwaketse, the only group who offered any resistance.

A Ndebele woman painting her house. Source: [www.africanceremonies.com](http://www.africanceremonies.com/graphics/photos/ndebelehousepaint.jpg)

Now the Ndebele moved to the Marico Valley and many Tswana were incorporated into their army and community. Many groups also lived as separate, dependent groups in the Ndebele area and on the edges of the main part of the kingdom. This migration from the central to western Transvaal did not make Mzilikazi as secure as he wanted to be and in 1834 he was again under attack from his Kora-Griqua enemies with support from the Hurutshe.

Mzilikazi ‘s forced withdrawal to the north was because of an attack by a Boer commando with a number of Rolong supporters close to Mosega. The battle ran for nine days and the Ndebele were driven from their main settlements. The cattle they captured were again won back by an Ndebele party. This attack followed closely after the Zulu and Kora-Griqua attacks and finally forced Mzilikazi to withdraw to the north. As the Ndebele masses streamed out of the Marico Valley many captured Sotho/Tswana, especially Hurutshe and Kwena, broke away and returned to their original homes.

Most of the Ndebele crossed the Limpopo River and gathered in what we know as Botswana. The Ndebele divided into two groups. One was led by Gundwane Ndiweni and included many of Mzilikazi’s wives and his heir, Nkulumane, the other party was led by Mzilikazi himself. The first group travelled to Zimbabwe and around 1838 they settled near the Matopo Mountains. Mzilikazi’s own group moved west through Botswana and received information on the position of the other Ndebele group. They joined by mid-1839.

The Ndebele in Zimbabwe was based around a group of military settlements that eventually developed into permanent divisions of the kingdom. There were also three classes. The upper class was a relatively small grouping called the Zansi that were descendants of the Nguni. Second in status and nearly double the number of the Zansi, were the Enhla, which consisted of Sotho-Tswana people that had been incorporated in the Transvaal. The last, and most populous group was the Holi, most of whom were of Shona.

The Ndebele continued to raid Shona areas around them, but never managed to conquer them. Mzilikazi's stronghold was again attacked by a Boer force in 1847, but all the captured cattle were re-claimed by an Ndebele pursuit party. Mzilikazi finally passed away in 1868 and after victory over the Ndebele, Potgieter claimed great parts of the Transvaal as part of his conquest, although only about half of it was actually occupied by his followers.

**Question**

1. How did the mfecane affect the Ndebele people? Draw a timeline showing what happened and where it happened. (10)

***Emergence of the Sotho kingdom***

The Basotho nation, a Sotho-Tswana group, is made up of refugees who had to flee their homes during the mfecane wars. Societies making up the Basotho nation were the Bafokeng, Bakwena, Batlokwas, Barolong, and some Nguni groups like the Xhosas who moved away in search for safer places to live. These people adopted the Sotho language of their leader and his ethnic identity as their own.This is how the Basotho kingdom under the leadership of King Moshoeshoe came to be.

King Moshoeshoe 1786-1870 .Source: [www.thabatours.de](http://www.thabatours.de/images/moshoeshoe.jpg)

Moshoeshoe is seen as the father of the Basotho kingdom because he drew together the scattered Sotho-Tswana and other societies driven apart by Zulu and Ndebele attacks. Moshoeshoe was the son of Mokoteli, a sub-chief of the Bakoena society and leader of his age regiment (mophato in Sotho or amabutho in Zulu) a group of young men of the same age during the early 1800 s. Moshoeshoe came to power by using his youth regiment and followers to overthrow the legitimate Bafokeng king, Makhetha son of King Mohlomi. After overthrowing a legitimate king, he relied on his military strength and wealth to create unity in his kingdom. He encouraged loyalty by promising protection against attacks from the Ndebele. He established a mountain fortress at Butha Buthe in northeastern Lesotho. Despite the strength of this camp it was still attacked by various other groups, like Batlokwas.

One of Moshoeshoe’s followers found a location that could not be easily penetrated about 30km from Maseru and King Moshoeshoe decided to move his people to this place, Thaba Bosiu, meaning ‘mountain at night’. This area was unconquerable as there were only seven paths of access to the top of the flat-topped mountain, all of them easily guarded. It also had natural springs and could support up to 3000 people and their animals. Moshoeshoe successfully defended his people against attacks from the Ndebele under Mzilikazi, the Griquas, and the Boers on several occasions as well as the British. He earned a reputation of acting wisely and with compassion towards those he defeated. This together with his proven success in defence attracted many people seeking protection to his kingdom.

***Basotho and Trade***

Trade was also an important factor in the growth of the Lesotho kingdom. The Basotho people are nicknamed the blanket people because of the blankets they wear as a form of traditional dress. Before the introduction of wool and cloth blankets, the Basotho made their blankets from animal hide. Only after establishing trade relations with the Cape colony the new blankets were introduced to the Basotho people. The other important change among the Basotho people was the introduction of horses. Initially, these horses were captured from the Boers and later they were bought from the Cape colony. Through a process of natural selection, the Basotho people bred their own horses and ponies that were recognised as Sotho horses or ponies. The Basotho ponies were traded with the British. Demand for them increased during the Anglo-Boer war because the ponies had stamina, were well trained and provided a much- needed mode of transport.

Basotho blankets and horses. Source: [www.futureshock.co.za](http://www.futureshock.co.za/basotho.htm)

Initially the Basotho kingdom had extensive control of the most fertile region along the Caledon River. This made it easy to produce enough grain for their own use and to sell to Cape Town markets where they made huge profits. The money earned was used to buy guns, iron, and blankets. The diamond discovery in Kimberly in 1867 attracted thousands of people. Lesotho became one of the main suppliers of wheat, maize, and sorghum to Kimberley, able to supply Kimberley with more than 100 000 bags of excellent quality grain each year. Lesotho earned the reputation of being the granary of southern Africa.

[Moshoeshoe](http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/king-moshoeshoe-i)

The Boers were nervous of the growing dominance of Lesotho in this trade. The Cape colony was also aware that trade had enabled the Basotho kingdom to grow so powerful. Border disputes Broke out in the 1850s and Free State Boers destroyed grain crops, setting back the Basotho economy. This weakened the kingdom so that it could no longer defend itself against Boer and English aggression. In 1867 and in 1868 at the end of the second Basotho War Boers overran most of Moshoeshoe’s land from the Orange Free State. He appealed to the British for protection. In March 1868 his country became a British protectorate and Lesotho was saved and its current borders established. Most of its territory was lost, specifically the fertile farming area west of the Caledon River.

**Questions**

1. What led to the rise and strength of the Sotho nation (5)
2. Evaluate Moshoeshoe’s decision to seek British protection (5)

**Total for all questions (60)**

Other states and paramountacies: Gaza, Swazi, Pedi, Mpondo, southern Tswana.

**Useful links**

***Southern Tswana***

SAHO feature on the [Tswana People](http://www.sahistory.org.za/people-south-africa/tswana)

Article on the[Tswana people](http://strategyleader.org/profiles/tswana.html) from [strategyleader.org](http://strategyleader.org/profiles/tswana.html)

Article on the [Tswana people](http://www.encounter.co.za/article/94.html)from [www.encounter.co.za](http://www.encounter.co.za/)

***Swazi***

Article on the [Swazi people](http://www.umjindi.org/pages/history/history_swazi_shongwe_matsamo_tribe.htm)from [www.umjindi.org](http://www.umjindi.org/pages/history/history_swazi_shongwe_matsamo_tribe.htm)

***Pedi***

SAHO feature on the [Pedi People](http://www.sahistory.org.za/people-south-africa/pedi)

Article on the [Pedi](http://www.ezakwantu.com/Tribes%20-%20Ba%20Pedi%20-%20Bapedi%20-%20Northern%20Basotho.htm) from www.ezakwantu.com