



Spreading the Fingers

Suriname

There was a time, when sugar cane plantations covered extensive areas of Suriname's coastal regions, that former African slaves began to take control of their lives, after more than two hundred years of forced labour and abuses. Among them was Ba Yau, a sharp-minded and good-natured man, who was offered the chance of becoming an overseer by the owner of one of the plantations. His good character and friendly manner made him on good terms with his former fellow slaves, and the plantation owner felt that, with Ba Yau, he would never be short of skilled workers with whom to make his business productive.

Ba Yau excelled in his supervisory work, mainly because he treated his labourers so well that the best of them wanted to work with him, and he soon began to thrive. Eventually, he managed to buy a house in town, and could even afford to buy homes for his two daughters, born in his younger years to two different women. The girls had long since lost their mothers, but Ba Yau had not forgotten them, so he settled them as best he could without forcing them to live with him or each other.

Whenever Ba Yau returned to the town from the plantations, he would bring each of them provisions and gifts. And when he was about to leave, he would say to each of them, pointing to the food he had brought:

‘When you eat, spread your fingers.’

This comment, which he repeated over and over again as he left for the plantation, was enough a puzzle for each of the daughters to interpret it in a different way.

One of them, the youngest, after preparing her food and eating, would go out onto a small courtyard at the back of the house and, raising her arms, would spread her palms and fingers as far as she could several times. While the older one, when Ba Yau left her the provisions each week, was quick to share with her neighbours half of what her father had left for her sustenance.

But the day came when Ba Yau died, and the daughters were suddenly left in a precarious situation. The youngest daughter suddenly found herself living in scarcity, as the kind father who brought her food was no longer there. However, the other daughter suddenly found that people were coming to visit her to bring her food and help her meet her needs. There were those who brought her coffee, those who brought her sugar or salted fish, those who brought her bacon, and there was even a neighbour who gave her a cow.

One day, the older sister went to visit her stepsister and found a bleak sight. Her sister had lost a lot of weight and her eyes were dull and sad.

‘What happened to you?’ asked the older girl.

‘Since our father died, I’ve been starving,’ replied the other.

‘But ... didn’t you spread out your fingers, as our father recommended?’ asked the first in surprise.

‘Of course, I did! Every day, after every meal, I would go out into the courtyard and spread my arms, hands and fingers as far as I could.’

‘You didn’t understand what our father meant when he said spread your fingers!’ the older sister finally understood. ‘What he meant was to share your food with those in need, not to hold on to it, and to spread out your hand to give some of your food to others.’

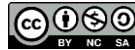
And the younger sister understood at last what her father had meant. But she ceased to suffer hardship from that very day, for her older

half-sister began to spread her fingers with her whenever she came to her home.

Not long after, the younger one began to receive gifts, too, as she began to spread her fingers with the food her sister brought her. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2025).

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Comments

The former Dutch colony of Suriname flourished between the 17th and 19th centuries thanks to its sugar cane, cotton, coffee and cocoa plantations, as well as the trade in timber from its vast jungles. But such labour fell on the shoulders of African slaves brought there, first by the British and eventually by the Dutch, to make their business immensely more profitable.

However, with so few European settlers and so many slaves, and the territory consisting almost entirely of jungles, the abused African slaves began to escape in substantial numbers to settle in the forest thicket and create their first free communities. They were what the Dutch called the *Maroons*.

They became a real headache for the European settlers, regularly returning to the plantations in search of food and other utensils, and even freeing other slaves to escape with them.

The Dutch organised several expeditions to recover these thousands of slaves, but they were not very successful. Finally, in the 1760s, the Dutch recognised them as free groups and left them alone.

The Netherlands abolished slavery in 1863.

Sources

Carter, A. (ed.) (1993). Spreading the fingers. In *Strange Things Sometimes Still Happen* (pp. 207-208). Boston, MA: Faber & Faber Inc.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 10a: Promote the equitable distribution of wealth within nations and among nations.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble – The Global Situation: Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Principle 2b: Affirm that with increased freedom, knowledge, and power comes increased responsibility to promote the common good.

Principle 3b: Promote social and economic justice, enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible.

Principle 7: Adopt patterns of production, consumption, and reproduction that safeguard Earth's regenerative capacities, human rights, and community well-being.

Principle 9b: Empower every human being with the education and resources to secure a sustainable livelihood, and provide social

security and safety nets for those who are unable to support themselves.

Principle 9c: Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

The Way Forward: Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals.

