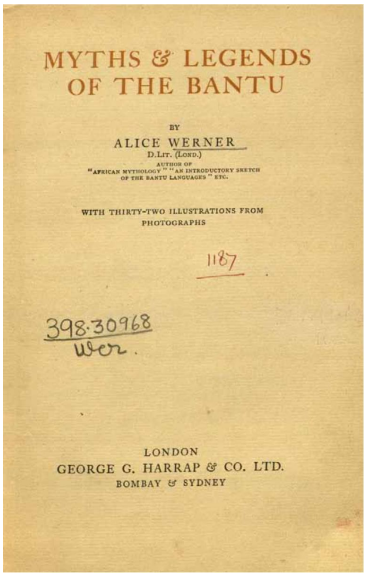
Divine Che Neba, "Entry on: The Girls Who Wanted New Teeth by Alice Werner", peer-reviewed by Daniel A. Nkemleke, Hanna Paulouskaya and Marta Pszczolińska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/776. Entry version as of November 12, 2026.

Alice Werner

The Girls Who Wanted New Teeth

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 Girls Who Wanted New Teeth
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	Rwanda and other English-speaking African countries, United Kingdom, United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	1933
First Edition Details	Alice Werner, "The Girls Who Wanted New Teeth" in *Myths and Legends of the Bantu*, London: George G.Harrap & Co., Ltd., 1933, 55–57.
ISBN	Not applicable for editio princeps
Available Onllne	*The Girls Who Wanted New Teeth* (accessed: July 29, 2021)
Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover (children and young adults)
Author of the Entry	Divine Che Neba, University of Yaoundé 1, nebankiwang@yahoo.com

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

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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

This myth narrates the life of a girl whose mother dies and is left to be cared for by her stepmother. However, she is mistreatment by this stepmother. It is an illusion for her to measure up to her friends who had the freedom to go out and get new teeth*. Envious of her friends who returned with their sparkling new teeth, she decides to go for hers. She completes her house chores, and without anyone noticing her, leaves. On her way, she meets a hyena and a lion who admire her beauty and name her “Child of Imana”. Later, she finally meets Imana, the God responsible for beautifying other girls. He bestows upon her everything that makes her beautiful, precisely as she desired but under the condition that she will not laugh or smile with or at anyone when she returns.

When she returns, her stepmother is astonished by her beauty and accuses her of theft. When her father questions her, she remains silent. Soon a responsible man comes for her hand in marriage, and she gets married. The two soon have a son and, when he is four or five years old, the wicked stepmother instructs him not to take milk from his mother unless she smiles. If his mother did not, he should reject the food and tell her that he would die if she continued with the same attitude. The boy follows her instructions, but his mother also follows Imana’s not to smile or laugh. The boy dies, and the girl has another son who dies in the same manner. When the couple have a girl child, she takes the child to the graves of her deceased sons and cries out to Imana, pleading that he should preserve her daughter since she had respected his edicts. Imana grants her requests, brings her sons back to life, anoints her, gives her new clothes and makes her more beautiful than ever. He then accompanies her to her compound, and everyone is surprised to see her renewed self and a strange being (Imana) walking with her. Her husband receives Imana, and Imana asks for more stools to be brought. When the stools are there, he calls the two deceased sons whom he had revived to come and sit. Their father is happy to see his sons. Imana then tells everyone about the wicked stepmother’s atrocities and the killing of children. He punishes her by burning her in her hut with a lightning bolt. He now allows the man’s wife to smile and then disappears. The couple lives happily after that.

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* Alice Werner writes that “no explanation is given. It may mean that having lost their first teeth, they thought a special act of creation was needed to procure the second set; but they would seem to have been beyond the usual age for that process. Or they may only have wanted their teeth to be made white and even.” (p. 53).

Analysis

The patriarchal set-up of traditional Rwandan society from time immemorial has persistently pushed women to the periphery of society. After the post-genocide era, women were brought into the limelight. However, even with this renaissance, especially within the political scenario, men still shun outspoken women. Thus, in the time of the post-genocide, with its spirit of reawakening, there was only light shed on certain issues (the parliament with women dominating). However, many strings are still attached to behavioral patterns and relationships between men and women. In this light, men continue to officiate to what is sacred. This practice of preventing women from accessing such spheres of influence thrives in most world mythologies. From ancient religious bodies through Christianity to the present, the story has been the same. As the myth records, certain women’s concerns from the past were their beauty and adherence to cultural practices. The Rwandan woman, like their Burundian counterpart, was ready to sacrifice all to be beautiful. That is why they journeyed even into the world of the Gods and wild animals to attain their objective (of becoming beautiful). According to African tradition, beauty includes attributes like virginity, submissiveness, shiny teeth, a gap tooth, and not being outspoken, especially in the presence of men. The greatest gift a Rwandan will cherish is a beautiful woman, often referred to idiomatically as a cow*. Thus, when such a gift is offered to any individual, he is obliged to sing a praise song (amasina) in honor of the giver.

Despite the mistreatment meted out to the heroine in this myth by her wicked stepmother, she remains submissive and obedient and is finally crowned with happiness at the end. Though overridden by the patriarchal order, female submission within some patriarchal environment sometimes has its merits, as the myth above purports. The subservient nature of the orphan girl makes her triumph over the mishaps of her stepmother. Without being openly defiant to her stepmother (a patriarchal arm) and later to Imana, she successfully obtains her new teeth, completely renewing her beauty. Thus, one way

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	out of such entanglement is by transforming negative situations into positive ones. The mettle and resolve, born through these times of patriairchal oppression, has and is gradually propelling the Rwandan woman to the forefront of the socio-political realm in contemporary Rwanda.
	* A cow is a sacred animal among the Rwandans and the Burundians. Owning a cow is a blessing and synonymous with riches.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Appearances Child, children Childhood Family Oppression Orphans Step-parents
Further Reading	Burkett, Elinor, "Women Movement" in *Britannica. Online Encyclopedia* (accessed: July 29, 2021). Hunt, Swanee, *Rwandan Women Rising*, New York: Duke University Press, 2017. Hurel, Eugène R.P., *La Poésie chez les Primitifs ou Contes, Fables, Récits et Proverbes du Rwanda (Lac Kivu)*, Bruxelles: Goemaere, coll. Bibliothèque-Congo 9, 1922. Newbury, David, "Canonical Conventions in Rwanda: Four Myths of Recent Historiography in central Africa", *History in Africa* 39 (2012): 41–76 (accessed: July 29, 2021).

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Addenda

Alice Werner mentions Père Eugène Hurel, a French Catholic priest, as her source of the tale.

see: Hurel, Eugène R.P., “Abakobwa bagya kwihangisha amenyo. Jeunes filles allant se faire créer des dents” in *La Poésie chez les Primitifs ou Contes, Fables, Récits et Proverbes du Rwanda (Lac Kivu)*, Bruxelles: Goemaere, coll. Bibliothèque-Congo 9, 1922, 27–34.

Origin/cultural background:

The Hutu, Tutsi and Twa are the descendants of Rwanda’s earliest inhabitants. These people believe in Imana*, the supreme deity who gave immortality, after killing an animal called death. Rwanda’s children invoke the name Imana each time they are in need. Many names have the syllables curbed from Imana: “Twagirimana” (only God can save us); and “Habimana” (God is supreme) etc. Among the Rwandans, a pregnant woman keeps water in a pitcher every night for Imana to mix it with clay at night, to create a baby in her womb. They also believe in the afterlife, spirits and worship of ancestors.

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* Imana is the Creator deity in the traditional Banyarwanda religion in Rwanda.

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