



## Gail's Bush Stories

### Transcript

**Gail 00:00:02**

Thank you. I'm Gail Hickman, I have spent 50 wonderful years in South Africa, I was born there. And I am very aligned with the Zulu tribe, because that's the area that I lived in in Kwazulu-Natal. And, and we have lots of lovely bush stories, as do most tribes throughout the world. And what is interesting is that a lot of the tribes throughout the world share the same story. It's got little variations to it, but it is basically the same story. And what is also interesting is that the Native Americans and the Zulus share the beadwork style. If you look at Zulu beadwork, and look at Native American beadwork, it's very hard to tell the difference on some of them. And considering these tribes have never met, it's quite amazing how this art style is shared between the two of them.

So I'll tell you a few of the stories. They they're cute, and they're funny, and some of them have got little morals to them.

And we'll start off with the hippopotamus. If you know the hippopotamus, you know, he's a large animal that lives underwater during the day, and he comes out on land to feed at night. He's got virtually no hair on his body, and he has no sweat glands. So in the beginning, when everything was created, the hippo was very unhappy because he was getting sunburned. So they got together and they had an Indaba. Now an Indaba is a meeting of people who sit down and thrash out problems and get things sorted. So they called an Indaba. And they spoke about this problem, and they decided to go to **nKulunkulu**, who is God, and ask him if they could live in the water. So they had set up a meeting, an Indaba, with Unkulunkulu, and they put their case to him. And Unkulunkulu was horrified and he said, "oh, there's no way you can live in the water because you'll eat all the fish and you'll foul up the rivers." So, very despondent, off the hippos wandered, and they thought about this for a while and they had another Indaba, and then they were ready to go back to **nKulunkulu**. And they said, ", we have a proposition for you. If we can live in the rivers during the day, where we are protected from **nKulunkulu** the sun and the sunburn, we promise that we will come out to eat at night on the land. And we will walk about 60 kilometres at night feeding. And what we'll do is when



we shed our dung, we will pass our tail through it, which will cause it to spray. And that way you can check for fish bones." [Laughter]

So that's why when you see an - a hippopotamus and he's shedding dung, he will always put his tail in the middle of it and it goes like a fan. It makes such a noise, and it sprays the dung over a huge area. And you can check for fish bones. [Laughter]

Then we have the dogs in the beginning, when the dogs were created, they had all sorts of issues that needed sorting out. They were unhappy about this and unhappy about that. So the head dog said, "Look, let's have an Indaba." So they went to the Indaba Room, which was this big, beautiful rondavel made of clay and straw, thatched roof. And they went in there and had their meeting. But the rules was that everybody had to hang their tails up before they could go into that room. So the dogs arrived, and they all hung their tails on the hook, and they all sat down at the table. And they had just started the Indaba when a fire broke out. So all the dogs ran. They just up and they took off and left their tails in the room. So now whenever two strange dogs meet each other, and they sniff each other, the reason is that they're looking for their tail. [Laughter]

**Interviewer 00:04:25**

[Laughter] What's the moral of the story?

**Gail 00:04:27**

There's no moral, it just explains why dogs sniff because it does seem a weird thing doesn't it, you know? [Laughter] So they're looking for their tails.

And now a story with a moral, and this one is particularly shared by tribes all over the world. I've heard this story so many times and so many variations of it. And that was one day a man, a young man, decided to go on a vision quest. Now vision quest is when take yourself off to the mountain, and you stay up there for as long as you need to, until you have a very clear vision of what your life is about, what you're meant to do, where you're going with it. And you just get all the answers, but it takes lots of peace and lots of meditation.

So off went this young man up the hill on this vision quest, and he got to the top of the mountain. And he was there for days and days and days. And eventually it all became clear, he was going to be a great man, and he was going to do good works. And he was going to achieve much and he was going to be a really worthy person. So having got his vision quest, he then came back down the hill. And as he was coming back down, he heard this little voice saying, "Help me, help me". And he looked down and there was a snake on the ground. And the snake said, "Please, won't you pick me up and carry me down? It is so cold here. And the



rocks're all scraping my belly. If you would just pick me up, put me in your jacket, and take me to the bottom of this hill, that would be wonderful." So the man looked at him and he said, "You know, you're a snake." And he said, "There's a good chance you're going to bite me." And he said, "And that would be very sad, because I've just been on a vision quest. And I've had the most beautiful vision of who I'm going to be." And the snake said, "I would never bite you. No, I just want to lift down the hill."

So, overcoming all his good judgement on the issue, he picked the snake up and he put it to his bosom inside his coat. And off they went and they were doing fine. And they marched down the hill and they were talking to each other. And when they got down the bottom of the hill, he put his hand inside his jacket to take the snake out, and the snake bit him. And this man was devastated. And he said to him, I'm going to die from this bite. And I've had this marvellous vision quest, and I'm going to be so valuable to this world. And you have just short circuited that. Why did you bite me? And the snake said, "It's in my nature."

And a variation on that story is, a scorpion on the riverbank. And the river was flooding. And he asked the frog and he said, "Please, could you give me a lift across the river?" And the toad said, "No I ca-" -- the frog said, "No, I can't do that, because you'll sting me", and the scorpion said "I would never do that. I just want a ride across the water." So he climbed on the frog's back and exactly in the middle of the river, the scorpion stung him. And the frog said, "Why did you do that? I'm going to die." And he said, "Because it's in my nature." [Interviewer laughs] So that same story is through many, many tribes all over the world and it has the same message. It's a very powerful message, of do be careful of when something is simply in one's nature. [Laughter]

### **Gail 00:08:09**

I want to tell you a lovely story about an African wood called **umtambuti**. And it's a multicolor wood. It's black, brown and cream. And it's used in a lot of furniture making, stick making, and it it really is so beautiful. But when you're in the bush, be very careful of the fire pit. Because when you're with a Ranger who has to suffer all these townies coming to the bush on a regular basis, who want to sit and talk until two o'clock in the morning and the Ranger's got to be up at four o'clock in the morning to get you all up for your early morning bush drive. When you see a Ranger stand up, yawn, throw a piece of wood on the fire and say "Well, I'm off to bed now. We'll all be up at five o'clock." You can guarantee that there will be no bush drive the next morning because the smoke from **umtambuti** wood gives you the most awful diarrhoea and



it's the Ranger's way of just getting his own back for annoying townies that come to the bush.  
[Laughter]

**Gail 00:09:20**

The **Marula** tree, which grows in the bush all over South Africa, is a magnificent tree with big spreading arms and it provides wonderful shade for the animals. And in the summer, it produces berries which are so delicious. And we have learnt over the years to make wine and cocktail drinks out of the berries, but the animals knew much about the berries before we did. So they use the shade of the **Marula** tree during the summer. And then the berries drop, and they just feast. While they're just laying in the shade, they feast on these beautiful berries, which rot very quickly in the sun. But not only do they rot, they ferment. So when the animals have absolutely feasted - you've got elephants, you've got monkeys, you've got the burns, all those sorts of animals just resting in the shade under the tree - they all get horribly, horribly drunk. And they stagger around all over the show and they roll on their backs and they bump into each other. They fall out of trees. It's a complete comedy show. And if ever you're in South Africa at the time of the **Marula** fruiting, make a point of going to find a **Marula** tree because it's so entertaining. [Interviewer laughs].

**Gail 00:10:48**

There is a bird called the Sacred Ibis that is known as the **Hadedda**. And it's a very large bird. And it has flight, although its flight is very clumsy. And he's mostly found on the ground, he's got a long beak, and he'll peck down into the ground and get ants and that sort of thing out of it. And when he flies, as he takes off, he makes this dreadful screech of, ah, ah, ah, and normally at five o'clock in the morning when you're trying to sleep. And after much research, it was discovered that the reason he does that is because he's afraid of heights. [Laughter]

And I want to tell you about Ubuntu, U-B-U-N-T-U. It exists in tribes all over the world. And in South Africa, it is known as Ubuntu, and it's a philosophy that 'I am because of you', which basically says no man is an island. So people in South Africa are never on their own. You're always attached to somebody to help, to give, to receive, to share. And it's amazing how strong a community is with Ubuntu. And what has happened in civilised nations now is that that sense of Ubuntu, even amongst the tribes in South Africa, is diminishing, or it's lost altogether. And it's creating its own set of coexisting rules, as it were, where people have become territorial and don't share.

And when you see Ubuntu in action, it is so wonderful. Just whatever you're trying to do, there's suddenly somebody at your shoulder to help or to let you graze your animals on their



land because it's more green than yours because they have water. And in exchange, you will share vegetables with them. And if ever you visit South Africa, I would suggest that you keep a very sharp eye out for Ubuntu, which you will see being practised everywhere. And if you can learn it and take it back to wherever you're from, that's very exciting because you'd be helping the spread of Ubuntu.

**Gail 00:13:22**

If you should ever be lucky enough to find yourself at an Indaba in South Africa, you will find it's an amazing experience of organisation and control. And one of the things that helps with the organisation is the talking stick. Now talking sticks are not peculiar to Zulus. They are found all over the world in various tribes, and they're very ornate carved and beaded sticks or spoons. And the person that holds the stick is the person that has the right to speak. And that way, you have no interruptions, no over-talking, and a person gets a clear space to say what they've got to say.

But it's also considered very inappropriate to hold on to the stick for any length of time. So you say what you've got to say. And then you're mindful of the fact that others have things to say, and you pass the stick on and this goes round the table. And that's how everyone gets their say. And because you're obviating jabber, which often happens at a conference table, it shortens the Indaba, and it also makes everybody's point very clear and gets everyb- gives everyone a chance to put their point forward.

Yeah, so -- Talking sticks are absolutely wonderful thing for Indabas, for keeping control and organisation and allowing even the weaker people at the table a space to have their say. And they very often have important things to say but get talked down at meetings. And the one thing I love about the the Indaba talking stick is that it's something can be adapted to every household, and if every household has an Indaba once a week, and they use a talking stick, every member of the family gets to have their say and a lot of minor issues are ironed out before they become major issues. So take it into your home, it's a good thing to have.