

Orality and Subversion in Jack Mapanje's *Of Chameleons and Gods*

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Jack Mapanje, one of Malawi's leading poets, was arrested and detained without charge from September 1987 to May 1991 by former president for life and dictator Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda and the Malawi Congress Party (MCP). 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 revealed the actual reasons for his detention. However, Banda gives a hint in a letter he wrote to the faculty of the University of Edinburgh in 1988 in response to their protests over Mapanje's detention. In it, Banda accuses Mapanje of "using the classroom as a forum for subversive politics."¹ How Mapanje used the classroom for subversive politics is not stated. What is obvious, though, is that in Banda's Malawi, any form of criticism, including any complaint against Banda or the party, were considered subversion. 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*.² The regime heavily censored stories, poems, plays, songs, etc. for critical commentary on the regime even if only suspected.³ Needless to say, the Ministry of Education withdrew *Of Chameleons and Gods* from circulation in schools and colleges.⁴ Under the censorship atmosphere then, this action was a prelude to the outright banning of the book.

In this article, I argue that some of Mapanje's poems in *Of Chameleons and Gods* lend themselves to a subversive reading to annoy a dictator such as Banda in that, among other things, the poems demystify Banda and openly undermine his legitimacy. Even as a dictatorship, the regime of Banda and the MCP relied heavily on a hegemonic discourse that both popularized and legitimized it.⁵ In so

¹ Qtd. in David Kerr and Jack Mapanje, "Academic Freedom and the University of Malawi," *African Studies Review* 45.2 (2002): 79.

² Jack Mapanje, *Of Chameleons and Gods* (London: Heinemann, 1981). Subsequent references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.

³ See James Gibbs, "Of Kamuzuism and Chameleons: The Experiences of Censorship in Malawi," *The Literary Half-Yearly* 23.2 (1982): 69-83; Africa Watch, *Where Silence Rules* (New York: Africa Watch, 1990) 69-83.

⁴ Letter qtd. in Jack Mapanje, "Censoring the African Poem," *Index on Censorship* 9 (1989): 8.

⁵ For a detailed discussion, see Reuben Chirambo, "Culture, Hegemony, and Dictatorship: Song, Dance, and Politics in Malawi, 1964-1994," Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2005. See also Wiseman Chirwa, "Dancing Towards Dictatorship: Political Songs and Popular Culture in Malawi," *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 10.1 (2001): 1-27.

far that Mapanje's poetry constituted a counterhegemonic discourse that threatened to undermine Banda's popularity and challenge the MCP's legitimacy, it was considered subversive. This may explain why the collection was withdrawn from schools, and why Mapanje was later arrested. This article, using a selection of poems from *Of Chameleons and Gods*, shows the specific elements of Banda's dictatorship that Mapanje sought to undermine and challenge.

During the reign of Banda in Malawi, the dominant political discourse was shaped by what is called Kamuzism, an ideology that produced a powerful myth of Banda as the "fount of all wisdom" and a leader who "always knew what was best for the nation,"⁶ that is, an individual who possessed supernatural or divine wisdom. He was called *Mpulumutsi*, meaning Messiah or Savior. This was derived from the fact that in 1963 Banda led the people of Malawi to independence from British colonial rule. He assumed the stature of a god similar to Jesus. For the same role, Banda was called *Ngwazi* (Conqueror), which indicated that, apart from the meaning that he was brave and ferocious, he was invincible. No one could harm or defeat Banda. Banda was also *Wamuyaya*, president for life, in the sense that to some of his supporters his reign was never going to end, thereby suggesting that Banda was immortal. He was also *Nkhoswe No. 1*, a protector, guardian, and provider for his people.⁷ He was called Father and Founder of the nation, which presented him as if he fought colonialism more or less single-handedly to bring about independence in Malawi. This obliterated an entire history of nationalists' efforts before him, including those who fought together with him. Banda in turn regarded Malawi as one big village in which he was the paramount Chief and father, guardian, and protector of all people. He then assumed the position of divine right and absolute authority to rule Malawi unchallenged. Banda and the MCP produced this perception by tacitly acknowledging the praise and worship where Banda was presented as a gift from God to the people of Malawi. These were the dominant ideas of the national political discourses that popularized and legitimized Banda's dictatorship. These hegemonic discourses were borne mainly in and constituted by traditional and popular music and songs that were performed for Banda and the MCP and in the praise names and titles for Banda outlined above.

Mapanje wrote most of the poems in *Of Chameleons and Gods* in the 1970s, with Banda's autocracy in mind and in an attempt to engage with it. His poetry demystifies Banda by interrogating the messianic claims attached to, and implied by, his names and titles, as well as by challenging his claims of benevolence and

⁶ Kings Phiri, "A Case of Revolutionary Change in Contemporary Malawi: The Malawi Army and the Disarming of the Malawi Young Pioneers," *Journal of Peace, Conflict and Military Studies* 1.1 (2000). <http://malawi.freehosting.net/article3.html>

⁷ See Cullen Young and H. K. Banda, eds., *Our African Way of Life* (London: United Society for Christian Literature, 1946) 13.

his pretensions to immortality, among other things. Mapanje's poetry characterizes Banda's regime as a brutal dictatorship characterized by the absence of a fair judicial system that would prevent torture and detention without trial, a regime that crushed people's dreams and aspirations for freedom and prosperity—the very things people fought and died for during the struggle for independence. It mocks Banda's display of power and majesty as hollow and a travesty of reality. Mapanje's poetry, therefore, exposes Banda's dictatorship in Malawi for what it really was.

Mapanje adopted the role of a traditional oral poet, the *imbongi*, and borrowed techniques from oral praise poetry in the country. In traditional society, the role of *imbongi* that Mapanje makes claim to is both as a praise singer and a critic. Archie Mafege explains that an *imbongi*, as a praise singer, eulogizes the king by singing laudatory or adulatory poems/songs “celebrat[ing] victories of the nation, chant[ing] laws and customs of the nation.”⁸ As a critic, the *imbongi* “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,”⁹ among other things. The *imbongi*, in his role of critic, serves as “a check against abuse of power by those in authority”; the *imbongi* represents the “opinions of the ruled.”¹⁰ Mafege compares the *imbongi* with a newspaper cartoonist, and as Archibald Jordan argues, it is when criticizing the king that the *imbongi* “found the greatest scope for his wit.”¹¹ 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 position and function in traditional society. And Trevor Cope writes that this special position enables the *imbongi* to “criticize with impunity ... either by overt criticism or covertly by the omission of praise.”¹² Leroy Vail and Landeg White equate this to “poetic license.” It is in this role and position of an *imbongi* as a critic that Mapanje casts himself in his poetry.

Mapanje's project in *Of Chameleons and Gods* is anticipated in his 1974 dissertation, *The Use of Traditional Literary Forms*.¹³ In it he suggests that, for African poets in the face 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

⁸ Qtd. in Leroy Vail and Landeg White, *Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991) 53.

⁹ Vail and White 53.

¹⁰ Vail and White 54.

¹¹ Qtd. in Vail and White 54.

¹² Trevor Cope, ed., *Izibongo: Zulu Praise-Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) 28.

¹³ Jack Mapanje, “The Use of Traditional Literary Forms in Modern Malawian Writing in English,” M.Phil. diss., University of London, 1974. See also Mapanje, “Orality and the Memory of Justice,” *Leeds African Bulletin* 60 (1995): 9-21.

messages “and inspiration” to challenge autocratic leadership.¹⁴ Mapanje remarks that, given the kind of censorship and the manipulation of oral traditions that sustained Banda’s dictatorship, writers “were forced to find alternative strategies for survival, alternative metaphors for the expression of our feelings and ideas.”¹⁵ The alternative strategies and metaphors are borrowed from the same oral traditions appropriated for the praise and worship of Banda. In Mapanje’s poems, they are used to criticize and unmask what Tiyambe Zeleza calls Banda’s “lies, deformities and fantasies of ruthless, unproductive power.”¹⁶

The poem “The Song of Chickens” (4) protests against a master who protects his chickens from hawks only to prey on them himself. Mapanje says he wrote this poem in 1970 following the visit of South African president John Vorster to Malawi.¹⁷ In 1967, while most African countries boycotted South Africa because of its apartheid policies and practices, Banda established diplomatic relations and signed trade agreements with South Africa. By hosting Vorster, Banda betrayed his neighbors, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Zambia, which hosted African National Congress (ANC) freedom fighters. He also defied the Organization of African Unity (OAU), which designated southern African countries to act as frontline states against South Africa. Not only did Banda host Vorster in Malawi; he also reciprocated the visit in 1971.

In the first stanza of the poem, the chickens ask their master why, after putting on a fight to protect them from predators—using bows and arrows and catapults, his hands “steaming with hawk blood” (4)—he has turned to prey on them himself. They question him: “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 can be read as criticism of Banda. It criticizes him for his lavish entertainment of the visiting South African president and also attacks Banda’s Messianic claims. It asks him why, after calling himself a Savior and *Nkhoswe* of his people, he has turned into a beast that preys on his people. Banda, who led the nation to independence, lectured everyone on how he sacrificed a successful medical career in Britain and Ghana to come back to liberate his people from white domination and exploitation. Yet, about six weeks into independence, in August and September 1964, Banda forced into exile some of his colleagues with whom he fought for independence for disagreeing with him. These included Kanyama Chiume, Orton Chirwa, and Masauko Chipembere, the very individuals who had invited him back to Malawi, offering him the leadership of

¹⁴ Mapanje, “The Use of Traditional Literary Forms” 136.

¹⁵ Jack Mapanje, “Leaving No Traces of Censure,” *Index on Censorship* 5 (1997): 76.

¹⁶ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, “Totalitarian Power and Censorship in Malawi,” *Southern Africa Political and Economic Monthly* 8.11 (1995): 33.

¹⁷ Jack Mapanje, Personal Conversation with the author, San Diego, California, 24 March 2002.

the independence movement, the Nyasaland African Congress (NAC). From 1964 and throughout his reign, Banda practiced Machiavellian politics of eliminating his opponents and critics by means of detention, forced exile, and death. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, 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 Malawi Congress Party, salute the flag, or attend his official functions. Many of them and others were forced into exile.¹⁸ 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."¹⁹ Mapanje suggests in the poem that the behavior of the master, in this case Banda, who protects but then destroys, is both hypocritical and sadistic.

In "The New Platform Dances" (12), a humiliated Chopa dancer who has lost his charm 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 old fashionable platform-soled shoes as well as to Banda's penchant for dancing with women during public meetings ... the persona, like Banda, enjoys dancing with women and brandishing his flywhisk."²⁰ What is at issue here is that Banda and the MCP have debased the very cultural traditions of Malawi that they claimed to protect, in this case traditional dances. The dance in question here is the Chopa, a rainmaking dance among the Lomwe of southern Malawi. The subject in the poem laments the fact that the dance, in which he himself traditionally participated, has now become a political propaganda dance. 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 subject 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," and the politicians

¹⁸ For details see Africa Watch, *Where Silence Rules* 63–67; Klaus Fiedler, "Power at the Receiving End: The Jehovah's Witnesses' Experience in One Party Malawi," *God, People and Power in Malawi*, ed. Kenneth Ross (Blantyre, Malawi: CLAIM, 1996) 145–76.

¹⁹ Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, "Geopoetics: Subterraneanity and Subversion in Malawian Poetry," *Essays on African Writing (2): Contemporary Literature*, ed. Abdulzak Gurnah (Oxford: Heinemann, 1995) 80. See also David Jefferess, "Saying Change in Malawi: Resistance and the Voices of Jack Mapanje and Lucius Banda," *ARIEL* 31.3 (July 2000): 106–23.

²⁰ Msiska 84–85.



Banda dancing the Ingoma. Courtesy Department of Information, Malawi

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 a rainmaking dance. In other words, having been adopted for political purposes, the dance is fake or, in the words of Roscoe and Msiska, a “terpsichorean debasement”²¹ of culture. Though Banda claimed to be the custodian and promoter of Malawi’s cultural tradition,²² in this poem he appears not as the custodian of tradition but as a usurper. In other words, Mapanje is against the appropriation and manipulations of the 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) (*Kwangala* is a Yao word for dancing frantically), the poet says the Chief is in his mind (79) without telling which Chief he is referring to. The Chief could be either any local traditional leader or Banda as Chief in his tribe, Malawi. The imagery points to Banda. Banda loved to dance with his people. In the above photograph, for example, Banda, in a three-piece suit with a shield in his left hand and a spear in his right, is shown dancing the Ingoma with people of the Mzimba district.

The photo forms an apt background against which to read Mapanje’s poem. It would be to Banda that the persona says, “I admire the quixotic display of

²¹ Adrian Roscoe and Mpalive-Hangson Msiska, *The Quiet Chameleon: Poetry from Central Africa* (London: Hans Zell Publishers, 1992) 51. See also Vail and White 301.

²² See Peter Forster “Culture, Nationalism, and the Invention of Tradition in Malawi,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 32.3 (1994): 477–99

your paramouncy / How you brandish our ancestral shields and spears / Among your warriors dazzled by your loftiness" (57). The Ingoma dancers dressed in animal skin seem dazzled by Banda's display. Ingoma is a warlike 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, they all put down their gear whenever Banda joined them to dance. Like the poem, the photo suggests that Banda stood tall and proud, that is, lofty among his fellow dancers. However, the poem is hardly an example of admiration for Banda's display; rather, it is a question as to whether the performance described as a quixotic display is worthy of the president.

By the mid-1970s and through the 1980s, when Mapanje composed these poems, the leadership of Banda could correctly be described as a "quixotic display." Banda lavishly rewarded those who supported him, particularly women. For example, he built them houses, and sent some on educational visits as far away as Egypt, Israel, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Taiwan. He also gave monetary gifts to those women whom he invited to dance for him at his Sanjika Palace on many occasions. These trips and gifts, he claimed, were to fulfill his role as *Nkhoswe*. His public appearances and his joining in the dancing and singing were probably the most elaborate displays of his "paramouncy," that is, rituals of power, pomp, and grace that could be described as nearly absurd.

Mapanje's persona in "On His Royal Blindness Paramount Chief Kwangala" is also amazed at how unconcerned the subject is about his stature and possibly age. The persona 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,"²³ the poem does not express admiration. The question at the end of the stanza interrogates. The entire stanza is a kind of "delicate mockery, offering praises and in the same breath reclaiming them."²⁴ In reference to Banda in Malawi, the poem raises doubt as to whether Banda, given his age and stature, is fit for the kinds of displays in which he is involved with his subjects. What the poem calls "long-winded tirades" are Banda's angry outbursts against all those who criticized or questioned his leadership, outbursts that were characteristic of his public speeches that often followed the dances.

In the following stanza, the persona continues to interrogate Banda on his claims that he liberated the people of Malawi from the poverty in which they lived under colonial rule:

²³ Roscoe and Msiska 57.

²⁴ Vail and White 307.

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."²⁵ However, acknowledgement does not amount to admiration. Since Banda loved to be praised, he and his party forced everyone to sing what Zeleza calls "the monotonous story of his achievements."²⁶ Praising Banda was not a matter of choice, just as belonging to the MCP was never a choice. The statement "I know I too *must* sing to such royal happiness and I am not arguing" (italics mine), points to the fact that the stanza is a complaint against being forced to sing praises for Banda. Like everybody else, the persona knows that he/she must sing Banda's praises or else risk being suspected of subversion. It is important to note that the persona talks of singing to "royal happiness," that is, Banda's happiness and not to that of the persona.

The phrase "Loin-cloth infested by jiggers and fleas" from which the persona is supposed to have been rescued refers to Banda's too-familiar and constant claim that when he returned to Malawi in 1958, he found people literally naked. This was Banda's way of saying he found people very poor, a statement nobody could quibble over in Malawi, as the persona says. Banda further claimed that he had developed Malawi beyond recognition to suggest that the country was far different from the state in which colonialists left it at the time of independence. Banda claimed that since he took over the leadership of Malawi, people were well dressed, had enough food, and had good housing that did not leak—three things, he said, people needed most. While the stanza seems to enumerate these achievements and express admiration for Banda, the insinuation that praises have become epitaphs in the line "We have scribbled our praises all over our graves" (57) suggests that development under Banda cost lives. The epitaphs on graves are to those who may have dared not to sing the praises and, as a result, disappeared. The question Mapanje is asking is, if Malawians have made progress or have been rescued from poverty, it is at what price? This is not to acknowledge being rescued from poverty. In effect, Mapanje is not singing to royal happiness; rather, he is quibbling. Again, the rhetorical questions in this stanza accuse rather than praise Banda.

²⁵ Roscoe and Msiska 57. See also Vail and White 307.

²⁶ Zeleza 33.

Mapanje returns to the above theme in “The Lies We Told About the Elephant” in *Skipping Without Ropes*.²⁷ Here 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 stories of the elephant in this poem parallel those of Banda in Malawi. Like Banda, the elephant is supposed to have left his home country for alien lands where he wandered for years before returning as a Messiah to save his fellow elephants from hunger and poverty. The story of Banda was that he left Malawi at the age of thirteen, walking through the bush to Zimbabwe and South Africa. He then proceeded to the United States and Britain to get an education. He returned to Malawi after more than forty years to save his people and become president for life. Once he became president, Banda supposedly transformed the country into a land of prosperity, providing houses that do not leak and enabling people to produce enough food for themselves, among other things. Such stories, the poem suggests, are lies that should never be told again to children. Mapanje suggests that the people may not have been grateful despite the impression created by songs of praise and the throngs of praise singers that surrounded Banda. Mapanje is not denying the fact that Banda led the country to independence or that the economic conditions improved beyond what they were before independence. Yet, Banda’s story is a lie because it 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)

²⁷ Jack Mapanje, *Skipping Without Ropes* (Newcastle, England: Bloodaxe Books, 1998) 70.

Because Malawi did not have mines of her own, many people worked as migrant laborers in neighboring countries, Zimbabwe and Zambia as well as South Africa. That was the story of Banda as well. In relation to Banda's story, first, the stanza challenges claims that Banda's walk on foot to other countries for education was unique. The persona suggests that this is not the only story. Second, the stanza queries the value of what such trips accomplished for the general populace of Malawi. The persona 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 simply made the dance strange, that is, did not improve people's lives. 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, for example, he was the only dancer in Western attire surrounded by people wearing animal skins, with bare stomachs and bare feet. While he danced, it is his attire more than anything else that made him look like a stranger among his fellow dancers. At another level, dance in this poem represents 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 "His Royal Blindness Paramount Chief Kwangala" Mapanje is also concerned with Banda's failure to see the limits of his indulgence. For example, the persona 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 suggests that his continuous and monotonous story of his achievements and the angry outbursts and criticism of his opponents are a dull performance. The persona'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 aging (he is believed to have been more than sixty years old in 1964 when he became president of Malawi and around eighty when Mapanje published this poem), it seemed Banda would wait to be told he was too old to lead the nation. He did not appoint a vice president or groom a successor until 1993, when he was around ninety years old and frail.

Throughout "On His Royal Blindness Paramount Chief Kwangala" terms used to refer to Banda such as "your bright eminence," "your grace," and "your majesty" are far from polite forms of address. These are forms of subverted praise. Throughout the poem the persona does what he claims he is not doing—he questions Banda's claims and raises alarms for the dangerous political direction his regime was taking. After all, in the title of the poem the Chief is a

“blind paramount,” which could be read as an affront to Banda, who, in the praise songs and praise names, 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 showing gums. The ironical statements and rhetorical questions in the poem accuse Banda; they challenge what Banda claimed to be in order to show who he really was. This is typically the way an *imbongi* deals with his subjects.

In “When This Carnival Finally Closes” (61), Mapanje not only compares Banda’s leadership to a carnival in which he is a god but also warns that this carnival will someday 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 obvious when Banda took to entertaining his *mbumba* (women) from each district at Sanjika Palace in Blantyre. These occasions of merrymaking, dancing, and singing were nothing short of a carnival. Also, the euphoria and pomp of Banda’s political rallies made him believe that he had become a godlike hero and beloved of his people. His public appearances were often processions of singing and dancing people, clad in party uniform on which was imprinted Banda’s face. But the persona in the poem suggests that upon his death, Banda would be nothing but a deadly spirit that people from the village or nation would rid themselves of. The carnival affair where he is at the center is “a lie-achieved world,” and he is not closer to “a God” than “the devil.” The poem suggests, implicitly, that behind the carnival is a political nightmare Malawians cannot wait to see the end of. Banda’s fall from power or death would therefore be celebrated with a cleansing of the nation of his spirit. The mention of death itself was very provocative in a country where even to speculate on the age of Banda was a mortal sin. The poem suggests that Banda is indeed mortal, contrary to what his titles and praise names such as *Wamuyaya* suggest. Here Mapanje caricatures a presumptuous Banda preoccupied with seemingly unassailable glorious attainment that gives

impressions of permanence. Mapanje mocks Banda for his failure to see that his life is only a “frothful” carnival that, like all carnivals, is bound to come to an end. His dancing and singing in 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 by popular demand for democracy Banda was forced to hold a national referendum on his continued rule.²⁸ Once Banda lost the referendum, his life-presidency was scrapped from the constitution together with the clause that gave the Malawi Congress Party monopoly over politics in the country. The national public radio service Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), which Banda controlled and monopolized throughout his reign, stopped playing the songs of his praise, that is, as the poem suggests, they “burn[ed] the scripts of [his] praises.”²⁹ People danced in the streets turning the very songs with which they praised him against him. This marked the end of Banda’s carnival that Mapanje anticipates in his poem above.

After the multiparty general elections in 1994, in which Banda again lost, efforts to clear, if not obliterate, his name in Malawi abounded. The government of Bakili Muluzi and the United Democratic Front (UDF) removed Banda’s name from all major infrastructure including roads, the hospital, airport, national stadium, and other public signifiers. Few public institutions 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 humiliation³⁰ 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.³¹ Mbembe argues that dictatorships institutionalize themselves by seeking legitimation and

²⁸ Banda called a national referendum after tremendous pressure to reform from within and outside Malawi. Foreign aid donors imposed democratic reforms as one of the conditions for continued aid 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, engendering a crisis of confidence in Banda.

²⁹ In 1993, following the national referendum that favored change to democracy against the one-party system of Banda and the MCP, a National Consultative Council (NCC) was formed to work with government to manage the transition to democracy. One of the first recommendations of the NCC was to stop all praise songs of Banda on the MBC.

³⁰ Banda and John Tembo were arrested in 1995 and tried for conspiring to murder four politicians (Aaron Gadama, Dick Matenje, Twaibu Sangala, and David Chiwanga) in 1983. For details see Malawi Commission of Inquiry, *Mwanza Road Accident: Verbatim Report of Proceedings* (Limbe, Malawi: Civic Offices, 1994).

³¹ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 104.

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, were grotesque displays of power.

Mapanje's counterhegemonic discourse exploits the resources and techniques of an oral poet, the *imbongi*, to challenge the political discourse about Banda. He fulfills 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 paramount chief who could not measure his own strength. These images subvert the once accepted assumptions of Banda and his leadership in Malawi. The description of Banda's leadership as a quixotic display, a "frothful" carnival that covered up the suffering of thousands of Malawians, were an affront to Banda's leadership and person.

While Mapanje believed that his adopted role of *imbongi* and the use of oral traditions provided him the possibility and legitimacy to censure Banda for the public good as well as to camouflage his criticism, Banda and the Malawi Congress Party recognized his efforts as insubordination and a threat to the system.