

# Katitu Momambo, the clever little girl

Traditional San story  
English





Once upon a time there lived three girls in a desert village in the Kalahari. Katitu Momambo was the youngest of the three. She was small but clever and wise.

The three big girls went into the veld one day to gather food and wood. Little Katitu ran after them, but the sisters sent her back. "Go back Katitu! You are too small to go with us! Stay at home!" they said.

Katitu did not pay attention to them. She followed them from a distance.

When they noticed her, they were too far away from home to send her back, so she joined them.

While she was walking behind them, Katitu cut herself some wood. She made herself a bow and many arrows.

The girls walked and walked and walked until the sun dropped into the Kalahari horizon. They were lost.

They walked into a deserted village and found a hut in which to spend the night.





An old woman was sitting next to the hut.

Little Katitu went and greeted her. “Oh?” answered the old woman, “This is the village of the Big Snake! He stays in a big hole in the cattle kraal. When people come to milk the cows, he eats them! He will go to your hut at night when you sleep and kill you there!”

Wise little Katitu did not panic. She asked the old woman for a hard cow skin to cover the door of their sleeping hut. Then Katitu wanted to sleep a little, so that she could stay awake throughout the night. "When the wind begins to blow," she said to her sisters, "you must wake me up."

The wind came up, the sisters awoke Katitu and went to sleep. Katitu fixed the hard cow skin against the door of the hut and made a little hole in the middle for her bow and arrows.

Katitu heard the Big Snake approach.





“Hai, gom-gom, hai, gom-gom, where are they?” sang the Big Snake.

The little clever girl answered him with a chant, “Here they are, here they are!”

Then the Big Snake rushed against the hard skin at the door of the hut. Little Katitu shot an arrow through the hole in the skin.

Yes, the little girl killed the Big Snake.

Then Katitu woke up the older girls.  
“Sister, sister, sister,” she  
whispered, “get up, get up, get up!”





And when the girls woke up they saw a big snake lying there. “Come, we have to take him back to his hole!” shouted Katitu. They rolled him up, rolled him up, rolled him up and they set him right back in his hole. “Hurry! We have to run!” And the girls ran and ran and ran.



The next morning, the Big Snake's wife told his children to go and look for him. When his children found him lying dead in his hole, they screamed: "Father is dead! Quick, let us go after those girls!"

All the snake's children went after the girls.

Katitu told her sisters to turn into trees. When the snakes arrived at the spot where they had seen the girls, only trees were standing there. The snakes were tired and lay under the trees to sleep. When they were asleep, the girls turned back into human beings and ran on.



The girls continued to run and were very tired and thirsty. Eventually, they saw a waterhole! None of older sisters wanted to scoop the water from the deep well. They asked Katitu to climb in as she was the smallest.

“Will you help me out of the well if I climb into it?” asked Katitu.

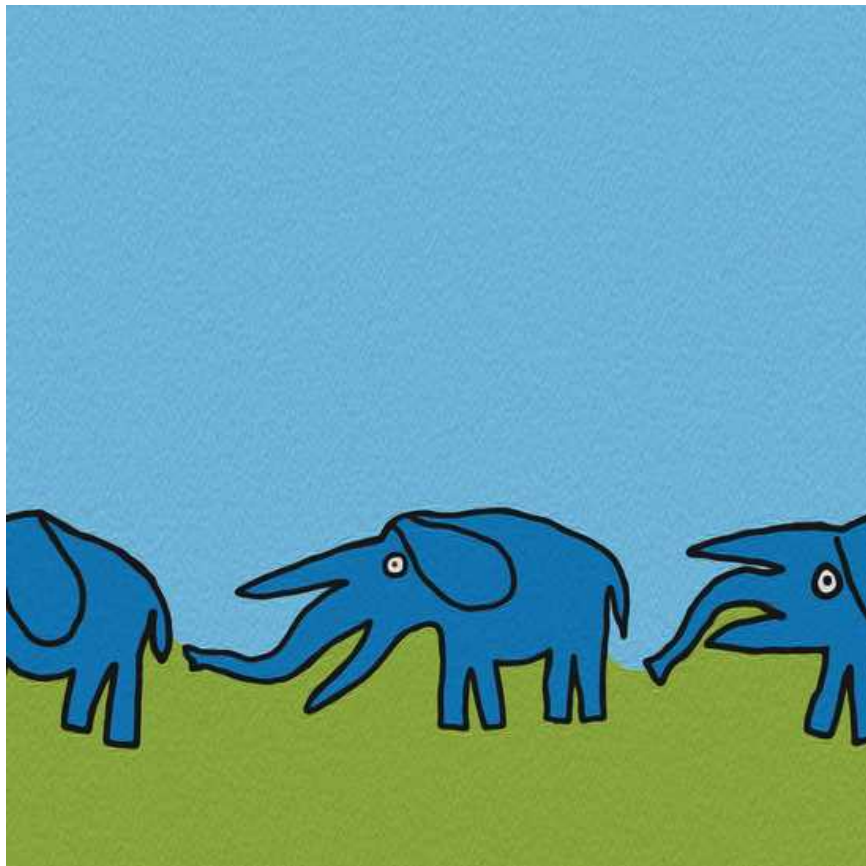
“Yes,” they replied, “we will help you.”

Katitu went into the well and scooped water for her sisters.

Each girl drank and then walked away. They all left Katitu in the deep well and walked home.

Later that evening, the elephants came to drink. One of them drank and left. Another one drank and left. The last elephant drank and swallowed Katitu with the water!

A few drops of Katitu's blood sprayed onto the reeds growing at the water hole.



Meanwhile, Katitu's sisters had arrived home without any food or wood. They were crying and told the family that Katitu was lost. Everyone started searching for her.

Katitu's little brother and his friend were searching too. They became very tired and rested next to a waterhole. They cut some reeds to make themselves flutes. When Katitu's brother played on his flute, the flute sang by itself:

"Is this my brother who plays me, who plays me,  
The other girls left me, left me and the elephant swallowed me,  
swallowed me!"

The boy rushed home and handed the reed to his father, who played it. And again, the reed sang:

"Is this my father who plays me, plays me?  
The other girls left me, left me, and the elephant swallowed me,  
swallowed me!"

The father handed the reed to Katitu's mother, who played it. And again, the reed sang:

"Is this my mother who plays me, plays me?  
The other girls left me, left me, and the elephant swallowed me,  
swallowed me!"

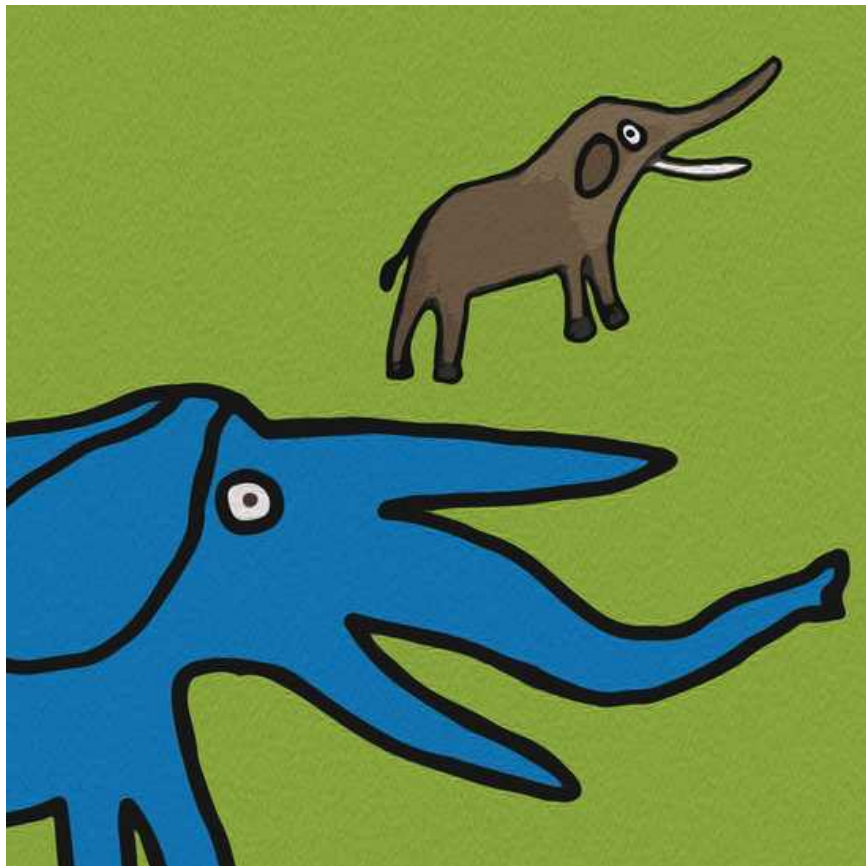
Katitu's father called the young men of the homestead and ordered them to find the tracks of the elephants and find Katitu.

The young men hurried off. They met the first group of elephants and asked them, "Elephants, elephants, have you seen the one who swallowed our girl?"

And the elephants sang:

"!a plaf! !a plaf! We trot lightly. We are so light, we carry nothing!"

And they passed on.



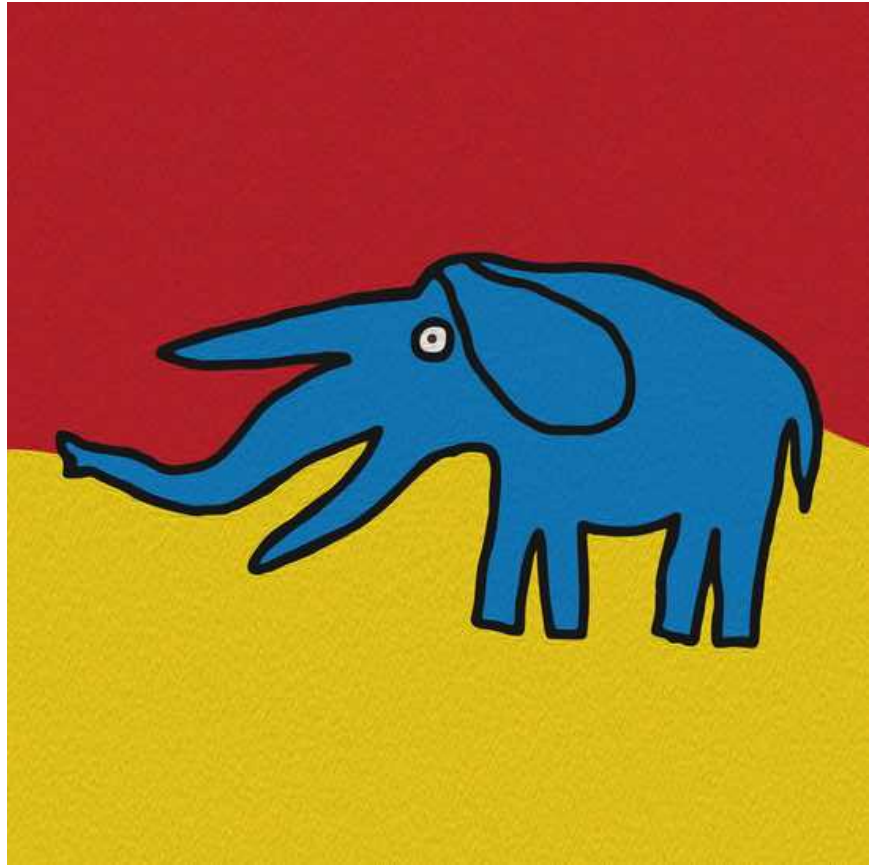




The young men met up with an old elephant in the bush and asked, “Old elephant, elephant, have you seen the one who swallowed our girl?”

The old elephant sang:  
“!a plaf! !a plaf! I trot lightly! I am  
so light, I carry nothing!”

But now the young men heard a  
little voice in the belly of the  
elephant.  
“Cut him open! Go on, cut him on  
his left side, for I am sitting on his  
left side!” said the voice.



They held the old elephant down and cut open his belly. There was little Katitu lying inside! The young men took her out and carried her home. Katitu was welcomed as a hero by the villagers.

And that is the tale of Katitu Mamombo. The wise little girl who saved her sisters from the Big Snake, saved them from the snake's children, and (with the help of her brother) saved herself from the belly of the elephant.

Of course, her sisters were punished.

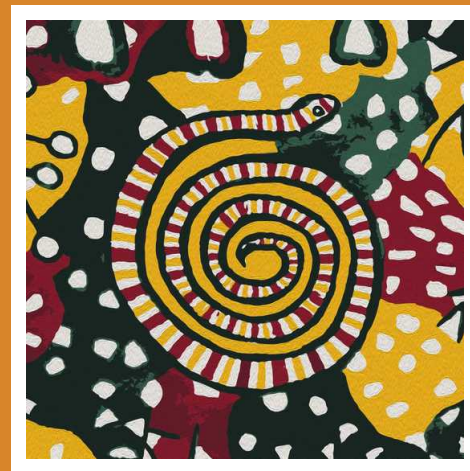
### Story notes

Ju|'hoan storyteller, Nxisae Magdaline Nxao, told a short version of this story in Dkar, Botswana, in 2005 (Winberg 2009). In 1993, Sigrid Schmidt recorded another version from Paulina Oxoros in northern Namibia (Schmidt 2007: 59). This particular version was retold by Marlene Winberg in 2013 for the Cave to Cave European Union storytelling project in Spain, based on Nxao and Schmidt's recording. The 'clever little girl' belongs to a well-known story type where a vulnerable young girl (or young boy), saves the lives of others, by engaging her wit and the power of words, rather than supernatural means to solve problems.

The illustrations in this story are from story boards by Marlene Winberg, interpreted digitally by Satsiri Winberg through manipulations of the Manyeka Art Collection of paintings made by San artists.

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Writer: Traditional San story  
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The Manyeka Arts Trust celebrates the traditions of southern African San storytellers.  
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