



Why Some Of Us Are Beautiful And Others Not

Ndunto, wife of the great chief Koalo, was childless. Her days and dreams were full of painful longing to be with child, but she could not conceive. Kradnala, the village diviner, told her of Walekela, an ancient and wise oracle, who could advise her. Now Walekela dwelled on the shores of great Lake Victoria in a far-off land. Ndunto was thoroughly frightened of the long, arduous journey through a jungle thick with beasts of prey. But she gathered her courage and made the difficult passage. At last she came to the oracle's village, exhausted and chilled with fear from the long hours she had spent in the forest listening to the jungle din of predators.

Walekela welcomed the woman, and he was filled with admiration for this creature who had come so far.

“My good woman,” said Walekela, “news of you reached me before you arrived. I am much impressed that your desire for a child has so filled you that even death's face could not destroy it. Therefore, I shall grant your wish. In your village where the grasses rush to meet the jungle's edge, you will find a magical palm. Go to it. Press your aging face against its scented bark and whisper:

Ah tree of life,
Fill me,
Fill me,
Help me birth.
Fill me with life.”

Walekela leaned over his medicine horn and muttered: “Aee-warō tago simbo.”

Ndunto found herself magically transported back to the door of her hut. She walked quickly from the hut through the silken grass that brushed her graceful legs. The jungle was far but Ndunto moved as a gazelle that has seen the lion’s jaw. It seemed only seconds before she reached the edge. Perhaps Walekela’s magic was still afoot? Her blazing gaze searched the forest’s life for a palm bent with golden nuts. At last she saw the tree. It pushed up from the brush flinging its black leaves against the diamond sky. Its golden nuts appeared as fireflies. Ndunto moved to the tree and placed her face on it. The bark was warm and soft. Ndunto whispered:

“Ah tree of life,
Fill me,
Fill me,
Help me birth.
Fill me with life.”

The tree replied in a voice that seemed to echo from the hills of her ancestors.

“Woman of Koalo, great granddaughter of Mlecheba, mother of your clan. You are now with child and it shall be born in three days. But you must promise that the child will never work.”

And so Ndunto promised and fled the tree to her waiting hearth.

A boy was born to her in three days, who Ndunto called Olonga, and in three more he grew into a handsome young man, for so the magical palm had foreordained. His mother informed him that he was never to work or the gods would punish him, and the boy gave Ndunto his oath.

Now Olonga seemed almost magical. His body was graceful with rippling muscles and ox-like strength. His chocolate skin had a golden sheen, and his eyes were the black of palm leaves. His voice was deep and powerful. All the village women desired him, but he loved Reda, a creature so well turned she matched Olonga's excellence.

Olonga courted Reda in the grasslands away from the prying eyes of the villagers. They ran hand in hand through the sun-scorched grasses flecked with butterflies and an occasional cicada that had strayed from the trees in the jungle. One day, while they were playing, Olonga accidentally pulled one of the numerous strands of multicolored beads that hung from Reda's long slender neck, and it broke. The beads rolled over the girl's naked breasts, between the folds of her leather apron, and disappeared into the grass. Reda stooped down pushing the blades apart trying to find the beads. Luckily, most had fallen in one spot.

"Please, Olonga, go and fetch me some palm tree fiber so I may restring the beads. They were a gift from my uncle, and I treasure them highly."

The lovely Reda sat alone in the silence of the summer's afternoon carefully picking up the bits of colored stone, while Olonga ran to the forest seeking the palm

fiber. When he found a palm tree, he scurried up its trunk to pick the fiber. He had completely forgotten Ndunto's warning and his oath never to work. He ran back to Reda with the fiber.

When Reda saw the palm fiber in his hand her face fell.

"Oh, Olonga, I cannot use this fiber, as it is not strong enough. I need the fiber from the palm which grows in water."

So Olonga went in search of the water palm. Alas, the magical palm deep in the forest knew that Olonga had broken his promise never to work. When Olonga reached the top of the water palm and cut into it, the magical palm caused the water palm to crack with a deafening sound, and it swallowed the hapless boy. All that remained of Olonga was a shadow, which had a form like a man and cast itself over the muddy water where the palm tree stood.

Olonga was gone for so long Reda feared he was lost or hurt by a wild animal. She ran to the hut of Ndunto who had just returned from her gardening.

"Ndunto," she cried, "Olonga went to pick palm fiber and he has not yet returned. I am so frightened."

Ndunto's beautiful coffee-black skin turned ashen.

"My child," she moaned, "he has broken the taboo."

And she ran from the hut toward the jungle, her legs weak with fear, her eyes teared. She went from palm to palm calling her son, but the only reply was a deep

silence, broken occasionally by a parrot's shriek. At last she came to a water palm that cast a strange shadow over the water.

"Whose shadow is it that lies on the water?" Ndunto cried.

"Ah, mother, it is I, Olonga."

"Let him go, let him go, oh palm," wailed his mother.

But the palm held fast.

Reda stood beside the palm in silence. Her grief was so great it flowed into the trees, the still grasses, and the watching birds. They all felt its weight. It was strong enough to touch the ancient, magical palm. Feeling sorry for the girl, the magical palm caused the water palm to release Olonga's shadow, which skipped down the trunk and slid over the water to the ground.

Reda ran to embrace her lover, and the magical palm turned them both into a light, golden oil that formed a tiny pool at the edge of the water. Ndunto, moaning, put her hand into the warm oil, letting it trickle over her fingers. She sat next to the pool grieving over the loss of her son. At last she rose and returned to the village.

When Ndunto went to tell Koala the sorrowful news, he hardly recognized her; Ndunto's face had become so lovely. It seems she had spread the oil from her fingers onto her face as she wiped away her tears, and her face had become beautiful. News of this miracle soon circulated among the rest of tribespeople, and they ran to the palm to get some of the oil. But it was only a small pool, and the first ones there used it all.

And that is why, or so they say, some people are beautiful and others are not!