

Nana Miriam and the Hippo

In olden times in Nigeria, there was a powerful shaman called Fara Maka, who had three special talents. He could talk to the spirits, control nature, and heal people.

Fara Maka knew all there was to know about the natural world and he passed on his knowledge and his magic to his only daughter, Nana Miriam, who remembered every word he said.

When Fara Maka was busy, Nana Miriam would sneak away to a secret place in the forest and practise her magical arts – and she was good, even more powerful than her father. However, nobody knew this yet.



One harvest-time, Fara Maka and Nana Miriam were woken early by the wails and cries of their people.

“Oh no!” they howled, pointing at their crops. “What shall we do?”

The nearest field to the village had been torn to pieces and every last grain of rice had been eaten.

“It was a hippo!” cried one of the men. “A giant hippo with blazing eyes. It woke me with its grunts and I saw it running away. If it does this to all our crops, we will soon starve!”

“Do not worry,” said Fara Maka. “I will guard our fields tonight. It will not dare to touch them when I am there.”

That night, Nana Miriam wished her father good luck as he set off to guard the crops. Everyone slept more peacefully, knowing that he was there.

When the moon was high, a giant hippo stepped out from the long grasses and ran at a thunderous pace towards the fields. ➡

LOCATE IT!

This folk tale is set in Nigeria in Africa. Can you locate it on a map and find out **five interesting facts** about this country?



“Stop!” cried Fara Maka. “You are not welcome here, Nile horse!”

But the hippo didn’t slow down. Fara Maka summoned his magic and tried to stop the hippo in its tracks, but the hippo was so powerful, nothing could hold it back. Soon, it was devouring everything in its sight.

Fara Maka was enraged. “Stop right now!” he shouted, and he threw a magical spear at the hippo, but the spear snapped against its thick hide and fell to the ground.

Fara Maka asked the spirits for help, and they sent a hundred dogs, who ran at the hippo, snarling and baring their sharp teeth. To Fara Maka’s horror, the hippo ate every single dog, then finished the crops in the field.

No matter what Fara Maka tried, he could not defeat the hippo. At dawn, he returned to his people, ashamed to tell them the bad news.



When he reached home, he collapsed on his bed. Nana Miriam came to him. “Is there nothing you can do, Father?”

“I used every bit of magic I know,” said Fara Maka. “The terrible beast has powers stronger than mine.”

“Let me try, Father. I am not afraid,” said Nana Miriam. Her eyes were shining with excitement.

Fara Maka was impressed by his daughter’s bravery. “Very well,” he said. “But don’t use a spear. The hippo’s skin is unbreakable.”

Fara Maka wished his daughter luck and she set off with nothing but her courage, a bag of magic powders and some tools. She walked into the tall grasses, following the heavy footprints of her enemy.

At last, she found the hippo lazing in a clearing by the river. As Nana Miriam approached, the hippo stood up. It was indeed a giant. She had never seen a beast like it.

“So you’ve come to finish the job your father failed at?” jeered the hippo.

“I have,” said Nana Miriam, looking straight into the beast’s fierce eyes.

“Your father didn’t scare me, his spear couldn’t pierce me, and his magic dogs were no match for me. Do you really think you can beat me?” laughed the hippo.

“Let’s find out,” said Nana Miriam but, at that moment, the hippo created a towering wall of fire around itself. Nana Miriam stepped back from the searing flames and closed her eyes.

She began to chant, then she grabbed a handful of magic powder from her bag and threw it at the flames. In an instant, they went out.

The hippo looked pleased. 🏹



“Good, you are more of a challenge than your father,” he said, and an iron wall sprang up around the hippo.

Nana Miriam began to chant again. She put her hand into her bag and produced a hammer and a chisel. Using the tools, she struck the iron wall and it turned to dust.

For the first time, the hippo felt fear. Quick as lightning, it turned itself into a stream, which trickled and then gushed towards the banks of the mighty Niger River.

“You think you can hide from me in the river?” smiled Nana Miriam. “You’re not getting away that easily!”

As she chanted, she threw her magic powder onto the stream, transforming it into the hippo again.

The frightened animal had met its match. It raced towards the river with Nana Miriam close behind it. Just as the hippo reached the riverbank, Nana Miriam flung some powder at it, causing a long wall to block the hippo’s escape.

It had no choice but to run alongside the wall – and soon it was hurtling towards Nana Miriam’s village. She could see the villagers and her father waiting up ahead.

“I cannot let my father have the glory of defeating this beast,” she thought.



She threw herself at the hippo and grabbed one of its hind legs. Holding it firmly, Nana Miriam lifted the hippo into the air and swung it around her head. She did this once, twice, three times, then she hurled it as hard as she could into the sky, where it soared all the way around the earth, then flew into deep, dark space where it could never bother anyone again!

The people clapped and cheered, and Fara Maka grinned. “What a brave and clever daughter I have,” he said.

Nana Miriam went on to become the most wise and powerful shaman the people ever had. 🌀



Did You Know?

In some parts of Africa, the hippopotamus used to be known as a Nile horse – not just because they look like fat horses and like to bathe in the River Nile, but because the word ‘hippopotamus’ is Greek for ‘horse of the stream’.