

**Wednesday, 13 July 2005**  
**Trevor Mostyn interviews Jean-Louis Ntadi for Open Democracy**  
**(online journal)**

*Aged 40, the Congo-Brazzaville playwright **Jean-Louis Ntadi** arrived at Heathrow on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2004 with a British visa. After interrogation he was refused asylum in the UK and was sent to Oakington detention centre where he was put into the immigration authority's so-called 'fast track' system. He has a wife and six children. He is a sensitive, frail man in poor health. He has had a limp since birth. He speaks and writes impeccable French. He is strongly Christian and carries a bible everywhere. His play *Le Chef d'Etat* is a parable highly critical of the Congo-Brazzaville presidency of President Sassou-Nguesso. Ntadi is a political activist with the main opposition party, *Le Mouvement Congolais pour La Democratie et la Developpement Integral* (MCDDI) led by the exiled Bernard Kolelas. On account of these activities Ntadi spent 14 months in prison in Brazzaville and was tortured. Ntadi has passed through five UK detention centres (Oakington, Harmondsorth, Belmarsh, Dover and Campsfield) and about seven lawyers. He claims he was beaten up by Wackenhut, the UK's deportation police, taking him from Harmondsworth to Heathrow after a 'super fast-track' deportation order in May 2004. The Home Office claims inconsistencies and 'lack of veracity' in his defence. For his part, Ntadi claims Home Office errors in fact. He also cites errors in translation by poor, hurried translators. He claims that he was confused at Heathrow and could understand no English, that documents have been given to him for signature at the last minute and that interpreters and lawyers, prior to the Refugee Legal Centre (RLC) who now represent him, have failed him. Father Seraphim Vanttinen Newton, a Russian orthodox priest who is chaplain to detainees at Campsfield, says that Ntadi is a man of great integrity and is deeply religious, sincere and modest. Ntadi's prayers remind Father Seraphim of the anaphora prayer in the Divine Liturgy of the sixth century St John Chrysostom. In April 2005 Ntadi was commissioned to write *The Cries of the Cricket*, a play based on his experiences produced by the theatre company Flight 5056. Soon after this The RLC persuaded the immigration service to release him on bail. He is now living in a house in Oxford run by three women dedicated to a religious life. *The Cries of the Cricket* was performed in the London Eye on 21 June 2005 as part of a celebration of African culture in advance of the G8 summit in Scotland in July. A week later it was performed again at the Olivier Theatre in London's National theatre complex. Ntadi has been made an honorary member of English PEN and received a formal motion of support from the delegates to the International conference of PEN held in Bled, Slovenia, in June 2005.*

**TM:** You are married with six children

**JL-N:** Yes, I was married in 1996. My wife is from the Lari tribe. She studied accountancy in Brazzaville.

**TM:** How did you make ends meet?

**JL-N:** In 1990 I was a student but my wife was in commerce. She sold salted fish. We started with a small shop, then expanded to a depot, then bought another shop.

**TM:** You studied drama at the University of Brazzaville. What were your dramatic influences?

**JL-N:** The influences on me were purely African. The main influence was Guy Menga Bikouta who fled the Congo in 1974. He was a journalist who became director-general of Congo Radio and Television. Also Tchicaya U'tamsi and Sony-Labou-Tansi who died in 1995. I have also read the works of Hamadou Ampate Ba, in particular his novel *Wangrin*. *Sous L'Orage*, the novel by the Guinean writer, also influenced me as did the works of the Cameroonian Guillaume Oyono Mbida and also, of course, the famous Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka.

**TM:** I felt that I recognised the influence of the plays of Sophocles, particularly in the use of the chorus, the *fetichistes*, in your play *Le Chef d'Etat*.

**JL-N:** No. I have read no Greek literature.

**TM:** Other European or Russian writers?

**JL-N:** No. Nothing at all from outside Africa.

**TM:** Why did you join the opposition party, *the Le Mouvement Congolais pour La Democratie et la Developpement Integral* ?

**JL-N:** I joined the MCDDI because of Bernard Kolelas, the leader of the party. He was optimistic and courageous. He always said 'no' to socialism and to monopolyism. He believed that the Leninists had led people virtually into the gutter and into a world of murder and theft. He suffered so very much for his country. You know, he was condemned nine times to death.

**TM:** Meanwhile, you joined the Red Cross.

**JL-N:** I joined them as a pro-bono aid-worker when in 1983 I went to Kinkala to do my Brevet d'Etudes Moyennes Generales (BEMG) exam. I had no financial gain working for the Red Cross. I just worked for the wellbeing of the organisation.

**TM:** In 1999 there was a massacre you all but witnessed. Working with the Red Cross you greeted the return from Kinshasa of women and children, while many of the men were detained and later massacred.

**JL-N:** Yes. In September 1998 I returned to Brazzaville because I had fled the region of Pool where there was civil war. When I was a student I had bought a piece of land in Kinkala. My family and I fled first to Linzolo, then to Mbanaza-Ndoundou. Then we went to Kibouma (Ngouma), the village of my father. Then we ended up in Kinkala.

At Kinkala a humanitarian corridor had been opened up. People were told that the road was open and safe for them to return to Brazzaville. There were, in fact, two corridors, one from villages in the Pool region to Brazzaville Beach and another from Kinshasa Beach across the River Congo to neighbouring Brazzaville Beach. One of the Pool corridors went from Nganga-Lingolo to Brazzaville which followed the Route Nationale 1.

I returned to Brazzaville at the beginning of April with my little family. I arrived at the humanitarian corridor where the International Red Cross and organisations like the Programme Alimentaire et de Developpement pour les Nations Unies (PNUT) were stationed. Vehicles were there to escort people to the food centre, the

assembly centre. They put people here who had returned from the villages or from Kinshasa. Those who were malnourished were taken to the food centres. We arrived at Makan. We went with The Red Cross to the food centre, then we went to our house.

When I reached my home the Red Cross came to tell me that, as a Red Cross worker, it was my duty to join them for work. My job was to disinfect the area because people were lying dead in their houses, people whom the militias had killed inside their houses; also, people who had been killed in the market and whose bodies were stinking horribly.

As soon as I arrived in Brazzaville I joined up with the aid workers to bury the bodies and disinfect the market, disinfect the area. Because there were three areas, three different districts in this war. There was district 1, district 2 and district 7, all in the south of Brazzaville. I went all over the place with Red Cross colleagues, to Nganga-Lingolo, to Brazzaville Beach where we prepared food for the sick.

At this time a big Red Cross delegation came over from Kinshasa with 400-500 people. These people were registered on Kinshasa Beach. Led by the Red Cross, they arrived at Brazzaville Beach. We were inside big lorries ready to take in the children. The security services and the police were all over the place.

The women and children arrived. They were crying. Exhausted men arrived. They, too, were weeping. Most of the men, maybe 400 of them, had been kept back on the other side. We were behind a wall so we couldn't see what was happening. We took in all those who had been freed. It was a terrible thing to witness; children, old men, women, weeping their eyes out. The men were never heard of again. I heard that they had been pushed into containers which were dropped into the river to drown them. Ten were taken for interrogation at the presidential palace. Seven were shot there after interrogation. Three escaped and are now in France where they have given evidence.

**TM:** Now your own troubles started when you were imprisoned for three days in Brazzaville.

**JL-N:** Yes, I was taken into the central police station. I was interrogated. I had no complaints of mistreatment then but they questioned me over my play, *Le Chef d'Etat*. They asked me a thousand questions. They kept asking "What does your play mean?" While I was incarcerated the security forces came to my house and questioned my wife about me. It was moral torture. After three days I was released.

In July 2001 I was called in again for interrogation about *Le Chef d'Etat* over a 24-hour period. Two of my other manuscripts were seized. On 24 December, on Christmas Eve, I was again called in for questioning. I was ordered to attend a hearing of the tribunal on 12 January. I had nothing to feel guilty about. The judge asked me three of four questions. I had showed him my diplomas to prove that I had worked for the Red Cross, for example. Nevertheless, I was charged but not convicted of defamation, trafficking information and murder.

**TM:** Murder? Why murder ?

**JL-N:** I didn't understand that. I just don't know

**TM:** They're accusing you of their own crime

**JL-N:** Yes, accusing one of something absurd like murder is just an attempt to stitch you up. The government was frightened because relations of those massacred in 1999 had taken their case to the high court (La Tribune de Grande Instance) in Paris.

I spent 14 months in prison where, during the first ten days, they beat me and tortured me with electrodes to my bad leg – it was damaged at birth - but I was never convicted of anything.

**TM:** How were you treated in prison?

**JL-N:** Conditions were very bad. There were four people to a cell. The food was bad.

**TM:** Were you allowed visits?

**JL-N:** Yes. Visits were allowed between 11 am and 6 pm. That is the custom in Congo-Brazzaville. Your family can bring you food. My wife and two children would visit me but I wouldn't allow my smallest child, who was only four, to see me in prison.

**TM:** Describe to me the circumstances of your release, Jean-Louis.

**JL-N:** I was released suddenly at six in the morning. They said 'Prepare your bags. We are taking you somewhere.'

I said, 'Where to?' I was frightened.

I asked, 'Are you going to kill me?'

The man replied, 'these are the only instructions I have. I don't know where they are taking you to. But you must get ready, wash, prepare your things.'

I couldn't wash. I gathered all the papers I had written in prison.

They told me I was being released. I thought they were trying to frighten me or else trying to mock me. I went to the reception to find out for certain and they confirmed that I was now free.

I asked them to give me a document confirming that I was free but they just said, "Go. You are free."

They gave me money for my taxi and I went home. But I did not stay in my house. From March 2003 until the moment I left for England I hardly ever stayed in the house. It wasn't safe. I moved to a place about ten kilometres from Brazzaville. I stayed with a friend. I couldn't stay with my family because they would have been threatened by the police. They would have been targeted.

**TM:** Did your wife want you to flee ?

**JL-N:** Yes, yes. The whole family wanted me to flee. Even my priest where I prayed did. He said to me, 'If you have the means the best thing is to leave the country.'

Even the men of God, the Brothers in Christ...wanted me to leave. I didn't want to stay in Africa because there is no security in Africa. I went to Benin, then to The Central African Republic, then to the Ivory Coast, just to get a visa because I couldn't apply for a visa in Brazzaville for fear of being re-arrested. I wandered from country to country for three to five days. I would have had to return had I failed.

Friends and the Pentecostalist Church helped me finance my air fares. The Church gave me £300 for my flight to London.

I couldn't apply for a French visa in Kinshasa because the French had an embassy in Brazzaville but as there was no British embassy in Brazzaville I asked for a British visa in Kinshasa.

**TM:** You once suggested that the French had refused you a visa because the French government was in hoc to African regimes.

**JL-N:** Yes. That is also true.

**TM:** The Home Office maintain that you came into Britain with a business visa as a wood merchant.

**JL-N:** No, the translator misunderstood me. It was a service visa, a tourist visa, valid for six months.

**TM:** You arrived at Heathrow with only £20 plus \$20 in your pocket and were interrogated by the immigration services.

**JL-N:** Yes.

**TM:** Did you ask for asylum?

**JL-N:** Yes. I asked for asylum immediately and I explained everything. They said that I must have a special interrogation and sent me to Oakington detention centre.

**TM:** Why did they refuse to grant you asylum?

**JL-N:** They gave no reason. Perhaps it was because I had nowhere to stay. I spent three days at Oakington, and then came my great Calvary at Harmondsworth [detention centre]. The inmates burnt down part of the building. I was finishing my play *L'Acte de Naissance* at the time. My health was bad. I had an appointment at the hospital for 29 July, 2004.

Then I was sent to Belmarsh. That was the worst thing I have ever experienced. I was treated like a criminal, a thief, a terrorist. From Belmarsh I was sent to Dover where I spent two months. I was treated like a prisoner at Dover. We were locked in all the time, in a small room the two of us, with one toilet. After Belmarsh I couldn't bear to be alone which is why I chose a cell for two, not a cell for one, although I had the choice. Being alone would have reminded me too much of being in Belmarsh

**TM:** How were your cellmates ?

**JL-N:** I always had nice cellmates. They always pitied me. There was no-one else in my situation. As soon as I arrived in England I was put into detention. Everyone was sorry for me. From Belmarsh I was sent back to Harmondsworth for one week. Then, on 24 October, 2004, I was sent to Campsfield. There I found conditions a little more acceptable. I had good relations with officials, detainees, the manager, with you, English PEN, and with International PEN.

**TM:** But the authorities tried to deport you four times.

**JL-N:** Yes. Four times. The first time was on May 15<sup>th</sup> 2004 when I suffered unacceptable treatment at Heathrow Airport. I still have pains in my shoulder. They pinioned my hands behind me. They beat me like a thief because I didn't want to leave, because I resisted. I was in danger. I had to resist because I was in danger. I was not violent. Look at me. Look how frail I am. How could I be violent? I resisted simply by refusing to leave. They were hitting me. It was just after passing the immigration counter. It was unbearable. I am visiting a hospital in Oxford regularly now to try to relieve the pain to my shoulder through massage.

The second time was September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2004. They took me to the airport. I resisted again but this time they were not violent. The same thing happened the third time, on 16<sup>th</sup> October, 2004. By the time of the fourth attempt to deport me I had switched lawyers to the Refugee Legal Centre whose Tim Ottevenger managed to cancel my seat on the flight to Brazzaville scheduled for November 22<sup>nd</sup> at the last minute. He was the first proper lawyer I had. The others were adventurers. They just wanted money. The four previous lawyers did nothing for me.

**TM:** Now there were contradictions in the case against you, were there not? For example, immigration documents claim that you have eight children, rather than six.

**JL-N:** Yes. I only have six children. All they have to do is check my family documents at the British embassy in Kinshasa. These are signed by me.

**TM:** Two names, Merveilles and Gloire, quite unlike the other names and both documented as male, have been added to the names of your children. Why do you think that is?

**JL-N:** I simply don't know. I think it's a case of bad translators.

**TM:** So what happened when you first arrived?

**JL-N:** I arrived from Accra, Ghana, at 6.45 in the morning. The men who interviewed me did not speak to me as you do.

**TM:** At the recent Birmingham hearing when your lawyers sought bail the judge claimed that you had contradicted yourself, saying that the man who provided you with a forged passport was called Eugene but at a previous hearing you had said he was called Mr Biskikita. In addition, she said that you now called him a 'brother' whereas previously you had called him a cousin, more specifically your father's sister's son.

**JL-N:** Yes, he was both a brother in the sense that he helped me and a cousin by blood. The man was called Eugene Biskikita. The passport had to be produced by somebody, clearly. I didn't understand why they wanted to know the man's identity. The judge asked me what I would do if they try to deport me again. I told her that I would ask PEN what they think I should do.

**TM:** Had I be given the opportunity to speak at that bail hearing I would have explained that these were misunderstandings, not intentional contradictions or lies.

**JL-N:** Yes, the judge did not understand me.

**TM:** Your play *The Cries of the Cricket* performed in June in the London Eye, was a success, was it not ?

**JL-N:** Yes, it was something close to a real victory because it is my autobiography. That's my victory but it is also your victory because you encouraged me so hard to write this play. This is a victory that we have won together, you and me.

**TM:** You also addressed UNESCO and the Red Cross

**JL-N:** Yes, I read my poem *L'Insomnie* to the Red Cross at the Bargehouse in London's South Bank and told them my story. I also copied it to UNESCO. I wrote it in two weeks.

**TM:** What about your future ?

**JL-N:** I am both pessimist and optimistic. What we have done is not in vain. You have visited me 18 times in prison. You know my words; I have never deviated from what I have said. What I say to you today is what I said yesterday. These words will triumph.

**TM:** You are a religious man, aren't you ?

**JL-N:** I am a servant of God. Ever since I have been in detention I have listened to God and I have read the word of God with much attention. I was born in a Christian family. My father was Catholic, my mother was Protestant, so there was harmony. I grew up in the word of God. Curiously, I came to know God in 1993 in Brazzaville when I was encouraged and converted to be a child of God, to serve God

**TM:** Are you Catholic now ?

**JL-N:** I am a servant of God, a Christian. I am a Pentecostalist. During the eight months I spent at Campsfield I became like a confessor serving the francophone inmates. I encouraged the brothers. I led them. I trained and supported them. They were converted as a result of the words that came from my mouth. Many are witness to this. Some of the brothers returned to Africa but before they left they would tell me that I must continue teaching the word of God.

I don't want to hide from you, Trevor, that I left detention with a spiritual diploma in teaching the word of God as an evangelist, in learning the true word of God that I learnt in prison. Now I can teach the word of God with my eyes closed and arms crossed. Ask Father Seraphim [Campsfield's Russian Orthodox chaplain] who was my teacher. Ask Father Dominic [Campsfield's Roman Catholic chaplain]. Together we celebrated the mass. They know my deep commitment to the word of God.

**TM:** Are you are happy now to be free, living in this house run by women dedicated to God?

**JL-N:** Why do you think I landed up in this house ? This house belongs to people of God so I must have a mission. It's not by chance that I am here. The women here are very, very kind to me. They are more than a family to me. I am like a prince in the house of the king. The atmosphere here is indescribable.

