

*The
Ferwellers'
Story*



MC

METAL CONCENTRATORS

REAL STORIES

In Conversation with Labi & Wumba Kapo

*Words by Michael Pryke
on behalf of Metal Concentrators*

We are sitting in the office of Akapo Jewels (Pty) Ltd. Its eponymous founder, Labi Kapo, a gigantic smile creasing his handsome ebony features, points to entry number 33 on the copy of an ancient Wesleyan-Methodist baptism register dated 1878.

“This was the first baptism done by my Great Grandfather – in Porto Nova, West Africa,” he beams.

“But I see that the Minister’s signature is TJ Marshall?” I query.

“Yes, it’s a remarkable story,” he quips, his strong London accent incongruous in the heart of Randburg.

“He was converted to Christianity by early European explorers from the Methodist Missionary Society in 1840,” he continues. *“They sent him to study religion at Edinburgh University. He changed his name to become The Reverend Thomas Joseph Marshall. He returned to build the first church in Porto Novo in 1858.”*

At this moment, Labi’s wife, Wumba, glides into the room, her colourful traditional cotton garment swirling around her ankles. Her naturally locked hair is festooned with delicate golden amulets that sparkle in the shafts of sunlight filtering through the windows. She extends a confident hand in greeting and I am drawn into her dark almond eyes that accentuate her aquiline gaze.

Labi smiles at her affectionately. *“It was rare to find such an educated black man in West Africa. And he truly understood the value of education. In fact, he sent his son Sesi Kapo, my Grandfather, to Edinburgh to study medicine where he graduated as a Medical Doctor.”*

“That’s impressive!” I observe.

“Yeah, he was something else ... specialised in bacteriology and dentistry ... practiced in Lagos” ruminates Labi.

“He’s proud of his heritage,” adds Wumba. *“And his Dad was also successful. Tell Mike about your Dad!”*

“Well, he originally wanted to study law. But he ended up becoming a really good entrepreneur. He established a business exporting washing machines and dry-cleaning machines from London to Nigeria. In fact, during World War II, he served with the British army fighting the Japs in Burma.”

“I never knew that!” said a voice from the doorway. It was their daughter Sara. She came and sat behind another desk, fascinated with the developing conversation.

“So how did you arrive on the scene?” I prompt Labi.

“I was named Thomas Owalabi Kapo and started life in Essex in the early 60’s. During my education at Teddington Secondary School for Boys in London, I learned that I had good practical skills – always very good with my hands ... you know, making things.”

“Like what?” I enquire.

“The school had an engineering workshop and I learned metalwork and how to use fibreglass and Perspex ... I built a canoe and all kinds of stuff. And I won awards for many of the things I made. During my last two years, we also attended Twickenham Polytechnic and at 16 I qualified as a bricklayer and plumber ... started my first job at a sheet metalworking factory.”

“That’s a long way from the jewellery business!” I remark.

Labi chuckles. *“Now that’s a really interesting story. You see, I got here by accident or chance, or whatever you want to call it.”*

“I love stories ... tell me what happened!”

“OK – I suppose my very first influence was around the age of ten. The Tutankhamen exhibition came to London and I was fascinated – I always remember that. I was blown away by the quality and mastery of all this golden jewellery. I couldn’t believe that they already had gold 4500 years ago. It was really beautiful. Anyway, that’s not the real story. When I was growing up I had this good friend, Bernard Bologna ... we went to night clubs and did stuff together. He ended up working in a jewellery shop in Brompton Arcade in Knightsbridge. Anyway, I saw a watch in the window that I really fancied but I couldn’t afford it on my wages. So, Bernie introduced me to the owners, Mr. and Mrs. Peera (from Tanzania). Based on his recommendation, they agreed to let me pay off the watch in instalments. On the day I went in to pay the last instalment, they told me that Bernie had left ... and would I like a job?”

“He jumped at it!” quips Wumba excitedly.

“Yeah, I was only 17 or 18 and they started me off making simple pendants – gluing jade, ivory, tortoiseshell and coral pieces onto jump-rings. Then they allowed me to use gold, twisting thin strands around the pendants – it was my introduction into the world of real jewellery. I realised how much I had to learn and I begged them to let me go to college.

They agreed and I started night classes at Sir John Cass College in Aldgate East. But I felt I wasn’t learning enough so I asked if I could also attend a day class once a week. Again, they agreed but with the proviso that I had to work in the time on Saturdays.”

“He was so talented and he learned really fast!” adds Wumba, looking at him with fondness.

“Well, after a couple of years Mr Peera realised he couldn’t teach me any more about western-style jewellery ... but I still wanted to learn so much more.”

“So, what did you do?” I enquire, intrigued.

“I phoned every jeweller in London ... introduced myself as Thomas Kapo and asked for an interview. When I arrived, some would not even let me in the door ...”

“Must have been a hell of a shock when they saw a black man arrive,” shrieks Wumba with delight.

“And I never got one job offer,” lamented Labi good-naturedly. *“Anyway, I saw an advert in a tool shop for a goldsmith at Coopers. I had a chat with Barry Stern and got a job as a trainee goldsmith. My wages were based solely on what I produced, regardless of how long it took ... you know, I’m still in touch with Barry today!”*

“I worked there some years, watching and learning – touring different workshops and gaining knowledge along the way. I helped Barry make models and even took pieces home to work on after-hours for extra money. During that time, I met John Coppin, the goldsmith on the fourth floor of Harrods. I watched him making jewellery and eventually started going to his house to help him, both to learn and for extra cash.

“I saved enough money to buy my own tools and by now, I was renting my own bench at Barry Sterns. I started doing jewellery repairs for Atkinson’s ... on antique and modern pieces as well as chain repairs. Then Atkinson’s gave me a bench in their shop where I worked weekends. During the week, I still freelanced out of Barry’s business and in

between, I also took orders from Robert Glenn and also took employment later on."

"How old were you at this time?" I enquire.

"About twenty or twenty-one. And that's when I decided I needed experience at an even higher level. I was freelancing all round Hatton Gardens and I got the opportunity to do work for Andrew Grimmer, the Queen's Court Jewellers who were the first to produce really high-end, Avant-guard designs, mixing sapphires, emeralds, agate, amethysts and citrines in very bold expensive creations – a style of work that was very rare in London. He had a huge reputation and outstanding relationships with colleagues in the industry. Later on, in my ascension, I got commissions for the top auction houses – Christie's, Sotheby's, Phillips. And then I was awarded my own Hallmark in 1980. He taught me so much, that guy! Just before he passed away I contacted him to thank him for everything he taught me and allowed me to do!"

Wumba can't stop herself from interjecting: *"Labi was so likeable that everybody gave him a chance! And he got exposure to so many of the goldsmiths around Hatton Garden because of the really intricate work he was getting known for. Even his lecturer at the Royal College can't forget Labi – we looked him up when we were last in London!"*

"And – you were achieving so much ... at a relatively young age!" I acknowledge.

"Well, for me it was my life ... I was learning and trying to build a reputation ... I had a passion. It wasn't just about earning a living." He concedes.

A voice from the corner shouts: *"I never knew any of this!"* It is Sara again, her face a caricature of rapt awe.

"Yeah, I've never shared all this stuff before," chuckles Labi.

"Even my own daughter is learning about my past! It's because of you," he says, pointing at me.

"Don't stop!" I encourage.

"Well, I continued like this and in 1986 decided I had to meet the other half of the family. So, I travelled back and forth between London and Nigeria, still renting my bench at Barry's."

"Over the next ten years, as I got commissions to produce really high-end work, I started getting interested in the source of the raw materials ... the gold and the gems. So, I joined a company as a partner in London called 'Universal Gem Trade' and I moved to Ghana. Whilst I was there my partner emptied the safe. I found myself unemployed in the middle of Ghana ... so I had to return to freelancing in London."

"What happened then?"

"Around 1997 I had the urge to continue exploring and over the next three years travelled throughout West Africa. I spent long periods in the interior of Ghana to source raw gold. I negotiated with the local chiefs and paid miners a stipend based on the weight of gold excavated. There was no water, no gas or electricity ... it was camping at its roughest. You know what I missed the most was batteries for my radio – I couldn't listen to BBC World Service."

"Incredible! How did you finance this?" I ask.

"I had sponsorship from my brother and still had my own bench in London. And I opened a workshop at 15 Hatton Garden and started renting benches to other jewellers."

"And what about Wumba – how did you two meet?" I prompt, as Wumba claps her hands with excitement.

"It was at my 35th birthday party. Wumba was there with some other people from the industry."

"Oh yes," gushes Wumba. *"I'd been to college and had been in the civil service but wasn't sure what I wanted next. I did know I wanted my independence. I liked his smile and we got involved. Soon I started managing his business."*

“What brought you to South Africa?”

“My friend Dwayne in London returned from a visit to South Africa. He told me that they were looking for people willing to contribute to skills transfer projects. I have always been passionate about passing on skills – I mean look at all the training I was given – and it seemed like a chance to give back. I travelled all round SA for three months. I called Wumba in London and asked her if she was keen to start a business with me in Johannesburg. She arrived with our three daughters and we registered Akapo in 2003 – we have run our jewellery business in South Africa ever since.”

“And we’re still manufacturing for clients in London,” chirps Wumba.

“What’s your take on the current scene here?” I probe.

“It’s all about passing on skills. I am totally committed to economic beneficiation, especially for the local community. I would like to play a greater role, together with the South African government in transferring skills to the next generation.”

“How would you like to do that?”

“I would like to see South Africa becoming competitive in the genre of high-quality, bespoke jewellery. We can’t compete with China but we can use local talent to develop our own brand of finesse. That’s why my door is open to everyone who wants to learn. I am keen to talk with, guide, assist, share information ... to mentor entrepreneurs ... to guide them to manufacture to the right standard, help with pricing – to get their own orders, build a clientele and

manage their business.” Responds Labi, his face radiating his commitment.

He continues: *“In order to contribute to true beneficiation, I am lecturing at UJ and I also run a two-day course on platinum in a workshop at Anglo Plats. I have this belief that the students must out-shine their master and many of them are winning awards.”*

“What else?”

“We have formed a joint venture with the Bafokeng peoples of the North West. It seems ideal, because the platinum is mined there and I can teach the people how to use it in jewellery.”

There is a silent pause. Wumba and Sara look at Labi expectantly. I sit in admiration of a man who has such a rich cultural background, steeped in Africa yet nurtured in London ... and now determined that others may benefit from his experiences.

“I just want opportunities to teach more ... I want to introduce a new inspiration to the next generation of jewellers in this country!”

Labi Kapo, the master-craftsman who designed the now famous ‘trembler butterfly’ for the Nelson Mandela Foundation, a unique creation using intricate springs to make the wings shiver and shimmer, has so much to share with the next generation. Hopefully there will be many that take advantage of his wisdom ... and in doing so achieve the success for which they aspire.

The Jewellers' Story.

An initiative from Metal Concentrators.

Neville Crosse, his wife Charlotte and son Grant purchased Metal Concentrators (Pty) Ltd (Metcon) in late 2015 and rapidly became aware of the issues and difficulties faced by retail jewellers and manufacturing jewellers on a day to day basis. This led to a lot of thought and discussions as to whether Metcon could play a role in improving the sustainability of the industry.

To that end, Metcon created The Jewellers' Story. An initiative intended to provide a platform for dialogue and debate within the industry.

The first phase was a series of published caricatures presenting the compelling case to the public that purchasing South African manufactured goods has a number of benefits for the jewellery purchaser as well as developing the industry to be more inclusive of all the talented people in the country.

The second phase seeks not only to highlight the most apparent issues, but as a space to share knowledge and wisdom from the most senior and innovative participants, and to nurture emerging talented jewellery makers, as well as to help established businesses struggling to compete at the global industry level. To tell important stories. To share lessons learned. To establish a sense of community within the industry.

There are many challenges ahead for the industry, from both direct and indirect forces. Only by working together to confront them as a community can we triumph over them and provide a new hope for all South African jewellery retailers and manufacturers.

This hope we place in The Jewellers' Story.

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