Daniel A. Nkemleke, "Entry on: Why the Thumb is Short by Joe Tabi Ekema, Emmanuel Matateyou", peer-reviewed by Divine Che Neba and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/201. Entry version as of November 07, 2026.

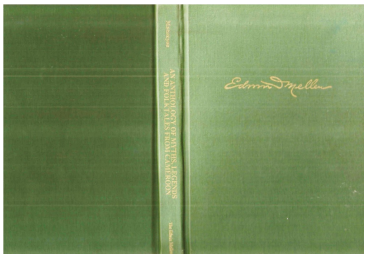
Joe Tabi Ekema , Emmanuel Matateyou

Why the Thumb is Short

Cameroon (1997)

TAGS: African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions





The cover of *An Anthology of Myths, Legends and Folktales from Cameroon* by Emmanuel Matateyou. Courtesy of The Edwin Mellen Press Ltd.

General information	
Title of the work	Why the Thumb is Short
Country of the First Edition	Cameroon
Country/countries of popularity	Cameroon
Original Language	Kenyang
First Edition Date	1997
First Edition Details	Emmanuel Matateyou, *An Anthology of Myths, Legends and Folktales from Cameroon*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997, 255 pp.
Country of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Cameroon
Full Date of the Recording of the Story for the Databasey	October 15, 1992 (summarised from a book published in 1999, in which the date of the collection of the story is mentioned)
More Details of the Recording of the Story for the Database	Mamfe, Southwest Cameroon
Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover
Author of the Entry	Daniel A. Nkemleke, University of Yaoundé 1, nkemlekedan@yahoo.com

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Creators



Joe Tabi Ekema (Storyteller)

Age of Narrator: 52 (in 1992)

Occupation: Teacher

Language: Kenyang

Bio prepared by Divine Che Neba, University of Yaoundé 1, nebankiwang@yahoo.com



Emmanuel Matateyou by Rama. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons, licensed under Cc-by-sa-2.0-fr (accessed: December 15, 2021).

Emmanuel Matateyou , b. 1952
(Author, Storyteller)

Emanuel Matateyou is a writer and a professor at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, University of Yaoundé 1. He is a former Fulbright scholar and has published widely on oral literature and Cameroonian culture and languages. Some of his publications include: *An Anthology of myths, legends and folktales from Cameroon* (1997), *Les Merveilleux récits de Tita Ki* (2001), *Parlons Bamoun* (2001), *Problématique d'une conciliation du réel et l'irréel* (1999), *Les sociétés secrètes dans la littérature camerounaise le cas des Bamoun*. 2. vol. (1990).

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Additional information

Origin/Cultural Background/Dating

Cultural Background*: Mamfe, Southwest Cameroon

The Ejaghams of Manyu Division are found mainly in Eyumojock Sub-Division. The Ejaghams are of Bantu stock and probably migrated because of wars and the need for a peaceful settlement. The majority of their population is found in Cross-River State in Nigeria. They are also known as the Ekoi. Like many other tribes of this part of the globe, they believe in the supremacy of the ancestors whom they worship in cults. As a custom, they do not sell land to strangers and new comers in the belief that the land is owned by their ancestors (the first settlers), and they are simply heirs and custodians to them. They hold the Lake Ijagham as their sacred cradle. As an art, the people are good sculptors but their produce ends at local consumption. Their main economic activity is fishing and farming (of yams, maize, plantains) both for subsistent and commercial purposes. Some remote villages in the Ejagham tribe still practice female genital mutilation.

* Source:

Ekoi (Ejagham) People: Originators of Ancient Secret Nsibidi Writings and Famous for Their Traditional African Ritual Expressions, June 8, 2013, kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com (accessed: July 2, 2019).

Summary

This is a reprint of the story as it appears in: *An Anthology of Myths, Legends and Folktales from Cameroon* by Emmanuel Matateyou, published in 1997 (pp. 49–50) by The Edwin Mellen Press Ltd. We have the permission of the publisher and the author to publish up to 10 myths in this collection in the context of our project on "Our Mythical Childhood…". We are therefore thankful to The Edwin Mellen Press Ltd and Professor Mataeyou for granting us this permission.

Many, many, many years ago, the various parts of the human body possessed the ability of speech. They could converse, quarrel and fight with one another.

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One day all the fingers decided to go on a visit to a very distant land. The journey was very dangerous and tiring. They travelled for many days and night without resting or even chewing a morsel. One week had passed and Small finger could no longer preserve the hunger that had reduced him to the size of a broomstick. “I’m hungry!” spouted small finger. The Second finger was also dying of hunger and was waiting for the least opportunity to shout out his woe. “Let us go to that house” the Second finger groaning, holding his stomach and pointing to a house by the road-side. But the Third finger complained “If we go to that house and there is nothing to eat, what shall we do? “. The Fourth finger retorted, stooping and bending double with his hands holding his stomach and chin. “But if there is no food in that house. Then think of a better place where one can get even just a morsel.”

All of them were terribly hungry. They put their thinking caps together, but no solution was arrived at. In the midst of their misery, they resigned themselves to their fate and lay under a nearby tree. They all lay languidly and looked helplessly into each silence. “Let us go back to that farm which we passed in that valley and steal cocoyams”, he said to the other fingers pointing to a valley. His companion except the Fifth finger was very happy about this bright idea. “We can also steal a fowl and use it in preparing the cocoyams”, the Third finger added. “What do you mean!” he interrogated the First, Second, Third and Fourth fingers. “If you dare steal that man’s cocoyam and fowl, then I shall implicate you. I shall tell him, I swear “, he continued. The thumb’s negative reaction greatly infuriated his famished mates. They joined together and gave him the beatings of his life. He was beaten to near death and almost trimmed off the hand. He laid unconsciously for more than a week. The gravity of beating inflicted on The Thumb caused him to become short and a bit detached from the rest of the fingers. He has remained short and a bit detached since then.

That is why the Thumb is shorter and is further away from the rest of the fingers.

Analysis

The myth underscores the paradox of morality and uprightness. On the one hand, it demonstrates the fact that people sometimes suffer unjustly and/or for being strict to moral demands. On the other hand, it raises philosophical questions about the rule of morality and/or what

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	constitutes morality when one is faced with the bleak reality of hopelessness. This is exemplified in the above myth by the other fingers' decision to steal in order to save themselves from dying of hunger, even with the knowledge that stealing is morally incorrect. This question may find answers in the imperfections of human and religious laws with respect to a hopeless human situation. Good and evil are therefore concepts that are relative to social conditions.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Conflict Journeys Transformation Violence
Further Reading	Agrawal, M. M., "Morals and the value of human life" in Emmanuel Eze, ed., *African Philosophy. An anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, 146–154. Matateyou, Emmanuel, *An Anthology of Myths, Legends and Folktales from Cameroon*, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press Ltd, 1997.
Addenda	Collected by: Irene Mukeke.

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