

Tongue Meat

EAST-CENTRAL AFRICA—SWAHILI



The sultan's wife was thin and unhappy. Although great riches surrounded her and servants fed her the finest foods, she remained lean and listless. This distressed the sultan, for he did not know how to please her.

It happened that near the sultan's palace there lived a very poor man whose wife was plump and happy. The sultan invited the poor man to visit him and privately asked, "How is it that your wife is so fat, joyous, and healthy? What is the secret of her well-being?"

The poor man replied, "It is no secret! Every day I nourish my happy wife by feeding her *meat of the tongue*."

"Aha!" cried the sultan, delighted with this simple solution. He immediately ordered his cook to buy the tongue of every animal slaughtered at the market. For days the sultan's wife was given tongue meat prepared in exotic sauces. Although she ate tongue meat several times a day, she still remained thin and sad.

Finally the sultan demanded that the poor man exchange wives with him. Despite protests, the poor man's wife was taken to the palace, and the sultan's thin, sad wife was delivered to the poor man's home.

As soon as the poor man's wife arrived at the palace, she became sad and grew thinner with each passing day. Her happiness and beauty faded like a wilted blossom.

At the poor man's home, meanwhile, the sultan's wife grew happier and began gaining weight. At sunset each night, when the poor man returned from his work, he would tell his royal wife all the funny things that had happened to him that day. He would make her howl with laughter until tears of joy ran down her cheeks. Then he would sing her songs, accompanied by his banjo, until late in the evening, and she would dance. Each night was spent in conversation, song, and story.

During the day, the royal wife would chuckle as she thought about the funny things her new husband had told her the night before. Although her food was simple and the portions quite modest, she grew plump in a short time. Her hair began to shine, and her skin had a healthy glow.

When the sultan saw his old wife and the poor man walking in the marketplace, he wanted her back. She refused to go, saying, "I am much better off with my new husband."

The sultan was amazed at her transformation and in a jealous rage demanded, "What has this poor man given you that I, a great and rich sultan, cannot offer? What has caused such a change in you?"

The wife told the sultan how she and her new husband passed each evening together in story and song. The sultan's eyes filled with understanding, and he left the couple to their happiness. He now humbly knew what the poor man meant when he said that he fed his wife "*meat of the tongue*."