

# THE REBELLIOUS GIRL WHO WANTS THE PERFECT MAN: ROLE ASSIGNMENTS IN FOLKTALES OF THE BULSA IN NORTHERN GHANA

---

Rüdiger Schott\*

Girls are social misfits in patrilineal and virilocal societies. (Or: Are patrilineal societies not fit to meet the emotional needs of nubile girls?) They cause problems for their parents as well as for their husbands because their place in patrilineal societies shifts between their 'family of orientation' and their 'family of procreation'<sup>1</sup>. Boys, in contrast to girls, have their place fixed in their patrilineage as well as in their father's house and local clan section from birth until death, and even thereafter as ancestors<sup>2</sup>.

Girls, however, upon reaching the age of puberty and after having married will exchange their social environment in their father's house and family for that of their husbands. For girls, the decisive step in life is the shift to their husband's 'family of orientation' where – at least in the beginning – they are strangers.

This unstable position of girls in a patrilineal society like that of the Balsa<sup>3</sup> is reflected in their folktales. Out of a total of about 1,200 folktales of the Balsa collected by myself as well as my Ghanaian and German collaborators between the years 1966 and 1989<sup>4</sup>, 78 Balsa tales (c. 6.5%) are concerned with the general theme 'Girl refuses to marry'<sup>5</sup>. Out of these stories, 65 relate how a 'Girl chooses a husband herself', after she had rejected all previous suitors.

The plot of these stories<sup>6</sup> is simple:

1. A girl refuses to marry; she rejects all suitors.
2. At last a suitor comes at night and/or from afar. The girl falls in love with him.

---

\* Nachtigallenweg 56, D-53115 Bonn, Germany, Email: schott.r@uni-bonn.de

<sup>1</sup> These expressions are used here in the sense defined by G. P. Murdock (1949: 13): '... every normal adult in every human society belongs to at least two nuclear families – family of orientation in which he was born and reared, and which includes his father, mother, brothers and sisters, and a family of procreation which he establishes by his marriage and which includes his husband or wife, his sons, and his daughters.' (Emphases by Murdock).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Schott, 1982: 56ff., 64f.

<sup>3</sup> The Balsa (sing. Bulu) are an ethnic group of about 70,000 people in the dry savannah zone of northern Ghana, speaking Buli, a language belonging to the Moore-Dagbani branch of Gur languages. The Balsa subsist on hoe agriculture, their staple crop being various kinds of millet and guinea corn. They also keep cattle, sheep, goats and fowls. The Balsa are organised in patrilineal virilocal clan sections. For an introduction to the ethnography of the Balsa see Schott, 1970 and Kröger, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> For details see Schott, 1989; Schott, 1990a and b; Schott, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> It seems that this motif does not exist in Stith Thompson's motif index (Thompson, 1955 quoted henceforth as Mot.). On the difficulties of analysing motifs in Balsa stories according to Stith Thompson cf. Schott, 1998. - Of the total sample of 78 stories, 34 (44%) were told by female tellers, 43 (55%) by male ones. This distribution between the sexes probably corresponds to the general distribution, male story tellers among the Balsa being slightly preponderant over the female ones.

<sup>6</sup> Christiane Seydou, in her article *Autour d'une Fille Difficile ...* (Seydou, 1998), has recently presented a similar sequence of six (or seven) main plots of this tale-type on the basis of 150 stories she had analysed. There are, however, some remarkable differences in the content (or in our constructions?) of the main episodes: The Balsa stories begin with the girl's refusing to accept any suitor, i.e. – according to my interpretation – she refuses

3. The girl wants to marry him at once – against the custom of the Bulsa and against the advice of her parents.
4. The girl goes away with him; she accompanies her new ‘husband’ far away into the wilderness of the bush. (In a few cases the girl goes to the platform roof of her parents’ house in order to consummate the marriage with her new ‘husband’ at once.)
5. In the bush (or in the parents’ house), the ‘husband’ turns out to be not a human being, but either a dead person, a ghost (or several ghosts), or he retransforms himself back into his original form of a wild animal, such as a bush cow, a leopard, a snake, or even into a tree. All of these ‘husbands’ come from the non-human world, usually from the wilderness of the bush.
6. The girl either (6.1) follows her non-human ‘husband’ into the bush or (6.2) flees on a tree or (6.3) returns home.
7. The non-human husband either (7.1) tries to kill the girl or kills her on the spot or (7.2) kills one of the girl’s relatives or all of them.

Veronika Görög-Karady, 1997 has recently analysed ten versions of stories treating the subject ‘*La fille rebelle qui choisit son époux*’ of the Bambara and four versions of the Malinke. At first sight, these stories are very similar to the Bulsa stories in question. Concerning the latter folktales I can also fully subscribe to the conclusions Görög-Karady draws from her materials:

L’héroïne du récit est la jeune fille que nous qualifions de rebelle car elle refuse la coutume, la stratégie matrimoniale pratiquée dans son groupe; agissant ainsi, elle s’attaque à l’organisation socio-politique même de la communauté. Le conflit fondamental se focalise d’emblée sur la tension entre désir individuel et norme sociale et se trouve élargi par l’interrogation sur la place de la femme dans le tissu social. La vision de la femme qui se dégage repose, pour partie, sur les clichés récurrent dans cet univers social patrilinéaire et virilocal selon lesquels elle est un être mineur incapable d’action réfléchie et responsable. (Görög-Karady 1997, p. 80-81).

Yet in the Bulsa stories, the topic of the girl’s refusal to marry, i.e. to accept her role as an adult woman, seems to be more prominent than the motif of her choosing her husband herself. If she does so, the man of her own choice turns out to be a being offensive if not deadly to herself and/or to her family.

As in the stories of the Bambara and the Malinke, in 21 of the afore-mentioned 78 Bulsa stories (c. 27%) the girl unknowingly chooses wild animals as ‘husbands’. Out of these stories, eleven tell how a girl, having refused all other suitors, falls in love with a man who comes from afar; against the warnings of her parents, she wants to marry him at once. He turns out to be the most dreaded of all wild animals, causing real horror in any Bulo, viz. a snake, usually a giant snake,

---

to marry and rejects all suitors. As to Seydou’s episodes II. - IV. I understand them differently: the important points seem to be that the suitor comes at night and/or from afar and that he takes the girl into the wilderness of the bush. The fifth episode of Mme. Seydou’s analysis and mine correspond with one another: ‘Révélation de la véritable nature de l’époux’. The fatal end of the girl and, in most cases, her relatives is stressed in many Bulsa versions of this tale-type.

the python. This reptile represents a being without any scars on its skin, the physically perfect creature.

The British anthropologist Meyer Fortes wrote on the Tallensi, an ethnic group living in the vicinity of the Bulsa and being linguistically and culturally closely related to them: 'The skin is a very significant feature of an individual's constitution. [...] A fresh and glowing (*farr*) skin is the most admired sign of beauty in a maiden. [...] Ideally, then, a whole body is one with an unblemished skin.'<sup>7</sup> The German Africanist Leo Frobenius has published a version of the above quoted story from the Mande according to which 'the daughter said: "I shall not marry a man who has any scar. I shall not marry a man who had any wound."<sup>8</sup> Only the snake has a body which is 'smooth' and without any scars.

Other than the Bambara and Malinke versions (cf. Görög-Karady, 1997: 78), the Bulsa versions do not say *expressis verbis* that the snake suitor bears no scars on his body, but it is implied. The snake also represents a being which can rejuvenate itself by casting its slough; its life seems to be everlasting. In the Bulsa stories the snake-suitor always turns up in disguise as a human being, as a handsome man.

There are two subtypes to the Bulsa versions of the tale-type *Girl Marries Snake*: according to one of these, the snake-husband takes the girl to the distant bush, where he has his home underground in a hole. The girl's mother and her mother's co-wife come to visit her in her snake-husband's home in the bush. The co-wife, respecting the rules of the snake-husband's home, survives the stay in the snake's den. The snake even bestows great gifts upon her when she departs for home. However, the girl's own mother, jealous of her co-wife, is devoured by her daughter's husband when, out of curiosity, she happens to look at him<sup>9</sup>. In tales of the other sub-type, the snake takes the girl to a platform roof of her parents' house; instead of sleeping with her lover, the girl is devoured by the snake<sup>10</sup>.

Many of these stories in which a girl marries a being from the non-human world end in fatal disaster for the girl herself and/or for her relatives. In so far their final moral is different from the stories of the Bambara and Malinke analysed by Veronika Görög-Karady who concludes: 'It is an ideology of tolerance and a pedagogical message which the Bambara and Malinke versions of our story convey, because, with one exception, the individualistic and obstinate girl is led back to her home.' (Görög-Karady, 1997: 94, translation mine) Most of the afore-mentioned Bulsa stories, on the contrary, express an unveiled threat: the rebellious girl who

<sup>7</sup> Fortes, 1981: 283-319.

<sup>8</sup> Frobenius, 1922: 72.

<sup>9</sup> I was told this story (BUL-E0608) by Mr. Augustin Akanbe, a former health assistant of about 34 years, in Sandema-Balansa on September 9, 1974. An almost identical variant is BUL-E0200 which was told by the same teller almost eight years later. Similar stories of this type are: BUL-E0086, BUL-E0265, BUL-E0290, BUL-E0621, BUL-E0818, BUL-E1614. - These and further stories are preserved under the mark BUL-E plus a number in the archives of the Institut für Ethnologie, University of Münster and in the private collection of the author.

<sup>10</sup> Stories of this sub-type are: BUL-E0086, BUL-E0089.

has chosen her husband herself will perish and die a violent death, often together with her mother and/or other close relatives<sup>11</sup>.

All these stories reflect thoughts on the social relations and social tensions existing between a girl and her parents, particularly her own mother, but also between a girl and her 'handsome' husband, between her husband and her parents, and between co-wives. The Bulsa themselves seem to be particularly concerned with the latter relationship: the explicit 'message' added to some of the stories of the sub-type 'Girl marries snake; snake eats girl's mother' condemns the 'rivalry' and 'jealousy' between co-wives who should imitate their 'dances', but not their 'deeds'. However, this moral is also added to other stories; it does not reflect the intrinsic meaning of this story.

The most important 'moral' of the stories quoted lies in the role assignment to nubile girls, and at the same time to that of their closest female relatives, their mothers and their mothers' co-wife or co-wives. In some Bulsa folktales, the father has also a say in his daughter's choice of a husband, but, as in real life, in most of the Bulsa stories he remains a marginal figure. Bulsa men do not pay any form of bridewealth in cattle or other valuable goods to their future wife's father. Only symbolic gifts mark different stages of the marriage<sup>12</sup>.

Under these conditions, Bulsa girls enjoy a much greater freedom, compared to other African societies, to decide for themselves whom they want to marry. According to the traditional customs of the Bulsa, the suitor had first of all to ask the consent of the girl's mother to marry her daughter (cf. Wanitzek, 1998: 133). The final decision, however, was with the girl herself (cf. Kröger, 1978: 266)<sup>13</sup>. In this sense, women are 'social actors' in a patriarchal, male dominated system that otherwise leaves them little freedom to act as they wish (cf. Wanitzek, 1998: 121-123ff.). This was also true in former times when among the Bulsa stricter wooing and marriage rules were observed. When there were several suitors wooing for the same girl, '[...] the parents asked the girl whom she wanted to marry. Although many parents tried to influence her decision, the last word was with the daughter herself.' (Kröger, 1978: 271; translation mine). Since she had the option to make her final choice between the suitors, she was, among the Bulsa, always free to 'choose her husband' (*choisir son époux*) without necessarily being 'difficult' (*difficile*) or 'rebellious' (*la fille rebelle*, cf. Görög-Karady, 1997: 77). It seems remarkable that in many of the stories the girl's decision for a certain husband depended on whether she 'loved' (Buli: *yaali*) him or not. This personal

<sup>11</sup> This point is also stressed by Christiane Seydou: '[...] cette mort correspond en effet à une seule et même intention: simple et évidente punition, au premier degré, elle traduit aussi, sur le plan sociologique, la condamnation de ce type d'union qui est vouée d'emblée à un échec total, la fille étant alors responsable d'une interruption dans le réseau relationnel qui, par le jeu d'alliance matrimoniale, est à la base même de toute société.' (Seydou, 1998: 318f.)

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Schott, 1980: 627-634, Wanitzek, 1998: 141.

<sup>13</sup> According to Kröger, 1978: 267 it happens that the girl may even hoax her suitors: She tells them to come to different points of rendezvous at night and elopes with the man she really loves, leaving the others literally in the dark. – Cf. the tale-type AaTh 940: 'The Haughty Girl entices three suitors (unknown to one another) into the churchyard.'

feeling of sympathy overruled all other considerations – though often with catastrophic consequences.

Apart from snakes there are six other animals from the bush who turn up as suitors, disguised as human beings, to woo the girl who had rejected all other suitors. In four versions, it is a bush cow<sup>14</sup>. Other big and strong wild animals also turn up as suitors. One such story (BUL-E0512) begins with the typical opening: ‘Once there lived a chief who had a daughter. Many men came to woo for her, but they [= all of them] failed. One day a lion turned into a man, put on clothes and came [to ask] for the daughter. When the girl saw the lion [in disguise as a man], she at once said that he was [to become] her husband this very day.’ He takes her far away<sup>15</sup> into the bush where he retransforms himself into a lion. The chief’s daughter is finally saved by the one-eyed and one-legged horse she chose from her fathers’ horses. In other stories, the daughter marries harmless animals of the bush after she had rejected all other suitors, such as, for instance, a Roan Antelope (*Hippotragus equinus*) (BUL-E0942), a Ground Hornbill (*Bucorvus abyssinicus*) (BUL-E1355), or two fish<sup>16</sup> (BUL-E1601) which came as suitors. (Polyandry is completely unknown among the Bulsa; marrying two or more men would be the height of abnormal behaviour for a woman.) In a further story, the chameleon appears as a suitor wooing for a girl who had rejected all other men (BUL-E0598, BUL-E182817).

The Bulsa believe that many trees are supernatural beings, gifted with extraordinary powers. Girls rebelling against the authority of their parents may suffer from the power of trees even if they do not refuse to marry, but only because of frivolous behaviour. One such story (BUL-E0249) begins: ‘Once there lived a girl from Wiasi [= Yuesi, a village in the South of the Bulsa country]; there was no dance<sup>18</sup> anywhere in this country to which she wouldn’t go<sup>19</sup>. Her father and her mother talked and talked [that she should not go], but in vain; even if she were lying down asleep and there was a dance at Fumbisi<sup>20</sup>, she would leave [her parent’s house] and go there. If she had gone out to a dance and arrived there, you would then know that a woman had now really come to the dance<sup>21</sup>. She knew all dances; they told her [to stay away], but in vain; she refused and did [what she liked]. One night, as she was sleeping, she heard [the sound of] flutes and drums,

<sup>14</sup> BUL-E0167, BUL-E0217, BUL-E0276, BUL-E1410.

<sup>15</sup> In some Bulsa stories (e.g. BUL-E0128, BUL-E1830) girls are warned not to choose their husbands from men who live far away.

<sup>16</sup> A species of fish called paang, pl. paangsa in Buli, probably *Tilapia galilaea*, cf. Kröger, 1992: 295, 296 sub paaring.

<sup>17</sup> The second version of this story (BUL-E1828) was recorded by Dr. Barbara Meier in Sandema-Longsa on 28 February 1989 from a 12 years old girl. It contains the frequent motif that a calabash (Mot. D965.2, D1610.3.1) and a pot warn the girl not to marry this suitor. The girl breaks the calabash and the pot, as she does in the preceding story of the fish coming to woo her (BUL-E1601).

<sup>18</sup> The word gok, pl. gokta means ‘1. dance ...; 2. festival, feast, ball ...’ (Kröger, 1992: 134). Gokta are staged in the evening to the accompaniment of drums, flutes and other musical instruments.

<sup>19</sup> Lit. ‘where she refused its journey’.

<sup>20</sup> A market town in the South of Bulsa country, at a distance of approximately 12 km from Yuesi (Wiasi).

<sup>21</sup> I.e., she was dancing more lively than any of the other women participating in the dance.

and [the music] intensified; she then climbed [the wall of her parents' compound] and landed [on the ground outside], she did not know the place where there was dancing. She followed the sweet sound of the drumming, went and went and went; when she had gone far, she stood and listened. Then she went on again and again; then she arrived where the dancers<sup>22</sup> had gathered [...]. While she is dancing, the people suddenly disperse and the girl finds herself alone. Only a tree and its children are still with her. They sing a song announcing that they have married their wife [the girl] today<sup>23</sup>. The girl escapes into a compound, but the tree's children follow her everywhere, always repeating their song. When they follow her into the sleeping room, she cannot escape them any more; they stab and kill her. The moral of the story is: children who do not listen to their parents' advice, but go their own way, will die their own death<sup>24</sup>.

In two Balsa stories, the girl is wooed by *kikita* (sing. *kikiruk*). *Kikita* are ogres or monsters<sup>25</sup> from the bush, sometimes born in the shape of deformed human beings<sup>26</sup>. In one story (BUL-E0282) eight *kikita* come to marry a girl; in the end they slaughter her and her mother, cook them and put pepper and salt on them before swallowing them.

In another story (BUL-E1240) a girl rejected all suitors; 'she even did not agree [to marry them] if they said that they loved the girl. There were also *kikita*, [among them] a *kikiruk* who consisted of only a big head like a scrotum<sup>27</sup>. He went to borrow things [limbs, clothes] from a *dawa-dawa* tree, a tamarind tree<sup>28</sup> and from many other trees, 'until he had borrowed and borrowed [everything] and had become a suitor.' When the girl 'had seen him [she said that] she agreed to marry him. Although she had refused to marry any man before, when she had seen him [the *kikiruk*], she really loved him.' Attracted by the *kikiruk*'s appearance, the girl follows him far away into the bush and marries him. When they reach the tamarind tree, the tree claims back its leg. The *kikiruk* gives it back. Other trees claim back the *kikiruk*'s smock and hat. The couple reach the *kikita*'s house which is full of skulls. The *kikiruk* forces the girl to enter and to sit on a huge toad. A former suitor offers to rescue the chief's daughter. The man, equipped with magical powers, transforms the girl and himself into winds and they can flee

<sup>22</sup> Lit. 'the dance'.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Mot. T 117.5 Marriage with a tree.

<sup>24</sup> Dila le soa ti ba ain biik dan yiti, fi nye kukeri a wom fi nyam laa biisi fu diila; fi dan kan wom ya ale yaali fi-dek siuk, faa kpi fi-dek kum. Translated literally: 'This is why it is said: when a child gets up (grows up), you should make efforts to listen to what your parents (lit. owners) tell you; if you don't listen [to them], but you go your own way, you will die your own death.'

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Mot. T 118 Girl married to a monster.

<sup>26</sup> Kröger, 1992: 174: 'kikiruk [...] fairy, ogre, monster (often harmful, can be born in a deformed or precocious child or in twins; some Balsa use the term kikiruk only for human persons, while they call the invisible fairy kikerik; others use the terms kikiruk and kikerik as synonyms).' The expression 'fairy' is colonial English; it means any kind of 'spirit' or 'supernatural being' except gods and ancestors.

<sup>27</sup> zu-koluk, < zuk 'head' and koluk 'scrotum', possibly referring to a scrotum swollen and enlarged by elephantiasis.

<sup>28</sup> dueb 'dawa-dawa tree, Locust Bean Tree (*Parkia biglobosa*)' (Kröger, 1992: 112); pusik 'tamarind tree, *Tamarindus indica*' (Kröger, 1992: 314).

leaving the angry *kikita* behind. The chief gives him his daughter in marriage. This is one of the few Bulsa stories on rebellious girls with an happy end. The moral of this story runs as follows: 'If God chooses something for you, although you have already made up your mind yourself to marry [someone else], do not do it [your own way]. You should fetch what God has given to you.'

No less than 12 stories<sup>29</sup>, the relatively largest number of our sample, tell of ghosts (Buli: *kok*, pl. *kokta*) marrying girls who refused to marry any other suitor. The word *kok* designates a 'ghost' or 'spirit of a dead person that cannot enter the realm of the dead [*kpilung*], e.g. because he or she was a wizard or witch [*sakpak*] in lifetime; *kokta* are always harmful to living persons.' (Kröger, 1992: 180, cf. Schott, 1970: 17). Anyone who touches a ghost, will die. In one story (BUL-E0553) a suitor rejected by the girl he wooed, dies and returns as a ghost and goes to the girl's house. The girl marries him that same day. His mother recognizes him as a ghost and asks her daughter-in-law whether she has touched her 'husband'. She denies it, runs back to her father's house and is saved. In a variant of this story (BUL-E1741), the ghost's mother also warns her daughter-in-law of her dead son: 'If your husband comes and asks you to lie down [= to sleep] with him, do not lie down together with him at his place [...] because, if the boy touches you, you will die.'

In many stories of this kind, not only one (BUL-E0003), but several ghosts come to woo the girl. This motif of polyandry<sup>30</sup> seems to be frequent in characterizing an abnormal marriage. In many stories (e.g. BUL-E0195, BUL-E0250) the girl is warned by her parents and/or by her calabash(es) and water pot(s) not to go away with the ghosts, but in vain: she follows them far away into the bush. The ghosts sing a song while abducting the girl (BUL-E0059).

In some of the stories the girl is saved by a dog (e.g. BUL-E0613, BUL-E1749), but she dies later on after having violated the taboo that she must not eat dog's meat. Thus in one story (BUL-E0120) a girl marries a ghost against her mother's advice. She flees unto a tree and has her parents informed. One of her parents' dogs rescues her. She is not to eat dog's meat any more. After having disregarded this taboo, she dies while giving birth to a dog. In another version (BUL-E0909) the daughter, having been saved by a dog, eats some meat from the dog's head. 'The next day she went out to shit. As she sat down and pushed, the dog's head came to her anus and started singing. [...] She got up and ran home and said: 'Mother, mother, there is something singing a song in my anus.' She told her [her mother] that she should come with her so that she would do it for her to see. Then she sat down and pushed and the thing began its song again. [...] They wondered what to do. At last the girl entered a room and covered herself with a mat and at once died.'

<sup>29</sup> BUL-E0003, BUL-E0059, BUL-E0120, BUL-E0195, BUL-E0197, BUL-E0224, BUL-E0250, BUL-E0553, BUL-E0613, BUL-E1741, BUL-E1749; BUL-E0051 (Girl who refuses to marry turns into a ghost)

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Mot. T 146.1 Several men marry one woman.



In other stories, ‘dead people’ (*kpilima*) turn up to marry a girl who had rejected all other suitors. *Kpilima* (no sing.) are the ‘ordinary’ dead who, other than the unredeemed *kokta*, live in *kpilung*, the realm of the dead; they are the usually benevolent ancestors of their living descendants. However, they may become angry when one of their descendants does not follow the rules of social life, such as girls who hesitate or refuse to marry. One story (BUL-E0487) says that ‘there lived a girl who sat at home and all the suitors tried to court her but she wouldn’t marry [any of them]. They all courted her in vain. Then a man who had died returned from the land of the dead (*kpilung*) at night, dressed up and looked more elegant than all the others [suitors] who wanted her. He then went and reached [the girl’s house] at night. The girl at once told her mother that she had found her suitor today and that she was going to follow him [home].’ Walking away together with his bride, the dead man sang a song<sup>31</sup> which began with the words: ‘My companions are in the grave [...]’. When they reached his grave, the dead man disappeared, leaving the girl alone. She covered his grave with a pot, as it is the custom with the Bulsa (cf. Schott, 1970: 44, 96, fig. 50). As a man passed by, she repeated the dead man’s song and died at once. The man went to inform the girl’s relatives of her death caused by singing this song. After having sung it himself, he also died and so did all the girl’s relatives except an orphan who said that he did not know the song<sup>32</sup>.

In another story (BUL-E0176) a girl refuses to marry any of the suitors. ‘One day some seven dead people (*kpilima*) got up, dressed up in smocks and trousers made of gang<sup>33</sup> and came [in order to court the girl]. As soon as they came and the girl saw them, she said that she was going to marry these people.’ Her calabash and the water pot warn her, but she does not listen. She follows the *kpilima* into the bush to places unknown to her. They reach a grave and her ‘husbands’ enter it one by one singing a song. When she is left all alone she returns home and tells her family what has happened. While her father and her eldest brother reflect about her problem, she sings the dead peoples’ song again and dies from it. The moral of the story proclaims: ‘[...] when you are a girl, and they court you for a short while you should marry and not sit for too long. When you sit for too long without marrying, you will marry the wrong person in the long run.’

To marry the ‘wrong person’ may not only mean a girl’s marriage to a wild animal, a tree, an ogre, a ghost or to dead people, it may also refer to a girl’s union with a human being of low status, a cripple or an orphan. In some of these stories,

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Mot. E 402.1.1.4 Ghost sings; Mot. E 546 The dead singing.

<sup>32</sup> Variants of this story: BUL-E0251: Two orphans are left who ‘received the house and the cattle’; BUL-E0617: Dead people (*kpilima*) come as suitors at night; BUL-E0678: A girl marries nine dead people, follows them to a burial place, learns their songs, returns home, she and all the people who sing the song die except an orphan; BUL-E0908: Eight ghosts come as suitors. She is warned by her parents and by her calabash, but follows the dead to their grave where they disappear one after the other. Their magic songs kills everybody except an orphan, cf. BUL-E0911; BUL-E1385. - In BUL-E0390, a story of the same type, it is not clear what kind of people are wooing the girl.

<sup>33</sup> gang ‘traditional cloth (e.g. as used for smocks in Northern Ghana; consisting of woven strips sewn together), cover cloth for women, smock of men’ (Kröger, 1992: 125).



the girl, after having refused to marry any of her suitors, is henceforth forbidden to speak to any man; she is to marry the first one to whom she talks in spite of this interdiction. In one story, this man turns out to be a leper<sup>34</sup>.

Among the Bulsa, the girl's choice of husband may be unpredictable. Out of a whim, they may choose the exact opposite of a 'perfect man', as, for instance, a cripple. One Bulsa story (BUL-E0917) tells us: 'There was a man who had a hunchback [...]. A girl was there; all the suitors went to court her. They went to court her, but they failed. The "owner" of the hump<sup>35</sup> got up and went and said that he loved her. [The girl said:] 'I did not marry better men [who came to woo me] - look at the "owner" of the hump!' [And yet:] She loved him and she married him.' Then her mother died; with the help of a magic song, the hunchback opened the wall of the compound where the mourning for his mother-in-law took place. The story ends with the remark addressed to a girl: '[...] when you sit at home and suitors come to court you, don't say you don't want this [a certain] person. The one you don't like, is the one you will marry. The hump "owner" and the girl married and he came and opened the wall [of the compound], passed and entered and mourned for her mother.'

Another story (BUL-E1382) reads: 'There was a woman who had a daughter. The daughter's house was on the way to the market. All the suitors came to marry this girl, but they failed. [Even] chiefs came to woo her, but they [also] failed. All of them tried hard, but they failed. Then there was an orphan boy; the boy got up and told his father that he would go and court the girl.' His father warned him that the girl who rejected better men would not marry a poor and useless orphan<sup>36</sup>. 'You have not even enough millet porridge to eat, and you want to marry a lady?' The further details of this story are not relevant in our context: the boy provokes the rich and haughty girl who in the end marries the orphan. He takes the girl home. The boy's father asks him how he has managed to take the girl to his house. The boy answered: 'The woman loves me – what can I do?' The moral of the story is: 'An orphan has more sense than a rich person who has many things.'

In another story (BUL-E0021), told by a man of about 62 years, a chief's most beautiful daughter refuses to marry any of her suitors. A man has three sons: one of them becomes a farmer, the other one a hunter and the third one a *ja-kayuok*<sup>37</sup>, a 'useless' or 'anti-social person' (Kröger, 1992: 147), a 'good-for-nothing'. The latter is frequently in the bush, preparing his fetish medicines. Children and adult people abuse and insult him. He also goes to court the chief's beautiful daughter,

<sup>34</sup> For the Buli text and an English translation of this story (BUL-E0514) cf. Schott, 1993: 248-254.

<sup>35</sup> *goruku nyono*, lit. 'hump owner', composed of the nouns *goruk*, definite form *goruku*, 'hump, hunchback' and *nyono*, '1. owner, possessor, bearer, proprietor [...]' 4. *nyono* is used to form new conceptual categories according to one specific common quality [...]' (Kröger, 1992: 136, 289). In the present context, the word *nyono* is presumably used in an ironic sense: the only thing the suitor 'owns' is his humpback.

<sup>36</sup> *kping* 'orphan' means someone who has lost his own mother. Orphans have to rely on the mercy of their mother's co-wives who will always prefer their own children to them. Orphans stand at a very low level in the social hierarchy of the Bulsa.

<sup>37</sup> *ja-kayuok* from *ja-* < *jaab* n. 'thing' and *kayuok*, adj. 'useless, antisocial, unimportant', also: 'extraordinary, strange, funny' (Kröger, 1992: 172).

but he is laughed at: chiefs and rich people came to woo her, what chances has he, a 'good-for-nothing'? As Bulsa custom requires, he goes to greet first the girl's mother. She calls her daughter who has only contempt and derision for him. Chiefs arrive with their followers, they are equipped with guns and horses and beat their arm-pit drums. The chief's daughter says she will take a bath and come back. She takes her pot and descends to the river. While drawing water, she loses her vagina. Her mother goes to the water and also loses her vagina. Her father follows them in order to search for his daughter's and his wife's vaginas. The father's penis and his testicles also drop into the water and disappear. The chief goes to the man called 'good-for-nothing' and promises him a horse, guns, blowers of trumpets and drummers, a box of clothes and other possessions, begging him to restore their sexual organs with the help of his fetish medicines. He does so, but before, the 'good-for-nothing' reminds them that they have insulted him. With all his new riches he rides to his father's house and has the chief's guns fired. He says to his two brothers: 'You called me a 'thing' running and roaming about; if I am a 'running thing' (a stroller), it is God (*wen*) and the Earth shrines (*tanggbana*) and the ancestors (*kpilima*) who made me so.'

In another version of this story (BUL-E1812), told by a man of about 40 years, the handicapped suitor is described as being extremely ugly<sup>38</sup> and a depraved drunkard whose companions vomit their beer on him and spit on him when chewing cola nuts or tobacco. The girl rebuffs him. When she goes to the water, the ugly man goes to hide in the hollow of a nearby tree. He utters a magic curse causing her to lose her vagina. Her lover tries to help her, but he loses his testicles and his penis. The same happens to Hausa cattle herders when they drive their cattle into the water. Finally the girl's mother begs the ugly man to restore the sexual organs to their owners; in return, she promises him her daughter. The Hausa herders promise him their cattle if he restores them their penises and testicles. He is given the girl in marriage. This version of the story ends with the moral: 'If you are a girl sitting at home, and a suitor likes you, even if you don't like him, don't insult him! Even if you don't like him, you don't know how God (*wen*) works. It is God who gave the woman to him and who gave him things (possessions) to feed the woman, so that she became his 'thing'.'

This male moral, calling in the Sky God in order to justify the extortion of a girl by robbing her and her parents of their sexual organs, reflects the day-dreaming of deprived men who want to refuse girls the free choice of their husbands.

However, in many more Bulsa stories, and often in reality, the girl is free to choose between several suitors. Being in this position, she may, in the Bulsa stories, look out for the morally 'perfect man': In addition to the above-quoted sample of 65 Bulsa stories, in 13 stories of this type all the suitors wooing for the girl are put to a test which is passed only by the one who proves to be truly unselfish. Only

<sup>38</sup> Buli: loarima, v. 'to be nasty, bad, wicked, spoilt, ugly (moral sense)' (Kröger, 1992: 216).

the girl who is too fastidious in her choice, will find herself married to a leper or some other undesirable person.

In some stories the girl herself tests her suitors. For example, one story (BUL-E0109) tells of a woman who surpasses all the other women in beauty. Although there are many suitors who woo her, she doesn't know who really loves her. The suitors bring her gifts of cows, donkeys, sheep and goats. One suitor, a poor man, can give her only a chicken. Not knowing whether the man who brought the cows really loves her, she lays down and feigns to be dead in order to test the man's love. The men who sit in the *kusung*<sup>39</sup> tell him that the woman has died. When he hears this, he gets angry and claims his cows back. When the man who gave the donkeys arrives, he is told the same story. He regrets the loss of his donkeys and claims them back in a song. The man who brought the sheep is told the same story. He gets very angry and sings a song by which he claims back his sheep. The owner of the goats comes, fetches his goats and goes home. When the suitor who gave the chickens hears of the woman's death, he regrets her death. He sings a song offering his chickens as sacrificial gift for the funeral. The girl, upon hearing his song says that this man really loves her. The girl wants the suitor to repeat the song and then she tells him that she will marry him<sup>40</sup>.

In some of the stories, so-called 'dilemma tales' (cf. Bascom, 1973), the girl cannot make up her mind which of several suitors she should choose.

For example, in one story (BUL-E0031)<sup>41</sup> the girl is unable to decide between three sons<sup>42</sup> of different men who woo her, because all of them seem the same to her. While the girl leaves for Kumasi in the South of Ghana, the three suitors take a magic medicament. When she does not come back in time, the three men are worried. One of them sees in a mirror that she is nearly dying and so they decide to go to Kumasi. Lead by the second one, they are travelling through the sky. When they arrive in Kumasi, the woman is nearly dying. The third one then makes her stand up again by a clapping his hands and thereby revives her. Now again she does not know which one she will marry because each one of the three suitors helped her. The story ends with the words: 'Because they all helped her, she cannot marry any of them; they don't know who should 'own' the woman, that is the meaning [of the story].'

Girls about to pass the threshold of marriage find themselves in a severe life crisis. Some girls, in real life as well as in the stories quoted, rebel against their role of wives and mothers in the extraneous, often even hostile, environment of unloved husbands. Bulsa folktales warn them: if they do not accept somewhat

<sup>39</sup> A shelter in front of the compound.

<sup>40</sup> In another version of this story (BUL-E0192), an orphan with scabies takes the testicles of a small goat as a gift to house of the chief's daughter who feigns death. He succeeds in the test, because when he hears about the girl's death he starts singing a song telling her relatives to use his present for the girl's funeral. Similar story: BUL-E0262.

<sup>41</sup> In another dilemma tale (BUL-E0056) a girl who refused all suitors is finally swallowed by a hippopotamus. She is rescued by three men.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. AaTh 653 *The Four Skillful Brothers* and Mot. H 621.2 *Girl rescued by skillful companions: to whom does she belong?*

‘imperfect’ men as husbands, they and their families will suffer dire consequences. In reverse, these moral threats, expressed in Bulsa folktales, prove that girls in male dominated West African societies do have their own will and wishes. In their search for the perfect husband, they rebel against the restrictions imposed on them by the social order of their patrilineal societies.

## Bibliography

- Aarne, Antti and Thompson, Stith 1961, *The Types of the Folktale – A Classification and Bibliography*, Second Revision, FFC No. 184, Helsinki (quoted as AaTh).
- Bascom, William R. 1973, *African Dilemma Tales*, The Hague - Paris, Mouton Publishers.
- Fortes, Meyer 1981, “On the Concept of the Person among the Tallensi”, in *Colloques internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique* Nr. 544, Paris, pp. 283-319.
- Frobenius, Leo 1922, *Erzählungen aus dem Westsudan*, “Atlantis – Volksmärchen und Volksdichtungen Afrikas” vol. VIII, Jena, Eugen Diederichs.
- Görög-Karady, Veronika 1997, *L’univers familial dans les contes africains. Liens de sang, liens d’alliance*, Paris-Montréal, L’Harmattan.
- Kröger, Franz 1978, *Übergangsriten im Wandel – Kindheit, Reife und Heirat bei den Bulsa in Nord-Ghana*, “Kulturanthropologische Studien”, vol. 1, Hohenschäftlarn bei München, Klaus Renner.
- 1992, *Buli-English Dictionary* – With an Introductory Grammar and an Index English-Buli, Münster, LIT-Verlag.
- Murdock, George Peter, 1949, *Social Structure*, New York, Macmillan.
- Schott, Rüdiger 1970, *Aus Leben und Dichtung eines westafrikanischen Bauernvolkes – Ergebnisse völkerkundlicher Forschungen bei den Bulsa in Nord-Ghana 1966/67*, Veröffentl.d.Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Forschung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, Reihe Geisteswissenschaften, Heft 163, Köln und Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag.
- 1980, “Das Recht gegen das Gesetz: Traditionelle Vorstellungen und moderne Rechtsprechung bei den Bulsa in Nordghana”, in *Recht und Gesellschaft – Festschrift für Helmut Schelsky zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. by Friedrich Kaulbach und Werner Krawietz, Berlin, pp. 605-636.

- 1982, “Ehe und Familie in einer Gesellschaft westafrikanischer Bodenbauer (Bulsa in Nordghana)”, in Bernhard Mensen SVD (ed.), *Ehe und Familie in verschiedenen Kulturen* (Vortragsreihe 1981/82), Akademie Völker und Kulturen, St. Augustin, pp. 55-74.
- 1989, “Bericht über laufende Forschungen zur Motivanalyse afrikanischer Erzählungen im Seminar für Völkerkunde der Universität Münster”, in *Fabula*, vol. 30, pp. 83-95.
- 1990a, “Project of Comparative Analysis of Motifs and Themes in African Tales”, in *Asian Folklore Studies*, Nagoya, vol. XLIX-1, pp. 140-142.
- 1990b, *Afrikanische Erzählungen als religionsethnologische Quellen – dargestellt am Beispiel von Erzählungen der Bulsa in Nordghana*, Rheinisch-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Geisteswissenschaften, Vorträge G 305, Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag.
- 1993, “Bulsa Sunsuelima – Folktales of the Bulsa in Northern Ghana”, Series S: Folktales of the Supernatural, vol. 1, *Tales of the Sky-God* (Wen, Naawen). Part 1, in Rüdiger Schott (ed.), *Forschungen zu Sprachen und Kulturen Afrikas*, vol. 2, Münster und Hamburg, Lit Verlag.
- 1996, “Bulsa Sunsuelima – Folktales of the Bulsa in Northern Ghana”, Series S: Folktales of the Supernatural. Vol. 1, *Tales of the Sky-God* (Wen, Naawen). Part II-III, in Rüdiger Schott (ed.), *Forschungen zu Sprachen und Kulturen Afrikas*, vol. 4, Münster, Lit Verlag.
- 1998, “Some Problems with Tale-Type, Motif and Keyword Indices in Analysing Folktales of the Bulsa (Northern Ghana)”, in Walter Heissig and Rüdiger Schott (eds.): *Die heutige Bedeutung oraler Traditionen – The Present-Day Importance of Oral Traditions*. Opladen/Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, pp. 333-340.
- Seydou, Christiane 1998, “Autour d’une Fille Difficile: histoire d’une expérience”, in Walter Heissig and Rüdiger Schott (eds.), *Die heutige Bedeutung oraler Traditionen – The Present-Day Importance of Oral Traditions*, Opladen/Wiesbaden, Westdeutscher Verlag, pp. 315-332.
- Thompson, Stith 1955, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*. Revised and Enlarged Edition. 6 vol. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press (quoted as Mot.)
- Wanitzek, Ulrike 1998, “Bulsa Marriage Law and Practice: Women as Social Actors in a Patriarchal Society”, in E. Adriaan B. van Rouveroy van Nieuwaal & Werner Zips (eds.), *Sovereignty, Legitimacy, and Power in West African Societies – Perspectives from Legal Anthropology*, Hamburg, Lit Verlag, pp. 119-171.

## ABSTRACT

Girls are social misfits in patrilineal societies. Upon marriage, their social environment will shift from their fathers' family to that of their husbands. This unstable social position of girls and the resulting conflicts of role assignments are reflected in the folktales of the patrilineal society of the Balsa in Northern Ghana.

Quite a number of their folktales concern the 'rebellious girl' who either refuses to marry, i.e. to accept her role as an adult woman in society, and/or who waits for the 'perfect man'. When the girl finally decides to follow a certain man who appears to her to be without any blemish, he turns out to be not a human being, but either a ghost or a wild animal, such as a bush cow, a leopard, a snake, or even a tree.

In other stories, the girl looks out for the morally 'perfect man': All suitors wooing for the girl are put to a test which is passed only by the one who proves to be really unselfish. However, the girl who is too fastidious in choosing her husband, will find herself married to a leper or some other undesirable person. A girl insulting an ugly suitor loses her vagina etc.

Girls about to pass the threshold of marriage find themselves in a severe life crisis. Balsa folktales warn them: if they do not accept somewhat 'imperfect' husbands, they and their families will suffer dire consequences. These moral threats, expressed in Balsa folktales, prove that girls in male dominated West African societies do have their own will and wishes. In their search for the perfect husband, they rebel against the restrictions imposed on them by the social order of their patrilineal societies.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Mädchen sind in patrilinearen Gesellschaften fehlangepaßt. Bei der Heirat wechseln sie ihr soziales Umfeld von der Familie ihrer Väter in die ihrer Ehemänner. Diese instabile soziale Position der Mädchen und die daraus resultierenden Konflikte der Rollenzuweisungen spiegeln sich in den Volkserzählungen der patrilinearen Gesellschaft der Balsa in Nordghana wider.

Eine beträchtliche Anzahl ihrer Erzählungen befaßt sich mit dem "rebellischen Mädchen", das sich entweder weigert zu heiraten, d.h. seine Rolle als erwachsene Frau anzunehmen, und/oder auf den "perfekten (Ehe-)Mann" wartet. Wenn das Mädchen sich schließlich entschließt, einem Mann zu folgen, der ihr ohne Makel zu sein scheint, entlarvt er sich als nicht-menschliches Wesen - entweder

als Geist oder aber als wildes Tier, wie Wildbüffel, Leopard, Schlange, oder sogar als Baum.

In anderen Erzählungen hält das Mädchen Ausschau nach dem moralisch “perfekten (Ehe-)Mann”: Das Mädchen unterwirft alle Freier einem Test, den nur derjenige besteht, der sich als wirklich selbstlos erweist. Ist ein Mädchen jedoch allzu anspruchsvoll bei der Auswahl seine Ehemannes, findet es sich schließlich verheiratet mit einem Leprösen oder einer anderen mißliebigen Person. Ein Mädchen, das einen häßlichen Freier beschimpft, verliert seine Vagina usw.

Mädchen, die im Begriff sind, die Schwelle der Heirat zu überschreiten, befinden sich in einer schweren Lebenskrise. Erzählungen der Balsa warnen sie: Wenn sie nicht bereit sind, “unvollkommene” Ehemänner zu akzeptieren, werden die Mädchen und ihre Familien unter schrecklichen Folgen zu leiden haben. Diese moralischen Drohungen, ausgedrückt in den Balsa-Erzählungen, zeigen, daß Mädchen in von Männern dominierten Gesellschaften Westafrikas ihren eigenen Willen und ihre eigenen Wunschvorstellungen haben. Indem sie für sich perfekte Ehemänner begehren, lehnen sie sich gegen die Beschränkungen auf, die ihnen die patrilineare Sozialordnung auferlegt.

## RESUMO

Nas sociedades patrilineares, as raparigas têm um estatuto de marginais. Com o casamento, o meio social a que pertencem deixa de ser a família do pai e passa a ser a do marido. A posição social instável das raparigas e os conflitos que daí resultam quanto à atribuição de papéis reflectem-se nos contos da sociedade patrilinear dos Balsas Norte do Gana.

Um número substancial de contos tradicionais diz respeito à “rapariga rebelde”, que, ou se recusa a casar, isto é, a aceitar o seu papel de mulher adulta na sociedade, e/ou que espera pelo “homem perfeito”. Quando a rapariga finalmente se decide a seguir um certo homem que lhe parece ser sem mácula, este, afinal, não é um ser humano, mas um fantasma ou um animal selvagem, como uma vaca do mato, um leopardo, uma cobra ou até uma árvore.

Noutras histórias, a rapariga procura o homem moralmente “perfeito”: todos os pretendentes da rapariga são submetidos a um teste em que só passa aquele que prova ser realmente generoso. Contudo, a rapariga que é demasiado difícil na escolha de um marido acaba por se ver casada com um leproso ou com uma pessoa indesejável. Uma rapariga que insulta um pretendente feio perde a vagina, etc.

Ao passar o limiar do casamento, as raparigas encontram-se numa enorme



crise existencial. Os contos bulsas avisam-nas: se elas não aceitam um marido com algumas “imperfeições”, tanto elas como as suas famílias sofrerão consequências catastróficas. Estas ameaças morais expressas nos contos bulsas provam que as raparigas, no mundo dominado pelos homens das sociedades da África Ocidental, têm uma vontade e um desejo próprios. Na sua procura do marido perfeito, insurgem-se contra as restrições que lhes são impostas pela ordem social das sociedades patrilineares.