

ACTIVITY ONE: SWEET WATER AND EARLY NGUNI PEOPLE

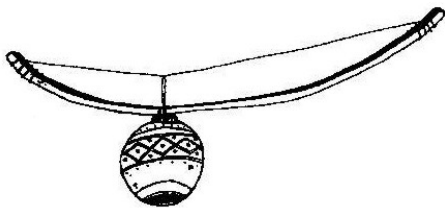
This **SOCIAL SCIENCES: HISTORY** reading and questioning activity looks at early Nguni people of southern Africa and their commonsense ways of collecting and storing “sweet” water.

(In the story that follows, comments and scientific observations are in brackets and italicised so that the learners can see the practical wisdom behind some water collection myths and techniques of the past).

Before the time of the Zulu King, Shaka, sweet water was called “amanzi amnandi”. Shaka’s mother was called Nandi and it is said that because it was not considered respectful to use the queen mother’s name in this way, Shaka referred to sweet water as “amanzi amtoti”. *(This is how the town of Amanzimtoti, south of Durban, got its name).* Today both terms are used and many people of Nguni origin will sniff, smile and hold up “sweet” water, collected from a river, spring or well for their daily household needs. *(Water quality scientists today still have people smell and taste household water. Human senses give a refined indication of whether water is good and clean and fresh).*

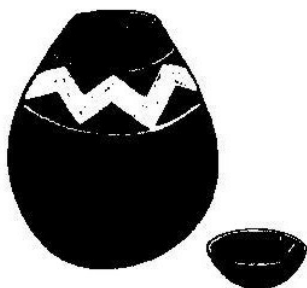


Historically, water was usually collected in areas where people could hear it running over stones or dripping down rocks *(well oxygenated water supports natural biological cleansing processes)*. If a spring was for human use, it was protected by a circle of rocks with a small outlet. Cattle drank elsewhere.



An area nearby was cleared and the site soon became a meeting place for young people. Young men would hang around these water collection sites, playing musical instruments and admiring the maidens who came to collect water. The girls would saunter along slowly and gracefully, singing and flirting. Water collecting was rarely seen as a tiring or boring chore because of the prospect of courtship!!

A water source would always be approached with care so as not to frighten crabs and other small water animals. When disturbed, their movement would stir up sediments and the collector would have to wait for the silt to settle. The surface film was brushed aside for “sweet water” to be collected. *(Sediments and surface films have higher bacteria numbers than the middle waters of pools and rivers. Today scientists take water samples below the surface film, taking care not to suck up sediments. In this way, scientists can get consistent and reliable measures of bacterial contamination).*

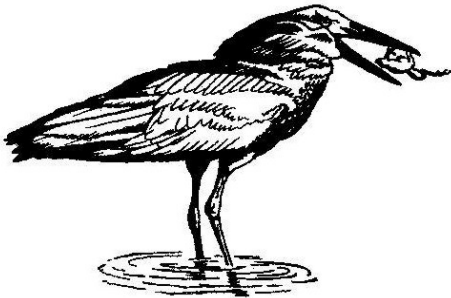
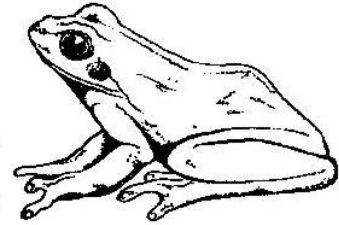


Clay pots were filled with water and covered with a collecting bowl, a piece of skin or a mat made from incema (*Juncas kraussii*) grass. The water would thus stay cool and fresh. *(Water evaporating through the sides of a porous clay pot cooled the contents. Most water bacteria cannot reproduce in cool, dark conditions. Some micro-organisms envelop themselves in a calcium secretion in the pores of clay pots).*

Scientists spoken to were uncertain about the detail of these issues but it is of note that, in earlier times, great care was taken to scour out a calcium-like scale in water pots. Also of note is that when the grass “lids” and head rings for carrying pots became old they were simply thrown away and new ones were woven. Discarded lids did not pollute the river like today’s bottle tops and plastic waste).

There were many other customs and traditional practices surrounding water. Children were warned that urinating in a river would change them to the opposite sex! (This myth was probably sufficiently frightening to prevent people urinating in streams and rivers. This would have limited a disease like bilharzia. The bilharzia parasite is passed on from human urine and faeces to small water snails. From these, its life cycle takes the disease back to people through river water).

Nguni water collectors say that where there are frogs, one does not find sweet water. Frogs are eaten by hammerkops (uthekwane, the “lightning bird”) and the prospect of collecting water while being watched by a “witch-bird” must have been terrifying in earlier times when spirits, myths and mystery had a more central place in everyday social life. Children were told that if they killed this bird or stole its eggs, their homes would go up in flames. (Where there are frogs, one will usually find snakes. Both animals are feared by many people today, not least the children who were told the Nguni myths of witches and lightening to fill their hearts with terror. Today, scientific tests suggest that many frog species need “sweet water” if they are to live and reproduce successfully. There must be some doubt about the Nguni suggestion that frogs are an indication of water that is not fit for human consumption).



It is also said that it was not advisable to collect water from a river after heavy rain at the start of the annual rainy season. Indigenous commonsense told people to put out pots to collect rain-water. River water would again be collected four days after the rains stopped and the water had cleared. (Heavy rains wash human and animal wastes into rivers. There is thus a rapid increase in faecal bacteria and disease. In KwaZulu-Natal, health workers have to warn rural people not to collect river water after heavy rains as few remember the earlier Nguni practice of collecting rain-water only four days after the rains have stopped).

Today human and livestock numbers have increased vastly, catchments have become degraded and rivers are often polluted dumping places. The best indigenous practices for the collection of “sweetwater” may not prevent people getting serious diseases from river water. Learning about historical water collection and storage practices can, however, develop a respect for early people and might also help our understanding of water quality issues.

Read the story of ‘Sweet Water and Early Nguni People’ to the class or make photocopies and allow the learners to read it on their own.

As a class, discuss the following questions:

1. How many of you have collected water from a nearby river? What was the water used for? (If for drinking, how were you certain that it was safe to drink?)
2. How many of you have heard the story that has just been read? Who told you this story?
3. Do any of you have stories of other ways of collecting water long ago?
4. Many stories from long ago, are passed down orally from one generation to another. One does not find them written down in books and one has to ask the older people in a community who may remember how things were done long ago. How reliable is this information? What is the danger of not writing down stories from different cultures?
5. Why do you think it is important to look after our rivers and streams?
6. Does the class think that rivers and streams throughout South Africa have changed over the last 100 years? In what way? Why? Have any of you seen changes taking place in a river in your life-time? *(Keen young fishermen in the class may have noticed a decrease or increase in fish species and a change in the water quality or path of the stream/river).*
7. How can we find out what the rivers, streams and other water sources were like in our own community 50 years ago so that we can compare them with what we see today?

Criteria to assess learners during this social sciences: history lesson

Criteria	Exceeded requirements of the Learning Outcome	Satisfied requirements of the Learning Outcome	Partially satisfied requirements of the Learning Outcome	Not satisfied requirements of the Learning Outcome
The learner was able to discuss how reliable and useful stories told by older members in the community were (question 4)				
The learner was able to give reasons why we should conserve and look after our rivers and streams (question 5)				
The learner was able to discuss possible or real changes that have taken place in rivers or streams (question 6)				