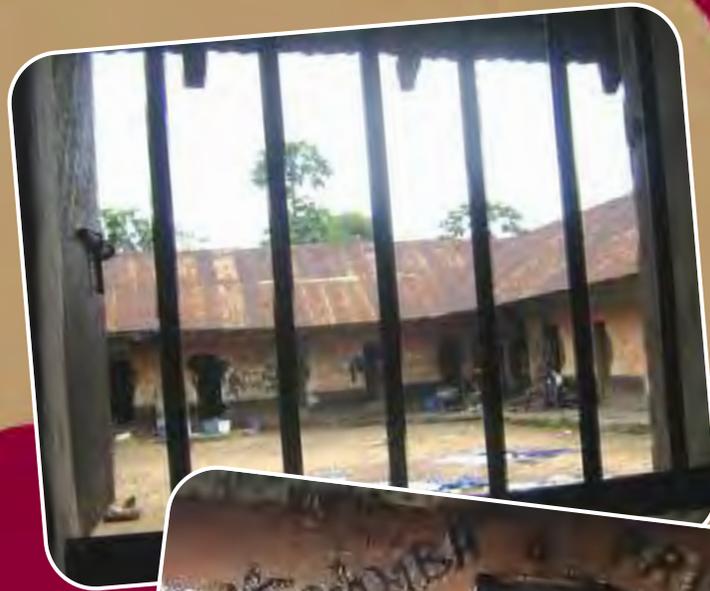


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in Africa**

repertoire of practical norms that are at play in a given context. Human rights are not a blueprint that can be successfully (or unsuccessfully) exported into an institutional landscape like UPS. A better analogy would be that human rights are a supple raw material that is imported locally.

Conclusion

Where does this lead us more generally in the exploration of the effect of policy reforms in African prisons? And in the exploration of the localisation of human rights?

First of all, we need to acknowledge that prisons in Africa are run according to discernible rules; they have their own rationality. They are not abject spaces of chaos and arbitrary violence. They are rather locations of intense and complex tactical competence, embedded in local histories, governed through pluralistic normative orders. People in these places tend to be pragmatic with eyes fixed on institutional, professional and physical survival.

This is an important insight if we care about what happens in these institutions — not just in Uganda, but also as a point of departure when one wants to understand and respond to other penal situations — for instance when European governments help to run pirate prisons in Somaliland or worry about the plight of Afghan detainees handed over from military custody to local prison authorities.

Secondly, this study shows that human rights have a propensity to become a mundane managerial tool rather than a noble expression of justice. Thus, human rights do not necessarily have as much top down power as is both hoped for (and feared). In UPS, at least, human rights are in fact rather inspirational and pragmatic but material circumstance sets limits for their effectiveness. Human rights are a powerful — and in many ways potentially commendable — change agent, but human rights are also just another ideology. The effect is messy and needs to be understood — and sought after — from the bottom up.

Skipping Without Rope¹

By Jack Mapanje²

I will, I will skip without your rope
Since you say I should not, I cannot
Borrow your son's skipping rope to
Exercise my limbs, I will skip without

Your Rope as you say even the lace
I want till hang my neck until I die
I will create my own rope, my own
Hope and skip without your rope as

You insist I do not require to stretch
My limbs fixed by these fevers of your
Reeking sweat and your prison walls
I will, I will skip with my forged hope;

Watch, watch me skip without your
Rope what me skip with my hope
A-one, a-two, a-three, a-four, a-five
I will, a-seven, I do, will skip, a-ten,

Eleven, I will skip without, will skip
Within and skip I do without your
Rope but with my hope; and I will,
Will always skip you dull, will skip

Your silly rules, skip your filthy walls
Your weevil pigeon peas, skip your
Scorpions, skip your Excellency Life
Glory; I do, you don't, I can, you can't

I will, you won't, I see, you don't, I
Sweat, you don't, I will, I will wipe my
Gluey brow then wipe you at a stroke
I will, will wipe your horrid, stinking,

Vulgar prison rules, will wipe you all
then hop about, hop about my cell, my
Home, the mountains, my globe, as your
Sparrow hops about your prison yard

Without your hope, without your rope
I swear, I will skip without your rope, I
Declare, I will have you take me to your
Showers and bathe me where I can resist

This singing child you want to shape me
I'll fight your rope, your rules, your hope
As your sparrow does under your super-
vision! Guards! Take us for the shower!

1. Prisoners were not allowed to bathe until they stank; they created stench by skipping.
2. Reprinted with the kind permission of Jack Mapanje, *The Last of the Sweet Bananas: New & Selected Poems* (Bloodaxe Books, 2004).