

I am.

A novelette by Thando Xaba



“Therefore I tell you, seek ye the kingdom of God and all these things shall added onto you.”

- *Christ on the Sermon on the Mount*

1

“Ha ka na tum. Da na fu mon. Den na re pum.”

The ancient text appeared on a PowerPoint presentation on the wall behind Professor Nate Norrington.

“The words mean ‘The kingdom you seek is not far. The kingdom is near. The kingdom is within,’” explained the professor to a lecture hall full of asleep students. He was a professor of history in the University of the Free State, who taught at the QwaQwa campus. His discovery of the lost city of Ts’ehäyi Aten Musuko, built by King Barakatumba in 214 AD, earned him the reputation of being a worthy professor among fellow academic scholars. Yet, in this slightly lit Lecture Hall 2 of the QwaQwa campus, he was just a regular professor with too much brainpower.

“Ke 10 Sir! Class is out!” One of the students from the back row yelled at the top of his voice. Professor Nathan understood trying to reprimand the student would be a waste of time. So instead, he quickly wrapped the lesson of the day, for his module, LADH 3076 (Lost African Dynasties History 3rd year, year module, NQF level 7, 6 x 4 credits).

“Ke tla lee bonaa husane,” in his extremely broken Sotho, Professor Nathan concluded the class for the day. As he walked out of the lecture hall, a wind pierced through his cheeks like shaving with an extra sharp razor. As the wind cut around his cheeks and nose, he wrapped his scarf around the lower half of his face. It had been close to six years lecturing at the university and three years lecturing on the QwaQwa campus. His body was used to the predictable climate of Bloemfontein and not yet the unpredictable one of QwaQwa. The campus situated in-between mountains, the winds channelled through the campus with great fury. He held his book and laptop tightly by his side, as he rushed to his offices in the Mendi Building. The brown hue of the brick a reminder of the old days of the campus before it became a campus for the University of the Free State. The professor always appreciated how the campus was grounded; not riddled with the facades of social masks seen in more urban located campuses. He loved the peace of the mountains and he loved the calmness of the campus. Even during the SRC elections, days will go by calmly and peacefully, in a way he had never experienced anywhere else. He enjoyed lecturing history on this campus. He felt at home.

At 4pm sharp, he began packing his things when a knock sounded on his office door. Before he could reach the door,

the handle was already motioning downward. The door opened slightly. A head popped into his office. “Don’t forget Coloniser, we meeting at Prof Jackson today,” said Dr. Themba Mtembu, his fellow history lecturer.

“Ok, Native. Ke tla ba daar,” replied Professor Nate.

“Leave the Tsotsi taal Coloniser. We won’t be brainwashed again,” Dr. Themba said jokingly as he closed the door. Meeting at Professor Jackson’s place. He knew he would be there enjoying biltong with his fellow colleagues discussing the politics of the day. Tonight however, he was not in the mood for being in the company of people. Especially the company of educated individuals who everything had an argumentative stand and everything had logical reasoning. He wanted to submerge himself in some quiet time and relaxation. The truth was that he had been thinking about the ancient text he was presenting in class earlier. Those words had held him captive since he discovered the tablet in which they were engraved on in the lost city. Those words like a mosquito at night could not leave him alone. They kept him up, throughout nights, as he wondered what could have the great priest of Ts’ehäyi Aten Musuko, who wrote the words, meant by them. Why was the tablet placed in the tomb with the great King? Why was the tablet placed carefully in the centre of the tomb? Why were those words haunting him?

He exhaled a huge gasp of air for he knew that tonight he would not get the answers he was seeking. Tonight he was going to eat biltong, discuss social matters, talk about politics and most importantly, laugh until his stomach hurt.

“TaJackson!” Professor Nathan greeted Professor Jackson at the doorstep of his house in Elite, the middle-upper class suburb of QwaQwa.

“Fede taNate!” Professor Jackson extended his hand to complete the greeting.

“Coloniser, understand you will be compensated with biltong tonight for this land!” Dr. Themba yelled within the sounds of Black Motion that filled the air. Tonight was different. Instead of the usual biltong, the braai stand was filling the air outside with delicious smells of chuck meat, wors and Six Gun.

“Evening Professor,” said Ms. Mathenjwa with her beautiful voice. How Professor Nathan wished he were Zulu every time he was in the presence of Ms. Mathenjwa. Ms. Mathenjwa was a recent graduate from the campus who chose to further her career in the corporate world rather than in the academic world. She was an elegant lady sculpted by the hills and sands of KwaZulu Natal. Her voice was smooth

and sweet. Professor Nathan would liken her kiss to that of taking a spoonful of condensed milk. A kiss he had only ever imagined.

“Evening my Grace,” bowed Professor Nathan to Ms. Mathenjwa. Her blush delighted him.

“Enough flattery Nathan!” Ms. Mathejwa teasingly responded.

“Yah eh? They start with our women and then boom! Land gone,” Mr. Mokoena said with his overwhelmingly booming voice.

“I won’t deny it, I sometimes wish I was Black,” responded Professor Nathan to Mr. Mokoena’s comment. Mr. Mokoena worked as the head chef at the university cafeteria. Everyone knew with him behind the grill, the meat would come out perfect. Tonight’s weather was a contradiction of the one earlier. Such is the climate of QwaQwa. The night was met with a warmth that allowed the men and lady to sit outside to enjoy the biltong and drinks. They sat on wooden crates in which Professor Jackson’s son would use for his parties in and around QwaQwa.

“Coloniser, tell me, what do you think we as the Blackman of South Africa are lacking?” Dr. Themba asked.

“Well, I don’t know.”

“What you mean you don’t know? What is this ‘I don’t know’? You better answer!” Mr. Mokoena interjected while intently focusing on the sizzling of the meat.

“Well, I don’t know because I don’t know what the Blackman of South Africa is going through. I can only speak from an academic point from the documents I have read and articles I read in the daily news. But to answer you effectively, I simply cannot. Therefore, I do not know what the Blackman of South Africa is going through,” replied Professor Nathan with a slight disappointment in his voice. Among the academics, he knew his answer failed the grade.

“You know what’s wrong with the Blackman of South Africa? It is the Black MAN of South Africa!” Ms. Mathenjwa said with a fat biltong in her hand pointing to Professor Nathan.

“Morena!” Dr. Jackson proclaimed with a loud clap.

“Vele! You men have forgotten your place in society. You men-“

“Meat’s ready! Someone please bring me a pot,” interjected Mr. Mokoena. To the relief of the other men, they knew Ms. Mathenjwa was not going to end her sermon anytime soon.

After the meat was dished up, the discussion drifted to the politics of the day and past. They speculated about who will win the next elections. They spoke about the EFF, Jacob Zuma, Verwoerd and even about Marcus Garvey. The meat seated comfortably in Professor Nathan's stomach. He silently stood up and announced his departure. The men were too engaged in a heated debate about the significance of the Anglo Boer War and its key significance in shaping South Africa. He knew his departure was not as important. And so, he simply let himself out.

"See you tomorrow Nathan. I'll pop by your office. I have something to show you." Ms. Mathenjwa said while opening the door for him.

"Why are you opening the door for me? Can you not see I'm a strong independent man to open the door for myself?" Nathan jokingly mocked Ms. Mathenjwa.

With pearl white teeth carving the most beautiful smile Nathan has ever seen, Ms. Mathenjwa replied, "call me Leko."

2

“How ironic the lecturer teaching you African dynasties is white,” said one of the students outside Professor Nathan’s office.

“How ironic thinking these offices are soundproof,” whispered the professor inside the office.

There was a knock on the door and routinely, Professor Nathan yelled enter. Time froze as the door opened to reveal who it was. Leko stood there looking straight at the professor. Her beauty mesmerized him. He failed to find the words to welcome his Zulu crush. She was wearing a tight black leather skirt and a loose white blouse. As she opened the door, the cross breeze created by the open door and open window blew her hair back. She closed the door and quickly readjusted her hair. Nathan remained motionless the whole time.

“Hello Nathan,” she said warmly.

Her words broke the enchantment. He motioned her to sit down in the seat in front of his desk. “I hope you not here to

seek that 1% to get you into the exam,” said Nathan with birds flying in his chest.

She landed on the seat as swift as a butterfly landing on a flower. She smiled and began positioning herself comfortably on one of the old brown office chairs that furniture Nathan’s office. She crossed her legs and in doing so, her knees peeked under the skirt. The birds in his chest rose his heart to his throat. Once comfortable in the seat, Leko raised her bag to Nathan’s table. She inserted her hand into her bag and pulled out a document. The document was concealed in a brown envelop. The kind that packaged important documents. There was no writing on the envelope.

“Here, take a look,” said Leko as she extended the envelope towards Nathan.

“Sealed? Ok let’s see,” said Nathan with a look mixed with infatuation for Leko and curiosity roused by the envelope. He extracted the document inside.

“KING BARAKATUMBA: NEW FINDINGS.”

Read the headline of the document. Suddenly, the professor fixed his focus on the document. He took his time reading

the seven-page report on the new findings of King Barakatumba. The document detailed most information he already knew about the king. After all, this was his lifework. He knew everything about everything about the great ancient king.

“I was thinking we visit the king’s great city and see if this is true. I don’t believe what the document is saying but if it is, this could be huge,” Leko calmly said with her hands wrapped around her exposed knees. “Plus, I need a vacation. I’ll be thrilled to be your assistant for this trip.”

The professor was to drawn by the document to think clearly. Even the presence of Leko at that moment could not captivate him. He was in deep thought, seeking to find sense in the document that was in his hand. Such vital and key information, how had he missed it? How did it come about that in his travels, excavations and journals that he studied miss such information? At the end of the document, the words that made King Barakatumba immortal were written:

“HA KA NA TUM. DA NA FU MON. DEN NA RE PUM.

‘THE KINGDOM YOU SEEK IS NOT FAR. THE
KINGDOM IS NEAR. THE KINGDOM IS WITHIN.’ ”

“You know, I know I have known you for a month. I know you have known Barakatumba for all your life. I knew you would find this interesting. Tell me when do we leave so I can arrange my plans in due time. Ciao Nathan,” said Leko as she raised herself from the chair. She could tell that Nathan will not be flattering her today so she made for the door herself. The thud of the door made Nathan realise that Leko had left. He was not quite sure what she said. All he heard was ‘when do we leave’ and in ‘due time’. He quickly got up and locked the door. His office illuminated with natural light that cut through the slightly opened window blinds. He preferred the slight darkness to full blown light. The document baffled him. He went to his bookshelf on the left of his desk in search for a book. A book he believes will provide him with the answer he needs. Suddenly, a loud sharp noise robbed him of his focus.

“HEAVEN IS REAL! HEAVEN IS NEAR FOR THOSE THAT BELEIVE!” yelled someone outside. It must be one of the students collecting a test script from the other lecturers, escorting one of his or her friends to collect a test script from their lecturers or a bored student just roaming the offices’ corridor.

“How foolish students think these offices are soundproof!” Professor Nathan in silent rage whispered to himself. He

regained his focus and found the book he sought. Hidden between *The Power of the Subconscious* and *African Renaissance* there was his book: *King Barakatumba-Africa's Forgotten King*.

He lunged himself on his more comfortable seat and rushed to the index of his book. He found it funny how he wrote the book and yet needed to reference the index page. He searched under the letter H. On page 151 lay what he hoped was the answer to the riddle that was presented to him. He ran his fingers to page 151 and read the whole page. Nothing. He read the whole page again. Nothing. Confused, he referenced the index page to see if he was correct. Page 151, “Ha Ka na Tum: The Kingdom you seek is not far”. Nothing. He held the document up. He raised it up as if raising a glass of wine for a toast. He looked at the fine old brown paper bearing evidence that could dramatically revolutionise his findings. A knock on the door interrupted him in his thoughts. He looked at the time and was stunned that it was lunch already. He knew that Themba was the one behind the knock.

“Enter,” yelled Nathan.

“Sho, Coloniser! Enter how? Its locked. Hurry up, you know what time it is,” proudly proclaimed Themba with what Professor Nathan imagined to be white ashy lips.

Nathan opened the door. “Fede, sure,” responded Nathan with a white man’s smile.

Today the weather was behaving well as the wind was minimal, only to be felt by the fine leaves on the trees. They were walking towards the cafeteria. During their journey, Dr. Themba’s stomach kept protesting in loud roars for food.

“Coloniser, I’m so hungry. Tjo!” Themba proclaimed with widen eyes. Nathan loved Themba’s freeness to the world. He became a doctor before the age of thirty-five yet one could never tell. His passion of passing knowledge to fellow students had always awed Nathan on levels that he could not put into words. He felt honoured to share these moments with him. In his rich Zulu accent, he continued describing the extent of his hunger, “TaNate, I could eat a whole cow by myself. No, not eat. Devour!”

They reached the cafeteria and placed their orders. The usual. Rice with pumpkin and beef stew. They ate the meal almost every day but never grew tired of it. They simply loved what Mokoena described as the C-T Secret. They knew it was Six Gun. Mokoena poured Six Gun in

everything. Even the pap. Only Mokoena had the C-T Secret therefore only he could make Six Gun a secret ingredient that transformed even the blandest of food into five star cuisine.

They sat at their usual spot which was a table situated furthest from the TV. Themba never enjoyed the TV and joked how his youth pastor used to call it the Devil's window. They sat down and began to eat. Silence was shared among them for about a minute. "Feeling bad about the lies your people wrote about King Shaka?" Themba's way of asking Nathan 'what's wrong' was always in the form of a dry joke alluding to history.

"Ever had a feeling Themba that simply doesn't want to get away? Like being in love or- "

There was a sudden roar from the outside.

"Eish!" Themba said with great agitation, "So it was true. Eish, students. Let's go hear what they are saying. We'll go with the food."

Nathan had received a WhatsApp message about a potential protest that would be happening on campus grounds. The Student Representative Council President, David Phali, wrote in a communique that he and the fellow SRC would be gathering the masses in protests against the deregistration of students based on shortage of funds. He thought the

message was a hoax as Tannie Lali forwarded it to him. The elderly white lady who to her, the gathering of even two black students was a threat to social order. But, Tannie's insecurities this time were true. The students were gathering and for Nathan, this was his first time to witness a student protest.

The masses and SRC gathered by the main entry gates of the campus. Campus soccer goal posts were dragged from the sports field to block the entrance of the front campus gates except for one. Two security guard booths from the campus's boarding rooms were also dragged to the entrance, and set alight. On the wall stood David. A young, fit man with a voice that commanded attention. He's Sotho accent fading in whenever he was stressing certain words in speech. He held a megaphone he had stolen from the security offices earlier. With confidence beaming from his glare under the sun, his message was ready for all to hear.

“Power!”

“POWER!”

“Power!”

“POWER!”

“Enough is enough! Enough is ENOUGH! We have been told lies but today we say it’s enough! We will NOT be lied to anymore! They sit with their master’s degrees and doctorates that can explain Adam’s invisible hand yet cannot find the hand to feed us KNOWLEDGE! Enough is ENOUGH! A student of this campus should not go home because they lack funds to study! Enough is enough! If the creation of new fences can be included in the budget, then FREE EDUCATION can also be included!”

The students erupted in jubilation as their leader climbed down the wall. Nathan saw how student structures of the political opposition parties were debating over what he said. He saw how lecturers were debating over what the student leader had said as well.

“Let’s go get our stuff. This is about to get crazy,” Themba motioned Nathan to their offices. They walked fast to reach their offices in quick time. Themba quickly vanished into his office and re-emerged with only his laptop. Nathan took his book, the brown envelope with the document about King Barakatumba’s new findings and his laptop. He closed his office and made sure it was locked. Themba was already seven steps ahead of him, making a turn down the stairs. Nathan heard the cries of girls running for cover. He ran to see what was happening, in doing so, pushing Themba over.

Students in numbers running for cover. Others running into empty classrooms, others running to the back exit that leads down the mountain the campus is built on. Others were fighting back with rocks and loose pebbles. It was the first time Nathan noticed the lack of rocks on campus grounds. Teargases, from every direction, flew through the air. Their suffocating scent choking students immediately when hitting the ground. The brave SRC leaders would run with bottles of water and trash bin lids to cover the canisters. Themba eventually picked himself up and literally pulled Nathan to his car.

“Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go,” Themba said while starting his car. He took the route around the campus that leads behind the natural sciences faculty to avoid the warzone. “Exciting to be a student!” Themba yelled with excitement as he drove around the campus. To Nathan’s surprise, special security forces in black uniform had arrived on campus. They made the waiting room by the main entrance their Homebase. Themba slowly drove out the unblocked gate with a wildly excited look.

“Why are you so excited man?” Nathan asked with great confusion.

“Because the students are fighting for what they believe my good man. It is sad that most of these protests are merely facades of the true power at hand. When I was in the SRC, we thought that we the students have the power. Not really. We would protest, burn and loot but at the end of the day the power to decide the courses of action was reserved for campus management. The burning and looting we as the SRC had to pay of it. The irony being the money comes from the university anyway. But understand this Nathan; even though these demonstrations are really a play of false power in student leadership, what these demonstration do is that they enable even the most shy student to gain confidence to fight for what they believe is right. Isn't that what Verwoerd inadvertently did by giving us homelands?” Themba chuckled and continued, “Bafo, like '76, true or untrue the power may be, when we students want something- we get it.”

“I don't think you allowed to say ‘we students’ anymore,” teased Nathan. A WhatsApp text flashed on Nathan's phone. His cheeks slightly brighten with a pink blush. It was Leko asking whether he was safe. She heard from a friend what happened on campus. Nathan looked at his phone with a smile that rendered him speechless.

“Tell your girlfriend men are discussing real talk here,” Themba said while searching for a song on his radio flash drive.

“At least I have a girlfriend,” responded Nathan, and with an overdone British accent added to say, “and she ain’t white.”

“Aga!” Themba laughed.

“There we go. Some good music,” Themba fell back into his seat and held the steering wheel with one hand, the other hand out the window. He drove this way when he had plenty on this mind. He would look outside the window for extended periods of time. Nathan knew he better not ask what was on his mind for Themba will not tell a soul. Only thing he could do was to fasten his seatbelt.

“I’ll see you around Coloniser,” Themba said as he left Nathan by the gate of his house. A modest house he managed to rent out monthly from a grandmother whose children had bought her a house in Bethlehem. Nathan walked up the stoned pathway to the front door. A heavy load fell off his shoulders as he entered his house. He plunged himself onto the sofa. The beauty of most homes into QwaQwa is that after a long day like the one he had endured, most front doors are literally a jump away from the sofa that furniture most

TV rooms. As the sofa slowly sucked him deeper into the abyss of comfort, he could not help but fall into a deep sleep.

3

Professor Nathan was lost for words as he beheld mountains that stood tall on solid gold bricks. Valleys flowed with rich red waters that looked too sacred to touch. He was riding on a donkey when he realised that he was in the great city of the mysterious yet powerful royalty that is King Barakatumba. In front of him, were dozens of chariots, each heaped with unbelievable amounts of gems and precious stones. Each chariot different in design and in craftsmanship. To the professor, it seemed that each chariot represented a different tribe that had sent a delegate to the king. A woman riding the chariot directly in front of him looked back towards him. She was wearing a veil. As she was about to reveal her face, the loud tone of his iPhone rung; destroying his beautiful dream.

Written on the screen was simply “Beautiful Zulu Woman.” He heard the soft humming of a car outside. He stood up and extended his limbs as wide as possible. With the rush of air and blood rushing in his body, he was dazed for a second before regaining control of himself. He opened the front door and walked towards the gate. There she was. His Beautiful Zulu Woman.

“I heard what happened. Let’s go get something to eat,” Leko said in her calm voice as she drove towards Setsing’s Crescent Mall.

Even though he had eaten already, he would not tell his Beautiful Zulu Woman that.

“The student up rise?” asked Nathan.

“Wow! This isn’t 76! Student protest yes,” replied Leko.

“It felt like an up rise. We usually do not strike. Because most of the time we know someone very high up who can get things done our way,” said Nathan with a faked tone of arrogance.

“Hayi! White boy!” laughed Leko as she parked the car in front of Steers. She quickly opened her door, rushing over to open Nathan’s door.

“For a change, I’ll be the gentle-lady to open the gentleman’s door,” teased Leko as she gave Nathan a slight bow on his exit.

Nathan could not help but blush. “Thank you pretty lady,” he replied.

They got into Steers, ordered the usual King Steer Burger with extra chips, and sat at their usual spot in the middle of

the store. The middle of the store stood as the border between Steers and Debonairs.

“We have been doing this pre-dating thing long enough to know when something has crawled up your sun-bathed British skin. Come out with it,” while seeking out the fattest French fry Leko said.

“Well, well, well. The whole ‘seek the kingdom’ thing has been on my mind. Today while listening to the students, more precisely, that Tlali kid-”

“Phali,” interjected Leko.

“Sorry, Phali kid, I wondered what seeking the kingdom really means. Here you have this confident child who speaks with great gusto and energy about what he believes in. What’s sad is that, most often or not, that child will drown in the shadow of the glory self he is today. So, can we say did he found the kingdom? Or, is the kingdom slowly rising over the horizon for him, seen through the lens of his leadership acumen? I don’t know,” said Nathan while drooling over the mountain of a burger resting on his plate. Mokoena’s C-T secret refused to provide space in his stomach.

“Maybe he has the kingdom but hasn’t found it. Yes, Nathan I said has because I believe the kingdom lies within us

already. You know I love old Kung Fu movies and one of the masters in one of those action packed movies once quoted Bruce Lee. The master quoted the same Bruce Lee quote I have on the cover of my dairy. It says: 'It is not the daily increase but the daily decrease.' The way I see it, the potter at some point doesn't add more clay to create pots. The sculptor doesn't add more stone to his sculptures. Instead, they keep removing bits and pieces until only perfection lies in front of them. The beauty of their creation was there from the start, they simply needed to remove the extra bits. Like if you were to remove that extra lump under your love handles, then maybe you'll be proper handsome," Leko said with a beautiful smile that carved her face. She extended her hand towards Nathan who has only but drooled over his food. Leko knew good and well it was time to take him home.

4

“See you later,” Leko said as she drove off. It was the break of dawn when Nathan returned home from his date with Leko. He gingerly walked into his house. He placed the Steers takeaway bag on the coffee table in the TV room. He then headed straight to his study. A man living alone, he had converted one of the bedrooms into his own personal study room. The walls of his study room were covered with piles of boxes containing a variety of books. From John Grisham’s stories about ambitious and courageous lawyers to Alan Watt’s philosophical teachings of Zen. In the middle of it all was the lone table that housed nothing but a lamp and a clock. He figured having the table in the centre was symbolic. A remainder that knowledge was always around if one only but searched for it. He pulled the chair placed by the table and sat down. With a great sigh, looking up to the cracking white ceiling above, he took a nap.

Professor Nathan found himself choking to great desert dust. The face wrap was not thick enough to prevent the dust from

entering his nostrils. He could barely see ahead of him. However, he heard great trumpets. Orchestras of mighty bands conducting a crowd of chanting people. They seemed oblivious to the great sandstorm that engulfed them. The people were dancing, swirling around in circles and throwing palm leaves to the ground. Instead of chariots, the professor saw a donkey walking confidently in the crowd. A sharp knock on the window in front of him woke him from his slumber.

“Coloniser! Coloniser get out now! Stop rewriting history and come outside!” Themba yelled at the top of voice.

“Yiza Bafo, I’m coming,” Nathan replied with sleepy undertones in his voice.

As he was walking out his study room, he hit his tiny toe against one of his boxes of books. The pain rushed through his body as sharp as lightening. He clutched a fist and bit on the knuckle of his right index finger. Only a single tear expressed his anguish. He pulled the box back into its rightful position. In doing so, he saw an interesting book laying on top. A book he last read in 2015. He looked at it with a nostalgic feeling and felt somehow compelled to read it. He blew the dust of the cover and threw it in his bedroom—that is directly across the study room. The book gently

landed on the bed. After seeing the safe landing of the book, he rushed to the door.

“Did you forget? It’s that time,” Themba said as they walked to his car.

“Biltong and politics time,” Nathan said with a breath that clearly yearned the biltong.

They hopped into Themba’s car and drove to Prof Jackson’s house. Tonight there was no sizzling of meat. There was no Black Motion. There was no Leko. There was just Zamalek, biltong and Coke for Nathan. He was a teetotaller.

“Did you guys hear David on the radio? I’m telling you, dai boy is going places,” Mokoena said with drools of saliva seeping through his lips as he wrestled the biltong with his teeth.

“Ya noh, that kid is powerful. But it’s sad he doesn’t realise it,” Themba said catching falling saliva as he grappled with the biltong with his tongue.

“Dis waar. He is too much of a ‘popular guy’. In that he says what people what to hear. He acts according to what the students expect him to act. This is a problem because when it matters most, he fails greatly. Look at the waters his in

now. All of this could have been avoided,” Prof Jackson said with a thick piece of biltong slithering between his teeth.

“But do you guys think that’s the problem? If he didn’t take a stand and shut the campus down, would have management taken note of the seriousness of the deregistration of students based on financial issues? I think it’s a fair and clear stance that the young lad is embarking,” Nathan replied with a dry mouth.

“Yes, deregistration is wrong but, there is more than one way to skin a cat,” Mokoena interjected.

“Ya you would know about skinning animals,” Themba said whilst wrestling his bottle of Zamalek with his teeth to open it.

“Shut up wena, jou Stupid!” Mokoena responded with an awful imitation of Themba’s accent.

The room burst into laughter and they shortly forgot about the student leader. The discussions went way into the night; none of them worried about work the following day. The campus had shut down until further notice. A further notice was anything from a day to two weeks of involuntary vacation as Themba had explained to Nathan. It amazed Nathan how students can and will, when pushed, shut down an entire institution. It was one thing to read and study how

students played key roles in various movements over the years. It was another thing to experience it.

Judging from Themba's overly jubilant mood, Nathan realised his ride home was not about to leave anytime soon. Nathan silently excused himself but none of the men saw he was leaving. He exited through the back door of Prof Jackson's house. He was met by the pure darkness of the streets of QwaQwa.

He never enjoyed walking the streets of QwaQwa at night. To speed up the time, he decided to jog to his place. He lived in Beirut, which is a considerably long walk away from Elite, where Professor Jackson resides. 6 minutes into his jog, he heard whistles from all directions. Like war trumpets, these whistles were coordinating a strategic attack. His heart began to outpace him as he pressed even harder to his destination. Suddenly, sparks of metal lit the road in front of him. Behind him was the sound of a sharp metal object being dragged along the tarmac below. Frozen with fear, he was confronted with a knife that whisked past his nose from his right. A quick jab followed. The jab, from the left, struck his rib. He fell instantly. A beam of lights from a far revealed silhouettes of four lanky men, wearing bucket hats with the top ripped off. They hovered over him like vultures waiting for the death of their prey. As the beam of lights approached,

the four men scattered into the trees by the road. The car pulled over and the driver yelled to Nathan to get in.

“Are you stupid? O lekgowa and you walking these streets bosiu o le one? O dom mara?” The driver yelled at Nathan, “Where you going?”

Still shook from the ordeal, Nathan murmured his house number in Beirut. Shock slowly leaving his system, Nathan realised he was in a taxi. The taxi driver easily navigated the streets of the modest suburb and dropped Nathan off.

“Next time, you won’t be so lucky. And I’m talking about my payment!” The taxi driver in his beat down Toyota Corolla drove off.

Nathan quickly walked into his house. He slid the key in the key hole to lock the front door. He took his Steers takeaway meal and placed it in the fridge in the kitchen. Dragging his feet, he walked to his bedroom. He fell on the bed. A sharp blow hit his rib. He pulled the object from underneath him.

“Gee, sorry Jesus.”

The object was the book he threw earlier. Exhausted and adrenaline beginning to exit his body, the earlier nostalgic feeling to read his first Bible left his body as well. The remaining pain, forced him to sleep.

5

“You did not actually lock your door you know?” a soft voice woke him up. He shot up but quickly fell back on the bed. Leko had made her way to his bedroom.

“It’s not every day you hear about a white ‘teacher’ from the university nearly dying in the taxi you know? How are you feeling? Leko asked him while she was stirring the bowl of oats in her hand. She placed the bowl on the corner of the bed and picked up a box of milk she had carried from the kitchen. She carefully poured milk into the bowl. With a spoonful of oats, she tasted and savoured the oats in her mouth. The oats passed her test. Satisfied with the oats, she handed the bowl over to Nathan.

Still in pain and slightly embarrassed for Leko to see him all crusty, he gingerly took the bowl from her. The spoon felt heavy. His fingers could not clutch the spoon properly. Seeing this, Leko quickly rushed to his aid. She placed her hand under his. Her fingers intertwined with his. She helped him raise the spoon of oats to his mouth. She stood close enough for him to smell her scent. Her scent masked with

lavender, rose petals and coconut oil from the crown on her head. They locked eyes after he swallowed the immaculate oats. Immaculate because this oats came from his crush. Their eyes locked for a second. A second that felt like an hour.

“Maybe if you were clean then on this day, you would have tasted my lips,” Leko said as she raised herself to her feet. She walked away. He could not resist to admire her. The fullness of her hips and thighs concealed within her knee length pencil skirt eased his ordeal. Moments like these, he really wished he were a Zulu man.

The oats was delicious beyond his imagination. The pain from his rib shot his nerves. Under careful inspection, he realised that the wound was only that of the flesh. The rib under his skin was still intact and did not need any medical attention. He would be right as rain by the next day. Leko came back into the room. She began tidying up the room. She took the loose notes on the floor, the Holy Book that lay on the bed and carried them to the study room across the bedroom. She came back and gave Nathan a stern but loving look.

“Go bath. We have work to do.”

Leko stayed the whole day at Professor Nathan's house. She cleaned up the house and made the professor lunch. A strong, powerful and vocal feminist such as herself yet she was in the kitchen of another man cooking him lunch. The inspiration or desire to cook for this man she had no comprehension where it came. However, she loved it. The feeling gave her a sense of maternal feeling. The onions giving a homely aroma that she adored. The kitchen was typical of that of a single bachelor. It had the bare essentials yet with these bare essentials, Leko was able to create a meal that would rival Siba's Table. She was proud to prepare a meal for her man.

Nathan took a nap after his shower. Most of the pain washed down the drain. Only fatigue remained. He plunged back on his bed and the slumber took him away. The sweet smells sent from the hands of the chef in the kitchen turned his house into a home. The warmth of the different aromas of the spices, vegetables and meat enveloped him into the most peaceful of naps. He napped for about three hours. He had no dreams. He woke up fully restored.

Over the afternoon news, Leko served Nathan and herself a plate of her food. Her food, on a Wednesday afternoon, was a plate of rice; carrot salad; mash potatoes; beetroot and ample servings of beef stew with the dreamiest of gravy. Not

once had Nathan ever cook such a meal. They both sat on the large sofa opposite Nathan's massive TV. They ate slowly, allowing themselves to touch as they ate. To Nathan, he felt cared. To Leko, she felt secured.

"I'm so full," Nathan proclaimed as he rubbed his belly.

"That's good. But now we must work," Leko said as she took Nathan's empty plate. She rose quickly and took her plate along with Nathan's to the kitchen. Nathan could hear that she was washing the dishes. He waited patiently for her to return. A few moments later, she returned with two cups of coffee. A coaster sat conveniently on the table. She placed the hot coffee on it, and gently pushed it over to Nathan. Her cup, she carefully placed on the carpet below. Nathan was deeply infatuated by Leko. He watched her place the cup on the coaster. Her elegance never broke. He watched as she reached for the TV remote. Her neck looked like a pillar of solid bronze. She wore a formal shirt that she had loosened three of its buttons. A black, laced bra lay underneath, supporting her succulent bosom. He adjusted himself trying to hide the rise in his pants.

"Yesterday, I was reading more about your king. It is interesting that the king is said to have had many wives but he is survived by none. What happened to his children? Were

they taken as slaves or what? Anyway, Your King, it is said, he ruled all over the deserts of the Sahara. The document I gave you however says that he was the Ruler of the Sands with traces of his empire found in the deserts of Africa. All the deserts. How is that possible? Exactly how big was the kingdom of your king?" Leko asked while laying under his arm.

"Wait, that envelope you gave me was sealed. You know, we cannot work like this. My attention is elsewhere," Nathan said shyly.

Leko blushed. She raised herself from the professor's arm and stood up. The leather of the sofa had pulled her skirt up, only to be stopped by her African bottom and hips. She fixed herself and made for the door.

"You are right. You need to rest anyway. I'll see you later Nathan. I L word you," she said as she made her way out the door. Nathan stood up and watched her walk away to her car.

"I L word you too," He said. He shut the door. This time, made sure it was locked.

6

“Seek ye the Kingdom and all these things shall be added on to you!” the TV evangelist yelled at the top of his voice. The purple suit sparkling under the spotlight. Nathan hardly watched television and found it quite odd that on a Wednesday evening; prime time television aired church sermons. Boredom knocking on his heels, he switched the TV off. The only reason he had bought such a massive television in the first place was to feed his gaming addiction. He loved his PlayStation. Two months ago, after a heavy session of FIFA, Themba told him that it was not wise for him to put his PlayStation so close to the window. Themba warned him that people are crazy and such a possession in arms’ length away from the window makes it an easy target. He wished he had listened to his friend.

His study room was calling his name. There was enough time left in the day to do some work. Before he headed into his study, he went outside to lock the gate. He walked around his yard for any suspicious items or markings. Mr. Mokeona, during their biltong nights, regaled them about how he had seen an ‘X’ marked on the entrance of his garage paving. He

thought that perhaps his kids were playing earlier and paid the marking no attention. Two days later, he woke up with this garage wide open- his new Ford Ranger stolen. Nathan walked around his yard twice to make sure he did not miss any spots. Using his phone as a torch, he securitised the walls of the house, the paving around the yard and the blades of the grass. He found nothing. Satisfied, Nathan walked back into his house.

Inside the house, he locked the front door. He walked over to the opposite wall to lock the door leading to the garage. Since he had no car, he converted the garage into a mini-gym with a multi-purpose bench press, a few free weights, two adjustable dumbbells, a barbell and a treadmill that he rarely used. He continued onward to lock the kitchen door. He marvelled at how clean the kitchen was. There were no traces of the warmth that brewed earlier. His last round of security checks were that of the windows. He would begin in the TV room and make his way, room by room, to his bedroom. All the windows were closed and secured. He was satisfied that he was safe inside his house. Before heading to his study, he decided to make himself a hot, creamy cup of coffee. He knew he would not make it as sweet as Leko, but, he would try nonetheless.

Armed with hot coffee, he made his way to his study. By the door were his slippers. There were two slippers in Nathan's house. One pair was found in his bedroom and another pair was found in his study. The ones in his bedroom were brown, rich with fur. The ones in the study were blue, finely lined with fair amounts of cotton. Some men wore Cat boots to work; he wore no name PicknPay slippers.

With the flick of the switch, the lone dim reading lamp illuminated the room. The lone table in the middle of the room commanding respect. The soft office chair smothering him with warm comfort. The coffee steaming, filling the air with smells of caffeine. Beside the table was a wooden box that kept all his research and work on King Barakatumba. The envelope that Leko had given him lay on top of the pile of work. The thought of the King's famous words rung in his mind like a radio's favourite summer song. Suddenly his phone silently vibrated under the lamp. He placed his phone on silent whenever he wanted to get work done. He crouched over to see who it was. A smile widen his face. He answered the phone.

"Hey, unjani?" Leko asked with her angelic voice.

"Ngi-ya-pi-la, wena Sthan-dwa?" Nathan responded in broken Zulu.

He could hear Leko chuckle. He blushed.

“I know you probably working. But, tune in to the radio in about thirty minutes time. The community station. They’ll be talking about your king. Goodnight Sthandwa.” Leko said and hung the phone.

Nathan found her calling amusing and strange. Amusing because she called and strange that the community station would be discussing King Barakatumba. Seeing how this was his field of specialty, he had no option but to tune in.

As usual, the radio host of the talk show began forty-two minutes late. Nathan could never understand how this was possible. What was even more baffling, how this was the norm. When the show finally aired, a soft-spoken male announced the show’s name and welcomed the guests that were present on air. The show was about African dynasties and it so happens that tonight they will be discussing the great King of the Desert. The guests claimed to be descendants of one of the priests that served in the courts of the forgotten king. Because the guests were foreign internationals, the talk show host apologised that the whole show would be in English and not in Sesotho. For Nathan, obviously, this was not of any inconvenience.

“Good Evening, listeners! My name is Triple T, Tshepang ‘Trust’ Thabethe and welcome to Royal Africa! Tonight I have with me two special guests. Two very special guests who come all the way from Timbuktu in Mali to share with us the secrets of one of Africa’s greatest kings: King Barakatumba the first, the one and the only.” Tshepang the radio host said while breathing heavily on the microphone. It was either the man was suffering from a block nose or he had never seen a gym in his life.

“Thank you Triple T, and thank you listeners for welcoming us.” The other man said with a thick French accent.

“Well, tell us your names, who are you and ja, tell us more about yourselves,” Tshepang said. Nathan did not appreciate how he could hear over the radio that the host was distracted with other things as Tshepang’s fiddling could be heard.

“My name is Tse’ki, pronounced like one of the villages here, and I’ve come with my assistant and sister Narodji. We are descendants of the priest Barenkatum who served in the royal court of King Barakatumba. This royal court was some miles beyond the Temple of Djenne in days past.” Tse’ki said. Nathan loved the pride that rode on the wave of the man’s voice.

“Wow! That sounds so amazing! So who was King Barakatumba?” Tshepang with his heavy breathing asked.

“King Barakatumba truth be told is a bit of legend and a bit of a myth. It is said that he is an ancestor of Mansa Musa but this is a lie. A book written by a Professor Nathan Norrington speaks the truth about the great King’s origins. The King did not come from a royal tribe. Instead, he came from a tribe of herdsman. These herdsman lived like the Wodaabe of Niger. About the age of eighteen, the great King suffered a great loss. Desert storms can be very unforgiving. Unfortunately for our King; one such storm suffocated his family and buried them deep in the sand. The King was lucky enough that he was herding his goats at the time. He had found shelter with one of the fellow herdsman who was herding cows.

After this tragedy, the King had no home. His tribe were nomads so they quickly left and began travelling to another region. This occurred right here in South Africa’s Karoo. These people were desert people and were highly intelligent. It is said that they could never find joy in the savannah or vast veldts and such. So, they kept walking, walking until they reached the Kalahari of Botswana. It is here that the great King began forging his legacy. At this time, the King was twenty-five.

When they arrived in Botswana, many of the men, women and children died. Some died of infections, some died from attacks from wild animals. It is said that the King's people only had three men and five women left. In the Kalahari, the King devised a plan. He forced the men to take the women as wives. He told them that they would not leave the Kalahari until their tribe had tripled in number. One man raised in objection. He said that the death of his own wife still lingered in his mind. Many believe that the remaining men and women did not listen to the King because at the time, he was simply an orphan herdsman. The King, without any warning, stabbed the man in the heart with his long spear. The man died instantly. The remaining two men muttered no word on the matter. It was a difficult time. So much so that the King took a perilous journey, by himself, to Aethiopia. A long and treacherous journey it was.

The people of Aethiopia, however, were good people and welcomed the King. They clothed him. They taught him the true scriptures. He was such a diligent and shrewd learner that they allowed him to enter the temple that is housing the Ark of the Convert. Yes, our King saw the convert and did not die! However, our King was no fool. The kings of Aethiopia knew this. In private courts, after eight years in Aethiopia, the monarch of Aethiopia allocated to our King

twenty-five thousand people, thirty-five thousand herds of cattle and twenty-nine tons of precious gems. They ordered the King to go north. There, he will find his kingdom. The King told the monarch of Aethiopia about his people in the Kalahari. The monarch said that they would send a messenger to relay the message. The monarch of Aethiopia promised our King that they too would be awarded with enough treasures to help them move. However, to this day, no one knows what happened to the men and women that remained in the Kalahari.

This part of our King's history is vague. Professor Norrington claims that it is during this journey, ordered by the monarch of Aethiopia, that the King learnt many different aspects of African life. This enabled the King to build one of the greatest kingdoms ever in Africa. So says the professor. The professor claims that the Aethiopian monarch had ordered the King to travel straight, across the centre of Africa, to Timbuktu. However, our King travelled along the Nile, north from Aethiopia, as ordered. He travelled through Nubia, visiting Egypt and helping the Carthaginians establish themselves as a formidable trading city of the Mediterranean of the time. This extended travelling helped the King establish and build relationships with much of Africa.

After many years of travelling, finally the King arrived in Timbuktu. However, he was not fully satisfied with it and moved six hundred and ten kilometres south of Timbuktu where he created his great city, Ts'ehäyi Aten Musuko. The city that Professor Nathan found the King's burial tablets and our ancestor's diary about his servitude in the royal court. The King died only seven years after establishing his kingdom. No one knows the how of his death." Tse'ki said, with a gulp of water making his way down his throat.

"Wow, that's powerful. Listeners, we will be back to discuss more about the great king shortly after the commercials," grunted Tshepang as he switched to the commercials.

The rest of the show was a repetition of what Tse'ki said. A few callers asked whether was the great king as great as King Shaka or Moshweshwe. Tse'ki, with wisdom, responded that each king ruled their kingdom the way they saw fit. To compare King Shaka to the great king will be an insult to the Zulus added the soft-spoken Narodji. The conversation continued until close to the end, where Tse'ki gave his contact details to any person listening who might be interested in the great lost king of the sands.

Strangely, Nathan felt as if Tse'ki was talking directly to him. Telling him, to call. Nathan looked at his phone- and called.

7

“Leko, let’s go to King’s Palace Hotel tomorrow at 10am.”

Nathan sent Leko a text message.

“KING’S PALACE HOTEL! Are you SERIOUS!?” replied Leko.

Nathan decided he best calls Leko to explain. King’s Palace Hotel is not necessarily the most lavish of hotels around.

“Leko, calm down. I called that guy who was on the radio. I think it will be best we see him before we leave next week.”

“Wait what? Leave? Aaaaah where are you taking me white boy? I’m no Sarah Baartman you know.”

“Very funny, we are going to Timbuktu so that we can visit the great lost kingdom of King Barakatumba. You said you will be my assistant.”

“Yes, yes I remember. Eish, this guy. Ok fine. Ok fine to leaving with you next week. Mina I’m not going to that hotel though. Khohlwa bhuti.”

She hang the phone. Nathan loathed that habit of hers to hang the phone when SHE is done talking. Anyway, he thought to himself that he had a lot to prepare. He would prepare the key questions he was burning to ask. He would carry the envelope that Leko gave him to meet Tse'ki. It felt as if he was about to meet a very popular celebrity. He was nervous but excited. It was 11pm at night yet he could not sleep. He forced himself to bed. About an hour later, he slept.

He found himself walking behind a great herd of cattle. The vastness of the desert lay in front. He was among the thousands of people led by a bright, shining figure that spearheaded the whole caravan of cattle and people. The hot desert sun beamed off the figure. The figure's bright yellow and purple clothing reflecting vividly even though Nathan could have been a kilometre behind the figure. Powerful and majestic the figure was. A modern tone interrupted his dream. The alarm of his phone indicating it was 6am. Shortly, a text from university management appeared, claiming that the issue on campus had not yet been resolved. Management had decided to give staff the permission to work from home. He had bought two plane tickets and filed for work-leave a few days ago. With all the new discoveries

about King Barakatumba, he was eager to find the true kingdom of the king.

Around 8am, he made his way out his door. He decided to walk to the hotel. Passing by his gates were four young teenagers playing their music loudly through the portable speaker.

“The carpenter to build your house is me,” one of the boys sang along. Young and free Nathan thought as he locked the gate to his house. His walk was a relaxed one. It was a Thursday in Setsing. The streets showed signs of booming business. Taxis were stopping wherever they saw fit. Drunkards were claiming someone somewhere owed them. The filth today was as bad as ever. Two homeless men were collecting all sorts of treasures from the ground. Another man’s trash is another man’s treasure Nathan thought as he walked down the heart of QwaQwa.

After an hour and ten minutes later, he arrived at King’s Palace Hotel. The hotel, a sad shadow of its former self. The gates darkened by years of accumulated dirt. The dirt so rich in oils that the metal did not rust. The walls stained with dry, old, yellow paint. The glass door gave way into the main foyer. Upon entering, a stiff scent of un-vacuumed carpet welcomed Nathan. Beyond the counter, there was a woman

who had no interest in her job. Nathan approached her ready for the typical QwaQwa customer service.

“O batla neng?” The woman sharply asked. She stood up behind the old, cracked counter. Her fingers greased with the polony, archer and *magwinya* stuffed in her mouth.

“Ke ba tla motho wa- Ke. . .” Nathan struggled to respond.

“Vel pop! Speak your mother tongue! O batla neng?” The woman curtly cut Nathan.

“I’m looking for a man called Tse’ki, room twenty-five he said he is staying,” Nathan responded. He could feel his British self take over him.

“First floor.” The woman said. That was it. She sat back down, fingers ready to now tackle the snoek fish that lay next to her cup of tea.

Nathan walked up the stairs of King’s Palace Hotel. He wondered how this hotel looked like in its former days. Now the long corridors carried an eerie feeling. Not the eerie feeling of ghosts that might be lurking in the rooms. Eerie like that murders, rapists and human traffickers might snatch his soul. Room twenty-five, written in permanent marker signalled the door. Cracked from the doorknob down to the corner of the bottom hinge, Nathan thought twice about

knocking. He reached is phone to call when the door opened. It was a female. Noradji.

“Come in. Yes, you are expected” She said as she motioned Nathan inside.

It was dark with the finest of light creeping through the thick window curtains that embellished the room. The light finely highlighting the silhouette of a man sitting on the single sized bed. Smoke from the lit incense on the kitchen counter adding an extra layer of thick stuffiness to the room. The light through the windows illuminating only the left side of his face. The man turned his head to face Nathan. A smile emerged from the man’s face.

“Welcome Professor Norrington,” said Noradji as she closed the door.

8

“Come in Nathan,” said Tse’ki, seated on the edge of the dusty, old bed.

Like an impala that just heard the paws of a lion, Professor Nathan gingerly walked in. The kitchen lay on the left. On the brown, plaster covered counter in the kitchen, the fine incense was smouldering away. The fine smoke carried a very potent scent that choked Nathan immediately.

“That is any evil that was inside of you leaving your body. So we are told,” said Noradji as she closed the door behind Nathan.

The room was dark, thickened by the potency of the burning incense. The urge to vomit overwhelmed Nathan. He fought within himself to prevent his bowels from opening. Tse’ki rose from the bed and walked to over to Nathan. A tall man he was. He overshadowed Nathan as he approached him. He gently patted Nathan on his shoulder and motioned to Noradji to douse the burning incense. Without hesitation, she did so and quickly rushed across the room to open the window.

The fresh air brought life to the dull room. Blowing the curtains aside, Noradji pulled them back to fasten them against the wall framing the window. The full light of the sun beamed into the room. Nathan could clearly see Tse'ki. He was a tall man indeed. Well-built with a slight bit of fat tucked under his belly. His skin was rich with the handsome darkness found in men who live in the desert lands. He was wearing a silver matte robe made from silk with a thick, curly afro crowning his head.

“Come. Sit.” Tse'ki said. The undertones of his voice carried an enchanting effect that instantly got Nathan charmed.

Tse'ki motioned towards a broken three-leg barstool. Nathan remembered Leko's joke about his weight. Steadily, Nathan positioned himself on the seat. The legs buckled. They stretched a few centimetres on the floor. Bracing myself for contact with the floor, Nathan held his breath. But, the stool took a firm grip on the floor. He exhaled an air of relief. In doing so, the stool stretched even wider. Luckily, he was still above ground.

“My sister, please make us some tea” Tse'ki, with a courteous gesture, asked Noradji.

Noradji was like his brother but short and more feminine. Her complexion too marked by years of living in the desert.

Unlike her brother, who the sun had scorched in a rich black hue, she was dipped with the fudge brown of the desert sands. The eyeliner accentuated her eyes, revealing two brilliantly sculpted hazel gems lodged under her eyelids. Her purple dress hid what Nathan thought could be a body that even Cleopatra would envy.

“I know why you are here Nathan. It is not a surprise. However, I will not address you as a foreigner for it is your research on the great King that has brought me to your land today. Ah, thank you Noradji.” Tsek’ki said as he reached for the tray carrying the tea.

“I will be back, brother. The fine woman we met yesterday said she’s taking me to town to purchase a few items for later today. Pleasure meeting you Professor,” announced Noradji with her angelic, soft and slightly baritone voice.

She turned around. Nathan saw he was right in his earlier thoughts.

“Yes, she is my sister Professor. Seeing, I am the only living male of our family, I’ll take cash for her. Cows are a bit old fashioned,” Tsek’ki said jokingly.

A bit embarrassed, Nathan looked down. He saw the immense strain experienced by the stool. So much so, he got up and pushed the stool aside so that he can sit on the floor.

The floor was clean. He thought perhaps that they must have cleaned up before he arrived. He reached for his bag and placed it on the floor like a cushion. He sat on it. He crossed his legs and using his knees as support structures, he placed the tray of tea across them. Tsek'ki held his cup with his right hand. He was comfortable with the arrangement. However, Tsek'ki felt that it would be noble if he too sat on the floor with Nathan. And so, he did.

"I'm not sure where to start." Nathan said nervously.

"Start wherever you feel comfortable."

"Well, I mean. The great King is the reason for my career in academia. When I was a little boy reading about the great kings and pharaohs of ancient Africa, the stories always left me in great awe. I remember reading a book that went into great detail about how Howard Carter discovered the tomb of King Tut. The book said that Mr. Carter was enthralled by the poetry of the Boy King and all his treasures. A fire began to kindle in me to know more about Africa. Particularly, about the ancient kingdoms of Africa."

"Yes, I see. Please Professor, go on." With a sip of his tea, Tsek'ki motioned Nathan to continue.

"In my master's years of study, I had the privilege to go to Mali to visit the great mosque of Djenne. I fell in love. The

beauty of such a magnificent temple built with the sands of the desert. Oh my goodness! While I was there, a man approached me. Now I must admit I was sceptical at first. This man looked filthy. His hair was unkempt and he smelt of years of living under the scorching sun. Through the numerous gaps in his mouth, he told me that I should go south from Djenne. There, he said, I would find something much greater. Naturally, I brushed him off. I gave him the ‘white man’s smile’.”

“Pardon, what is a white man’s smile?”

“It is the fakest expression of a smile known to man.”

They both laughed.

“Anyway,” Nathan further regaled his story,” I went back to the hotel where we were staying with my fellow researchers. Now, the hotel we were staying at was not really a hotel. It was a large pavilion. The locals said that they occasionally set one up when preparing for a long journey. I insisted greatly that we stay with the nomadic tribe there. This tribe that welcomed us was a special tribe. Their culture was a combination of those of the Zulu, infused with the lifestyle of the Fulani. They spoke in a language that my linguistic teacher said that it is an infusion of the ancient languages:

medu neter and *ge'ez*. I must say, that was a great time for me.”

“Would you love some more tea, Professor?”

“Oh no, I’m fine thanks.”

Tse’ki stood up, taking the tray that rested on Nathan’s legs with him. With long strides, he walked towards the kitchen. He placed the tray, with the teacups, on the brown kitchen counter next to the now burnt out incense. He went to the kitchen sink and poured himself a cool glass of water. After a few quick deep swigs, he placed the empty glass in the sink and headed back to the floor.

“Sorry, tea makes me thirsty. Please,” extending both his arms, “continue.”

Nathan felt highly honoured by his host. He obliged.

“And so, we spent the night with the tribe in their grand pavilion. One of the herdsman the following morning told me that apparently, the royal daughter had been asked for a hand in marriage. By this, it is custom that the king must go to the family that has made the proposition. Unfortunately, for us the foreigners, we must leave. It is believed, he said, that such matters must be witnessed and addressed by the people of the tribe. Absolutely no form of external or alien

element can be involved or the newlyweds will experience fifth-teen thousand years of suffering. Thus, for the sake of their future generations, we had to leave.

Later that evening, the grand chief of the tribe summoned us to his tent. He explained the story of the marriage as the herdsman had done so earlier. He gave us great wealth to ensure that we will survive the desert. He even gave us eight camels to journey with! What the grand chief said next struck a nerve. He pulled me to the side and escorted me to the exit opposite the main entrance of his tent. Standing outside with us was a mighty fine horse. Along were three camels, three females wearing pink rose, white tunics with rose gold turbans. Two camels were assigned to them. The mighty fine horse was strapped to a trailer carrying buckets of water, bags of sealed sorghum, packets of mealies, heaps of clothing and, quite ironically, an electric cooler box stored with meat. The grand chief pointed at the lone camel that only carried a sword across its side, told me that I'll be riding that camel. What the grand chief told me next left me dry for words.

The grand chief said that I would not be joining my fellow researchers. He said that my journey goes south. He whistled inside his tent. Eighty of his finest guards came rushing to his call. I could hear my friend Thomas yelling. He was

timid. The grand chief continued to tell me that his eighty best men and his three concubines would escort me to a lost city that will be worth the world knowing. And just like that, he walked back to the tent. That was the start of my journey that I am yet to complete.”

“That is extremely powerful.” Tse’ki said with a fine smile broadening his face.

As if on cue, Noradji entered through the door. She held a few plastic bags with her. She passed the men seated on the floor and made her way to the bed. Only at that time did Nathan realise that their luggage was already packed.

“Excuse me, but I must ready myself. I am running a bit late for a dinner that a group of young businessmen have invited us too. You see, my sister and I are doing the best that we possibly can to keep the honour and prestige of our culture alive. Any donations we can receive, we accept with open hands and- I really want to leave this hotel.”

Tse’ki stood up, helping Nathan to get to his feet as well. Baffled yet satisfied, Nathan reached for his bag. He patted the little dust that had accumulated on it off. He strapped the bag across his shoulder and extended his hand to shake Tse’ki. Tse’ki, overshadowing Nathan with his powerfully beaming presence, extended his hand to Nathan.

“It was a pleasure to meet you Nathan,” Tse’ki said. The robe of his sleeve rolled upwards, exposing the tattoo inked on the inside of his right wrist. The tattoo was written in the ancient language only understood by the scholars of Timbuktu. Nathan could translate the tattoo.

“The great movement of the people 3:14” read Nathan has he translated the tattoo in his mind.

Tse’ki saw that Nathan read his tattoo. He smiled. He proceeded to give Nathan a firm handshake. A handshake that ordained Nathan as one of the last remaining priests of King Barakatumba.

For more from the author, please visit the author's blog: www.modernbantu.com