

Part 1 Behind the Scenes conversation with Big Chief Shaka Zulu and Laura Anderson Barbata

<https://vimeo.com/552002135>

Laura Anderson Barbata 00:05

My name is Laura Anderson Barbata and it's an honor to be here. I am from Mexico, and currently I'm in Brooklyn. It's really an honor to be here this morning, with you Chief Shaka Zulu. And I am really moved by this opportunity and basically speechless. Because of the powerful work and, and the legacy that you carry, and that you are responsible for continuing and sharing with the world; as well as Naimah - I also admire her work and her collaborations, her joint work with you. I really believe that this is a moment for me to learn from you, and I'm thrilled about it. And, again, I'm honored; and all I can do is just thank you, thank you for this opportunity. I have so many questions, but I want to hear you speak. I want to listen to you.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 01:16

I'm excited about this opportunity as well. First of all, I'm Chief Shaka Zulu in New Orleans, Louisiana. Born and I can't say raised here, even though I was here, pretty much my whole life. But I've been raised in many parts of the world. Because I've, you know, my father was a traveler, with his performing arts and you know, and I was just right there. You know, I didn't go to college here. I went to college out of state and was an athlete as well - a lot of people don't know that. New Orleans, I feel like it's my birthright spiritually, as well as the location that I really can't get away from - because it holds such precious moments as it relates to spirituality, and some of the things that I'm brought here on Earth to do.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 02:20

I really admire your work. I was given a book that you did years ago, from a very, very good friend / mentor that's from New York, that's in the arts world that - actually he gave me the book in St. Louis. But I had heard of your work, [while] working with the children in West Oakland, with the Prescott Circus Theatre. Eileen Moffitt, she was running that program. She also had Women Walking Tall. I used to do workshops with them, with the stilts. So I had a lot of questions, of course, but I had been admiring the the work that you put into this art form, which is very important because this art form basically comes from secret and sacred societies. And the wonderful thing about secrets is sometimes the secret gets out. But the fact that it's still sacred is what's important.

Laura Anderson Barbata 03:36

When I am thinking about you, and all of the work you do - you are involved in so many of these very important cultural traditions. So many. And very rarely are practitioners and keepers of this knowledge and tradition responsible for so many of them, like you are, and I wanted to ask you about that. How you came about and how you, partly well, you were born into this path - but how did your journey begin, to where you are today with all of the traditions that you uphold, or are a keeper of?

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 04:46

I was fortunate. The first fortunate situation for me is: I'm born in New Orleans, and I think this place is probably where everything came together, you know, as it relates to the culture, of especially Black America. And that's the first part. The other part is my grandfather was a blues musician, and my dad was in performing arts. So I kind of like was born in the arts; so I didn't really have a choice in that matter. The other part to that was my father - and by the way, his name is Zohar Israel - he kind of ventured off into the spiritual art form of the carnival traditions of New Orleans. And I'm going to rephrase that: spiritual traditions of the black Carnival traditions of New Orleans, because when we say Mardi Gras, it means two different things, to most people. For us, I've never done Mardi Gras in the French Quarter and I'm 52. Because at one point in Louisiana, Blacks born in New Orleans wasn't allowed to do Mardi Gras in the French Quarter. So we had what we call Carnival, and they have that all over the world, and that's where the Black Carnival traditions of New Orleans were present.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 06:35

So fortunately, my dad kind of ventured off into stilt dancing, probably over 40 years ago. And not only that, he ventured off into it, and he started to study its origin. It took him to many different places. And so I was born into a tradition where I understood very early on that still dancing and still walking was two different art forms. And so just from that, I wanted to [explain], you know how fathers and sons are: the father usually turn the pilot on, and the son always spark the fire. So I kind of took it a little bit further into traveling to study, and not only traveling to study but actually being initiated into those societies - which for me, it wasn't performing anymore, it became a way of life. You know, once you've take the time to initiate yourself into the secret and sacred societies, and then it's how you live; it's a way of life from that point on. And what was fortunate, once again being in New Orleans, I had been in a masking art form many years, before I got into the masking Indian art form. So it was for me, it was a no brainer. The only difference is I felt like I had an edge because I understood that masking was a situation where once you put a mask on, you're not a person anymore. You become the energy or the entity of what it is that you're masking. So I understood that. So I had initiations in those different art forms, but coming into the masking Indian tradition, their mask and tradition was based right here in New Orleans, and bringing the secret sacred African art form into the masking tradition was sort of a challenge for the folk who have been following traditionally how it had been done for a couple 100 years here. So in the beginning, it was a challenge, but I also understood that I had a slight advantage, being able to travel the world and see how, as much as it seemed to be different, it was one of the same. So it took me years and years and years to incorporate my whole concept of masking into the masking Indian tradition. So that's the that's the second part to it.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 09:46

The other part to it was, once again my grandfather was a musician, and my father was a musician, so it brought me to the music. Right? So I got into the masking Indian tradition as a musician. For many years I was a musician for the for the [masking] Indian tradition and eventually I started actually masking, and eventually I became a chief in the masking Indian tradition. But I can honestly say my path was very narrow because I had people before me, to kind of set everything up for me, to just fall in place to become a practitioner.

Part 2 Behind the Scenes conversation with Big Chief Shaka Zulu and Laura Anderson Barbata

<https://vimeo.com/552106067>

Laura Anderson Barbata 00:04

So with all of this suits, only you portray them. Only you bring them to life, you made them and conceived of them?

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 00:14

I make them but you know, it's is a family tradition and a community tradition. I don't make them by myself.

Laura Anderson Barbata 00:22

You are a collective.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 00:25

I get some help, you know, my wife and my daughter, and I have a couple of friends that come in help.

Laura Anderson Barbata 00:32

Right.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 00:32

Good friend from New York, he come down every year with family to help. Because if you try to make a suit with over almost a million beads on it in one year by yourself -two things: either you're not telling the truth, or that suit doesn't look very good. It's a lot of work, you know. You're talking about, you know, thousands of man hours, you know. I do something every day, on sewing a suit. And I know, I do at least 300 days a year to make suit. Because I try to make masterpieces, you know, stuff that can educate people around the world. You know, I'll put over \$4,500 to \$5,000 in materials in a suit every year. And it takes a year to make one. So that's why when museums want to buy them, we are talking about close to six figures, or six figures because - you know, how much is a year salary worth to you? And how much, you know, in terms of materials you want to put into it? So it's not outrageous to ask for those kind of prices - since we get to sell now, because at one time, we used to destroy them when we started on our suits for the next year. But since we don't do that anymore - you know, it became part of music culture in the 1950s - and also, museums wanted to learn about them. So there's a lot of exhibits now. They don't destroy them anymore, but you can't mask him, once you mask in them, you can't mask in them anymore.

Laura Anderson Barbata 02:07

So it's worn once and only once?

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 02:12

Three times a year: That suit is worn Carnival Day. There's another thing called Super Sunday. And then there's another event at St. Joseph Night - remember, under Code Noir we had to be Catholic,

right? That was one of the... So, St. Joseph's Night was very important. But that's another time that we came out. So three times a year, and then that's it. You can't mask in that suit anymore. It's that year's suit.

Laura Anderson Barbata 02:50

Right, and nobody ever wears it again.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 02:53

Don't say that. Some people cheat. But this is street culture, so when you do cheat, everybody know it. So when you meeting another tribes, and you try to chant that tribe down, there was a some of the things are some of the issues. But the streets know. And it's more important that the streets know, than the scholars - because this is a street tradition. I call it street ballet, you know. Each tribe is a ballet that represent that neighborhood.

Laura Anderson Barbata 03:27

Right

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 03:27

So they go toether. Hey, I won't lose many battles, trust me. Because I'm gonna put the work in. It's about work etchic, creativity, and your entourage. That's what the culture is really, based on in terms of winning the battles.

Laura Anderson Barbata 03:50

Three times in one year, we will see that one suit. This is just a technical question I'm very interested in knowing about: Because of the amount of stress that the suit, the character will go through, because of the long day, the weight of it. For example, how much does each suit weigh, just so people can get a sense of what this means? The weight and dimension.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 04:24

My Chief's suits, all of them are over 100 pounds. That's why I've only done two suits on stilts, because of the weight of it. But I wasn't the chief yet. I was flag boy. I was running flag position, so it was a little bit lighter because, you know, the Chief has the big, big hats. So it's very, very difficult, even not on stilts.

Laura Anderson Barbata 04:53

Even not on stilts.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 04:54

Yes, wearing them on stilts is very difficult. But I just had to make the sacrifice, because one, I'm a trendsetter. So if something has hasn't been done before, I want to do it for some reason. The other part is, whatever I do, I want to always add my personal art form in it, as it relates to the stilt dancing.

Laura Anderson Barbata 05:21

What do you call the lineage, tradition of stilt dancing? What is the one you come from?

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 05:30

Yeah, the entity that most I do? I do many different ones, because once you are initiated into a stilt society, there is specifics, depending on what country you're dealing with- but you're pretty much open to doing a lot of different ones as it relates to the stilt society. But Chakaba is one that I mostly do. That one, it's pretty much Senegambian region, and it polices the village. So he walk around in the markets as human, and then is watching for different things, like people that are that are doing unjust things. And when a becomes masquerade, then you become the chastiser, of a those folk. And that's why I realized, when I used to do a lot of festivals and the Chakaba would come out, right, and masquerade, and you see a lot of the African vendors, they will run away. Question is: Why they running? Chakaba's coming back to chastise them, because a lot of them probably haven't been sending money home, or doing something they aren't supposed to be doing. So I find that very interesting. Chakaba, a lot of times exposes your environment, as it relates to festivals and vending and things of that nature. Because you get to see where people are, you know, in terms of their integrity to their families or their culture. So when Chakaba comes out, and you see people running away, you know why they're running. Chakaba also has the ability to bless the childrens - so it's a good environment for kids, because it has the ability to, to know when someone's expecting a child, even before they know. They have this thing called a Yurrykari (spelling?), They carry the spirit with, we call it, and they kind of like an antenna that reads energy of people in human form - so it had that ability as well. That's another thing, you see a lot of children embraces Chakaba. But also Nayakoiya (spelling?), you know that one is done a lot because it's the acrobat, that's when you start seeing skill level of a stilt dance. Because remember, there's no such thing as stilt walking on the continent of Africa; it's the dance of the high spirits.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 08:20

So in Louisiana, we basically do the Free Spirit. The Free Spirit mean that you're representing a spirit. But that spirit doesn't have a specific connection to any entity, other than the spiritual connection. So the Free Spirit, it allows you to represent an ancestral or African spirit without pinpointing anything specific - so the costuming can be very creative. Like if I wore anything that you made, that wasn't specific to any particular entity, then that will be a Free Spirit outfit. When I do a [masking] Indian on stilts, even though I'm representing the New Orleans masquerade societies as it relates to the masking Indian - but it's not a connection to an ancestral spirit from the continent of Africa. So when I do the Indian suit on stilts, I'm representing Free Spirit stilt dancing. And I like that one, because it is non-emotional, non-religious. And it's non-specific as a relates to any particular entity. So that one works for me. Most times you find me stilt dancing in New Orleans, it is mainly the Free Spirit entity.

Laura Anderson Barbata 09:50

Well, it's such an honor to hear you say this. Thank you.

Part 3 Behind the Scenes conversation with Big Chief Shaka Zulu and Laura Anderson Barbata

<https://vimeo.com/552125959>

Laura Anderson Barbata 00:06

You have such a strong tradition as an educator. I'm sure you see how that impact has changed and created positive impact in your, in your students, in your disciples, in your followers. I would love to hear more also about that, how you see that carried on - with others that maybe had to move; They were closer to you and they had to move and now how your teachings are being spread.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 00:50

First of all, none of us is smarter than all of us. We all have a specific role to play, as it relates to children. I think there's no such thing as a bad child. The problem we have in is kids are so disconnected from their culture. I'm gonna use African American kids as an example, African kids born in America, should I say. First of all, when you get disconnected from information that our history didn't start from slavery; you know, we come from a lineage of great kings and queens, on the continent of Africa. And the whole concept of divide and conquer, you have to realize that people can't come conquer you unless you're already divided. So the issues that we have, or had, on the continent of Africa - we were already divided before the Europeans came into the continent of Africa. We had already divided from our lineage of kings and queens, as it relates to our ancestors. So it was a no brainer, you know, when Europe went into Africa.

So when we came through the Caribbean, all the way to the Americas, we had already been pretty much messed up. So how do you fix that problem? To keep the issue going is to tell kids that the history started with slavery. So that was the first thing; the other one was: take your name; the name means something. In Africa they give you a name, and you have from seven days or seven years to experience the naming ceremony. And if you don't live up to your name, usually they take it from you. So your name means something. But when you're giving somebody else's name, especially someone who controlled you and your family, then you're dealing with some serious stuff. So, kids acting the way they act? What do you expect them to be?

So now let's get past that, and how do you correct that, that problem? First, your DNA doesn't lie. It tells the truth. So once you have that DNA in your bloodline, when you connect to some of the things that you know morally that's in your DNA, it happens pretty quickly. So it takes a special kind of person to be able to make that connection. And I think that person has to be initiated into those societies, well researched and well-traveled to be able to authentically give the kids what it is that they need, to make that connection. So for me, it's not as hard because I know what we have come from. It's not hard because it's just the basic things -you know, giving the kid the information of him or her just being reconnected, and this is the value system. It is the law of God and is also the law of Man, you know. If you understand the connection between the two, then it is pretty easy because most of us try to make change through religion. And you know, and that's where a lot of issues happen because you know, you putting Gods against other Gods when there ain't but one God. This complicates things. So my job as a teacher, or as a mentor, is to just simplify things again.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 04:59

And I would always say, "It's very hard for me to believe what you're saying, when I'm watching what you're doing." So the way you do it is by example, you know, when kids see a Black man in America doing great things, and showing them greatness, them experiencing greatness, and you're showing them true love, by giving them their birthright - which is righteousness as it relates to their energy and their spirit. And it's gonna happen pretty quickly. I have about 13, or 14 kids around me. And I can honestly say, within weeks, I've seen transformation. I've seen change because I don't teach them about what it is that they cannot do, or what it is that may be challenging to them. I just give them their direction and they prove to themselves that they can actually do it. And that's we're still dancing really is about. It's about raising your consciousness to a height of the *incorporer*, or infinity, you know, being up there out of this world. And the balance is really making sure that to get to that point, you know, you have a balance in life, you know, nothing is more stronger than the other. Nothing is extreme, you know, you do a little bit of this and a little bit of that. Too much of anything is not good. So, so when you start giving them those basic principles to reality and righteousness, then they apply that to other parts of their life. You know, when they go to school, they know that the environment of school will be wholesome for them to thrive in that environment, because they've seen it in class. So that's the most important part, you know, you can police your way out of this stuff.

Laura Anderson Barbata 06:58

I imagine that people, so many people from all over the world will watch this and say, I want to learn from Chief Shaka Zulu. Can people come to you from all over and say, I want to learn? How does this happen? How do you choose your students?

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 07:25

Yes, word of mouth. But I always say I don't recruit kids; I recruit the parents who invest in their children. That's very important, because they got this whole thing with "advantage" and "disadvantage" kids quote, unquote. You know, I did that before. I started working with kids whose parents just didn't care about their children, and it's draining, you know. Because what happens is, you put so much time into trying to get them to understand the very, very basic thing. And then all of the kids who can really benefit from your teachings get left behind. So I had to change that model. Some kids, you're gonna lose. I mean, that's just realistic. You can save all of them. But I try to start with parents who have interest in the growth and development of their children. You know, so the parents usually bring the kids to me.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 08:32

My dad taught me this. When a kid has issues, we never ask the parent what the issues are, you know, because you don't want to go into this thing with this preconceived notion of whether they're going to be successful or not. You know, we don't want to know what the issues are. Let me work with them. And we'll figure it out. And it works for me. You know, and a lot of kids are, you know, they grown now with beards be like, "Baba Shaka, you did this, and it changed my life. And I had this problem and that problem." So a lot of times I learned about their problems after they become grown, and have been under my tutelage and saw how it benefited their lives. So that's why I try not to deal with knowing what the issues are, because it makes me go into it being truthful about the success of the process of raising

those children. So tends to work for me. And I'm saying from autism to you name it, I don't want to know. Let's just get to work, you know. And yeah, a wide range of kids, and it's been working out for me. I had 61 kids in Oakland.

Laura Anderson Barbata 09:55

Wow

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 09:56

And you got 61 children, some of them going to have some issues, but I didn't know what they were. And if you look at Higher Ground, that thing that we put together with Eileen Moffitt with the Prescott Circus Theatre, it was wonderful. You know, that was some of my best work.

Part 4 Behind the Scenes conversation with Big Chief Shaka Zulu and Laura Anderson Barbata

<https://vimeo.com/552237972>

Laura Anderson Barbata 00:05

And your experience and your work, really and your calling - if I can refer to it that way - encompasses so many different practices. For example, also making suits and regalia. Can you talk to us a bit about this aspect and how it is also woven into your way of teaching and living, and your philosophy?

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 00:44

Yeah, I come from a masking culture. So masking in this tradition, the Indians, is a no brainer, you know. It was about communities, you know, The chief represents a neighborhood or a community. The tribe represents a neighborhood. So, that's what made me drawn to it. And then the music component, you know, because I'm also a percussionist. So, I was intrigued by, you know, the music, too. So, it was, it was natural for me to fall into this masking tradition afterwards. And then I'm a very disciplined person - so the process of sitting down for a whole year and hand beading, and hand sewing suits was easy for me as well, You know, because I can sit, you know. I don't go out much at all, you know. I travel and study, but in terms of just hanging out and partying, I've never was that kind of person, even when I was in my 20s. You know, I just played sports and I just never, never did much of it. So, so this was pretty easy for me to do, you know, it gets a little wearing, after a while, you know, after 20 something years of it. But then, you know, I was still practicing African tradition, African culture with the beading systems, you know, the Yoruba style of beading, or the Ndebele, or the Maasai, or you name it. So I still felt like I was, you know, in the same realm or in the same family, as it relates to practice and cultures and traditions, even though it was a New Orleans tradition. So then the suits had a meaning, you know. Every suit means something, you know. This toucan suit [gesturing his right], the white one. That was about, you know, environmentally there's only 10,000 of them left in an Amazon or the rain forest, you know. In the suit to my left, you know, that suit was about Kemet or Egyptology. You see the falcon, and I didn't realize the female is the only one that's called a falcon.

Laura Anderson Barbata 03:11

Oh?

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 03:11

The history of the falcon - it's a very powerful bird, as relates to females. So in my design for my suit this year - because I did Egypt as a theme seven times - but this year is going to be more meaningful, because everybody in the tribe is doing Egypt as a theme. And I hope I'm not saying that too early, because we aint supposed to say. [laughs]

Laura Anderson Barbata 03:11

Ha ha!

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 03:37

Yeah, and then behind me, is a suit that is a Shango suit. I think we all know the image of the Shango, you know, with the ram and its food, and I think you see axes. His tool is double-edged axe. But its in the face, in the middle of the African mask - and it's almost like you shh-ing, or you shutting up Africa. Right? And that suit was very intentional, because in some tribes in New Orleans, they pretty much have a narrative that it has nothing to do with Africa. And every suit that I make is African-inspired. So I didn't want them to hush Africa in me. So that's what the symbolism of that axe going down the middle of the face of the African mask. But then in the back of the suit, I had the African mask without the axe shutting it up - meaning that I'm free. So that was my first suit with my own tribe, after nineteen years of another tribe. So that was the statement that I was making. So it was a very powerful suit. And that was my second Shango suit. I did a Shango see many years. I think 2009 or something like that, but it was quite different. And my daughter says. "Baba, we should do another Shango suit with a statement." So that was the second one.

Part 5 Behind the Scenes conversation with Big Chief Shaka Zulu and Laura Anderson Barbata

<https://vimeo.com/552238290>

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 00:05

I was in a movie called "Just My Luck" with Lindsay Lohan, and I was a stilt waiter. [laughs]

Laura Anderson Barbata 00:10

[laughs]

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 00:11

Oh, everything I do, I try to incorporate sticks - because it's fun, you know. I love it. I really enjoy it, you know. I enjoy everything about it. I enjoy how it enhanced my life. And you know, I do it for a life, you know. I pay my bills this way, cultural arts, and you know I've never held a traditional job and that was by choice. My father always said, "I've never held a traditional job, and I've never been evicted." That's a big statement. Because it's very difficult in arts, I think you know that, right?

Laura Anderson Barbata 00:51

Yes, very difficult

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 00:52

So to be able to survive with integrity, without having to give up some of your principles - it's very difficult, especially in New Orleans. Because I think here - New Orleans sometimes have a great way of making the genius feel like he's not ready.

Laura Anderson Barbata 01:21

Hmm.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 01:22

It was when I left and started traveling, that I started realizing my genius. So it is that much harder here, because it is a small market. And, you know, there's very few opportunities, culturally. So, to take charge, we have to get out and see the world and then come back and re-strategize. And I'm still [word missing] here, but not for very long. I think, like I said, there is a paradigm shift happening. And like they say, "art is a imitation of life," I think life is an imitation of art. I just flipped it. And so it's our turn; it is really our turn to educate people on humanity through arts. Because how do you heal people? How do you tell people that things are going to be okay? You know, how much have we verbalized that? Now, we have to just give people that brush to create their own painting. And give them that space, give them that time, give them a canvas, the blank canvas, you know, and that's what's going on right now. People are in pain. And I think it's gonna all change when we start embracing the differences in people and culture. That's the only way. Because we only hate somebody when we don't know about them, or you don't know about yourself. And that's what's happening. It's very clear to me. Very clearly, you know, sexism, racism, or any ism, you know, it's about pain. Where does all that pain go? You know. So you just have to reverse it. And like I said, you know, show people what love looks like, and

humanity. And you put them in that environment and just put a brush in their hand, you know, whatever that brush may be. So if I'm sitting here sewing all day, I'm not hanging out on the streets. That's why your wife loves you when you an Indian Chief, because, you at home. [laughs] If you got big suits like this, where you're going to put them? You're going to need a home to put them in, or a gallery or something, you know. So it's just the small things like that, you know, if you practice in culture or your culture - and I always say, you know, because your culture is different, it don't mean it's better than anyone else. It just means it is different. So we just have to embrace and educate ourselves on that diversity or that culture, cultural differences. And that's what it's going to take. You know, you can't put a police on every corner think, "crime goin to go away", you know. You can't put a camera on a corner and think its going to go away. It's about what drives people to that point to where they do care anymore. You know, that usually take a while, you know. So we have to find out where does that come from?

Laura Anderson Barbata 05:00

Right.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 05:02

And that's lack of culture.

Laura Anderson Barbata 05:05

Yes and respect. We need to really promote respect and interest in eachother, listening skills, receiving, giving. What I think of is reciprocity of everything, of knowledge. Right? Or feelings of intentions and, also how we are responsible for the welfare of eachother. And, there's a responsibility, especially right now, especially groups who have benefited from those differences and those exclusions, right? And so this is a very important moment for you. I'm so honored to be speaking with you, and to listen to you and to learn from you. And I am thrilled, and again, honored that we will be seeing something that you will present to us and this is exciting. Thank you. Thank you so very much.

Big Chief Shaka Zulu 06:38

My pleasure, my pleasure.