POETRY FOR OUR TIMES: JACK MAPANJE'S *THE CHATTERING WAGTAILS OF MIKUYU PRISON*

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John Alfred Clement 'Jack' Mapanje was born of Yao and Nyanja parents in Kadango Village, Mangochi District, Malawi, on 25 March 1944. After obtaining a Diploma in Education at Soche Hill College, University of Malawi, he taught in Malawian secondary schools for some years, then entered Chancellor college, University of Malawi, to read for a B.A. Degree, which he obtained in 1972. A stint at the Institute of Education, University of London, earned him an M Phil in 1975. For the next four years he was a lecturer in English at the University of Malawi, but he later left for University College, London, to work towards a Ph.D in linguistics. He returned to Malawi in 1983, after successfully completing his doctoral studies. From 1985 to 25 September 1987 when he was arrested by the Special Branch at Zomba Gymkhana Club, Mapanje was a Senior Lecturer in Lingustics and Head of the Department of English at Chancellor College.

As readers will discover from the account given below, for a long time no reason was proffered for the poet's detention. Considering Malawi's political situation at the time, speculation naturally revolved round the contents of his first book of poems, Of chameleons and Gods.[2] Mapanje was to spend the next three and-a-half years in Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison in Malawi's old capital, Zomba. He was held incommunicado for the first twenty-two months. Repeated requests to see him made to the police by his friend, spiritual adviser and colleague in the Department of

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English, Father Patrick O'Malley, were routinely turned down. Not even his wife, Mercy, a midwife at Zomba General Hospital, was during that period allowed to visit him in prison. However, yielding to overwhelming international pressure, President Banda finally ordered the poet's release on 10 May, 1991.

Instead of rejoining the University of Malawi immediately, Jack Mapanje opted for leave of absence in the United Kingdom. In October 1991, he and his family left for the University of York in England, where the poet had been invited as a Visiting Research Fellow by the Centre for Southern African Studies.

Besides Of Chameleons and Gods and The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison, Jack Mapanje's publications include Oral Poetry from Africa (eds. Mapanje and White, Longman, 1984) and Summer Fires: New Poetry of Africa (eds. Calder, Mapanje and Pieterse, Heinemann, 1983). His poems have appeared in London Magazine, Stand Magazine, Poetry Wales, Bananas, Index on Censorship, West Africa, Saiwa, Kunapipi, The Page, The Kenyon Review, The Loft, Oxford Magazine, Prison Writing, The Kalahari Review, Tees Valley Writer, The Twitter Machine (Basil Blackwell, 1989), The Haunting Wind, (Dzuka, 1990), Curing Their Ills (Stanford University Press, 1991), and Power and the Praise Poem (University Press of Virginia, 1991).

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In the introduction to his earlier collection of verse, Of Chameleons and Gods, Jack Mapanje explains that the book spans a turbulent decade during which he had been trying to find a voice or voices as a way of preserving his sanity. From the dates given in the text itself, it is evident that the Malawian poet is referring to the period between 1970 and 1980. During that era the poet completed his undergraduate studies at the University of Malawi, travelled to the United Kingdom to do postgraduate work and returned home just in time to witness the beginning of a reign of terror characterised by the detention of a cross-section of Malawi's professionals, including Mapanje's own colleagues in the University. The end of the decade also brought some kind of resolution to the crisis in that the alleged perpetrators of the terror were apprehended, tried for treason and sentenced accordingly.

Thus when he again left for further studies abroad towards the end of 1979, Mapanje's mind was relatively at ease.

The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison spans another decade, this time that between 1983 and 1993. The earliest poem in it dates back to March/April 1983 when, after obtaining his doctorate from University College, London, the poet decided to return to Malawi and take up his teaching post at the University. The latest piece, taking the form of a prologue to the whole collection, was written at Heworth in England in February 1993, six months before the whole collection was published. By then the Malawian poet was already living in exile with his family after being released two years before from Mikuyu Prison of the book's title. Thus the decade covered in this volume is also unstable, arguably more so at a personal level than the one spanned in Of Chameleons and Gods.

The prologue with which Mapanje's second book of poems opens serves, among other things, to establish a connection between the two volumes through the reference to Chingwe's Hole on Zomba Plateau. According to local belief, this is the hole into which wrong-doers were in the distant past dropped as their punishment. In the prologue, however, the hole is closely identified with the detention which the poet and other victims like him have experienced. Another link with Of Chameleons and Gods is the use of a variety of voices in the poems. The chattering wagtails of the second book's title are not just the birds that frequently visited the prison yard but also the inmates themselves and, by extension, all Malawians forced by President Banda's autocratic rule to flee into exile. Also introduced in the prologue is a strong committed stance on Jack Mapanje's part. Here is a writer who by now has clearly taken sides in the continuing political struggle in Malawi. He is firmly on the side of the oppressed, who now actively seek 'Justice!' (p.1).

The remainder of the poems in the collection are divided into four closely related sections, arranged in a chronological order: 'Another Fools' Day Homes In,' 'Out of Bounds,' 'Chattering Wagtails' and 'The Release and Other Curious Sights.'

The title poem of the opening section suggests that Mapanje returned to Malawi from his Ph.D studies in London on or around 1 April 1983, a day traditionally marked as Fools' Day, when one can play wicked jokes on friends, relatives and colleagues with impunity. Within the context of Malawian politics, Fools' Day

might also have one of two specific references. The first is the date of Dr Banda's release from Gweru Prison in Southern Rhodesia on 1 April 1960, an event which officially heralded the end of the State of Emergency imposed on Nyasaland in the previous year by the colonial authorities. Commentators have for a long time been wondering who was fooling who at the time. The second possible reference is to Jack Mapanje himself. Does his landing on Malawian soil on this day underscore the foolishness of his decision to return to this politically volatile country after three-and-a-half years of relative freedom and security in England? The question would have been particularly disturbing considering that while abroad, the poet had dared publish his reputedly offensive first book of verse, Of Chameleons and Gods.

'Kadango village, Even Milimbo Lagoon Is Dry' records the poet's return to his place of birth only to find it drought-stricken like all other parts of the country. Its power derives from its vivid evocation of the devasting effect of the drought on every aspect of life. The poem closes with a bitter attack on the politicians of the day for giving a false picture of the situation to the outside world, thereby blocking desperately needed food aid.

Another piece, 'The Haggling Old Woman at Balaka,' beautifully illustrates Mapanje's effective handling of voices, in this case a monologue. The poem ranges over a number of issues, including the relative merits or demerits of breast feeding and powdered milk, the folly inherent in getting agricultural inputs from the government on credit and the degradingly low prices offered to peasant farmers for their produce by the Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (ADMARC). The poem has a tight structure, consisting as it does of the monologue proper framed by introductory and concluding couplets.

One of the most dreadful events in Malawi's post-independence history took place in May 1983. This was the death in an alleged car accident on the old Mwanza road of three cabinet ministers and a member of parliament. The rumour quickly spread that the four men met their deaths while trying to flee the country after having been found to be implicated in some kind of plot against the government. Their badly bruised bodies were wrapped in torn prison blankets and delivered to their families by armed police, who insisted that the 'rebels' should be buriedwithout the usual funeral rites. Malawi Congress Party youth leaguers moved from door to

door, warning citizens against listening to accounts of the events given by foreign radio stations.

Jack Mapanje accurately captures the atmosphere of fear, tension and uncertainty prevalent in Malawi at the time in a piece called 'The Rise of the New Toadies (1983).' The familiar sight of little boys selling strawberries on Zomba Plateau now only serves to remind one of the recently spilt blood. No ministerial Mercedes Benzes move up and down the street of the town below. Instead, there are roadblocks everywhere. Mapanje has a government spokesman warning would-be followers of the murdered politicians against similar 'liberal jokes' and threatening 'gun-point burial.' All the other features of a totalitarian state are present: jammed foreign radio stations, surveillance by the secret police and a self-imposed curfew. A church-gate is burnt following a bishop's call for a requiem mass and a Presbyterian pastor is banished to his home village for being so bold as to preach against the murder.

Like most other observers, Mapanje attributes the killing of the four politicians to a power struggle within Malawi's ruling clique between liberal and conservative elements. Unfortunately for the country, the liberals lost and the conservatives triumphed:

> Apparently, the 'yobbos' only wanted the air cleared,
> but the other toadies wouldn't wait; you know the pattern! (p.10)

To show just how terribly shaken he was by the disappearance of the four politicians, Mapanje returns to the subject of their horrendous death in 'No, Creon, There's No Virtue in Howling.' Here he convincingly draws a parallel between Creon's callous treatment of Haemon, his own son, in Sophocles' tragedy Antigone, and President Banda's public outbursts against the late Aaron Gadama, according to some sources his own cousin. The single stanza poem is addressed to the Malawian tyrant by a figure corresponding to the Zulu or Ngoni imbongi, the praise singer who also feels free to criticize his subject. Mapanje has increasingly been adopting such a stance in his poetry.[3] Besides, favourite device of the poet's, the rhetorical question, is brought into play in this piece with considerable effect:

How can you hope to repair Haemon, your
Own blood, our only hope for the throne,
By reproaching his body mangled by your
Decree and put to rest without the requem
Of our master drums?'... (p.12).

Notice here the use of the first person plural point of view, representing the collective voice of all Malawian citizens.

The last poem in 'Another Fools' Day Homes in' is a moving narrative about a dedicated Malawi Congress Party member who is ironically rewarded with death. 'Vigil for a Fellow Credulous Captive' tells the story of Anenenji, whose name literally means 'What is he supposed to say?' or 'What can he say?.' He is an underpaid labourer who spends his free time selling MCP membership cards as a means of raising funds for the organisation. Like all political fanatics in Malawi at the peak of MCP power, Anenenji insists that even babies should have cards bought for them. Every time he takes the money to the areal party branch for safe keeping. One day, however, a millstone is tied to Anenenji's legs, he is shoved into a sack and then thrown into Lake Malawi. The reader can only speculate that some party officials have falsely accused Anenenji of stealing party money, a common enough offence in Malawi. Over the years, everyone else seems to have forgotten the labourer, except the speaker and Anenenji's widow, who stubbornly look forward to his return, if only in the form of bones, in order to haunt those who murdered him. As is the case with the majority of the pieces in the volume under discussion, this composition reflects the political reality in Malawi, recording as it does the longstanding MCP practice of drowning people it didn't like in the Shire or any other body of water. The Malawian novelist, Legson Kayira, dramatises this effectively in his book, The Detainee.[4]

At the time of his arrest in 1987, Jack Mapanje was planning to publish a book of verse called Out of Bounds. The collection was to include most of the poems he had written since returning to Malawi in 1983. The project, however, never became a reality. Now 'Out of Bounds' is just one section of The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison.

The title is based on the poet's chance visit to the maternity wing of Zomba General Hospital, where his wife then worked. Detailed in the piece are the appalling conditions in the place: crumbling iron roofs, rusting paint, cracked cement floors, overcrowded wards, poor food, inadequate supplies of drugs, and overworked staff. The speaker explains that when the expatriate health workers once proposed extending the wing with funding from their own countries, the Malawi government curiously declined the offer. And yet at public meetings politicians never stop promising to deliver better health services to the people. Mapanje also takes advantage of the situation to ridicule the hypocritical practice of renovating hospitals and prematurely discharging patients whenever President Banda went to cheer the sick around Christmas.

In this section, the writer ranges all over the country, constantly asking himself and his compatriots what real progress has taken place since independence. He also seems to be aware that his treatment of some of the issues might offend those in power. In 'Baobab Fruit Picking (or Development in Monkey Bay),' for example, Mapanje records the desperate struggle for survival of women whose husbands left a long time ago to seek employment in South African mines with a view to buying farms on their return. The poet also describes the threat posed to the environment and to the local people's livelihood by the expanding tourist industry, represented by the proliferation of pine cottages all along the lakeshore, 'With barbed wire fences fifty yards into the lake!' and 'blighted - tomato-thighs in reeking loincloths.' (pp.22-23).

'The Farms That Gobble the Land at Home,' modelled on the Ghananian writer Kofi Awoonor's composition, 'The Sea Eats the Land at Home'[5], calls attention to the phenomenal growth of the estate sector of Malawi's agriculture dominated economy during the postcolonial era. Here, too, is a tale of dispossession and exploitation as peasant farmers are turned into tenants earning a pittance a day. Their traditional form of agriculture, characterised by mixed planting and the use of cheap original ashes or compost manures, is banned, and they are forced to buy fertilisers they can ill afford. The government's argument for encouraging estate farming is that it offers a viable alternative to the gold mines of Southern Africa and also enables women to become breadwinners alongside men. Also attacked in this

poem is the concept of rural growth centres, introduced in the late seventies in order to stem rural-urban migration and provide in selected areas around the country such amenities and facilities normally associated with town life as clean water, electricity, education, telecommunications, employment opportunities and entertainment centres. In the poet's view, such centres rarely serve their purpose but instead hasten the destruction of indigenous culture, in the form of traditional dances and oral literature, and lead to social decay, as evidenced by widespread prostitution. A sinister dimension is added to the piece when the writer observes that nobody comments on the harmful effects of such policies for fear of being victimised.

Some time before Mapanje left the United Kingdom for home, he received an offer from a Blantyre based publisher to have a Malawian edition of Of Chameleons and Gods brought out. There was, however, to be one major condition: the volume had to be sanitised, expunging all those pieces that 'poked at the raw wounds of the nation.' The poet immediately rejected the offer as a matter of principle. Surprisingly, some copies of his book were imported into Malawi and allowed free circulation before suddenly being bought up by a Special Branch squad. Thus, by the time Mapanje actually returned home in 1983, his book was in a kind of limbo. It was neither formally banned nor readily available from the local bookshops. In fact, the final decision to proscribe Of Chameleons and Gods was not taken until around the time of the poet's detention. Mapanje's frustration and anger at the antics of the Censorship Board are evident from an address he gave to a conference of writers held in Stockholm in 1985 and from a poem written in the same year anticipating the banning of his first book of verse. The former was called "Censoring the African Poem" while the latter was entitled 'On Banning Of Chameleons and Gods (June, 1985).' The poem, included in The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison, is addressed to the Chief Censor, at the time a divorced lady with feminist pretentions, and to the publisher referred to above, who is alsoan author in his own right:

> ...To ban, burn or merely withdraw from
> Public engagement, what's the difference? It
> Still humiliates our readers, you & me...(p.35)

The poet goes on to point out that there is nothing particularly alarming about the verse itself, in terms of either form or content. The literary devices employed in it, including myths, fables, riddles and jokes, are all familiar from oral literature and from everyday conversation. Going on the offensive, he suggests that the censors would do better to confront the harsh political reality in Malawi than to find fault with lines of poetry. The poet's business is, in fact, less harmful than 'hacking at people's innocent necks' (ibid). The passionate appeal which concludes the poem could easily come from any frustrated Malawian writer living and working either inside or outside the country: 'No, for children's sake, unchain these truths;/Release the verse you've locked in our hearts!' (ibid).

Around one in the afternoon on Friday, 25 September 1987, a plain clothes policeman walked into the front bar of Zomba Gymkhana Club and inquired "A Mapanje alipo pano?" ("Is Mapanje here?"). Whereupon Jack Mapanje, who had been relaxing with some friends after taking lunch, stood up and identified himself. "Someone would like to see you outside," politely explained the Special Branch officer. Standing just outside the back bar was the then Commissioner of Police for the Eastern Division, looking tall and imposing in his khaki uniform. "You are Mapanje?" he asked and, his question being answered in the affirmative, he led the poet out of the club. By then it was clear to all present that there was something seriously wrong, and so when, a quarter of an hour later, witnesses saw the Assistant Registrar of Chancellor College driving Mapanje's red Daihatsu Charmant away, their worst fears were confirmed: Jack Mapanje had finally been 'taken.'

The section of the volume entitled 'Chattering Wagtails' is as detailed an account as any so far given by a writer of the experience of political imprisonment. It begins on the day of arrest, with the humiliation of stripping and being thoroughly searched for razor blades, pencils, pins and 'change,' and ends with the tremendous feeling of excitement on the eve of the poet's release.

Mapanje was not the first senior University of Malawi employee to be detained in Mikuyu. In the seventies, dozens of his colleagues, especially those from the Northern Region, found themselves incarcerated there. The list includes such eminent scholars, administrators and librarians as Alifeyo Chilivumbo, Bernard Harawa, Augustine Msiska, Peter Mwanza, Mupa Shumba, James Chipasula, Chifipa Gondwe,

Peter Chiwona, Dominic Milanzi, John Banda and Felix Mnthali. They were victims all of the reign of terror orchestrated by Albert Muwalo, then Secretary General and Adminstrative Secretary of the Malawi Congress Party, and Focus Gwede, at the time Head of the Special Branch. The men also fell prey to internal politicking within the University, where the overwhelming presence of highly educated staff from the Northern Region was deeply resented by their politically well connected colleagues from the Centre.

It is against this background that one should read Mapanje's piece. 'Fears from Mikuyu Cells for Our Loves.' Attention here is focused on the detainee's neighbours and colleagues, as well as their well rehearsed reactions to such an arrest. They are usually the ones who provide the police with information on the prisoner's movements, associates and statements. In prison, Mapanje imagines what his own neighbours did or said after his detention. Although he is convinced that betrayal was the inevitable outcome, his bitterness is nevertheless softened by the recollection that his family underwent a similar experience eleven years before, when a neighbour, the Africana Librarian, Augustine Msiska, was detained. The poet recalls how it was considered a crime to show any sympathy towards the family of the 'rebel.' Even the University Council, Msiska's employer, moved swiftly to send the still bewildered woman to her husband's village.

That Jack Mapanje was kept well informed of developments outside prison is evident from the uncanny accuracy with which he reproduces some of his colleagues' unkind reactions to the news of his arrest. It is indeed true that there were those who triumphantly declared that with the kind of poetry he had been writing, Mapanje's detentionwas long overdue. One fellow, who was several years later elevated to the august rank of full professor, was actually quoted as having said, "He got what he deserved!" As had been the case in the seventies, some people celebrated the poet's arrest in homes or bars around Zomba. Here, at last, was their opportunity to go to all those international conferences which Mapanje had seemed to monopolise between 1983 and 1987.

The poem from which the entire collection derives its title, 'The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison,'describes Mapanje's induction into the 'other society.' Before he can tell the other inmates of the circumstances of his own arrrest, the poet

is given a historical account of the wing of the prison from which he has just been moved, namely, the New Building. He is informed that the structure was specifically erected by Muwalo and Gwede to house a deposed President Banda and his henchmen. The main prison itself, Mikuyu, was named thus after fig trees as a distraction from the horror evoked by the infamous Dzeleka (literally 'I shall never do it again') Prison in Dowa District, which was built after the Cabinet Crisis of 1964 to accommodate particularly implacable dissidents. It was originally intended for Banda's remaining aides as well as such other detainees as medical doctors, teachers, diplomats, journalists, lawyers, pastors and a host of 'other nameless bumblebees' who would have been released upon Muwalo's and Gwede's successful take-over of the government. Ironically, after the uncovering of the plot, the two major conspirators themselves ended up being the first occupants of the New Building.

As he is being introduced to his fellow inmates, the new prisoner is advised to share their humour but not to be daunted by the number of years they have spent in detention. This gives the narrator an opportunity to comment on the fate of the four politicians who perished in May 1983. They were apparently 'released' from Mikuyu after spending a night there. However, the Special Branch officers who came to collect them were not particulary keen to leave their signatures in the appropriate gatebook, as was the usual practice.

In the last part of this long poem, the writer's initiators bring in an element of birdlore. They tell the neophyte that the real wagtails of Mikuyu Prison, that is, the birds, announce inmates' visitors, minister to the sick, deliver messages of cheer, and foretell impending releases. On the other hand, these thousands of wagtails also litter the prison yard, forcing the detainees to devise 'shit-mopping rosters.' Along with the diet of weevil infested beans and the stings and bites of ticks, fleas and scorpions, the stench produced by the bird droppings constitutes a subtle aspect of prison torture.

Jack Mapanje records several visits by the Special Branch while he was in detention. Apart from bringing back painful memories of the arrest itself, such visits also either arouse fears of fresh charges or bring the hope of securing a quick release. All these features are present in 'Mikuyu Prison Visit of the Head of Detainees'.

Mapanje recognises a member of the visiting team as the one who ransacked his house a year before, scattering books, papers, and records, and quarelling with members of the writer's family. He again it was who forced the poet to sign his own deteniton order a month after his actual incarceration. On this particular occasion, Boxing Day 1988, the 'Head of Detainees', almost certainly the Head of the Special Branch, has been sent by the Inspector General of Police to enquire about the prisoner's problems. The inmate for a while reflects that there are so many things that he is not allowed to have, including good food, access to a medical doctor, the services of a priest, and reading matter. There are, however, two particularly pressing problems. The first one is that for fourteen months his family has not been allowed to see him, obviously part of the attempt by the authorities to break his spirit. The second problem is that he himself would dearly like to apologise to the powers that be but, unfortunately, he has neither been charged nor tried. Paper and pen are quickly brought and the detainee is invited to set down all his grievances. The kind of apology he offers underscores the absurdity of the situation in which he finds himself. He apologises to His Excellency the Life President, his government, and his university authorities 'for any embarrassment caused' or to be caused by his detention. More seriously, he requests a reconsideration of his case, in view of the fact that he left behind a very sick mother, a distraught wife and three asthmatic children. The whole exercise is clearly calculated to humiliate the prisoner, to point up his total helplessness in the face of his captors.

In the wake of Jack Mapanje's arrest in 1987, colleagues and friends both inside and outside Malawi began a relentless campaign for his release. Amnesty International, International PEN, Africa Watch and the African Literature Association (ALA) all wrote to Malawi's leader to implore him either to bring Mapanje to an open andfair trial or release him. Most of the letters elicited no response from Banda, if they ever reached him at all. However, in mid-1988, the Life President broke his silence and came up with the strange accusation that Jack Mapanje had been 'teaching subversion in the classrooms'[6]. On the positive side, the same year saw Of Chameleons and Gods being awarded the Rotterdam Poetry Prize. The renowned Nigerian writer, Wole Soyinka, collected the prize on behalf of Jack Mapanje.

In 'The Delight of Aerial Signs of Release', Mapanje pays tribute to Patrick O'Malley, David Kerr, Landeg White, Angus Calder and a host of other individuals and organisations who worked tirelessly to secure his release from detention. The poem opens with a chilling boast made by Hastings Banda following the opening of Dzeleka Maximum Security Prison in 1965: 'And there, rebels will rot, rot, rot!'. The remainder of the poem mounts a challenge to that statement as the poet anticipates his own freedom. In keeping with the advice given to him by his initiators earlier on, he looks for 'aerial signs of release'. He then acknowledges the warm thoughts, the bulletins and the exhortatory messages conveyed by both his friends and such bodies as the Poetry Society, the Irina Trust, the BBC, Radio Deutsche Welle, Radio Netherlands International, the Church of Scotland, Edinburgh University, and SADCC Universities. From his point of view, they have all played their part. What remains now is God's intervention.

The last two parts of the poem describe the aerial signs in detail. The spectacle of thousands of dragon-flies swarming over the prison yard, for example, is related to a similar event fourteen years before when two hundred political prisoners were released. Similarly, on the eve of the poet's release itself, the sight of hundreds of psychedelic moths landing on the rusting wire-gauze inspires the hope that more detainees will soon march past the stubborn gates of Mikuyu.

According to his own testimony, Jack Mapanje was released on 10 May 1991, just four days before President Banda's official birthday. On that occasion it sometimes pleased His Excellency to set some prisoners free. Mapanje celebrates the event in a poem appropriately labelled 'The Release: Who Are You, Imbongi?', the centrepiece of the closing section of the book, 'The Release and Other Curious Sights'. The question in the poem's title, at once expressing bewilderment and awe, comes from the Inspector General of Police, whose Special Branch officers arrested the writer in the first place. Its full text, placed in brackets at the head of the piece, reads as follows: We've detained more distinguished people than you in this country, but we've never had the same amount of trouble as we've had over your case. WHO ARE YOU? The trouble in question, of course, is the local and international publicity given to the poet's detention. The police are frankly stunned to discover that the imprisonment of a mere university lecturer could attract such embarrassing worldwide attention to the atrocities perpetrated in Malawi during the Banda era.

The poet's reply to the Inspector General's question is cast in typical folktale style, reinforced by the now familiar rhetorical question:

> When the lion wrung the gazelle
> Under his smoking armpits, when
> The foaming rhinoceros pierced his
> Sharp horn or the leopard pounced:
>
> Did you ask, Imbongi, who are you?
> (Even this underwear feels rough after
> Three years, seven months, sixteen
> Days and tweed jacket fungus-stinks,
>
> Itching like ancient goat-skins); (p.71).

The remainder of the poem recounts what actually happened on the day of the poet's release. Hand-cuffed, he was thrown into a landrover and then driven for an interview fifty miles away, presumably at the Southern Region PoliceHeadquarters in Blantyre. During the drive, the prisoner was given no clue as to what the outcome of the interview with the Inspector General might be. His fellow prisoners' ambivalent farewell still echoed in his ears:

> ...'If this is your release,
> Then best wishes, remember you have
> Left behind fellow inmates; if further
>
> Charges, Mikuyu will gladly welcome
> you back; if otherwise accidentalized
> Our Gatebook signatures will testify'. (p.72)

Mapanje explains in a note that the word 'accidentalize' was first used by members of the Writers' Workshop in Chancellor College, University of Malawi, in the 1983-84 academic year. It means to kill and pretend it was an accident when every-

body knows it was not. Obviously the poet took the word with him to Mikuyu Prison in 1987 and popularised it there. Its specific frame of reference, needless to explain, is the gruesome political murder in May 1983 of Messrs Gadama, Matenje, Sangala and Chiwanga. As he is being driven to Blantyre, therefore, the writer briefly considers the possibility that he, like those politicians almost exactly eight years before, might be heading for an extrajudicial execution rather than a proper release. To console himself, he returns to the world of folktale, comparing himself to a mere maccah, a burr that will tenaciously stick to one's clothes when one is walking in the grass or to the brown ant that once crept into the elephant's ear, forcing it to scratch and scratch until the huge animal finally destroyed itself. In other words, the poet humbly projects himself as, at best, an irritant, and not as important a threat to the status quo as those murdered politicians might have been. Nevertheless, the more aggressive overtones of the insect parallel are not entirely lost on the reader.

After his release from detention, Mapanje had the option of returning to his university job at Chancellor College. Initial enquiries in fact indicated that the Univeristy Council would place no obstacles in his path. On second thoughts, however, he felt that it would be somewhat odd to move from a prison cell straight into a lecture room. Accordingly, he opted for leave of absence. An invitation soon came from his long time friend, Landeg White, the Director of the Centre for Southern African Studies at the University of York in northern England. Some time in October 1991, Mapanje and his family flew to the United Kingdom, where the poet was to spend a number of years as a Visiting Research Fellow. Maybe one day the Mapanje family will return to Malawi.

As Mary McCarthy has pointed out, exiles are great readers of newspapers and collectors of clippings on events at home. The fact that the press of their country if often censored makes them hungry for scraps of rumour and information which they can piece together.[7] This tendency is evident in poems written by Mapanje after his departure from Malawi. 'Where Dissent is Meat for Crocodiles', for example, is a poem marking Martyrs' Day in Malawi which echoes a threat issued in public to his exiled political opponents by President Banda. In this reflective piece, Mapanje traces Malawi's political problems to the Cabinet Crisis which shook the

country soon after independence from Britain in 1964. Several ministers rebelled against Banda's autocratic style of leadership and subsequently fled the country to organize opposition from abroad. Since that time, Mapanje asserts, the Malawian leader has maintained himself in power through the brutal suppression of all dissenting voices. The poet cites as recent examples of this the ruthless way in which the students' riots and the workers' strikes of early 1992 were handled. He also calls attention to the death in police custody of a Mangochi businessman who dared protest at the manhandling of women found wearing trousers at a Yao circumcision ceremony for boys. To Mapanje, such 'brethren in dissent' qualify to be called martyrs.

While abroad, the poet does not forget those he left in detention. The sight of geese flying over a friend's house reminds him of the birdlore his fellow inmates taught him and, as if to confirm it, within a few days he learns that the last eight political prisoners in Mikuyu have been released. Not so lucky were those fellows who were later to die in prison even as momentous changes were taking place around them. These included Sylvester Phiri, Alick Kadango and Frackson Zgambo. In 'For Madame Potiphar's Waste-aways', Mapanje suggests that these three were not, strictly speaking, political prisoners. Like Joseph in the biblical story of Potiphar's wife, their only crime wasthey they had foiled the sexual and/or business schemes of a powerful woman within the MCP establishment. Infuriated, this lady had used her political connections to have them put away in jail, where they would languish until it pleased her to order their release. In the event, however, they all died, apparently of cerebral malaria, an explanation which the poet refuses to take seriously.

One of the most moving poems in the closing section of The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison is an elegy dedicated to Orton Ching'oli Chirwa, the founder and first president of the Malawi Congress Party, who died of mysterious causes in Zomba Central Prison on 20 October 1992. Malawians will remember that when Orton Chirwa, his wife, Vera, and their son, Fumbani, were arrested on Christmas Eve in 1981, the official story was that they had infiltrated the country from Zambia with the intention of assassinating President Banda and overthrowing the Malawi Government. For their part, the Chirwas had always insisted that they had been kidnapped from Zambia by the Malawi Police Mobile Force as they were making

their way to a party at a friend's house in Chipata. However, as during the Traditional Court trial that followed they were allowed neither access to defence lawyers nor the privilege to call witnesses, the case predictably went against them. They were duly found guilty of treason and subsequently sentenced to death on 5 May 1983. But, bowing to massive international pressure, President Banda commuted the death sentence to life imprisonment and set Fumbani free in June 1984. The remainder of the story is now familiar: following her husband's death, Vera Chirwa was released in January 1993, after spending twelve years in detention, on what Banda described as 'humanitarian grounds'.[8]

In his poem, Mapanje recalls how, after his release from Mikuyu, he was asked by Orton Chirwa's British friends about the prisoner's health and the conditions in which he was being kept. Then the poet expresses his own admiration for Chirwa and the role the latter played in bringing colonial rule in Malawi to an end. Given the nature of the lawyer's contribution and considering that in the early sixties he selflessly handed over the leadership of the MCP to Dr. Hastings Banda, then emerging from Gweru Prison in Southern Rhodesia, the poet finds it difficult to understand the unusually harsh sentence handed to Chirwa and his wife in the eighties. Something seems to have gone terribly wrong somewhere along the line. Mapanje then narrates his own story, recounting how around midnight on 25 September 1987, he entered the single cell of the New Building wing of Mikuyu Prison where Chirwa himself had been dumped once. The graffiti inscribed on the walls reflected other prisoners' respect for the veteran politician, and the story was told of how Chirwa the detainee stitched together foya-gowns to make bedsheets. In short, he was a source of inspiration for the other prisoners.

On the basis of rumours that Orton Chirwa had been smuggling letters from Mikuyu to supporters outside, an enraged Banda had the prisoner, already in his seventies, moved to Zomba Central Prison, where he was kept in solitary confinement in leg-irons and chains. As extra punishment, his naked body was regularly splashed with cold water and he was fed only once every three days. Not surprisingly, on hearing of Chirwa's death, the poet's first reaction, like that of most other Malawians, is to suspect foul play: was the prisoner, perhaps, strangled with his prison blanket? Mapanje also wonders whether anyone will now mourn the de-

ceased, considering that he has all along been labelled a 'rebel'. Will his wife, a fellow political prisoner, be allowed to witness the burial? How about the children living in exile? Will they be permitted to return in order to bury their father? Recalling that inmates who die in Zomba Central Prison are usually buried in unmarked graves near St. Mary's lines, the poet wonders further whether this particular one will be allowed to rest among his own people in Nkhata-bay. For the record, Vera Chirwa was refused permission to attend her husband's funeral. However, the MCP government let the children of the Chirwas come and witness their father's burial. The funeral itself took place in the deceased's home village and was attended by prominent members of the then newly established opposition pressure groups, Alliance for Democracy (AFORD) and the United Democratic Front (UDF).

Whatever happens, Mapanje confidently predicts in his elegy, after the excitement and possible confusion brought about by the introduction of pluralist politics in Malawi, the nation will one day erect a monument to the memory of Orton Chirwa and all those heroes and heroines whom the MCP leadership may deliberately try to ignore.

On Sunday, 8 March 1992, Malawi's Roman Catholic bishops issued a pastoral letter called Living Our Faith,[9] which strongly condemned the political, social and economic injustice that had prevailed in the country since independence and called for immediate reforms. However, instead of appointing a commission of enquiry to look into the problems highlighted in the document, the MCP government started a slander campaign against the bishops aimed at alienating them from their congregations. An emergency party convention was called during which, among other things, a proposal was made to physically eliminate the prelates. Monsignor Roche, an Irish priest in charge of Mzuzu Diocese in the North and presumed to be the actual author of the offending letter, was subsequently deported from Malawi. A printing press operated by Montfort missionaries at Balaka in Machinga District and alleged to be the place where the booklet had been produced, was set ablaze by MCP operatives.[10] The document itself was formally banned and all those with copies were ordered to surrender them to the police. In addition, radio broadcasts of Catholic masses were temporarily suspended. Meanwhile, students at the main

campus of the University of Malawi, Chancellor College, marched in support of the pastoral letter, precipitating the first closure of a university campus in the country's history.

The situation appeared to be returning to normal when, in early April 1992 the government announced that its misunderstanding with the Catholic bishops had been amicably resolved. However, the crisis was soon rekindled by Chakufwa Chihana, Secretary General of Southern African Trade Union Coordination Council (SATUCC), who was then attending a conference of exiled groups opposed to the Malawi government in Lusaka, Zambia. Chihana publicly declared that he intended to return to Malawi and form a coalition of Malawian organisations in non-violent opposition against the ruling MCP. As he stepped off the plane at Kamuzu International Airport on 6 April, the trade union leader was arrested by the Special Branch. He was subsequently charged with three counts related to possession and importation of seditious publications. When judgement finally came in December, 1992, the trade unionist was sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labour. However, the Supreme Court of Malawi later reduced the sentence to nine months. Chihana was released from prison on 12 June 1993, just two days before the referendum in which Malawians voted overwhelmingly in favour of a multiparty system of government.

Apart from the Catholic bishops, university students and Chihana, other important players in the process of ushering change into Malawi were workers and western donor countries. It is notable, for example, that soon after their return to Chancellor College from an early Easter holiday occasioned by their demonstration in support of the bishops' pastoral letter, students quickly took advantage of a protest by clerical, technical and support (CTS) staff demanding better pay to cause further disturbances and vandalise college property, including the Chancellor's Pavilion in the Great Hall Complex. The police were called in to restore order and the college was subsequently closed indefinitely. Some of the students were later issued with dismissal notices. From then on the initiative passed to workers in Blantyre and Lilongwe who, echoing the issues addressed in the pastoral letter, downed their tools and went onto the streets, demanding higher wages and better working conditions. The strikes swiftly degenerated into scenes of violence and looting, and, in

the ensuing battle with the police and the Malawi Young Pioneers, some forty people lost their lives. These disturbances later came to be called the May riots of 1992, a landmark in Malawi's history comparable to 3 March in 1959. Through them, a new generation of martyrs was ordained.

All the issues and events discussed or narrated in the foregoing pages are essential to a proper appreciation of the poem with which The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison closes, namely, 'The Deluge after Our Gweru Prison Dreams'. In a note between the title and the text, Mapanje reveals that the piece was inspired by the students' and workers' riots of early 1992. He also describes the composition as 'a history of the nation', dedicated to fellow countryman, David Rubadiri, who had been living in exile since the Cabinet Crisis of 1964. Rubadiri was at the time Malawi's ambassador to the United States of America and to the United Nations.[11] True to its declared purpose, the poem is a detailed account of the fate that befell the dreams of Malawi's development which Dr Banda claimed he had had in Gweru prison, Southern Rhodesia, when he was a political prisoner there between 3 march 1959 and 1 April 1960 during the State of Emergency in Nyasaland. The dreams in question refer to the following specific projects: the removal of Malawi's capital from Zomba in the South to Lilongwe in the Centre; the construction of a highway all along Lake Malawi's shore and the establishment of a national university in Zomba. A second order of visions would include the setting up of an academy in Kasungu, Banda's home district, and the building of Kamuzu International Airport in the new capital.

In the first part of the piece, the poet shows how most of these dreams have by the the early nineties finally unravelled. The idea of a new capital, for instance, in many ways still remains unfulfilled because the country's economy has been undermined by persistent droughts, making it difficult for the government to set aside enough funds for the completion of the project. Secondly, the section of the Lakeshore Road that was actually constructed has now been reduced to 'crustaceous tarmac' and 'yawning potholes' that cripple even the hardiest of vehicles. Thirdly, the local university students, hitherto well known for their docility, now dare take the institution to court for unlawful dismissal, supported by none other than the Head of the Department of Law himself, who then proceeds to defend Chakufwa Chihana against sedition charges.

The second part of the poem places developments on the Malawian political scene in both a global and a regional context. The poet argues that the democratisation process in his country benefitted greatly from the change in international relations following the disintegration of the Eastern bloc as well as from western donor countries' insistence on linking aid packages with political reforms, especially transparency and good governance. The shift of focus among capitalist nations from fighting communism to building and strengthening democracy in the world shocked their erstwhile Third World ideological allies, including the despotic MCP regime in Malawi.

When, a year after Malawi's independence in 1964, Banda failed to attract funding from Britain or any other regular donors for his plan to move the country's capital from Zomba to Lilongwe, he quite unexpectedly turned to South Africa for help. This was a radical departure from his earlier position on Malawi's relations with the white-dominated South. For example, though he later recanted for economic reasons, in 1960, he threatened to recall Malawi's 80,000 migrant labourers from South Africa.[12] Again, immediately after independence, he took steps to reduce the volume of trade between Malawi and South Africa, instructing government departments to purchase their requirements from elsewhere.[13] However, by August 1966, he had announced that the government might seek South African expertise in the design of the new capital.[14] In March 1967, formal contact began with a visit to South Africa by a Malawian ministerial delegation which resulted in the signing of a new trade agreement between the two countries.[15] On 12 December 1967, diplomatic relations were established between Malawi and South Africa, resulting in Malawi's alienation from other members of the Organisation of African Unity (O.A.U.).

In March 1968, South Africa announced that it was setting up a Loans Fund for the Promotion of Economic Cooperation, 'to grant direct assistance... to well disposed developing countries - particularly in Africa'[16] The first loan to be made from the Fund would be R8 million, to Malawi, for the first phase of the construction of the new capital. A second announcement indicated that South Africa's Industrial Development Corporation was to lend R11 million to the Malawi Railways to finance the line to the Mozambican port of Nacala.[17] Thus South African influence on Malawi's political and economic life had come to stay.

The point of the above detour is that Banda was prepared to, in his own words, 'sup with the devil himself' in order to fulfil his Gweru dreams. Jack Mapanje picks this point up in his poem, suggesting that now that the major western powers have withdrawn aid from Malawi, President Banda might once again turn to South Africa for assistance. Unfortunately for the Malawian leader, however, even South Africa itself has been profoundly affected by the 'happy debris of the Berlin Wall'. The process of reform is evident from the unbanning and/or legalisation in early 1990 of such organisations as the African National Congress, the Pan African Congress, the South African Communist Party and the United Democratic Front, as well as the unconditional release from prison of Nelson Mandela. According to Mapanje, it is doubtful whether after all these changes and in view of its own internal problems, South Africa might still want to extend its generosity to the present regime in Malawi.

The third section of 'The Deluge after Our Gweru Dreams' begins with the poet's approval of the timely action taken by the youths and the workers of Malawi. It then challenges the government of the day to name any dissident, dead or living, internal or exiled, who might be behind the strikes, demonstrations and riots. Masauko Chipembere, Jomo Chikwakwa, the Chisiza brothers, Silombera, Kanada, are all exonerated, as are the more recent 'rebels': Aaron Gadama, Dick Matenje, Twaibu Sangala and David Chiwanga.

The fourth and final part of the poem criticises Malawians for their gullibility throughout the period of single partyrule and goes on to debunk all prison dreams and visions, including those of the addressee, David Rubadiri, in H.M. Prison Khami, Bulawayo, in 1959, and those of the speaker and his fellow wagtails in Mikuyu Prison only a few months before. As in Of Chameleons and Gods, so too here, Mapanje expresses his total distrust of all 'lie-achieved' worlds.

Apart from being a history of Malawi, the poem was obviously also intended to be an epitaph on the Banda era. However, as a realist, Mapanje refuses to posit an entirely smooth transition to the new multiparty dispensation. Instead, he squarely confronts the possibility of chaos in the wake of President Banda's departure. Hence the last two couplets, characteristically rendered as a rhetorical question:

...Whatever, the question still
Lingers: won't toxic mushrooms burgeon

Under those rotten logs of nightmares
That now threaten apres moi, le deluge'? (p.98)

The 'toxic mushrooms' suggest destruction on the scale of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the close of the Second World War, whereas the French allusion is to President Charles de Gaulle's famous apocalyptic prophecy that after him, France would be plunged into political, social and economic instability.

From the foregoing discussion, it should be abundantly clear that the poems in Jack Mapanje's second collection speak to contemporary Malawi. Long before the Catholic bishops had plucked up enough courage to issue their pastoral letter, he was already calling attention to persistent poverty, social inequality, the unfair wage structure, inadequate health services, harsh censorship laws and the disturbing disregard for basic human rights in Malawi. Anticipating by many years the advent of the independent press, the poet undertook to expose the delusion and hypocrisy underlying his country's public life.

Instead of silencing him, his detention in fact served to highlight in an unprecendented manner the excesses of the Banda regime, forcing even the friendliest foreign governments and organisations to reexamine their attitudes and policies towards this country. In exile, Mapanje has been a close observer of events back home, identifying problems in the movement towards multiparty democracy and earnestly trying to find solutions to them. Not contented with mere poetic commentary, the writer has recently aligned himself with the United Democratic Front (UDF), becoming its chief spokesperson in the United Kingdom. Thus by courageously assuming the role of the Ngoni imbongi, at once praiser and critic, Mapanje has made a substantial contribution to the process of political reform in Malawi.

Some remarks on the form of the poems in The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison are appropriate at this stage. In the introduction to his earlier collection, Mapanje, comparing himself to a chameleon basking in its brilliant camouflage,

admits to writing in a cryptic style calculated to frustrate censors and political enemies. Such an approach, adopted by most Malawian poets based in the country, has prompted the English critic, Adrian Roscoe, to observe that in general, Malawian verse prefers a quieter tone and a less public stance than its East African equivalent.[18] It is further typified by circumspect statement, irony and ambiguity. Writing eight years after Roscoe, Frank Chipasula confirms this cautious quality of the verse, Mapanje's in particular, by drawing attention to the sombre tone and the tendency to puzzle out Malawi's blatant contradictions from a quiet distance.[19] Chipasula also makes the important point that elements of oral literature play a significant role in Mapanje's poetry. Malawian folktales and myths are versified, and such folkloric characters as chameleon and frog are transformed into symbols.[20]

The form of the pieces in Jack Mapanje's second book of verse attests to both continuity and change. Mythmaking is sustained through references to Chingwe's Hole, adaptations of folktales and the evocation of the birdlore acquired in detention. Multiple voices and masks are also employed here, as is the ubiquitous rhetorical question used to subvert such illusions as economic prosperity and political stability. Considering the deprivation and the hardshipwhich the poet and his fellow prisoners underwent, the amount of wit, humour and irony pervading the poetry is quite amazing. It bespeaks a rugged resolve to survive against all odds.

In terms of pure prosody, it will be remarked that Mapanje's poetry still displays his dilemma between adherence to convention and a desire to experiment. He often neatly divides the poems into regular stanzas. The connection between these units, especially in the short pieces, is at times effected by the same opening or closing line and at others by means of syntactical parallelism. The favoured structure is antithetical, the elements in the first stanza being negated or balanced by those in the second. In longer poems, the sting comes literally in the tail, signalled by a sudden switch in the structure of the very last stanza. The cumulative impact of the preceding units serves to accentuate the intended contrast. The diction too contains elements that point to opposition with the foregoing stanzas. There is thus an inbuilt irony even at the purely formal level.

Occasionally, the writer does away with stanzaic division altogether and presents the reader with block poems, often approaching prose both in the length of the lines and in the conversational tone of the speaker's voice. Such poems frequently take

the form of letters or dedications, and the reader has the distinct impression of eavesdropping.

If there is anything new in Jack Mapanje's style as it is reflected in The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu's Prison, it is the shedding of the cryptic manner of the earlier volume and the adoption of a frank and direct approach to his subject matter. This is the result of at least two liberating experiences: detention and exile. It is as if after personally going through one of the worst ordeals imaginable in Malawian life, Mapanje now feels more justified than ever before in exposing and denouncing the evils of the Malawi Congress Party regime. Similarly, exile confers upon him an immunity from persecution not easily taken for granted by fellow writers back in Malawi. Given this advantage, it is not surprising that the poet gives free rein to his considerable descriptive powers in his new poetry. To read the poems about prison life especially is to fall under the spell of the poet's eye and ear for detail, a quality all the more remarkable considering that most of the pieces were 'composed in the head' in a world without pen or paper.[21]

Notes

1. Jack Mapanje, The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison (London: Heinemann, 1993). All page references are to this edition and are included in brackets in the text.

2. Jack Mapanje, Of Chameleons and Gods (London: Heinemann, 1981).

3. For an elaboration of this view, see Leroy Vail and Landeg White, Power and the Praise poem: Southern African Voices in History (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, and London: James Currey, 1991), Chapter 8, pp.279-318.

4. See Legson Kayira, The Detainee (London: Heinemann, 1974).

5. See George Awoonor-Williams (Kofi Awoonor), 'The Sea Eats the Land at Home' in Modern Poetry from Africa, ed. by Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963 repr. 1973), p.101.

6. See "Jack Mapanje Released", ALA Bulletin, 17, 2, (Spring 1991), p.21.

7. Mary McCarthy, "Exiles, Expatriates and Internal Emigres", The Listener, 86, 2226, (25 November 1971), p.706.

8. See Felix Mponda, "Ngwazi Tells the BBC about Late Orton Chirwa: 'He Came Back to Kill Me'", The New Express, 1,2, (16-22 April), 1993, p.1.

9. Catholic Bishops of Malawi, Living Our Faith (Balaka: Montfort Mission aries, Lent 1992).

10. See Prince Shonga, "The Mistold Horror of Balaka", Moni, 30, 349, (No vember, 1993), pp.4-5.

11. David Rubadiri has since returned to Malawi.

12. Ibid,. pp.13-14

13. Philip Short, Banda (London and Boston: Routlege and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 284.

14. Ibid., p.290

15. Ibid., ibid.

16. Ibid, p.296

17. Ibid., p.305

18. Ibid., ibid.

19. Adrian Roscoe, Uhuru's Fire: African Literature East to South (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p.136.

20. Frank Mkalawile Chipasula (ed.), When My Brothers Come Home: Poems from Central and Southern Africa (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1985), p.54.

21. Ibid., ibid.