

A Tale of Two Zulu Women

Written by Tzu Chi Foundation
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"A woman must be strong, is able to protect herself and do what is right." For ages, Zulu women have an inferior position in their society. There is, however, one particular group of Zulu women who use their love to accomplish the impossible. There are in fact more than five thousand of them eager to lend their hands to those who need a lift in their lives.

Under the patriarchy

Tolakele Maria Mkhize would never forget how the men in her tribe raised their fists and weapons and yelled at her: "You better shut your mouth and stop acting smart, lady!" when she first voiced her opinions in front of a crowd.

This is the situation that most Zulu women face in South Africa. In fact, they never had any say in the tribe all along.

In Africa, when one mentions the Zulu tribe, people are most daunted by the image of the Zulu men who are known to be fierce and skillful warriors in the history of wars and battles. The Zulu men today still practice polygamy and the women have to stay at home, give birth and bring up children, handle household chores and earn a living. They have hardly any position to hold their own ground.



Although modern creations such as plastic clothing and electronic gadgets have infiltrated the lives of the Zulus, the ancient ideology of patriarchy remains and has yet to be changed.

In Durban, the largest city in KwaZulu-Natal Province where it is most populated by the Zulus, there is a group of women who is trying to break this ideology. They get out of their homes and involve themselves in communal activities. They wear pants which can only be worn by men and go deep into the mountains to help the poor.

They have triumphed over their poverty and utilize their limited resources to help those who are more unfortunate.

Political strife breaks village's peace

Towards the end of the 18th century, the infamous Zulu warrior Shaka gained control over a number of Zulu clans and created the most powerful kingdom in the whole of southern Africa. As his army strived to expand the kingdom's territory, the Zulu Civil War broke out and clashes were everywhere. Even though the Zulu Kingdom has ceased to exist, the tribesmen are belligerent and still clash among themselves, especially during 1994 when the new government was established and almost every tribe was determined to seize political power. Many villages were burnt down overnight, leaving behind widows and orphans. There was hardly any sight of

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any men as many were perished in the fights.

Tolakele recalled in pain that that was the darkest period of South Africa. It was more hurting than the Apartheid period, she lamented.



Years ago, the South African government implemented the Apartheid system whereby the Whites governed the KwaZulu territory, practicing strict racial segregation against the non-whites. Millions of people living outside of KwaZulu were forced to move into the territory.

When the new government took office in 1994, it merged KwaZulu and Natal to form the KwaZulu-Natal Province and citizens were finally allowed to move freely. However, most of the Zulu tribes still stay put until today.

The neighbourhood where Tolakele resides is considered the most dangerous area in Durban. The whole village is separated into the northern and southern tribe by a jungle. The hearts of the villagers were separated by two political parties as well.

"Our people would get killed when they crossed over to the other side. And whoever crosses over to our side suffers the same fate," said Tolakele.

Gone was her loved one who crossed over

Tolakele, who thought herself already at peace, became deeply grieved when she related her grandson being one of the victims during the dark period. The wound in her heart has never fully healed.

Before the separation of the village, her grandson had fallen in love with a girl from the opposite tribe and had promised to marry her. However when the war started, the girl risked her life by crossing over to visit her relatives. Tolakele's grandson started to get worried when she did not return nor hear anything from her. Even though he was aware of the danger ahead, he went ahead to cross the jungle.

"He was only 28 years old then and he had never returned since..." At the time, Tolakele had already involved herself in the charity activities organized by Tzu Chi. Losing her grandson made her realize further that she has to really put the Tzu Chi spirit of Great Love and Compassion she advocates to practice, but how could she make peace with the whole village?

Without thinking too much, she decided to cross the jungle with another volunteer named Mini Ngcobo to befriend the opposite tribe.



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The women did it

Mini Ngcobo, who is the wife of the tribe's chief, supported Tolakele fully. "But I was so afraid that my husband would object, so I told him that I was going out for some errands instead. He probably had no idea that his wife went out to run such a life-and-death errand!"

Surprisingly, Tolakele and Mini's actions were totally unplanned; what they had was only a thought for goodwill and their blue shirt and white pants uniform.

The significance behind the Blue-and-White Uniform is the hope that Tzu Chi volunteers would be broad-minded like the vast blue sky and their actions be as pure as the white clouds. However, to Tolakele and Mini at that instance, the uniform had a deeper meaning: "It gives us the greatest strength and courage that we needed."

With firm steps, Tolakele and Mini held each other's hands and headed towards the other side of the jungle.

"We are here for peace." Even when they were facing hostile remarks and weapons ready to be hurled at them, Tolakele and Mini calmly explained their intention. "We have been fighting each other for the past ten years, leaving behind countless orphans, widows and wounded soldiers. You or your family have been a victim at some point too, haven't you? Why don't we put down our weapons and care for each other from now on?"

The tribesmen were moved by their sincere appeal that day and both of them went back to their own tribe and said the same thing.



When Mini's husband heard of what they had done, he took a heavy breath and said, "Even men like us do not dare to cross over. How on Earth did the two of you have the courage to attempt that?"

Since then, Tolakele and Mini have done their best to mediate both sides.

"When Tzu Chi distributed winter goods to the poor prior to the wintertime, I brought several people from my tribe and together we went to the other tribe to present the goods to the needy people there," said Tolakele.

Due to the unique status of Mini as the wife of the tribal chief, her umpteen times of aiding has warmed the hearts of the tribesmen and has also set a good example for her own tribe.

Today, Tolakele, Mini and their tribesmen could cross over to the other side to take the public bus without the need to make a detour and villagers from the other side would cross over to fetch water too.

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The Zulu 'warriors' would never have guessed from the start that the seemingly impossible task to uphold peace was accomplished by two amazing women!

On the vast land of South Africa, the team of Tzu Chi African volunteers may seem as small as a grain of dust, but they have become an indispensable stabilizing force in the settlements.

By Tu Xin-yi
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