



**JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND  
COMMUNICATION STUDIES (GOSAJOLLCOS)**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
GOMBE STATE UNIVERSITY**

**MAIDEN EDITION**  
November, 2020

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November, 2020

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**PUBLISHED BY:**

Jos University Press Ltd.,  
No. 15, Murtala Mohammed Way,  
Jos Plateau State, Nigeria.

**COVER DESIGN:**

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## Teshikaye

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Once upon a time, there lived a man whose name was Teshikaye. He lived in a grass hut in the outskirts of Pishiwuko village. He had no wife nor child. He had no known relatives. He was rootless, at least, as far as he knew. As far as people knew.

Teshikaye just happened to be there since the beginning of existence, his own existence. Was he an orphan? Was he an abandoned child? No one knew of his origins. He simply inherited from no one that ramshackle grass hut.

When it rained, the hut was a veritable receptacle of water. When the sun fiercely sent down its rays at noon, patches of light played with the shadows in the hut. The cobwebs on the roof provided a dancing ceiling when the wind blew.

A lonely hut, at the outskirts of the village, on a stony ground, inhabiting a lonely man. Teshikaye had no cow, no goat, no sheep. He had no ducks, no chickens. Not even rats paraded his house for there was nothing to attract them there. Even lizards scurried away from this ghost-like house for on them Teshikaye fed.

What else could he had fed on? He had no farm to call his own. The earth, this wide earth full of bounty was denied him. Not even a piece.... Only that part inhabited by his lonely hut. Fruits, sweet fruits, bitter fruits, sour fruits, fruits of the forest and lizards, occasional lizards, were his food.

Teshikaye's sole possession apart from the bare, grass hut gaping with holes, was an hairless goatskin he wore as a pant.

He moved in the village in his semi-naked form to the jeering of children. Nature had of course been kind enough to endow him with plenty hair on his head and his bushy beard was pointed out like that of a he-goat.

One day Teshikaye was lying on the bare floor of his hut, the shining noon bathing his body in patches. He was musing. He thought of his solitary life and his destitute position. He wondered as to how he came to be:

What is the purpose of existence? The birds of the forest are better housed, better fed and better clothed than me. They also move as a flock. They sing, they play, they mate. Likewise the animals. Even trees are often in clusters, swaying their green garments and bearing fruits in the seasons. Yes. I am the only sufferer on earth. Why do I have to live? Why do I exist?

Teshikaye kept on pondering over the problem of living till kind sleep took him away to the sweet land of forgetfulness and rest.

Very early in the morning, Teshikaye set out for the village. He trudged on with deep thoughts gnawing at his heart: He met no one on the road. In the sky the stars were disappearing one by one. By the time he got near to his destination the day

was already bright. He was heading to the chief's palace.

When Teshikaye reached the palace he met one of the palace attendants sitting on a big stone before the palace. The attendant had just finished sweeping the chief's reception room by the time Teshikaye arrived. He raised his bowed head as he heard the sound of approaching feet.

"Good morning, o chief's attendant," Teshikaye greeted.

"Has the day broken well with you?" the attendant replied. "And what has brought you to the king's palace so early in the morning today?"

"My message is a heavy one. It belongs to the ears of the chief alone." "Oh! Matters of state, is it? Have you scouted some approaching enemy or some plot against the chief? Is it some disaster or were you provoked by someone?"

"My message, I say, is for the ears of the chief alone. Can you allow me to see him?"

Though angry at the impertinence of Teshikaye who had refused to recognize him as being close to the chief and therefore worthy of carrying the message, the chief's attendant knew that it was useless to insist on getting the message of Teshikaye. He therefore told Teshikaye to be patient until the chief arrived his reception room.

They had not long to wait for the chief was an early riser. People came to him as early as possible. They came with various complaints and he had to listen to them, advice them and settle their cases. He could not afford the luxury of the bed when day had already broken. These were days when chiefs were chiefs, when only the most agile, the most virile men were chosen as chiefs.

The chief had known Teshikaye as one of the paupers in the village. He had always wanted to know something of Teshikaye's background but no one could give him satisfactory information. As far as the villagers of Pishiwuko were concerned Teshikaye had eluded all the theories of origins. Yet they accepted him as an inextricable and inexplicable part of themselves.

The chief's entry into the council chamber was first announced by one of his attendants, Kwagam. The chief then entered. He was tall and black and wore a red cap. His eyes were distant-looking. He held a royal spear in his right hand. All those who had come with complaints, some council members, attendants and those who merely came to greet the chief, rose at once. They bowed their heads in reverence and chorused:

*"Lele, mai."*

*Ma le mammu,"* the chief replied.

The chief then sat down on his royal seat. He laid down his spear, took his pipe and lit it. He puffed at the pipe in a slow, casual way. His eyes steadily surveyed the populace before him. The chief suddenly fixed his eyes on a particular spot, removed the pipe from his mouth and laughed heartily.

'So we are graced this early morning with the presence of Teshikaye! What a day! May it end well.'

Laushugma, the attendant who first welcomed Teshikaye to the palace, got up and said:

"Your Royal Highness. May the cold wings from the hills blow over us. I salute you. I opened the gate of the palace in the morning, had finished sweeping the council chamber and was resting on a stone when Teshikaye came. After exchanging greetings, I demanded to know what could have brought him to the palace that early. Teshikaye however refused to tell me the purpose of his visit, insisting that his words were meant for the ears of the chief alone. Thus it was that I asked him to wait for you as you might soon be in the palace. It appears he has grave words for us. I talk in peace your highness. May you live long and may your throne endure all weathers."

There was silence in the room as Laushugma sat down. People stared at each other and then shifted gazes at both Teshikaye and the chief. It was as if thunder had struck and everyone was cowering for no one could imagine that the pauper, Teshikaye, could have the audacity of demanding the chief's audience. And what could he have that was only for the ears of the chief?

The chief puffed at his pipe slowly and then called on Teshikaye:

"Teshikaye."

"Your Royal Highness. May you live long like the dead wood of Landwa."

"Are those words of Laushugma true?"

"They are as true as the sun that rises and sets every day my lord."

"Then may we know what message you have that has driven you out of your comfortable bed to the palace this morning?"

Teshikaye rose up. He was of medium height. He was haggard-looking. The uncombed hair gave him a wild appearance. His only covering, the hairless goatskin that has seen ages, was torn around the buttocks. Some people sneered. Others closed their eyes or turned their faces elsewhere. However, the chief's eyes, were once more on Teshikaye alone. It was a moment when a man confronted a man.

"Your royal Highness, you nobles and all that find themselves here. I salute you once more. I thank your Royal Highness for allowing me to speak. Who am I to carry my rugged feet, my foul body and my lice-infested hair to this palace? Who am I, wretched that I am, to sit among men here? Who am I to smile with the sun when darkness is my eternal state? Pardon me therefore your Royal Highness; pardon the strayed dog for being in the most high of places. I shall not waste your time. The sun is already up and weightier concerns await you. And now to the point. You all know me for what I am or rather for what I am not. For I am nothing. A negative. A ghost. A phenomenon that just happened to be. A body, a plant suffering on a barren land. I live in agony, day in, day out. I am a man of sorrow, a fish panting on the hot sands of the beach. My name means castaway, abandoned..."

"You tire the ears of the king with tales of your uselessness. Your miserable state is your own concern. Sit down and let us listen to more serious issues."

This was the remark of a short, fat man who, despite that fact that it was yet

morning, was perspiring.

The chief intervened, “No, Kadyugne. Ours is a generous palace. We have ears for every word. Let the man say what he wants to say. Let the truth be told and let us know his problem. Teshikaye, our ears are listening.”

Teshikaye said, “Lion of Pishiwuko. Python that moves slowly and stately to the admiration and fear of all. You shield of the weak, you mouth of the dumb, you eyes of the blind, I thank you for protecting the ant from the trampling legs of elephants. May your rule bring the birds of freedom to this land. I shall be brief. I have weighed my life and found out that I am better dead than alive, either to myself or to the community. I want you to give me the freedom to do away with my life. My talk is done. Thank you.”

There was a long, deep silence as Teshikaye sat down. The strange request chilled the bones of all the people in the palace. It was as if death had already occurred, worst still, suicide was a taboo. The air was suddenly still.

Just as sudden, the short, fat man, Kadyugne said, “Let him die, our dear chief. What use is he, alive or dead?”

The chief re-lit his pipe, puffed at it and stared vacantly for some time. He then said:

“I have heard your words, Teshikaye. They are frank words. However, I want you to exercise patience. Come back in seven days and I will reply you.”

Teshikaye thanked the chief and left. The chief and those around him proceeded to other businesses of the day.

Seven days later there was a sea of people at the village square, directly before the palace. The chief had, through the town-crier, asked all the villagers to come on that day. All kinds of people were therefore around: the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the cripple and the blind, the valiant and the coward, and so on. Nobody knew what the matter was. They all knew that there was something very serious for the king to summon all of them to the village square.

The morning sun shone bright but there were patches of clouds in the sky. The cows were mooing in the meadows. The dogs were barking here and there. The birds were singing in the nearby trees. The air was vibrant with expectations.

The chief rose from his stool, pipe in the left hand and spear in the right hand. He was facing the people as they stood in a semi-circular form. He then addressed them:

“My people. From the days of our founding ancestors no chief had ever called his people in vain. I have summoned all of you here because we are faced with an issue of life and death. Our very survival is threatened. The core of our communal set-up moves towards disruption. Seven days ago Teshikaye came to me with a problem. I asked him to come back today so that I will give him a reply. However your ears will listen to him before we reply him. Teshikaye, you may repeat your request before the people.” The chief then sat down.

The bright sun was slowly being covered by dark clouds that were building up. Teshikaye moved forward to talk to the people. He repeated his earlier story and

ended: "I therefore want permission to kill myself. Thank you may lord. Thank you, people of Tangal race."

As Teshikaye sat down there was a loud crack of thunder sending shudders through the people. The chief got up once more and asked if anyone had anything to say.

One man, in a more tattered loincloth, moved forward and said:

"Our most Royal Highness, the panther that moves with caution, I salute you. I greet you also, great people of this land. I crave your indulgence to allow Teshikaye to kill himself. When he dies, o noble chief, I want to inherit that goatskin pant of his. That is my plea, my lord, my people." The man stepped back just as there was another peal of thunder.

Teshikaye moved forward once more and said, "I never knew that there was, in this world, somebody who is poorer than myself. Life is indeed wonderful. I have therefore decided to live even in my poverty."

"His pant, my pant. His pant, my pant. My pant. My pant." The naked speaker kept on shouting when he realized bitterly that Teshikaye being alive meant that he would lose the goatskin pant. He begged the chief not to allow Teshikaye to live.

The chief got up again, his eyes piercing the populace. He nodded his head like that of a lizard in deep thought. His hands, now empty of pipe and spear, were spread out in the form of a cross. Like a roaring lion he thundered:

"My people! Today we have seen a contest between life and death. We are one people having one root. Today we know too that we are two people. There is a group that lives in misery, in total penury, mourning on the heap of ash, living with death and praying for death. There is a happy group with land, with houses with food, with family and with friends.

We have seen two cases of poverty which have both jolted my mind, and I believe, yours. Our family tree is large enough to accommodate everybody that wishes to seek for shelter. It is good to find out the origins of a man but if it cannot be traced then we have to accept him as one of us. Thus our society grows.

I hereby declare that fertile pieces of land be given to these men. I will also give them seeds, goats and chickens to start their new lives. As for girls to marry..."

The chief could not finish his speech. A man had dashed out of the teeming populace towards the chief, shouting, "Hail oh chief. Hail oh benevolent chief." As the man got near to the chief there was a deafening blast of thunder. The man fell inert on the ground. The rain began its torrential downpour bathing the still flesh of Teshikaye.

**Nereus Yerima Tadi** is a Professor of Literature in the Department of English, Gombe State University. Apart some critical works, he has also written creative books especially in poetry: *Voices from the Slum* and *Season of Sounds*. His "Teshikaye" is an attempt at a short story. Email: [nereustadi2k2@yahoo.com](mailto:nereustadi2k2@yahoo.com)