

African Tales

Compiled by Harold Scheub

The Favored Daughter²⁷

Batanga (Mpongwe) (Cameroon)²⁸

Ra-Mborakinda lived in his town with his women and sons and daughters and servants. Among his women were Ngwekonde, his chief wife, and Ngwe-lëgë, whom he neglected. But Ngwe-lëgë had a beautiful daughter named Ilâmbe, much beloved by him. Ra-Mborakinda prized this daughter so much that he left everything to her direction.

One day he wished to start on a journey, intending to stay a long time. He had, in his anxiety for her safety, a rule that she should not go out of her house to walk far, lest she get into trouble. When he was arranging to go, he gave her all the keys and directions of everything into her hands. He said to her, "As I shall be away a long time, I leave all cloth and other goods for you to give out as you may see the people need."

Ilâmbe consented to do this work, and Ra-Mborakinda went away. After he had been away for quite a while, and she thought it time to give out cloth and whatever was required for the women, she was very careful not to show partiality to her friends, not even to give more to her mother. So if she gave, for instance, two cloths to her mother, she would give as many as five to Ngwekonde, and to all the others what she thought they needed. Yet Ngwekonde was not satisfied. Even though she had been given more than the others, her heart was planning mischief to Ilâmbe.

So Ngwekonde made up her mind, "I will know what I shall do some day," for she was jealous that the petted daughter had been put into authority over her.

One day the people saw Ilâmbe walking on the premises, and they remembered that she was going out of the bounds her father had assigned her.

They called, "Ilâmbe, Ilâmbe! Where are you going?"

She replied, "I'm going for a walk."

Soon they all seemed to forget to observe where she had gone, for Ngwekonde by her sorcery had caused Ilâmbe's head to be confused and had made the people forget to watch her.

Soon after Ilâmbe had gone out of the town into the forest, Ngwekonde also followed to go after her, without the people seeing her go. Ilâmbe went aimlessly, with Ngwekonde behind her.

Then, when they were far from the town, Ngwekonde said, "Yes, I've got you now!—you, with your pride because you are the beloved daughter! Do not think that you will again see your father and mother."

So she seized and dragged Ilâmbe to the foot of a big tree, tied her to it, and began to give her a severe beating.

Ilâmbe pleaded and said, "Ah, Ngwekonde! Please, what have I done? In what have I wronged you?"

But Ngwekonde only replied, "No mercy for you!" and then tied her hands fast to the tree. Then Ngwekonde returned to the town.

Soon after Ngwekonde had gone, Ilâmbe longed to get back to the town, for she feared the forest. She began to try to loosen the knots. She tried and tried, but the knots were hard.

Darkness came, and she was very much afraid. Finally, after long effort, she got the cords loosened, but she was weak and faint with hunger. She thought, "When I started on the walk, it was at random, and when I came to my senses, when Ngwekonde dragged me to the tree, I did not know in what direction we came, and now I do not know the direction back to the town."

So she began to walk in any direction. As she went on and on, at last she happened down a path. She said to herself, "This path, even if it does not lead to any town, may lead me to where people are." She went on and on, and after a while, by daylight, she saw that the view ahead opened. By that, she knew that she was getting near to some clearing and perhaps to some village.

Following the path, she came straight to a hamlet, but she was afraid to enter it. She thought, "Perhaps the owners of this place are enemies of my father, and they may beat me, just as Ngwekonde did. I must hide." So she remained for a while on the outskirts and then slowly and gradually crept from tree to tree on one side of the path, lest someone should see her. When she was close to the hamlet, she peeped through the bushes to see whether she could recognize anyone, for she feared strangers. She saw no one at all and went on into the street and entered a large house, and she began to look around her. She saw no person, only goods and food. After she had examined this large house, she went into a smaller one, which was the kitchen where the cooking was done. She exclaimed to herself, "Ah, it is not very late, and I am very hungry. I will try to cook something. And I must be quick, lest the owners come and find me and kill me."

So she started to work. She took of different kinds of food, and dried fish, and firewood, and began rapidly to cook. After the pot had boiled, she took out a little of its contents and began to eat hurriedly. As to the remainder of the food, she went to the larger house and got clean dishes, put the food into them, and set them on the table.

Then she went out of the hamlet and hid herself in the bushes near by. Soon after she had hidden herself there, the owners of the house came. They were carpenters. They entered their house, and on the table was food that was still warm.

They exclaimed, "Who has done us this good thing?"

They looked all through the house and into the kitchen, but no person was there. Then they looked outside, in the back yard, and no person was there.

They said, "Perhaps some other day we shall find out."

So they went into the house, took their seats at the table, and began to eat. As they ate, they shouted, "You who have done this, if you are a man or a woman, come out and show yourself!"

But there was no reply. Ilâmbe had heard them but remained quiet.

So they said to themselves, "Never mind. Tomorrow we will by artifice find out this person, whether it be a man or a woman. If it be a man, we will take him for a brother in our work. If it be a woman, then none of us shall marry her. She shall be our sister."

At night, she did not enter the town but remained hidden near.

Next morning, the carpenters said among themselves, "We go to our work, but one of us must return early, as if unexpectedly, and perhaps we can find out this person."

And they went to their work, but one returned early.

In the interval, Ilâmbe was busy with her work of cooking. She made the food and put it on the table. As she was passing from house to house, the man who had been watching came softly behind her and seized her.

She began to scream, and beg, "Please, please let me go!"

He said, "Do not fear. You have done no wrong. Be quiet."

Then he asked her questions, and she told her story. So Ilâmbe was quieted, and she completed the arranging of food on the table. Not long after that, the other men came, and the first man told them of Ilâmbe.

They said to her, "Remain quiet. You are our sister. We will take good care of you."

The next day, off at their place of work, they began to buy nice things for her. And they dressed her in fine clothes.

But they warned her, "One thing we must tell you. Be very careful.

Sometimes there is a certain big bird that comes here and picks up people and kills them. When it comes, people have to remain in their houses and shut their doors and windows.” They also told her that the usual time of the coming of the bird was at noon.

On another day, they went away to their work, as usual. When they returned, Ilâmbe made their food, and they went into the house to eat it.

And the bird came at an unusual hour, and it killed Ilâmbe.

When the men came from the house where they had been eating, they found her dead. They mourned for her. When they had made a coffin and placed her in it, they refrained from burying it, for the body looked so lifelike and did not decay.

So they kept it suspended in the air, and daily they went to look at her face.