

Mirrors and Swords

My father inherited our home by the Umngeni River from Gogo and Mkhulu who bought it from a family of Indian Net-weavers who had built it from everything they found around them. That is before they were forced to move by the Group Areas Act.

My father was a retired Kung Fu instructor, a really eccentric character who wore Far Eastern attire during traditional occasions such as rituals and even funerals.

‘There are so many different cultures to embrace, why tie oneself to just one?’ He would say with his chuckle and broad grin, to Mama’s annoyance.

Mama was a very traditional Xhosa woman who insisted that we honour that heritage by knowing precolonial IsiXhosa history. She would tell us stories of fabulous maverick women who stood against the odds and insisted on their independence in the midst of patrilineal norms.

Baba insisted that the Xhosa were not that different from the Japanese and some other peoples of the Far-East. The rites of passage and even many names were quite similar.

In his own animated way he would enunciate, “Nakamura - Japanese”, “Nyakamula - ngesiXhosa”, “Nsabula – IsiZulu”, “Nitsabula – Chinese, “Mnumzane - IsiZulu, Munuzane - Japanese”, “Hadebe - IsiZulu, Sis-Swati, Ama-Hlubi, and you can find the same surname among the Taiwanese, Chinese and Malaysians.”

Ma would just roll her eyes and continue threading her needle through the silk, satin and cotton sheets she was always making patterns on.

“Ma-Miya, did you know that both the silk you are using and the shapes you are designing have both come from the Chinese trade with our people, long before that thug called Van Riebeck?”

My sister Shumi and I were picking the good from the bad beans on the large sisal tray and watching Ma’s face turning red.

Oh, boy, Baba had started it again? We braced ourselves.

“Oh Please, please, Mr Know-It-All. I don’t know what your Sensei taught you in Japan and what you ate in those Chinese restaurants, but there must have been something in that catstew that messed with your brain.”

“Cat stew?” Baba, exclaimed, scrunching his face but struggling to calm himself because he should have been used to Ma’s outlandish outbursts by now. He held his peace.

But before she could continue, a knock resounded from the door, disturbing her mid-tirade.

There was a familiar and obstinate rhythm to the knocking – It was a Sunday afternoon, so it must have been Baba’s scrabble-buddies, The Thought Police, as Mama called them.

“Hold that, thought!” Said Baba, holding his forefinger as he got up to go answer the door with a shrewd glint in his eye.