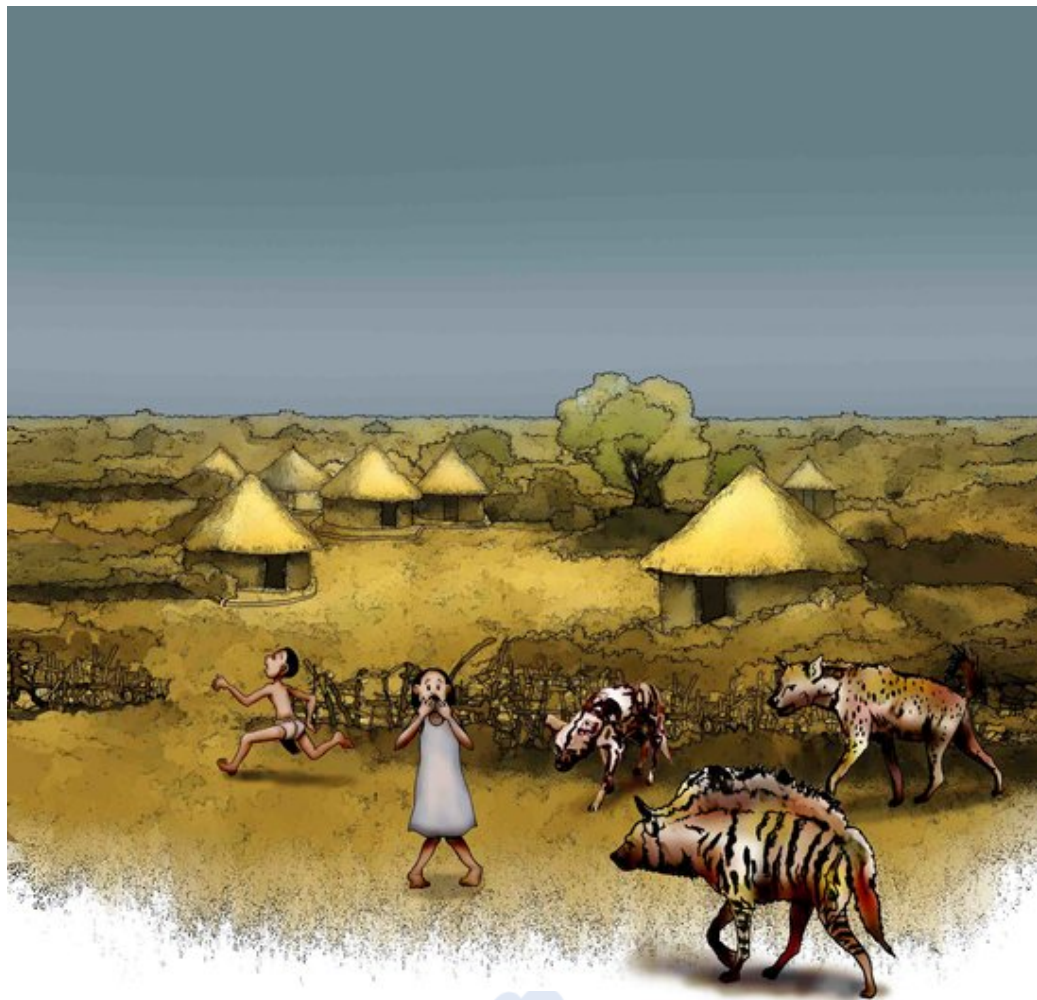




The baboons that went this way and that

Southern African Folktale
English

There was much unhappiness in a village of small huts. The people who lived there had been happy before, but then wild animals had come and had begun to frighten them. These animals ate all their crops and from time to time they even carried off children who wandered away from their parents. It was not a good place to live any longer, and the people began to think of where they might go to lead a new life.

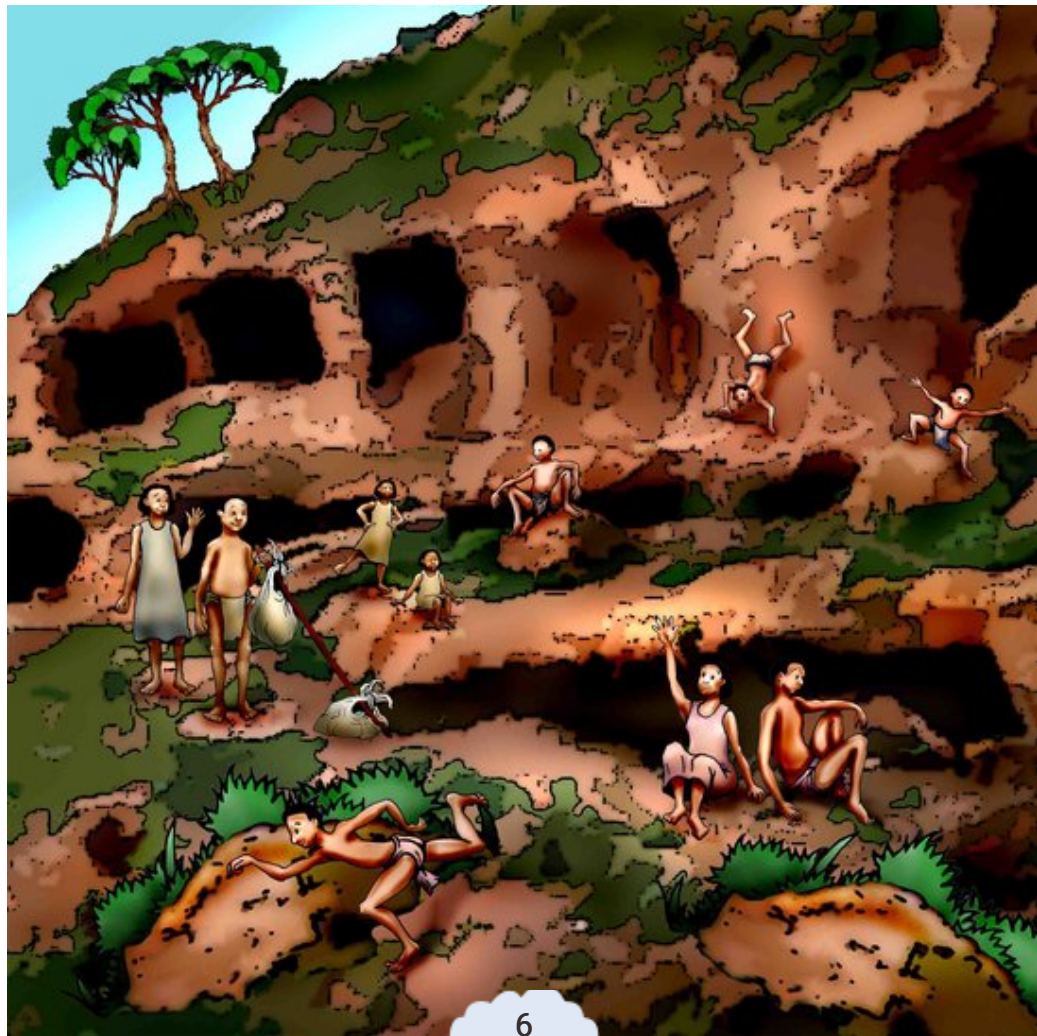


One family found the answer. Rather than deal with the wild animals who seemed to be everywhere on the flat land, they decided to go in search of food up in the hills. It was not hard to find food there. There were bushes that grew in the cracks between rocks. There were trees that grew at the foot of the slopes. There were rock rabbits which could be trapped and birds which could be brought down with the stones which littered the floor of the caves.



Other families noticed how well the hill family was doing. They saw the sleekness of their children, and they noticed how calm the parents were. "It is a good life that we lead up in the hills," said the husband. "You should come there too."

Soon the other families abandoned their homes on the flat land and went up to the hills. Each family found a cave to live in, and in this way they were warm and secure. Soon everybody talked about how sorry they were that they had not come to the hills earlier, rather than letting the wild animals eat their crops and drag off their children.

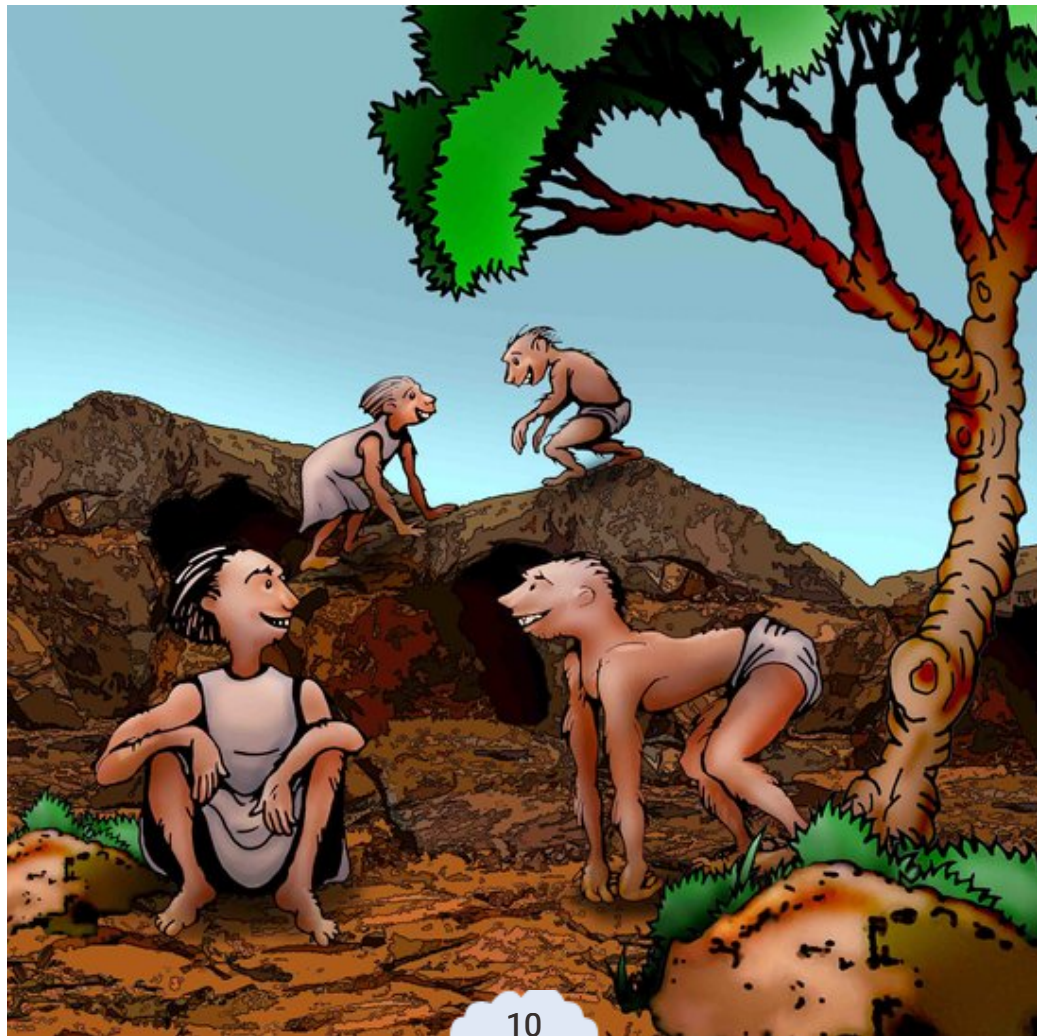


As the children grew up in the hills, they began to get better at the things that had to be done to live in such a place. They became very quick at climbing rocks, and even the youngest could scamper up a face of rock almost as quickly as any rock rabbit. They also became good at climbing into trees to look for fruit, and they could swing in the branches almost as well as any monkey. People who passed by and saw the hill people living on their hill wondered whether they were perhaps wild animals, but when they saw their faces and the clothes that they were wearing they realised that they were only people who had made the hills their home.



Slowly, things began to change. The parents noticed that their children were talking less, and that rather than speaking to one another in the language of people they were beginning to use grunts. Then the adults themselves noticed that their noses were getting bigger and that they were growing hairier. Every time they looked at one another they saw that their faces had changed yet more and that their teeth were longer.

Soon they spent as much time on four legs as on two, and it was at this point that they became a new creature. This creature, which had never before been seen in that place, was the creature which people now call the baboon.



For a time, the baboons lived happily. They stopped chasing the rock rabbits and started to eat grubs from the ground. They also forgot how to talk, and nobody now made any sound other than a bark or a grunt. They took off their clothes and let the rags lie on the ground until they were destroyed by ants. Their legs and arms were now completely covered with dark hair.

They still remembered, though, that they had been people, and this was something which made them worried. When they looked into each other's faces, they realised that their noses were now much bigger than they had been before, and this made them jeer. Every baboon laughed at every other baboon, pointing at his enlarged nose and throwing his hands about in mirth. This made the baboon who was being laughed at angry. He would jump up and down in anger, all the while laughing at the large nose of the other.



Eventually the mockery became so great that the baboons could no longer bear to be together. Each family split off and lived by itself, laughing at the others because of their great noses, but not liking to be laughed at for their own noses. That is why baboons live in small groups today and do not live as a baboon nation, as do people and many other animals.

The baboons that went this way and that

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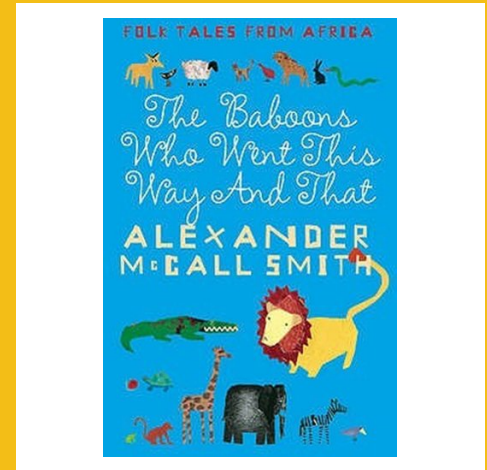
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Another excellent version to read aloud to children is the story "The Baboons Who Went This Way and That" in Alexander McCall Smith's book of folktales: *The Baboons Who Went This Way and That* (Canongate, 2006).

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