

FABULISTIC INSIGHTS INTO JUSTICE AND HUMAN DIGNITY AS DEPICTED IN LA FONTAINE’S *FABLES* TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This paper has tried to contextualize justice and human dignity as depicted in two tales adapted from La Fontaine’s Fables, examining the two terms from a bi-lingual and bi-cultural perspective. The two (2) fables titled “The Villager & the Serpent” and “The Horse and the Ass” were written in the 17th century by Jean de La Fontaine: French poet and fabulist. A man who experienced injustice many times before attaining fame, lost all material wealth and died a tenant. His Fables, usually called Les Fables de La Fontaine, were published over the last 25 years of his life. The first volume appeared when the author was 47 years. The book includes some 240 poems and timeless stories of countryfolk, heroes from Greek mythology, and familiar beasts from the fables of Aesop, from which La Fontaine unhesitatingly borrowed his material. The last of his tales were published posthumously. Each tale has a moral - an instruction on how to behave correctly or how life should be lived. Hence the choice of this great poet and fabulist, who lived among a people that attained liberation through popular justice and upholding cultural values, determined by collective prise de conscience to attain Justice and human dignity.

Keywords: *Fables, popular justice, human dignity, French revolution, morality*

1. PROLOGUE

1.1 Background of the Fabulist: Jean de la Fontaine (1621-1695)

Born in 1621 at Chateau-Thierry France, he was educated at the Collège (grammar school) of Reims, and at the end of his school days he entered the Oratory in May 1641, and the seminary of Saint-Magloire in October of the same year; but a very short sojourn proved to him that he had mistaken his vocation. He then apparently studied law, and is said to have been admitted as *avocat* (lawyer).

A man that the French refer to as “Notre Homere” in the Western classical tradition, **Homer**¹, revered as the greatest of ancient Greek epic poets. Jean de La Fontaine was the most famous French fabulist and one of the most widely read French poets of the 17th century. He is known above all for his *Fables*, which provided a model for subsequent fabulists across Europe and numerous alternative versions in France, and in French regional languages.

According to Flaubert, Jean de la Fontaine was the only French poet to understand and master the texture of the French language before Hugo¹. The numerous works of La Fontaine fall into three traditional divisions: the *Fables*, the *Contes* and the miscellaneous works. Of these the first may be said to be known

¹ Modern researchers appear to place Homer in the 7th or 8th centuries BC. The formative influence played by the Homeric epics in shaping Greek culture was widely recognized, and Homer was described as the teacher of Greece. His works, which are made up of 50% speeches, provided models in persuasive speaking and writing that were emulated throughout the ancient and Medieval Greek worlds.

universally and to exhibit the versatility and fecundity of the author's talent more fully than any of his other work; the second division, his tales, are known to all lovers of French literature, but the rest of his writing, with a few exceptions, is practically forgotten. Dan Chapman's 2012 novel *Looking for Lucy* uses an epigram from La Fontaine, "*On rencontre sa destinée souvent par des chemins qu'on prend pour l'éviter*", meaning "*Destiny is often met in the paths we take to avoid it*"ⁱⁱⁱ.

Sad experiences

In 1682 he was, at more than sixty years of age, recognized as one of the foremost men of letters of France. **Madame de Sévigné**, one of the best literary critics of the time, and by no means given to praise mere novelties, had spoken of his second collection of *Fables* published in the winter of 1678 as divine; and this was the general opinion. It was not unreasonable, therefore, that he should present himself to the Academie francaise and, though the subjects of his *Contes* were scarcely calculated to propitiate that decorous assembly, while his attachment to Fouquet and to more than one representative of the old Frondeur party made him suspect to Colbert and the king, most of the members were his personal friends. He was first proposed in 1682, but was rejected for **Marquis de Dangeau**. The next year Colbert died and La Fontaine was again nominated. Boileau was also a candidate, but the first ballot gave the fabulist sixteen votes against seven only for the critic. The king, whose assent was necessary, not merely for election but for a second ballot in case of the failure of an absolute majority, was ill-pleased, and the election was left pending. Another vacancy occurred, however, some months later, and to this Boileau was elected. The king hastened to approve the choice effusively, adding, *Vous pouvez incessamment recevoir La Fontaine, il a promis d'être sage*. (You may wish to admit La Fontaine as many times, he has promised to be wise). La Fontaine's marriage to 16 year old Marie Héricart brought him 20,000GBP and expectations; however her beauty and intelligence didn't help the union as they separated 11 years after due to his negligence and lack of business sense.

At the age of 71 La Fontaine became ill, and he started to think seriously about his life. He translated the Psalms, wore a hair shirt, and again embraced Catholicism. La Fontaine died in Paris on April 13, 1695. Before his death La Fontaine was encouraged by his Abbé (Priest) to condemn publicly his indecent stories, which he did.

2. CORPUS

Fable 1: Le villageois et le serpent	The villager and the Serpent
<p>Esope conte qu'un Manant, Charitable autant que peu sage, Un jour d'Hiver se promenant A l'entour de son héritage, Aperçut un Serpent sur la neige étendu, Transi, gelé, perclus, immobile rendu, N'ayant pas à vivre un quart d'heure. Le Villageois le prend, l'emporte en sa demeure, Et sans considérer quel sera le loyer D'une action de ce mérite, Il l'étend le long du foyer, Le réchauffe, le ressuscite. L'Animal engourdi sent à peine le chaud, Que l'âme lui revient avecque la colère. Il lève un peu la tête, et puis siffle aussitôt, Puis fait un long repli, puis tâche à faire un saut Contre son bienfaiteur, son sauveur et son père. Ingrat, dit le Manant, voilà donc mon salaire Tu mourras. A ces mots, plein de juste courroux, Il vous prend sa cognée, il vous tranche la Bête, Il fait trois Serpents de deux coups, Un tronçon, la queue, et la tête. L'insecte sautillant cherche à se réunir, Mais il ne put y parvenir.</p> <p><i>Leçon morale : Il est bon d'être charitable; Mais</i></p>	<p>Aesop tells of a peasant Charitableⁱⁱⁱ, but not too wise. One winter's day was traveling Around the land he tended. He saw a serpent stretched out in the snow Cold and frozen, paralyzed Having little time to live. The villager took him home And, without considering the cost Of such an action, Laid him out before the fire Warmed him and revived him. The frozen serpent began to sense the warmth Which revived his soul as well as his evil nature^{iv}. He lifted his head a bit and whistled; Coiled his body and then struck, Against his benefactor, his saviour and his father. "Ingrate!" said the peasant. " 'Tis thus you repay me? You will die!" And with these words, in righteous rage He took a knife and sliced the beast Making 3 serpents with 2 cuts; A trunk, a head, and a tail.</p>

<p><i>envers qui ? c'est là le point. Quant aux ingrats, il n'en est point Qui ne meure enfin misérable.</i></p>	<p>The evil one tried to rejoin himself But 'twas to no avail.</p>
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DISCUSSION

2.1 a. Issue in Fable 1: Contextualizing Charity as Ruler’s Rights over the Citizens

The issue under this heading can be framed as follows: Relative to the rights of the *charitable* citizens, how important are the rights of a ruler who is elevated to lead unchallenged? It seems apposite that where the two sets of rights conflict, those of the citizens should prevail. For one thing, the citizens’ rights apply to and protect far more people than the rights of the individual ruler. Thus, La Fontaine in his Fables expressed diversity as he experienced it early in crisis^v – political (as seen in incarceration of Fouquet his mentor), sociological (as in the era of Absolutism). These all led the fabulist to choose his words to reflect his opinion and question the *raison d’être* of knowledge and limits of truth and how to express truth through art.

The villager was referred to as ‘charitable’ (line 2) and at the same time foolish. He did not consider the consequences of his action (lines 6-10). As soon as the serpent was revived, he manifested his ‘evil nature’ (line 14) and the benefactor in line 19 cried out in a ‘righteous rage’. La Fontaine’s choice of words incites one to question Nigerian leaders (political class). Who is the benefactor and who is the evil one? Is charity only common to the oppressed (the masses) and evil, nature of leaders or politicians?

The villager’s charity was abused by the serpent. And one may ask: who is the villager and who is the serpent in Nigeria? Individual and collective rights to rid their country of suffering remain paramount. It is quite reasonable, expected, and consistent with justice in the tale for the villager to cut the serpent in 3 pieces. What a skill? La Fontaine had so much observed animals (his father was a Forest guard and he worked under him for some time) that it was not enough to kill the serpent in one cut, knowing that it may try to rejoin itself. Here charity turns to ‘righteous rage’. Justice becomes a ‘justified anger or reaction’ to ‘evil nature’.

We are now asking- Should not same apply to those prominent officials in Nigeria who spend the crude oil proceeds as if they were the only Nigerians and, obstruct law and justice in the country over the past fifty-two years?

Fable 2:

Le Cheval et l'Ane	<u>The Horse and Ass</u>
<p>En ce monde il se faut l'un l'autre secourir. Si ton voisin vient à mourir, C'est sur toi que le fardeau tombe.</p> <p>Un Ane accompagnait un Cheval peu courtois, Celui-ci ne portant que son simple harnois, Et le pauvre Baudet si chargé qu'il succombe. Il pria le Cheval de l'aider quelque peu : Autrement il mourrait devant qu'être à la ville. La prière, dit-il, n'en est pas incivile : Moitié de ce fardeau ne vous sera que jeu. Le Cheval refusa, fit une pétarade : Tant qu'il vit sous le faix mourir son camarade, Et reconnu qu'il avait tort. Du Baudet, en cette aventure, On lui fit porter la voiture, Et la peau par-dessus encor</p>	<p>An Ass and rude horse were travelling together. The Horse carried little beyond his own tether. While the poor laden beast beside him did struggle; So overburdend that he finally faltered. He pleaded with the Horse to show him some pity, Else he would die before reaching the city. "My request after all is not impolite; Half of this load you would still find light." The Horse he refused thinking himself clever, But soon saw his comrade fall down forever. He realized quickly he had been mistaken, For soon he was carrying the whole of the burden Along with the skin of his little companion.</p> <p><i>Moral: Share your neighbour's troubles. If he fails it's on your neck, the load will fall.</i></p>

2.1. b. Discussions on Fable 2

The relevant issues as contained in the preceding text are-

- What is “human dignity”^{vi}?

George Kateb asks what human dignity is and why it matters for the claim to rights. According to him, Dignity is “existential”^{vii}. Kateb does not limit the notion of dignity to individuals but extends it to the human species. The dignity of the human species rests on our uniqueness among all other species². In the book’s concluding section, he argues that despite the ravages we have inflicted on it, nature would be worse off without humanity. This may justify why La Fontaine and fabulists in general, employ anthropological means to express their thoughts. This question raises the related query, thus:

- What is the just sanction for a person who ignores the polity? To what extent, can one say a people are ‘overburdened’? If at all, should the poor always carry burdens? Why do the privileged seem to “suffer less”?

The ass is described in line 1 as simply ‘ass’, while the horse is referred to as ‘rude’.

- Three, relative to the rights of an individual, to what extent should the privileged assist the less-privileged?

Being rude or being over-burdened neither has the right. Such is ‘life’. Neither chose to be, but the latter is always aspiring to be assisted to attain independence (be it social or financial). The over-burdened surely does not shift his burdens to the privileged in Nigeria because the rude and arrogant nature of the former does not allow him do so. Should Nigerian leaders read La Fontaine’s tale of the *Horse and the Ass*, one can only expect laughter and gaiety! One, the death of any over-burdened Nigerian enriches the leaders the more. For La Fontaine, the horse was repentant at the death of the ass (line 11), because he was left alone to carry the Ass’s corpse and his luggage. Well, that is why it is called a Fable; otherwise how can one expect any Nigerian politician to feel the pains of losing a poor man that voted him into power? The reaction would have been that of ‘*bon debarras*’ (Good riddance...).

3. French Revolution and Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen

We wish to provide succinctly the facts of the French revolution as they are relevant to this paper.

The **French Revolution** (*La Révolution Française*; 1789–1799), was a period of radical social and political upheaval in France that had a lasting impact on French history and more broadly throughout Europe. The *Monarchie Absolue* that had ruled France for centuries collapsed within three years. French society underwent an epic transformation, as feudal, aristocratic and religious privileges evaporated under a sustained assault from radical left-wing political groups, masses on the streets and peasants in the countryside. Old ideas about tradition and hierarchy regarding monarchs, aristocrats, and the Catholic Church were abruptly overthrown by new principles of *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* (liberty, equality and fraternity). The royal houses across Europe were horrified and led a counter crusade that by 1814 had restored the old monarchy, but many major reforms became permanent. So too did antagonisms between the supporters and enemies of the Revolution, who fought it out politically over the next two centuries.

Amidst a fiscal crisis, the common people of France were increasingly angered by the incompetence of King Louis XVI and the continued indifference and decadence of the aristocracy. (see line 1-Fable 2). This resentment, coupled with burgeoning *enlightenment* ideals, fueled radical sentiments, and the French Revolution began in 1789 with the convocation of the Estates-General^{viii} in May. The first year of the Revolution saw members of the Third Estate proclaiming the Tennis Court Oath^{ix} in June, the assault on the Bastille in July, the passage of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in August, and an epic march on Versailles that forced the royal court back to Paris in October. The Oath signified the first time that French citizens formally stood in opposition to Louis XVI, and the National Assembly’s refusal to back down forced the king to make concessions.

This day in Nigeria, the National Assembly approved a new law, mandating any sitting president to address a joint session of the National Assembly on the 1st legislative day of July every year. (DAILY SUN May 10, 2013 p.6). This then means that the president will talk to Nigerians through the National Assembly. The objective of the bill, according to Newspaper reports was:

“To make the president accountable to the Nigerian people as represented by the National Assembly and to render account of his stewardship to the people”.

With the recent developments in Nigeria, the country is already experiencing a sort of popular justice^x

(Imo state Gubernatorial elections 2011: The people vs PDP, Anti-Subsidy removal Protest January 8-14,2012, GMB's victory at the Presidential polls March 28,2015, FG vs Dasuki...). These and other developments are early signs of contextualizing Justice and Human Dignity in Nigeria.

Internally, popular sentiments radicalized the Revolution significantly, culminating in the rise of Maximilien Robespierre and the Jacobins and virtual dictatorship by the Committee of Public Safety during the Reign of Terror from 1793 until 1794 during which between 16,000 and 40,000 people were killed. (Contrary...? to the recent [BH] killings in Nigeria, the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary killings in France were master-minded by the King).

The French Declaration was not itself considered to be law, but its principles nevertheless formed the basis of subsequent French constitutional law, which emphasizes Liberal principles such as the presumption of innocence, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and the right to property.

In Fable 1, the Villager reacted to the action of the serpent severely. The question is: what determined the guilt of the serpent? See lines 13 – 17. In line 18 the serpent's evil nature was immediately met with an equal punishment:

'Ingrate!' says the peasant...and cut him in 2 making 3 parts with two cuts'.

The Original declaration of Human Rights states:

"No man can be accused, arrested, or detained, except in the cases determined by the law and according to the forms it has prescribed. Those who procure, expedite, execute, or cause arbitrary orders to be executed, ought to be punished: but every citizen summoned were seized in virtue of the law ought to render instant obedience; he makes himself guilty by resistance"^{xi}.

True to this law, the evil serpent did not render "instant obedience" and the kind villager only exercised this right because the serpent made himself guilty by resistance: "The evil one tried to rejoin himself But 'twas to no avail". (lines 23 -24).

The moral in the 2nd Fable 'The Horse and the Ass' addresses the above declarations. 'Share your neighbour's troubles. If he fails it's on your neck, the load will fall'.

If La Fontaine is condemning rudeness, arrogance, wickedness, indifference in his time (17th century France!), one may assume that since he lived before the French Revolution and the Declaration of Human Rights, his opinion had been over ruled. More so, popular justice took the place of morals in La Fontaine's Fables. The French citizens took power into their own hands and used it to transform their society. Though there was bloodshed, but it was justified because they were fighting for a common good.

"The law has only the rights to forbid such actions as are injurious to society. Nothing can be forbidden that is not interdicted by the law, and no one can be constrained to do that which it does not order"^{xii}.

The Horse in Fable 2 (lines 9-13), though not constrained by law to help the ass, still inherited the burden left by the dead Ass:- "The Horse he refused thinking himself clever, but soon saw his comrade fall down forever. **He realized quickly he had been mistaken**, For soon he was carrying the whole of the burden along with the skin of his little companion".

Until Nigerian leaders and politicians think of carcasses of poor people as their responsibilities, Justice will be defined out of context and Human Dignity will be unattainable.

CONCLUSION

The English word "dignity" comes from Latin *dignitas* by way of French *dignité*. In ordinary usage it denotes respect and status, and it is often used to suggest that someone is not receiving a proper degree of respect, or even that they are failing to treat themselves with proper self-respect^{xiii}.

One thing is common to the two fables: **injustice**. In the first fable, the Villager (supposed victim) immediately obtained justice through “self-defense”, in the second fable, the victim died before the reparation, while the French Revolution was achieved through “popular justice^{xiv}”. According to the French Declaration of Human Rights,

“No one should be disturbed on account of his opinions, even religious, provided their manifestation does not upset the public order established by law”^{xv}.

It is only when one’s actions upset public order that he is disturbed. In other words, every nation, country, people, race or group must edict their laws in order to address issues bordering on their proper context. In his epilogue, La Fontaine advises his readers to ‘coat the truth in Fables’ because, according to him, human spirit and lie are one and the same; just as the truth needs a figurative skin to be acceptable by the human spirit. (Fontaine 2002, *Fables*: 27).

The French Declaration^{xvi}, drafted by Marquis de Lafayette, was intended as part of a transition from absolute monarchical rule to a form of constitutional or representative government. Like the American Declaration, the French Declaration also appealed to enlightenment principles such as popular sovereignty, equal rights, and equal opportunity. Today in Nigeria, there are popular chants in the Media calling for Constitutional Review, Sovereign National conference, transparency, institutionalized popular justice and above all, power shift or dis-integration.



French Revolution

Storming of the Bastille, 14 July 1789. Participants French society Location France Date 1789–1799. Result:

- A cycle of royal power limited by uneasy constitutional monarchy; then the abolition and replacement of the French king, aristocracy and church with a radical, secular, democratic republic, which, in turn, becomes more authoritarian, militaristic and property-based.
- Radical social change based on nationalism, democracy and the Enlightenment principles of citizenship and inalienable rights.
- Rise of Napoleon Bonaparte.
- Armed conflicts with other European countries.

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Endnotes

ⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_de_La_Fontaine

ⁱⁱ Chapman, D. (2012), *Looking for Lucy*,

ⁱⁱⁱ MORAL: Charity is a virtue but be careful toward whom. There's no point showing it to ingrates who seal their own doom.

^{iv} Genesis 3 v 1.

^v La Fontaine (2002: 10), *Fables*, le livre de Poche

^{vi} A value that pertains to the identity of a person as a human being. To injure or even to try to efface someone's dignity is to treat that person as not human or less than human—as a thing or instrument or subhuman creature.

^{vii} Kateb George (2011), *Human Dignity*, Cambridge, Belknap press

^{viii} The Estates-General was organized into three estates: the clergy, the nobility, and the rest of [France](#). On the last occasion that the Estates-General had met, in 1614, each estate held one vote, and any two could override the third. The *Parlement* de Paris feared the government would attempt to rig the results. Thus, they required that the Estates be arranged as in 1614.

^{ix} The **Tennis Court Oath** (French: *Serment du jeu de paume*) was a pivotal event during the first days of the [French Revolution](#). The Oath was a pledge signed by 576 of the 577 members from the [Third Estate](#) who were locked out of a meeting of the [Estates-General](#) on 20 June 1789. The only person who did not sign was [Joseph Martin-Dauch](#), a politician who would not execute decisions not sanctioned by the king. They made a makeshift conference

room inside a tennis court located in the Saint-Louis district of the city of Versailles, near the Palace of Versailles

^{xx} Popular justice is defined by Merry as an informal process ‘for making decisions and compelling compliance to a set of rules’ (Merry, 1992: 162).

^{xixi} human_rights_declaration_French_Revolution no 17

^{xii} Ibid. no 5

^{xiii} <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dignity>

^{xiv} The legitimacy of this justice, however, remains uncertain when confronted with government fears of losing control of their regal powers

^{xxv} Ibid. no 10

^{xvi} http://imgdev.unl.edu/humanrights/01/0102/0102_09.htm