

Zulu Sushi

MPUNZI MEETS NAOKICHI NAKUMURA

Mpunzi Shezi met Naokichi Nakamura in Durban nearly a hundred years ago and went on to become the first Zulu Guru teaching Ubuntu to the Buddhists while explaining Zen to the Zulus.

Thirty six year old Naokichi Nakamura set off from Nagasaki in Japan in 1901 to see the world. He first explored Korea, South East Asia, India, the Middle East and Europe, before sailing from Portugal to Cape Town in May 1903. At that time a Japanese trader called Kotani Komahei lived in Cape Town where he had a kiosk called the Mikado selling soap, food and Japanese imported goods. He was the first person most Japanese travellers made contact with on arrival in the Cape. There were also a dozen or so single Japanese women who worked from the "Tavern on the Dock". They were not bona fide geishas although they wore kimonos and played the shamisen. They entertained Nakamura and he noted that their playing of the shamisen was beginning to influence the local dance music.

Nakamura travelled to the Kimberley diamond mines where he was asked to start organizing migrant labour from Japan to work the mines. He then went on to Durban via Johannesburg. In Durban he was fascinated by the Zulu people who wore very colourful costumes and transported the white colonists around town in imported Japanese rickshaws. He was disappointed that the Zulu people all appeared to be servants. Nakamura felt an affinity with them as he was forced to travel third class on trains and ships. He was usually treated like a black by whites, and like a white by blacks, and found this to be a rather strange caste system.

Nakamura took a ride along Durban's palm lined beachfront in one of the rickshaws and took his tea at a kiosk run by a Cuban wearing the largest straw hat he had set his eyes upon. He found Durban to be reminiscent of Yokohama with its bustling Port, palm lined beachfront, gentlemanly clubs and colourful gardens. He spoke hesitant English and found that he and his Rickshaw puller could communicate if they took their time. Together they supped at a pie cart in the harbour area and he sampled Zulu beer with the stevedores in a nearby beer hall, noting that his English improved after the second pot.

Nakamura was impressed with Shezi and regaled him with tales of Geishas, cherry blossoms, sake and brave Samurai warriors. Mpunzi told tales of the tyrant King Shaka and his grief after murdering his own mother Nandi, and about the Zulu medicines used by witches to create evil. Snippets from the eyebrow, eyelid, nose, lip, tongue, heart, hair, both from private parts and the head, both finger and toe nails, private parts as well as anything which may have been thrown away used by humans. Crocodile brain, parts of baboon's stomach and tail which is taken while the baboon bends forward to ensure that if the person being poisoned does not die, he may live the rest of his days with a bent back.

Before parting Nakamura scribbled his Japanese address on a scrap of paper and invited Mpunzi to work as a rickshaw puller in his home town Toyohashi. He had decided that a little snake oil business would do well in Japan. The two men parted friends promising to write to each other. Little did he realise that he would soon be teaching a Zulu to make sushi. From Durban Nakamura sailed up the East Coast of Africa to the Mediterranean Sea and visited Germany, Scandinavia, Russia, England, North America crossing it from East to West then sailed on to South America, back to North America, Australia and New Zealand via Hawaii. Nakamura finally reached Kobe harbour in 1907 and finished his travels there.

He collaborated on eight novels together with a famous writer Oshikawa but remains almost unknown as Oshikawa neglected to mention that the books were based on the travels of Nakamura. Oshikawa died rich and famous while Nakamura could hardly afford to eat rice. Most people found it difficult to believe Nakamura's adventurous tales as few people had left the country for over three hundred years. In 1929 Nakamura stood to be elected mayor of Toyohashi and most people thought he was crazy so he only managed to get five votes.

Aoki Sumio has recently written a book about Nakamura's amazing travels.
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