

# Zwedru's Children: Part One

A story of a West African family in Liberia, and a young girl's life as she is brought to Virginia.

By STEPHEN HANKS

In the year 1692, in the first month, in the tenth year of the headship of Korwolo, Chief Elder of the south eastern dako, there was a woman in the village of Zwedru, near the river Cavella, who was heavy in child. Her name was Akee, and her husband, the father of her child, was Sensobo.

In the first month, on the fourth day of the month, the woman Akee gave birth to a son. They named their son Mennah. The sons of Sensobo were Prero, Bodebe who is also called Botswain, and Mennah. Prero was the husband of Mimba, and Botswain was the husband of Couba.

Akee continued to nurse her newborn son with the aid of her midwife and her female servant. Sensobo now knew that he would not see his wife or son for the next eighteen months until the child would be fully weaned. "It is now time for me to go to the great ocean," says Sensobo, "and find a voyage that I can take again, and bring home wealth for my son. I will have Bodebe, my sailor, come with me." Yes, Sensobo and his son Bodebe were sailors, who sold their skills of seafaring to the European merchant ships that came up and down the West African coast. The ships would stop often along the "Grain Coast" to purchase "ethiopian pepper." Sensobo and his son had gone on several voyages together, Sensobo having taken Bodebe with him the last four years now since he became sixteen. They had even gone all the way to a place the Europeans called "England" twice, as well as Portugal and Spain, and returned bringing with them their earnings as well as articles of clothing, jewelry, and other goods that are still to this day being distributed among their community panton.

"We will leave tomorrow morning. My son Prero, the fisherman, will remain here and watch our wives and our children," Sensobo thought to himself. Prero was a skilled fisherman, having learned his trade nine years ago when he was eight and sent to live with his teacher for his train-

ing. nedye omrane kani (father has a dream, to bring his son gold, i.e. wealth), Bi got up and repeated the words with him. Then Sensobo, Couba, and Mimbe joined in. Next, Bodebe began another rhythm, "Botswain dyadye name nedye mwe kani, Botswain..." (Botswain has a dream, to bring everyone gold). Everyone was now repeating the new chorus line. Akee could hear the chanting song and smiled. Finally after twenty minutes of their melodic interchange, they all broke out in cheer and laughter. Sensobo came over to his son Bodebe saying, "Yes, you are Botswain, now go, and show the nye-puru (Europeans) why they named you thus!" It was in fact the Europeans that gave Bodebe his nickname "Botswain", as a result of seeing his superior skills as a seaman, and also because of their inability to pronounce the names of the Kru.

Prero then turned to his father and brother and hugged both of them, saying "May you both return swiftly, and in peace." Bodebe, in turn said to Prero, "dieju (brother), I will see you soon. May you be safe and in peace. What can go wrong?"

Early in the morning while it is still dark, Sensobo and Bodebe rise from their sleep to begin their journey, gathering the supplies and food that has been prepared. As they begin to head to the door of the hut, the family say their final goodbyes. They step down from the hut and begin their walk towards the outskirts of the village. Upon reaching it, they look up at the sky and observe the position of the morning stars, as this will serve as their compass toward the river Cavella. From there they will paddle their canoe south until it reaches the cape at the mouth of the river. As Sensobo and Bodebe head through the thick forests, their one hand balances the canoe on their shoulders, while their other hand stays close to their knives, ready to use if confronted by the leopard, the python, or the sharp-tusked hog. For some reason they also dread the harmless skink lizard, believing it to be poisonous. Their worst fear, however, is to be captured

and his interpreter are securing a crew of krumen. Sensobo and Bodebe hurry down to take their place in line. As the captain and his interpreter go down the line, followed by a kru interpreter, they are met by some who already speak Portuguese, and still a few other who speak a mixed jargon of Portuguese and English. As they approach Bodebe and ask his name, he replies "Botswain", the name given him by the English sailors. Soon Sensobo and "Botswain" are given their assignments: load 5000 lbs. Of the melaguetta pepper, known by the Europeans by the names "ethiopian pepper" or "guinea pepper." Then they would ride the ship to the "Gold Coast" and load ivory, gold, and 360 "heads of cargo": three hundred and sixty slaves. But to them seeing "slaves" was not an alarming thing. They purchased slaves, or servants, too, for use in their village. Their slaves were well treated, well fed. Many of them became part of families, could marry, had rights, and could even buy their freedom. So when Sensobo and Bodebe saw their African brothers being put upon foreign vessels, it did not even enter their minds that they would not be treated by the Europeans any differently than how they treated their own. Of course, to personally be caught and made a slave would be a totally different matter. No African welcomed being made a servant.

That evening in the village, Prero returns bringing his catch of fish for the day. After handing it to his wife to prepare, Prero goes and fills a calabash bag with hot water then goes to take a bath, pouring the water over his long arms, shoulders, and short legs, while using a soap made from a sapindaceae tree. Afterward, he lubricates his muscular build with palm oil.

But inside Akee's hut, she notices that her son is sick, eating the food given him, but the food does not stay in him. Quickly Akee summons her servant to find the fruit of a certain tree, have them boiled, and brought back. This tree, the Akee, was known to cure many ailments. When Akee was herself being carried in the womb

the farm, crawled over to the goat and bit it. Next, the snake made its way over to the ox and bit it. It quietly slithered over to the goat and bit it. Next, the snake made its way over to the ox and bit it. It quietly slithered over to the lamb and bit it. Finally before leaving, the adder cornered the chimpanzee and bit it. The next morning the man rose to milk his goat, but the goat would not give any. Then he

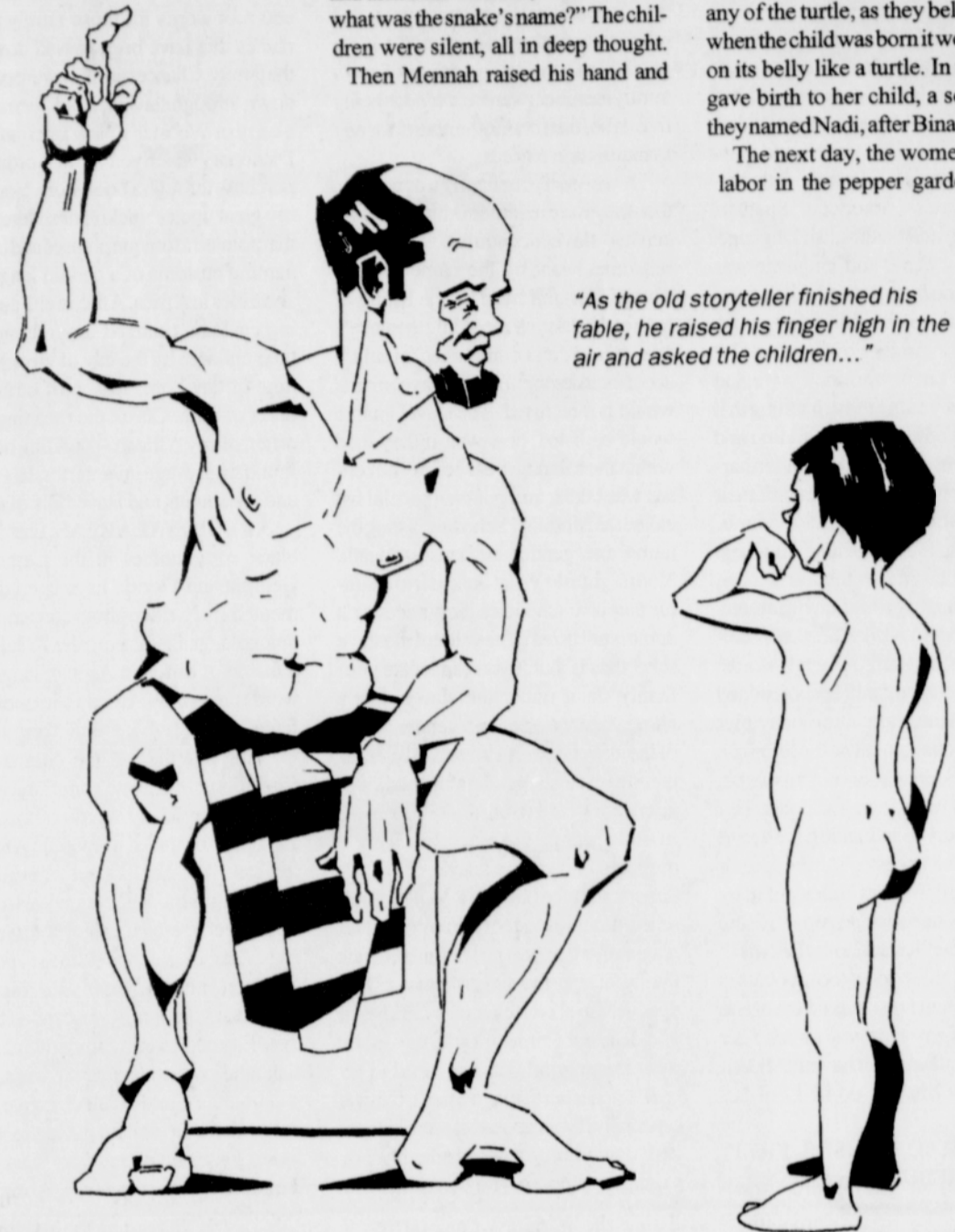
the chimpanzee, was crying and beating himself saying, "Why are the three of you blaming yourselves? Why, all of you spent all day with him while all I did was make him laugh at night and scared the birds while gathering firewood by day." Just then, the Puff Adder appeared in the yard in front of them and began to laugh at them saying, "Now who will take care of you?"

As the old storyteller finished his fable, he raised his finger high in the air and asked the children, "Tell me now, what was the snake's name?" The children were silent, all in deep thought. Then Mennah raised his hand and

ages, and even gave them a few sheep from his own herd.

One day Mennah and his two brothers, Bodebe and Prero, departed to the fishing grounds. They returned with snapper, catfish, mudskipper and turtle. Upon returning, Mennah learned that his wife Bina was now pregnant. During the evening meal of fish, okra, tomatoes, fruit and turtle meat, everyone in the family talked about Mennah and Bina's future child. They also made sure that Bina not eat any of the turtle, as they believed that when the child was born it would crawl on its belly like a turtle. In time Bina gave birth to her child, a son, whom they named Nadi, after Bina's brother.

The next day, the women arose to labor in the pepper gardens. They



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Illustration by James King

went to plow the field but the ox refused to move. So next he decided to shear his lamb but the lamb kept running away. After toiling all day without any success, he finally retired to his hut that night to build a fire to eat. But the chimpanzee had not brought wood. This same thing continued every day with the man's prized animals, who had been his cherished family for many years. Soon the man had hunger pangs, due to the birds swooping into his field and eating his food, and was dying of thirst. He became cold at night from no firewood and his clothing was wearing out. After one month the man cried: "I am no longer happy now; all I can do now is lay down and die." When the animals saw that the man who had cared for them had died, they became sad. Then the goat spoke up saying, "This is my fault, for I thought he loved me less than you three, so I refused to give him milk." But the ox quickly jumped in, "No, I am at fault. I believed that I was the one appreciated less than you three, so I did not plow his field to produce food." "You are both wrong," said the lamb. "It was me that he did not love, so to teach him a lesson I swore that I would never again give him my wool." Now,

said, "the snake's name is 'Jealousy'." The old man put his hand upon the boy and nodded his head in the affirmative as he drove home the point further: "No one is greater than another, but all in the family contribute to its happiness."

Later the time came for Mennah to choose a nyeno (wife) among the girls of the village. Upon notifying his father and mother of his selection, they will approach the parents of the girl to ask permission to purchase their son's future wife. When he becomes of age he will then bring her home. Mennah has been developing a fondness for a young girl named Bina, whose father is Kru and her mother Grebo. One day Mennah approaches Bina and places a flower in her hair to signify his interest. Sensobo and Akee visit the parents of Bina to ask their permission, which is granted. Then, Sensobo negotiates the dowry price: two oxen, a cow, and a goat.

Ten years later, finally Mennah brings Bina home as his bride. She now enters the rectangular hut that now will become her home, made of palm fronds, and having three rooms and chairs. Sensobo had purchased two oxen and two cows for them from the money he had earned on his voy-

pluck the ripe berries, soak them in water for several days, then lay them out to dry under the hot tropical sun. As Akee was busy gathering the peppercorns, she suddenly fell sick. The women brought her inside to her hut and laid her down while the servants fanned her with palm reeds to cool her. Couba fed her a drug made from the skin of bananas, kola nuts, and the fibre of pineapple leaf, while Mimba had her drink lime juice. When Sensobo and the young man returned home, they then learned of Akee's condition.

Becoming weaker and burning with fever, Couba and Mimba stay up throughout the night nursing Akee, feeding her a concoction of rice and corn soup, and junumo (palm wine) to help ease her pain. Sensobo came over to Akee's bed, knelt down, and began to whisper in her ear while holding her hand. What he said to her the women could not hear.

The next morning, Sensobo and the women came out of the hut. Sensobo then instructed his servant to go dig a hole. For the next three days following the burial, no work in the fields was to be done in the village of Zwedru.

TO BE CONTINUED...



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That warm night, while Akee and her child Mennah ate separately in her oblong clay hut, Sensobo and his sons and their wives and children ate together, eating fish and sweet potatoes, along with a concoction of red pepper soup. Sensobo then began to explain to the family his plans of taking another voyage starting in the morning, and his desire to take Bodebe with him. Bodebe became excited, "I am going on another voyage? Oh, I am happy!! I will bring back many things for all of you, and especially for my beautiful Couba!" Sensobo continued, "Prero will be the family head while I am gone. He will protect, he will provide, in the name of the Great Nyeswa" (GOD). Prero already knew what to do. His duties starting tomorrow were all too familiar to him. He had been trained to do this for the last four years, as was the family custom. A good son will always humbly obey his "Bi" (father), and will always protect his "Di" (mother).

Bodebe still in an excited mood, jumped up from the table and began to dance, singing, "Bi dyadye name

by a warring tribe and sold into slavery. The blue stripe running down the forehead to their nose, they believe, will protect them. Carefully they note landmarks on the way, as these will aid them during their return. After a twenty kilometer trek, they finally reach the river.

As the sunrise begins its ascent over the distant Nimba mountains, the women in the village of Zwedru head out to work their plantations. A Prero goes to check on his mother and the newborn, Couba and Mimba and their women servants prepare themselves to work in their fields. They have been preparing a new field all this month while the ground is dry. In two more months the rainy season will begin and the ground will become muddy and impossible to work.

The field has now been cleared. The bush and trees have been cut down and left to dry. Couba and Mimba burn them, then hoe the soil, mixing with it the ashes of the burnt brush and vegetables. Soon the ground will be ready for sowing.

Sensobo and Bodebe now reach the coastline. Already a Portuguese ship has anchored and the captain

with difficulty, this tree had been used to help her mother give birth to her, after which, in thankfulness, mother named her baby thus. But now will her baby live?

The young boy Mennah continues to grow strong, now having reached his eighth year. Except for when he was sick as a baby, Mennah continues to steadily mature and gain wisdom. The village storyteller would often come to the village and recite the ancient tales to the children who came to listen. Mennah would listen intently, so to learn and understand the meaning of each story, ready to respond in case the old man should pose a question to him. On this occasion the storyteller related: "There was a man who was very happy and satisfied with what things he had. He had a goat that yielded milk and gave his drink. He had an ox that plowed the field and produced food. He had a lamb that grew wool which he used to clothe himself. And he had a chimpanzee that was his domestic pet and would help him by scaring away the birds from the field, and would bring in firewood for the man to keep warm. One night a Puff Adder snuck onto

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