

**Subverting Banda's Dictatorship in Malawi:  
Orality as Counter-Discourse in  
Jack Mapanje's *Of Chameleons and Gods***  
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The government of former president-for-life Dr. H.K. Banda and the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) in Malawi was a dictatorship that relied on coercion as well as mobilization of grassroots popular support and consent to maintain itself in power for 30 years (1964–1994). The regime's coercive tactics included draconian censorship of stories, poems, plays, songs, and other creative work that contained any critical commentary of the dictatorship (Gibbs 69–83; Zeleza 33–37). The ruling party also made liberal use of detention without trial, the torture of political opponents, extra-judicial killings, and forced exile against those it deemed a threat to its survival (Africa Watch 23–54). Banda's regime appropriated citizens' cultural activities producing a political discourse that popularized and legitimized the dictatorship in ways that resonate with Antonio Gramsci's definition of hegemony. Gramsci defines hegemony as "consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" (12). In a similar vein, Roger Simon explains hegemony as a relation of the ruling class and the governed "by means of political and ideological leadership" (21). In Malawi Banda and the MCP comprised the dominant group. Carl Boggs observes that the hegemonic ruling class "seeks to justify their power, wealth, or status ideologically with the aim of securing popular acceptance of their dominant position as something 'natural,' part of an eternal social order, and thus unchallengeable" (161), a strategy sought by Banda and the MCP. Banda's political and ideological leadership were propagated and naturalized under the virtually irrefutable rhetoric of Kamuzuism.

Kamuzuism, a political theory that understands the leader to be chosen for lifetime rule by a higher power, included ideas, beliefs, and

myths about Banda and presented him as the “fount of all wisdom” and a leader who “always knew what was best for the nation” (Phiri 3). That is to say that Kamuziism imbued Banda with the aura of possessing supernatural or divine wisdom. Through Kamuziism, Banda’s life and actions became legends and myths, acts of God’s divine intervention in his life for the good of the people of Malawi. This was most explicit in the titles and praise names with religious connotations given to Banda, each supposedly representing his special attributes. These names should be understood within the cultural politics of political symbols, where Hayward and Dumbuya explain that their importance

Rests on what they evoke in the minds of the people—whether pride, hostility, satisfaction, reassurance, or support—because they are associated with particular events, types of action, deeds, benefits. It is not so much the symbols themselves that are significant, but the meanings that people attribute to them. (648)

Victor T. Le Vine goes further to suggest that political symbols adopted by political leaders in Africa relate to the political roles, styles, and images that they intend to project. These are directly related to people’s expectations of the leaders and the given norms by which they should operate. Le Vine argues that any leader “must cope with a given image of his role by attempting to satisfy the sum of the norms and expectations of performance, as well as finding the appropriate acts to give personal expression to the role” (632). The choice of praise titles, for example, Le Vine observes, is based on the “evocative power” of the symbols, and whether they will help to “create or maintain affect between [the leaders] and their followers, to induce submission, acquiescence or support, as well as to satisfy their own role-cognitions” (632).

Banda was called *Mpulumutsi*, meaning Messiah or Savior. This title was derived from the fact that in 1963 Banda led the people of Malawi to independence from British colonial rule. In so doing he assumed the stature of a god similar to Jesus. Being the Messiah meant that Banda alone had divine blessings to rule Malawi which justified his life presidency. Banda was also called *Ngwazi* (Conqueror), a praise name from the Ngoni people, which indicated that apart from the meaning that he

was brave and ferocious he was invincible: no one could harm or defeat Banda. When he brutalized his critics and opponents he was essentially demonstrating the fact that he was *Ngwazi*. Banda was also *Wamuyaya*, that is, president for life, indicating the potential of immortality. To some of his supporters this implied that his reign would last forever. The titles *Ngwazi* and *Wamuyaya* were included in his official titles preceding his name and were recited together with a litany of others each time Banda was addressed. He was also called *Nkhoswe* No. 1. This idea was adopted from the predominantly matrilineal Chewa society of central Malawi where as Young and Banda explain,

All the male members of a Chewa family on the mother's side are *nkhoswe* to all the female members on the mother's side [who are *mbumba*]. That is to say, if you are a male, all your mother's brothers, all your own brothers from the mother, you yourself, and all sons of your mother's sister are *nkhoswe* to your mother and to her mother, to all of her full sisters, to all daughters of your mother. (13)

Young and Banda further explain this relationship and its responsibilities as follows:

Being *nkhoswe* to them [*mbumba*] you, as a male and no matter how young you are, are a Responsible Relative. . . . When you say "They are my *mbumba*", or, "She is my *mbumba*", you are admitting a responsibility in law; you are *not* claiming them or her as particular sort of relative such as aunt, cousin, sister or daughter. All *nkhoswe* are responsible in law not only for the well-being but also for the good conduct of their *mbumba*. . . . *Nkhoswe* [is] an "advocate" and a "sustainer" of his *mbumba*. (13)

By becoming *Nkhoswe* No. 1 Banda adopted and extended his authority of *Nkhoswe* over all women in Malawi whom he called his *mbumba* and by extension of every Malawian. In this relationship women in Malawi were placed under direct tutelage of Banda and as Semu argues, "this restricted women's public role to that of supporters of male politicians" (82). Their main role was to organize and perform dances for Banda at political meetings.

Banda regarded Malawi as one big village in which he was the paramount Chief and father, guardian, and protector of all people and went so far as to call Malawi, “my tribe . . . the whole nation, the tribe of Malawi” (qtd. in Short 266).<sup>1</sup> Under the guise of Kamuzuism Banda assumed the position of divine right and absolute authority to rule Malawi unchallenged and was presented as a special gift from God to the people of Malawi.

The titles and tactics I describe above were the dominant ideas of the national political discourses used to popularize and legitimize Banda’s dictatorship. These hegemonic discourses were disseminated by the strategic use of traditional and popular music and songs that were performed for Banda and the MCP and justified the use of elaborate praise names and titles for the dictator. People across the country composed and performed these traditional songs and dances, which were all adaptations of the rich and lively oral heritage of Malawi.<sup>2</sup> The performances also enabled a fraternal and subversively patronizing relationship between Banda and the ordinary people in Malawi. The regime was acutely aware of critical discourses that threatened to undermine its influence and authority among the people and relied heavily on hegemonic discourse to quash any dissent. Any writer who sought to challenge the regime within Malawi not only had real fears of detention, but also had the difficult task of constructing a way to undermine the hegemonic influence held by Banda and the MCP. It is against this background that I will examine Jack Mapanje’s efforts to articulate a counter-discourse that threatened to undermine Banda’s dictatorship.

Mapanje is one of Malawi’s leading poets, detained without charge for almost four years between September 1987 and May 1991. At the time of his arrest, Mapanje was serving as Chair of the English Department at Chancellor College of the University of Malawi. To this day the government has not given the actual reasons for his detention. However, Banda hints at possible reasons in a letter he wrote to the faculty of the University of Edinburgh in 1988 as a response to their protests over Mapanje’s imprisonment. In it, Banda accuses Mapanje of “using the classroom as a forum for subversive politics” (qtd. in Kerr and Mapanje 79). However, he does not indicate how Mapanje did this. What is ob-

vious is that in Banda's Malawi any form of criticism, including any complaint against the leader or the party, even if only suspected, was considered subversive and dealt with accordingly. It is highly probable that what Banda calls use of the classroom for subversive politics refers to Mapanje's own poetry in *Of Chameleons and Gods* published in 1981. The Ministry of Education withdrew *Of Chameleons and Gods* from circulation in schools and colleges (Mapanje "Censoring the African Poem" 8). Under the threatening atmosphere of censorship, this action was to be only a prelude to the outright banning of the book and raised the possibility of arrest of the author. In this article I argue that some of Mapanje's poems in *Of Chameleons and Gods* lend themselves to a subversive critique of Banda's dictatorship insofar as the poems work to demystify Banda and threaten to undermine his legitimacy through interrogations of some of the beliefs and practices that anchored Banda's regime.

Mapanje wrote most of the poems in *Of Chameleons and Gods* in the 1970s with a mind to engage the autocracy. He interrogates the Messianic claims attached to and implied in the praise names and titles granted to Banda and challenges his claims of benevolence, as well as his pretensions to immortality. Mapanje's poetry characterizes Banda's regime as a brutal dictatorship without a fair judicial system where the ever-present threat of torture and detention without trial crushed people's dreams and aspirations for the very things the Malawian people fought and died for during their struggle for independence. Mapanje's poetry exposed the harsh realities of Banda's dictatorship.

Mapanje adopted the role of a traditional oral poet, the *imbongi* and borrowed techniques from oral praise poetry. In traditional society the role of an *imbongi* is both as a praise singer and a critic. Archie Mafege explains that an *imbongi* eulogizes the king by singing laudatory or adulatory poems and songs, "celebrat[ing] victories of the nation, chant[ing] laws and customs of the nation" (qtd. in Vail and White 53). Importantly, the *imbongi* also "criticizes the chiefs for perverting the laws and customs of the nation and laments their abuse of power and neglect of their responsibilities and obligations to the people" (Vail and White 53). Thus the *imbongi* represents the "opinions of the ruled" and serves as "a check against abuse of power by those in authority"

(54). Mafege compares the *imbongi* with a newspaper cartoonist, and as Archibald Jordan argues, it is in criticizing the king that the *imbongi* “found the greatest scope for his wit” (qtd. in Vail and White 54). Wit and subtlety are essential qualities of praise poetry for in criticizing the king the poet does not want to appear vulgar. The *imbongi* holds a recognized and accepted public function in traditional society. And, as Trevor Cope says, this special position enables the *imbongi* to “criticize with impunity . . . either by overt criticism or covertly by the omission of praise” (28). Leroy Vail and Landeg White equate this to poetic license. Mpanje casts himself in the role of an *imbongi* in an attempt to criticize Banda’s dictatorship with impunity.

Mapanje’s project in *Of Chameleons and Gods* is anticipated in his Masters of Philosophy thesis entitled, “The Use of Traditional Literary Forms in Modern Malawian Writing in English” (1974), which he undertook at the University of London. He suggests in this work that for African poets who work in an atmosphere of draconian laws that prevent them from speaking out against despotism in their society, recourse to oral traditions, particularly of praise poetry, is the best alternative to silence. He suggests that oral poetry provides “modes of thought and a source of metaphor [to camouflage critical messages] and inspiration [to challenge autocratic leadership]” (136). Given the kind of censorship as well as the manipulation of oral traditions Banda employed to legitimate his dictatorship, Mapanje says, “we [writers] were forced to find alternative strategies for survival, alternative metaphors for the expression of our feelings and ideas” (“Leaving No Traces of Censure” 76; see also “Orality and Memory of Justice” 9–21). In Mapanje’s poems, these strategies are used to criticize and unmask what Tiyambe Zeleza calls Banda’s “lies, deformities and fantasies of ruthless, unproductive power” (33). These strategies are evident in some of the poems in *Of Chameleons and Gods* I discuss below.

The poem “The Song of Chickens” (4) protests a master who protects his chickens from hawks only to turn and prey on them himself. Mapanje says he wrote this poem in 1970 on the state visit to Malawi of the South African Prime Minister John Vorster. In 1967 while most African countries boycotted South African government because of its

apartheid policies and practices, Banda established diplomatic relations and signed trade agreements with the country. By hosting Vorster this time Banda betrayed his neighbors—Tanzania, Mozambique, and Zambia—countries that were homes to anti-Apartheid freedom fighters and the African National Congress (ANC). He also defied the Organization of African Unity (OAU), which charged Southern African countries with the responsibility to act as frontline states in opposition to South Africa. Banda not only hosted Vorster in Malawi, he reciprocated the visit in 1971, touting it as a pragmatic policy of contact and dialogue with the apartheid regime instead of isolation.

In “The Song of Chickens,” the persona asks the master of whom he says just recently used bows and arrows and catapults, his hands “steaming with hawk blood” (4) to protect the chickens,

Why do you talk with knives now,  
Your hands teaming with eggshells  
And hot blood from your own chickens?  
Is it to impress your visitors? (4)

The poem criticizes Banda on multiple levels, attacking his lavish entertainment of the visiting South African leader, as well as his Messianic claims. It asks him why after calling himself a Savior and *Nkhoswe* of his people he has turned into the very beast that successfully preys on his people. Explicit examples of Banda's inconsistencies can be found in his own contradictory actions: while claiming to have led his nation to independence after having sacrificed a successful medical career in Britain and Ghana a mere six weeks into independence (August-September 1964), Banda violently forced some of his colleagues into exile for disagreeing with him (Baker 104–203). These people included Kanyama Chiume, Orton Chirwa, Masauko Chipembere, and several others. Yet strangely, these are the individuals who actually invited him back to Malawi and offered him the leadership of the independence movement, the Nyasaland African Congress (NAC). From 1964 and throughout his reign, Banda practiced Machiavellian politics. For example, in the 1960s and 70s, the time captured in the poem “The Song of Chickens” Banda arrested, tortured, and killed hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses

who refused to become members of his MCP, to salute the national flag, or attend his official functions. Many more were forced into exile (Africa Watch 63–68; Fiedler 145–76). It is for these reasons that Mpalive-Hangson Msiska suggests the poem becomes “an allegorisation of the political situation in Malawi through the idea of the keeper turned poacher, where the everyday practice of slaughtering chicken for guests becomes a metaphor for the leadership’s betrayal of the ideals of the anti-colonial struggle” (80). Indeed, Mapanje suggests that the behavior of the master is both hypocritical and sadistic.

In “The New Platform Dances” (12), a humiliated Chopa Dancer who has lost popular favor complains of the debasement of his cultural dance by politicians. The title, Msiska suggests, “plays on the ambiguity of the word ‘platform’ which refers to the once fashionable platform-soled shoes as well as to Banda’s penchant for dancing during public meetings [because] the persona, like Banda, enjoys dancing with women and brandishing his flywhisk” (84–85). What is at issue here is that Banda and the MCP debased the very cultural traditions of Malawi. The dance in question is *Chopa*, a rainmaking dance of the Lomwe people of southern Malawi. The subject in the poem laments the fact that the dance, in which he himself traditionally participated, has now become political propaganda. Besides the *Chopa*, many other dances, some associated with secret society rituals or ceremonies, were similarly adopted and performed for Banda’s entertainment and praise at political functions. Banda often joined in with his people to dance and sing his own praises. It is in this new space and function that Mapanje calls them “new platform dances.” After lamenting the degradation of the dance, the speaker notes,

Now . . . I see my daughters writhe  
Under cheating abstract  
Voices of slack drums, ululate  
To babble-idea-men-masks  
Without amulets or anklets. (12)

The women performing the new platform dance “writhe” instead of dance. They do so under the “cheating abstract voice of slack drums,”



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and the politicians themselves for whom the dance is now performed are “babble-idea-men masks.” Also, the dancers are not wearing the appropriate regalia of amulets or anklets for rainmaking dance. In other words, having been adopted for political purposes the dance is no longer genuine, or, in the words of Roscoe and Msiska, it is now a “terpsichorean debasement” of culture (51). Though Banda claimed to be the custodian and promoter of Malawi's cultural traditions (Forster 477–99), in this poem he appears not as the custodian of tradition but a usurper. In other words, the poem is against the appropriation and manipulations of the traditional dances for political purposes for such uses dilute the rich traditional dances into mere political propaganda.

In the poem “On His Royal Blindness Paramount Chief Kwangala” (57) the poet says in a glossary note that the Chief is in his mind (79) without telling which Chief he refers to.<sup>13</sup> The Chief could be either any local traditional leader or it could be Banda. The imagery suggests that it is Banda, who loved to dance with his people. In the photo below, for example, Banda is in a three-piece suit, and he alone brandishes a shield in his left hand and a spear in his right hand while dancing *Ingoma* with people of Mzimba district.



*Photo by Department of Information, Malawi. Used by permission.*

The photo above forms an apt background against which to read Mapanje's poem. It would be to Banda that the speaker says, "I admire the quixotic display of your paramountcy/How you brandish our ancestral shields and spears/Among your warriors dazzled by your loftiness" (57). The *Ingoma* dancers who are traditionally dressed in animal skin seem literally dazzled by Banda's display. *Ingoma* is a war-like dance in which the dancers stamp their feet on the ground creating a noise like that of a war stampede. While, ordinarily, each dancer brandishes a shield and a spear, whenever Banda joined them all the dancers put down their shields and spears so that he was the sole armed dancer. Like the master in the poem, the photo depicts Banda looming lofty over his fellow dancers, thus suggesting the nature of Banda's rule.

By the mid 1970s and through the 1980s, when Mapanje composed these poems, the leadership of Banda could indeed be described as a "quixotic display." Banda lavishly rewarded those who supported him, paying particular attention to female supporters. For example, he built some women houses in places of their choice, and sent others on educational visits to as far as Egypt, Israel, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Taiwan in what he described as 'education by traveling.' He also gave monetary gifts to those women whom he invited to dance for him at his Sanjika Palace. These trips and gifts, he claimed, were to fulfill his role as *Nkhoswe*. His public appearances and his participation in the dancing and singing were arguably the most elaborate display of his "paramountcy," that is, rituals of power, pomp, and grace that reached near absurd heights. At this point the persona turns to Banda himself and asks whether his power displays are suited to his age.

Mapanje's persona in "On His Royal Blindness Paramount Chief Kwangala" is amazed at how unconcerned the subject is about his stature and age. The speaker asks, "I fear the way you spend your golden breath/Those impromptu, long-winded tirades of your might/In the heat, do they suit your brittle constitution?" (57). While Roscoe and Msiska suggest that the poem here duly acknowledges and admires the chief's strengths and achievements, that is, "his quixotic style, his feel for tradition" (51), the poem may not be expressing admiration as such, for the end of the stanza is interrogative rather than blindly laudatory.

The entire stanza is a kind of "delicate mockery, offering praises and in the same breath reclaiming them" typical of oral praise poetry (Vail and White 307). The poem raises doubts about whether Banda is fit for the kinds of displays in which he is involved with his subjects given his age and stature. What the poem refers to as "long-winded tirades" are Banda's very angry outbursts against all those that criticized or questioned his leadership that were characteristic of his public speeches that often followed the singing and dancing.

In the following stanza, the speaker continues to interrogate the Chief on his claims that he liberated his people from poverty in which they lived:

I know I too must sing to such royal happiness  
And I am not arguing. Wasn't I too tucked away in my  
Loin-cloth infested by jiggers and fleas before  
Your bright imminence showed? How could I quibble  
Over your having changed all that? How dare I when  
We have scribbled our praises all over our graves? (57)

Again Roscoe and Msiska suggest that the persona in this stanza duly acknowledges and admires the chief's "rescuing of the persona and his contemporaries from poverty, [and] his attack on local unemployment" (57). However I suggest that this is far from admiration. Banda loved to be praised. He and his party forced the people to sing what Zeleza calls "the monotonous story of his achievements" (33). This stanza, I would argue, is therefore a complaint for being forced to sing praises for Banda. In other words, like everybody else the speaker knows that he/she must sing Banda's praises or risk being accused of insubordination. It is important to note that the speaker talks of singing to "royal happiness," which could be read as Banda's happiness and not the speaker's own happiness. Nothing seemed to please Banda more than praises even where the praise singers were simply flattering him. His love for praise was as intense as was his abhorrence of criticism.

The "loin-cloth infested by jiggers and fleas" from which, according to Roscoe and Msiska, the speaker is supposed to have been rescued refers to Banda's habitual claim that when he returned to Malawi in 1958, he

found people literally naked. After independence Banda further claimed that he had developed Malawi beyond recognition thus suggesting that the country was far different from the state in which colonialists left it. Banda further declared that since he took over the leadership of Malawi people were well dressed, well-nourished, and had well housed, with roofs that did not leak—three things that people needed most. While the stanza seems to enumerate these achievements and express admiration for Banda, the insinuation in “we have scribbled our praises all over our graves” (57), where praises have become epitaphs, suggests that under Banda’s rule development came at the cost of lives. The epitaphs on graves may well be for those who may have refused to sing the praises and, as a result, disappeared. The question Mapanje asks here is: if Malawians have made progress or have been rescued from poverty, then at what price? This is not an acknowledgment of rescue.

Mapanje returns to the theme of costliness in “The Lies We Told About the Elephant” in his collection of poetry written after his detention entitled *Skipping Without Ropes* (1998). In this poem, the narrator says

[Do] not tell the children  
Another lie, how wise elephant returned  
To his kraal at his own fancy after years  
Wandering in alien lands, how elephant  
Found fellow elephants naked, starving,  
Living in huts that leaked; how grateful  
Elephant’s folks were when he removed  
Their barkcloths . . .  
[Do] not lie that  
Elephants can be Messiahs that live forever. (70)

The story of the elephant in this poem parallels that of Banda in Malawi. Like the elephant in the poem Banda left Malawi at about the age of thirteen by walking through the bush to Zimbabwe and South Africa. He then proceeded to the United States and Britain to get an education. He then returned to Malawi after more than forty years. Once he became president, Banda is supposed to have transformed the coun-

try into prosperity. Such stories, the poem suggests, are lies that should never again be told to children. Mapanje suggests that the people may not have been grateful despite the impression that this was the case as created by songs of praise and the throngs of praise singers that surrounded Banda. However, by suggesting that public gratitude is a lie Mapanje is not denying the fact that Banda led the country to independence or that the economic conditions improved since independence. It is a lie, he suggests, because the story ignores the brutality and cruelty that characterized Banda's dictatorship and became the price of development.

The following stanza in "On His Royal Blindness Paramount Chief Kwangala" continues to question the story of development in Malawi:

Why should I quarrel when I too have known mask  
Dancers making troubled journeys to the gold mines  
On bare feet and bringing back fake European gadgets  
The broken pipes, torn coats, crumpled bowler hats,  
Dangling mirrors and rusty tincans to make their  
Mask dancing strange? (57)

Because Malawi did not have mines of its own, many people worked as migrant laborers in the neighboring countries of Zimbabwe and Zambia as well as South Africa. In fact, Banda himself worked as a migrant laborer in Zimbabwe and South Africa before making it to the United States and later Britain. This stanza challenges claims that Banda's walk to other countries for education was unique. However, in the government-sanctioned public narration of Banda's journey he is presented as a small boy who passes through wild forests protected by God, for he was a destined child. His journey was depicted as being Messianic, for he was meant to return to save his own people. Second, the stanza questions what such trips accomplished for the general population of Malawi. The speaker says the sojourners to the mines brought back to Malawi fake European materials in the form of broken pipes, torn coats, and crumpled bowler hats, among other things. These materials, when used in performing traditional dances, only made the dancers look strange. It is no coincidence that Banda's trademark dress for

his public engagements was a three-piece English style suit, a coat, and a Homburg hat. When he joined his *Ingoma* dancers as in the picture above, for example, he was the only dancer in Western attire surrounded by people wearing animal skins, with bared stomachs, and bare feet. Though he did dance, his attire sets him apart from his fellow dancers and makes him look strange. On another level, dance in this poem could be read as representative of culture and politics in Malawi where Banda, having obtained high academic degrees from abroad, returned and made cultural traditions into instruments of political oppression. The question the poem asks is therefore whether Banda's acquisitions from abroad are no less fake and strange in Malawi than what his fellow travelers brought home.

In the poem entitled "On His Royal Blindness Paramount Chief Kwangala" Mapanje is concerned with Banda's failure to recognize the limits of his indulgence. For example, the speaker says, "No, your grace, I am no alarmist nor banterer/I am only a child surprised how you broadly disparage/Me shocked by the tedium of your continuous palaver. I adore your majesty" (57–58). This is nothing short of telling Banda that his leadership is cause for alarm. The poem further suggests that Banda's continuous and monotonous retelling of his achievements, as well as his angry outbursts and criticism of his opponents, is all a dull performance. The speaker's question, "why should we wait for the children to/Tell us about our toothless gums or our showing flies?" (58), suggests that the Chief should recognize his age and pass on the mantle of power to those who are younger. For though Banda was very old it became apparent that he would not relinquish his power willingly.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, Banda did not have a vice president nor groomed a successor until 1993, when he was approximately ninety years old and weakened by age.

Throughout "On His Royal Blindness Paramount Chief Kwangala," the terms used to refer to Banda as "your bright eminence," "your grace," and "your majesty," are far from polite forms of address. Rather, these are forms of seditious praise. Throughout the poem the persona does what he claims he is not doing; he questions Banda's claims and raises alarm over the dangerous political direction the regime was taking. After all,

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in the title of the poem the Chief is a "blind paramount," which could be read as an affront to Banda who is supposed to be wise, dynamic, and foresighted. In the poem Banda is a paramount that has become too preoccupied with his "paramountcy," and therefore blind to notice his own ageing. The ironic statements and rhetorical questions in the poem interrogate Banda and challenge what he claimed to be in order to show who he really was in a style typical of an *imbongi*.

In "When This Carnival Finally Closes," Mapanje not only compares Banda's leadership to a carnival in which he is a god but also warns that this carnival will some day come to an end:

When this frothful carnival finally closes, brother  
When your drumming veins dry, these very officers  
Will burn the scripts of the praises we sang to you  
And shatter the calabashes you drank from. Your  
Charms, these drums, and the effigies blazing will  
Become the accomplices to your lie-achieved world!  
Your bamboo hut on the beach they'll make a bonfire  
Under the cover of giving their hero a true traditional  
Burial, though in truth to rid themselves of another  
Deadly spirit that might otherwise have haunted them,  
And at the wake new mask dancers will quickly leap  
Into the arena dancing to tighter skins, boasting  
Other calabashes as the undertakers jest:  
What did he think he would become, a God? The Devil! (61)

The "frothful" carnival was most literally obvious when Banda took to entertaining his *mbumba* (women) from each district at his palaces and at mass rallies across the country. These occasions of merry-making, dancing, and singing were nothing short of carnivalesque. Further, the euphoria and pomp of Banda's political rallies made him believe that he had become a true hero and beloved of his people, indeed a god. His public appearances were often processions of singing and dancing people clad in party uniforms bearing the imprint of Banda's face. Meanwhile, Banda himself would ride in an open Land Rover in the middle of the processions waving his flywhisk to acknowl-

edge the praises of his people. Similarly, during the performance of traditional dances, Banda would sing and dance with as many groups while waving his flywhisk. He was literally at the center of the carnival performances. But the persona in the poem suggests that upon his death Banda would be nothing but a ghost that people from the village or nation would exorcise. In other words, while Banda and his supporters may have believed that he had attained a godly status, the poem suggests Banda is not closer to becoming a god if anything may be “the devil.” Therefore the poem suggests implicitly that Malawians could not wait for the carnivalesque dictatorship to end. Banda’s fall from power—or his death—would therefore be celebrated. Further, the mention of the possibility of Banda’s death was itself very provocative in a country where even to speculate the age of Banda was a mortal sin. The poem suggests that Banda is mortal contrary to what his titles and praise names suggest. Mapanje mocks Banda for his failure to see that this is only a “frothful” carnival that, like all carnivals, is bound to come to an end. His dancing and singing, pomp and ceremony are exposed as hollow and a travesty of reality.

As if to fulfill Mapanje’s prophetic poem, Banda’s carnival started to close in 1993 when Banda, under tremendous pressure to reform from within and outside Malawi, was forced to hold a national referendum regarding the continuation of his single-party rule. Foreign aid donors, for example, imposed democratic reforms as one of the conditions for continued economic aid to Malawi in the early 1990s. However, by that time Banda’s age had begun to show and it was increasingly obvious that his close aides, John Tembo and Cecilia Kadzamira were behind government decisions, thereby engendering a crisis of confidence in Banda (Chirwa 25–27). Once Banda lost the referendum, his life-presidency was excised from the constitution together with the clause that gave the MCP monopoly over politics in Malawi. The only national public radio Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), which Banda controlled and monopolized throughout his reign, stopped playing songs of his praise, and, as the poem suggests, they “burn[ed] the scripts of [his] praises.” These were some of the first recommendations of the National Consultative Council (NCC), an umbrella group that included opposi-



tion figures formed to work with government to manage the transition to democracy. As people campaigned for change the very songs with which they praised Banda were now turned against him and used to castigate his leadership, thus marking the end of Banda's carnival.

After the multiparty general elections in 1994, which Banda again lost, there were abundant efforts to clear if not obliterate his name. The government of Bakili Muluzi and the United Democratic Front (UDF) that succeeded him removed Banda's name from all major infrastructure including roads, the hospital, airport, national stadium, and other public signifiers. Few public infrastructures in Malawi were not named after Banda and few, if any, today bear his name. His name became a signifier of autocracy. Mapanje's poem here derides Banda for living in a carnivalesque dream world. Banda's fall and subsequent humiliation are examples of what Mapanje predicted in "When This Carnival Finally Closes," a theme he picks up again in the collection *Skipping Without Ropes*.

What Mapanje undermines in the poems discussed here is the cacophonous display of power and the abuse of tradition that Achille Mbembe describes as "an aesthetics of vulgarity" that institutionalizes dictatorship (104). Mbembe argues that dictatorships institutionalize themselves by seeking legitimation and hegemony through a grotesque display of power or majesty in forms of spectacles. Singing and dancing, the key features of all public appearances and meetings of Banda and the MCP could be described as a grotesque display of power that Mapanje challenges in his poems.

Mapanje's counter-hegemonic discourse exploits the resources and techniques of an oral poet, the *imbongi*, to challenge the political discourse about Banda. He fills his adopted role and position of *imbongi* through the use of irony and rhetorical questioning, literary devices that effect a satirical interrogation of Banda's dictatorship. The images of Banda in Mapanje's poems are those of a sadist, a hypocrite and a vainglorious paramount; a Messiah who saved in order to plunder and a blind chief who could not measure his own strength. These images subvert the once mandatory assumptions of Banda and his leadership in Malawi.

## Notes

- 1 Banda was also called Father and Founder of the nation, which figured him as having single-handedly fought colonialism to bring about independence in Malawi thereby obliterating an entire history of nationalists' efforts before him, including those who fought together with him. See Chirambo "Protesting Politics of 'Death and Darkness' in Malawi," especially 205–27.
- 2 These performances produced a dominant political discourse that popularized and legitimized dictatorship while stifling and undermining dissent. See Chirambo "Traditional and Popular Music" 109–26.

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