

Jack Mapanje

(25 March 1944 - )

James Gibbs

Bristol

**Books:**

*Of Chameleons and Gods* (London: Heinemann, 1981);

*The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* (London: Heinemann, 1993) <sup>6</sup>

**Other:**

*Summer Fires: Poetry of Africa*, edited by Mapanje with Angus

Calder and Cosmo Pieterse (London: Heinemann, 1983);

*Oral Poetry from Africa*, edited by Mapanje with Landeg White

(London: Longmans 1983);

*Akoma Akagonera*, edited by Enoch Timpunza-Mvula (Limbe: Popular

Publications, 1985), contains five poems by Mapanje <sup>7</sup>

**Selected Periodical Publications - Uncollected:**

"The Place of Oral Literature in Literature", *Kalulu*

(Zomba), 1, 1 (1976), 5-14;

"Censoring the African Poem", *Criticism and Ideology: Second*

*African Writers' Conference, Stockholm 1986*, edited by Kirsten  
Holst Petersen) (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of  
African <sup>Studies</sup> ~~Affairs~~, 1988, 8): 104-111.

All Jack Mapanje's poetry grows in stature when placed in the Malawian context from which most of it springs, but the best of it is so emotionally charged that it can be appreciated with a minimal <sup>understanding</sup> ~~appreciation~~ of the circumstances in which it was produced. Through his verse he pushes back the frontiers of oral poetry; he engages in conversation in a country where the freedom of speech is strictly curtailed, and asks questions in a situation in which unquestioning silence on a whole range of issues is insisted on. For years Mapanje walked a perilous path, trying out different voices, testing his vocation, neither courting danger for its own sake, nor allowing himself to make disreputable compromises. Eventually he fell foul of the repressive system and the result was a prolonged period in detention in one of the prisons in which Malawian "rebels" <sup>were</sup> ~~was~~ expected to "rot."

After more than three years of detention without being either charge or tried, Mapanje was released and able to leave the country of his birth. Not surprisingly, the poetry he has written since his release continues to draw on his prison experience and to be part of a dialogue with <sup>Malawi</sup> ~~the country~~. In the ~~paragraphs which follow I have set some of his verse and some of his~~

~~statements in a context provided by his own life and by developments in Malawi, and drawn attention to the distinctive qualities of his poetry.~~

~~This process will not, I hope, prove grimly reductionist,~~ for the poems as a whole continue to hold their own as verse, meticulously crafted, compressed, resonant, individual, deeply felt and profoundly moving. It is simply that many are densely allusive: they are, ~~as I have already suggested,~~ part of a dialogue and their meaning emerges from a knowledge of other parts of the conversation. The reader benefits by knowing, for example, about the machinery of repression which has been brought into being in Malawi, and about the terms and idioms in which the one-party state proclaims itself. The Malawian Head of State, the Life President Ngwazi Dr. H. Kamuzu Banda, constantly talks about the importance of "Peace and calm, law and order," and no public address is complete without reference to the four "cornerstones" of the Malawi Congress Party: loyalty, obedience, unity and discipline. Malawi is sold in tourist brochures as "The warm heart of Africa" and there are saving graces in the country which Mapanje cherishes: these include families and flowers, colleagues and schools.

Mapanje writes mostly in English and <sup>his poetry</sup> ~~as will be apparent from what has already been said,~~ requires close attention of his readers. But this does not mean that he fails to communicate with his fellow Malawians. His scholarly interest in existing oral forms, his adoption in poem after poem of a

conversational manner, tone and register - together with his publications in "the other national language", ChiChewa, mean that many bridges are built to readers and listeners. It is notoriously difficult to estimate the impact of a poet and one is initially sceptical that a Malawian poet writing mostly in English can make much of an impression, but the attention he has received from the agents of repression in Malawi tells a different story. In a country in which all channels of communication have for many years been rigidly controlled by a repressive government, the people listen attentively. ~~Mapanje's questions reverberate off the mountains and his images are mirrored in the lake.~~

John Alfred Clement ('Jack') Mapanje was born in Kadango Village, Mangochi District, Malawi; his mother, Victoria Mereresi Ziyabu, was Nyanja and his father Yao. His date of birth is taken to be 25 March 1944 but there is an element of arbitrariness about this: Mapanje has said "There were enough things to prove I was born around that time." After local primary schooling, he went to the Chikwawa Mission, and then to the celebrated Catholic Secondary School in Zomba. He became and remains a Catholic, and is deeply committed to education.

His passage through the educational system coincided with the last years of the colonial period, and he came to maturity as the country, for a time part of the Central African Federation, approached independence. Malawi became

independent on 6 July 1964, some four years after "The Year of Africa" which had seen the Tricolour and the Union Flag run down in many African countries. In September of the same year there was a "Cabinet Crisis" when six senior ministers challenged Hastings Banda, then merely Prime Minister, over the pace of Africanization<sup>z</sup>. The challenge failed, the "rebel ministers" fled and many suspected sympathizers were arrested. In February of the following year there were uprisings that were quickly put down. Mapanje's home-district of Mangochi, then still known as "Fort Johnston," was the scene of anti-Banda demonstrations.

In one area of political life, that of establishing the machinery of repression, Malawi moved as quickly as any newly independent nation. In 1965 Public Security Regulations were introduced which permitted detention without trial for a 28-day period for a wide range of perceived offenses relating to "the preservation of public security." In fact the 28-day temporary detention period, stipulated by the Regulations, was often disregarded - detainees were simply held - and reviews of cases, on which the Regulations also insisted, were rarely carried out. The Regulations equipped the authorities, and these included the Youth League and the Young Pioneers as well as the police and security forces, with the means of disposing of any who were considered "rebels."

An indication of Banda's intemperate and inhuman attitude to political opponents is indicated by his reference to detainees held at Dzeleka Prison which was built near Dowa. He told Parliament on 26 January 1965 that detainees would be kept "and they will rot", beaten from time to time by "additional warders".

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A variety of forms of torture were introduced to "knock sense into their heads" this has continued, and has been monitored, publicized and challenged by human rights organizations. Among Malawians the country's detention centres were sometimes referred to as "Chingwe's Hole" - a reference to a deep shaft-like pit on Zomba Plateau into which wrong-doers had sometimes been hurled in earlier times.

In 1966 a republican constitution was introduced which made the Malawi Congress Party dominant in a one-party state. Criticism of the Party became, as criticism of the Head of State already was, a "detention offence" and the mildest form of dissent could lead to arrest. Even keeping a close guard on one's tongue did not guarantee a quiet life since the climate of fear was used by ethnic factions, the ambitious, the envious, and <sup>the</sup> well-connected.

The position of authors was clarified by the 1968 Act which established the Malawi Censorship Board. The Board members, themselves potential victims of malicious gossip, established a list of banned books, partly based on South African prototypes, partly an attempt to second guess what the leadership, in

its infinite paranoia, might find objectionable. All texts for publication within the country had to be approved by the Board before being printed. Inevitably writers working within Malawi have devised various strategies to speak to their audiences "over the heads" of the censors. Equally inevitably, the public developed the habit of searching texts for coded messages.

The University of Malawi was established in 1967. The creation of this institution, one of the "dreams" which Banda had had while detained by the British in Gwelo during 1959/60, implied a commitment to principles of academic freedom and the unhindered pursuit of truth, which inevitably came into conflict with the machinery of repression already in place. Initially there were four constituent colleges. In the mid-sixties Mapanje did a Diploma in Education at one of these, Soche Hill, for which he earned a distinction, and then, from 1967 to 1969, taught at Mtendere Secondary School. In that time he broadened his knowledge of his homeland and, frustrated by the limitations of the material available in the school, wrote some seventy-five poems in ChiChewa. The only copy of this collection has gone astray, and irritation at this experience, coupled perhaps with the prevailing climate about what constitutes "correct" ChiChewa, has discouraged Mapanje from writing more in that language. Some of the verses have since been rewritten from drafts and appear in Odi magazine, published in Zomba, or a collection edited by Enoch Timpunza-Mvula, Akoma Akagonera (1985). While in the teaching field, Mapanje was awarded a Malawi Government Scholarship to enable him to

do a degree at Chancellor College. Since he had already <sup>had</sup>~~done~~ a diploma in education, he went straight into the second year, and completed a BA, with distinction, in mid-1972.

One of the most important aspects of University life for him was undoubtedly the Writers' Group which brought together students and staff who were interested in creative writing to discuss one another's work. Mapanje made an impression as a productive member of the group, committed, like others, to "putting Malawian literature on the map."

In an interview with Lee Nichols recorded in August 1975, Mapanje spoke about the abundance of poetry in Malawi, and about the importance of the laughter and smile of Africa. He said, "I started off writing for Malawi." His poems appeared in Writers' Group publications, such as *Expression* and *Odi*, and in a pioneering volume entitled *39 Poems from Malawi*.

The opening section of Mapanje's first collection of poems, *Of Chameleons and Gods* (1981), brings together poems written up to 1971. Through them can be felt the issues being excitedly debated by those interested in African literature during the sixties. The forms are varied and often experimental, and the sources of inspiration eclectic: the poet is still in the process of defining his role and "finding a voice." In these early verses the chameleon persona emerges, linking elements established in folklore about the chameleon

as 'teller of tales' and 'singer of songs' with those abilities for disguise for which the creature is well-known. Malawian writer and critic Steve Chimombo has examined this idea in some detail, and he has linked it with his critical assessment of Mapanje. Briefly, he regards Mapanje as capable of "profound, satisfying poetry like 'If Chiuta Were Man'" but considers he is too often led into producing "episodic, fragmentary, fleeting, topical pieces which cannot sustain analysis beyond the immediate event."

Although I disagree with Chimombo's critical assessment, he helpfully draws attention to some of the qualities of Mapanje's style in which repeated words and sounds make a distinctive impact and in which we are often taken aback by an unexpected expression. Chimombo allows his preference for myth-pervaded poetry too much rein, and fails to recognize the teasing quality in much of Mapanje's work. Indeed, the poet who begins to emerge for this first collection is recognizably the Mapanje with the mischievous smile and sidelong glance seen in a widely reproduced photograph. He is constantly testing out the limits of acceptability to those in power and, when he is not playing a cat and mouse game, he is sometimes a little like the elusive and enigmatic Cheshire Cat which could vanish leaving only a smile behind.

These qualities are combined with an occasional meditation on the responsibilities of the individual and with hinted at dangers. Already in the early published work there is the characteristic mingling of pertinent

questions with the apocalyptic in poems which are shaped with great care and constitute a deliberate reaching out to forge a new kind of orature. For example, "The New Platform Dances" - which first appeared in *39 Poems from Malawi* (1971), is deliberately conversational. It ~~would be~~<sup>is</sup> unwise to attempt to consider this poem as a political allegory, but it is helpful to see it in terms of broad developments taking place in the country.

As part of a staff development program<sup>g</sup>, Mapanje went, in 1972, to London to begin work on an M. Phil. at the University's Institute of Education. He combined course work with a thesis on *The Use of Traditional Literary Forms in Modern Malawian Writing in English*, in which he explored the predicament of the writer in Africa, and examined in considerable detail the complexities of the oral traditions which, he suggested, the contemporary writer should feel free to use. The thesis contained the following statement:

Writers are a threat to African leadership because having been published abroad they are usually given international recognition and hence international protection.

The assumption that international publication leads to protection that one can "usually" rely on suggests a dangerously inaccurate assessment of the situation.

From this period we have the six poems in the "Sketches from London" section of the 1981 volume. Several contain references to the image of "drinking water

from the sources" <sup>A</sup>ware of how much of his education had been in the traditions of England he recognized<sup>Z</sup> the advantages of studying in London, and, as a poet anxious to extend the range of the oral tradition, he was happy to make use of familiar expressions. If they were clichés so much the better; he could dust them down them while making contact with his audience. But, while recognizing<sup>Z</sup> the advantages of studying at "the source," he ~~is~~<sup>was</sup>, as one would expect, aware of the pollution ~~present~~<sup>there</sup> and familiar with other "fountain heads" of knowledge. However, ~~there is~~<sup>could be found</sup> no nostalgia in his glance homeward:

... Drinking water from the sources

We must turn back to the peripheral mosaics of home

Revealing the depth of their natural negatives.

Indeed the news was grim enough to prevent rose-tinted visions of family life at home. For example, there was a ~~Christmas~~ letter from "Little Florrie" who had become a Jehovah's Witness and was spending Christmas 1972 as a refugee in Mocambique. She wrote:

... Darling Brother, only God of Abraham

Knows how we escaped the petrol and matches

Yet we are all in good hands.

She was a victim, it seems, of the Young Pioneers unleashed by Banda against a religious group that refused to pay what was considered due deference to the symbols of nationhood. The tone of the poem may appear light, but the underlying pain is apparent.

Another poem from this period, "Travelling in London Tubes," contrasts the dust of the red, laterite roads of rural Malawi - dust which can be seen and to some extent guarded against, with the "subtle" dust of London, the grime which gets into "your nose/ eyes / lung<sup>S</sup>," and which one cannot avoid. This is Mapanje the observer, recording a difference, fixing his impression in words, and leaving the reader to draw conclusions.

On his return to Malawi from London, Mapanje began teaching English to students of agriculture at Bunda College, but he soon moved to Chancellor College, by this time on a purpose-built campus at Zomba where all the other University faculties had been brought together. Once again he became deeply involved in the life of the Writers' Group and with publishing activities within the Departments of English and of Education. His poems from this period are gathered together in *Of Chameleons and Gods* in the section entitled, in a phrase that can be easily deciphered, "Re-entering Chingwe's Hole."

Light is shed on his practice as a poet by a paper Mapanje delivered during December 1976 ~~as part of a series of staff/ student seminars in the Department of Human Behaviour at Chancellor College.~~ <sup>1415</sup> Entitled "The Art of Malawian Riddling," and <sup>between</sup> In it he established several links ~~established~~ riddling and writing. For example, he maintained that "the riddler effectively brings unlikely words together, like a poet..." For those reading between the lines

he made further relevant points about his own practice as a riddler-writer by arguing that riddlers assume an active, that is a thinking, audience, and that a riddle either contains or implies a question. <sup>This</sup> The view of the poet as riddler ~~which has emerged from the quick glance at this paper~~ should be set beside that which had already emerged of the poet as chameleon and Cheshire cat.

The Head of State was well aware of the advantages of "tradition" himself and, though ~~he~~ normally dressed in top hat and tails on formal occasions, he was often accompanied by ululating women, and he ensured that the crowds were entertained by "traditional dancers." He also made use of the so-called "traditional courts" set up during the colonial period to try minor cases. For example, in 1976 these courts, in which the accused had very few safeguards and in which hearsay was regarded as admissible evidence, were entrusted with an important treason trial: Muwalo Ngumayo, who had been Secretary General of the <sup>Malawi Congress</sup> Party, and Focus Martin Gwede, who had been the Head of the Special Branch, were charged with plotting to assassinate the Life President. Predictably a guilty verdict was returned.

~~in an essay published in 1987, I linked~~ <sup>T</sup>his conspiracy, which may have involved a series of murders in Chilobwe township and the detention of several lecturers and students from Chancellor College, <sup>can be linked</sup> with Mapanje's poem "We Wondered About the Mellow Peaches." ~~I suggested~~ <sup>can</sup> The poet as riddler ~~could~~ be

seen at work, <sup>employing</sup> and that, ~~on one level, the~~ allusions ~~seemed~~ to reflect upon a particularly disreputable event in Malawian history.

Mapanje, by this time married to Mercy and the father of two daughters, returned to London at the end of the seventies to begin a Ph.D. in Linguistics. He combined his demanding doctoral studies with ~~completing~~ work on two editorial projects: a collection entitled *Oral Literature from Africa*, edited with Lan White, ~~and published by Longman~~, and *Summer Fires: Poetry of Africa*, edited with Angus Calder and Cosmo Pieterse, ~~published by Heinemann~~.

In the first volume, designed for the school and college market, a selection of poetry from a wide variety of African sources was helpfully gathered under such headings as "Praise," "Pleasure," and "Protest and Satire." In view of Mapanje's scholarly interest in orature it is not surprising to find that his poems can be read aloud so well; they are "polished" and "effortless," ~~to take two adjectives from the "Introduction" I have just referred to,~~ but have a dense sub-text.

*Summer Fires*, the volume of poetry, grew out of the 1981 BBC Poetry Award for Africa, which apparently attracted some 3,000 entries from over 700 contributors. Mapanje, as a member of the Writers' Group and as Staff Advisor for various University publications, had long been a spotter and nurturer of talent, and these qualities emerged in this work. So too <sup>did</sup> ~~does~~ his interest in a wider poetic map: it <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ not surprising to find him acknowledging the

influence of Kofi Awoonor and Derek Walcott in his own poetry, or to find him drawing inspiration from events in South Africa and Mozambique.

The breadth of the intellectual and creative activities Mapanje was pursuing while in London was extraordinary, and it is very much to his credit that he was able to combine the study of linguistics and oral forms with the reading of African poetry and the composition of his own poems. There were domestic developments too, and, while in London, Mercy gave birth to their third child, a son.

During this second London period, some of the poetry he had written in Malawi found its way into print, and Heinemann agreed to publish ~~the~~ <sup>2</sup> volume of some forty-five poems he submitted, <sup>The book</sup> under the title *Of Chameleons and Gods*, <sup>was</sup> ~~they were~~ launched, he subsequently recalled, at the National Poetry Society, <sup>an</sup> ~~the~~ occasion <sup>of</sup> attended by "friends, a few critics, publishers, students of African literature, cynics and two informers of the Censorship Board."

After his return to Malawi in April 1983, Mapanje summarized his brief exile in "Another Fool's Day:"

"A Ph.D., three books, a baby-boy, three and half years -"

The poem goes on to incorporate the question he must have been asked often ("So, you decided to come back, eh?") and the need for caution - the full title concludes with "shush." His book of poems was not in the bookshops, but

some copies were circulating and students, for whom they were <sup>poems</sup> ~~not~~, could <sup>compulsory reading,</sup> obtain texts.

The Malawi he found was as dark as ever. ~~Shortly before~~ Malawian security forces had kidnapped Orton and Vera Chirwa, distinguished lawyers and prominent 'rebels', from neighbouring Zambia, <sup>g</sup> <sup>and</sup> during May, the Chirwas were tried before the Southern Regional Traditional Court; predictably they were found guilty and sentenced to death.

This was not particularly subtle, but Banda was able to claim that by using the "Traditional Court" he was ensuring that African patterns and traditions of justice were being recogni<sup>z</sup>ed. A different tactic was employed to eliminate, on 18 May 1983, Aaron Gadama, Dick Matenje, David Chiwarka and Twaibu Sangala - all ministers or distinguished political figures, whose bodies were found in a wrecked vehicle at Mwanza. The pretence that they had died in a car crash was, presumably, believed by some, but others soon picked up rumo<sup>r</sup>s about the number of gunshot wounds in each body and about the victims having been seen at the gates of Mikuyu Prison shortly before the "accident." In a letter quoted in News from Africa Watch <sup>of</sup> 20 September 198<sup>9</sup>, Mapanje wrote with reference to the assassination: "... it was so painful that I could not work or think for months."

Despite the emotional turmoil, Mapanje returned to teaching duties in Chancellor College, in a section known as the Department of Language and Literature. He now had a higher status than before and, being "grac'd with doctor's name," senior appointments were open to him. The extent of his following within the College became clear when, still in 1983, he delivered a lecture on a topic scarcely guaranteed to attract those who were not linguists, "Aspect and Tense in ChiYao, ChiChewa and English," that proved so popular it had to be transferred to a larger lecture hall.

Whatever the Life President, and others, sometimes referred to as the Tembo ~~exercised power~~ faction, who ~~manipulated the system~~, feared from the poet, there was no attempt to prevent him from communicating with students or from moving in and out of the country. His poems were still not on sale, but they had not been officially banned, and in 1984 he was able to attend a conference on "New Directions in African Writing" held in London. A few weeks later, he took a leading part in organising<sup>2</sup> a conference of Southern African linguists in Zomba.

The same official tolerance continued into 1985 and some way beyond: he became Head of Department, he again travelled outside the country - this time to judge the African section of the Commonwealth Poetry Prize<sup>2</sup> and, in March 1985, he attended the World Poetry Festival in Delhi. In 1986 he again judged the Commonwealth Poetry Prize - indeed he was Chairman of the jury - and he

attended another international poetry gathering, this time in Stockholm. He told friends he was keeping a low profile in Malawi so that he did not cause trouble for his wife and their children. But this did not mean he had stopped writing. Indeed, it seems as if 1983 to 1985 were as productive as any period; a slim volume of verse was coming into being and, in the meantime, some of it was being published outside the country. For example, *Index on Censorship* printed "The 1984 Martyrs' Day Prayer," "The Rise of the New Toadies," and "Seasoned Jacarandas."

The last is reflective, hints at possible threats and is described as "for Frank Chipasula." Chipasula, a fellow Malawian and a near contemporary, had cut short his undergraduate career and gone into exile where he had published a series of ~~swingeing~~<sup>ed</sup> poetic onslaughts on Banda's regime. This poem shows Mapanje at his bleakest, using nature imagery and pathetic fallacy to communicate his feelings.

During April 1986, Mapanje returned to Sweden to attend, with such fellow authors as Wole Soyinka, Kole Omotoso, Taban lo Liyong, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ama Ata Aidoo, the Second Stockholm Conference for African Writers. There he delivered a paper entitled "Censoring the African Poem: Personal Reflections" in which he ~~raised his head high above the parapet~~<sup>ed</sup> by describing the operation of the Malawian Censorship Board and their handling of his collection of poems. He spoke too of the "unprecedented development of indiscriminate censorship of African writing and

other cultural artifacts under the pretext of protecting African societies against the decadence of writers and artists" which had been seen during the previous twenty years. He suggested "that writers use as much subtlety and imagination to fight censorship as they have done to fight the injustice and exploitation of this world." And he added that he saw the struggle as particularly important because

The objective of most Censorship Boards is first and foremost to protect the censors from dismissal and to protect the oppression of the governments which establish them; censorship ultimately protects African leadership against truth.

In giving an account of his investigations into the fate of Of Chameleons <sup>and Gods</sup> in Malawi, he quoted in detail the reports of those who had read the poems for

the Censorship Board and the reasons why the volume had been withdrawn from circulation. It seems that withdrawal had been the policy adopted because formal banning was likely to attract too much attention: his was to be a slow martyrdom. He concluded the paper with a poem dated June 1985 and entitled "On Banning Of Chameleons and Gods." This responds to a judgement quoted in a letter from "a friend" who was working for one of the publishing companies in Malawi: the assessment was that certain <sup>of his</sup> poems "poke at wounds that are still raw in Malawian history." The poem concludes:

... Who does not

Know who pokes at whose nation's wounds raw?

& why should my poking at wounds matter more

Than your hacking at people's innocent necks?

No, for children's sake, unchain these truths;

Release the verse you've locked in our hearts!

The final note is unusually defiant, and uncharacteristically the poem ends with an exclamation mark. <sup>Ⓟ</sup> While at Stockholm, Mapanje was interviewed by John

Stotesbury, to whom he suggested that "Often oral performers can get away with very devastating commentary on society because their work evaporates after it has been recited." But his performance may have been noted for.

five months later, on the evening of 25 September 1987, Mapanje

was arrested. He was picked up at the Zomba Gymkhana Club and taken to his office at the University where, according to Amnesty International, copies of

his book and of his Stockholm paper on censorship were seized. He was then taken to his home, and the vigorous protests of his mother and of his son are incorporated into poems. There was, of course, nothing they could do to prevent him from being taken to Mikuyu under the 1965 Public Security Regulations. At the beginning of 1988 Amnesty International issued a briefing paper examining the possible reasons for the Security Officers' action against the background of internal Malawian politics and the changing patterns of relationships with other governments and with international organizations. There is evidence in his latest collection that Mapanje himself thinks his detention was "largely because of his controversial poems."

Mapanje was taken to Mikuyu Prison, where detainees were held in isolation or in one of four sections: A, B, D or New Building. Although Regulations existed to ensure a reasonable existence for <sup>Prisoners</sup> ~~the detainees~~, these provisions were constantly violated. For example, the warders forbade the possession of pen or paper, and the only books allowed in the prison were three copies of the Bible.

It will be recalled that in his first thesis, Mapanje had written about the international protection which might be enjoyed by writers, <sup>and, predictably,</sup> News of the poet's arrest and detention triggered international action both by individuals and organizations. For example, International PEN and *Index on Censorship* coordinated petitions, and the chair of PEN's Writers in Prison Committee, led

a demonstration which gathered in front of the Malawian High Commission in London. The international spotlight was focused on Mapanje again when, in June 1988, he won the Poetry International Award which was presented in Rotterdam. There was also increased interest when his name was among the fourteen selected for the Lillian Hellman and Dashiell Hammett Award which is administered by the Fund for Free Expression in New York.

This sporadic, high profile pressure was accompanied by the unrelenting efforts by friends, students of his poetry and ~~human rights~~<sup>g</sup> activists. Human Rights groups and individuals managed to get out some ~~news~~<sup>information</sup> about what was happening in the prison and <sup>news</sup> of Mapanje. For instance, in about July 1989, Father Patrick O'Malley, a teacher at Chancellor College, was able to drive Mapanje's wife and their children to the prison and the family was briefly reunited.

Towards the end of 19~~88~~<sup>89</sup> increased international pressure on the country's human rights<sup>g</sup> record led to a review of some detainees' cases. Those campaigning for reform found further encouragement after 23 February 1990 when Malawi became the thirty-ninth state to accede to the Organization of African Unity's "African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights." However, it was not until 10 May 1991, after three years seven months and sixteen days inside, that John Alfred Clement Mapanje "heard his naming named" and was

released. It is suggested that the donors of the aid on which Malawi had become increasingly dependent because of poor harvests during 1991-92,<sup>1991-92,</sup> began to make stronger representation to Banda's government. In his poem entitled "The Release," Mapanje quotes the Life President as saying that the timing was "To celebrate his official birthday." But these "tricks" have been tried before, and few take them seriously.

Soon after he regained his freedom, Mapanje travelled to York, where Ian White was instrumental in preparing a base for him and his family. At this time he was considerably better known than he had been before his detention, and invitations to speak, read his poems and attend<sup>a</sup> literary gatherings came in from many sides.

The problem of securing an income was approached in a variety of ways: for example, in 1991-92 he received a stipend from the Society for the Protection of Science and the Humanities, and during the first half of the 1992-93 academic year he held a Research Fellowship at Exeter College, Oxford, where important work was done in bringing the second collection of poems together. Subsequent employment included being Greater North International Writer in Residence, and in May 1993, the University of Leeds invited him to be a Visiting Professor for the following academic year.

During this post-prison period, Mapanje continued to write and to respond to events in Malawi. These events included the death in prison on 20 October 1992 of Orton Chirwa, <sup>and</sup> the reading out, on 8 March 1993, of a Lenten Letter signed by an Archbishop and five Catholic bishops. Though temperate and restrained in any other context, <sup>tho</sup> <sup>^</sup> it sounded a clear and dissonant note in Banda's Malawi. It seemed to indicate that open debate might be possible. ) 

Although under pressure from abroad to move towards a more open political system, Banda's government - and there were inevitably rumours <sup>of</sup> that the old man was being manipulated, seemed grimly determined to hang on as long as possible. Student demonstrators, encouraged to move onto the streets by the Bishops' Letter, were fired on by security forces.

Mapanje's poetry began to appear in European and American publications and it was possible for readers to find out what he had been writing since his first volume appeared. For example, in September 1992 three of prison poems appeared in *Stand*, two of them prompted by events at Mikuyu. The first concerned what happened some ten hours after Mapanje was "picked" from the Gymkhana Club in Zomba. Entitled, "The Streak Tease at Mikuyu Prison, 25 Sept. 1987," the poem is dedicated to Alec Pongweni, who had been a fellow student in London during the seventies. He and Mapanje had shared an interest in phonetics and, when relaxing, in "the structure of English pub vowels." It seems they had been together at a London pub when a striptease was performed, and it was the link between this and the humiliating strip search which <sup>poet</sup> <sup>^</sup> he had been subjected to

at Mikuyu that provides the way in to Mapanje's poem. It begins in characteristic "button-holing" style:

It was not like the striptease at the Birds' Nest

On London Street Paddington in the seventies

After an allusion to a streaker in Talbot Square, the poet has the audacity to suggest that

The streak-tease in Mikuyu Prison is an affair

More sportive.

Having established someone to talk to, the poet moves into an account, apparently urbane and relaxed, of a humiliating and terrifying experience. As he describes the process of undressing and "shoving" clothes into a "shroud-white bag," the realities of Malawian prison life seep through. A reference to handcuffs which "dig in" is followed by an allusion to the "four parliamentarians" who spent only one night at Mikuyu before being "released." Mapanje does not provide any details: he assumes that the listener who has followed his reference to Paddington and "the three-day week" will also know of the grotesque "motor accident" of May 1983 <sup>and</sup> ~~or~~ <sup>and</sup> will be alert enough to work out what sort of release comes in inverted commas.

The strip search continues - for dangerous items such as "Pencils & pens" — which, he adds matter-of-factly, "bring leg-irons & more handcuffs/ Here." Mapanje does not rage at the conditions in which he is kept; he starts chatting and the details slip out, apparently casually and all the more

frightening for that. The Mapanje smile remains and, on the surface, the tone of the poem is mostly light; however, the smile conceals gritted teeth and the information imparted is horrifying. He had been "picked up" and carried into a nightmare, all the more ~~horrifying~~ <sup>terrifying</sup> because some of the habits of the old world remain. For example, the bureaucratic procedures are meticulously followed and the loose change in the detainee's pocket is carefully put aside - for "nobody wants the reputation of stealing / Prisoner's change." The values of the wardens are clear: take away a man's freedom without trial, yes; imprison him in terrible conditions, by all means, but don't purloin his loose change.

The bizarre, nightmare world into which he has been pitched also emerges from the next incident he records. The poet refers to "pleading blisters on that bad / Foot," presumably a reference to a foot which was operated on when he was a student, but this hint of criticism only brings "another string of ministers and rebels ... who have followed these rules." Such is the experience in Malawi - and it is no doubt repeated in other totalitarian states: prison officers casually impart information which human rights organisations spend months trying to obtain - and which poets may have felt intuitively. The wardens have done the dirty work for a brutal regime, they have despatched some of those who were great powers in the land: *they have one among the best informed in the country.*

Mapanje was fitted out with a prison uniform: he writes: "shroud-white pocketless/ Gown and pocketless shorts (they call them foya) /Wrap that shivering midnight body." The transformation is finished and the reduction of the casual drinker at the Gymkhana Club bar is more or less complete: there is a kind of dying - the clothes are "shroud-white," there is no longer anywhere to hide, conceal or keep anything - the garments are "pocketless." ~~and~~ The linguist, <sup>still</sup> mentally alert enough to note a particular prison usage, one which might have interested Alec Pongweni, "'(they call them foya)," is reduced to a "shivering midnight body." After brief questioning, that "body" then "staggers <sup>#</sup> onto/ The cracked cold cement floor of Mikuyu prison." With this poem the fusion between the poet and his concern with tyranny and oppression in his native land is complete: the poet is confident that his experience can carry the burden of the poet as national commentator. The strength of the verse comes from the fact that, though speaking directly, Mapanje has not cast off the habits of a life <sup>(</sup>time's apprenticeship. He has not, for example, started to declaim or denounce; he has not begun to search mythology for inspiration. Instead he has retained the same convivial persona; he is the same companionable Jack even though he knows how serious matters are. And it works - the poem is both profoundly moving and <sup>deeply</sup> shocking.

Cap P

The second poem Mapanje chose to have published in Stand was "Scrubbing the Furious Walls of Mikuyu Prison." The most striking word in this title is "furious" and as the poem unfolds the reader is again and again surprised by

the energy and even rage of the adjectives: there are references to "impetuous / scratches," "vicious / red marks," "insolent scratches," and "barbarous squiggles." Startling collocations are a feature Mapanje had drawn attention to in riddles and had incorporated into his own work from the seventies. The violence of the adjectives makes the poem more outspoken, more obviously angry than some of his others, but in many respects it is still typical Mapanje for here, once again, is the insistent questioner, <sup>q</sup> ~~at~~ <sup>no</sup> less than six question marks punctuate the poem, which becomes characteristically quizzical. It also becomes a voyage of discovery as the questions nudge the reader closer and closer to the realities of the poet's predicament:

... This is the moment  
we dreaded; when we'd all descend into  
the pit, alone;

This is an experience of utter abandonment which has been shared by others: though for them it may have come on a cross, or a blasted head, or a primordial marsh, or "as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde<sup>d</sup>" rather than in "the pit." The poet survives the ordeal by asserting himself and by refusing to cooperate with those who want to obliterate the evidence of a defiant humanity inscribed on the walls. The anger, initially felt only in the adjectives, fuels the act of defiance with which the poem concludes:

I will throw my water and mop  
elsewhere. We have liquidated too many  
brave names out of the nation's memory;

I will not rub out another nor inscribe  
my own, more ignoble, to consummate this  
moment of truth I have always feared!

In this instance, as in many others, one poem throws light on another and it is helpful to glance at "In Memoriam (For Orton Chirwa, 20 October 1992)" in which it is recorded that

...The walls spoke loudly your  
fanatics' tattoos O.C., Q.C. was here, OK?

In Malawi under Hastings Banda history is written in blood on prison walls, and for a poet at least that prison may be a sort of pit or shaft. It may be a "Chingwe's Hole."

Mapanje's second collection of poems, *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*, was published by Heinemann in 1993. It contained the two poems just considered with forty-three others, separated into four sections: the first two made up of poems from the early and mid-eighties into 1987 and entitled "Another Fools' Day Homes In" and "Out of Bounds"; the third begins with "The Streak-Tease" and the date 25 September 1987. It contains the ten prison poems proper and is followed by "The Release and Other Curious Sights," a dozen poems, including "In Memoriam" and "Tethered Border Fugitives Upon Release," over which the experience of prison hangs and from which further insights into prison experience can be obtained.

Comparison between the 1993 versions and those which had appeared earlier indicates that the poems have been closely re-read, slight adjustments have been made: words have, <sup>occasionally</sup> ~~on occasions~~, been changed, and the lineation in a fair number of cases has been altered. The alterations have tended to break the line at more unexpected points and so to give the poems a sharper, more challenging edge.

Every aspect of the collection gains significance from the knowledge that the poet spent so long in such a dreadful place. For example, the volume is dedicated to the memory of the mother who "gave up waiting" and, put as simply as this, the dedication is inexpressibly poignant. The collection as a whole is for his wife and children, and for, a Mapanjeish touch this, "the good humour of" his fellow inmates!

The dedication is followed by two quotations from the Bible which are resonant and indicate, among much else, the importance of the Bible to the prisoners: the three copies fed some of the spiritual needs of a community under great pressure, many of whom seemed to have been shut away because a country had gone mad, because reason, justice, sense, human feeling, even God Himself had fled.

Some of the poems written in prison touch on aspects of Mapanje's life which concerned observers might have hoped for or heard about. Of the many letters

and cards written to Mapanje and in support of his case one at least reached its destination. "To the Unknown Dutch Postcard Sender (1988)" is a profoundly moving poem prompted by the delivery of a card addressed to him "Near Zomba, Malawi." ~~Direct, understated,~~ Mapanje has a point of contact, someone new to talk to, and he makes the point that the card with its signature comes most opportunely just after he has signed his Detention Order, just when he

... desperately

Desired some other solidarity signature

To stand by (to give me courage and cheer)

to "buttress this shattered spirit." The poem celebrates a positive moment, an event to be savoured in the long dark night of the soul when it must have been easy to think that friends had forgotten and the international community proved impotent. It is clear that it is a moment that will be shared, for the poet offers "many thanks on behalf of these D4s too!"

The poem reveals the extent of his deprivation: each quarter of a the postcard which, as he says, he would "probably have spurned outside," is scrutinized carefully and described in detail. As in other poems, Mapanje employs the strategy of slipping in, apparently as asides but really as a calculated indictment of the system, references to the circumstances in which he and his fellow inmates are forced to live. And he uses telling descriptions: a "shattered spirit" is impossible to visualize<sup>z</sup>, but the words "mottled bare feet squelching / On this sodden life-sucking rough cement" make

an impact on several senses. In the final section of the poem, he returns to his tactic of appearing to stress the positive, while taking advantage of every opportunity to draw attention to the harsh realities of existence: he suggests that the genuine pleasure taken in the "Groeten uit Holland" will eliminate the "fetid walls ... cold cells ... midnight centipedes ... rats nibbling at / the rotting corns of our toes ... midnight piss from those blotched lizards [and] .. scorpion stings."

In "You caught me Slipping off Your Shoulders Once," included in the final section of the collection, Mapanje speaks to a fellow inmate, Tukula Sizala Sikweya, celebrating the news of his release with "all those D4/ Wagtails." Celebrating too Sikweya's endurance, his robust individuality, and, quite literally, his support; there is a reference to the "lion shoulders" on which the poet climbed to glimpse the wife and children he had not seen for twenty-two months - "And Pat O'Malley in white collar." Eased into the poem through an account of a remarkable, resilient detainee, the reader is drawn into sharing a moment of heart-rending intimacy. In diction and reference the poem offers few difficulties, and close attention to other poems removes most of these. There is just enough complexity to make the reader appreciate Sikweya's remarkable qualities, enough detail - "green acacias dancing to Lake Chilwa breeze/ The chickens pecking under the guard's granary" - to establish the setting, and then the wave of feeling crashes through. Mapanje writes that

his "heart/Started" and his "feet began to sweat". The pace of the poem, and the juxtaposition of those two sensations, one of heart, the other of feet, indicate the art which conceals art, the craft by which Mapanje makes a complex, moving work appear to have simply rolled off the tongue. As in other poems, the details of the appalling conditions in prison "slip out," apparently by mistake.

It is clear ~~from what has been said above~~ that there were terrible experiences which must have made an impact. For example, when he arrived at Mikuyu, Focus Gwede, who had plotted against many of his colleagues at the University, was already a captive; while he was there inmates were tortured, sometimes to death; for many months his friend, Blaise Machila was kept naked and in chains in a near-by cell. In reading the poems the presence of the pain caused by these experiences should not be disregarded, and it should never be forgotten that the celebrations he writes about <sup>took</sup> ~~take~~ place against this background of suffering. As a poet who wants to share his experience and tell the truth without posturing, this is part of his way of coming to terms with the "horror" of what he has seen. He knows that man cannot stand very much reality, and he shares with us as much as he can.

The position of Mapanje is the subject of the first poem in the final section of the collection. It is prefaced by the following question - presumably addressed to Mapanje by someone in the security forces.

(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?~~) ← (all caps)

This becomes, in the title, 'Who Are You, Imbongi?' An *imbongi* is defined as a praise singer, but it is clear that this praise singer, true to the functions of such people as described in *Oral Poetry from Africa*, tempered praise with criticism. The question can be answered in various ways: Mapanje may have appeared a slight, bespectacled figure with a limp. From the sort of information one has to fill in on cards at airports, one might surmise that he is "a middle-aged academic with a wife, and three children." Clearly the security officer knew that there was more, much more, than these descriptions implied. He knew that to him and what he represented, Mapanje was trouble.

In the poem which follows the question the poet is reminded, even as he leaves Mikuyu, that he has "left behind fellow inmates." This is followed by the assurance that "Mikuyu will gladly welcome / You back" and the menace contained in the information that distinguished inmates had been released only to be "released" from life. In a word "accidentalized." But, in a Mapanjesque answer to the question 'who are you', the *imbongi* suggests that he's a *maccah*, a burr, or "the persistent <sup>Brown ant</sup> / ~~ant~~ that crept into the elephant's / Ear" and drove the elephant to destruction.

To "the elephant" Mapanje may be a brown ant, but he clearly plays other roles as well. After the chameleon, the Cheshire cat, and the riddler, the role of the brown ant is a new one. What he would be too modest to say is that he is a poet, an *imbongi*, of international stature, with a sure command of the skills required for his profession, acutely sensitive, and courageous in defence of the highest principles.

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