

*Saying Change in Malawi:
Resistance and the Voices of
Jack Mapanje and Lucius Banda*

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A MINI-BUS ATTEMPTS to navigate Malawi's pot-hole-riddled lakeshore road. It dodges some holes and hits others, jolting its snugly fit passengers. The reggae rhythm of Lucius Banda flows from the van's speakers. "This song is called 'Adzalira'" my seat-mate informs me. "It means 'They shall regret.' He's saying that life is like honey; you must get rid of the bees before you may enjoy it. He's telling parents to teach their children the truth, or else they will regret. While their stomachs may be full today, tomorrow they may not be so lucky."¹

Rarely a day went by while I lived in Malawi, during 1997 and 1998, that I did not hear a track from Lucius Banda's cassette, *Cease Fire* (1996), blaring from the stereo of a bus or a bottle-store. As I sat on the stoop of a grocery, I would be asked if I understood the words. And when I admitted that I had only begun to learn Chichewa, I was told the meaning. In explaining the songs to me, my fellow patrons or passengers spoke on topics that not long ago were forbidden. Prior to the referendum on democracy in 1992, the Special Branch or the Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP) were listening; politics was not a subject for public discussion. Today, Lucius Banda's lyrics draw out smiles and laughter and elicit discussions of education, the family, food, poverty and pot-holes: politics and history.

In many respects, Malawi's history has followed the pattern shared by many other African nations. After decades of exploitation under British colonial rule, an organized political resistance movement directed by the Nyasaland African Congress (NAC) led to Malawian independence in 1964. Dreams of self-determination and a more equitable distribution of resources

and wealth were quickly revealed to be illusions, however, as the NAC transformed itself from an independence movement into Malawi's sole political party, the Malawi Congress Party (MCP), and as Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, the figurehead of the independence movement, quickly consolidated power within that party. For thirty years, the people of Malawi suffered under a system no more democratic or less exploitive than the colonial order. In the early 1990's, as pro-democratic movements emerged across Africa, Malawi, with its own particular causes and method, underwent a transition from autocracy to multi-party democracy.

To this point, little has been written of Malawi's history under Dr. Banda, of its remarkable political transformation in the early 1990's, or of the significance of cultural products in that transformation. The role of culture has certainly not been ignored in the study of resistance to oppression in Africa. The theorizing of resistance, however — whether it be Frantz Fanon's analysis of African independence movements and his concern for the shape of the newly established nation-states in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) or Barbara Harlow's treatment of the subject in *Resistance Literature* (1987), to name just two prominent critics — has tended to consider cultural resistance from a position which unquestioningly accepts the prominence and necessity of political organization and armed struggle. Many nationalist movements, in Ghana or Zimbabwe, for example, provide historical models of this paradigm of resistance. However, the continued economic exploitation and lack of gains in education or health care in newly-independent African states during the 1960's and 1970's, as well as the deep disillusion with independence reflected in literature produced in these states, reveals the failure of violent and political struggle to achieve the goals of national liberation or to effect change other than in the political order. Neocolonialism emerged out of the collapse of colonialism, altering the faces of power but not the political and economic structure. Similarly, newly democratic governments in Africa must work within an ever-increasingly globalized economy which leaves little room for genuine self-determination or socio-economic "liberation."

Lucius Banda has achieved immense popularity in Malawi in recent years. In *Cease Fire*, singing both in Malawi's national language Chichewa and its official language English, Banda protests the corruption and economic mismanagement of the newly-democratic Malawi and laments the fragmentation of community and family. In his stories and sermons, he promotes education, cooperation and nonviolence. Lucius Banda's words, however, are only a more forceful and popular intonation of a theme evident in the poetry of Jack Mapanje. In *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* (1993), written in the 1980's and early nineties, Mapanje describes the oppression of Dr. Banda's regime, the experience of being a political prisoner, and his release from prison during a time of dramatic political change. He writes of, and against, the injustice and repression of Malawi's First Republic era. However, juxtaposed to the recurring image of oppressive walls there is compassion and the cultivation of a new concept of the resistance hero. By discussing the songs of Lucius Banda's *Cease Fire* and the poems of Jack Mapanje's *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*, I wish to consider the role of cultural resistance in Malawi's transition from autocracy to democracy, not only in deconstructing and resisting domination, but in reconceiving the social order. I wish also to problematize constructions of resistance as necessarily violent, oppositional, and primarily political.

Although Malawi's path to independence was largely free of violence, in contrast to related movements in Africa and in contrast to prominent theories of resistance, Malawi suffered a fate similar to that of other postcolonial states. After the MCP ran unopposed in the 1964 elections, Dr. Banda purged the party; many of his opponents were detained, exiled or killed. Despite promises of development and prosperity, health, education and social indicators were among the worst in the world throughout the seventies and eighties (Young 13). Although it was not a "neo-liberal universalist" discourse, Banda's nationalist ideology conformed to that described by Neil Lazarus in his reading of Frantz Fanon. Such a discourse "equipped its users to make the claim that they were indeed speaking in the best interests of the nation as a whole even as it rendered them indifferent to

the actual circumstances of the general population” (Lazarus 9). Banda maintained order and his hold on power through intimidation while “reality” was moulded in a culture of deceit.

In March 1992, however, this imposed silence was broken. In a pastoral letter, *Living Our Faith*, Malawi’s Catholic Bishops uttered the unspeakable to hundreds of thousands of people. In the statement, the Church criticized the Banda regime for the underservicing of health care and education, for lack of government credibility, for an unfair judicial system, and for denying freedom of speech and association. In response to the letter, university students demonstrated in support of the Bishops and multi-partyism, and urban strikes were violently suppressed by the police and the MYP. Shortly thereafter, the international community suspended all but humanitarian aid. In October 1992, President Banda acceded to demands for a referendum and in June 1993 a majority of Malawians voted for the “Lantern,” democracy. For the second time in four decades, Malawi underwent major political change with relatively little violence.

Malawi’s transition from autocracy to democracy was precipitated by voices rather than violence. As I read Fanon’s representation and critique of nationalist movements in *The Wretched of the Earth*, these movements seem to be concerned primarily with the eviction of foreign rule. They are less concerned with the systems and structures of domination than with who wields power within those structures. While “independence” and “multi-partyism” in Malawi may be seen as little more than ends in themselves — the end of British rule and the end of Dr. Banda’s rule — resistance or change in Malawi should be regarded as in process. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said clearly differentiates between political and armed resistance, and ideological resistance (209). Barbara Harlow further contends that literature has a role “*alongside* the gun, the pamphlet and the diplomatic delegation” (xvii emphasis added); literature is an arena of struggle within a political movement. Certainly diplomacy, mass nonviolent direct action, pamphlets and international pressure were integral to Malawi’s transition to democracy, but positive social change in Malawi seems to be something which must be expressed rather than demanded or negotiated.

Jack Mapanje begins *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* with a poem which concludes with the image of children and friends “nestling up for a warm story” (“Another,” line 12). The word “shush” is repeated throughout the poem; this word, which may demand not just silence but also attention, sets the tone for the collection, which juxtaposes the climate of fear during Dr. Banda’s regime with the request for a captive audience to an alternative (hi)story. During Malawi’s First Republic era, the state controlled the story. In the poem “Kadango Village, Even Milimbo Lagoon is Dry,” Mapanje’s speaker describes how even the “bawdy songs” of fishermen are banned, “cloaked in the choking fumes of dawn” (line 17). Mapanje engages in an act of semiotic resistance, altering the MCP rallying-call of *kwacha* or “dawn” from a signifier of independence to one of repression. The speaker continues: “our fat-necked custodians despatch another tale” (line 18). The significance of the voice or the story both in Dr. Banda’s regime and in Malawian culture is a recurring trope in the collection. The truth of the nation is moulded metaphorically by the controller of the word.

In “For Fear of Which Mandrax Images & Which Death?” Mapanje’s speaker describes government censorship as a means of disguising the reality of violent repression of dissent, and muses upon Malawi’s climate of fear: “we merely chuckle at the in-/ ward truths we know we share but won’t admit/. . . . What of us? What/ Incurable despair has gripped us that our lips/ Won’t open? For fear of which elusive death?” (lines 15-6, 28-30). People remain silent in fear of the wrath of the MYP, but the concluding question of the poem suggests that this silence is itself a form of death.

The government body imposing this silence was the Malawi Censorship Board, established in 1968. Through the Censorship Board, the government controlled what was published, reported or performed; it suppressed languages other than Chichewa and English; and it exiled, detained or killed those who violated laws against dissent (Chimombo 1-2). As control of the written word only partially enabled the MCP to control

the "story" of Malawi, due to the high rate of illiteracy in either English or Chichewa, it was important for President Banda to control the oral media as well. To do this, Banda appropriated African traditions and in doing so, "gave a new twist to oral tradition, in which Malawian organic literature would be fundamentally subverted to serve his bent for Western interests" (Mphande 85).

Despite this repression and attempt to monopolize control of the (hi)story of Malawi, some did dare to open their lips. In the late 1970's, students and faculty of the University of Malawi formed the Malawi Writers' Group. The group was established to provide writers a forum in which to discuss their work but also to counter Dr. Banda's preference for the Western canon and to foster a distinctively Malawian literary tradition (Mphande 91). In practice, the Malawi Writers' Group was "the only forum in which Malawian affairs were habitually discussed . . . [as] young intellectuals whose interests would normally have been diverted into other channels . . . found in poems and short stories a rare permitted outlet for their concerns" (Vail 281). The genre of poetry, because it was easy to disguise dissent in poetic language and imagery, became a prominent arena of resistance (Mphande 96). As a member of the group, and later by publishing his work while a student in England, Jack Mapanje opened his lips often and widely enough to result in his more than three-and-a-half years of imprisonment without charge following the suppression of his first collection, *Of Chameleons and Gods* (1981).

In his poem "On Banning Of Chameleons and Gods," Mapanje pokes fun at the Banda regime and himself, seemingly minimizing the power of words:

. . . your brother's threat,
 'Your chameleons poke at the raw wounds of
 Our nation!' won't rhyme however much you
 Try. To ban, burn or merely withdraw from
 Public engagement, what's the difference? It
 Still humiliates our readers, you & me. . . .
 & why should my poking at raw wounds matter more
 Than your hacking at people's innocent necks?

(lines 3-8, 19-20)

The political poet is seemingly merely a trickster, and by condemning him the political order only legitimizes and strengthens his voice.

In its nationalizing project, the MCP attempted, to borrow the words of Edward Said, to “rename, reclaim and reinhabit” (226) Malawi by creating a national mythology. As a result, the act of story-telling became a crucial means of resistance to the MCP. Although there were numerous unsuccessful attempts to usurp power from President Banda through violence or from within the political system (see Vail 286-7) it is the utterance of an alternative history, by Jack Mapanje, and then the Catholic Church, which leads to the end of the Banda regime. The poet is not merely a trickster. Leroy Vail and Landeg White argue that a central reason for government opposition to Mapanje’s writing was the unwillingness to allow poems, or any utterance “that recorded with moral precision the main events of Malawian history since 1959” (Vail 310-311). While Barbara Harlow argues that the struggle over the historical record of a nation is “no less crucial than the armed struggle” (Harlow 7), in light of the history of many postcolonial African states, and Malawi in particular, I believe that the arena of cultural expression is paramount to that of diplomacy or force in a struggle to articulate what the nation *is* rather than a struggle over the political order of a nation and who wields power within that order.

In “The Release: Who Are You, *Imbongi*?” Mapanje muses upon the question he unexpectedly encountered upon his release from Mikuyu Prison. The speaker of the poem labels Mapanje an *imbongi* or “praise poet” and, drawing upon folklore, answers with “afterjokes”: “he’s the persistent / Brown ant that crept into the elephant’s / Ear, scratching, scratching, scratching, / Until the elephant destroyed himself. . .” (lines 36-39). Mapanje’s poetry may be a mere ant to the elephant that is Banda’s dictatorship, but it is the ant, the breaking of the silence, which leads to the regime’s collapse.

With the first democratic elections in 1994 came a more open society and the freedom to discuss the economy and the government over a packet of Chibuku beer. Already, however, disillusion with the failures of the new system to produce the

anticipated social and economic gains are being expressed in poems and short-stories in newspapers, in drama, and in popular music. Singing of the current political climate in Malawi, Lucius Banda, in "*Njira Zao*" or "Their Ways," presents a damning critique of corruption and greed among politicians. He maintains, however, that real power in the nation wrests with the people and that change is something to be uttered. "He's saying that the time will come when we say enough is enough," my friend translates. "That's how the old man was driven from power. Please, listen to my crying." In 1992, the public utterance of collective, unspoken knowledge, freed students, labourers, and farmers to resist, to speak openly, to raise the repressive cloak of dawn, and continued change will be precipitated in the same way.

I regard the poetry of Jack Mapanje and the songs of Lucius Banda as prominent contributions to what Vail and White define as a "mapping of experience": history as drama, evaluation and judgment, utilizing metaphors not simply as vehicles for events but "the means of comprehending those events in terms of permanent or changing systems of values" (73). In Mapanje's poems and Banda's songs, injustice, corruption and cruelty are named and described. Their resistance to domination, however, is not merely opposition but a creative and constructive articulation of what Malawi is or should be. I do not, however, wish to overstate the significance of the work of either poet in regard to social change in Malawi, and in their poems and songs I hear a recognition of the limitations of their individual voices.

Although the poems of *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* span a period which begins long before Mapanje's physical imprisonment and continues after it, these poems are those of a prisoner: a prisoner of oppression and injustice, of Mikuyu Prison, and of the discourse of protest or opposition. He writes from behind walls. While Mapanje's speaker expresses a sense of solace or freedom behind the "tranquil walls of York" (*Chattering* 10), Mapanje's use of English and his acquisition of a university education is a wall behind which his ideas are imprisoned; the vast majority of Malawians do not have access

to his poems, and if they did they would be unable to read them due to Mapanje's complex and subversive use of English. Yet, Mapanje does not profess to lead the vanguard of social change. Setting himself against the myth-making Dr. Banda, who spent much of his pre-presidential life in the United Kingdom, Mapanje writes, as if in a letter to a friend back home in Malawi:

... And knowing what
 We know about dawns and bonfires, I believe I
 Was not meant to map out Africa's dawn from
 The dark alleys of London & I make no apology
 For being a late visionary . . .

("April Wishes," lines 9-12)

Lucius Banda's position is somewhat different. Posters advertising a 1998 national concert tour billed Banda as the "Voice of the Voiceless." Preaching, story-telling, teaching, mostly in Chichewa and with a popular reggae rhythm, Banda is likely the most widely known and popular Malawian artist. In "*Amandituma*" or "They Send Me," he argues that he has been sent by the poor to speak on their behalf. However, in counselling opposition politicians in another song, "*Tigwirana Manja*" or "Let's Cooperate," he recognizes that it is easy for a passenger to criticize a driver. Further, he laments in "What's Wrong?" that there is so much bad news in Africa that he does not know what to sing about, thereby questioning the power of his own voice and of words in general.

For Barbara Harlow, the chief function of resistance poetry is to preserve or articulate the cultural images of organized resistance in the historical moment (82). Neither the poetry of Mapanje nor the music of Banda fits neatly into this paradigm, as neither works within or represents an organized movement. Yet in the work of both men there is a literal and symbolic recording of the historical moment in terms of events and of values. Lucius Banda's tape includes songs which may be characterized as protest songs. In "*Njira Zao*," for example, he condemns the politician and the political order. "In this song," I am told, "he says that in the past persecution was the order of the day. Nowadays we are cheated and told lies. He's saying that while they may pretend to be just and honest, we'll soon see

that they are the same ones who oppressed us before; they have changed their names but not their behaviour." His criticism may be heard not so much as criticism of the ruling party within an oppositional discourse, as it is a criticism of the failure of the social order genuinely to change with the transition to democracy. Lucius Banda is a story-teller or a preacher, reciting tales or giving sermons not to condemn but to provide a moral lesson. He describes men who are unfaithful to their wives, or the greed of a man's family who takes from a woman all of her possessions following her husband's death. Banda's resistance does not condemn an oppressive "other"; rather, it recognizes the iniquities of the social order.

His most antagonistic song, and the most damning in content, is the English title-track, "Cease Fire." To a pounding reggae beat, Banda, in an angry monologue, takes stock of the ills of Africa and Malawi: war, oppression, the repression of dissent, economic exploitation, inequality, selfishness, the failures of democracy. He utilizes an inflammatory rhetoric; for instance, a dictator who is given five years to rule will develop only "A stream of blood- blood, sweat and tears / You know one thing, tyrants are always tricky, clever, shiny like snakes" (22-23). However, this wide-ranging catalogue of injustice and cruelty has no single party, individual or even ideology to blame, only the metaphorical Babylon, a recurring metaphor for oppression in Banda's work. He punctuates this monologue with a refrain, a plea: "cease fire." The ills Banda catalogues, from the unwillingness to confront openly the AIDS pandemic to a comparison of Malawi's first elected government with the former regime, are all part of the "fire" which Banda calls upon to "cease." While certainly not an uplifting message, implicit in the association of "fire" with the hardships confronting Africa is the futility of a discourse of opposition.

Many of Mapanje's pre-imprisonment poems included in *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* are also characteristic of an oppositional or antagonistic paradigm of resistance. Mapanje represents and critiques the repression and deprivation suffered by the people of Malawi during the 1980's. He "maps" the experience of the Kamuzu Banda regime, from descriptions of

peasant deprivation and exploitation to value-laden and metaphorically-rich alternatives of history, alluding, for example, in "The Rise of the New Toadies," to the automobile "accident" which claimed the lives of three cabinet ministers in 1983. In "The Farms that Gobble the Land at Home," the speaker reinterprets government development initiatives as failures: small-scale farmers are unable to afford required fertilizers and are exploited as Wage Earning Tenants while "Rural Growth Centres" are revealed to be whorehouses. Mapanje records in these poems one of the few alternative histories of Malawi's First Republic era. He seems to willingly utilize a rhetoric of blame, yet I read the denunciation of an oppressive or cruel "you," "him" or "them" as ironic.

In "Where Dissent is Meat for Crocodiles," the speaker describes how, since the inception of the nation, "This monster of state . . . / Continues rest / lessly to breed its plethora of / Baffling metaphors" (lines 5-8). Protesting workers and students or those who dare to defend a woman who wears trousers are "brethren in dissent / . . . out of bounds, meat for crocodiles, / Mere cliché in our country's anthology / Of martyrs, perhaps even smudges on / The blank page of this nation" (lines 29-33). Do we read Mapanje's satire as condemnation of Dr. Banda and his government, or as irony, revealing such rhetoric of blame to be an obstacle to positive change? The speaker of the poem concludes, "But in a century crying out / For love, what rancorous metaphors!" (lines 36-37).

Are such rancorous metaphors really resistance or does this bitterness and anger leave the writer merely a belligerent, no different from those condemned? In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon describes the progression of the native intellectual from active assimilation into the culture of the occupying power, to an awakener of his compatriots, and finally to a realization that the "proof of the nation" is not in cultural achievements but in the fight against occupation (222-3). This outline is part of a much larger discussion of nationalism and culture set firmly in the historical period of the end of colonialism. I do not wish to conflate the economic, political or identity issues of the climax of the colonial period with that of contemporary

Malawi. However, it is this text and these issues which have underpinned the development of the theory of cultural resistance. In a sense, Mapanje and Banda, as poets, are involved in performing the task of “awakening” the people of Malawi, but I do not believe a “fighting” or “revolutionary” literature, as Fanon calls it, a recording of and protest against the experience of injustice, exploitation and deprivation, constitutes a genuine awakening of a community. The power of Mapanje’s poetry, the Bishops’ Letter or Banda’s songs is both in the fact and, more importantly, in the manner that they utter the unspeakable. I read in the poetry of Jack Mapanje and Lucius Banda not simply “resistance” — a pointing out of the pot-holes in the road — but directions towards an alternative path.

Mapanje leaves Mikuyu Prison pondering the question, “who are you, *imbongi*?” (*Chattering* 71-72). Traditionally in Southern and Central Africa, the *imbongi* or “praise poet” has fulfilled the role of chronicling lives, most often the reign of chiefs. In the song, the singer has the license to praise worthy attributes of the subject as well as criticize the unworthy. For instance, a praise poet may decry a chief’s neglect of a duty, or in a pounding song, a woman may satirize her husband’s laziness. In the praise song, opinions may be expressed that would otherwise be a breach of social convention (Vail 54, 285).

Under the guise of strengthening traditional cultures, President Banda distorted traditional practices and institutions, including transforming the praise song into mere flattery of his rule (see Mphande). Mapanje then, described by Vail and White as the first poet “to appeal to this aesthetic as his license in questioning power” (286), reclaims the tradition. Mapanje is not, however, attempting to return to an idealized past. I believe that both Mapanje and Lucius Banda draw upon the tradition of poetic license, but what they have to say, and how they say it, is shaped by a complex web of influences including Malawi’s landscape, reggae, Christianity, English poetry, the experience of colonialism and dictatorship, local folk traditions, and so on. For instance, in “*Mukawatule*” or “Send Her Back,” Banda draws upon Chewa proverbs and assumes the voice of a guide or a teacher counselling an unfaithful husband. “Do you

know the song you're listening to?" my neighbour shouts, smiling, as she cooks her family's lunch. "He's saying the world has gone wild with AIDS, and he's telling a man that if he can't be faithful to his wife then he should send her back to her mother while she is still alive." In their poetry, Jack Mapanje and Lucius Banda assume a variety of voices, including that of critic or preacher, politician or farmer. They adapt the tradition of the praise song to the contemporary situation, chronicling the historical moment. Barbara Harlow underpins her analysis of literary resistance on the notion that resistance is an act *against* the authority and institutions of a dominating power (Harlow 50, emphasis added). I hope that by considering Mapanje and Banda within the tradition of the praise song, and with emphasis upon the poet's role as counsellor, I have demonstrated that these two poets articulate a more creative and constructive form of resistance.

Although Mapanje's poetic discourse often seems imprisoned within the walls of protest, the pattern of usurping domination — resistance as opposition and retribution — is broken at times. The imagery of the "Chattering Wagtails" section of the collection, poems conceived during his imprisonment, is resilient as often as it is desolate. Outside the dark walls of Mikuyu prison is the memory and the hope of beauty, often in the image of winged creatures such as moths or wagtails. Pondering wall-etchings of previous prisoners, Mapanje's speaker, in "Scrubbing the Furious Walls of Mikuyu," wonders, "Who'd / have known I'd find another prey without / charge, without trial (without bitterness)" (lines 33-35). The voice of a political prisoner describes the unsanitary conditions of his cell, muses upon the fate of previous inmates of the room, and records, in a place where pens and paper have been denied, a sad era of Malawi's history. Yet, two words imprisoned in parentheses resound: "without bitterness."

Critic Angela Smith writes that "people in the new, post-Banda Malawi may not need Said's 'oppositional quality' from their artists and intellectuals as much as they need an imaginative interpretation of nationalism" (169). I believe, however, that such an imaginative remaking of the nation is already, and

perhaps always has been, in process. Mapanje and Banda utilize the poet's license to critique society, and in so doing contribute to the remaking of the nation, an interpretation of nationalism in which the dominant order's power to construct identity is undermined and in which identity is much a matter of values and attitudes. In "*Tasiyana bwanji?*" or "What difference do we make?" Lucius Banda sings of the injustice of capital punishment. Drawing upon the Biblical story of Cain and Abel, the song is ostensibly a moral critique of the death penalty and a call for its abolition. He states that if we follow the principle of an eye for an eye, we will all become blind and, in the chorus, asks what difference we make if we kill murderers for the sin of killing. I hear in this query — "*tasiyana bwanji?*/what difference do we make?" — not so much a demand for change as a questioning of where change must take place. My seat-mate on the bus turns to me and says: "This song is called '*Tigwirane manja.*' He's talking to politicians and to peasants, saying that we are all passengers on the same ship and that if we love each other, we'll win the battle against our poverty." Genuine, positive social change is not legislated in the political system but articulated in the values and attitudes of the community, an articulation that must be free of bitterness.

As part of the project of reclaiming a nation's history, the writer has transformed resistance leaders into national heroes. To counter President Banda's selective history, members of the Malawi Writers' Group, including Jack Mapanje, endeavoured to give prominence to heroes of resistance (Mphande 92). A number of the poems in *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* include imagery of "martyrs." In reclaiming the praise song from President Banda's corrupting of the tradition, Mapanje, and Lucius Banda as well, redefine who is to be praised and why. In contrast to the three faces that have graced Malawi's banknotes — the *ngwazi* or "saviour" of the nation, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda; the first democratically elected President, Dr. Bakili Muluzi; and, most recently, the leader of a failed 1915 rebellion against the British, John Chilembwe — Mapanje's heroes, while they may be opponents of colonialism or Dr. Banda, are not solely remembered for their acts of protest.

Having been a leader of the NAC and Malawi's independence, Orton Chirwa was imprisoned by President Banda and died a political prisoner in 1992. Elegizing Chirwa, Mapanje recounts Chirwa's exploits as a resistance leader and, significantly, as a political prisoner. Mapanje writes that a "monolith" will tower to Chirwa's memory, but in my reading of this elegy and my conceptualization of resistance, Chirwa's "heroism" is passed from prisoner to prisoner: "The legend of the foyagowns you stitched/ Together to make a mimicry of bedsheets/ . . . Your lore continued to urge us to combat/ The stench of Mikuyu bats without bitterness" ("In Memoriam," lines 25-26, 29-30). As a prisoner himself, Mapanje draws courage not from Chirwa's political leadership or his status as victim but because Chirwa resists despair and hatred.

In a poem written before Mapanje's imprisonment, "The Haggling Old Woman at Balaka," a "dear granny" is remembered for her willingness to protest and for the content of her protest. The woman's unabashed and dangerous defiance of the social order and decorum, as presented in monologue form, is enclosed by the introductory and concluding couplets of a speaker who seems embarrassed by and fearful of the woman as "She haggles over every new event" (*Chattering* 9). She laments the malnourishment of children as a product of "national development" and criticizes the imposition of the use of fertilizers which must be purchased on loan. She rejects the hollow achievements of neocolonialism and the arrogance of Dr. Banda, vowing to keep her crop for herself: "No, I've sung too many tattered praises, / Spare me these spotted desires, children" (lines 18-19). In haggling over every event, she reveals her concern for the welfare of her community and criticizes her community's acceptance of values and attitudes imposed upon it.

I read the walls of Mikuyu Prison as not only an important image of Mapanje's prison experience but as a metaphor for oppression and injustice. The trope is established in "The Chattering Wagtails" section of the collection but continues in the poems written following his release, juxtaposing the walls of Mikuyu with those of York and the crumbling Berlin Wall. The

space enclosed by the walls of Mikuyu is one that is too small for its captives, reeks with the filth of wagtail shit and pails of excrement, and crawls with cockroaches and scorpions. Tempted by despair, Mapanje is emotionally buoyed by the subject of "You Caught Me Slipping Off Your Shoulders Once." The subject of this praise poem, another prisoner, commits himself to helping others survive the prison ordeal:

... I

Hear those commands you shouted at me, often
At midnight as the hyenas howled, when you knew

I was awake, 'Come and watch this moon!' you'd
Whisper. 'It goes past that gap once a month!'

Sometimes at noon, 'Climb my shoulders, view
Those trees blossoming outside, you will be

Blinded gazing at these sick walls . . . '

(lines 22-29)

The prisoner tells the speaker to peep through the cracks, for one day it may be his wife who sits under the tree. The subject of the poem is a "resistance hero" though he is not angry and does not protest. He resists despair and bitterness rather than an enemy or ideology. "Liberation" is, or will be, the result of constructive endeavours inspired by hope.

In addition to decrying injustice, Lucius Banda identifies attitudes and behaviour necessary for the social development he desires. For instance, one needs education and realistic, rather than idealistic, goals. Banda renames or redefines the resistance hero. He counsels compassion, justice, respect and personal responsibility, and he praises the courage of individuals to resist the expectations of modern society regarding, for example, family responsibility and the social construction of manhood. In "*Ulimbe mtima*" or "Take Courage," he assumes the voice of a man who has left the village for town, seeking to provide for the family he has left behind. He has lived a desperate and lonely life, weeping at the thought of all he gave up. He is

not afraid to shed tears, though some may call him weak. Unemployed, he feels he is a failure. His wife commits suicide thinking he is with another woman. It is a painful and dear lesson, but the man resolves that bringing up children is a difficult task and that children need love from the parents, not monetary support alone. It is a praise song of which the subject is society. It is a parable or lesson which resists dominant societal assumptions and fosters alternative notions of manhood and the nature of wealth.

The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison and *Cease Fire* may be read within a tradition of "resistance literature," but I believe that neither should be confined by this critical perspective. Both Mapanje and Banda record a value-laden interpretation of history, using the poem or the song, and drawing upon diverse traditions while creating new metaphors, to say that which is not supposed to be spoken. In the work of both poets, I read disillusionment with resistance and with the failure of "independence" or "democracy" to produce significant social and material improvements for the general populace. Dreams of liberation born from and within the walls of a politics and discourse of oppression failed. With the failure of "revolution" — a struggle *against* a "them," a political entity — to promote genuine and positive social and economic change, I read in the work of Mapanje and Banda a position directed at extinguishing the "fire," a broadly defined notion of the social, political and economic ills of Malawi. Mere protest of the "fire," a pointing-out of the pot-holes in the road, is insufficient and violent overthrow is impracticable. Social change is a process in which culture is not merely an arena of struggle but what the struggle is about: how communities live and understand their lives. While both poets partake in the "rhetoric of blame," both poets also reveal that an oppositional discourse limits one's ability to imagine alternatives to structures of domination.

In the final poem of his collection, "The Deluge after Our Gweru Prison Dreams," Jack Mapanje records a history of Malawi's First Republic era, an era envisioned by Hastings Kamuzu Banda while a political prisoner of the British, and he expresses concern for the consequences of Malawi's latest "revo-

lution." The speaker of the poem states, "the time has come for our / Youths to dance; and let them take / The arena" (lines 31-33). In the final song of *Cease Fire*, "Down Babylon II," Lucius Banda assumes the voice of God uttering the fall of Babylon or oppression. Presumably, then, the task is left to the next generation or to God to articulate change, a "new" nation. In the poems of Jack Mapanje and Lucius Banda, however, an ethic of caring and compassion is being fostered. I regard the work of these two poets as taking part in a struggle not only to dismantle an unjust social and political order but also to cultivate the values and attitudes necessary for the social, political and material developments aspired to in the image of "liberation." Consequently, I recognize in their work a reclaiming, a renaming and reinhabiting of what it is to resist: they say change.

NOTES

- ¹ This paper has been adapted from a paper I presented at the General Conference of the International Peace Research Association (IPRA) at Durban, South Africa in June 1998.
- ² I would like to thank Lucius Banda for providing me with a promotional poster which included the lyrics to the songs of *Cease Fire*. I would also like to thank L.S. Kamphonda and G. Jeremaya-Phiri for providing English translations for the songs written and sung in Chichewa. I have chosen to paraphrase the songs of *Cease Fire* or to present them in the voice of a patron at a bar or a passenger on a bus in an attempt to preserve the oral quality of the songs and to share the way in which Banda's music is heard and discussed.

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