

THE HIDDEN PRINCESS

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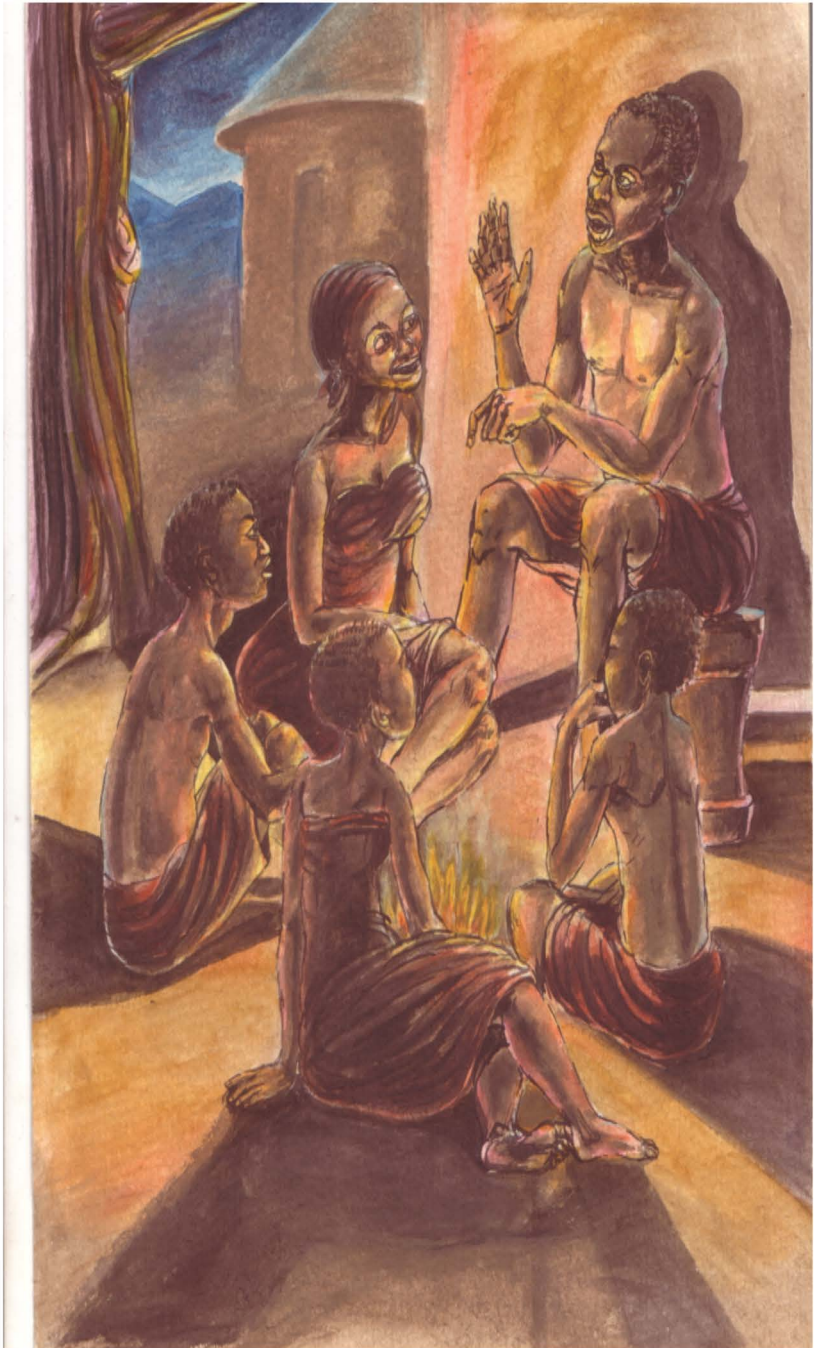
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DEDICATION

For all lovers of Oral Literature, especially the
Folktale Genre

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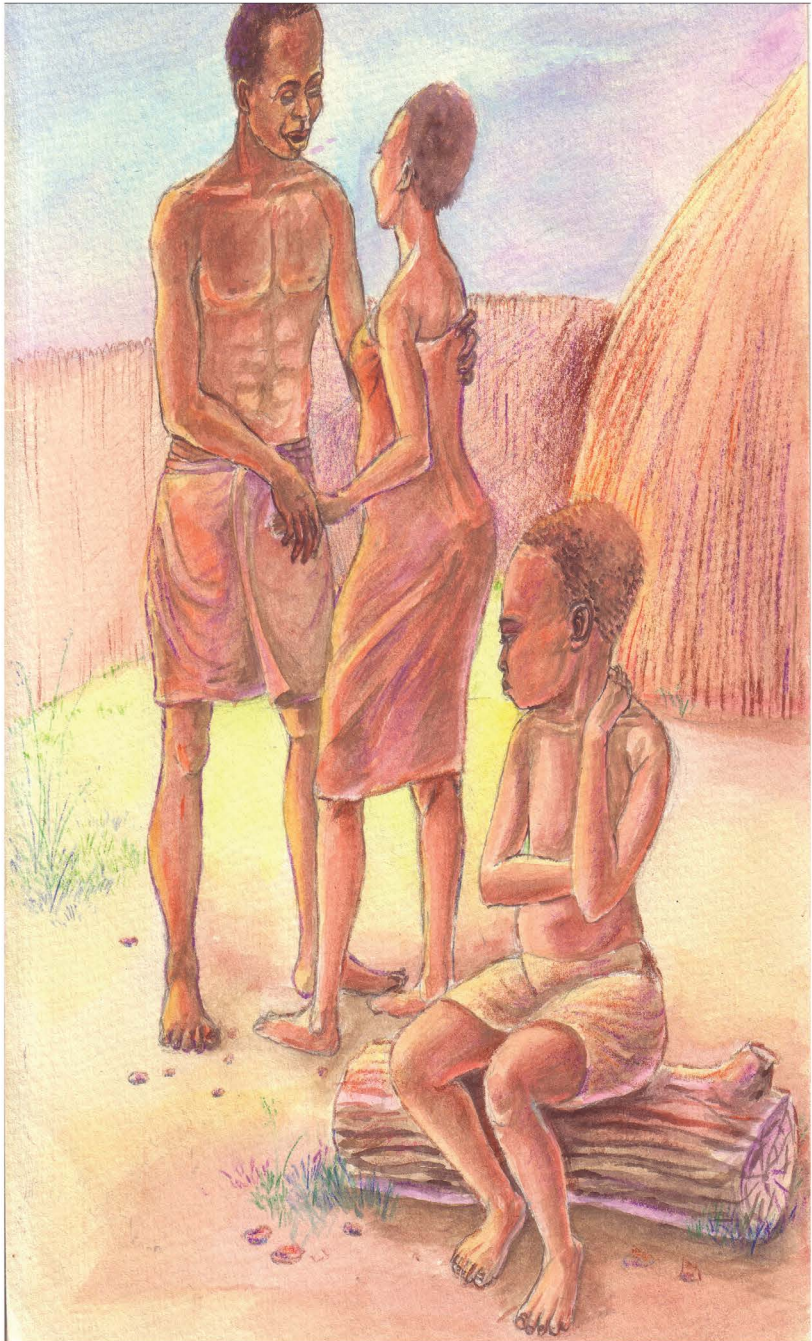


By the fire place listening to folk tales

The Hidden Princess

Listen, listen, to this my tale! Once upon a time, there lived a man called Rwamayongo. He married a woman called Nyangoma who gave birth to a beautiful girl named Nyamwire, a name from the Basingo clan of Ankole. Nyangoma died when Nyamwire was just a toddler. So the father decided to marry again. He was hoping that his new wife, named Bayara, would take care of his daughter Nyamwire.

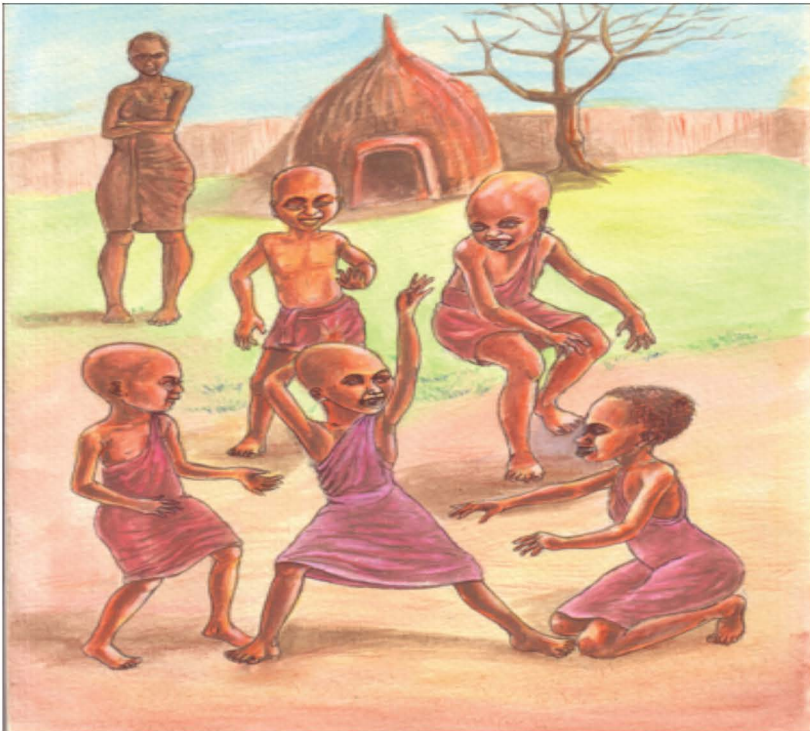
However, this was not what happened. As time went by, Bayara produced her own children, a boy named Mugasho and a girl named Murungi.

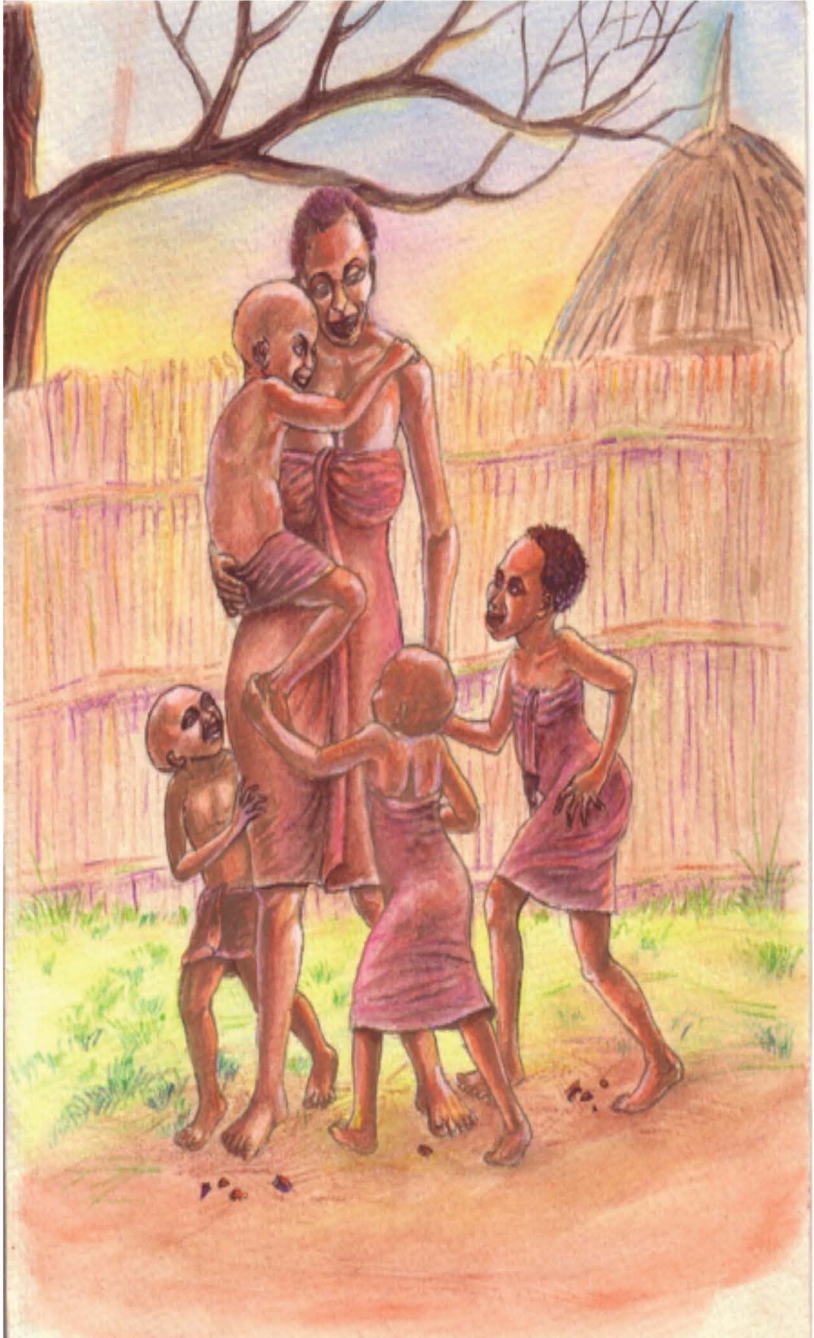


Nyamwire ignored by the father and his new wife

Bayara, who never loved Nyamwire, liked her even less when her own children were born one after another until the home was filled with children's voices.

The home became so lively with Bayara's children that Nyamwire was almost as forgotten as loneliness and quietness.





Nyangoma surrounded by her children

Meanwhile, Nyamwire was growing into a beautiful young girl. Her very smooth skin was between black and brown. Her hips were as wide as the calabash that is used to churn milk! Her eyes were as big and as white as those of a calf, and her legs were as round as banana stems.

Nyamwire was indeed beautiful! Whenever she smiled, her small white teeth sparkled like stars on a dark night. To crown it all, she was very friendly towards her siblings as well as to anyone who visited the family. She was sociable and well mannered. Her siblings adored her and whoever visited their home instantly liked her. Moreover, to their mother's annoyance, the other children never wanted to play or eat without her. Unfortunately, the more beautiful and sociable Nyamwire became, the more hatred she attracted from her step-mother.

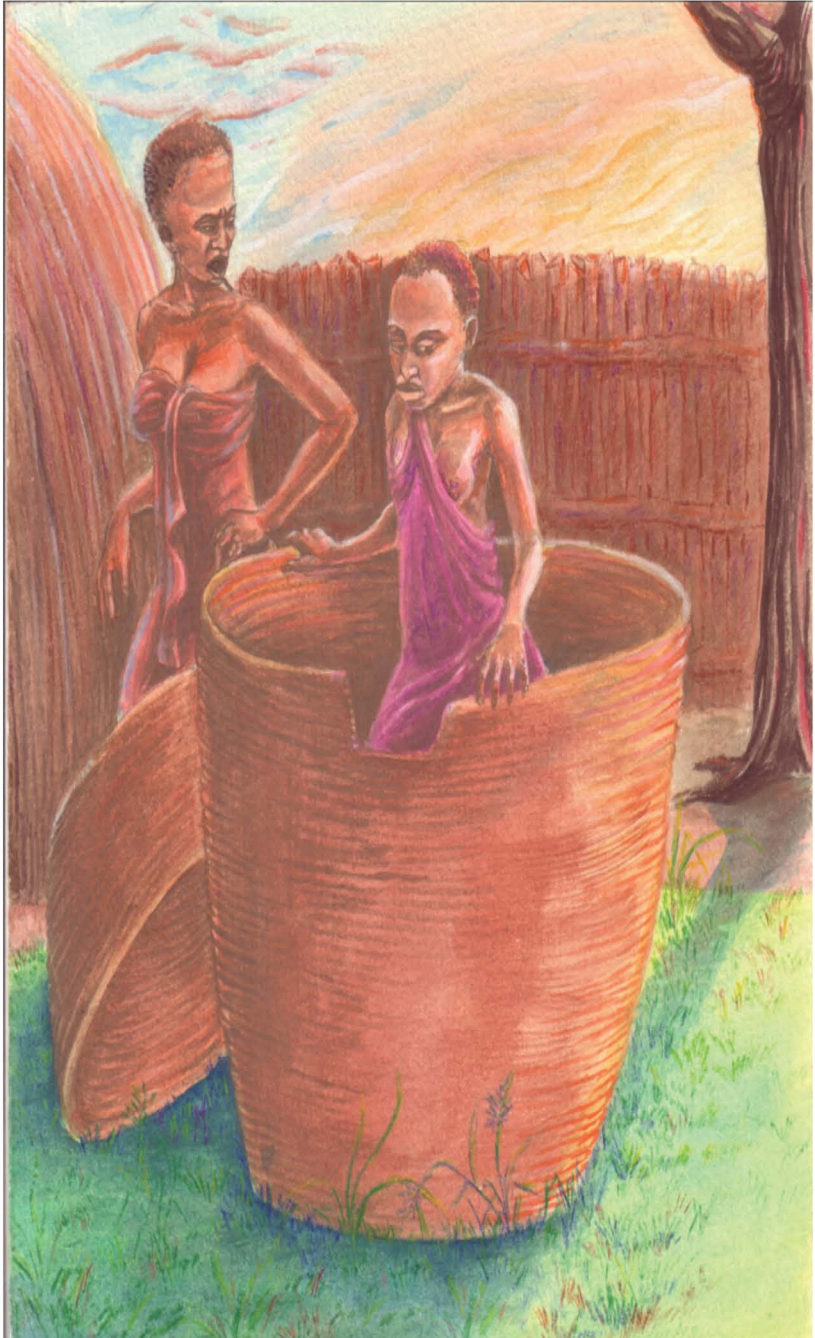


Nyamwire the beautiful girl

One day, Bayara hatched a wicked plan to make sure that no one saw Nyamwire or interacted with her. "This adorable girl, who attracts everybody with her charm, will one day get kidnapped or killed." she told her husband. "Let us hide her where no one can find her."

Nyamwire's father thought this idea was out of genuine concern for his daughter. He agreed without question. Bayara was ecstatic because this meant that people would no longer make unfavourable comparisons between Nyamwire, her step-daughter, and her own beloved children.

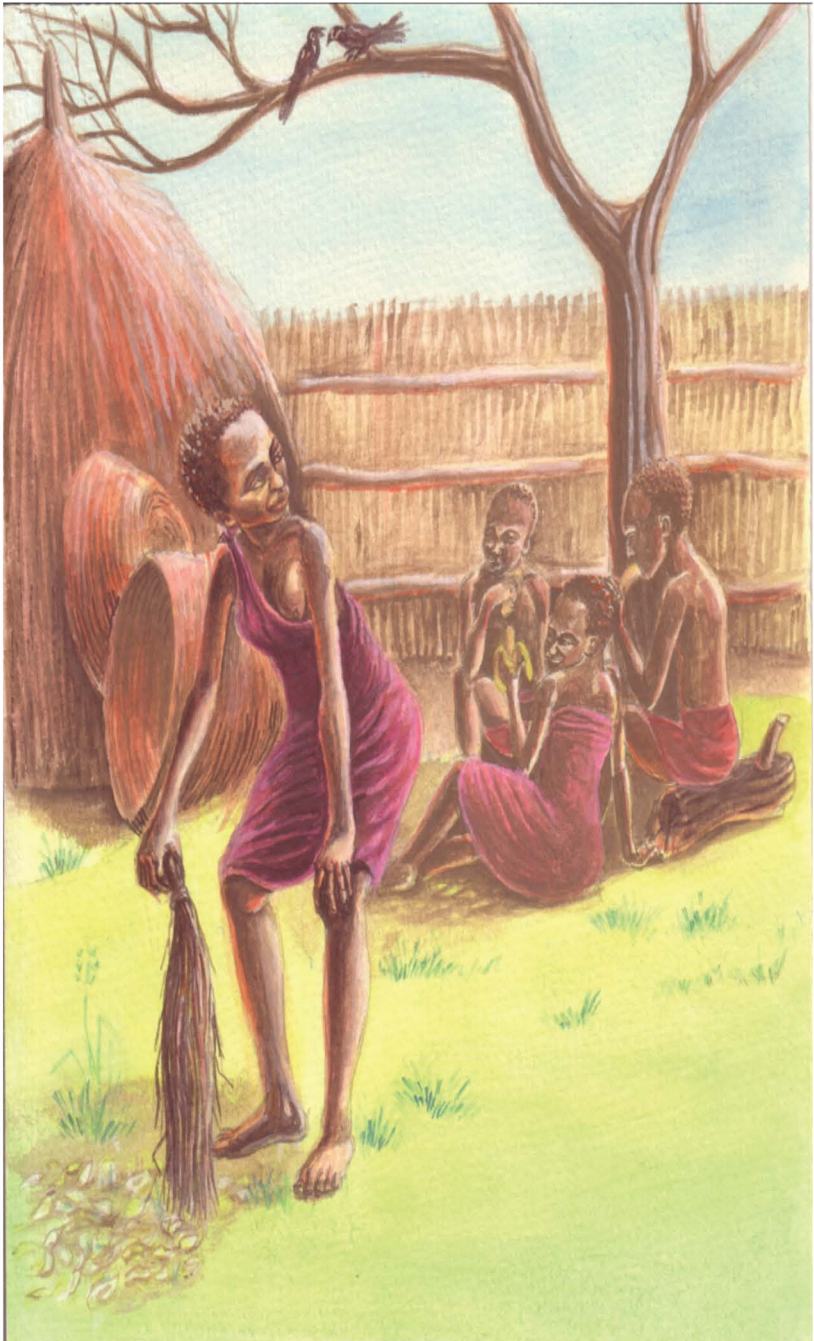
So Bayara got a gigantic basket woven in which she would force Nyamwire. The basket was then covered with a lid and Nyamwire was instructed to stay in it silently throughout the day.



Nyamwire forced into the basket by her step mother

Whenever the parents went to work in the garden, Nyamwire's siblings would remove the lid and ask her to come out and play with them. They would assure her that they would never reveal this secret to their mother who had instructed them never to play with her.

Nyamwire appreciated the younger children's concern for her and she selflessly did everything possible to help them with the household chores. On coming out of the basket, she would clean the house and do all the demanding tasks, like cooking food and feeding her siblings. They would then play for as long as possible after which Nyamwire would ignore her siblings' protests and reluctantly climb back into the basket until night.



Nyamwire helps her siblings with household chores

In that land there was a king with a grown son who was ready for marriage. The young man was very handsome. He was of noble stature, with a pointed nose and a long forehead. These were features that everyone admired in anyone of royal bearing.

At his home, the prince was nicknamed "Mutuusi", because he resembled the beautiful Tutsi people of Rwanda.

Every morning after the rays of the sun had chased the coldness away, the prince and his father would walk about, inspecting the land. At times they would go to gaze at their cattle that would be grazing in the nearby fields.



The handsome Prince "Mutuusi"

On one such occasion, the Prince went for a walk without his father. He was alone with his attendants. As they passed near Rwamayongo's home, the Prince looked through the papyrus reed enclosure and his eyes landed on a girl who was playing with the younger children. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

"Let's stop here for a while," he ordered his attendants. "I want to find out what's going on in this home. My eyes have seen something that I can't believe." The attendants stopped and waited to see what the Prince was talking about.

He walked ahead of them and entered the enclosure. He then greeted the children who were playing with a very beautiful girl. So his eyes hadn't deceived him after all.



The Prince and the slave boys peeping over Rwamuyongo's fence

"May I know your name, lovely maiden?" he asked her.

"I'm not allowed to talk to strangers," she replied.

"Do you think I'm a stranger?" he asked with a smile. "Don't you know who I am?"

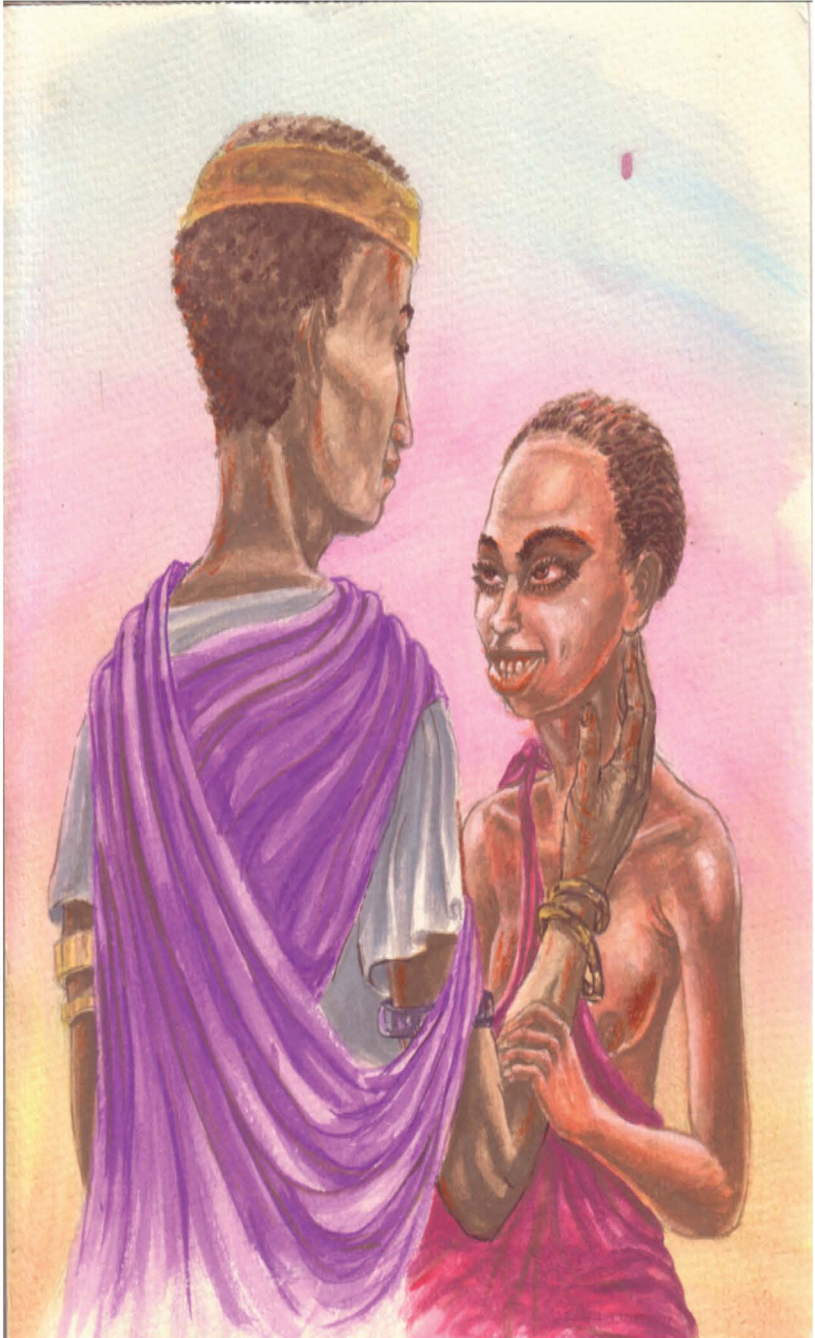
She shook her head as she looked him over with her sparkling eyes.

"I am the Prince, everybody knows who I am," he informed her. "My father is the King and I will be King someday. Will you be my Queen?"

She shyly looked down and gave no answer. In her mind, she was wondering if she was dreaming. Was it possible that she could one day be a queen?

"You don't believe me!" he said. "But you wait! I will prove you wrong someday. But, first, tell me your name."

"Nyamwire!" she answered boldly, staring him in the face without timidity or fear.



Nyamwire and the Prince, face to face!

It was a challenge and it was he who first looked away. At that moment, he swore to himself that nothing would stop him from marrying this beauty and proving to her that he meant every word he had said that day. The Prince knew he was smitten and that he would never forget this wonder. He was still looking about the home when Nyamwire vanished into her hiding place.



Nyamwire disappearing into the basket

“Where’s she?” the Prince asked the children.

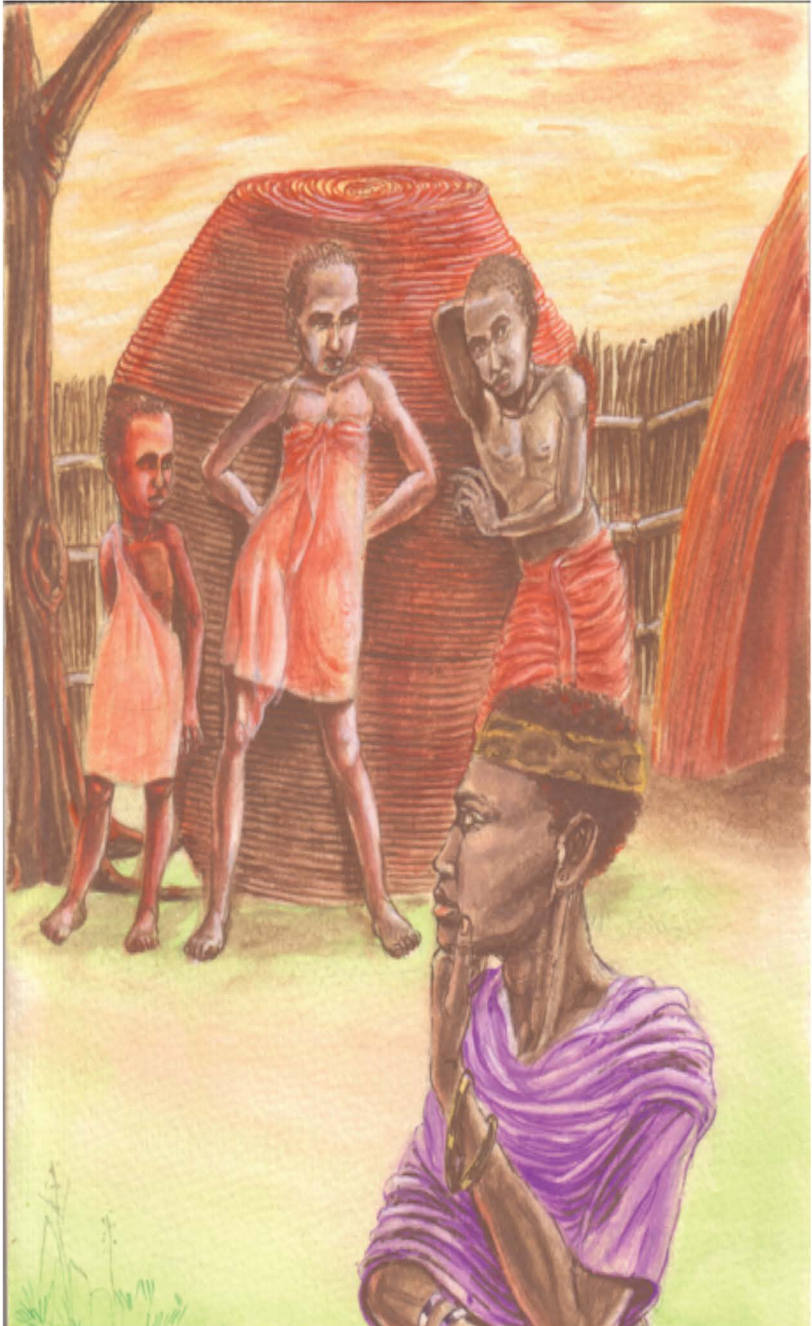
The children just stared at him without answering. “Who is she?” he asked.

“Our sister,” volunteered one of the younger children.

“Where did she go?” asked the Prince again, looking everywhere for Nyamwire.

The children only stared at him in silence as they leaned against the gigantic basket that stood in a hidden corner of the compound.

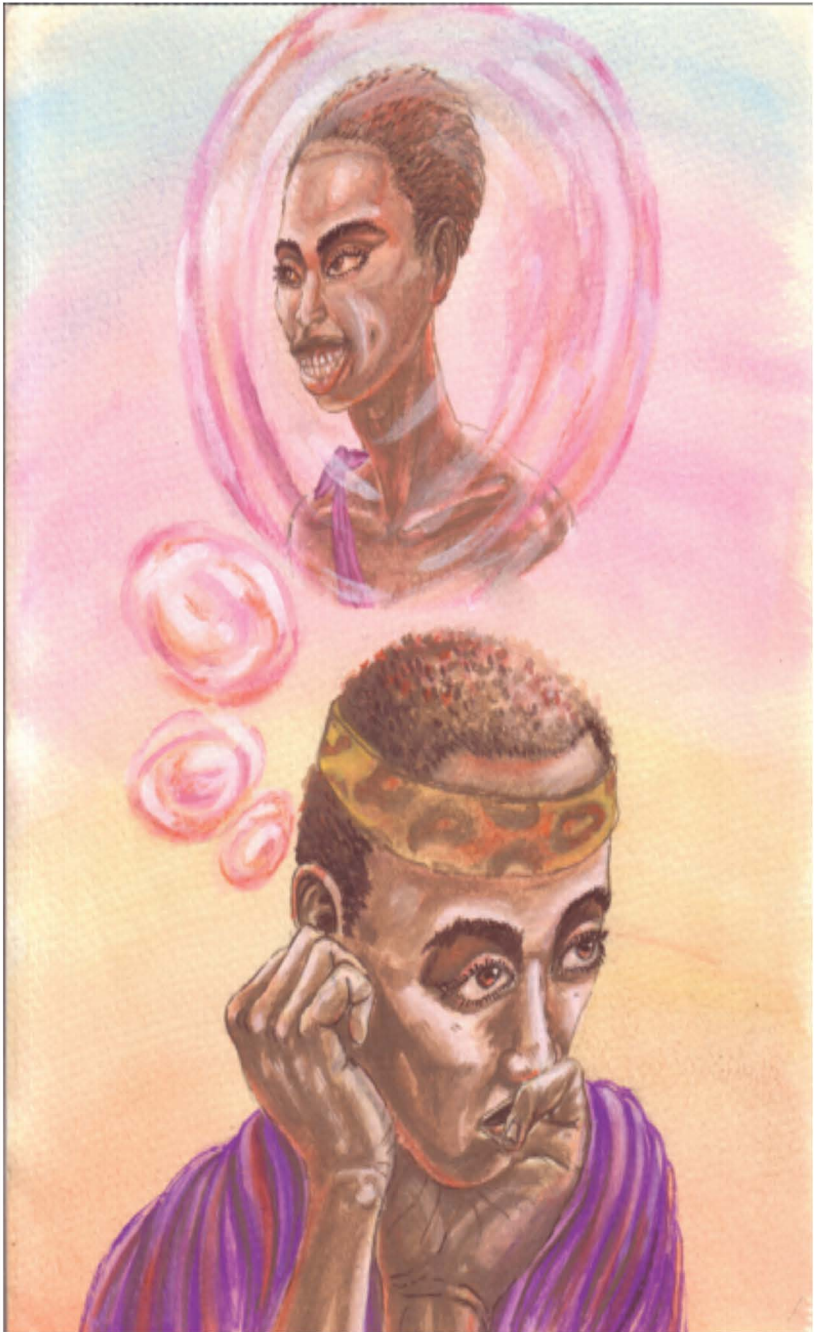
The Prince finally gave up and left with his entourage of attendants. He left knowing that, for the first time in his life, he was truly in love.



The Prince leaves Nyamwire's home reluctantly

From that day on, not a moment passed without him thinking about Nyamwire. He could think of nothing else but this beautiful girl. He could not eat all day and he could not sleep all through the night. At times, he would stare into space and drift into absentmindedness. How he wished he could be near his dream queen!

After sometime when the Prince could not take his mind away from the beautiful Nyamwire, he went back to the home and peeped through the papyrus enclosure.



Every moment the Prince thinks about Nyamwire

The children were absorbed in their game. However, there was no sign of Nyamwire.

"Where's your sister today?" he asked them when they came to greet him.

One of the youngest pointed at the huge basket.

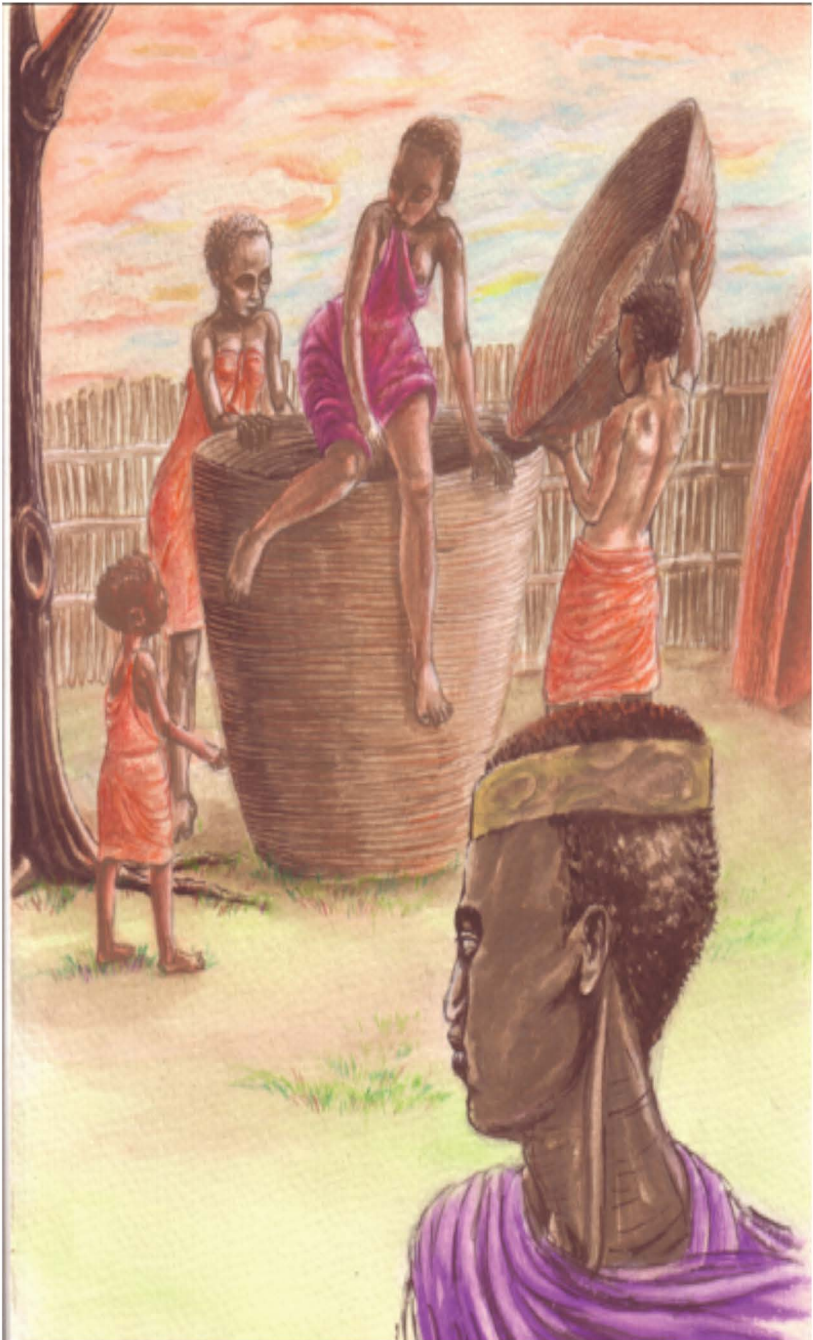
"You mean she's in there?" he asked, incredulous.

Before anyone could answer, the lid suddenly popped open and Nyamwire scrambled out.

"Nyamwire!" exclaimed the Prince. "What were you doing in there?"

"That's my playhouse," she lied.

"So you were playing hide and seek with the children, were you?" he laughed, pleased that he had found her.



Nyamwire coming out of the basket

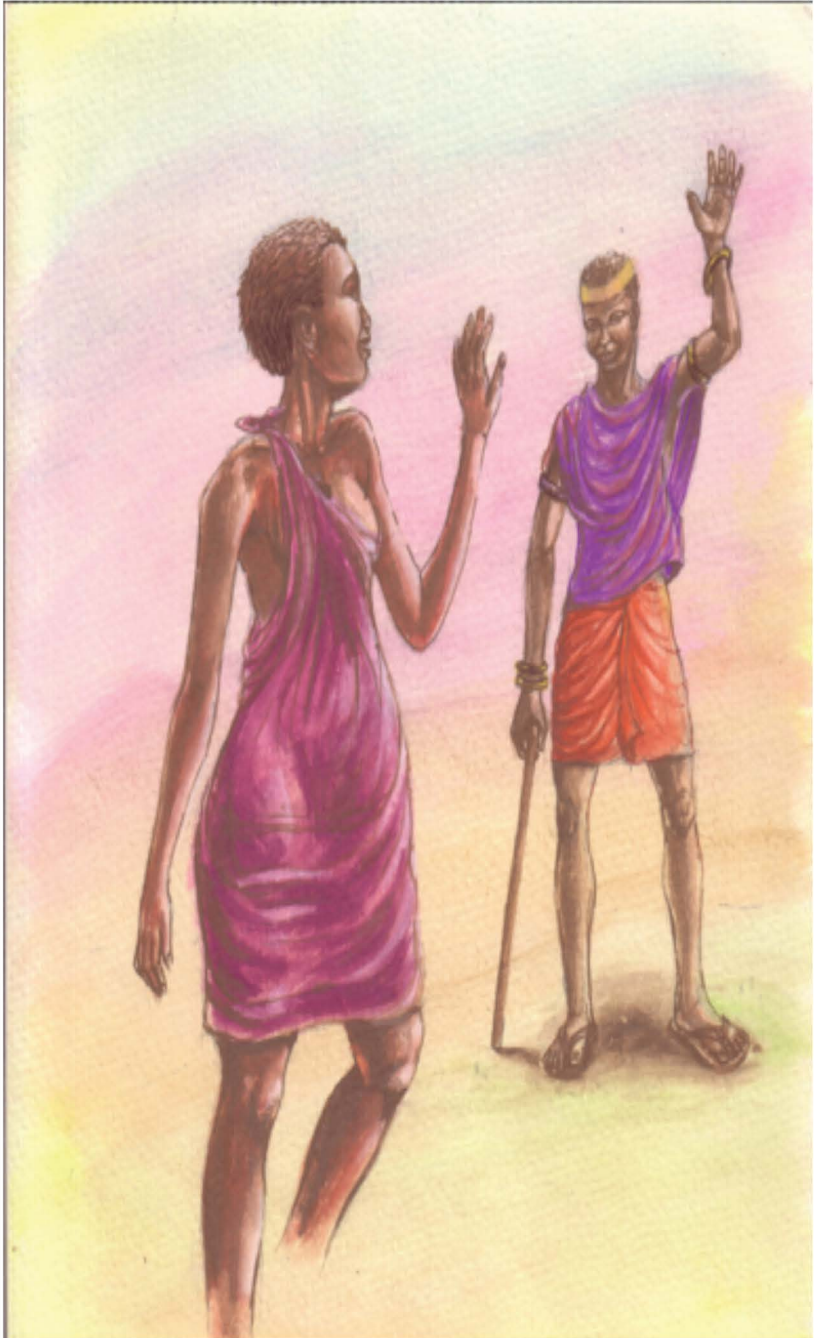
He had been half afraid that all this was a dream and that he might wake up and find himself in his bed. However, it wasn't a dream and here she was, as real as himself!

"I said I would come back to ask you to marry me," he said after they had exchanged greetings. "Well, here I am!"

Nyamwire did not know what to say.

"You don't have to answer me now," said the Prince, to her great relief. "Don't worry. There are things I have to do first. Then I'll come and ask for your hand in marriage properly, as befits a future King."

With those words, he left, but reluctantly.



Nyamwire and "Mutuusi" waving goodbye to each other

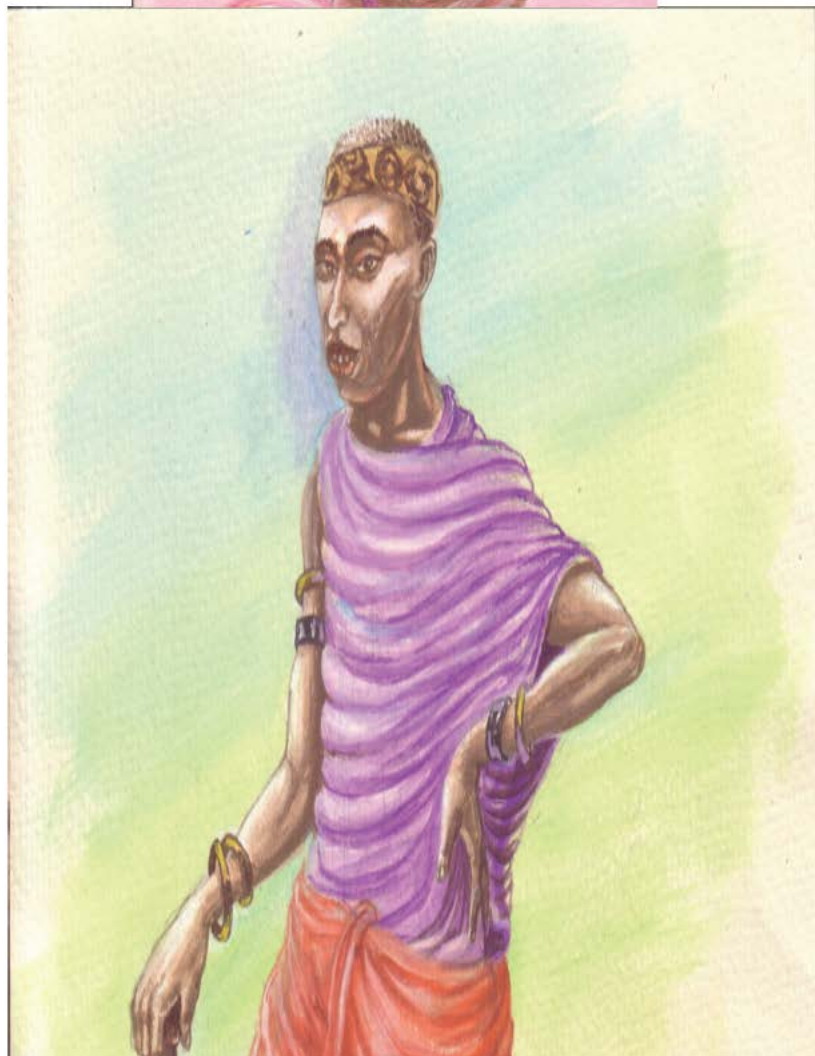
That day when the Prince got home, he told his father that he had found the right girl to marry. The King at first refused to believe this because, among the Banyankole, he who is going to marry first asks around. To marry into the King's palace, one's background has to be thoroughly investigated. The clan, the taboos and all the background details of the would-be bride must be unearthed and thoroughly scrutinized. However, seeing how ardent his son was, the King consented to the proposed marriage.



The Prince tells the King about his desire to marry Nyamwire

These investigations had proved that Nyamwire's step-mother, Bayara, who had kept her in a basket, would not welcome her getting married. The only person who could prepare her as required by tradition, was her aunt, Biragiro, who lived in a village not far from the palace.

The Prince was directed to Biragiro's home where he met the aunt and asked for Nyamwire's hand in marriage. She readily accepted but on condition that the whole issue be kept a secret in order to protect Nyamwire from her step-mother's wrath. This secret was to be known by the Prince's family and Nyamwire's aunt, Biragiro.



"Mutuusi" can't stop thinking about Nyamwire

The King's Palace was buzzing with activity in preparation for the Prince's marriage. The men went to the forest to collect logs of firewood. The women fervently moulded cooking stones and cooking pots. They also churned milk in great quantities. The occasion would require a lot of ghee to make "eshabwe" (the Kinyankole delicacy meant for important visitors). All the delicacies were put together for the grand occasion.

In Nyamwire's home, none of these preparations were known. Life went on normally until the day Biragiro arrived to demand for Nyamwire and two of her younger sisters to follow her to her home. Biragiro's brother, Rwamayongo, and his wife Bayara dared not ask why. Biragiro never allowed anyone to question her. She only talked to Nyamwire, saying:

"Leave all your rags behind," she said. "You don't need any of that where you are going."



Nyamwire being prepared for the wedding

The whole kingdom gathered at the Palace for the Prince's wedding. The flute players and the drummers roused the crowds with their beats. The kyevugo performers recited the poetic praises of the bride and the dancers raised dust.

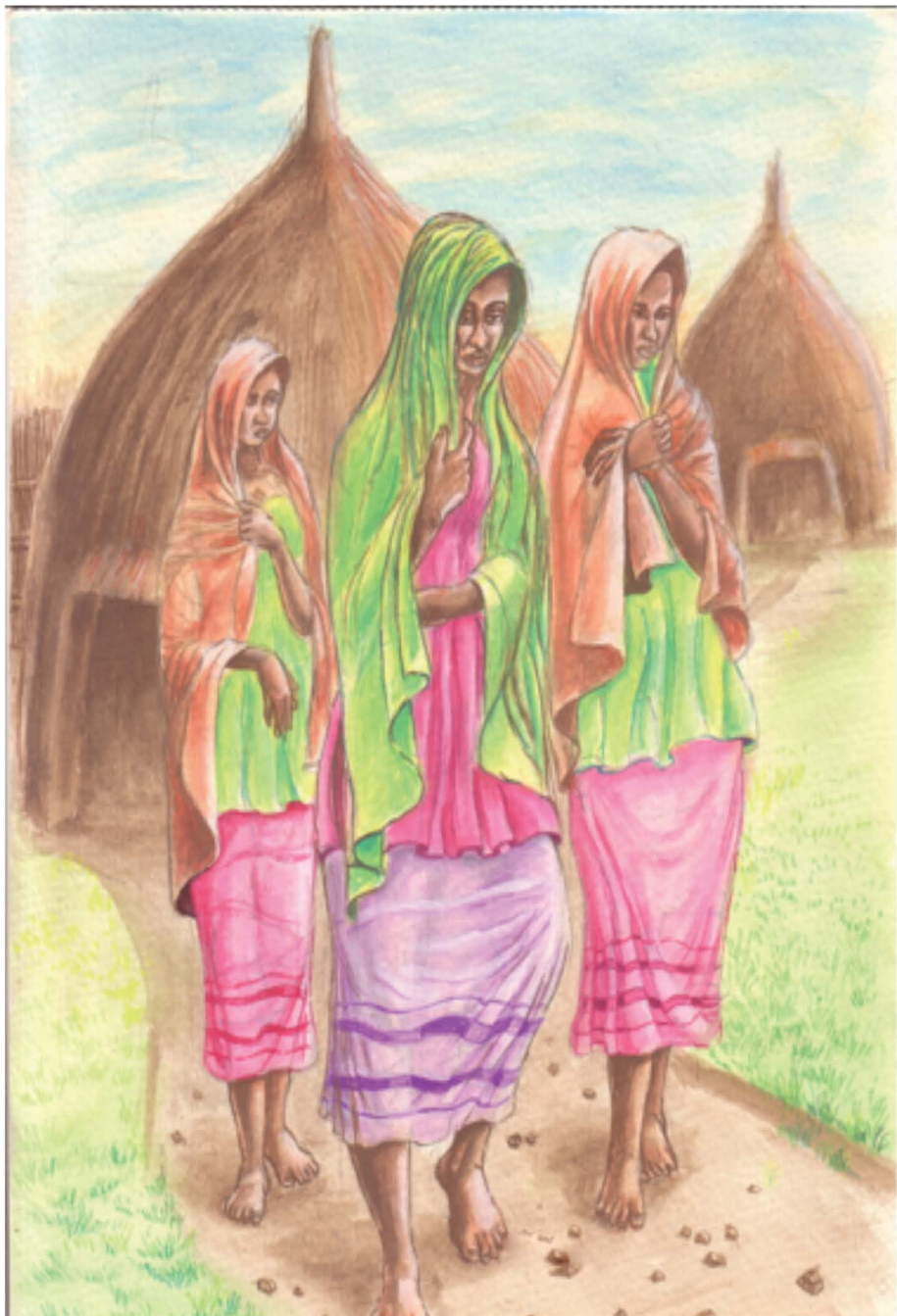
In the evening, the palace attendants were sent to Biragiro's home to pick the bride. The aunt had already prepared Nyamwire for her wedding. She had been smeared with ghee, tattooed and dressed in the Kinyankole attire. At the time to leave for the palace, Nyamwire in a sad solo started singing the farewell song in accordance with tradition:



The traditional dancers celebrating Nyamwire's wedding

*Iwe Maama eei,
Nagyenda eei,
Nakutsigaho eei,
NiiweTaata eei,
Nagyendaeei,
Nakutsigaho eei,
Kanyanyazi eei,
Nagyenda eei,
Nakutsigaho eei
Karumuna eei,
Nagyenda eei,
Nakutsigaho eei,
IweTatento eei,
Nagyenda eei,
Nakutsigaho eei,
Iwemarumi eei,
Nagyenda eei,
Nakutsigaho eei,
Mawento eei
Nagyenda eei
Nakutsigaho eei
Tatenkazi eei,
Nagyenda eei,
Nakutsigaho eei,
Banyaruganda eei,
Nagyenda eei,
Nabatsigaho eei,
Imwe mwena eei,
Nagyenda eei,
Nabatsigaho eei,*

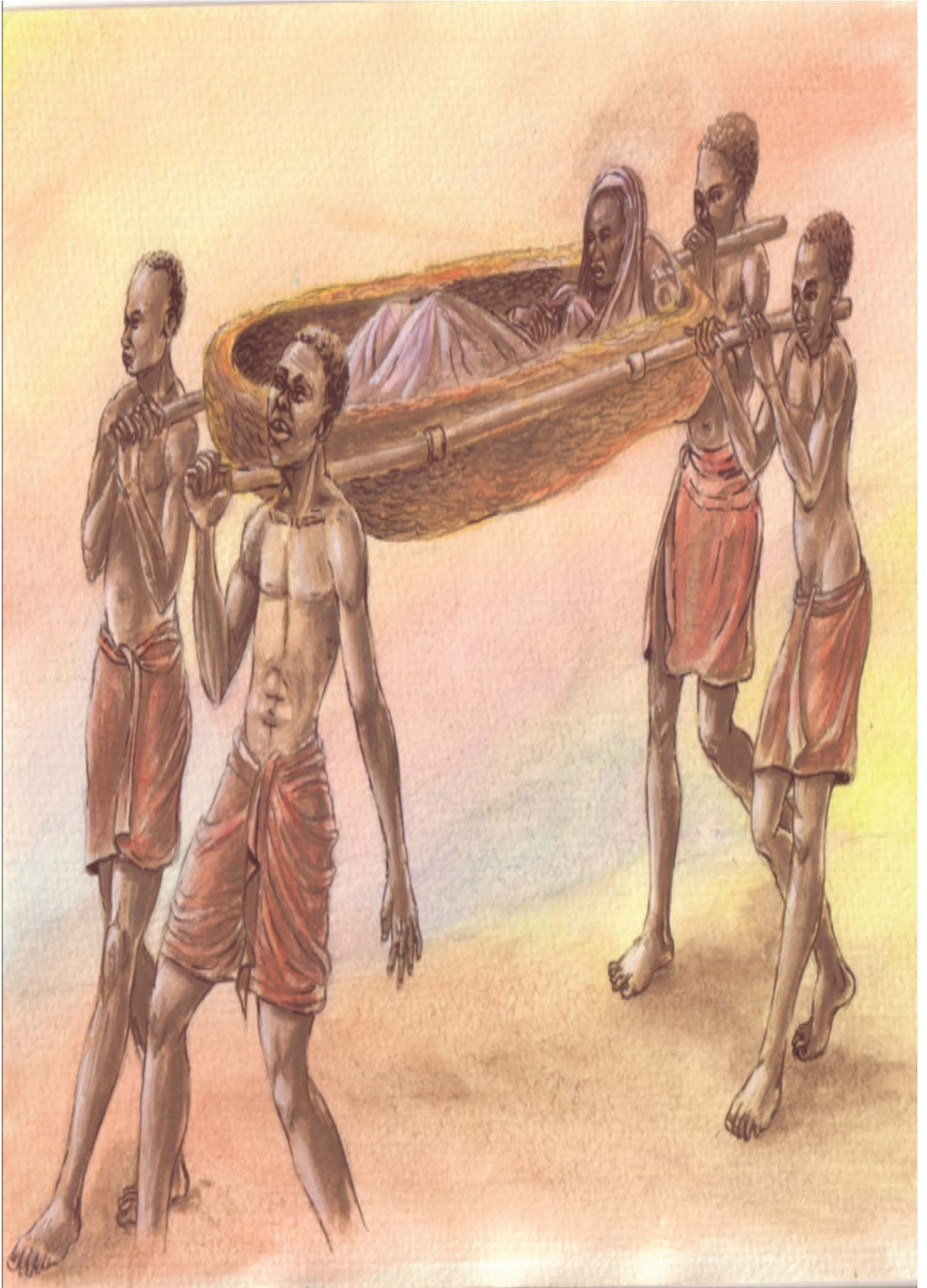
*You my mother eei,
I have gone eei,
I have left you eei,
And you my father eei,
I have gone eei,
I have left you eei,
You my brother eei,
I have gone eei,
I have left you eei,
Young sister eei
I have gone eei,
I have left you eei,
Paternal uncle eei,
I have gone eei,
I have left you eei,
Maternal uncle eei,
I have left you eei,
I have gone eei,
Maternal aunt eei
I have gone eei
I have left you eei
Paternal aunt eei,
I have gone; eei,
I have left you eei,
Clans-people eei,
I have gone eei,
I have left you eei,
All of youeei,
I have gone eei,
I have left you eei,*



Nyamwire being escorted from her home to the Palace

The palace attendants who had come to pick Nyamwire slung her in the traditional carriage (ekigagara), which is used for carrying brides. Her sisters and cousins escorted her to the King's Palace. That evening, when the cows were nearing the homestead, the bride and her escorts were welcomed with ululations inside the palace.

As the saying goes, "The bride cannot get to the courtyard before the time when the cows come home because it is the cows that bring her." Nyamwire was taken into the interior of the Palace where she stayed until morning.



Nyamwire in the traditional Kigagara (a kind of carriage) from her home to the Palace

In the morning, the King summoned Nyamwire's parents to the palace.

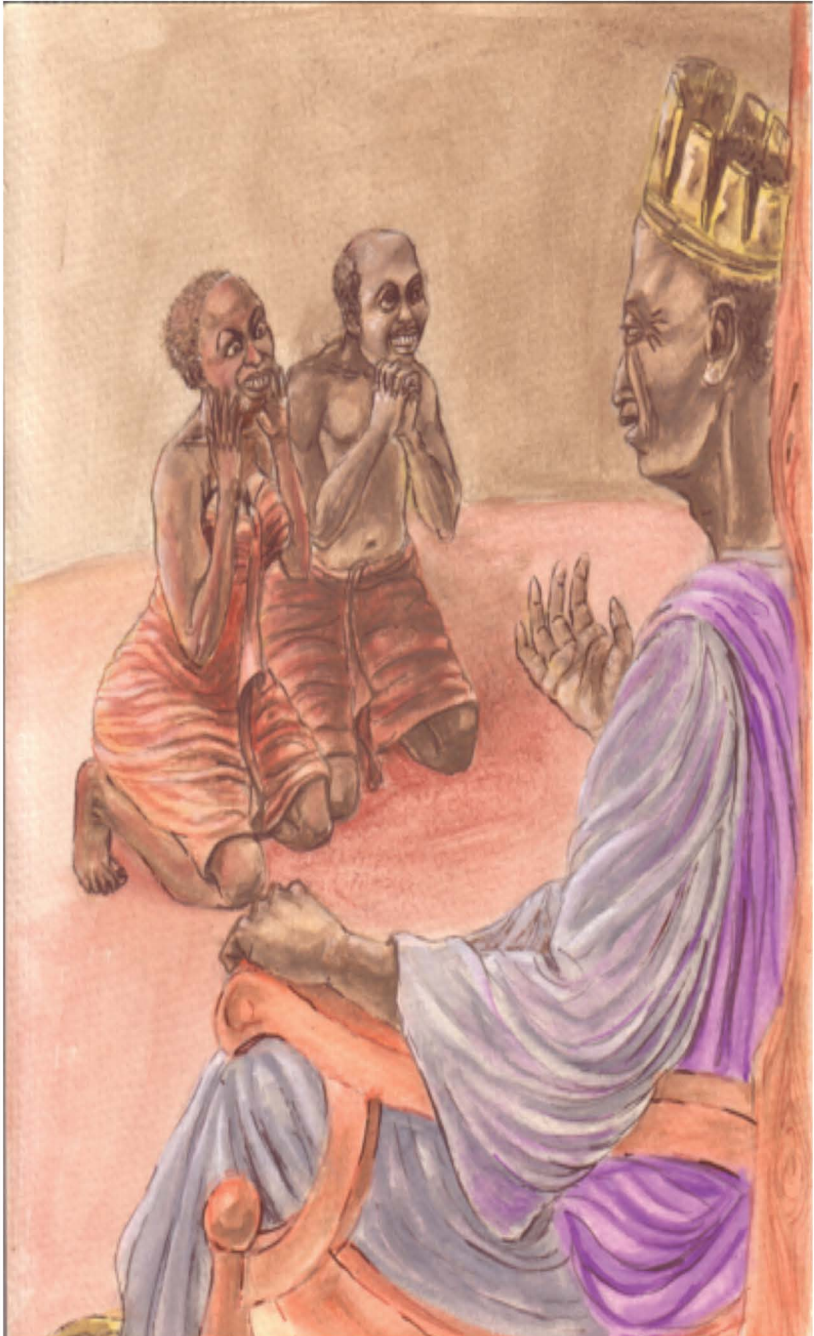
"I have called you here to inform you that my son and heir has married your daughter, Nyamwire," he said. "Don't go looking for her anywhere. She is here at the Palace with her aunt, Biragiro".

Nyamwire's parents were astounded. Bayara didn't know whether to cry or laugh. How could the girl in the basket end up marrying the Prince? Nyamwire's father stood tall and proud! He had raised a future Queen!

The King then gave Rwamayongo and Biragiro gifts of cows, goats, sheep, attendants and even part of his territory to rule over.

"As for you Bayara, because of the way you treated Nyamwire in the last one year, you will be banished from the kingdom for one year."

He then called the guests and showed them the bride. This was according to the Kinyankole tradition.



The King tells Nyamwire's Parents that his Son and heir has married their daughter

There was a lot of rejoicing and jubilation. When I saw everybody happy and excited, I put my spear on my shoulder and went to Rurengyero to give water to the cattle of Kakarakamba-ka-Kashagama's grandchildren, the one of the Basingo clan and Babukaara, the one who never mixes with the white pearls.

I passed through my grandmother's vegetable garden and they wilted and turned into weeds. I went through my uncle's sugar cane plantation and it changed into papyrus reeds. Then I came here to tell you that this is the end of the tale but not the end of me!



The Narrator moves away and magical powers are felt wherever he passes

