

Some Reflections about Barbarism in Africa: An Interview with Jack Mapanje

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Abstract

Jack Mapanje was born of Yao and Nyanja parents in Kadango Village, Mangochi District, in southern Malawi. He holds a B.A. Degree and a diploma in Education from the University of Malawi and an M.Phil degree from the University of London. In 1975 he joined the staff of the Department of English at Chancellor College, University of Malawi. In the early 1980s, he worked at University College, London, where he obtained his PhD. In 1981 he published *Of Chameleons and Gods*, his first collection of poems. Back in Malawi, in 1987 Mapanje was detained and imprisoned following the banning of his book, being released only in 1991 following intense international pressure. His second volume of poetry, *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*, written in prison, was published in 1993. He is currently based in England, where he lives with his wife and three children. An academic at the University of Leeds, he recently edited the anthology *Gathering Seaweed: African Prison Writing* (2002).

The following interview was held in Barcelona in May 2000, during the International Conference “Poesia i Mestissatge” organised by Aula de Poesia de Barcelona.

You have been invited to Barcelona to participate in a venue called “Poets Confronting Barbarism”. What has been your contribution to this event?

First of all, I want to take the chance to thank those institutions which made my coming possible: Aula de Poesia de Barcelona and, of course, the British Council. Well, I am presenting myself as a contribution. I have presented a brief summary of how I think poets confront barbarism, especially throughout the African continent, but also in other parts of the world. I have also been able to read some of my own poems, poems where I have myself confronted an aspect of barbarism which involved me. My contribution was my own experience, yet my experience is not merely African; barbarism exists not only in Africa, but all around the world: In America, South America, in the West, in Bosnia, in China... everywhere.

Let us talk about your personal experience. In 1987 you were the Head of the English Department of the University of Malawi, and then you were arrested and imprisoned by dictator Hastings Banda. Was the political situation extremely tense at the moment? Were you an activist?

If the question is whether I was expecting arrest, the answer is: anybody living in my time in my country and anybody who was in the limelight expected to be arrested. Not because you were a radical, but the mere fact that I was a writer, that I had published a

book of poems and that I headed a Department with about five hundred students and a whole staff... anybody who is in that situation is bound to be in the limelight. The authorities are watching him. Now, we lived at a time when there were not only authorities, but also 'minor authorities': there were agents, spies, and so on, who could report anything you did. So we were living in a time when everybody was expected to be arrested. Now, I was not myself an activist in the sense of an activist, because in a dictatorship you simply can't. They would get rid of you. Most of the fellows who were activists had actually left the country, and joined what were called 'opposition parties' outside it. They lived in exile in Zambia, Tanzania, Mozambique or Zimbabwe, or in Europe or America. They sent in letters, they broadcast on radio, they wrote in newspapers... so those were the real activists. But those of us who had decided to live in the country simply couldn't do those things.

What could you do, then?

The only thing you could do was write, whatever little you were able to write, from within. And make sure you would not have it published, because it was too dangerous. It was a delicate situation. Technically there were a lot of 'undeclared' activists within the country. And yes, I was one of them.

So you were very conscious of the risks you were taking when you wrote your first book, Of Chameleons and Gods.

It was published in England when I was doing my PhD in Linguistics at University College London. Fortunately for me (or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it) the book was the first to be published by Heinemann educational books on the African Writers series. Other African authors had been published before but in this series this book was the first one. There was this review which said here is a poet living in Malawi who is writing good poems. That is dangerous, because the government did not expect anyone living in the country to write good poems. Good poems were defined as poems which were critical: they were not only about beauty, but were also critical about the political situation. I was exposed, and therefore when I was going back home after my PhD I expected trouble. In fact several friends warned me that the book had annoyed the authorities, especially those surrounding Banda, those who expected to rule the country after his death. Of course he never read poems.

Do dictators ever read poems?

The other interesting thing is that I lived at a time when anybody who went outside the country to do research or pursue studies could be interviewed. "Who did you meet? Did you talk to rebels or Malawian dissidents? Which socialist countries did you visit? What socialist thinkers were part of your studies?" We were prepared to answer those questions, especially those of us in the social sciences. To answer your question directly: I expected that something could happen, but I did not know the nature of the thing.

Then there was this six-year period between the publication of the book, in 1981, and your incarceration in 1987. What happened in those years?

When I returned home I discovered that everybody was talking about my book.

So they could read it; some editions had reached Malawi.

Yes. The book was circulating the first year, but when I actually arrived back, a special branch of the police bought all the copies remaining in the bookshops and threw them in the pig latrine. So the book was not technically available. Then they discovered that I was teaching linguistics, and not literature. And that was useful, because linguistics are theoretically free from politics: you cannot talk to people about ideas of revolution or government and democracy. And I decided that I would not write poetry anymore, and that if I did I would not have it published. So I didn't publish anything in those years—I published some poems in some British magazines, but they didn't reach Malawi. *Of Chameleons and Gods* was banned in 1985, about four years after the publication. Well, they did not really ban it, because that would have made me too famous. They withdrew it from circulation. They wrote letters to every educational institution and library in the country asking them to withdraw all copies from the shelves. I didn't receive the letter. My secondary school teacher—who is a Catholic Brother and lives in Rome now—rang me and told me about it. I went to see this woman in charge of the censorship board, who was actually a good friend of mine. She told me: “Don't worry; your book won't be banned, we have just withdrawn it from circulation”. I said, “What is the difference?”. She replied: “We are not banning it by *Government Gazette*, which would mean it is illegal to buy or sell it”.

Merely withdrawing it is more intelligent on their part.

Yes, more subtle. In my second book there is a poem about that: “On the Banning of Chameleons and Books”. Dictatorships usually find their way of knocking you out. Withdrawing has a strong psychological effect on you. You wonder why have they done it, but they won't tell you. So you are supposed to be worrying, and going crazy. And afraid: perhaps the next thing they will do is arresting me. Banning is clear, you know where you are. Withdrawing from circulation is worse, since you do not know what is coming next. Two years after that, they arrested me. No explanation, nothing. I do not even think it was because of the book. Nobody gave me any reasons.

You spent nearly four years in prison.

Three years, seven months, sixteen days and several hours.

You were released thanks to the pressure of several organisations. Let us move our subject slightly. What is your opinion about international organisations of the kind?

When I was in prison, I was without communication. Neither my wife nor my relatives were allowed to visit. For up to twenty-two months they did not know where I was. Then there was this guard in prison, very good, very reliable. There are some people in the world so kind, so good you don't believe it. This young man just decided he was going to help me and others in prison, so we used him as a courier. I could start writing little notes to my wife, and to two friends from the University who were my link. It was these two friends who passed on information to human rights organisations in the world. These two friends told those organisations about the terrible situation of Malawian prisons. I do not even know many of the organisations who helped me, only three or four: Pen International, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Africa Watch.

Several international linguistic associations also collaborated. They would write hundreds of petitions and letters. I discovered after I was released that while I was in prison they were getting up to three or four bags of letters every week. They were shocked. Then a report on prison conditions in Malawi, *Where Silence Rains*, was produced with the help of Africa Watch and Amnesty International members. This report went to every embassy in Malawi. They had heard about them, but did not believe atrocities really existed until they read this report. At the same time, the pressure of writers and journalists in their own countries was pressing them to pressure the Malawian Government. The man who released me said: “We have detained many people in this country; many much more distinguished than yourself”—some members of Dr Banda’s cabinet were also imprisoned—“Who are you? Where did you get all this press from?”.

Would you then agree that, in general, NGOs are useful?

There is a difference between Human Rights organisations and NGOs. With the creation of NGOs, I think governments have seen a chance to release their responsibilities. And many of those organisations are too busy feeding their own infrastructures, which are too complex. I don’t mean that they do not do work, but that is a problem, too. Western governments are not doing enough; they are leaving most of the work to NGOs, and that’s unfair.

In Europe, do we tend to have a too general vision of Africa?

Everybody generalises about everybody else, that is the problem. And the usual tendency for the West is to generalise about Africa. The different problems experienced by Mozambique, Angola, Malawi, or Zambia, are taken to be the same: Africa is disaster, Africa is corruption. Actually, many Western governments use corruption as an excuse for not aiding African countries. They fear that African leaders are going to keep the money. When Dr Banda died, he had a fortune of 3.3 billion Sterling Pounds in British banks. Those who helped him must have known about this!

Are there any ways to avoid that?

Of course. If you help me to build a hospital, and you send your own experts to help build it, and you buy your own equipment, well that is aid, isn’t it? And you can monitor that, you can make sure the money does not go to the governors’ pockets. Mechanisms must be established.

In your speech you recalled that Africa has a tradition of tolerance, of acceptance and celebration of diversity. Has this changed? Why? Colonisation? Greed?

Those are two reasons I can see. With colonisation, the whole notion of extended family slowly started to break down. The love there was amongst people disappeared. Now the whole thing has become unmanageable. The old values are disappearing very fast; man is becoming more and more individualistic and materialistic, which is a global thing. The world is becoming a market force. Now, where does corruption come from? Not from African traditions. Once you could not criticise anybody without being killed.

How does an independence fighter become a dictator?

I really don't know. Dr Banda lived for forty years in America and the UK. He trained and worked as a medical doctor. He lived under two typical examples of democratic regime. Why did he make a country into a dictatorship and built more prisons than hospitals? I don't know. You can follow that process throughout Africa. Wherever there was a colony, and wherever there were nationalists fighting the metropolis, the European countries, everybody rallied behind one leader. Even if fighting from different sides or clans, they had a common enemy, the ruler. After independence, it all broke up. Most of those leaders refused to rule democratically. Look at Mugabe right now; he was a fighter when he came to power, and... I can only think of three African leaders who haven't followed this pattern: Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and Léopold Senghor of Senegal. I do not believe that it comes from our tradition, because our tradition was hereditary, and these people have not got power from their ancestors. I don't understand.

Are dictatorships the only kind of barbarism Africa is suffering nowadays?

No! Diseases, AIDS, for instance, are another kind of barbarism. Malaria is also killing a lot of people in my country. Banda never cared about building hospitals, and there are no medicines. Censorship is another kind. Not allowing the majority of your people to learn to read and write is another. That is the difference between Nyerere, in Tanzania, and Dr Banda. Banda established an elitist system of education, whereas Nyerere established a mass system. The majority of the people in Tanzania nowadays can read and write. In their own language, not in English, in French, or in Portuguese. In Malawi most people can't read in their own language. That is barbarism. And the biggest one is the global barbarism of markets, big banks controlling every country in the world. It is crazy to want everybody in my village to have a computer; there is no electricity in my village! If market forces have to succeed for the West, then they must start again, they must start from the basics. Make sure that the roads are good, that the people's health is good, that there is transport and that there is electricity in these places. How can you talk about global markets and the rest of it when you cannot get the basic stuff for the others?