

*He paid a hundred cows which I could not count,
O, Ajiech, my shining husband."*

Ayak and Her Lost Bridegroom

DINKA PEOPLE, SUDAN¹⁴

This is an ancient event.

Ajiech was so handsome, so very handsome. He was about the most handsome of all men.

Ajiech married a girl called Ayak. He brought the cattle for the marriage with his age-mates. Among his age-mates was a lion. But no one knew he was a lion. They drove the cattle to Ayak's family.

A very great feast was held by Ayak's family. People ate and ate. One night during the celebration, while Ajiech was in a deep sleep, the lion came and gave him some medicine so that he would not wake up from his sleep. Then he took him away to his home. He broke his neck and seated him in the hut with his back resting against the wall. Then he left the body under the care of his wife.

Meanwhile, Ayak was shaken with sudden grief. She cried and cried and wandered away from her house. She just walked and walked in the wilderness, not knowing or caring where she was going. She did not care whether she lived or died.

On the way, she met a group of foxes and sang as they approached:

*"My man Ajiech,
My man, Ajiech, the Shining One,
He courted me with tenderness,
He courted me with the sweet words of youth,
The sweet words of age-mateship,
And when he married me,*

The foxes asked her, "Lady, what is the matter? Why are you crying?"

She answered, "I have lost a man. He had just brought his cattle for marriage, but had not yet completed the marriage, when someone came and took him away; I do not know where he has been taken."

The foxes then consoled her and said that they had seen a person passing by, carrying something on his shoulders. "Hurry, you may never catch up with him; he is really a long way away."

She threw herself down crying. Then she got up and ran on. She ran and ran, until she met a group of lions. She sang the same song to them as they approached. They asked her what was troubling her. When she explained to them, they said, "We met a man on the way, carrying something on his shoulders, but if he is the one, he is too far; you can never catch up with him."

She said to them, "Please do not kill my hope. Why do you put it in that way? I must catch up with him."

And she ran and ran and ran. Then she met a group of hyenas and sang to them. She went on running and meeting all sorts of animals until she met a herd of elephants. They told her they had seen a man enter a village. One bull took pity on her and offered to carry her there. They ran and ran until they could see houses in the distance. When the elephant pointed out the huts, she pretended she did not see them. She wanted the elephant to take her right into the village.

Only when they were nearly there did she agree she saw the huts. The elephant then put her down to enter the village by herself. But the elephant gave her some medicine and said, "This will be your weapon against the lion. If he attacks you, throw some into his face and he will fall dead. But then put this other medicine in his nostrils and he will come back to life. When he comes back to life, have him remake your husband exactly as he used to be. Make

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sure the lion makes him so well that he can run with the wind. When he has made him perfect, he will probably want to kill him again. At that point, throw the medicine in the lion's face. He will die. But then bring him back to life again so that he may bless you in his last words."

She went and sat near the cooking-place in front of a hut and sang. She sang until the wife of the lion came and asked her what she wanted.

"My husband is inside that hut," she said. "I want him."

"You will never have him," said the lioness.

"I have an idea," said Ayak. "You are a woman and I am a woman. Why don't you create him, make him come back to life as complete as he used to be, and then we will fight in competition for him. I dare you!"

The lioness got angry and said, "Very well, he will be created this evening."

That night, the lioness asked Ayak to kindle the fire so that she might have light to work with. As she kindled the fire, Ayak sang:

"Fire, fire, come, light up,

Our word is a word of honor,

Fire, fire, come, light up,

Our word is a word of honor."

When the fire died down, Ayak threw more grass into it and sang.

The lioness worked until Ajiech was re-created. But one eye was pulled in. So Ayak said, "My dear woman, did you not see that his eyes were perfect? Go on, make them what they used to be!"

So the lioness worked on his eyes. Then Ayak said, "He used to outrun the wind; so bring back his speed. He was also a very strong man, who could pull down a big tree. That husband of mine was not an ordinary man."

The lioness worked on him again. But when he raced with the wind, he was outrun. Ayak insisted that she work on him some more. She worked on him until he was perfect in every way.

Then the lioness said, "It is now time for us to fight for him. I cannot leave him to you!"

So they fought. After wrestling for some time, the lioness began to turn wild in order to eat her, but Ayak threw the medicine into her face. The lioness died. So Ayak put the medicine of life into her nostrils and she came back to life.

Then the lioness said, "My dear woman, I will no longer stand between you and your husband. Go with him. You will have seven children, but on the birth of your seventh child, you will both die together the same day."

Ayak said, "Increase the number of children we shall have."

"Very well," said the lioness. "You will have eight children and they will all grow up to be big. But you will both die the day you bear your eighth child."

"Very well," said Ayak. "Our children will continue our life if we die."