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## African Style

Hello again. It is 100 years since the first book of "Bonsai Rules" was published in Japan, around 1908. It was possibly the most significant event in almost 3000 years of bonsai, as far as us western people are concerned. The rules which had until then been passed from one generation to another verbally, were formulated and written down purely for the benefit of westerners who did not have the time to spend many years apprenticed to a master, or sen-sei, to learn the art of bonsai. This fast-food approach to bonsai efficiently communicated some of the hitherto secret technical aspects of bonsai, but in the process many of the more basic principles and spiritual attachments were lost in the translation. The net result was a whole set of instructions that people tend to follow blindly which in turn results in two things, boring trees, and novices (and experienced growers) who are too afraid to try anything different. The rules often chase people away, and this is very sad.

The rules are really just suggestions, and when applying them one must always take into account that each tree is an individual, and instead of following the rules parrot fashion one should rather emphasize the beautiful bits, and remove or hide the ugly bits. In doing so one will end up with a tree that will probably follow most of the "rules", but more importantly, will reflect the beauty of nature, and elicit a positive emotional response from the viewer, true art.

Furthermore, the rules were written by a Japanese gentleman who probably had never been to Africa and seen our flat top acacias, fever trees and enormous fig trees. African trees do not always subscribe to the theory of left branch, right branch and then back branch which is theoretically the way branches should be positioned going up the trunk. Our trees are predominantly flat on top to provide shade for animals in the bush, while trees from the northern hemisphere are tall and pointed to allow snow to fall off.

The tree in the photo stands on the grass verge just around the corner from where I live in Durban. It displays the shape of probably 70% of the trees in our bush. A single lower trunk (nebari) that splits to multiple trunks forming the trumpet shaped flat top. I have seen some trees where the top of the crown is perfectly straight, flat, and level with the horizon, as if they have been trimmed by a giant Edward Scissorhands. Traditionally the trunk formation is "incorrect". Multiple trunk styles require the trunks to split close to the ground, otherwise the trunk should be a single entity. So, throw that rule out the window when styling African trees. The suggestion that the back branch is never the first branch is generally a good one, but I feel this rule can be bent on the flat top. A well-placed back branch is used to emphasize the illusion of depth, and as long as it does not make the tree appear to fall backwards then anything goes.

The bare tree in the background of the photo very clearly displays the concept of ramification. The base of the trunk must be the thickest point, the branches becoming more slender towards the ends, a bit like a river in reverse. The rules suggest that we should try and group objects in odd numbers, in this case meaning that one branch should split into three or five smaller branches. This is not a concept that is unique to bonsai. ALL art forms employ this principle. Dance groups have odd numbers, and there is always one prominent figure, the leader. Odd numbers create a dynamic feel while even numbers are static and boring. The only time one can get away with having two objects together is when one object is dominant and the other subservient, a mother and child arrangement rather than twins of similar height and shape.

The only exception to the odd number rule is the Pierneef style where branches split into