

Giant Love Affair

The Zulu Love Bean Story

My Love Affair with a Curious Gigantic Bean

This story was submitted by Belinda Beckley of Zulu Love Bean.

Most people who know our Lucky Bean, the Zulu Love Bean, have found it on one of South Africa's beaches, amongst the shells, pebbles and seaweed, washed up by the sea. These wonderful beans are eagerly gathered and kept with our treasures. Mothers and grandmothers lovingly give them to their children saying: "Look after it well and it will always bring you luck and love".

These beautiful beans are an enigma. What plant in the sea could produce such a seed? It looks too much like polished wood to be some egg from a sea creature, and, curiously, they float. The shell is hard, sealed so tight it is impossible to open. Their smooth red-brown shells are cool to the touch unless they have been basking in the sun all day, then they get hot, hot, hot! But neither sun nor sea can damage its tough shell.

Living in Richards Bay, on the coast of Zululand, we'd explore the long sandy shores of the Indian Ocean, lagoons and dense jungle habitats. One could fish, dive, catch tropical sea fish for a salt-water aquarium, go bird watching, look for Russian submarines, whales, sharks; there were so many things to do on that Zululand coast. Between these adventures we would often spot these exquisite 'lucky beans' on the beach - which I'd gather, and admire, and wonder about. They looked so beautiful in a wooden bowl on the coffee table. Little did I know that in later years my entire business would be focused on these beans.

Mabel, a Zulu employee of mine, remarked: "these beans, the Zulu people call them the Love Bean, and also the Lucky Bean. We Zulu people use them for medicine for the stomach, for the teething babies, and the most, for bringing the good luck, and the love happiness".





She also told me how medicine was put inside the bean, which would be worn around the neck. A cork would close the hole, and a few beads would decorate the necklace.

Other fascinations among the myriad of plant and bird life in the tropical Zululand jungles, were long, ropey liana-like stems reaching right into the tree canopies. Tarzan would have loved this place! These enormous lianas, had bunches of immense seedpods, much like our ordinary green beans grow, just on a massive scale. What were these gigantic seedpods? Never had I seen anything quite like them. I had to have one of these 2 metre long seedpods! But Zululand is still quite wild. The deep lagoon water looks black. We knew there were water leguans, there was one leguan of 1,5 meter who would regularly wander around the LAC centre, its black snake-like tongue flicking in and out, as he window-shopped! Water-snakes, crocodiles and of course, hippopotamuses wandered where they pleased. Monkeys and boomslangs in the trees and who knows which snakes lured on the dune-forest floor... Then, there were MOSQUITOS. Apart from these hazards, these long pods were hanging high up in the tree canopies. It was an epic task to climb up and saw one free, but I finally managed to pick just one of these pods to add to my treasures!

Only when we relocated to Stellenbosch, was I able to find out more about this incredibly big seed pod. Mr Wim Tjimens, the then director of the Botanical Gardens in Stellenbosch, immediately recognised the rare bean. The *Entada Polystychia*, a member of the *Entada Gigas* family, was commonly known as the Lucky Bean plant. In those pre-internet Google search days, he rummaged through his botanical books, showed me where the coffee was, and said: "Make yourself at home! You can read more about this plant, and take some time to do some research while you are here".

Oh my gosh. I had been collecting the loose beans from these *Entada Gigas* plants we'd thought were Tarzan's



ropes, and had never connected the two! Wow! I was so thrilled! So the plant is a gigantic bean,

the *Entada Polystychia*. A tropical land plant, which uses the ocean currents to disperse its seeds, much like the coconut does. The beans are classified as 'drift seeds' and grow encased in the largest bean pod in the world, up to 2 meters long. Equipped with an internal air pocket, they use the ocean currents to disperse their seeds where, after 1000s of kilometres, they finally reach new shores.

Why is it a Lucky Bean? In Zulu folklore, it is believed that the ancestors come from the sea. Because the sea "brings them these beans", they believe that they are sent to them by their ancestors, to give them their blessings of good luck and happiness. Consequently, the item in the 'bones' of the Sangoma, which represents the 'luck=prosperity' and 'love=happiness' and 'finding a partner' is the Zulu Love Bean. The person is given one of these beans, as a symbol that they now have the blessing of the ancestors. On reaching home, the bean is put into a bucket of water with which one would wash - so that the 'lucky' would come off in the water. While washing, the 'lucky' would stick to the body. Wherever he goes, the 'lucky' which is in the air, would 'see' his 'lucky' and come straight to him (much like the universal principle, of 'like attracts like!').

The Zulu Love Bean has been used as a teether for babies as long as people can remember. The bean warms, as little gums rub on it, which soothes teething babies! Organic, safe and unbreakable! Perfect! Today, in some parts, it is still used as a snuff-box, decorated with silver. For traditional medicine, the bean is filled with the medicine and closed with a cork stopper, worn as a necklace. Great for people without pockets!



Esoterically, the bean is a seed, which symbolises potential, which we all have within us. When we nurture ourselves, and allow ourselves to grow, we will become the best we can be, producing beautiful flowers or fruit, giving our gifts to the world! Zulu Love Beans can wash up anywhere in the world - Nelson Mandela even found one washed up on Robben Island! Prisoners treasured their Zulu Love Beans, their sign that the ancestors were giving them the blessing for good things to come, giving them much hope. They got the nickname of 'Mandela Beans', and everyone wanted one! Even Monet, the painter, had one of these sea beans. It had a place on his desk. Monet loved gardening, and actually planted the lovely gardens which he later painted. He must also have wondered about the origins of this huge, mysterious red-brown bean. Columbus, the explorer, was said to have been given one by the Spanish Queen, and sent off sailing the oceans, to find the origin of this seed. He found America instead!

When I became a single girl again, I had a vision of using the Zulu Love Bean as a product... to use this ordinary, but in a sense, extraordinary seed, so that people everywhere can enjoy their beautiful positive energy, and have this blessing for good luck and happiness from Africa. This is how my love for this special bean took root and grew into a thriving business.

I began experimenting, using the lovely beans, some heart shaped, some smooth, some wrinkled, as decoration on a key ring, earrings, bracelets, necklaces, curtain tiebacks, candlesticks, bookmarks, teething rings, as 'African stars', with wire and beads - and even found that one could successfully engrave into the shell. Engraved logos and family crests on key rings have become very popular as corporate gifts, business promotions, hotel and game lodge curios, souvenirs and wedding gifts.

Since being diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in 2002, I have had a different approach to business, firmly believing in maintaining genuine personal relationships with each valued customer. Keeping things simple, I work from home and network with friends and family to ensure everything runs smoothly. I believe in social upliftment and it has been a great joy growing and prospering together with my dedicated ladies and their families from Kayamandi, through the good times and the bad. Each Zulu Love Bean product is a gift to the world and I spend the majority of my time finding new and exciting design combinations of beads and beans, often getting custom beads made to complement the unique shape of the bean. My product range has since been extended to include beaded crocodiles, walking sticks, teething rings and more, and I supply shops, lodges and hotels throughout South Africa and abroad.

Since I started producing Zulu Love Bean products for the tourist, promotions, shops, weddings, corporate and conventional markets and more, 15 years ago, the Zulu Love Bean has been my only currency! My children would laugh at me 'putting 10 beans petrol in the car'. All over, people have heard of the Zulu Love Bean Queen of Africa!

To find out more about the Zulu Love Bean, visit www.lovebean.co.za or phone 021 855 3398.