

Bird Metaphors in Jack Mapanje's *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison and Skipping Without Ropes*

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Abstract

It is a notable feature of Jack Mapanje's poetry that it represents creatures from the world of nature—mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and insects—for close association with life experiences in various contexts and situations and with people he views with contempt and disgust and those he regards with tenderness and compassion. Through his use of animals in his poetry Mapanje seeks to comment on social and political affairs in his society. This essay focuses on bird metaphors or the symbolic import of birds, which Mapanje depicts in the poems dealing with his imprisonment, release from prison and the associated experiences. I argue in the essay that Mapanje uses birds as metaphors for the poetic voice (or himself), fellow prisoners at Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison, exiled Malawians and other victims of Malawi's dictator Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, as well as victims of other oppressors and despots around the world. Where metaphors are used in this way the aim is to underscore the harmlessness, victimhood, and suffering of these victims, while emphasising the oppressors' evil and injustice. In cases where the metaphor is for the poetic voice it also highlights the creativity and ingenuity of the poet. Besides representing birds as images for certain individuals, the poet also represents them as symbols of events in his life.

Key Concepts: metaphor, representation, dictatorship, harmlessness, victimisation.

Master, you talked with bows,
Arrows and catapults once
Your hands steaming with hawk blood
To protect your chicken.

Why do you talk with knives now,
Your hands teaming with eggshells
And hot blood from your own chicken?
Is it to impress your visitors? (Mapanje 1981:4).

In Jack Mapanje's poem 'Song of Chickens', the chickens accuse their master, a human, of duplicity for protecting them from predators but later killing them for food. This is an instance of a typical human-animal relationship (especially between a farmer and his/ her domestic animals) where a human protects his/ her livestock from predators only to be the predator him/ herself later on. However, in the context of the poem, as some critics have rightly observed, the poem's extra-poetic referent is Malawian dictator Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda who ruled the country from independence in 1964 to 1994. The allegorical persona of the chicken collectively represents ordinary Malawians (Nazombe 1983:176; Chirambo 2007a:82-83; 2007b:144-146). Banda came as a liberator of his people from colonial bondage. He championed the struggle against colonialism, but when freedom was won, he turned against his own people—oppressing them.

The mention of blood in the poem evokes the 'Chilobwe Murders' of the 1960s and 1970s. Accompanied by various rumours, these were mysterious murders that took place in 'several townships in the country's southern and central regions' (Mapanje 2007:63), particularly in Chilobwe township in the commercial city of Blantyre. According to Paul Brietzke (1974: 362):

One rumour held that the Government was responsible for the murders, and was draining the victims' blood and sending it to South Africa to repay a loan, since white men are believed to drink African blood and manufacture money from it.

In the poem the collective persona of the chicken represents the victims of oppression, although they themselves are harmless. It is typical in

Malawi to have a host slaughter a chicken for a visitor. Having a chicken slaughtered for you as a visitor is one of the greatest symbols of welcome and honour. In the poem the visitor could be South African Prime Minister John Vorster who paid a state visit to Malawi in 1970, the year the poem was written (Chirambo 2007a:82; 2007b:144). The visit followed on South Africa's agreement to finance Banda's project of moving Malawi's capital from Zomba to Lilongwe (see Potts 1985:188f). It was around the time after Banda had struck the deal with the South African government that the mysterious murders in Chilobwe and other townships in Malawi began to take place and rumours began to make the rounds that South Africa had agreed to fund Banda's project in exchange for blood. Besides, during the 1960s and 1970s, the period Mapanje deals with in 'A Song of Chickens', up to the 1980s, the Banda regime 'arrested, tortured, and killed hundreds of Jehovah's Witnesses' who refused to buy the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) membership card, 'salute the flag, or attend [Banda's] official functions' (Chirambo 2007a:83; see also *Africa Watch* 1990:64ff). Many of them were forced into exile in Zambia and Mozambique.

In the poem the chickens are portrayed as harmless victims of the whims of their master. Similarly, Malawians whom the chickens represent were victims of Banda's despotism. Mapanje's tendency to highlight the victimhood and suffering of harmless people by using bird imagery that begins here continues in the two collections which form the textual focus of this essay, namely *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* (CWMP, 1993) and *Skipping Without Ropes* (SWR, 1998). Dating from 1981, 'Song of Chickens' formed part of his collection, *Of Chameleons and Gods*, which was,

neither officially proscribed nor cleared for sale. Thus bookshops were not allowed to display it, but no one could be prosecuted for possessing a copy. In 1985 the Ministry of Education and Culture issued a circular banning its use in schools and colleges (Human Rights Watch/ Africa Watch 1990:76).

This volume set the stage for the critical politically loaded poetry of Jack Mapanje. Mapanje was incarcerated in 1987 without trial and released more than three years later. CWMP and SWR contain some of this poetry on his

prison experiences and their aftermath. The main reason for focusing on these two volumes concerns his use of bird metaphors relevant to the topic of this colloquium. Reflecting on his use of metaphor less than a year prior to his imprisonment, he quoted,

the Polish novelist Tadeusz Konwicki to the effect that censorship ‘forces the writer to employ metaphors which raise the piece of writing to a higher level’. He is amused that the Malawi Censorship board may have actually improved his poems (Human Rights Watch/Africa Watch 1990:76).

This essay then focuses on bird metaphors¹ or the symbolic import of birds, which Mapanje depicts in the poems dealing with his imprisonment, release from prison and the associated experiences. For this purpose, I have identified a number of themes related to Mapanje’s bird metaphors which are significant for our focus. In general this derives from his familiarity with birds and their ubiquity in Malawi and in Malawi’s oral tradition, but also his actual encounter with them during his imprisonment and thereafter. From within his own context, he has drawn on what Leonard Lutwack (1994:xii) refers to when he points out that birds,

are used more frequently in poetry than in any other genre because they can be incorporated more easily in the minute imagery that makes up the basic stuff of poetry than in the broader elements of plot and character upon which drama and fiction depend.

Lutwack also observes that ‘[f]amiliarity and transcendence have given birds a wider range of meaning and symbol in literature than any other animal’ (1994:xi). It is no doubt his familiarity with birds and their common presence in Malawi that inspired Mapanje’s use of them in his poetry.

¹ For purposes of brevity, the minimalistic understanding of ‘metaphor’ is used, e.g. as the application of ‘a word or expression which in literal usage denotes one kind of thing or action [...] to a distinctly different kind of thing or action, without asserting a comparison’ (Abrams 1993:65). It stands to reason that the metaphoric meanings so produced would often be more than one as they are generated in metaphoric usage.

1 The 'Song of Chickens' in Context

'Song of Chickens' appeared in Mapanje's first collection of poetry *Of Chameleons and Gods (OCAG)*, which appeared in 1981, and it is the only poem from that collection that so explicitly uses bird metaphors. *OCAG* appeared at a time when the excesses of the notorious dictatorial leadership of Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda were at their peak. During this time Malawians experienced a regime characterised by terror and repression. Those who opposed or were suspected of holding contrary views to those of Banda and the MCP suffered long detentions without trial or were murdered (Africa Watch/ Africa Watch 1990).

To engage in creative writing that was critical of Banda's style of leadership under such circumstances would be considered foolhardy. Not surprisingly, other well-known Malawian writers such as Frank Chipasula, Lupenga Mphande, Felix Mnthali, and Legson Kayira, among others, went into exile. Those

authors operating from within Malawi had to resort to a private and cryptic mode of expression in [their] writing in order to elude both the tough censorship laws of the country and the real possibility of political persecution (Nazombe 1995:139).

Animals such as chameleons, lizards, flies, cockroaches, and their associated myths, and the mythical subterranean serpent Napolo, came in handy for some Malawian poets.

However, despite his attempts to mask his political messages in *OCAG*, Mapanje spent three years, seven months and sixteen days in Kamuzu Banda's notorious Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison without charge or trial. Although the real reasons for his detention still remain unknown, it is indisputable that they had something to do with the politics of the time (see Chirambo 2007 a & b; Mapanje 1989; 1997 a & b). Mapanje himself suspects that his lunch-hour arrest at Gymkhana Club in Zomba on the 25th of September, 1987, which led to his detention in Mikuyu Prison until May 1991, came as a result of what he calls his 'peeping into the dictator's drawer'—exposing the evils of the Banda regime through his writing (Mapanje 1997c:219).

Unlike in *OCAG*, Mapanje makes no attempt to obscure the victims

of his sardonic humour, satire and lampoon in subsequent poems. This can be attributed to the fact that all his poetry collections after *OACG* appeared while he was in exile in the United Kingdom. In the subsequent collections he dispenses with cryptic language and myths but maintains his use of metaphors, especially animal metaphors. It is also in these subsequent collections, especially in *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison* and *Skipping Without Ropes*, where the ‘rhetoric of animality’² and animal metaphors are most prevalent.

The fact that Mapanje maintains the use of animal metaphors in his post-Banda poetry also reveals the deep influence of Malawi’s oral narratives, in which animals act as mirrors of human society and behaviour. His use of animals also proves the validity of Claude Levi-Strauss’s observation that animals are ‘good to think with’ and Kate Soper’s (2005:307) observation that:

In animals we discover our own loathsome and most laudable qualities, projecting on to them both that with which we most closely identify, and that which we are most keen to be distanced from.

I should hasten to mention that the use of animals in poetry as demonstrated by Mapanje in ‘Song of Chickens’, and in literature in general, is as old as humanity itself. Animals have appeared in written and oral literature, both African and Western, since time immemorial. Mary Allen starts an introduction to her book *Animals in American Literature* with the cogent observation that ‘Animals have served literature well’. She goes on to say, ‘They have stood as allegorical figures to represent human nature and as a rich body of metaphors for the inanimate as well as the animate’ (Allen 1983:3). Animals have been used as examples for humans to follow or avoid in fables that serve as standards of moral didacticism, they have represented various human and godly attributes, they have been used to teach moral and religious lessons, and in satire they have held up mirrors that serve to ridicule human foibles and political corruption.

² The tendency to give people, institutions, or societies that we do not like or despise derogatory animal names such as ‘beast’ or ‘brute’, or to refer to them using names of particular animals as a crude tactic of name-calling (Baker 1993:77ff).

Three notable ways of representing animals in literature can, according to Soper, be termed naturalistic, allegorical and compassionate. In the naturalistic mode animals 'are described in a fairly straightforward way and figure as part of the narrative situation and environmental context' (Soper 2005:303), while the allegorical register depicts animals not as natural beings but as metaphors for human beings or registers of human forms of behaviour'. The compassionate mode of animal representation, on the other hand, uses literary works 'as a way of meditating upon or bringing us to think about our treatment of animals' (Soper 2005:307). But, as Allen (1983:6) also observes, 'The metaphorical [read the allegorical] far outnumber the literal animals in literature'. It is in fact these metaphorical uses of animals that we encounter most often in the poetry of Jack Mapanje.

2 'Song of Chickens' and Harmlessness

In addition to the predetention context 'Song of Chickens' creates for the volumes *CWMP* and *SWR*, it is also significant that it uses the figure of a domestic bird. More often than not, the birds and mammals that feature in Mapanje's poetry are wild rather than domestic ones. References to domestic birds are very rare in his poetry. This perhaps owes to the fact that his representation of animals in general is influenced by oral literature and, as Brian Morris observes, 'domestic animals play a minor role in [Malawian] folk tales' (1998:181). Leroy Vail and Landeg White rightly observe that Mapanje is attracted by the oral aesthetic and uses aspects of it in his poetry (1990:30-32; see also Nazombe 1983:161). Vail and White (1990:31) say,

To Mapanje, the language of the oral poet is sophisticated and mischievous, dense with history refined to metaphor, yet capable of dynamic effects of communication precisely because those metaphors are understood and have achieved currency. To recreate in Malawian English a language of such local resonance, recapturing the toughness and complexity of oral poetry and especially its capacity for intellectual rebellion, has become his literary programme

It is a notable feature of Jack Mapanje's poetry that it represents creatures from the world of nature—mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and insects—for 'close association' (Uledi-Kamanga 1998:42) with life experiences in various contexts and situations and with people he views with contempt and disgust and those he regards with tenderness and compassion. Through his use of animals in his poetry Mapanje seeks to comment on social and political affairs in his society.

Mapanje uses birds as metaphors for the poetic voice (or himself), fellow prisoners at Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison, exiled Malawians and other victims of Banda, as well as victims of other oppressors and despots around the world. Where metaphors are used in this way the aim is to underscore the harmlessness, victimhood, and suffering of these victims, while emphasising the oppressors' evil and injustice. In cases where the metaphor is for the poetic voice it also highlights the creativity and ingenuity of the poet. Besides representing birds as images for certain individuals, the poet also represents them as symbols of events in his life.

In literary works more generally birds have featured as, for instance, 'harbingers of the time of day and seasons of the year' (Lutwack 1994:23). Their songs are associated with intense sorrow and joy, while a lone black bird or crow in a tree in winter has been seen by many poets as an image of forlornness (Lutwack 1994:29). Whereas the nightingale is a favourite muse of the poet as its song has been a pre-eminent symbol of poetic inspiration, the dove has featured as a favourite Christian or biblical symbol of the Holy Spirit and of purity. Night birds, large black-plumaged birds and birds with carrion-eating proclivities, such as ravens, crows and vultures, are seen as villains, supernatural agents of evil or prophets of doom.

In some of his portrayals of birds, Mapanje rejects traditional conceptions by selecting small and vulnerable species that are generally viewed as harmless, such as wagtails, and by extending a tender attitude towards birds that are normally reviled, such as the marabou stork. These portrayals are perhaps influenced by the dynamism of oral literature where a narrator may decide to alter the role of otherwise stock characters, challenging his/her listeners' expectations in the process, to suit the moral s/he intends to attach to the narrative.

In his representation of animals Mapanje exploits his society's wealth of knowledge about animals and the associations and attributes it

assigns to some of them. He does not always do this as thoroughly with birds. He omits from his poetry traditionally controversial birds such as the owl, and big birds such as the ostrich³. He also, unusually, shows the negative effects of the behaviour of birds traditionally considered harmless on the lives of prisoners in Mikuyu⁴.

Mapanje also uses bird metaphors and symbols to emphasise the harmlessness of Banda's presumed political enemies and their experiences of victimhood and suffering. In his article 'The Symbolism of Bondage and Freedom: Jack Mapanje's *The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison*' (1998) Brighton Uledi-Kamanga argues that Mapanje associates harmless animals (including birds) with freedom. This might be the case in a few instances in *CWMP*, but in Mapanje's poetry in general, and especially in *CWMP* and *SWR*, he associates these birds rather with harmlessness, defencelessness, victimhood and suffering. By the strategy of using these harmless birds (wagtails, sparrows, geese and swallows), Mapanje seeks to show that those who were persecuted during Banda's regime were harmless people who fell victim to the excesses of a despotic leader. Further, the bird imagery helps to expose the great physical and psychological suffering that detainees in Banda's prisons such as Mikuyu faced (Uledi-Kamanga 1998:44-45).

³ Malawians, like other peoples of Africa and the world at large, have interacted with animals since time immemorial (see Morris *The Power of Animals: An Ethnography* [1998], and *Animals and Ancestors: An Ethnography* [2000]). The intimate relationship between humans and animals in Malawi is demonstrated in, among other things, oral literature where animals, especially in folk stories, are humanised. As a result of their long interaction with animals, which dates back to antiquity, Malawians connect certain attributes and behavioural traits epistemologically with particular animals. For example the lion is associated with bravery and cruelty, the elephant with strength, and the owl with witchcraft, death and misfortune.

⁴ The reader will notice that there are more negative images of birds in Mapanje's poetry as discussed here than positive ones. Although positive images of birds do also appear in Mapanje's oeuvre, it is beyond the purpose of this essay to attempt to balance the negative and positive images of birds in the poetry.

Those portrayed as harmless victims of Banda's paranoiac fear of rebellion are Malawians in general, prisoners in the various detention centres in the country (Mikuyu, in particular, Dzeleka, and Nsanje, among others), and the poet himself. Mostly, wherever the poet uses a metaphor for himself, he is pointing to his creativity, inventiveness and cunning. In the link with harmlessness, it is ironic that these detainees are mostly non-threatening individuals. For instance, the killing of Malawians whose only crime was holding a contrary view to that of the ruling clique is alluded to in 'Where Dissent is Meat for Crocodiles' (1993:80-81). The poem refers to the tendency to suppress dissenting views by imprisoning, exiling or killing those who held such views and feeding them to crocodiles in the River Shire. But in the same poem Banda (who is called 'this monster' or 'this beast') is said to have 'persistently blatantly wrung / And squelched nimble necks of sparrows' (1993:80). The violence underlined by the word 'wrung' emphasises Banda's insensitivity and evil while the innocence of his victims is emphasised by their depiction as sparrows.

Significantly, the threads of harmlessness and how harmless people are physically and psychologically abused as victims are carried forward through various related motifs in *CWMP* and *SWR*.

3 Bird Metaphors and Harmlessness

3.1 Wagtails

Mapanje continues to expose the harmlessness and victimhood of Malawians who found themselves in prison in his poem 'The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison' (1993:48-52). As Uledi-Kamanga notes, Mapanje uses in this poem 'the technique of literary self-effacement as a strategy for excluding his own physical and emotional reaction to his situation by presenting the poem from the point of view of another inmate' of Mikuyu Prison (1998:43). The speaker in the poem welcomes the poet, who is moved from the wing of Mikuyu called 'New Building', to the section of the prison called D4:

Welcome to the chattering wagtails of
D4. Before your Gymkhana Club story,
Let's begin with the history of the wing
You've come from. They call it the New

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Building, which is so marvellously blank
As you saw, that you'd have cracked up
Within months, however tough-willed;
Thank these D4s for moving you here (1993:48).

In the poem the wagtails are both real and metaphorical. The metaphorical wagtails are the prisoners who are introduced to the poet by the speaker as 'these chattering wagtails of D4' and are later referred to as 'these / sparrows in D4' or 'swallows':

We won't bother you with cases of these
Sparrows in D4, talk to them to share
Their humour; but let not the years some
Swallows have clocked here horrify you
(Sixteen, eleven, seven, that's nothing) [...] (1993:50).

The real wagtails are introduced to the addressee as 'the other wagtails / Of Mikuyu Prison; these that chatter in / Circles showing off their fluffy wings / To you' (1993:51). The features of the human wagtails, sparrows or swallows that stand out in the poem are their kindness (they helped facilitate the addressee's move from an isolation cell in the 'New Building' to the general section called D4), their humour (the poet is advised to 'talk to them to share / Their humour') and the injustice done to them by their long detention (the poet is advised not to let 'the years some / Swallows have clocked here horrify [him] / [Sixteen, eleven, seven ...]'). The prisoners are called 'chattering wagtails' because, like the real wagtails that sing all day, they have a great sense of humour and chatter a lot as they share life and prison experiences and jokes⁵. However, the bird metaphors here (especially

⁵ In reply to an interview question from Landeg White as to why he uses wagtails in *CWMP*, Mapanje said about the real birds: 'When I was in prison wagtails annoyed me and all the other inmates. They disturbed my creative and my spiritual life—initially, every aspect of my life in prison was irritated by the wagtails' (1994:54). About his wagtail metaphor, he said: 'I discovered that the majority of the inmates were, if you like, chattering wagtails. They are chattering away about their own little story, why they

the particular birds used—wagtails, swallows and sparrows) emphasise the prisoners' harmless and accentuate their victimhood. Wagtails, swallows and sparrows are generally perceived as harmless birds.

The real wagtails have both positive and negative aspects for the prisoners. Their chattering in circles, their 'showing off [of] their fluffy wings' and their splendour are said to presage visitors for those prisoners that are allowed any at Mikuyu. Moreover, they are referred to as inmates of the prison, since, as Uledi-Kamanga observes, they share the same 'filthy Mikuyu environment' (1998:49)—they are fellow sufferers with the prisoners in the confines of Mikuyu Prison. Nowhere is the similar identity and fellowship that is shared between the real and the metaphorical wagtails clearer than in the belief that these wagtails could follow prisoners admitted 'to Central Prison Sick Bay' to minister to them (Mapanje 1993:51). Here Mapanje alludes to a story he heard from a fellow inmate who claimed that when at one point he was very sick and was moved from Mikuyu to Zomba Central Prison for treatment, one of the wagtails followed him there. 'The wagtail just sat in the corner of his cell. Every morning he got up the little wagtail was there, sort of ministering to him and talking to him and he inwardly talked to it' (Mapanje 1994:54).

Nevertheless, the relationship between the prisoners and the wagtails is not always rosy as the poet tells us that,

When the day locks up, these wagtails
Twitter another tale; you won't laugh
When this courtyard wiregauze fills with
Thousands of wagtails that sleep standing
On one leg, head under wings, snoring
About today, fabricating their stinking
Shit on the courtyard below for us to mop
Tomorrow; and everyday you must mop this
Courtyard to survive the stench; D4 has
Even devised wagtail shit-mopping rosters,
The best in the land [...] (1993:51).

came here, why they weren't taken to court, what the government has done to them' (1994:54).

The above lines show that the wagtails accentuate the suffering of the prisoners. The stench in Mikuyu is another recurrent cause of discomfort for the prisoners. In this case, wagtails feature as agents of the prisoners' suffering⁶. Nevertheless, the mopping of the wagtails' droppings was not perhaps absolutely bad as the prisoners could also exercise as they cleaned. In the poem, therefore, the poet shows an ambivalent attitude towards the wagtails—they are both fellow sufferers or victims and enemies or victimisers.

The last line of the poem collapses the identities of the real wagtails and the metaphorical ones by simply welcoming the addressee 'To these chattering wagtails of Mikuyu!' after briefing him on the other evils of prison such as bites from ticks, fleas and mosquitoes, stings from scorpions and noise from hyenas. This emphasises the fact that the real wagtails are just as much victims of human cruelty and brutality as the prisoners themselves.

3.2 *Marabous*

Mapanje also makes reference to the victimhood and suffering of his fellow prisoners in 'Hector's Slapping of Mama's Brother' (1998:20-21), where he refers to them as 'marabous'. The poem itself deals with the poet's recollection of the release from prison of Hector who was arrested for slapping Cecilia Kadzamira's⁷ ('mama' in the poem) brother, and other prisoners. These are prisoners with whom Mapanje shared the trying experiences of detention in Mikuyu. One such experience was insomnia, which necessitated the discreet acquisition of valium to help them get some sleep. Hector and more than twenty other prisoners were released, leaving Mapanje (who was 'prisoner *never* to be released') behind bars as we hear him lament:

⁶ The shit is a symbol for evil in the phrases 'Mopping the wagtail shit of their creation' (1993:50) and 'confronting the wagtail shit of Mikuyu Prison' (1993:47) in the same poem.

⁷ Cecilia Kadzamira (Mama C. Tamanda Kadzamira to many Malawians) whom Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda simply and fondly called Mama, was the bachelor president's official hostess and long time confidante. Some Malawians speculate that she was Banda's mistress.

[...] now that Hector and more
Than twenty marabous have been liberated
Leaving us alone, unwanted, sterile, I dread
The time our turn will come [...] (1998:20)⁸.

One experience Mapanje had with these ‘marabous’ involved Hector’s request for valiums from Mapanje. When Mapanje tells him that he no longer has any, Hector barks: ‘Use your influence then’ (1998:20). This hurts Mapanje who withdraws into his cell to, as he puts it, ‘cry the hurt to sleep’ (1998:20). Later, possibly frustrated by the lack of valiums, Hector picks a fight with another prisoner. The immediate cause of the fight is Hector’s boasting that ‘only he was / The man in Mikuyu for plucking the temper / To bruise life-despot’s concubine’s brother in / A brawl’ (1998:21). The two combatants are separated by irate guards who

Lock them in punishment cells chained to
The stocks, handcuffed, leg-ironed and naked
No water, no food, three buckets of cold water
Poured onto their frigid bodies, then felled on
The cold cement floor to swim for three days (1998:20).

At the time of these recollections the poet could ‘still hear Hector’s comrade in his cell / Shrieking, remembering his mother’ (1998:21). The excessiveness of the punishment on these prisoners horrifies. The marabou stork is a victim of human contempt and ridicule as it ‘is commonly portrayed as being mean and ugly and as lacking good motive’ (*Awake!* nd). Like the marabou, the prisoners were the objects of contempt and scorn from their incarcerators. But, in addition to their victimhood, Hector’s and the other inmates’ selfish tendencies probably help to persuade Mapanje to call them ‘marabous’. The marabou ‘is a carrion eater’ that would kill other birds to satisfy its hunger when carcasses are scarce’ (*Awake* np). Hector’s poor

⁸ When the Inspector General of Police recommended to Banda that Mapanje, along with four other prisoners, be considered for release, Banda approved the release of the other prisoners and inscribed ‘never’ against Mapanje’s name. See ‘Our Friend Police Inspector General’ (1998:23-24).

public relations and selfish behaviour in the poem is therefore marabout-like.

3.3 Pigeon and Swallow

In 'Guilty of Nipping Her Pumpkin Leaves' (1998:66-67) the poet refers to himself variously as a 'pigeon', a 'swallow', and a 'turtle'. All these birds are normally regarded as harmless creatures and one suspects that the poet seeks to emphasise his own innocence by invoking them. The pigeon, like its near relative the dove, is considered a symbol of peace. Moreover, in the bible Noah relied on a dove to bring him the message about the end of the flood after the ravens had abandoned their mission (Genesis 8.11). The dove, therefore, like the poet, is a messenger. As a bird it is also an appropriate metaphor in the sense that in one of the most popular folktales in Malawi, that of Sikusinja and Gwenembe, it is a bird that reveals Gwenembe's secretive killing of his brother Sikusinja to his parents and the whole village. Like the bird in the story of *Sikusinja ndi Gwenembe*, in his poetry the poet exposes unwelcome truths for the powers that be. Besides, in an earlier poem, 'Glory Be to Chingwe's Hole' (1981:44), in which Mapanje uses another Malawian folktale, a pigeon's melodious song attracts the attention of a cruel chief and his guards who momentarily forget their duty of guarding Frog's beautiful wife (from wood which he carved and gave life to by inserting a pin on its head) whom the chief had abducted. Their momentary lapse of concentration enables Eagle to snatch the pin from the woman's head to render her lifeless as planned by Frog and his helpers. The pigeon's creativity enables Frog to execute his revenge on the chief.

In the poem 'Guilty of Nipping Her Pumpkin Leaves' Mapanje who has returned home in October 1994, after the removal of Banda in a democratic election, 'with a film crew from Diverse Productions of London to record for the BBC's TV programme *Africa '95*' (Mapanje 1998:78) decides to pay a woman vegetable seller for the pumpkin leaves he borrowed from her seven years before—that is before his detention and exile. In the ensuing conversation we hear that the woman 'cannot recall / When the pigeon was 'taken' [detained] or the swallow / Wafted to those dissonant frosty habitats [...]' (1998:66). The 'frosty habitats' here refers to the West where the poet migrated to after his release and the 'swallow', which is well

known for its migratory behaviour or its ability to fly long distances, is an appropriate metaphor for the poet as migrant to faraway places. The 'turtle' on the other hand is known for its long memory, especially its ability to return to the place of its birth to lay its eggs after an absence of many years. It therefore serves as the right animal to associate with Mapanje's ability to remember the debt he owed the woman vegetable seller after seven long years.

4 Bird Metaphors and Suffering

4.1 Ravens

Furthermore, Jack Mapanje uses animal metaphors and symbolism to expose the physical and psychological suffering of the prisoners in Mikuyu, the kind of suffering that induces him to call the lowly existence of prisoners 'our cockroach lives' and 'our gecko lives'⁹ in 'The Trip of Chief Commissioner of Police (1990)' (1993:64). Like the wagtails in 'The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison', ravens or crows are also architects of suffering for the prisoners in Mikuyu, as we see in 'The Famished Stubborn Ravens of Mikuyu' (1993:55). These ravens cause a racket on the roof of the prison, making the poet suspect that they are sent by the prisoners' adversaries¹⁰. For him,

[t]hese could not be Noah's ravens, these crows
of Mikuyu Prison groaning on our roof-tops each
day [...]
Noah's ravens could not have landed
Here (they never returned to their master's ark) (1993:55).

⁹ The comparison of the prisoners' lives of deprivation to those of these creatures degrades the creatures' lives. And yet human life is normally seen as superior to that of the creatures.

¹⁰ The poet here exploits a traditional belief that some animals such as owls, lions, hyenas, even rats, are owned through magic by some people who use them to victimise their enemies. The frustrating behaviour of the ravens strengthens such a belief in the poet.

They could not be Elijah's either for, as the poet puts it,

however
stubbornly this nation might challenge
Lord Almighty's frogs, these devouring locusts,
the endless droughts and plagues¹¹ today there's
no prophet God so loves as to want to rescue
(with the bread and meat from messenger ravens!) (1993:55)

This recalls Elijah. For Mapanje these ravens at Mikuyu

can only be from the heathen stock of
famished crows and carrion vultures sent here
to peck at our insomnia and agony-blood eyes
and to club the peace of this desert cell with
their tough knocking beaks (1993:55).

The fact that the ravens are bothersome comes out clearly when we hear the bitter poet asking in consternation:

And why don't they
choose some place and some other time?
Why must these crows happen at Mikuyu Prison,
always at dawn, hammering at the corrugated
iron of this cell, drilling at the marrow of our
fragile bones and picking at the fishbones
thieved from the dust bins we ditched outside? (1993:55)

The two phrases 'to peck at our insomnia and agony-blood eyes' and

¹¹ Signs of God's anger with his people. Elijah was fed by ravens in the wilderness (1 Kings 17:2-7). As a Christian, Mapanje could have been aware of these biblical stories before his detention or he may have come across them from his reading of the bible in prison. Bibles were the only books allowed in prison; however, they were in short supply as there would only be three bibles for ninety prisoners.

‘drilling at the marrow of our / fragile bones’ emphasises the deep psychological torture that the ravens’ behaviour causes for the prisoners.

4.2 Bats

Yet another cause of the prisoners’ suffering is the stench from bats and their droppings as well as the prison walls described as ‘fetid walls of these / Cold cells’ in ‘To the Unknown Dutch Postcard-Sender (1988)’ (1993:58) and ‘reeking walls’ in ‘The Stench of Porridge’ (2004:191-192). The stench in prison, from the walls, human urine, wagtail shit, and from bats in particular, stands out as perhaps the most constantly oppressive thing in prison, judging from the poet’s regular reference to it. For instance, there is mention of ‘stinking bats of Mikuyu’ in ‘The Trip of Chief Commissioner of Prisons (1990)’ (1993:64), ‘The stench of Mikuyu bats’ in ‘In Memoriam (For Orton Chirwa, 20 October 1992)’ (1993:93), and ‘stinking bats’ in ‘Warm Thoughts for Ken Saro-Wiwa’ (1998:46).

4.3 Vultures

Another interesting thing in ‘Warm Thoughts for Ken Saro-Wiwa’ is the fact that Mapanje uses a bird metaphor (that of a vulture) to scorn the police or security forces that help despots cling on to power by abusing other citizens. In the poem the forces who abducted Ken Saro-Wiwa, the Nigerian author, television producer, environmentalist and president of the [Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People](#) (MOSOP), following directives from the military dictator Sani Abacha, are called ‘The armed vultures’ (1998:46). The vulture is another bird that is held in great contempt by many people and is, as a bird of misfortune, associated with death. It is seen as ugly and its scavenging behaviour invites similar scorn to that visited upon the marabou stork. By calling the armed forces ‘armed vultures’, therefore, Mapanje is characterising these forces as contemptuous and hideous.

5 Birds—Positive and Negative

From the above discussion the reader might be forgiven for thinking that Mapanje only associates birds with negative experiences. This view,

however, is not entirely true since birds and insects (animals that fly), as Uledi-Kamanga (1998) observes, also serve as symbols of freedom from bondage—they presage the release of prisoners from Mikuyu. The speaker in 'The Chattering Wagtails of Mikuyu Prison' tells the poet that the wagtails and 'the dragon flies, hundreds of moths / In golden robes, the geese flying over [the prison] and more', bring messages of cheer, and foretell 'releases to come' (1993:51). Not surprisingly, the sight of dragon flies 'swarming over the prison yard' stirs hope in the poet especially upon hearing 'nyapala¹² Disi' declare that such a spectacle had been witnessed in Mikuyu once over the fourteen years he had been there and on that occasion two hundred prisoners were released. Again the sight of hundreds of moths in the cell and on the walls awakens hope for release from bondage. We also notice that when Mapanje is finally released and is in exile, the sight of Canada geese flying 'high above' Alison's house prompts him to tell his friends that:

[...] that chain
Of geese flying thus over Mikuyu Prison
From Lake Chilwa towards Zomba mountain
Ranges, gently criss-crossing, meant
Release of many political prisoners
Within weeks ('Canadian Geese Flying Over Alison's House'
[1993:82])¹³.

And as if in confirmation of this prophecy he gets news that 'the last eight political prisoners' he had 'Left at Mikuyu Prison' (1993:82) had been released. The number of the prisoners is similar to the number of geese he had seen flying over Alison's house. Here the birds, unlike their counterparts elsewhere in Mapanje's poetry, play a positive, prophetic role for the prisoners.

¹² 'A kind of "prefect" in a cell' (Mapanje 1993:99).

¹³ There seems to be a discrepancy between the titular geese and the common name of the actual geese that Mapanje refers to here, which he saw during a visit to Toronto, Canada. The common name for these birds is 'Canada Geese', not 'Canadian Geese'.

Birds therefore play both a negative and positive role in Mapanje's poems on his imprisonment and later release. As I have attempted to demonstrate in the preceding discussion, Mapanje uses birds as metaphors for the poetic voice (or himself), for his fellow prisoners at Mikuyu Maximum Security Prison, for exiled Malawians and other victims of Banda, as well as for victims of oppressors and despots around the world. By using birds in this way he seeks to underscore the harmlessness, victimhood, and suffering of these victims while emphasising the evil and injustice of oppressors, in Malawi and beyond. Mapanje also represents birds as symbols of release from prison. In some cases the negative attitudes that society takes towards some birds such as the vulture and the marabou stork are replicated, thereby revealing his indebtedness to his society's attitudes to animals in general, and birds in particular, in his representations of them in the poetry.

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