

Jack mapanje as an imbongi.

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HOW JACK MAPANJE FULFILLS THE ROLE OF AN “IMBONGI”- ON HIS ROYAL BLINDNESS PARAMOUNT CHIEF KWANGWALA. Africa is one of the world's continents, having a unique physical make up of its own which comprises of some of the distinct features in the likes of mountains, lakes, falls and plains just to mention a few. It is from this outset that one of the integral branches of literature particularly African literature sprouted.

Practiced and expressed in the southern central nation of Malawi, African literature was used as a tool in a fight for change and was used to question the monstrous leadership of the Malawi nation which was being practiced by the then country's president late Dr Hastings Kamuzu Banda. Chirambo (2009: p1) highlights that the government of former president for life Dr. H. K. Banda and the Malawi Congress Party (MCP) in Malawi was a dictatorship that relied on coercion as well as mobilization of grassroots popular support and consent to maintain itself in power for 30 years (1964–1994).

It was this governance that gave birth to different self camouflaging writing styles, a point which Kerr (1987) agrees to by saying that writers formed a Malawian creative writing movement which used literary methods that frequently outwitted Banda and his ever vigilant formal and informal censors. Jack Mapanje, James Gibbs, Leroy Vail and Landeg White all give accounts of how writers managed to beat censorship. Using oral forms, new metaphors from Malawi's indigenous languages, suggestive words, puns, and certain popular phrases, they managed to camouflage some of the critical literature for circulation without reprisal.

Depicting such a writing style some of the writers emerged as messengers. These messengers in African literature are termed as “Imbongis”. This essay

intends to bring to the fore how Jack Mapanje fulfills the role of an imbongi through his writings basing its discussion on a three stanza poem “ On His Royal Blindness Paramount Chief Kwangwala”. Mapanje is one of Malawi’s renowned poets who suffered the hand of Kamuzu's readership as he was detained without charge for almost four years between September 1987 and May 1991.

At the time of his arrest, Mapanje was serving as Chair of the English Department at Chancellor College of the University of Malawi. To this day the government has not given the actual reasons for his detention (Chirambo: 2009, p4). Writing in the time s of “ Kamuzuism” a term assigned to symbolize Kamuzu's oppressive acts, Mapanje secured the role of an imbongi as his writings circulated against Kamuzu's leadership with criticism, disagreement and at the same time praise. Whereby these are some of the roles of a praise poet (an Imbongi).

Mafeje(1967: p193) defines an imbongi as someone who lived in close proximity to the Chief’s Great Place and who accompanied the Chief on important occasions . His performances would be directed at the Chief, decrying what was unworthy, praising what was worthy and even forecasting what was going to happen. Clearly, the Imbongi's role was one that allowed for criticism . With reference to Mafeje's definition then taking a closer look at Mapanje's title “ On His Royal Blindness Paramount Chief Kwangwala” it can easily be assumed that the poet was describing the leadership of a chief whom the poet himself served as an imbongi.

The title on the other hand is brandished with sarcasm as the poet has used the term “ blindness” which represents the lost in direction of the leadership

in discussion. This leadership can be equated to that of Kamuzu this is so as Banda regarded Malawi as one big village in which he was the paramount Chief, father, guardian, and protector of all people and went so far as to call Malawi, “ my tribe . . . the whole nation, the tribe of Malawi” (Chirambo: 2001, p 226). This prompts us to earmark Kamuzu as the chief who's leadership the poet is trying to describe with sarcasm.

In the opening stanza the poet is praising the chief by describing how the chief (Kamuzu) finds loyalty in the carried-awayness of his people not under the fact that they really are carried away but the chief has instilled in them a sense that he is their hero. This is the same spirit that those who lived in the Kamuzu era expressed and it was due to the fact that Kamuzu termed himself with all sorts of self praising names for example Banda was called “ Wamuyaya”, meaning “ the immortal”.

The other reason for the undeserved praises was that Kamuzu ordered all women and girls to sing songs of praise where ever he was to visit and he named them “ Mbumba za Kamuzu” meaning Kamuzu's children. As an Imbongi the poet in the first two lines of the poem praising his chief but at the same time in the preceding four lines of the stanza the poet is expressing his bad feeling over how the chief talks to his people as he addresses.

The poet has used the term “ golden breath” which insinuates the importance of the chief's talks simultaneously criticizing him even more by calling the speeches breath wasting, this has been presented in irony in the line that says . “ Those impromptu, long-winded tirades of your might” Thus Mapanje depicting the role of an imbongi. The second stanza is just a

continuation ironic praise the poet is expressing towards the Chief to whom he is an imbongi. In the first lines of the stanza the poet is refuting the thinking that he is criticizing the chief's powers which is exactly what he did in the first stanza.

He manages to do this by admitting that him too is supposed to praise the leader and this has been developed in the lines that say; " I know I too must sing to such royalhappiness" " And I am not arguing". To further show his devotion Mapanje describes the leader's might by talking about how those that questioned his power suffered, and this is praise in disguise making Mapanje to assume the role of an Imbongi. Mapanje brings up the issue of those that suffered Kamuzuism as they questioned the leader's powers, as a way of showing up his might and at the same time exposing the dark parts of the leader's era.

This has been brought up in the lines that say; " How dare I when we have scribbled our praises all over our graves? " Which is a question that the poet has posed to mean how could he question the president's leadership yet he knows that others have died because of doing the same. A point which is similar to what Steve Chimombo raised in his piece " A Dead Song" in which he picked animals in the likes of lizards and rats and described by saying they kept seeking refuge from time to time. In Chimombo's context these homeless animals symbolized some of the politicians who went into exile and others who died mysteriously.

Mapanje in the last lines of the second stanza is using the leader's ill-treatments for praise and implicitly unveiling the president's monstrosity. Thereby fulfilling his role as an imbongi. In the third stanza Mapanje is

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proceeding with his criticism by highlighting that he can not go against the president's governance as he knows people have always done what ever they can to make the leader proud and he would not want to defy such a record. This is in the five lines that say; “ Why should I quarrel when I too have known mask dancers Dancers making troubled journeys to the gold mines

On bare foot and bringing back fake European gadgets The broken pipes, torn coats, crumpled bowler hats, Dangling mirrors and rusty tin cans to make their dancing strange? ” Mapanje closes the last line by questioning if others did not die trying to please the president. This is to prove how inhuman the president was. In complete closure Mapanje's last stanza is in total refutation of his underlying criticism in the first three stanzas. He addresses the chief as “ His grace” in sarcasm and refers to himself as just a child who is bored by the chief's self-praising, long, meaningless and tedious speeches .

Even though he throws such criticism is at the same time praising the chief in the lines that say “ I am only a child surprised how you broadly disparage Me shocked only by the tedium of your continuous palaver. I adore your majesty”. The poet then goes on by reminding the leader that his leadership powers are time bound and will at some point in time come to an end, and this is in total rejection of the term that refers to the president as being immortal the poet has presented this as a simile.

He is also making a wake up call to the nation by asking it as to when will it realize it is misled by old age that is being expressed by the president. This has been expressed by the poet in the lines that say; “ But paramountcy is

like a rain drop On a vast sea. Why should we wait for the children to Tell us about toothless gums or our showing flies. In conclusion Jack Mapanje as a poet he fulfills his role as an imbongi by using irony, sarcasm, similes, metaphors as poetic tools to camouflage his Kamuzuism challenging ideas which is one of the roles of a praise poet (Imbongi) .

Despite highlighting the monstrosity of Kamuzu's leadership, Mapanje at the same time praises the president. Thereby fulfilling his role as an Imbongi.

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