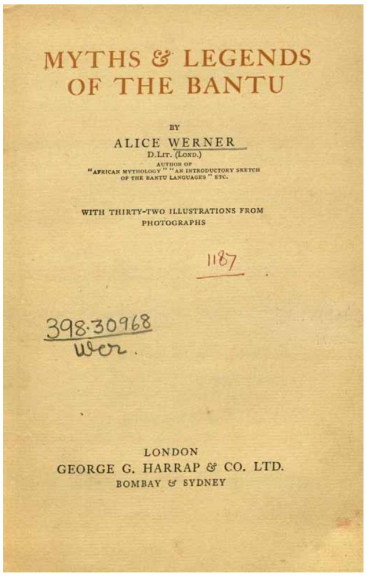
Divine Che Neba, "Entry on: Kwege and Bahati by Alice Werner", peer-reviewed by Daniel A. Nkemleke, Elżbieta Olechowska and Marta Pszczolińska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/756. Entry version as of October 07, 2026.

Alice Werner

Kwege and Bahati

United Kingdom (1933)

TAGS: African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions



Cover from The Archaeological Survey of India, Central Archaeological Library, New Delhi, Book Number: 1187.

General information	
Title of the work	Kwege and Bahati
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Tanzania and other English-speaking African countries, United KIngdom, United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1933
First Edition Details	Alice Werner, “Kwege and Bahati” in *Myths and Legends of the Bantu*, London: George G.Harrap & Co., Ltd., 1933, 87–91.
ISBN	Not applicable for editio princeps
Available Onllne	*Kwege and Bahati* (accessed: July 28, 2021).
Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover (children and young adults)
Author of the Entry	Divine Che Neba, University of Yaoundé 1, nebankiwang@yahoo.com

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Creators

Alice Werner , 1859 - 1935
(Author)

Alice Werner (June 26th, 1859 – June 9th, 1935), born in the Imperial Free City of Trieste on the Austrian Littoral, was a German linguist, writer, minor poet and teacher. She was one of the pioneers of African Studies in the twentieth century. She studied at Newnham College at Cambridge University. Her visits to Nyasaland and Natal reinforced her scholarly interests in Africa. In 1917, when the School of Oriental Studies (later SOAS University of London) opened its doors to students, she began teaching Swahili and Bantu continuing this work until her retirement, as professor emerita, in 1930. Two years earlier, she obtained there her PhD in Literature. She also taught at Oxford and Cambridge. She was awarded the Silver Medal by the African Society in 1931. Her poem *Bannerman of the Dandenong. An Australian Ballad made* her popular in New Zealand, Australia and other parts of the world. However, her major achievement remains her book *Myths and Legends of the Bantu* (1933). It presents the beliefs of the Bantu, their origins, their gods and their myths. Werner's earlier important publications include: *Introductory Sketch of the Bantu Language* (1919), *The Mythology of All Races, vol. VII.: Armenian,* by M.H. Ananikian, *African*, by Alice Werner (1925). She died in London at the age of 75.

Sources:

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digital.soas.ac.uk (accessed: July 28, 2021).

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Additional information

Summary

A long time ago, a man got married to Mulamuwingu of the Uwingu* clan. Mulamuwingu's new home was a two-day journey away from her brother's (Muwingu) home. The man and Mulamuwingu had a son and named him Kwege. When the man dies, Mulamuwingu inherits a slave called Bahati. The society she lives in is riddled with taboos. One taboo is that Mulamuwingu should never allow rainwater to touch her because she is an off-spring of the sky God. If it does touch her, she will die immediately. One day, she was about to cook, and fearing the rain, she sent Kwege to pick gourds from the farm. Kwege refuses, but Bahati volunteers for the chore and the family eats that day. The next day she wants to cook again, and Kwege, as usual, refuses to go to the farm to harvest food. Unfortunately, Bahati's not at home, and so she is obliged to go out. She warns Kwege that if it rains on her and she dies, he will be to blame. When she leaves, it rains on her, and she dies instantly. The next day Kwege is hungry and has no food. His mother did not return, and he did not care about going to look for her. Instead, he sets out to his uncle's house with Bahati.

Kwege is beautifully dressed, and Bahati is in rags. Kwege tells Bahati that if they come across a log on the way, Bahati should carry him over it because he is not supposed to cross a log of wood. On their way, they see a tree that has fallen. Bahati takes advantage of Kwege's taboo and agrees to help him cross the log with the condition that he (Kwege) would offer his regalia to him in exchange. Kwege acquiesces and gives his garments and beads to Bahati. When they get to Muwingu's village, Bahati is welcomed as Kwege and Kwege as Bahati because of their attires. Bahati tells them that Kwege is his slave and should be sent to drive away birds in Muwingu's farms like a scarecrow. He goes to the fields in rags, chases away the birds from the rice farm, and spends the rest of the time lamenting his past glory. He cries like a bird, and his dead parents transform into birds and come to his rescue. They sit with him and ask why he now looks like Bahati. He explains what happened, and in response, his parents transform into humans, feed him, replace his lost items and dine with him. On his way back to the house, he hides his new attire to conceal the secret.

When his uncle notices the freshness in him, he interrogates him. However, Kwege remains silent. Kwege's nephew also sees his strange behaviour and freshness and decides to spy on him. In his

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quest, he discovers that his late aunt and uncle have appeared as birds, transforming into humans to feed Kwege. The nephew calls on Muwingu to witness the scene. It was then that he realised that Bahati was Kwege and Kwege, Bahati. When Kwege's parents leave, his uncle and cousin come out of hiding, and Kwege takes them to where he had stored his new dresses. Muwingu is happy to know his real nephew. When Bahati gets home that day, he kills him in punishment and organises a feast to which he invites all his neighbours to welcome his nephew, Kwege, properly.

* Uwingu means sky.

Analysis

Taboos constitute part and parcel of the African belief system. These codes, usually unwritten, shape behaviour, limit excesses and guarantee the general welfare of individuals within the community. Despite the influx of different cultures into Africa, most people continue to abide by these taboos amid attempts of demystification by intruders, cultural hybrids and the assimilated. Most Africans use taboos as mythic charters to shape tradition and the status quo. Thus, within a given tradition, there are many dos and don'ts. Consequently, the violation of each taboo is often accompanied by a resultant effect, which is always detrimental to the individual or society. For example, in the above-myth, Mulamuwingu dies because she does not heed the taboo's warning against going out in the rain. On the contrary, Kwege, who is faithful to the tradition by respecting all the taboos, ends up regaining his stolen identity.

The overall morality of such a practice (i.e. respecting certain taboos) is to have a successful performance and vindicate humanity from certain curses or malediction. However, we should equally note that taboo breakers, sometimes viewed as scapegoats, are also useful in society. Through their adventurous spirits, many have tended to be liberators, especially within patriarchal and dictatorial environments.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs,

African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions

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Characters, and Concepts	
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Childhood Death Disability Family Identity Magic powers Religious beliefs
Further Reading	Burris, Edward Eli, *Taboo, Magic and Spirit: A Study of Primitive Elements in Roman Religion*, New York: Macmillan, 1931 (accessed: July 28, 2021). Klamroth, Martin, "Beiträge zum Verständnis der religiösen Vorstellung der Saramo in Bezirk Dar es Salaam", *Zeitschrift für Kolonialsprachen* 1 (1911): 118–153 (accessed: July 28, 2021). Valeri, Valerio, *The Forest of Taboos: Morality, Hunting and Identity among the Haulu of the Moluas*, Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000.
Addenda	Alice Werner mentions Martin Klamroth, a missionary from Dar es Salaam, as her source of the tale. Klamroth, Martin, "Beiträge zum Verständnis der religiösen Vorstellung der Saramo in Bezirk Dar es Salaam" in *Zeitschrift für Kolonialsprachen* 1 (1911). Berlin: Dietrich Reimer and Hamburg: C. Boysen, p. 128. *Kwege und Bahati* original text and German translation, see here (accessed: July 28, 2021).

Origin/cultural background:

The Zaramo or Uzaramo, a Bantu tribe settled in the low hills and coastal plains surrounding Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's capital, is part

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of the Sub-Saharan ethnic group of the Bantu, Swahili cluster, whose first language is Kiswahili. They are predominantly Muslim farmers and traders who deal in salt, fish, rhinoceros hides, and ivory. Beside the above, they also raise livestock. Their traditional society is matrilineal. They are generally polygamous. The birth of girls is welcomed with much joy. The rustling of a leaf indicates to the Zaramo people the passing of spirits; the eclipse of the moon reflects a war between the sun and the moon. Poison or witchcraft is believed to be the cause of most deaths. Their honoured spirit, Kolelo, resides in a cave. The Zaramo perform ceremonies to purify every harvest.

References:

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