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Answer

**Definition of A Chattel**

A chattel is any property other than land and immovable property. A chattel is any moveable property. The word "chattel" means any article, goods, or personal property, other than land and immoveable property. Examples of chattel or goods are innumerable. A chattel is any moveable thing which is capable of being owned, possessed, or controlled other than a human being, land and immoveable property. Examples of chattel include cars, furniture, animal, vessel, aircraft, sea craft, and anything whatsoever which is moveable and capable of being owned. Indeed, the list of chattels cannot be exhausted.

**The Purpose of Trespass to Chattel**

The tort of trespass to chattel protects all the chattel, goods, or personal properties of a person who has title, or possession by prohibiting all interference without legal justification. The tort of trespass to chattel protects the rights of ownership or possession of a chattel from all wrongful interferences. Thus, the tort of trespass to chattel protects the chattels, goods, and all personal properties of a person who has title, possession, or right to immediate possession against meddling, damage, destruction, diminution, conversion, detinue, or any interference whatsoever, by any other person without lawful justification.

**Trespass to Chattel is Actionable Per Se**

The three forms of trespass to chattel are each actionable per se upon commission or occurrence without the plaintiff having to prove damage. Explaining the law that trespass to chattel is actionable per se without prove of damage( Adefarasin J), as he then was, in **Davies v Lagos City Council(1973) 10CCHCJ** 151 at 154, held that;

*“The plaintiff is entitled to succeed... in trespass... there may be a trespass without the infliction of any material damage by a mere taking or transportation. In my view, the seizure of the plaintiff’s vehicle without just cause... is a wrongful act, on account of which all the defendants taking part in it are jointly and severally liable.”*

Although, trespass to chattel is actionable per se, however it is not a strict liability tort. Furthermore, where a specific damages has been done to a chattel, a plaintiff is entitled to prove it and recover damage for it as the case may be.

In Nigeria, Trespass to chattel is made up of three types of torts, they are;

1. Trespass to chattels per se, without a conversion or a detinue of the chattel in question
2. Conversion
3. Detinue

**Trespass to Chattel;**

Trespass to chattel is any direct and unlawful interference with a chattel in the possession of another person. It is the intentional or negligent interference with the possession of the chattel of another person. In other words, trespass to chattel is any direct interference with a personal property in the possession of another person without lawful justification. The interference must be direct and wrongful. Thus, the mere touching of a chattel without causing any harm to it may in appropriate circumstances, be actionable and entitle the plaintiff to get nominal damages.  
Trespass to chattel is designed to protect the following interests in personal property;

1. Right of retaining one's chattel.
2. Protection of the physical condition of the chattel.
3. Protection of the chattel against unlawful interference or meddling.

The tort of trespass to chattel is designed to protect possession, that is, the right of immediate possession of a chattel, as distinct from ownership. It protects the right of a person to the control, possession, retention or custody of a chattel against interference by another person without lawful justification. In other words it prohibits a person from any unlawful interference with a chattel that is under the control, possession or custody of another person. The strongest way to regain ownership of goods such as when one's property is stolen is perhaps through criminal law. To maintain an action for trespass, the plaintiff must show that he had possession at the time of the trespass or is entitled to immediate possession of the chattel. Thus, a borrower, hirer, or a bailee of goods, possesses the goods lent, hired or bailed and therefore he may maintain an action against any person who wrongfully interferes with the goods. Similarly, a person who has wrongfully acquired possession may also maintain action against all persons except the owner or agent of the owner of the chattel.

Essentially, trespass to chattel is:

1. Any wrong against a chattel, goods or personalty
2. In the possession or control of another person.

In this tort, injury or wrong is done to the chattel while it is in the possession of the person claiming damages for the injury. The chattel is usually not taken from his possession as we have in conversion or detinue.

In Erivo v Obi (1993) 9 NWLR pt 316, p. 60 CA, the defendant respondent closed the door of the plaintiff appellant's car and the side windscreen got broken. The appellant sued inter alia for damage to the windscreen and the loss he incurred in hiring another car to attend to his business. The defendant respondent alternatively pleaded inevitable accident. On appeal, the Court of Appeal held that the defendant respondent was not liable. He did not use excessive force but only normal force in closing the door of the car. He did not break the windscreen intentionally or negligently. It was an inevitable accident which the exercise of reasonable care and the normal force used by the respondent could not avert.

In this case, the Court of Appeal restated the position of the law that, trespass to chattel is actionable per se, that is, without proof of actual damage. Any unauthorized touching or moving of a chattel is actionable at the suit of the possessor of a chattel, even though no harm has been done to the chattel. Therefore, for trespass to chattel to be actionable, it must have been done by the wrongdoer:

1. Intentionally
2. Negligently

Thus, in the wider context, the tort of trespass to chattel is closely related to any tort or law which has to do with the protection of interest in personal property, such as:

1. Negligence
2. Malicious damage such as arson
3. Other damage to property or interest in property.

**Examples of Trespass to Chattel**

Trespass to chattel may be committed in many different ways. However, the trespass must be intentional or negligent. Trespass may be committed by mere removal or any damage and it can be committed when there is no intention to deprive the owner, possessor or custodian permanently of the chattel. Examples of trespass to chattel include:

1. Taking a chattel away
2. Throwing another person's property away, such as in annoyance
3. Mere moving of the goods from one place to another, that is, mere asportation. See Kirk v Gregory (1878) 1 Ex D 55.
4. Scratching or making marks on the body of the chattel, or writing with finger in the dust on the body of a motor vehicle
5. Killing another person's animal, feeding poison to it or beating it. See Shieldrick v Abery (1793) 170 ER 278; Cresswell v girl (1948) 1 KB 241; and Uwabia v Atu (1975) 5 ECSLR 139.
6. Destruction, or any act of harm or damage
7. Touching, that is, mere touching, for instance, touching a precious work of art which could be damaged by mere touch
8. Use, that is, mere using without permission
9. Driving another person's car without permission
10. Filling another person's bottle with anything. See Penfolds Wines Pty Ltd v Elliott (1946) 74 CLR 204 at 214-215.
11. Throwing something at the chattel
12. Damaging or causing any harm to a chattel, by any bodily or indirect contact, such as, running one's car into another person's car.

**Differences between Trespass to Chattel, Conversion and Detinue**

In the tort of trespass to goods, there is no taking away, stealing, conversion, detention or detinue of the goods from the owner; or person entitled to possession. This is the main difference between it and the torts of conversion, and detinue. However, in the tort of trespass to chattel there must be some act of interference, meddling, harm, injury, damage or destruction of the goods, against the desire of the owner, possessor, custodian or caretaker. Thus, the tort of trespass to chattel includes any interference, meddling, harm, injury, damage or destruction of goods against the desire of the person who has right to it.

The following cases will give clear illustrations of trespass to chattel. There circumstances vary but they are all on chattels.

In Davies v Lagos City Council (1973) 10CCHCJ 151, the defendant city council granted a hackney permit to the plaintiff to operate a taxi cab, which permit was meant for the exclusive use of the plaintiff. The plaintiff transferred the permit to a third party, whereupon the defendant council seized and detained the plaintiff‘s taxi cab. In an action for trespass to property, Adefarasin J. as he then was in the Lagos High Court held that although the defendant council was entitled to revoke the permit for non-compliance with regulations, however, it was not entitled to seize nor take possession of the plaintiffs vehicle. The defendant was therefore liable for trespass to chattel by seizing the plaintiff’s car.

In Fouldes v Willoughby (1841) 151 ER 1153, the defendant was the manager of a ferry boat. The plaintiff who was a passenger entered the boat with his horses. The defendant and the plaintiff had a dispute and in order to induce the plaintiff to leave the boat, the defendant disembarked the horses of the plaintiff from the ferry. The plaintiff who was not ruffled remained on the boat and crossed over to the other side of the river. The plaintiff then sued the defendant for trespass to the horses. The court held: that the defendant was liable for trespass to the horses, by moving them ashore. It was also held that there was no conversion as the plaintiff still had title.

In Kirk v Gregory (1878) 1 EX D 55, the movement of a deceased person's rings from one room in his house to another was held to be a trespass to chattel and nominal damages was awarded against the defendant.

In Haydon v Smith (1610) 123 ER 970, it was held to be a trespass for the defendant to cut and carry away the plaintiffs trees.

Also in G.W.K v Dunlop Rubber Co. (1926) 42 TLR 376, removing a tyre from a car, and replacing it with another tyre was held to be a trespass.

In Slater v Swann (1730) 93 ER 906, beating the plaintiff’s animal was held to be a trespass to chattel.

In Leame v Bray (1803) 102 ER 724, this was an accident between two horse drawn carriages. The defendant negligently drove his carriage and collided with the carriage of the plaintiff. The court held that the accident was a trespass to chattel and the defendant was liable in damages to the plaintiff for the damage done to the coach of the plaintiff.

**Elements of Trespass to Chattel: What a Plaintiff Must Prove To Succeed**

To succeed, a plaintiff must establish that the act of trespass was:

1. Intentional
2. Negligent. See National Coal Board v Evans & Co. (1951) 2 KB 861 and Gaylor & Pope v Davies & Sons (1924) 2 KB 75.

As a general rule, proving intention or negligence is very important as trespass to chattel is not a strict liability tort. However, accident, intentional or negligent trespass do not automatically give rise to liability per se, as an appropriate defense, may be pleaded to avoid liability.

The Persons Who May Sue For Trespass to Chattel

Anyone who has possession or caretaker ship of a chattel may sue any other person who meddles with the chattel. This is so for the object of the tort of trespass is to protect possession, or the right to immediate possession. In other words, anyone who has possession or right to immediate possession can sue. Accordingly, some persons who do not have legal right are deemed by law to have possession, so that they will be able to protect chattels left under their care. For instance, an employee to whom an employer has given custody of goods, a repairer, caretaker, personal representatives of a deceased and so forth. Therefore, the persons who may sue for trespass to chattel, provided they have possession at the material time of the interference include:

1. owners
2. bailers
3. lenders
4. assignees
5. trustees
6. finders
7. custodians
8. caretakers
9. Adverse possessors, because mere possession gives a right to sue to retain possession
10. executors
11. administrators of estates

In National Coal Board v Evans & Co. (supra), the defendant contractors were employed by a county council to work on land owned by the defendant council. A trench had to be dug, which the defendants employed a sub-contractor to do. An electric cable passed under the land, but neither the council, nor Evan & Co. who were head contractors, nor the sub-contractors knew this, and the cable was not marked on any available map. During excavation, a mechanical digger damaged the cable and water seeped into it causing an explosion, and thereby cutting off electricity supply to the plaintiff’s coal mine. The plaintiff sued claiming damages for trespass to the electricity cable. The court held that in the absence of establishing negligence on the part of the defendant contractors, there was no fault and there was no trespass by the defendants. The damage was an inevitable accident.

**The Defenses for Trespass to Chattel**

In an action for trespass to chattel, the defenses a defendant may plead include:

1. Inevitable accident
2. Jus tertii, that is, the title, or better right of a third party, provided that he has the authority of such third party. See C.O.P. v Oguntayo (1993) 6 NWLR pt. 299, p. 259 SC.
3. Subsisting lien
4. Subsisting bailment
5. Limitation of time, as a result of the expiration of time specified for legal action
6. Honest conversion, or acting honestly, etc.

**The Remedies for Trespass to Chattel**

The remedies available to a person whose chattel has been meddled with, short of conversion or detinue are:

1. Payment of damages
2. Replacement of chattel
3. Payment of market price of the chattel
4. Repair of the damage.

A frequent demonstration of these remedies is in motor accident cases. Where one vehicle runs into another, damages may be paid, or the parts of the vehicle that are affected may be replaced or repaired.

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**CONVERSION**

According to Sir John Salmond, in his book the Law of Tort, 21st ed. (1996) p. 97-98:

"A conversion is an act... of wilful interference, without lawful justification, with any chattel in a manner inconsistent with the right of another, whereby that other is deprived of the use and possession of it”. See also Ihenacho v Uzochukwu (1997) 2 NWLR pt 487. p. 257 SC.

Conversion is any inteference, possession or disposition of the property of another person, as if it is one's own without legal justification. In other words, conversion is dealing with another person's property as if it is one's own. Conversion is any dealing which denies a person of the title, possession, or use of his chattel. It is the assertion of a right that is inconsistent with the rights of the person who has title, possession or right to use the chattel.

It is dealing with a chattel which belongs to another person in a manner that is i inconsistent with the rights of the person. In other words, conversion is any intentional interference with another person's chattel which unlawfully deprives the person of title, possession or use of it. Conversion includes wrongful taking, wrongful detention, and or wrongful disposition of the property of another person. Therefore, conversion includes denying a person of the title or possession, or use of his chattel. It is not necessary to prove that the defendant had intention to deal with the goods. It is enough to prove that the defendant interfered with the goods. It is immaterial that the defendant does not know that the chattel belongs to another person, for instance, if he innocently bought the goods from a thief. See Lewis v Avery (1972) 1 QB 198. In criminal law, conversion is known as stealing or theft.

Essentially, Conversion is:

Any inconsistent dealing with a chattel, to which another person is entitled to immediate possession whereby the person is denied the use, possesion, or title to it.

Thus, an owner can sue for conversion. Likewise, a person who has mere custody, temporary possession or caretakership can sue any third party who tries to detain, dispose, steal or otherwise convert such chattel.

In North Central Wagon & Finance Co. Ltd v Graham (1950) 1 All ER 780, the defendant hire purchaser sold the car in contravention of the terms of the hire purchase agreement. In the circumstances the court held that the plaintiff finance company was entitled to terminate the hire purchase agreement and sue the selling hire purchaser in the tort of conversion, for recovery of the car.

See also the following cases: Chubb Cash v Crillery (1983) 1 WLR 599; Wilson v Lombank Ltd. (1963) 1 All ER 740; Greenwood v Bennet (1973) QB 195 CA; and Union Transport Finance v British Car Auctions (1978) 2 All ER 385 CA.

**Differences between Conversion and Trespass**

Conversion is different from trespass to chattels in two main respects. These are:

1. In conversion, the conduct of the defendant must deprive the owners of the possession of the chattel, or amount to a denial or dispute of the title of the owner. Conversion is known as stealing or theft in criminal law .Therefore, mere touching or moving of a chattel and so forth, only amount to trespass. See Fouldes v Willoughby (1841) 151 ER 1153.
2. To maintain an action in conversion, the plaintiff need not be in actual possession of the chattel at the time of the interference. It is enough if the plaintiff has right to immediate possession of the chattel, that is, the right to demand for immediate possession of the chattel.

Ashby v Tolhurst (1937) 2 KB 242.

The defendant car park attendant who negligently allowed a car thief to drive away the plaintiff's car from a car park under his watch was held: not liable in conversion. The driver had possession of the car which he had parked, for he has right to immediate possession. The defendant car park attendant is a bailee who only guarantees the safety of the car that is bailed in the car park as a bailee. The claimant should have sued in the tort of negligence for the loss of the car.

City Motor Properties Ltd v Southern Aerial Service (1961) CLR 477.

An owner of a chattel was held liable in conversion for dispossessing the plaintiff bailee of it, during the subsistence of the bailment, which was not unilaterally determinable at will by the plaintiff owner.

Youl v Harbottle (1791) 170 ER 81.

The defendant carrier of goods by mistake delivered the plaintiffs goods to a wrong person. He was held liable in conversion, for the loss of the goods. Therefore, it follows that, if an act of interference with a chattel is intentional or willful, it is not a defense, that the tort was done by mistake, even if the mistake is honest, that is, in good faith or innocently. See also Perry v BRB (1980) 1 WLR 1375.

Consolidated Co. Ltd v Curtis & Son (1892) 1 QB 495.

A certain client instructed an auctioneer to sell goods which did not belong to him, and which he has no right to instruct the auctioneer to sell. Upon sale of the goods the true owner of the goods sued the auctioneer for conversion, the court held: that the auctioneer was liable to the owner of the goods for conversion. The court further held that the auctioneer was entitled to be indemnified by the client who instructed him for the damages he suffered at the suit of the owner of the goods. See also Jerome v Bentley &. Co (1952) 2 All ER 114.

Adamson v Jarvis (1827) 130 ER 693.

An auctioneer was held entitled to be indemnified by a client who had instructed him to sell goods, to which as it was later discovered the client had no title.

In Hollins v Fowler (1875) LR 7 HL 757,

A cotton broker acting on behalf of a client, for whom he often made purchases, bought cotton from a fraudster who had no title to the cotton. The broker then sold it to his client and received only his commission. At the suit of the true owner for conversion sale, and loss of the goods, the court held: that the broker was liable in conversion for the full value of the goods.

**Examples of Conversion**

Conversion of a chattel, belonging to another person may be committed in many different ways. Examples of conversion include:

1. Taking; Where a defendant takes a plaintiffs chattel out of the plaintiff s possession without lawful justification with the intent of exercising dominion over the goods permanently or even temporarily, there is conversion. Contrast this proposition with the decisions in the cases of Fouldes v Willoughby (supra) and Davies v Lagos City Council (supra). On the other hand, a defendant may not be liable; if he merely moves the goods without denying the plaintiff of title.
2. Using: Using a plaintiff’s chattels as if it is one's own, such as, by wearing the plaintiff’s jewelry, as in the case of Petre v Heneage (1701) 88 ER 149, or using the plaintiff’s bottle to store wine as was the case in Pen folds Wine Ltd v Elliot (supra) is a conversion of such chattel.
3. Alteration: By changing its form howsoever.
4. Consumption: By eating or using it up.
5. Destruction: By damaging or obliterating it. Mere damage of a chattel is not sufficient to make one liable for conversion. As a general rule of law, mere damage or destruction of a chattel without more, is a trespass to chattel in tort and also a malicious damage in criminal law. See Simmons v Lillystone (1853) 155 ER 1417.
6. Receiving: Involuntary receipt of goods is not conversion. However, the receiver must not willfully damage or destroy the goods unless the goods constitute a nuisance. Receiving a chattel from a third party who is not the owner is a conversion. This is wrongful, for it is an act of assisting the other person in the conversion of the chattel, or the receiving of stolen goods.
7. By Detention: Armory v Delamirie (1722) 93 ER 664. A chimney sweep's boy found a jewel and gave it to a jeweler for valuation. The jeweler knowing the circumstances, took the jewel, detained and refused to return it to the boy. They boy then sued the jeweler for conversion and for an order for return of the jewelry to him. The court held: that the jeweler was liable for conversion. A finder of a property has a good title, and he has a right or interest, to keep it against all persons, except the rightful owner of the property or his agent. See also Moorgate Mercantile Co v Finch (1962) 1 QB 701. However, a temporary reasonable refusal by the finder or custodian of a property to hand it over to a claimant, in order to verify the authenticity of the title of the claimant. is not actionable, except where the refusal is adverse to the owner's better title.
8. By wrongful delivery: Wrongfully delivery of a person's chattel to another person who does not have title or right to possession without legal justification is a conversion.
9. Purchase: At common law, conversion is committed by a person who bought and took delivery of goods from a seller who has no title to the chattel nor right to sell them. Such as when a thief, steals and sells a chattel. A buyer in such a situation takes possession at his own risk, in accordance with the rule of law that acts of ownership are exercised at the owner’s peril.
10. By Wrongful Disposition: Such as by sale, transfer of title or other wrongful disposition. In Chukwuka v C.F .A.O. Motors Ltd (1967) FNLR 168 at 170, The plaintiff sent his car to the defendant motor company for repairs. Thereafter, he failed to claim the car. Nine months later the defendants sold the car to a third party who reregistered it in his own name. The plaintiff sued for conversion. The High Court held: that the defendant was liable to the plaintiff for conversion of the car. See also The Arpad (1934) p. 189 at 234 and Hollins v Fowler (1875) LR 7 HL 757.

**Innocent Receipt or Delivery Is Not Conversion**

Generally, innocent delivery, or innocent receipt are not torts, nor criminal offenses. Thus, innocent delivery is not conversion. Therefore, where an innocent holder of goods, such as, a carrier, or warehouseman, receives goods in good faith from a person he believes to have lawful possession of them, and he delivers them, on the person's instructions to a third party in good faith, there would be no conversion. Similarly, innocent receipt of goods is not conversion. However the receiver must not willfully damage or destroy the goods unless the goods constitute a nuisance.

Unipetrol v Prima Tankers Ltd (1986) 5 NWLR pt 42 p. 532 CA.

The defendant oil tanker owners had a contract to carry Unipetrol's cargo of fuel from Port Harcourt. The captain of the vessel allegedly went elsewhere with the cargo of fuel. The plaintiff appellant Unipetrol sued for the conversion and loss of the cargo. The Court of Appeal held: that the respondents were liable in conversion. The word "loss" is wide enough to include a claim for conversion against a carrier. It is elementary law that in a claim for conversion, the claimant is entitled to the return of the article seized, missing, or in the possession of the other party, or reimbursement for its value. See also FHA v Sommer (1986) 5 NWLR pt 17, p. 533 CA.

In Owena Bank Nig. Ltd v Nigerian Sweets & Confectionery Co. Ltd (1993) 4 NWLR pt. 290, p. 698 CA,

The 1st respondent was granted an import license by the Federal Ministry of Trade to import granulated sugar. However, the 2nd respondent opened a letter of credit and imported the sugar. The 1st respondent sued for damages for the wrongful conversion of the import license. On appeal by the bank, the Court of Appeal held: That the defendants were liable for conversion of the import license papers.

Thus, an action for conversion will lie in conversion for any corporeal personal property, including papers and title deeds.

Conversion is any dealing with a chattel in a manner inconsistent with another person's right whereby the other is deprived of the use and possession of it. To be liable, the defendant need not intend to question or deny the right of the plaintiff. It is enough that his conduct is inconsistent with the rights of the person who has title, or right to possession, or use of it. Conversion is an injury to the plaintiff’s possessory rights in the chattel converted. Whether an act amounts to conversion or not depends on the facts of each case, and the courts have a degree of discretion in deciding whether certain acts amount to a sufficient deprivation of possessory or ownership rights as to constitute conversion.

In conversion, negligence or intention is not relevant, and once the dealing with the chattel of another person is in such a circumstance that the owner is deprived of its use and possession, the tort of committed.

**The Rules Relating To Finding Lost Property**

The rules of law applicable to finding a lost property were authoritatively settled by the English Court of Appeal in the case of Parker v British Airways (1982) 1 AllER 834 CA. However, the rules are not often easy to apply. The rules applicable to finding lost property may be summarized as follows:

1. A finder of a chattel acquires no rights over it, unless it has been abandoned, or lost, and he takes it into his care and control. He acquires a right to keep it against all persons, except the true owner; or a person who can assert a prior right to keep the chattel, which was subsisting at the time when the finder took the chattel into his care and control.
2. Any servant, or agent who finds a lost property in the course his employment, does so on behalf of his employer, who by law acquires the rights of a finder.
3. An occupier of land or a building has superior rights to those of a finder, over property or goods in, or attached to the land, or building. Based on this rule, rings found in the mud of a pool in the case of South Staffordshire Water Co. v Sharman (1896) 2 QB 44 and a pre-historic boat discovered six feed below the surface were held as belonging to the land owner in the case of Elwes v Briggs Gas (1886) 33 Ch D 562.
4. However, an occupier of premises does not have superior rights to those of a finder in respect of goods found on or in the premises, except before the finding, the occupier has manifested an intention to exercise control over the premises, and things on it.

In Parker v British Airways (supra),

The plaintiff was waiting in the defendant airways lounge at Heathrow Airport, London, England when he found a bracelet on the floor. He handed it to the employees of the defendant, together with his name and address, and a request that it should be returned to him if it was unclaimed. It was not claimed by anybody and the defendants failed to return it to the finder and sold it. The English Court of Appeal held: that the proceeds of sale belonged to the plaintiff who found it. See also South Staffordshire Water Co v Sharman (1896) 2 QB 44 and Waverley Borough Council v Fletcher (1995) 3 WLR 772 CA.

Bridges v Hawkesworth (1851) 21 LJ QB 75.

The plaintiff finder of a packet of bank notes lying on the floor, in the public part of a shop was held entitled to the money instead of the shop owner, upon the failure of the rightful owner to come forward to claim the money. See also Hannah v Peel (1945) KB 509 and Moffatt v Kazana (1969) 2 QB 153.

As a general rule of law, anybody who has a finder's right over a lost property, has an obligation in law to take reasonable steps to trace the true owner of the lost property, before he may lawfully exercise the rights of an owner over the property he found.

**Who May Sue For Conversion?**

The tort of conversion, like other trespass to chattel, is mainly an interference with possession. Those who may sue in the tort of conversion include:

1. Owners: An owner in possession, or who has right to immediate possession may sue another person for conversion.
2. Bailees: A bailee of a chattel may sue another person for conversion of a chattel or goods bailed with him. However, a bailor at will has title to immediate possession of a chattel he has deposited with a bailee and can maintain action against a bailee for conversion.

See The Winkfield (1902) P. 42 at 60.

The Winkfield, a ship ran into another ship, a mail ship which sank. The Post-Master General though not the owner of the mails in the ship that sank was held entitled to sue the owners of the Winkfield, as a bailee in possession for the value of the mails that were lost in the sunk ship. COLLINS MR in the English Court of Appeal held: that the owners of the Winkfield were liable and that “As between a bailee and a stranger, possession gives title”. See also Kahler v Midland Bank Ltd (1950) AC 24 at 59 and Cooper v Willomatt (1843-60) All ER 556.

Other persons who may have right to immediate possession and therefore, may be able to sue another person for conversion of a chattel include; Holders of lien and pledge, Buyers, Assignees, Licensees, Trustees, Finders, see Armory v Delamirie (1722) 93 ER 664; London Corp v Appleyard (1963) 2 All ER 834 and Hannah v Peel (1945) KB 509.

**Defences for Conversion of A Chattel**

In an action for conversion of a chattel, the defendant may plead:

1. Jus tertii, that is, the title or better right of a third party
2. Subsisting bailment
3. Subsisting lien
4. Temporary retention; to enable steps to be taken to check the title of the claimant. A defendant may temporarily, refuse to give up goods, while steps are taken to verify the title of the plaintiff who is claiming title before the chattel is handed over to the plaintiff if he is found to be the owner, or has right to immediate possession.
5. Limitation of Time.

**The Remedies for Conversion**

In a claim for the conversion of a chattel several remedies are available to a plaintiff. The court in its judgment may order any, or a combination of any of the following reliefs:

1. Order for delivery, return or specific restitution of the goods.
2. Alternative order for payment of the current market value of the chattel.
3. An order for payment of any consequential damages. However, allowance may be made for any improvement in the goods, such as, where a person honestly in good faith buys and improves a stolen car and is sued by the true owner; the damages may be reduced to reflect the improvements.
4. Recovery of special and general damages. Special damage is recoverable by a plaintiff for any specific loss proved.
5. General Damages: Furthermore, where for instance, a plaintiff whose working equipment or tools are converted by another person, a plaintiff may sue for the loss of profit, or existing contract or wages for the period of the conversion of the work tools or equipments.

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**Bodunde Bankole Tort: Law of Wrongful Conduct: Lipservice Punishment (1998), Lagos. Fidelis Nwadalo: the Criminal Procedure of the Southern States of Nigeria, Mij Publisher, Ltd, Lagos (1996). John G. Fleming: The Law of Torts (1977), The Law Books Co. Ltd publisher, London. Sweet & Maxwell.**

**DETINUE**

The tort of detinue is the wrongful detention of the chattel of another person, the immediate possession of which the person entitled. Detinue is a claim for the specific return, delivery, or surrender of a chattel to the plaintiff who is entitled to it. Detinue is the wrongful detention or retention of a chattel whereby the person entitled to it is denied the possession or use of it. As a general rule, to successfully sue in detinue, a plaintiff must have possession before the detention, or have right to immediate possession of the chattel.

**Essentially, the tort of detinue is:**

1. The wrongful detention of the chattel of another person;
2. The immediate possession of which the person is entitled.

An action in detinue is a claim for the specific return of a chattel wrongfully retained, or for payment of its current market value and any consequential damages. Anybody who wrong fully takes, detains, or retains a chattel, and after a proper demand for it, refuses, or fails to return it to the claimant without lawful excuse may be sued in detinue to recover it or its value. In the United Kingdom, the Torts (Interference with Goods) Act 1977 has abolished the tort of detinue as a separate tort, and merged it with the tort of conversion where it is now known as conversion by detinue or detention.

In Nigeria, it still exists as a separate tort. Examples of detinue, that is, detention or retention of goods are many and include the following:

1. A lends his chairs and tables to B for a one day party, and B neglects, refuses or fails to return the furniture at the end of the day as agreed or after the expiration of a reasonable period of time.
2. C gives his radio set to D and pays him to repair it, and D fails or refuses to release or return it after a demand has been made on him for its return. In each of these circumstances, there is a right of action to sue for detinue of the chattel.

**When to Sue for Detinue**

A plaintiff can only maintain action for the tort of detinue after satisfying two conditions which are:

1. The plaintiff must have title that is ownership or right to immediate possession of the chattel.
2. The defendant who is in actual possession of the chattel must have failed, and or refused to deliver the chattel to the plaintiff after the plaintiff has made a proper demand for the return of the chattel, without lawful excuse. Thus, there must have been a demand by the plaintiff for the return of the chattel and a refusal or a failure to return them. This making of a demand by the plaintiff on the defendant is a condition precedent which the plaintiff must establish to succeed in his claim for detinue.

In Kosile v Folarin (1989) 3 NWLR pt 107, p. 1 SC,

The defendant motor dealer seized and detained the motor vehicle he had sold to the plaintiff on credit terms, upon delay by the plaintiff to fully pay up. The plaintiff buyer sued for detinue claiming damages. The Supreme Court held: inter alia that the seizure and detention of the vehicle by the defendant was wrong. The plaintiff was entitled to the return of the vehicle or its value and for loss of the use of the vehicle until the date of judgment at the rate of N20 per day.

In the above case, the Supreme Court emphasized the requirement that in an action for detinue, there must have been a demand by the plaintiff on the defendant to return the chattel, and if the defendant persists in keeping the chattel, he is liable for detinue. See also lhenacho v Uzochukwu (1997) 2 NWLR pt 487, p. 257 SC.

In West Mrica Examinations Council v Koroye (1977) 2 SC 45; 11 NSCC 61,

The plaintiff sat for an examination conducted by the defendant council. The defendant neglected and or refused to release his certificate. The plaintiff successfully claimed in detinue for his certificate and was award damages in lieu of the release of the certificate by the Supreme Court.

In Davies v Lagos City Council (supra at 155),

The defendant city council wrongfully seized and detained the plaintiff’s taxi cab. The plaintiff sued claiming damages. The Lagos High Court held that: The plaintiff was entitled to a return of the vehicle and loss of earnings on the vehicle as a result of the unlawful detention. In this case ADEFARASIN J as he then was stated that a plaintiff is entitled to loss of earnings on his chattel which he uses for work or business, thus:

"This is not a case in which the plaintiff is entitled to the value of the vehicle. He is, however, entitled to the losses caused to him as a result of the unlawful detention. He is entitled to the loss of earning on the vehicle.”

In Steyr Nig. Ltd v Gadzama (1995) 7 NWLR pt 407. p. 305 CA,

At the end of their services, the plaintiff appellant company sued the defendant respondents who were former employees of the appellant for detaining official cars and household items which were in their use as top management staff of the company. The Court of Appeal held: that the respondents were to pay reasonable prices for the items in lieu of returning the chattels.

Stitch v A.G. Federation (1986) 5 NWLR pt 47, p. 1007 SC.

The plaintiff appellant imported a car from overseas. It was detained by the Board of Customs and Excise at the sea port. The Customs then sold it to the fourth defendant who started cannibalizing and selling its parts. The plaintiff appellant sued the defendants for return of the car. On appeal the Supreme Court held: that the appellant was entitled to possession of the car, but as it was virtually a wreck due to cannibalism, the court will order that the trial court should take evidence as to what a fairly used car similar to that of the appellant's car will cost and award the purchase price as damages to the appellant in lieu of the return of the car. See also Ordia v Piedmont Nig. Ltd (1995) 2 NWLR pt 379. p. 516 SC.

**The Differences between Conversion and Detinue**

Detinue covers the same ground as the tort of conversion by detention. However, some differences are to be noted which include the following:

1. The refusal to surrender or return a chattel on demand is the essence of detinue, or detention. There must have been a demand for return of the chattel.
2. Detinue is the proper remedy where the plaintiff wants a return of the specific goods in question, and not merely an assessed market value. However, where specific return of the chattel or a replacement will not be possible, an award of the current market value of the chattel is usually made to the plaintiff.

Before the Common Law Procedure Act 1854, was enacted a defendant had a choice to either restore the actual chattel or pay the market value. However, since the enactment of the Act, a court has discretion to order specific restitution, or award the market value of the chattel to the plaintiff or it may award damages alone if the goods can be replaced easily.

**The Defenses for Detinue**

In an action for detinue, a defendant may plead that:

1. He has mere possession of the goods
2. That the plaintiff has insufficient title as compared to himself
3. The defendant may plead jus tertii, that is, a third party person has a better title, provided the defendant is the agent, or has the authority of the third party, or is claiming under the third party. Jus tertii, is the better title of a third party. Jus tertii is a defense, that is, based on ownership by a third party, and it is not pleaded, except the defendant is defending under the right of such third party who has ownership, or paramount title, that will enable him to establish a better title, and the right to possession, than the plaintiff. Otherwise, as CLEASBY BJ said in Fowler v Hollins (1872) LR 7 QB 616 at 639: "Persons deal with the property in chattels, or exercise acts of ownership over them at their peril”.
4. Innocent delivery
5. Subsisting bailment
6. Subsisting lien on the chattel. See Otubu v Omotayo (supra)
7. Temporary retention of the chattel to enable steps to be taken to check the title of the plaintiff
8. Inevitable accident, see National Coal Board v Evans (1951) 2 KB 816.
9. Reasonable defense of a person or property, such as when one beats or injures a dog that was attacking him or another person.
10. Enforcement of a court order or other legal process, such as levying of execution of property under a writ of fifa, or the police taking away goods they believe to have been stolen for the purpose of use as exhibit in evidence before court, etc.

**The Remedies for Detinue**

When a person's chattel is detained by another person, the person who is denied possession or use of such chattel, has several remedies open to him which include:

1. Claim for Return of the Chattel: This is a claim for the return of the specific chattel, especially, if the chattel has not changed its character, content, and it has not been damaged nor destroyed during its detention.
2. Replacement of the Chattel: Where possible or appropriate, a defendant may be ordered to replacement the chattel by supplying an identical or similar chattel. This is possible for instance in the case of manufacturers of products, who can easily replace the goods by supplying an identical or similar product.
3. Claim for the Market Value of Chattel: This is a claim for the current market value of the chattel as may be assessed. The measure of damage in detinue is usually the market value of the goods as proved at the time of judgment. The onus is on the plaintiff to prove the market value. Therefore, where there is default of restitution a plaintiff may claim for payment of the value of the chattel. This option appears to be the best form of action, where the chattel has otherwise been removed from jurisdiction, or hidden, damaged, destroyed or otherwise not found. In such circumstances there is no alternative than to claim for the market value of the chattel as assessed, plus any specific and general damages for its detention.
4. Recapture or Self help: A person who is entitled to possession of goods of which he has been wrongfully deprived may resort to self-help and retake the goods from the custody of the person detaining it, using only reasonable force after he has made a demand for their return. However, he may not trespass through the land of an innocent party to retake the goods. He may only go on such land with permission. However, recapture as a remedy is usually frowned upon by court for the breach of peace and other offenses it may occasion. This is because self help is an instance of taking the laws into one's hand. See Agbai v Okogbue (1991) 7 NWLR pt 204, p. 391 SC. Therefore, a person may not resort to the option of recapture or self help except it is safe, expected, and reasonable or if it will not be resisted by the defendant and or persons acting for him.
5. Replevin or Release on Bond: This is a return of the goods on security, pending the determination of the ownership of the chattel. When a third party's goods have been wrongfully taken in the course of levying execution or distress of the movable property of another person or judgment debtor, such third party claiming ownership may recover them by means of an interpleader summons determining their ownership. The registrar will then issue a warrant for the restoration of the goods, to such third party or claimant on bond. Therefore, Replevin is the re-delivery to an owner of goods which were wrongfully seized, the action for such re-delivery, and for any specific and general damages suffered by him as the result of the detention.
6. Damages: When a defendant has been found liable in detinue, he cannot deprive the plaintiff of his right to damages for detention of the chattel, simply because he has not been using it, nor earning anything .from its use. Also, if the wrongdoer has been making use of the goods for his own purpose, then he must pay a reasonable hire for chattel to the plaintiff. The reasonable hire usually includes the wear and tear of the goods. Therefore, as the courts have often affirmed the remedies available for the tort of detinue are an order for specific return of the chattel, or in default, an order for payment of the value and also damages that were suffered due to loss of use by the defendant up to the date of judgment or re-delivery of the chattel to the plaintiff. Also general damages may be awarded as may be assessed by the court. General damages are usually presumed in this action, especially for the loss of the use of the chattel. As in claims in other areas of law, general damages may be awarded at least to cover part of the cost of the legal action.

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