

## Book review

### *Syned Mthatiwa*

**Brutal Hand of Dictatorship: Jack Mapanje's *And Crocodiles Are Hungry at Night*. Oxfordshire: Ayebia, 2011, pp 435.**

I am publishing this memoir after more than twenty years of my incarceration, not because I want to take revenge on Banda and his inner circle for permanently shattering my academic career. I left vengeance to the Lord, who knows my opponents better than I do. Nor do I want to be a spoiler when most Malawians are intent on forgetting the past in order to move on. This memoir is not meant just to make my verse more accessible either, filling the gaps for readers of my poetry. I merely want to remind my compatriots that we should not allow ourselves to revert to the brutal days of Banda and his Kadzamira-Tembo cabal, when we lived in fear of everything and everybody including our own shadows, and when the only life that mattered was that of the president, his relatives and the coven around him; and more importantly, when the lives of the rest of us were considered worthless to them (Mapanje, p. 432).

He was an academic, a gifted published poet, chairperson of a regional body of linguists (Linguistics Association for SADCC Universities – LASU) from nine universities of Africa south of the Sahara, and a family man. His academic gifts and creative abilities were recognised and admired both locally and internationally. However, his skills and success may have provoked much more than admiration at home. They probably also triggered suspicion and hatred in some of Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda's henchpersons who felt that Mapanje's popularity was taking away the thunder from ageing Banda, Malawi's president for life, whose name was supposed to be above everyone and everything. Mapanje's success also stirred a sense of insecurity within those being groomed by what he calls "the self-styled royal family" (p. 419) to occupy topmost positions on the University of Malawi's administrative

hierarchy. His origin from Mangochi, a district associated with rebellion following the “protracted guerrilla warfare” against Banda mounted by Henry Masauko Chipembere and his “stubborn lieutenants Evance Medson Silombera and Kumpwelula Kanada” who engaged “Banda’s army in the mountain ranges of Mangochi district” (p. 72), did not endear him to the totalitarian regime.

On payday, Friday, 25 September 1987, Jack Mapanje was arrested at Gymkhana Club in Zomba and dumped at Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison where he languished for three years, seven months and sixteen days, without charge or trial, until his release on Friday, 10 May, 1991. His memoir, *And Crocodiles Are Hungry at Night*, is a record of this traumatic experience in Mapanje’s life. As Tiyambe Zeleza rightly observes in the “Foreword,” besides recording Mapanje’s distressful ordeal, “The memoir is a tribute to the endurance of the human spirit, to the indomitable courage of Mapanje and his fellow detainees, who – in their fortitude, creativity and solidarity – continuously subverted the regime’s fantasies of omniscient power and the terrorising technologies of prison surveillance” (p. viii). Zeleza goes on to say that “The memoir is a moving celebration of the complexity of the human condition even under the most harrowing of circumstances” (p. ix). In the memoir we encounter brutal, corrupt and cynical prison guards as well as caring and sympathetic ones. Among the prisoners hopeful, courageous and selfless detainees share the same space with opinionated, pessimistic and violent ones.

The title of the memoir, Mapanje reveals, comes from Dr Fergus McPherson’s obituary of Dr Banda where he quotes Banda telling his Young Pioneers to deal with his detractors thus: “Tell the police [...]. But if they do nothing, I put you above the police. And crocodiles are hungry at night.” In putting the Young Pioneers above the police, Banda “effectively put them above the law” and unleashed monstrous chaos that led to the imprisonment of “thousands of dissenters who were merely presumed to have been the regime’s opponents” (p. 428).

The memoir is divided into ten books, ranging between 5-7 chapters each, which are sandwiched between the “Foreword” by the renowned scholar Tiyambe Zeleza and the “Afterword” written by Mapanje himself. The memoir’s chapters are arranged sequentially through the ten books and are

sixty-six in total. Book One is titled “The Hell-Hole” and has six chapters. In this book Mapanje talks about his lunch hour arrest at Gymkhana Club, his mother’s reaction on seeing the police with her handcuffed son, his Kafkaesque interrogation at the Southern Region Police Headquarters in Blantyre, and his humiliating detention at Mikuyu prison.

After his arrest Mapanje is taken for interrogation at the Southern Region Police Headquarters in Blantyre where he spends agonising lonely moments of uncertainty and soul-searching, wondering what wrong he had committed to warrant arrest. The interrogation that follows is no interrogation but an exercise in futility, where Inspector General of Police, Eliot Mbeza, asks his prisoner to tell the gathered commissioners of police from around the country what wrong he had done for him to be arrested. Mbeza confesses that the gathered senior police officers have never heard of the prisoner in their midst. He goes on to say that since the directive for the arrest has come from above, the police will carry no investigation, as that will be tantamount to questioning the wisdom of the omniscient president, Banda.

In Book Two, “Hold Them Tight,” we get a glimpse of Mapanje’s first month in Mikuyu prison. Here Mapanje tells us about the horrible, stinking and maggoty prison food, reflects on the events that seemed to portend his arrest and imprisonment, talks about his orientation to prison life by his fellow political prisoners (the politicals) – T.S, Brown Mpinganjira, Alidi Disi, and Alik Kadango, among others – and his discovery of a clandestine way of communicating with the outside world.

In recording his experiences at Mikuyu Prison, Mapanje highlights his pain, suffering and frustrations. He also highlights the shared undying hope for release amongst the prisoners, and the conviviality and conflicts amongst them – conflicts sparked by the frustrations of detention. One of the harrowing experiences in prison for Mapanje is witnessing what he calls the abduction of condemned prisoners from Mikuyu’s A-Wing for hanging at Zomba Central Prison the following day. Six prisoners are “abducted” by the chief commissioner of prisons twice every year, in January and August. We learn this in the memoir’s chapter twenty, “Our Terminal Friends” which is in Book Four, titled “Birthday in Prison.” Another painful experience for Mapanje is being denied visitors, especially his wife and children for almost two years.

Some light briefly peeps into the gloomy narrative of life in Mikuyu in Book Seven, “After Twenty-Two Months,” where Mapanje writes about his happiness on finally being able to see his wife and children after about two years in prison. His family, relatives and friends had been applying to the police for permission to see him over the many months since his arrest, but in vain. When the family finally gets permission to visit, it is Father Patrick O’Malley, Mapanje’s friend and colleague, who drives Mapanje’s wife, Mercy, and the children to Mikuyu.

The occasional moments of joy in the gloomy cells of Mikuyu are, however, obscured for Mapanje by the death of his mother a month or so before his release in 1991. Mapanje the prisoner is not allowed to bury his mother. Worse still, the agents of the paranoid and brutal regime overreach themselves and stop staff and students of Chancellor College from paying their last respects to the mother of their colleague and lecturer.

A reading of the memoir reveals that while in detention, Mapanje and his fellow prisoners’ hope for release never dies. This hope is partly kept alive by a clandestine communication system in prison and events in other parts of Africa. The clandestine communication system is anchored by the gallantry and kindness of one of the prison guards the political prisoners code-name *Noriega* – after the brave, albeit shady, Panamanian military ruler, General Manuel Noriega – who served as courier for the prisoners and their contacts outside prison. Mapanje provides a salutary recognition of this guard’s bravery in the title of Book Three of the memoir which he calls “Lion of Mikuyu.” Through the clandestine system of communication Mapanje knows about the intensification of the campaign for his release by international professional bodies and organisations. One such organisation is Kamuzu Banda’s alma mater, Edinburgh University in Scotland, which exerts pressure on him to release Mapanje from prison. *Gossip International*, a group of prisoners (that include Mapanje, T.S, Brown Mpinganjira, and George Ntafu, among others) involved in a campaign/struggle for their release through covert communication with well-wishers, both locally and internationally, see this as a positive development that might lead to their release.

The release of Nelson Mandela by the apartheid regime in South Africa strengthens the political prisoners' hope for release as they believe that it will have a ripple effect on Malawi's political culture and landscape. The prisoners are of the view that "Banda, [...] a staunch supporter of apartheid, will be embarrassed by Mandela's release [and] will want to find an excuse for doing something good to his own people" – the release of political prisoners (pp. 324-325).

Mapanje's hope for release is, however, continuously tested by a number of events. One such event is the arrest and detention in Mikuyu of Blaise Machila, his colleague in the Department of English at Chancellor College, which Mapanje writes about in the aptly titled chapter 29, "Sting in the Tail." Machila, a brilliant but mentally unstable academic, was, according to information Mapanje obtains in prison, arrested and detained for being a nuisance in constantly asking about Mapanje's whereabouts (p. 189). Another event is the passing of Banda's official birthday in 1988 without the anticipated release of political prisoners. This throws those campaigning for the release of political prisoners into despair. Further, the arrival in prison of tobacco farmers from the central region, apparently detained for competing with Banda and the "royal family," increases Mapanje's uncertainty about possible release from prison. It is the release of twenty-two prisoners from Mikuyu in February 1991, however, that leaves Mapanje shattered.

After his harrowing ordeal at Mikuyu Prison, Mapanje is finally released on Friday, 10 May, 1991 – over three and half years later – without charge or trial. While in prison he had tried to uncover the reasons for his detention by engaging one of the prison guards in Mikuyu as a spy. But the spy's findings only served to mystify him more than clear the darkness around his arrest. In the memoir Mapanje refers to his release as "My Second Birthday," as he sees imprisonment as a form of death.

One of the things Mapanje attempts to do after release is to get his job back. But we learn in the memoir that each time he makes an inquiry about his job from the University Registrar of the day, the response he gets invariably starts with the words "The chairman of the university council [...] has directed." And the chairman of the university council happened to be John Tembo, one person Mapanje suspects to be behind his imprisonment. Mapanje's failure to get his job back, and the ever increasing warnings from well-wishers to

beware of a special branch hit-squad that had allegedly been unleashed by his enemies to bump him off, strengthen his resolve to leave Malawi.

It is in Book Ten of *And Crocodiles Are Hungry at Night*, “Goodbye the Jacarandas of Home,” that Mapanje talks about his departure into exile in the United Kingdom. He refers to his exile as a sentence, a painful experience. We learn in Book Ten that although the university finally offers him his job back when he expresses the wish to go away, the offer is half-hearted and an attempt to keep him permanently on the back foot. He leaves with his family of five for York, the United Kingdom, on one way tickets. While outside the country, Mapanje learns that neither Banda nor his coterie can stop the winds of political change sweeping through central and southern Africa. Following a referendum and general elections, Banda and his cabal lose their suffocating grip on power and Bakili Muluzi and his United Democratic Front party take over.

Mapanje’s quest to uncover the reasons for his arrest continues even in exile. In a chapter titled “Brown’s Story” Mapanje reveals how he gets to know for sure who was behind his arrest. This information is provided to him by Brown Mpinganjira, his cellmate at Mikuyu who is now Minister of Information in the new government (p. 414). Further details on who was responsible for Mapanje’s arrest are supplied by Sam Kakhobwe who was secretary to the president and cabinet at the time Mapanje was arrested and detained (pp. 418-419).

Book Ten ends with news of Banda’s death relayed by phone to Mapanje by Mpinganjira in the wee hours of 28 November, 1997. Mpinganjira was fulfilling a promise he and Mapanje made to each other in prison that “Whoever heard about Banda’s death first would tell the other as soon as possible” (422). By the time the memoir comes to an end, Mapanje knows who was behind his imprisonment, but he is none the wiser as to why he was detained. The question why remains entangled in theories and shrouded in mystery.

Mapanje’s narrative style, especially his use of the present tense, his poetic language and great attention to detail, give a dramatic effect and sense of immediacy to the events he describes. Through his narrative style, point of view, and grim humour in describing his prison experiences, he evokes in the

reader feelings of horror, revulsion, and empathy, among others. He also triggers both admiration and contempt towards the various actors in the tragedy of his imprisonment and release. The series of dreams that Mapanje had in prison that appear in the text highlight the mental torture he and his fellow prisoners went through as a result of their incarceration, and his enduring hope for release. They underscore his belief that one day he would triumph over his incarcerators and return home to his family.

The writer's constant search for reasons behind his detention that one encounters in the memoir rouses sympathy for him and underscores his victimhood. The search for reasons also highlights the paranoia and brutality of the MCP leadership that arrested people for having committed no crime. The fact that many of the detainees languished in prison without charge or trial is testimony to their innocence and victimisation. Their incarcerators simply had no justifiable reasons for taking them to court.

The quality of writing in the memoir is very good. Except for the occasional failure to put space between a period and the first word of the next sentence, the memoir is well edited. Nevertheless, one feels that the over-repetition of the expression "Kadzamira-Tembo cabal" when an alternative expression could have been used is unnecessary. Further, one encounters a glaring factual error in the last chapter of the memoir. In it Mapanje puts the date of Banda's death as Wednesday, 28 November 1997. First, 28 November 1997 was a Friday, not a Wednesday. Second, Banda died on Tuesday, 25 November 1997, not on 28 November. Either the person who informed Mapanje about Banda's death was a little mistaken, or the writer got the date all wrong. However, this confusion could have been cleared if the writer had crosschecked his information.

Another confusion of date and day of the week comes much earlier in the memoir. On page 152 Mapanje says 15 June 1985 was a Tuesday when in fact it was a Saturday. I should hasten to say, however, that these confusions are rare in the memoir. In fact Mapanje precision in his many references to date and day of the week makes one wonder whether he was keeping a diary or journal in prison. How can he remember dates so precisely twenty or so years after his release from prison? If he kept a diary, which is highly unlikely given the constant cell- and strip-searches in prison, he chooses not to mention it in the memoir.

On reading the memoir one notices that Fridays and Saturdays are the most eventful days. For instance, Mapanje is arrested and released on Friday. The reason why these weekend days are the most eventful days in the memoir remains unclear. Further, true to the author's expectations, a reading of the memoir indeed makes his "verse more accessible" (p. 432), especially the twenty poems that are included in the memoir. The memoir also exposes the villainy and betrayal that were rife during Banda's dictatorship.

Overall, the importance of the memoir to all peace-loving Malawians of today and of tomorrow is incontrovertible. Mapanje has given us a text that should provoke a soul-searching exercise on our roles, decisions and motives as citizens and leaders as we map the future of our country. Against those who think that the atrocities of yesterday should remain in the past, Mapanje rightly tells us that "The history of the nation [...] needs to be sketched again and again, if only to underscore the fact that the past is embedded in the present, which in turn is embedded in the future – and that the three times are inseparable" (p. 432).

Regarding the atrocities of the Banda regime Mapanje mentions elsewhere that "the project is to forgive, but not to forget." Speaking on behalf of all those who suffered the brutalities of that dark era, he says in his memoir: "Those of us who suffered under Banda and his Kadzamira-Tembo cabal cannot afford to forget the brutalities they exacted on us. Forgive perhaps we can; forget we could not possibly do; only death can erase that" for "however much we might deny, ignore or hide the injustices of the past, truth will eventually catch up with us" (p. 429). Mapanje concludes the "Afterword" of his memoir with an appropriate call to "our political leaders [...] to spare us the violence, injustices and siege mentality that characterised Banda's regime and [to] please give us the peace and freedom we have been crying out for [all] these years" (p. 433).

One cannot help but agree with Mapanje on these points.

Department of English  
Chancellor College  
P. O. Box 280  
Zomba  
MALAWI

*smthatiwa@cc.ac.mw*