

Nkosnati And The Dragon
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This story accompanies Steve's article that appears in the Fall 1997 Newsletter.

Once upon a time there was a boy called Nkosnati who lived with his mother in a village at the foot of the Drakensberg. He fetched water from the river and looked after the goats. Sometimes his friends went with him and they found clay on the river bank and sat and modeled animals together.

At the beginning of the rainy season, the people of the village became fearful. They saw the sky darken, heard the roar of the dragon, and saw the flashes of fire from his nostrils. When he was angry, he came over the mountains and brought lashings of wind and rain and blew over people's huts and flooded their land.

One morning, Nkosnati and his friends went with the goats down to the river. They were sitting and making clay animals when suddenly the swallows flew low over their heads. Nkosnati was so excited about their flight that he ran along the river bank and jumped up every now and then, flapping his hands as if he would fly.

"I want to fly like a bird," he said to his friends and sat down to make a swallow out of clay. The swallows were trying to tell the children that a storm was coming. The sky darkened and the children looked up and saw the approaching blue-black clouds over the mountains.

"I better get home and fetch my mother's calabash to get water before the storm comes. You take the clay birds and animals into the rocky cave and bring the goats back home," Nkosnati said to his friends. He rushed back and told his mother about the storm and that he was going to fetch water.

"Oh Nkosnati, look how dark it is. It is too late, my boy. It is safer to stay here."

"Mama, I must go. For you know that sometimes it can storm for many days and we will be in trouble without water to wash and cook. I must go."

Mother called Grandmother to try and persuade Nkosnati to stay. He did not listen. She then went to the villagers to ask them to help her, and they said; "If Nkosnati wants to be stubborn, he will have to learn a lesson, won't he?"

And so Nkosnati went down to the river. He knew that he might have to face the dragon so he took with him his drum and picked up a big stone along the way. His friends, in the meantime, had taken the goats with them and were hiding in the cave. Nkosnati came down to the river. Suddenly, over the mountain came the dragon, nostrils aflame and making thundering growls. His friends were scared to look and continued to make their clay birds, praying and hoping that Nkosnati would be saved.

When Nkosnati saw the dragon coming, he put up his hand and shouted, "STOP." The dragon was surprised and stopped in his tracks. He was quiet, and waited to see what this boy wanted.

"Before you eat me, I have a large cheese for you. Here. Open your jaws, I will throw it in."

The dragon did as he was told and Nkosnati threw the big stone into the dragon's jaws. Then the dragon brought his teeth together sharply and so broke a few of them. He spat them out onto the ground and was angry.

“Wait,” said Nkosnati. “Before you eat me, say that you will eat me only once.”

“Ha, ha, ha,” laughed the dragon. “What a silly boy. I only need to eat you once.” He opened his jaws and Nkosnati jumped inside with his drum. The dragon swallowed him whole and was satisfied with himself. But then something strange happened. His stomach began to ache and he felt unsteady. For Nkosnati was playing his drum.

“Boom boom budi boom boom budi boom boom.”

“Oh.” moaned the dragon. “What is happening to me? Maybe this meal of the little boy does not agree with me!” And so he opened his great jaws and Nkosnati jumped out. The dragon was amazed at the boy's bravery and tears came to his eyes and fell in great splashes on the ground. As they did, a radiant green light grew around the form of the dragon. His scales began to fall off and the misty form of a woman emerged, shimmering with light and beauty.

“You have released me from my bondage, and now I can show my true form. And so that you and the others may always be reminded of your bravery, take what used to be my teeth. Plant them in the ground, and water them. And you will see a wonder.”

Then she spread a fine mist over the valley and gently brought the rain to the village. When Nkosnati emerged from the dragon's jaws, his friends watched in amazement and they saw how the dragon changed its form. Then the clay birds flew out of the cave into the soft misty rain and circled the shimmering woman as she moved across the valley. Nkosnati's friends ran out to him and they all returned to the village.

Mother rejoiced when she saw him return. And the villagers became curious when they saw Nkosnati dig the soil. He planted the dragon's teeth and he watched green leaves appear. The stems grew taller and taller until they were taller than Nkosnati and his friends. And one day buds opened up at the top and sun-like flowers unfolded.

And every year when the sunflowers bloom, the villagers remember Nkosnati.

(This Michaelmas story is from *Hear The Voice of the Griot*, by Betty Staley. It comes from Natal, South Africa, and was adapted by Claartjie Wijnbergh and Carol Liknaitzsky. The story has also been revised by Stephen Spitalny to make it less abstract for young children. For instance, in South Africa Michaelmas is in the Spring, the rainy season. I changed “Spring” to “rainy season” for clarity, as well as removing a number of “very's” and “little's”. The essence of the story was in no way changed. There are other stories in Betty's book that can be told in kindergarten, including “The Winning of Kwelanga”. It is an excellent resource for all aspects of the African continent, very useful for teaching in the grades as well.)