Chester Mbangchia, "Entry on: The Girl Who Married a Lion by Alice Werner", peer-reviewed by Daniel A. Nkemleke, Susan Deacy and Marta Pszczolińska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/782. Entry version as of November 11, 2026.

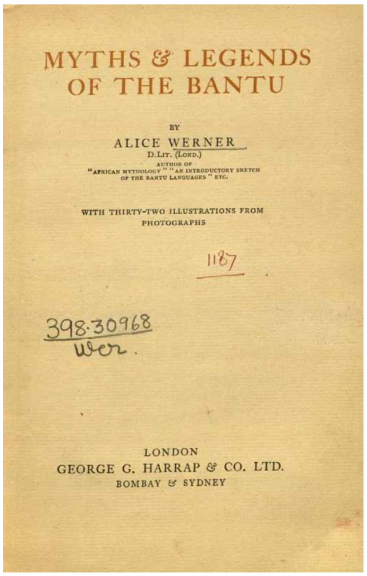
Alice Werner

The Girl Who Married a Lion

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	The Girl Who Married a Lion
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	English-speaking African countries, United Kingdom, United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1933
First Edition Details	Alice Werner, "The Girl Who Married a Lion" in *Myths and Legends of the Bantu*, London: George G.Harrap & Co., Ltd., 1933, 192–195.
ISBN	Not applicable for editio princeps
Available Onllne	*The Girl Who Married a Lion* (accessed: July 28, 2021)
Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover (children and young adults)
Author of the Entry	Chester Mbangchia, University of Yaoundé 1, mbangchia25@gmail.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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Additional information

Summary

Werner narrates the union between a were-lion (sisimwe) and a human. A lion, who appeared as a man, arrived in the village and married a young girl. After some time, they had a child and the husband proposed that they go and see his parents. The girl's brother accompanied them. As they journeyed the first day, the man used thorn-bush to build a kraal (mutanda) for them to rest. After the building, he told them he was going fishing. In his absence, the bride's brother mocked the groom's building skills. He cut some tree branches to support and fence the kraal.

Instead of fishing, the husband met his lion family. They asked him the number of animals he had killed, and he told them, "Two and a young one." He did not come back to meet his wife, child and brother-in-law. Rather, he led other lions and hyenas to attack the kraal he built. When they got there, they could not penetrate the kraal because of the strong fence his brother-in-law had built. The thorns on the fence wounded them, and they escaped, feeling defeated as dawn approached. In the evening, the husband returned with fish and lied about being detained in the valley. He also faked empathy by telling them that his absence might have been dangerous for them. They listened to him with doubts.

The following day, he went fishing again, and the bride's brother told her that her husband and relatives were the ones that wanted to eat them the previous night. Being uncertain, he wandered around, looking for solutions. He saw a gnome (akachekulu) in an aperture in a tree, and it told him the truth about the groom's intention to eat them the same way he had eaten many people in the district. The gnome asked him to cut down a hollow tree and produce a drum which he would tie around his waist. As he walked sidewards as requested, he found himself flying to the tops of trees. As instructed, he put the baby of the house and the bride in the drum and started beating it. The sound attracted the lion, and he hurried to see what was happening in his tent. There, he did not see his wife and child. Instead, he saw his in-law on the top of a tree and asked him to give him his family. But the closer he came to the tree, the harder it was for him to resist the tune of the drum. He started dancing, and as he danced, his skin peeled off. The in-law continued beating the drum as he moved from tree to tree, heading towards the village, with the lion dancing in tow. When the lion found himself in the village, he fled

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back to the forest.

When the bride's brother got to the village, his mother asked about her daughter and grandchild, and he removed them from the drum. He narrated the ordeals they had undergone with the lion. His mother praised him for saving his sister and her child and rewarded him with five slave girls.

Analysis

Stories of gods and beasts taking human form to marry humans are frequent in many mythologies worldwide though the most common phenomenon is a human-animal transformation. Were-lion husbands are common in African myths, and these stories most often have a near-tragic ending. Such is the case in the story above. Unlike the gods who take human women as wives, the were-lion's intention in the above myth was not to have her as a wife but as food for him and his family. The myth accentuates the disadvantages of marrying an unknown person. The girl, in her ignorance, accepted the lion man without finding out his origins. However, it also reflects on the ability to use caution. It is probably due to the brother-in-law's common sense that he decided to follow them to the supposed family of the were-lion and reinforce the hut, thereby saving the three of them from devouring.

Furthermore, the myth evokes the constant presence and intervention of the supernatural in the face of adversity, particularly when the victims are innocent. The gnome, which is a spirit being, rescues the three humans from the lion by instructing the girl's brother on what to do. The brother exhibits courage by first looking around for a solution and second by expediently acting on the instructions of the gnome.

Finally, the myth highlights the importance of interpersonal and fraternal love through the brother's actions (love and protection) towards his sister, from the village to the forest and back. By this, he proves himself a man by African standards and is rewarded according to cultural prescriptions.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and

African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions

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Concepts

Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adversity Family Good vs evil Relationships Siblings Supernatural creatures (non-classical) Values

Further Reading	Tompkins, Peter, *The Secret Life of Nature: Living in Harmony with the Hidden World of Nature Spirits from Fairies to Quarks*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers LLC, 1997.

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