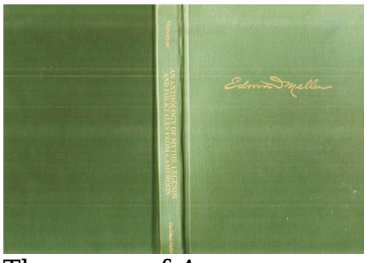
Daniel A. Nkemleke, "Entry on: Why Tortoise Has a Cracked Shell by Pa Buweh , Emmanuel Matateyou", peer-reviewed by Divine Che Neba and Elizabeth Hale. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/202. Entry version as of November 19, 2026.

Pa Buweh , Emmanuel Matateyou

Why Tortoise Has a Cracked Shell

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 Tortoise Has a Cracked Shell
Country of the First Edition	Cameroon
Country/countries of popularity	Cameroon
Original Language	Bafut
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	April 10, 1990 (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	Bamenda, Northwest Cameroon
Genre	Myths
Target Audience	Crossover
Author of the Entry	Daniel A. Nkemleke, University of Yaoundé 1, nkemlekedan@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

Pa Buweh (Storyteller)

Age of Narrator: 63 (in 1990)

Occupation: Farmer (notable of Bafut Kingdom)

Language: Bafut

Bio prepared by Daniel A. Nkemleke, University of Yaoundé 1, nkemlekedan@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*: Bafut is located in the North West Region of Cameroon, with an estimated population of about 140.000 inhabitants, spread over a surface area of 340 square kilometers. As Shu Abenego Che and Tanda Insidore in "The History of Bafut" rightly put, the first Bafut people migrated from Lake Chad down to Tikari area Northwest of Foumban, which was a dynastic rule. Due to the constant search for fertile land and a more peaceful settlement, they migrated again to Ndobo, (present day Ndop), then down to Bafut,where they finally settled. They negotiated leadership with the aborigines, who were the Mbebili people, under the leadership of Niba Chi. In order for peace to reign, the Mbebili people later agreed to be subservient to the people from Ndobo. Mbebili today is one of the villages that make up the Bafut Kingdom. The Bafut people as a whole believe in the worship of the Judeo-Christian God, gods, goddesses, ancestors and spirits. Most of their places of worship resulted from some mythic encounters between the living and the supernatural.

* Source:

Shu Abenego Che and Tanda Insidore in *The History of Bafut*, bafutmanjongcalgary.ca (accessed: April 20, 2018).

Summary

This is a slightly modified version of the story as it appears in: *An Anthology of Myths, Legends and Folktales from Cameroon* by Emmanuel Matateyou, published in 1997 (pp. 63–65) by The Edwin Mellen Press Ltd. We have permission of the publisher and the author to reprint up to 10 myths in the collection for our research on "Our Mythical Childhood…". We are therefore very thankful to The Edwin Mellen Press Ltd and Professor Matateyou for granting us this permission.

Once upon a time, there was a feast in the sky. Birds of all kinds were invited to it because they could afford to fly up to the sky. There was a great famine in the land and so the birds felt very happy. During the feast, they were going to eat to their fill and even carry some of the surplus back to their homes on earth. Tortoise, the glutton and cheat,

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got wind of the invitation. He coaxed the birds to take him along to the feast. All the birds refused and told him that they did not like him because of his wily ways. But Tortoise pleaded and pleaded until all the birds accepted. The fact that Tortoise had no wings was another great obstacle. How was he going to travel to the sky for the feast? Tortoise decided on a strategy. He would contact all the birds individually and convince them each to give him a feather. Promises of many favours to be done to each bird on their return from the feast were made by Tortoise. Each bird gave a feather to him and two great wings of multi-colours were constructed. He used these wings during the journey to the sky.

In the course of this journey to the sky, Tortoise's multi-coloured wings became an object of great admiration for all the birds. Many of the birds vied to fly close to Tortoise in order to share in the importance that he now enjoyed. Tortoise welcomed this opportunity and started recounting very interesting stories to them. This made him to become more popular to the birds. The popularity of Tortoise amongst the birds grew by leaps and bounds. Not a single bird hesitated to vote for Tortoise when he merely suggested that a leader be voted and should bear the name "All-of-you" during the feast, because that leader should represent all of them. All the birds ve-e-e-ep (expression of narrator), unanimously voted Tortoise to be their leader. They enjoyed a hearty welcome from their host when they finally arrived in the sky. The whole place was smelling of all delicacies. "We are very happy to welcome all of you here today. This feast could have meant nothing without the presence of all of you….", the spokesman of their host (Tortoise) addressed them. All the birds turned and looked at each other in great astonishment. They couldn't just imagine how Tortoise, who was not even officially invited, had stolen the show to the extent that their host had forgotten about them, the real invitees, and was only interested in "All-of-you" (Tortoise's new name).

When the time for eating came, food was served to the guests from the earth. "The food and drinks are for all of you", the service said to them and placed the food and drinks before them. All the birds tacitly understood that the food and drinks were meant for All-of-you, the Tortoise. The Tortoise settled on all the food and drinks. He greedily devoured it and drank all the palm wine until his stomach grew very fat and almost burst. Under the weight of great hunger, all the birds watched Tortoise eat and drink. They waited and waited for their own food to be brought, but nothing was brought. They greedily helped

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themselves with the remains of what Tortoise ate. Their throats and stomachs rumbled: “we-ehe, and wo-o-o” (sound made by narrator), as they ate. The spokesman of the host came in just at this time to encourage their guests to enjoy the meal that they had served them. “Thank you! Thank you! “All of you”. We are very happy that “All of you” have appreciated the food that we prepared for you by actually enjoying all of it…” On hearing this, all the birds turned and looked at one another. All of them were burning with anger within. But outwardly, they feigned a smile in order to look civilized. It finally dawned on the birds that Tortoise had tricked them.

Evening came. The host thanked their guests and wished them farewell. The guests on their part also thanked their host just for formality sake because they didn’t enjoy the feast due to Tortoise’s greed. After they had left the house of their host, each bird angrily seized its feather from Tortoise. Finally, Tortoises’ two wings were dismantled and he was left with no feather. He pleaded to them for the last favour. He wished that they should inform his dear wife back on earth to bring out all the soft material in his house and place them on a flat surface so he could fall on them as he descends from the sky. She was to pile these things where Tortoise was to jump from sky and land. These soft materials would prevent Tortoise from hurting himself. “He who throws wood ash in the air must have some fall back on him”, local proverb mentioned by the narrator.

When the angry birds reached the earth, they immediately moved over to Tortoise’s house and told his wife just the reverse of what he had said. “Your husband has sent us to ask you to bring out all the sharp and hard objects in the house and pile there…”, they told Tortoise’s wife. She did just what she had been told as instructions from her husband, Tortoise. When Tortoise looked down from the sky and discovered that his wife had piled material at the said spot, he jumped down with all his might and crashed “jawala” (crashing sound made by narrator) on the hard objects which the birds had deceived his wife to pile. His shell got scattered into pieces. His wife, Mrs. Tortoise, wept and wept and wept. She hired a strong medicine man who managed to patch the fragments of Tortoise’s shell together. After a long period of medical treatment, Tortoise got well. But the joints of the patches on his shell remained conspicuously unhealed till today. This is the reason why Tortoise has a rough shell.

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Analysis	Greed and egoism are considered major vices in many world cultures and mythologies. Myths involving greedy characters are often used as to educate children and young adults on the disastrous consequences of engaging in activities that promote this iniquity. Greed is usually accompanied by other vices such as trickery, cunning, slyness and craftiness. The fate of the Tortoise at the end of the story is an act of Nemesis (revenge and retribution for wrongdoing). The name comes from the Greek goddess of revenge and retribution. The animals used in this myth represent individuals in the society, who share similar character traits. For fear that they can be eliminated, most narrators use these animals as shields to their individual identities.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	African Mythologies African Storytelling African Traditions
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Animals Emotions Invention Tricksters
Further Reading	Dayrell, Elphinstone, *Folk Stories from Southern Nigeria, West Africa*, London: Longman, Green, 1910. Matateyou, Emmanuel, *An Anthology of Myths, Legends and Folktales from Cameroon*, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press Ltd, 1997.
Addenda	Collected by: Judith Bih Suh.

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