

4/4/6/1/29

# AFRICA WATCH

## FUND FOR FREE EXPRESSION

### **WRITERS AND HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN AFRICA**

*This paper was prepared for a conference held on November 10, 1991, organized by Africa Watch, in conjunction with the Fund for Free Expression and PEN American Center. The forum brought together writers from seven different countries, including Jack Mapanje, Ama Ata Aidoo and Njabulo Ndebele, to discuss the issue of the human rights abuses suffered by African writers. The writers addressed questions such as what penalties they have incurred for speaking out about social and political issues, how intolerant regimes stifle creativity and what the future holds for African writers.*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

As many African governments have sought to reinforce their hold on power by controlling the flow of information, writers have been the victims of a wide range of human rights violations. Some governments have tried to stifle creativity and suppress expression altogether. Others have attempted to mould the expression of writers, eliminating any critical elements by forcing them to tailor their works to conform with government ideology. Many governments have also tried to prevent the writer's voice from reaching his or her audience. To attain these ends, a diversity of means are used: physical abuse and psychological intimidation; prolonged detention without charge or trial; overt and subtle censorship; the co-option of writers; the deprivation of vital material needs and the fostering of an atmosphere that inhibits intellectual and cultural pursuits. This has forced many of Africa's most gifted writers to seek sanctuary abroad, thereby further impoverishing their country's cultural life. The fact that a staggering number of African writers have gone into exile elsewhere in Africa, or have left the continent altogether, inevitably has an impact on the writers left behind. While enabling some writers to express themselves freely, for many others, exile has been a lonely and sterile experience.

In the following pages, we provide a brief overview of the problems that confront writers in Africa. An extensive report will be published early next year. We welcome comments and suggestions. This paper deals principally with poets, novelists and playwrights. Reprisals against outspoken musicians and journalists will be dealt with separately in future publications.

---

**Africa Watch and the Fund for Free Expression are divisions of Human Rights Watch.**

485 Fifth Avenue  
 New York, NY 10017  
 (212) 972-8400 (tel)  
 (212) 972-0905 (fax)

1522 K St. NW, #910  
 Washington, DC 20001  
 (202) 371-6592 (tel)  
 (202) 371-0124 (fax)

90 Borough High St.  
 London, UK SE1 1LL  
 44 (71) 378 8008(tel)  
 44 (71) 378-8029 (fax)

## SECURITY LEGISLATION, TORTURE, DETENTION AND BANISHMENT

Throughout Africa, many writers have been tortured, detained and subjected to intimidation. Governments have devised stringent security laws which grant unlimited powers to security agencies and to the police to detain without charge or trial, to search premises without search warrants and to seize personal belongings. In the majority of these laws, the definition of "subversive" literature or that which "constitutes a danger to the security of the state or the public order" is so embracingly inclusive that almost anything can be banned or seized. As a result, many writers are obliged to write under the psychological burden of knowing that the offense of "subversion" encompasses anything which contradicts the government's official version of the truth.

One of Somalia's best known poets and playwrights and a chief architect of the written Somali script, Mohamed Ibrahim "Hadrawi" was an early victim of the former regime of Mohamed Siad Barre. A collection of poems, *Knowledge and Understanding*, critical of government policies and leadership, led to his first "warning." Later, his play, *Sadness*, was found politically unacceptable and banned. Then his contribution of poems to a national anthology of ballads was declared "too controversial" for the government. In November 1978, he was banished to a remote village far from Mogadishu, the capital, where he was then living and teaching at the University. He was never officially charged with a crime. In an interview with Africa Watch in 1990, he commented on the government's determination to discourage him from writing during five and a half years of internal exile.

I lived in a room in the house of a local district commissioner who had instructions to make sure that I was not given a pen or paper. I was forbidden to receive any reading material. I was even told that I could not have a lamp in order to discourage me from reading and writing. I was not allowed to have any contact with people except the man whose house I lived in.

Zairian playwright Tandundu E.A. Bisikisi became a political prisoner at the age of twenty-two. In his 1976 play *L'Aller et le Retour ou la Mort de L'Universite (Forward and Back, or the Death of the University)*, he denounced the nationalization and the politicization of the University by General Mobutu. The play ended with the words, "the university is dead, long live the Republic! The Republic is dead, long live the President! Long live the President!" This was his crime. The play was immediately banned and all copies were seized. In 1977 armed commandos detained him at Lumumbashi University campus. He was beaten up and imprisoned in the Centre National de Documentation (CND), Mobutu's secret cells, and suspended from the university for five months. Only days later did he learn that he was accused of "political subversion and threatening the security of the state."

A year later the events repeated themselves -- only this time with more violence. His play, *Quand les Afriques s'affrontent, (When the Africas Clash)* much more critical of the Mobutu regime, was published without seeking permission from the secret police. It was banned and all copies seized, and in December 1977 he was arrested and imprisoned on charges of "political subversion and breach of state security." After seven months of detention in conditions where prisoners died of torture and starvation, he was exiled to his home village. He was released months later and left Zaire for exile in France.

The South African Suppression of Communism Act, repealed only in June 1991, provided for the banning of persons. The Act prohibited the reading, reproduction, printing, publication or dissemination of any speech, utterance, writing or statement made or produced by banned persons. Forty-six authors have been banned in the past 25 years, including the poet and journalist Don Mattera. Mattera was served with a five year banning order in 1973 for his politically charged writing. During political rallies, he recited his poetry which predominantly

reflects the violent politics of South Africa in the 1960s. In 1978 the banning order was renewed for a further five years and only lifted in May 1982. Under the terms of the banning order, his career as a journalist was strictly curtailed and he could only work as a sub-editor. He was not allowed to publish in South Africa or to send his work abroad for publication. His spoken words and opinions could not be quoted by others. His private life was circumscribed by police controls, and he was forbidden to attend meetings. He described the effect of these restrictions to *Index on Censorship*:

And so I moved into this lonely world, the world of the forgotten, the world of the twilight people.. and you die. I died. It was a heavy dying. And I stopped writing. And I refused to write. I couldn't see the purpose of writing again.

It was only in the late 1970s with the help of the South African and international literary community, who persuaded him to resume his writing, that his work survived suppression and became an important part of resistance literature.

On September 25, 1987, Malawian police arrested Jack Mapanje, the country's best-known poet. He was finally released on May 11, 1991. During the three and a half years of his detention, he was held at Mikuyu Prison near Zomba in southern Malawi. He was never charged and the authorities gave no explanations for his arrest and detention. It is believed that the government was nervous about Mapanje's plans to bring out a new collection of poems, provisionally entitled *Out of Bounds*, and about an invitation for him to take up the post of writer-in-residence at the University of Zimbabwe. The government presumably feared that, from the safety of Harare, Mapanje would feel less constrained about openly criticizing policies and leadership in Malawi. In addition to being a published poet of international reputation, Mapanje is a respected theoretical linguist. He was chairman of the Linguistics Association of the countries of the Southern African Development Coordination Conference. He has edited two anthologies of African poetry, broadcast for the BBC and acted as judge in BBC and Commonwealth poetry competitions. In June 1988, he was the winner of the Poetry International Award in Rotterdam; the award was collected on his behalf by Wole Soyinka.

The Angolan playwright Fernando Costa Andrade was arrested on December 21, 1982. Four months earlier he had been elected as Secretary-General of the Union of Angolan Journalists. His six-month detention was a result of a play satirizing aspects of Angola's government and calling for a new Central Committee of its ruling party, the Movimento Popular de Libertacao de Angola (MPLA). Initially, the play was accepted. But in mid-December 1982, he announced that disciplinary measures were being taken to correct the errors of MPLA members who had made "incorrect use of their right to criticize" and who had not been observing "the principles of democratic centralism." Two of the actors were arrested at the same time and a third shortly afterwards, but were released a month later.

The Sudanese poet and teacher, Mahjoub Sherif, 42, is known as "The People's Poet," and is renowned for his poems that reflect the struggle for freedom and democracy in Sudan. Writing in colloquial Sudanese Arabic and in an accessible style, he treats various themes - politics, everyday life, stories for children - that relate to the experiences of ordinary people. Mahjoub has published two collections: *Songs for Love and Revolution* and *Children and Soldiers*. After being detained on three previous occasions, he was arrested on September 20, 1989. It is believed that his arrest resulted from both his affiliation with the Sudan Communist Party and his highly politicized poetry. In his poem *Leave me handcuffed*, he wrote:

Leave me handcuffed in your prisons,  
forget me detained in your cells,  
for I fight for a better future,

I fight for our children who will come  
and these marvelous people  
I fight for a human life <sup>1</sup>

Mahjoub Sherif remains in detention in a prison in Port Sudan.

The suppression of politically significant forms of cultural expression in Africa has its roots in the colonial past. Songs, poetry, books, plays and dances that were deemed critical of colonial structures were frequently banned and the artists and composers jailed. In Kenya, just before the First World War, Me Katilili, leader of the Giriama resistance to British rule, was arrested and detained. The songs generated by her movement protested against forced labor and military recruitment and called upon foreigners to leave Kenya. Many Giriama youth were arrested for singing these songs. In what was then Rhodesia, the white government of Ian Smith was particularly vigilant against criticism of the existing political order. In an interview with Africa Watch in Harare in October 1991, Solomon Mutswairo, currently at the University of Zimbabwe, explained the banning in 1968 of his book, *Feso*, written in Shona.

In 1957 my book *Feso* was published, the first novel by a black writer in the country and the first novel in Shona. It was published by Oxford University Press in association with the Rhodesia Literature Bureau. In fact, I had written the book in 1945, but it was not published until much later. I wrote it while studying at Adams College in Natal. I decided to write in Shona in protest against the fact that we were forced to study in English and Zulu and seeing that there were no novels written in Shona. The book was prescribed for the use of schools by what was then called the Ministry of Native Education. However, before its publication, the entire first chapter was deleted. It took the government to task over the Land Apportionment Act which had deprived blacks of the best lands in the country. This was considered too "political."

I did not expect any more trouble. But trouble was to come. I had grown up under a repressive regime that was mindful of what was then called the "color bar" and which had discriminated against us because of our color. I talked about that in a poem in the book. In this poem, I present a lamentation of an unnamed old man, lamenting over the execution of his relatives by a cruel chief, Pfumojena, which means "white spear." The poem was interpreted in a political context and subsequently cited in gatherings. The government became alarmed and asked the Rhodesia Literature Bureau to investigate. In 1968, the book was finally banned and those students sitting for their exams could not answer questions about the book. I was out of the country at the time and did not return until after independence, but they went to intimidate my wife and my father.

#### **THE LIMITS OF TOLERANCE: OFFICIAL CENSORSHIP**

Official censorship in the form of publications control has been an effective method of regulating the availability and distribution of literature. Publications control usually entails a publications act, whereby a government appointed control board identifies certain norms to which books, articles, play-scripts and songs are subject. Until the recent changes, the members of the Censorship Commission in the People's Republic of Congo were nominated from among Party militants and were chosen on the sole criterion of active militancy and "revolutionary"

---

<sup>1</sup> Mahjoub's work has not been published in English. This is an unofficial translation by Africa Watch .

involvement. Regular meetings were held in Brazzaville, under the sponsorship of the Congolese Labor Party, to scrutinize the press, literature and audiovisual productions whether national or international.

In Malawi, all publications require the prior approval of the censorship board. The 1968 Censorship and Control of Entertainment Act, governs films, stage plays, statues, pictures, records and all published material. In the first seven and a half years of its existence, the Censorship Board, set up in 1968, banned over 840 books, more than 100 periodicals and 16 films. Even when books are not officially banned, the government can inhibit their circulation. Jack Mapanje's *Of Chameleons and Gods*, a collection of poems critically depicting everyday life in Malawi, was withdrawn from circulation. *Of Chameleons and Gods* was neither officially proscribed, nor officially cleared for sale. Book shops were not allowed to display it, but no one could be prosecuted for possessing a copy. It is also believed that the Special Branch of the police had bought all fifty copies left in the Malawi University Bookshop and thrown them into pit latrines. The book was later officially declared "unsuitable" for education. Yet the reasons for this remain unknown. A letter from the Ministry of Education and Culture, dated June 1985, simply stated:

....*Of Chameleons and Gods*, a collection of poems by Jack Mapanje, has been declared an unsuitable book for schools and colleges in the country. And copies of the collection should be withdrawn from use in our schools and colleges without delay.

In South Africa 38,813 books have been banned in the last 31 years. The 1962 Publications and Entertainment Act, provides for a government appointed board which still consists solely of white Afrikaners - hardly a representative group. A publication is banned if it is considered "undesirable." Outside the field of indecency, obscenity, blasphemy, it can be undesirable if it "brings any section of the republic into ridicule or contempt" or "if it is harmful to the relations between any sections of the inhabitants of the republic" or "if it is prejudicial to the safety of the state, the general welfare or the peace and good order." The act applies not only to newspapers, but to books, periodicals, pamphlets, prints, photographs or engravings; carvings, statues and models; and records or other forms of reproduction.

The control system under the Publications Act has been successful owing largely to the state's ability to co-opt enough people to enforce the law. From 1984 to 1990, the state sector was responsible for 95% of the submissions to the Director of Publications, requesting to have books declared "indecent." Booksellers, publishers and librarians either cooperated or were left unsure what to expect, fuelling the temptation to simply avoid ordering "suspect" titles.

The absurdity of the appeal system, provided for in the Publications Act, is demonstrated by the banning of a collection of poems by Oswald Mtsali, *Fireflames*, describing life under apartheid. Mtsali refused to appeal the banning, on the basis that it would lend credibility to the system. The Director of Publications himself consequently appealed the decision of his own board. He argued that the book contained sufficient literary merit to justify publication and contested its ban under the section of the act prohibiting material harmful to state security. The Committee agreed that it did not pose a danger to state security. Instead, they banned it under the provision prohibiting material harmful to relations between groups of the population.

Rigorous censorship laws enable governments to keep writers under a tight rein. This grip is reinforced by the direct or indirect supervision of the activities of writers' associations. In the Congo, the Writers' Union and the Congolese Bureau des Droits d'Auteur (Copyright) were directly controlled by the government. In a letter to Africa Watch, Cameroonian professor Ambroise Kom, explained how government interference paralyzed the Cameroonian Association

of Writers and Poets (APEC, l'Association des Poètes et Ecrivains Camerounais) founded by the writer René Philombe:

The government, having realized the potential impact of such an institution, has always sought to control it through its directors. Philombe himself has been subject to numerous pressures. When the government eventually realized that he could not be easily corrupted, it persuaded citizens who were more sympathetic to its cause to control the running of APEC. Internal conflicts eventually rendered APEC a moribund body, to the benefit of its directors, no doubt. The role of APEC was to encourage young writers, to facilitate publications and promote the exchange and dissemination of ideas. APEC owned a journal *Le Cameroun Littéraire* and used to organize colloquiums and literary evenings.

The Zairian playwright Mobyem Mikanza, the co-founder of the Union of Zairian Writers (UEZA, Union des Ecrivains du Zaïre) in 1972, described in a letter to Africa Watch how the government limited the activities of Zaïre's cultural associations by depriving them of political autonomy and circumscribing their cultural domain:

Artists of different disciplines formed cultural associations (for example UEZA, the Union of Zairian Writers and FENATH, the National Federation of Theatres) which were initially intended as artists' unions. The regime established a single union UNTZA (the Zairian Workers' Union) strictly confining the activities of cultural associations to the artistic aspects and not to making claims [against the government]. In order to gain a greater control of the activities of these associations, the regime infiltrated them, sending representatives to the elections of the directors and ensuring that artists who were corrupt or in complete support of the government were elected.

In the face of stringent official censorship and the harsh penalties meted out to fellow writers who have tested the limits of official tolerance, many writers are afraid to say anything which might offend the government. The result is to avoid sensitive political issues. Moreover, the unpredictable and often contradictory behavior of governments leaves writers unsure of what constitutes an offense and encourages them to steer clear of politics altogether, resulting in an extraordinary degree of self-censorship. The extent of self-censorship is difficult to monitor, but has been commented on by a number of African writers in their publications, as well as in interviews and correspondence with Africa Watch.

In a letter to Africa Watch, the Sierra Leonean playwright Frederick Bobor James traced the origins of self-censorship in his country.

In 1979 censorship was evoked on theatrical plays in Sierra Leone owing to a play *Poyoton Wahala* written and directed by John Kolosa Kargbo who is now in self-exile in Nigeria. The evocation of the censorship law in 1979 put out the fire of [the] theater movement that was going strong in the country, particularly the capital city, Freetown. It also affected the creativity of playwrights. From that time on playwrights wrote what was palatable for the government and not what was palatable for their audiences. Our plays were soon full of domestic gossips. We shied away from the economic and political realities that were confronting the mass of our people.

The crippling effects of self-censorship remain even when official censorship laws are repealed and writers are, in theory, free to express their views. In Guinea, for example, drastic official censorship ended in 1984 after the death of Sekou Touré and the seizure of power by

Guinea's present military government, the Committee for National Redress led by General Lansana Conté. In a telephone interview with Africa Watch, the Guinean novelist Alioum Fantouré stressed that Guineans are still recovering from 26 years of being inculcated with the notion that survival requires passivity. He added that writers have yet to free themselves from a deep-seated tradition of self-censorship.

### **SUBVERTING THE CENSOR: ORAL POETRY**

Oral poetry is popular in Africa not only because it is a traditional artform but also because it is less susceptible to censorship and more accessible to the majority of people who are illiterate. Governments have consistently interfered with the means through which oral poetry reaches the population. Radio is an important mode of communication for poets and singers alike, especially in rural areas. Yet, radio stations are predominantly government controlled and only that literature which is "acceptable" will be broadcast.

The most effective way of suppressing oral poets is by detaining them -- effectively silencing them. South African poet Mzwake Mbuli, most famous for his performances at political rallies, is known as "the tall man" among security police in South Africa. He was first detained in 1988 for the purposes of interrogation and only released after 176 days. He was denied visitors, access to lawyers, interaction with other prisoners, reading material and study rights. In 1988 his first work, *Change is Pain*, was released on cassette, then banned. The Director of Publications stated:

This cassette with its stirring music and dramatic presentation will have great influence among revolutionary groups in the Republic of South Africa and at mass gatherings as well.

Oral poetry and dancing have also been used to propagate government ideology. In Malawi, for example, President Banda makes extensive use of pseudo-traditional rituals at all his public appearances, using women dancers, praise singers and poets. But where the traditional praise poet had license to criticize the chief, the modern equivalents merely pay homage to leaders.

### **THE HELLHOLE OF COMPROMISE: THE CO-OPTING OF WRITERS**

I will not clean the poem to impress the tyrant  
I will not bend my verses into the bow of a praise song.

--Frank Mkalawile Chipasula, Malawian poet currently in exile in the US.

Many governments have taken measures to ensure political conformity by offering economic and political rewards to those writers whose works comply with the official version of reality and promote the government's political agenda.

In Togo, since 1980, an official literature has emerged as the result of literary competitions in which the government invites writers to address specific subjects. The "Prix Eyadéma" was bestowed on the author who was judged to have displayed the greatest loyalty to the republic, which was interpreted as being synonymous with loyalty to Eyadéma himself. The contest prompted several works which eulogized Eyadéma, identifying him as the "Father of the Nation", the "Guide of the revolution", furthering the political myths that underlay the extraordinary personality cult fostered by Eyadéma. Much modern Togolese poetry is steeped in the country's official rhetoric and playwrights have frequently sought patronage from the government to stage plays which deify the head of state.

In 1987, the government commissioned the publication of a two-volume *Littérature Togolaise*. It was carefully supervised by the authorities to the extent that the collection's bibliography scrupulously omits any publications deemed politically unacceptable to the regime in power. Dissident writers such as Yves Emmanuel Dogbé are systematically overlooked. In their review of the collection, critics Guy Midiohouan and Camille Amouro observed:

One has the impression that each of the contributors to this collection of essays is terribly alone and struggling to cope with an oppressive reality, that *La Littérature Togolaise* is actually a fitting monument to the culture of silence, fear and renunciation that cannot speak its own name.<sup>2</sup>

In Cameroon, annual literary competitions, organized by Radio Cameroon, the government-controlled radio, have spawned novels in defense and praise of President Paul Biya. Etoundi Mballa, who is also a journalist for the government controlled *Cameroon Tribune*, was nominated "writer of the year" in 1987 for his novel *Une Vie à L'envers (An Upside -Down Life)* which was published by the state-owned publishing house SOPECAM. The novel was given a spectacular official publicity campaign and lauded by both the *Cameroonian Tribune* and Radio Cameroon. In an essay for the journal *Research in African Literatures*, Ambroise Kom, a professor at the University of Yaoundé remarked:

*Une Vie* became part of a country-wide project to legitimize the established social, political, and cultural order in Cameroon. Following the example of Balita, the principal character in the story, Etoundi-Mballa suggests that the reader/citizen must refrain from thinking and questioning...the author is inviting his reader to be indulgent toward the tyrant, who, according to him, "is trying his best to make a certain plan of action succeed."

In April 1988, Elle-Elijah Etian, then a high ranking civil servant of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote a play entitled *Allah Ouakbar ou la main de Dieu (God is Great or the hand of God)* In this work, the author compares President Biya to the Biblical Moses and condemns his uncooperative compatriots who would dare to challenge the established power. He writes:

Yes, all those who disobey the law, the authority, and the social programme outlined by the President of the Republic are rebels, por Dios, rebels, and just like criminals they will burn in the hell fire of Gehenna.

The author was subsequently promoted to the position of Cameroonian Ambassador to China.

## **MATERIAL DIFFICULTIES**

Writers in Africa have to contend with inadequate literary infrastructures, for example, the lack of libraries, publishing houses, bookshops, distributors and the cost of books which puts them beyond the reach of most people. In a letter to Africa Watch, the Sierra Leonean writer, Syl Cheney-Coker, detailed the situation in his country:

We have come away from the bad old days when [President] Stevens would send his thugs to smash printing presses and to beat up journalists; the playwrights Amadu Maddy and Sarif Easmon were detained and the journalist Ibrahim Taqi hanged, and College students flogged by APC [All Peoples Congress] bandits. The path chosen by his successor [President Momoh] is more sinister. They don't arrest anyone except in a few cases; or when the Minister of Information tried

---

<sup>2</sup> *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 22, NO.2.

to silence six newspapers. The method employed is to allow people the right to say what they want to say, while the regime goes on plundering, putting the cost of everything up so that books, magazines and journals from abroad have all disappeared from the streets. In a country where there is not a single literary magazine, a single publishing house, a national television, or even a decent bookshop, this is horror...The lack of a publishing house stifles creativity and dissent in the nation.

Even when local publishing opportunities exist, financial difficulties remain an impediment. In a telephone interview with Africa Watch, the Cameroonian playwright Bole Butake explained that the writer is often obliged to finance the publication of his or her works, and only occasionally will the publishing house subsidize the cost. In a recent interview with Africa Watch in Harare, Musaemura Zimunya, a Zimbabwean poet and Chairman of the Department of English at the University described what he called "the most farcical experience of my life" which took place during the August 1991 Book Fair in Harare.

I could not contain my joy when the President said that he had become a convert to the "don't tax books" campaign. But the security people were not amused. Someone tugged at my elbow and, to avoid a scene, I accompanied them out of the room. For half an hour I was grilled by four of them, asking why I had shouted so loudly. I explained that firstly, I was not shouting, but merely exuberating at the announcement, the way members of the Womens League ululate when the President says something that touches their hearts. Secondly, I said that as a writer and teacher, the expense of books had a direct effect on my life. Therefore, I was merely expressing my happiness at an announcement that lay so close to my heart. They got even more angry when I referred to the Womens League. After a long and futile interrogation, looking for a case that did not exist, they let me go. All this took place while, in another room, the President was officiating at a ceremony dedicated to books.

In many African countries the book is a rare and expensive commodity. Both poor economies and government policies have contributed to the general unavailability of books. In an article in *Index on Censorship*, Ludovic Ngatara explained the "book drought" in Tanzania. Before independence in 1961 and before the 1967 Arusha Declaration, several prominent publishers, including MacMillan and Oxford University Press had established a presence in the country. The Arusha Declaration introduced the ideological notion that most books published by foreign publishers were of an alien nature and propagated an alien culture. A national publishing house, Tanzania Publishing House, was formed and soon monopolized all publishing interests. Foreign companies were prohibited from importing much needed books, which, for economic reasons, were published outside the country. Furthermore, foreign publishers were prevented from publishing locally or replenishing their stocks of books printed overseas. The inadequate local printing services could not meet printing requirements. As a result of these publishing restrictions, for the last two decades, textbooks for schools, colleges and other institutions of learning have been scarce in Tanzania. In addition, the country has had to live with the almost complete absence of books for a general readership and the almost complete lack of scientific and professional books. Tanzania Publishing House has furthermore confined itself to publishing political books that accord with the government's ideology. Even these are published in extremely small editions and are not widely available.<sup>3</sup>

In Cameroon, crippling financial and bureaucratic obstacles have drastically curtailed independent theater activity. By the late 1980s, rental fees for the major theaters in Yaoundé had escalated to 400,000-600,000 CFA for a single performance. The Cultural Palace possesses

---

<sup>3</sup> See *Thirsting for Books*, Ludovick Ngatara, *Index on Censorship*, 4/89.

the most sophisticated theater equipment in the country but it is rarely used. The rental fee of 1.5 million francs ensures that it is used exclusively for government-sponsored performances. Furthermore, the French Cultural Center, the most commonly used theater in the country, now demands 125,000 CFA for the rental of space and facilities which used to be free.<sup>4</sup>

## THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

African governments have been particularly sensitive to the dissemination of writings and the performance of plays written in indigenous languages, which, given high illiteracy rates in Africa, are likely to reach wider audiences. The government of President Jomo Kenyatta banned Ngugi wa Thiong'o's play *Ngaahika Ndeenda (I will marry you when I want)*, which he co-authored with Ngugi wa Mirii. Wa Thiong'o was consequently detained without trial for nearly a year. The play was an attack on the injustices tolerated and perpetrated in post-independence Kenya. What made the play particularly offensive to the Kenyan authorities was that it was written in Kikuyu, making it accessible to a popular audience.

ChiTumbuka is the lingua franca in northern Malawi and parts of eastern Zambia. In Zambia which has eight national languages, ChiTumbuka is recognized as an official language and is spoken by a half million people out of a population of eight million.<sup>5</sup> But in Malawi with just one official language (Chichewa, President Hastings Banda's own mother tongue) ChiTumbuka is spoken by an estimated 2 million of the country's population of 9 million and yet the Banda regime banned the language in 1968, thereby extinguishing a strong Tumbuka literary tradition which dated as far back as the end of the 19th century. Until it was banned, ChiTumbuka had been a national language and the medium of instruction in schools in the north of the country. Many outlets had been created for literature written in Tumbuka, including a printing press at Livingstonia established by Scottish missionaries, the regional newspaper *Msimbi* and the national radio. The Malawian poet Lupenga Mphande, who is currently living in exile in the US, described to Africa Watch the destructive impact of the banning of Tumbuka on what had once been a flourishing literary culture. He said:

My first writing was in ChiTumbuka, and I remember reading poetry alongside famous Tumbuka poets like James Khongono Chavinda and Darson Chiumui at Embangweni Mission during the annual School Field Days organized specifically for the display of literary compositions in ChiTumbuka...And then darkness fell in 1968 when Hastings Banda banned ChiTumbuka, closed down the Livingstonia printing press, and decreed against the use of any other language in national media or official transactions apart from English and Chichewa, his own mother tongue. The government quickly tightened its stranglehold by establishing the Malawi Censorship Board in the same year which together with the Chichewa Board and the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation, effectively killed ChiTumbuka as a vehicle for the expression of popular literary and cultural forms to a wider audience. Thus, overnight, all that thriving Tumbuka literary culture was crashed and ground to ashes as bookshops in the north closed down when ChiTumbuka classics like *Kumsika Wa Vvawaka* and *Chau ncinonono* were taken off the shelves and ChiTumbuka was replaced by Chichewa as the medium of instruction in schools. Those of us who wrote in ChiTumbuka fell silent as we felt our throats being slit open so that we could no longer express ourselves in the language we know best: our mother tongue. But a people's fundamental and

---

<sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive account of culture and politics in Cameroon, see Richard Bjornson's *The African Quest for Freedom and Identity: Cameroonian Writing and the National Experience*, Indiana University Press, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> *Language in Zambia*, ed. Ohannessian and Kashoki, London International African Institute, 1978.

inalienable right cannot be trampled down forever and so the struggle continues.

## THE THEATER: THE DANGER OF ACCESSIBILITY

High illiteracy levels and insufficient educational structures have rendered the theater a valuable means of education and an important source of information. According to the Mozambican journalist and writer Mia Cuoto, theater is indispensable in Africa for the writer to reach his or her audience. In an interview given to *Index on Censorship* in 1990, he remarked:

... the writer must learn that he can't just use the book to communicate with his fellows. He's got to look for ways which are more compatible..with the oral tradition. Some of my stories were adapted for the stage for that reason because the theater going public is usually in sympathy with what is happening on stage. Theater in Mozambique is not a passive event. One of those stories which was adopted for stage *The Tale of the Two who Returned from the Dead*, a story which deals with various abuses in the government, generated a debate among the audience. In other words, it left the stage and went out into the public. In this way the writer is able to make an intervention in society.

Recognizing the potential impact of the theater, many governments have imposed stringent laws to hinder the performance of plays. In Kenya, Public Security regulations introduced by the British before independence have been maintained intact by post-independence governments so as to discourage public gatherings. The law prohibits a meeting of more than five people without a police license. Consequently theater groups in Kenya today have to be registered and each play requires a police license for public performance. Breach of this regulation would constitute an illegal public meeting. But even when theater groups have been granted a permit, the Kenyan government has not hesitated to revoke it. At the end of 1990, the government declared the play, *Shamba La Wanyama*, "too inflammatory" and immediately withdrew the group's license to perform. The play is an adaption of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

In Cameroon, prior censorship of plays was introduced in 1981. Directors have to submit play scripts to the Ministry of Information and Culture before they can obtain authorization to stage any public performance. This process involves laborious bureaucratic difficulties, which are further complicated by the policies of the government sponsored SOCADRA (Société Camerounaise pour les Droits d'Auteur) and by the soaring fees for the rental of theater space. SOCADRA was supposedly established to ensure that writers received royalties for the use of their works. The society demanded a substantial advance deposit before granting permission for a performance to take place. But this payment was often so high that in practice, performances lay beyond the financial reach of most playwrights. Moreover, it was usually the authors who were staging the plays and when they could afford the advance payment, only a fraction of this deposit would be returned.

## THE PAIN OF EXILE

Human rights abuses and government strategies to root out dissent and stifle creativity have forced many African writers to opt for exile. Others were forced to flee their countries for fear of their lives. In some cases exile has nurtured creativity, encouraging writers to write openly about the cruelties of their respective governments and to reveal the disparity between official rhetoric and reality. Other writers have found exile a lonely and sterile experience.

Guinea's most eminent writers were among the third of the country's population which fled the country during the rule of Sekou Touré. The repressive atmosphere and the dire

economic situation made it impossible to survive as a writer. The 1960s saw the departure of Camara Laye, Alioum Fantouré, William Sassine and Tierno Monenembo. Camara Laye went into exile in Senegal in 1965. In an interview in Dakar just before his death in February 1980, he explained why he had left Guinea.

I was not thrown out, but left because a writer cannot work where there is no freedom of expression. So in 1964 I played the *malade imaginaire* (feigning illness) and said I was going to Paris for treatment. Instead, I came to Dakar and found friends from Paris. I'm not saying the Senegal regime is better or worse than the Guinean. It is just easier here for me to create. There, I had no books to read, nobody to argue with...I started a book straight away on my arrival here. I had to purify myself. I talked about nothing else...I had to get Guinea out of my system.<sup>6</sup>

When Guinea's present military government, the CMRN, seized power in a bloodless coup on April 3, 1984, it promised to respect freedom of expression and other aspects of human rights. But those exiled writers who have returned to Guinea since 1984 have had to live with the discrepancy between the government's promises and its practices. In a recent letter to Africa Watch, novelist Tierno Monenembo, who has lived in exile for 22 years, explained his reluctance to return to Guinea:

If today I am authorized to return to Guinea, there is no guarantee that I would be able to write and speak freely. My friend William Sassine who decided to return is constantly suffering administrative difficulties, having his manuscripts confiscated, receiving aggressive threats, being prevented from participating in international conferences, prevented from pursuing his career as a maths teacher when it is widely known that the country lacks teachers. As for the dramatist Ahmed Tidjane Cissé, he found himself in detention for a week in May 1990 for having participated in a public debate. He was expelled from the country on his release from prison. For all these reasons, I continue to live in exile.

In the past three decades, numerous writers have left South Africa. During the 1960s the critical situation arising from the declaration of a state of emergency and the increasingly elaborate apartheid laws prompted many writers to leave. But some writers could not endure exile. Ezekiel Mphahlele returned in 1980, after 20 years in exile, despite the continuing existence of apartheid laws. In an interview, he explained why:

In a sense my homecoming was another way of dealing with impotent anger. It was also a way of extricating myself from twenty years of exile, for exile is compromise. Indeed exile had become for me a ghetto of the mind. My return to Africa was a way of dealing with the concrete reality of blackness in South Africa rather than with the phantoms and echoes that attend exile.<sup>7</sup>

Even after extensive reforms in 1990, other writers have found it difficult to return. The South African government banished poet Dennis Brutus in 1966. Brutus was banned in 1961, arrested in 1963, imprisoned in 1964 on Robbin Island, and released in 1965 - for criticizing apartheid. He was then placed under house arrest, forbidden to receive visitors and was not allowed to write poetry. In 1991, after 25 years of exile, Brutus hoped to return, but, as he told Africa Watch, the South African government only granted him a two-month tourist visa.

---

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Denis Herstein: "Camara Laye - Involuntary Exile", in *They Shoot Writers, Don't They?* Edited by George Theiner, Faber and Faber, London and Boston, 1984.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Ursula Barnett's *A Vision of Order*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1983.

For some writers, the experience of exile has meant a severance of all ties with their homeland. Breyten Breytenbach left South Africa in 1960. The government banned his often critical books and condemned him for marrying a "non-white" Vietnamese woman. In 1975 he returned clandestinely to South Africa and was imprisoned for seven years for his anti-apartheid political activities. Upon his release, Breytenbach went into exile in France where he has remained ever since. In a recent article in *Index on Censorship* he said:

I am no longer a South African. For me the door is closed.

## CONCLUSION

The examples cited above illustrate some of the constraints that writers face, including physical abuse, psychological intimidation, the denial of political freedoms and the deprivation of the basic material and intellectual conditions that allow a nation to treasure its cultural heritage and which encourage the emergence of future generations of writers, playwrights, poets and songwriters. The intense hostility of governments towards critical writers attests to the fear that writers have a substantial impact on society, giving voice to the grievances of the wider community, providing solace to fractured communities deliberately starved of information, playing a vital role in heightening political awareness and encouraging critical debate.

Paradoxically, the elaborate, repressive apparatus of the state has often stimulated creativity by compelling writers to develop subtle and imaginative ways of bypassing censorship and thereby eluding government reprisals. In a paper delivered at a conference in Stockholm in 1986 entitled "Censoring the African Poem: Personal Reflections", Jack Mapanje expressed amusement at the idea that the Malawi Censorship Board may have actually improved his poems. In the most adverse conditions, many African writers have emerged as key figures criticizing oppressive regimes and promoting respect for human rights.

*Africa Watch is a non-governmental organization created in May 1988 to monitor human rights practices in Africa and to promote respect for internationally recognized standards. William Carmichael is the chair and Alice Brown is Vice-Chair. Its Executive Director is Rakiya Omaar; its Associate Director is Alex de Waal; Janet Fleischman and Karen Sorensen are Research Associates; Lindsey Ashworth and Liesl Fichardt are Interns; Nicola Jefferson is a Sandler Fellow and Ben Penglase and Urmi Shah are Associates.*

*The Fund for Free Expression was created in 1975 to monitor and combat censorship around the world and in the United States. The Chair is Roland Algrant; Vice-Chairs Aryeh Neier and Robert Wedgeworth; Gara LaMarche is Executive Director; Lydia Lobenthal is an Associate.*

*Africa Watch and the Fund for Free Expression are divisions of Human Rights Watch, an organization that also comprises Americas Watch, Asia Watch, Helsinki Watch and Middle East Watch. The Chair is Robert L. Bernstein and the Vice-Chair is Adrian W. DeWind. Aryeh Neier is Executive Director, the Deputy Director is Kenneth Roth, Holly Burkhalter is Washington Director, and Susan Osnos is Press Director.*

*This paper was researched and written by Lindsey Ashworth and Liesl Fichardt.*

*For more information, contact:  
Lindsey Ashworth (212) 972-8400 (o)*