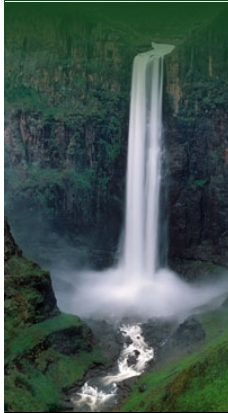


Orange-Senqu River Awareness Kit

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People and the River

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→ History and Water Related Culture: Stories:

The Legend of the Fish River Canyon

These stories are from a book called 'Muzimbikana and Other Namibian Adventures', created by the Namibia Oral Tradition Project (1997). They have been reproduced with kind permission from Gamsberg-MacMillan Books and New Namibia Books, Namibia.

This story and the next one ("The Tusk Keeper"), are from the Fish River Canyon area in southern Namibia. They show us, how the San and Nama people perceived the natural phenomenon of the Fish River Canyon, the extreme climatic conditions there and wild animals. This perception was obviously translated into social rules.

After a thrashing one day I sat bawling against the zinc dam when Grandpa Daniel came passing by.

'Hey you, girlie, don't sit there bawling. You know that little girls' tears corrode the ground,' he grunted bluntly.

I forgot all about crying and asked him how my tears could corrode the ground. 'Yes,' said Grandpa Daniel, 'the daughter of the King of the Black Hills cried so much about the son of the King of the Karas Mountains the time when the snake double-crossed him.'

'Grandpa Daniel, I don't understand. The princess cried about the prince when the snake foxed him, how's that?' I asked.

Grandpa Daniel explained. 'The King of the Karas Mountains was very rich and his son wanted to marry the daughter of the King of the Black Hills.

Well, he gave her a metal hat with a shiny, glasslike stone in it that shone in the light of the sun and also in the light of the moon.

'It sounds to me as if he gave her a crown with a diamond in it,' I said.

'That's it, exactly, that's what you call it, a crown,' he said laughing through his widely spaced yellow teeth, his whole face aglow with pleasure.

'What on earth does the snake have to do with them?' I asked.

'You see, there was also the son of the King of Holoogberg. He also wanted to take the princess to be his wife, and then he sent the snake to steal the crown, or rather the diamond in it, because he wanted to make an engagement ring with it for the princess. He himself did not have anything much because they never got much rain. It is very dry at the mountain and the animals there were so skinny, their eyes were set very deep inside their heads, and that is why the mountain is known as the Hollow-Eye Mountain, he continued.

'How would a snake be able to carry a crown or remove a diamond from it? I wanted to know. It doesn't have hands to do it'

The snake, it is clever. It got the diamond alright. You see, the princess was very pleased about the crown and did not want to take it off when she went to sleep; so she sat bolt upright with it in her bed. She fell asleep and the crown fell off. She picked up the crown in the dark, but the diamond had fallen out. Now the snake saw the diamond and wanted to pick it up, but it was stuck to the floor, and so the snake made the jewel stick to its own head.

The snake slithered out of the room with the diamond on its head and when it came outside, the stone shone in the moonlight, just like the sun on the dam's water.

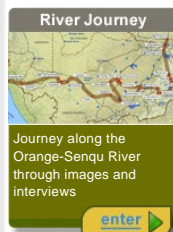
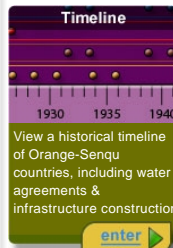
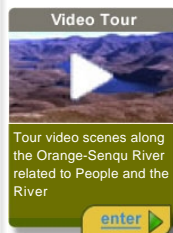
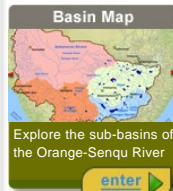
'What happened then?' I said.

'Then the snake with the light on its head sailed to Prince Hollow-Eye.

The snake thought it would get a lot of money from him, but instead, the prince said as compensation the snake could stay there with him on Hollow Eye Mountain. The snake was furious. It slithered away with the diamond.

The prince called, "Come back! Come back!" but the snake continued on its way. 'The prince was enraged, but he could also cast spells and so he shouted: "Snake, I curse you, you will change into the Snake's Head Mountain without your diamond!"

'Near the Fish River, the snake changed into the Snake's Head Mountain so quickly that the diamond fell off and landed in the water of the Fish River.





The Legend of the Fish River Canyon.

Source: Joseph Madisia 1997

(click to enlarge)

'When the princess started searching for her diamond, somebody grabbed her and she screamed for help. She managed to break loose and while she was running away, Prince Hollow-Eye cursed her too. He said, "You will change into a mountain with your crown but without the diamond. I curse you too and your tears will corrode everything they touch. The more you cry about your Prince Peace of the Karas Mountains, the faster your tears will flow and corrode the ground. Every eleventh year your tears will cause turmoil between the Sheep, the Lion and the Fish rivers and bring floods and tears to people and wash away their dwellings. Your tears will make war with the Fish River, fighting about the diamond, and corrode it deeply so that those who seek your diamond will get lost and shed even more tears. When people see this deeply eroded riverbed and valley and mountains, they will be reminded of scorned love and the unhappiness it brings. Also your parents will change into black hills, with veins of tears eroding their slopes. The rocks will roll and topple over each other as they search for your diamond - in vain, my dear, in vain Grandpa Daniel paused for a moment, scratching the soil absentmindedly with his foot.

'Prince Peace of the Karas Mountains arrived just in time to catch one tear-drop of Princess Zenobia, as the daughter of the King of the Black Hills was known, before it petrified to form a bright crystal as sign of her love.'

'But couldn't the prince do anything?' I said.

Grandpa Daniel shook his head. 'Prince Peace was very sad and lonely. He saddled his horse, took the tear-drop crystal and rode northward. Prince Hollow-Eye" who was riding up the Fish River on his way to visit Prince Brukkaros, saw Prince Peace from afar, and cursed him too. Prince Peace of the Karas Mountains was changed into a hill with a long neck that stretched as he tried to see who was casting the spell on him. Grandpa Daniel put in another pause. Finally he went on, 'The people living in the area did not like the hill which had a long neck. They rounded up all the oxen in the area and they tied ox-hide thongs around the hill's thin neck and the oxen pulled and pulled but they could not pull that prince's head over, in spite of his thin neck. The men said, "The Almighty Father does not want it pulled over," and gave up.

Grandpa Daniel, you say the canyon of the Fish River was formed with the princess' tears over Prince Peace, and the rocky hills are reminders of true love destroyed by hate. Tell me, is the Kaiserkrone the princess and is Mukorob the prince? I asked, intrigued by the possibility.

Maybe, said Grandpa Daniel. 'I think so, yes maybe,' he mumbled as he walked off to the other side of the dam where his brew was waiting.

[Next: The Tusk Keeper](#) ►