

THE CROCODILE WHO SWALLOWS THE SUN

AND OTHER
STORIES OF THE SOUTHERN SKY

ANCIENT STORIES OF THE EARTH,
SUN, MOON AND STARS RE-TOLD
FOR TODAY'S CHILDREN

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Marina Joubert

Project coordinator

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THE MOON, THE HARE AND THE TORTOISE

DANISILE NTULI



LONG AGO, MOON RULED OVER THE EARTH. He felt sorry for the people of Earth, because they became very weak in old age and then had to die.

So, he called Hare and said to him: “I trust you, Hare. You are quick and clever, unlike Tortoise who is slow and dull. I want you to take this important message to the people. Tell them that in the same way that I fade and return again, people will become weaker as they grow old, but then will become strong again.”

Hare was very happy and smiled from ear to ear. He ran off quickly, somersaulting as he went past Tortoise, leaving a cloud of dust behind him.

On the way to give the people of Earth the message he stopped often to boast about his important mission. “I am very special,” he said to everyone he saw. “Moon chose me to deliver a very important message.”

But by the time he reached the people, he had forgotten Moon’s message. He tried his best to remember, but the harder he tried, the more confused he became. Eventually he told the people of Earth: “Moon says that, unlike himself, you will become weaker as you grow old and then die and not return to life again.”

When Moon heard about Hare’s terrible mistake, he got so angry that he beat Hare on the mouth so hard that Hare’s upper lip split in two. Tortoise, who saw what was happening, laughed himself to tears. “I may be slow, but I am reliable,” he said when he saw

Hare’s new mouth.

Ever since that time, Hare has had a split lip as punishment for delivering the wrong message to the people of Earth. And people are still dying because he boasted so much that he could not remember Moon’s message.





THE HEALING STAR

DANISILE NTULI



THERE ONCE WAS A YOUNG WOMAN AND HER HUSBAND who desperately longed for a baby. Sometimes the woman imagined herself playing with her son, or pictured him hunting with his father.

After many years, they were blessed with a baby boy. They were very happy, but became sad again when they realised that their son's heart was not healthy. The father left to seek help from a wise old man who lived far away.

While the woman waited for her husband to return, she remembered a story that her grandmother once told her about the power of the stars.

One evening she took her baby and went out into the forest. She held her baby high above her head and lifted her face towards the sky. Then she started singing in a soft, pleading voice:

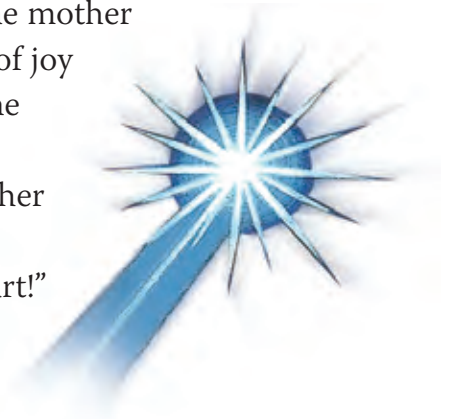
*"Oh, divine shining star that heals,
please cure my son and make him strong."*

Suddenly, one star became very bright. It shone directly onto the baby's chest. The baby let out a cry that cut through the forest. Then he smiled. The mother realised that the star's powerful light had healed her baby. With tears of joy running down her face, she held her baby close and ran home, with the help of the star's bright light.

When she arrived home, the star became dim again. At home, her husband was already waiting for her.

"Our son is well!" she shouted. "A bright star has healed his heart!" Together they thanked the warm-hearted star.

News about how the star had healed the baby, spread to the whole village. And as from that day people always came to consult this resourceful woman about healing.



THE CROCODILE WHO SWALLOWS THE SUN

BHEKI NTULI

A HUGE CROCODILE LIVED IN A RIVER NEAR THE SEA.

Every evening he admired the beauty of the setting sun. But he could not understand how the sun disappeared in the west every evening, only to reappear in the east every morning.

So one day, just as the sun was about to set, Crocodile shouted: “Oh, beautiful Sun, how do you set in the west only to rise again in the east?”

“This is my daily journey, dear Crocodile,” answered Sun. “I get into the water under the earth, and travel the whole night, until I rise up in the east the following morning.”

“Do you ever rest or sleep, beautiful Sun?”

“I have no time for rest or sleep, dear Crocodile,” Sun answered as he slowly sank into the waters of the west.

Crocodile thought that if he swallowed the sun, he might gain Sun’s beauty and magical powers. So the next day he said to the sun: “Let me swallow you. You can rest inside me as I journey through the water at night. I will release you again in the east the following morning. Then I will quickly return to rest and wait for you to come to the west.”

From that day on, Crocodile swallows the sun every evening and releases it every morning, hoping that one day he too will have the beauty and power of the sun.

Every year (365¼ days) the earth goes once around the sun. As the earth moves around the sun, it also spins (on its axis) like a giant ball. It takes 24 hours for the earth to spin around once. This spinning causes day and night. As the earth spins around, half of it will face the sun, while the other half will face away from the sun. When you are on the part of the earth facing towards the sun, you are in daytime. It is then dark – or night – on the opposite side of the earth.









THE ASHES OF THE MILKY WAY

MARITHA SNYMAN

LONG AGO, BEFORE THERE WERE STARS IN THE SKY, a young woman was married to a brave hunter.

During the day he went out to hunt and she stayed at home to gather fruit from the veld. At the end of every day the hunter returned home. Together they would light a fire and share a meal.

One day the woman waited and waited, but her hunter didn't come. The sun started to set and still he was not home. It became dark. She lit the fire all alone. Still he didn't come. She started to fear for his life, knowing that he could not find his way home in the blackness of the night.

As she waited, she watched how the flames of the fire turned the wood into red-hot coals. So great was her fear for the man she loved, that she scooped up the hot coals with her bare hands and threw them high into the dark sky. The coals turned into white ashes and floated higher and higher into the night, settling in the black sky like a broad, sparkling road.

The lost hunter saw the sparkling ashes and returned home safely.

To this day, this shining road is called the Milky Way and it still looks like a bright pathway in the night sky.

Our sun is one of about 200 billion stars grouped together to form our galaxy, the Milky Way. When you look up on a clear, dark night – especially when you are away from city lights – you can clearly see the Milky Way. There are many more billions of galaxies in the universe – all of them different shapes and sizes and each containing between one and 300 billion stars. Imagine several billion buckets of sand, each bucket represents one galaxy, each grain of sand represents one star. Our sun is then only one grain of sand in one such bucket!



THE FIRST RAINBOW

MARITHA SNYMAN



RAIN WAS A BEAUTIFUL, KIND-HEARTED WOMAN who lived in the sky together with her three daughters and her son, called Son-eib. Around her waist she wore a glittering girdle of many colours that could be seen from far away.

As time passed, the eldest daughter became restless. She wanted to go and see how people lived on the earth below.

“Promise me that you’ll return home,” Rain said. Her daughter promised she would return, but on Earth she fell in love with a handsome hunter and never returned home.

“We also want to go to the earth below,” the other children nagged. Rain refused. She was too scared that she would lose all her children.

But Wolf had an eye on Rain’s beautiful daughters. He disguised his wicked heart and said to Rain: “I will go with them and bring them back safely.” Rain believed Wolf and let the children go with him.

Wolf took the children to a village where good and bad people lived. One day Wolf persuaded someone to set fire to Son-eib’s hut. As Son-eib was burning to death, a red bird appeared in the flames of the burning hut. The bird flew up to where Rain was anxiously waiting for news about her children.

“Son-eib has burnt to death,” he sang sadly.

When Rain heard what had happened, she became so angry that she plucked the glittering girdle from her waist. This unleashed a terrible storm. The lightning struck down Wolf and all the bad people in the village.

From that day onwards, the girdle appears as a rainbow in the sky after every storm.



A rainbow is caused by sunlight passing through raindrops. The raindrops behave like little prisms, breaking the light up into the colours we see. The colours of the rainbow are red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet.

THE GIRAFFE STARS

BHEKI NTULI & THEBE MEDUPE

LONG AGO, LEBO LIVED WITH HIS GRANDFATHER in a small village smack in the middle of the bush. At night Lebo heard the roar of lions or the sad call of jackal in the bush. During the day, small buck and warthog fed on the grass around their hut.

Lebo loved it when his grandfather said: “Lebo, we need wood for the fire.”

These words made him rush off – through the thorny bush to the river. There, he looked for firewood, but also watched the wild animals drinking water and feeding on the soft grass that grew on the riverbanks. The tall giraffes intrigued him most of all. He watched them swinging from side to side as they walked away slowly on their tall legs. He marvelled at their height when they reached up with their long necks to pick the juiciest leaves on the highest branches from the tallest trees.

When Lebo returned home with the firewood, just before sunset, his grandfather usually made a fire, using the wood that Lebo had collected. He cooked porridge and meat for supper. While the food was cooking, he told Lebo stories about the animals and the stars.

One night he told Lebo a story about stars that never set. Lebo was very puzzled.

“Why do some stars never set?” he asked. “Where are they, these stars that never set?”

Lebo’s grandfather smiled. He looked towards the south and pointed out four bright stars. Lebo had to look through the trees to see the four stars shining just above the horizon.

“Grandpa,” he said excitedly, “they remind me of the giraffes moving through the trees.”

“How right you are my son,” said his grandfather. “Let’s call those four stars the giraffe stars. Two can be male and the other two female.”

The giraffe stars are the stars that we also call the Southern Cross.

People in different parts of the world see different stars. This is because they are looking up into different parts of the galaxy and universe. For example, in England (which is in the northern hemisphere) people do not see the giraffe stars, but they do see the pole star, called Polaris. We cannot see Polaris from the southern hemisphere.







SLICING THE MOON

MARITHA SNYMAN

SUN IS A FIERY AND ANGRY GOD who brings warmth and light to the earth during the daytime. But at night the moon is king, basking the earth in its soft yellow light.

A long time ago Sun became extremely jealous of Moon.

“Moon tries to imitate me. This impostor must be killed,” Sun hissed fiercely. He then slowly started to carve away pieces of Moon with his sharp and fierce rays.

Moon became smaller and smaller.

In great pain he called out to Sun: “Please, don’t do this to me! What will happen to my children if I die? Please leave a little backbone for them.”

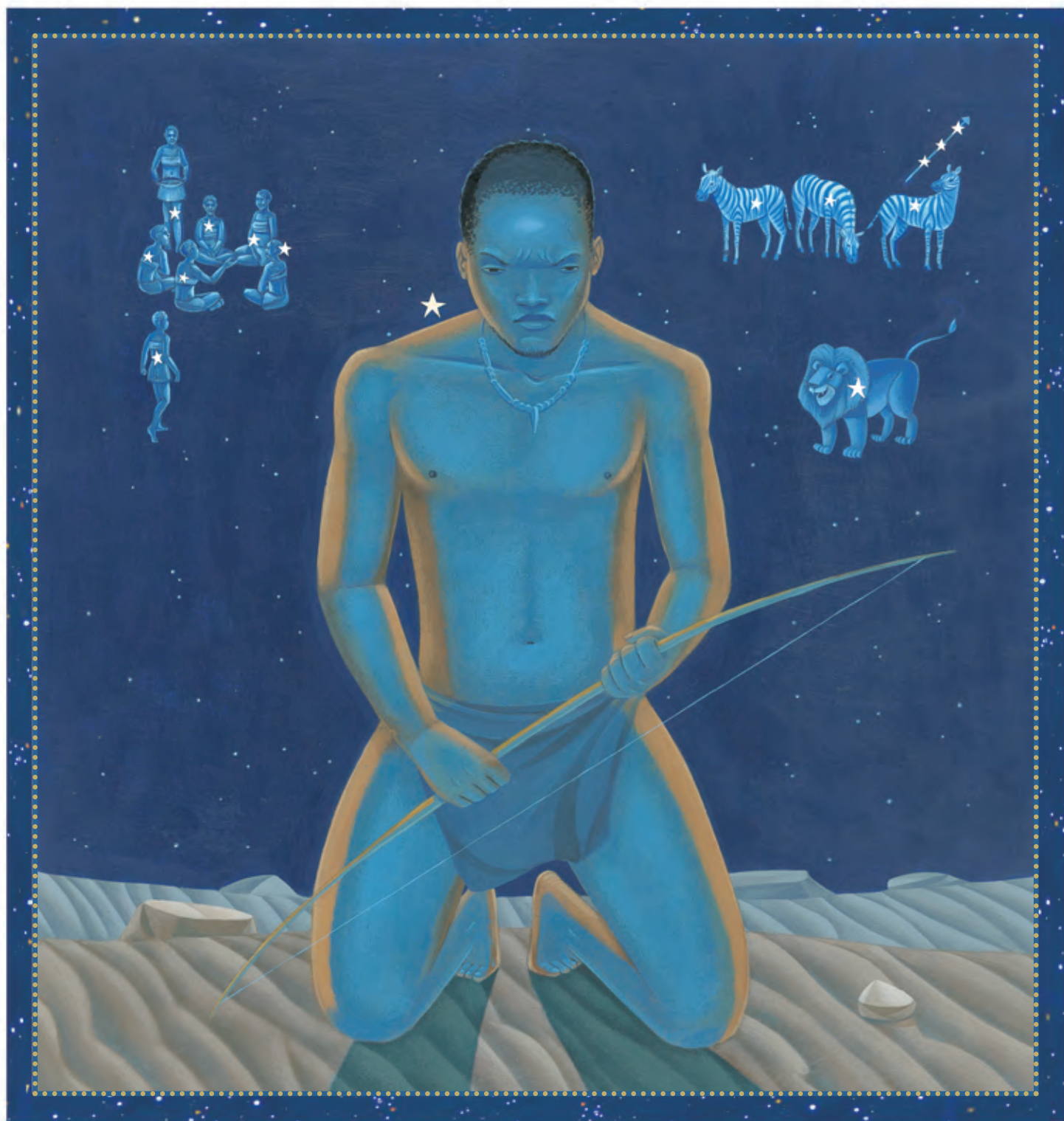
Sun started to feel sorry for Moon. He stopped his relentless carving and left Moon alone. Moon hid his face in pain and misery.

But then slowly, bit by bit, Moon started to grow again until he once again lit the dark night with his soft yellow light.

“Oh no,” Sun cried when he saw what had happened, “the impostor is back again!” And little by little he again started carving away at Moon.

Thus began the never-ending cycle of Moon’s gradual disappearance and growth that we call new moon and full moon.

The moon does not produce its own light. Moonlight is caused by sunlight being reflected off the moon’s surface. If you watch the moon for a month, you will notice that the moon appears to change shape. Sometimes it is a full circle, other times it looks like a banana and then sometimes it is not visible at all. These changes in shape are called the phases of the moon. These phases are caused by the positions of the sun, earth, and moon relative to one another. As the moon goes around the earth, half of it always faces the sun and is lit by the sun. But we do not always see a moon that is half lit because of our position relative to the moon and the sun. As the moon moves in its orbit, we see it from different angles and so different portions of it appear (to us!) to be lit up as we look at it from the earth. At new moon – when we see no moon at all – the moon is directly between us and the sun and we cannot see the side that is lit. But when the earth is approximately between the sun and the moon, we see the full moon because we see the half that is facing the sun. The important point is that the moon does not change shape, nor does the amount of the moon that is lit by the sun. The only thing that changes is the position of the moon relative to us and the sun.



THE HOPELESS HUNTER

MARITHA SNYMAN



LONG AGO, THE SKY GOD had seven beautiful daughters that shone brightly in the dark sky at night.

They are today called the Pleiades.

They were all married to a handsome, but hopeless, hunter, called Aldebaran.

“You are so useless,” they mocked him. “You can’t kill anything.

You won’t even be able to kill those three glittering zebras standing over there,” they teased, showing him the three stars of Orion’s belt.

“I’ll show you,” the hopeless hunter retorted angrily. In his anger he forgot all about Betelgeuse, the fierce red lion star that guarded the zebras.

The hunter grabbed his bow and arrows and took off into the dark night. Carefully he aimed and pulled the string of the bow. The arrow sped through the sky and ... missed the zebras completely.

There is a group of stars called the Pleiades. They are all the same distance away from the earth. Although we can only see six or seven of them, there are actually hundreds of stars in this cluster. For thousands of years Africans, from KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa to Mali in West Africa, knew that it was time to begin planting their crops when the Pleiades appeared. In Setswana these stars are called Selemela (meaning the digging stars).

The hopeless hunter sat down, feeling like a pathetic fool.

Betelgeuse roared with laughter. “You missed again!” He roared again, still laughing: “Come fetch your arrow. I am waiting.”

But the hunter was not brave enough to do this. He looked up in fear and misery. He was too scared to pass Betelgeuse who would surely kill him. He was also reluctant to go home to the never-ending mockery of his wives.

Today his arrow, known as the sword stars of Orion, is still stuck in the blackness of the sky behind the three glittering zebras.

NAKA, THE HORN STAR

DANISILE NTULI

VERY LONG AGO IN A VILLAGE IN LIMPOPO all the other men left their homes to go high up into the mountains to wait for Naka, the horn star. They believed that the man who saw Naka first would be prosperous. The king would also give this man an ox as a gift. While waiting for the star to rise, the men chanted: “Naka e a dišwa”, which means: “The horn is carefully watched.”

One old man said: “I have had many misfortunes. This has to be my year.” His friend laughed and said: “You are always saying that. I hope you will be fortunate this time.” Next to them a handsome young man secretly wished that he would be the first one to see Naka rising in the west.

It became quiet for a while. Suddenly, the handsome young man jumped and shouted excitedly: “The horn! There is the horn star!” He grabbed the phalafala and blew the horn long and loud. All heads turned to the sky. Naka was shining brightly! The villagers immediately knew that the star had been seen.

The happy young man danced and thanked his ancestors for his good fortune. The other men were happy for him and congratulated him. They were not jealous, because they believed that one day one of them too would be the first to see the horn star.

Naka is also called Canopus. It is the second brightest star in our sky. The brightest star is Sirius. In the past, Naka marked the beginning of winter and the time for African boys to go to their initiation schools.





WHEN THE SUN LIVED ON EARTH

BHEKI NTULI

MANY YEARS AGO IN THE LAND OF THE SAN PEOPLE there lived a huge Sun-man who had bright lights under his arms. Whenever he lifted his arms, the light appeared and it became daytime. When he lowered his arms, it became dark.

Then he became too old and tired to keep his arms raised every day. The days became shorter and shorter and the nights became long and very cold.

The people could not stand this any longer. The king called a meeting. He said to the young men of the village: "You can see how my people are suffering because of the long and cold nights. The Sun-man is of no use to us when he is tired and asleep. Go and help him to lift his arms so that we can enjoy daylight again!"

On their way to the Sun-man, the young men whispered to one another: "Let us lift him up and throw him into the sky. Then his arms will stay open for a longer time and the light will shine further."

They found the Sun-man fast asleep. They grabbed him and threw him into the sky. The Sun-man grabbed the sky with his hands, his arms above his head. The light shone all over the earth and the king and his people rejoiced.

The light grew bigger and bigger until the Sun-man's whole body was glowing. The shape of his body gradually changed and became round like a ball that could be seen by everybody on Earth.

Today that ball is called the sun.

The sun is really a giant ball of burning gas! Its surface temperature is about 6 000 degrees Celsius; that is 60 times hotter than boiling water. At its centre, where most of its energy is released, the temperature reaches 15 million degrees Celsius. This is much hotter than we can even imagine. The sun is about five billion years old. In about another five billion years' time, it will burn up and die.



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