The “Bigmanism” or the “Big Man Syndrome”
As an Optical Lens to Understand African “Democracies”
- A “Case Study” in Zimbabwe-

Susanna Iacona Salafia
Teacher of English Literature, Phd candidate in Comparative Literatures
Liceo Scientifico “Elio Vittorini” High School, 93012 Gela(CL), Italy
Fatih University, 34500 Buyukcekmece, Istanbul, Turkey  
sjs45@hotmail.com

Keywords: Big Man syndrome, African novel, Zimbabwe, James Kilgore, Robert Mugabe, Chimurenga, Gukurahundi

Abstract: This research analyzes the so called “Big man syndrome”, discovering the origin and etymological meaning of this definition. But “big man syndrome” is not only a journalistic definition but a precise socio-anthropological phenomenon in Africa. The paper describes its development and different stages from an initial “nationalism” to “neopatrimonialism” system as model of “democratic” government in “a one party system” in some African countries. Even if in contrast with the essence of Africanism of the Ubuntu philosophy, the Big man syndrome still influences most of the complex African politics. The phenomenon had been largely anticipated by Frantz Fanon, the inspirer “muse” of the anti-colonial wars and also “prophet” of the post-colonial African politics. To better understand the Big man syndrome from a sociological and political point view, Zimbabwe case study is reported, a country where the “Big Man” Robert Mugabe has been uninterruptedly ruling since 1980, for almost forty years. The hidden “facts and sheet” behind the first and second Chimurenga, the Zimbabwe civil war who brought Mugabe to power, are narrated in “We are alla Zambabweans” novel. The paper concludes highlighting the importance of the African novels in understanding the dilanating African wars and the Big man syndrome itself.

1. Introduction

The “big man syndrome” definition in Political Science has been used in 2006 by the Overseas Development Institute1, a UK independent “think tank” on international development and humanitarian issues, in a publication about Malawi and its dictatorial regimes2. Now the term is widely applied to all the degenerations, in most African countries, of the post-colonial presidential system of governments in hard and violent “democratic” dictatorships with the same man in power for decades as in the Malawian example. The “big man” phenomenon or “bigmanism”, from an anthropological point of view, refers to the Malynesian and Polynesian societies with their hierarchical model of chiefs and subchiefs deeply studied by the American anthropologist Marshall

---

1 ODI(http://www.odi.org.uk). Ed.note
Sahlins\(^3\) in his 1963 paper research.

Very distant from the austronesian concept of the chief authority by his wisdom and “"performing the most capable in social, political, economic and ceremonial activities”\(^4\), analyzed by Sahlins, the current African “big man” derives his authority from violence and terror and by exploiting the ignorance, poorness and fear of his people. Because of hard violations to human rights, some African presidents and rulers, as Robert Mugabe (on charge since 1980) in Zimbabwe and more recently, in 2012, Uhuru Kenyatta\(^5\) in Kenya, have received even travel bans\(^6\) to Europe and the USA. Despite formally embracing political governance structures based on those of the western world (Democratic Presidentialism and/or Parliamentarism) many African countries are still struggling to adhere to some important aspects of democracy and free elections. The expert at Wilson Centre in Washington DC, Chido Makunike, describes the big man syndrome with these words:

‘Many African leaders who started off with the affection and good will of their people then became stereotypical ‘big men’ over time. Among the characteristics of the ‘syndrome’ are increasing contempt for and repression of their people, dubious elections, helping themselves to the country’s resources and so forth. Where a ‘big man’ rules, the checks and balances that are supposed to make the modern system of government work optimally cannot be applied\(^7\).

2. Neopatrimonialism and one-party system

In sharp contrast with the African Hunhuism/Ubuntuism philosophy of life (“To be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognizing the humanity of others and, on that basis, establish respectful human relations with them.”\(^8\), the concept of “bigmanism” is nowadays rather strictly connected to “neopatrimonialism”\(^9\), which characterizes these “one man governments”. It is a system of social hierarchy where patrons use state resources in order to secure the loyalty of clients in the general population. It is a legalized corrupt system with its informal patron-client relationship that can reach from very high up in state structures down to individuals in small villages. A restricted political elite makes a personalized use of the state resources and institutions rather than being at service of them. Generally speaking, neopatrimonialism has been used, by some scholars and africanists, to explain the failure of neoliberistic politics experimented in the continent, as personal and private interests prevail on the public ones in most systems of African governments.

The “one-party state”\(^10\), has been the direct and immediate consequence of the “bigmanism”, in most of the African nations in the 70s and 80s, a model of government well explained by the africanist scholar Alex Thomson:

‘Kwame Nkrumah\(^11\) dismantled the multy-party system in Ghana because he declared this system to be socially divisive; Houphouët-Boigny\(^12\) did likewise in the Côte d'Ivoire on the grounds that no

---


\(^5\) The latter because of his charges at the Le Hague International Criminal Court. Ed.note

\(^6\) The former has recently dodged “for religious reasons” the EU ban with his presence at the Francesco Pope proclamation ceremony in Vatican. Ed.note


opposition actually existed; Sekou Touré\textsuperscript{13} opted for a single-party structure because Syria’s socialist ideology demanded this; Julius Nyerere\textsuperscript{14} favoured the one-party state because he considered it the most appropriate way to build democracy in Tanzania. The vast majority of African countries underwent a process of centralization, and each leader had their own set of justifications for the constitutional amendments deployed\textsuperscript{15}

The one-party system has been analyzed, in Kenya, also by Professor Muhammad Bakari, Head of Social Science Department at Fatih University of Istanbul (Turkey):

‘By the early 1990s KANU\textsuperscript{16} was seen more as a tool of self-enrichment and self-aggrandizement by both the party politicians and the general public at large. It had increasingly lost its credibility as development oriented and it had degenerated into the classic Fanonist conception of post-independence. African political parties, which start off well as nationalistic, anti-colonial and well-intentioned, until the national bourgeoisie discover the usefulness of the party as a conduit to personal wealth, self-preservation and absolute power. KANU, in its forty years in power vindicated Fanon by living up to all the fears that he had for the future of political parties in Africa’.\textsuperscript{17}

3. From Nationalism to Bigmanism: a visionary forecasting by Frantz Fanon

As Bakari infers, the big man syndrome in Africa had been forecasted with large anticipation in the early 60s, by Frantz Fanon in his \textit{The Wretched of the earth} masterpiece. Fanon, as a Marxist, used to see the start of an African national bourgeoisie or middle class on power as a real danger for the post-colonial and independent Africa:

‘The national middle class which takes over power at the end of the colonial regime is an underdeveloped middle class. It has practically no economic power, and in any case it is in no way commensurate with the bourgeoisie of the mother country which it hopes to replace. In its narcissism, the national middle class is easily convinced that it can advantageously replace the middle class of the mother country. But that same independence which literally drives it into a corner will give rise within its ranks to catastrophic reactions, and will oblige it to send out frenzied appeals for help to the former mother country’.\textsuperscript{18}

According to Fanon, the national middle class people, educated in the colonial institutions, who, as national heroes, drive the independence wars and the decolonization processes will become anything else than ”intermediary” between former colonizers and colonized:

Since the middle class has neither sufficient material nor intellectual resources (by intellectual resources we mean engineers and technicians) it limits its claims to the taking over of business offices and commercial houses formerly occupied by the settlers. The national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement: doctors, barristers, traders, commercial travellers, general agents and transport agents. It considers that the dignity of the country and its own welfare require that it should occupy all these posts. From now on it will insist that all the big foreign companies should pass through its hands, whether these companies wish to keep on their connexions

\textsuperscript{11} First president and PM of the independent Ghana, on power from 1951 to 1966.\textit{Ed.note.}
\textsuperscript{12} First President of Côte d'Ivoire on power from 1960 to 1993.\textit{Ed.note}
\textsuperscript{13} First president of Guinea from 1958 to 1984.\textit{Ed.note}
\textsuperscript{14} First President of Tanzania, on power from 1964 to 1985.\textit{Ed.note}
\textsuperscript{15}Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{16} Kenian African National Union.\textit{Ed.note}
\textsuperscript{18} Fanon,Frantz(1961) “The Pitfall of national consciousness” in \textit{The Wretched of the earth}.Paris:Grove Press,p.149

ISBN: 978-605-64453-0-9
with the country, or to open it up. The national middle class discovers its historic mission: that of intermediary.\(^{19}\)

So the former colonial nations played a specific role or and had an indirect/direct responsibility in the “big man syndrome” that spread in most African countries after the independence and is still on.

“National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, instead of being the immediate and most obvious result of the mobilization of the people, will be in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been. The faults that we find in it are quite sufficient explanation of the facility with which, when dealing with young and independent nations, the nation is passed over for the race, and the tribe is preferred to the state.”\(^{20}\)

Fanon defines the African nationalism as an “empty shell” in this visionary picture. National borders have been simply imposed artificially, during colonial age, in order to better control the territory without considering the precolonial form of social aggregation as the “non-hegemonic state”\(^{21}\) and lineage and kinship ties or extended families.\(^{22}\) “African nations “ were soon theatres of inner ethnic conflicts or of irredentism as in Somaliland and Eritrea. The former heroes of nationalistic wars of independence soon became dictatorial “big men”, since authoritarianism was the only form of government they were used to during the colonial age.

4. The Big man syndrome in Zimbabwe: a case study through a novel

To understand the post-1980 “Biganism” in Zimbabwe only through a novel is of course impossible. The author of *We are all Zimbabwean now*\(^{23}\), James Kilgore, is specifically focusing, however, only on the “Gukurahundi” (“the early rain which washes away the chaff before the spring” in Shona language) time, emblematic of the Zimbabwean big man syndrome. It was the civil war which blasted in 1982 soon after the defeat of the white rule and the election of Robert Mugabe as Prime Minister. Gukurahundi war ended with the merging, in Zanu-PF, of the two clashing ethnopolitical parties, Zanu(Zimbabwe African National Union) and Zapu(Zimbabwe African People Union) and the raising of a one party system of government era. Zimbabwe is in the southern part of the continent, it is landlocked and bordered by Zambia, Mozambique, Botswana and South Africa. Some neighbor nations played a specific role in the Zimbabwean politics during the ages. Tanzania and Mozambique, for example, offered military training camps for the guerrilla fighters or a logistic base as in Zambia where Herbert Chipeto, the first leader of Zanu and black barrister in Zimbabwe, found death in a car explosion in Lusaka in 1975, before the end of the second war of liberation from the white Rhodesia rule.

The main regions are Mashonaland, with the capital Harare (the city that never sleeps, in shona) and the main city Chinguwitza, a dormitory town. Mashonaland is inhabited by Shona people who speak Shona language. Matebeleland, in the southwest part, is inhabited, instead, by Ndbele people who speak Ndbele. The main Matebeleland city is Bulawayo or “place of the persecuted” or “of the slaughter”, in Ndbele language. The official languages of Zimbabwe are, in fact, Ndbele, Shona and English. In each of these two main ethnic groups there are also other subgroups and clans, such as Karanga, an eastern tribe among the Shona people, and even social castas as the Zanzi among Ndbele, direct descendants from the followers of the Zulu king Mzilikazi. A very complicated social organization dating back to the precolonial Zimbabwe. Moreover, Ndbele and Shona have a different pre-colonial history and mythology.

\(^{19}\) Ibidem  
\(^{20}\) Ibidem, p. 148.  
\(^{22}\) Ibidem.  
\(^{23}\) Kilgore, James(2011) *We are all Zimbabweans*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

ISBN: 978-605-64453-0-9
During the liberation war against the white minority government of Ian Smith in the early 80s, Shona people were predominantly of Zanu Party with Robert Mugabe as leader while Ndbele were Zapu with Joshua Nkomo. Before “Gukurahundi”, there was an ethno-political bipartisism in which the two democratic parties coincided with the two main tribal groups. The bipartisism was washed away by the Gukurahundi rain.

5. African history and fiction

Many African novelists and writers are trying to explain the violent conflicts of their countries through their novels. It is a point of view from the “inside” and in some cases fiction is the only way to tell the world what is happening there because of censorship and dictatorial regimes. Many of them are often in exile or have suffered persecutions. But learning the African continent through its contemporary novel production is also very useful for other different reasons, as Ngugi wa Thiong’o has expressed in his last masterpiece *Globalectics*:

- ‘confronted with an environment that they could not always understand, the humans invented stories to explain it’
- ‘the novel, like the myths and the parable, gives a view of society from its contemplation of social life, reflecting it mirror-like but also reflecting upon it simultaneously’
- ‘the novel mimics, contemplates, clarifies and unifies many elements of reality in terms of quality and quantity’
- ‘It was to the novel that I turned for a way of ordering my History!’

In a novel we are really immersed in the environment, the customs and the little details of a culture. We can better understand history by a story fiction rather than by a cold essay book or report, because behind each well written novel there is a historic and cultural research and study. African novelists are strictly connected with the contemporary history of their country and many of them are history scholars. As James Kilgore wrote, he adopted, in his novel, a 'history from a below perspective' that is, in a novel we can learn the story of the weakest characters of a historian event. History is made up of little episodes as the novelist Guy Vanderhaeghe wrote:

‘As a writer of fiction I live and breathe minutiae, quirky odds and ends of information. For a novelist, it is not the devil that is found in the details. The details are where God resides. A novel cries out for texture to lend it verisimilitude’

Ngugi Wa’ Thiong’o in Kenya, the just disappeared Chinua Achebe and the very young Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie in Nigeria and Biafra, Nuruddin Farah in Somalia, Abdulrazak Gurnah in Zanzibar and East Africa and the Zimbabwean historian Stanlake Samkange are only some example of important African novelists who have told an historic event of their country by means of a novel.

---

25 Ibidem. p.104
26 Ibidem.p.109
27 Ibidem.p.112
28 Ibidem.p.123
6. Decolonization and History

One of the most important and radical cultural operation of the Mugabe’s era in after Rhodesia’s Zimbabwe was the “decolonization” of its modern and contemporary history. The first ministry of Education scrapped the Rhodesian syllabus and inserted a new nationalist school curriculum in its place. As James Kilgore, the author of the novel and a school teacher, in 1983 during Gukuruhanda time, of History at Harare’s Mabvuku High School, states:

‘The problem was, there were no textbooks or support materials available. We had to create our own. To teach the first Chimurenga31/Umvukela32, I secured a copy of Professor Ranger’s Revolt in Southern Rhodesia. I spent many hours preparing detailed notes for my students which I then transferred to printed sheets via the mimeograph machine in the hallway outside the Headmaster’s office.’33

All the history textbooks were destroyed because they had been written by “white” colonizers. The new Zimbabwe history had to be rewritten relying upon “oral” sources such as the former guerrilla fighters. Zimbabwe war veterans were entitled with the role of “history instructors” in the Mugabe’s youth militia’s camps of Education in Harare. National History so was replaced by Patriotic History, propaganda and not history.

7. We Are all Zimbabweans Now: the plot

It is a political thriller set in Zimbabwe in the enthusiastic days full of hope for Robert Mugabe’s rise to power in the early 80s. Ben Dabney, the main character, an Usa graduate student, is doing a research for his PhD about the Reconciliation in Zimbabwe. This is probably an autobiographical character since the novel’s author himself, James Kilgore, is currently a scholar and a researcher at the Center for African studies of University of Illinois and has previously served in schools and universities in Zimbabwe and South Africa.

The young Ben arrives in Harare and he is very hopeful and fond with Mugabe and his promises of a government’s model of racial reconciliation. Nevertheless, he is also approached by a mysterious professor Dlamini (who lives in a real English Castle in the centre of Harare) who suggests him to investigate about the death of a liberation war leader, Elias Tichasara, who died in a mysterious car accident right before independence. There had always been rumors about political plotting behind his death. Ben begins his research but gradually he discovers the degeneration of Mugabe’s regime.

The Gukurahundi war was a violent attack in Matebeleland with mass killing of civilians and an ethnic and racist clash against Ndbele tribe and the party of Joshua Nkomo, to conquer the absolute power without any opposition. ‘But when someone who fights a war against the Rhodesians ends up hating his comrades because they speak another language ..than makes no sense’34 says Ben to his Zimbabwe fiancé, a former guerrilla fighter, on his return from a trip to Matebeland when he had witnessed to a violent action of the Mugabe’s Zimbabwe army, the Fifth Brigade, in a rural school because the people were supposed to support or hide dissidents.

8. The second “Chimurenga”

But to understand the novel is of course necessary to go behind the time and review the most recent history of Zimbabwe. The second Chimurenga war, against the minority white rule of Rhodesia of

---

32 Ibidem.Ed.note
33 Ibidem as note 20.
34 Ibidem as note 15.p.140

ISBN: 978-605-64453-0-9
Ian Smith, started in 1966 and ended in December 1979 with the Lancaster House agreement in London, after three months of peace talkings. The main “actors” of the second Chimurenga were: the Zimbabwe Rodhesia prime minister in 1978, Bishop Muzorewa, leader UANC-United African national Council; the Rhodesia Front leader Ian Smith; the ZAPU-Zimbabwe African People Union, founded in 1961 by Joshua Nkomo as a multiethnic party but mainly Ndbele and inspired by Mao ideology; ZIPRA-Zimbabwe People Revolutionary Army, represented by Jason Moyo from Bulawayo and connected to Zapu; ZANU-Zimbabwe African National Union, Shona and founded in 1963 by Herbert Chipeto (murdered in 1975 by a car bomb in Lusaka-Zambia) and then represented by Rev. Ntshanigi Sithole, Edgard Tekere and finally by Robert Mugab. It was of Marxist-Leninist ideology; ZANLA-Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army, connected to Zanu political party and whose military commander was Josiah Tongogara (a Shona Karanga member). Tongogara died in a mysterious car accident in 1979. One of the points of the Lancaster Agreement was that the land reform with seizure of white farm should have stopped and delayed of ten years. British and American proposed to buy farms and lands from the willing whites and give them to Zimbabwe people. It was created a fund.

9. Politics and mysterious deaths

There have been two mysterious deaths that, indirectly, favored Mugabe career. First, in 1975 the murdering of Herbert Chipeto, first leader of Mugabe’s party, and then the car accident of Tongogara, on December 26th 1979, six days after the Lancaster agreement sign. In the 1980 election, Robert Mugabe, leader of ZANU, defeated either Muzarewe or Nkomo parties (UANC and ZAPU) and became the first prime minister of Republic of Zimababwe. In 1987, at the end of the Gukurahundi civil war, the form of government changed and Mugabe suppressed the Prime Minister position. So he became President with ruling powers, after the agreement and merging in ZANU-PF of ZANU with the adversary party, Zapu led by Joshua Nkomo. In the more recent 2008 parliamentary and presidential elections, for the first time after 28 years of uninterrupted one party rule, Mugabe’s ZANU-PF didn’t obtain the majority: 110 seats were won by the MDC_Movement for Democratic Change (with the sum of the seats of two fations of the MDC, merged soon after the election) against the 96 of Mugabe’s party.

The presidential election, held on the same day, went differently. There was a second round between the most voted candidates: Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai but the latter decided to withdraw because of the many riots and violence against his supporters. So Mugabe was elected President of Zimbabwe as the only candidate. Soon after, a transition period of meetings and agreements, between the two parties, followed. Only in 2009, after almost a year, the two leaders convened on a power-sharing form of government: Mugabe is the President while Tsvangirai is the current Prime Minister of Zimbabwe. The same power sharing formula that has been recently adopted in Kenia and, not surprisingly, in Italy, after the last 2013 election, with the center right and center left party at the government.

10. Gukurahundi civil war

Coming back to the Gukurahundi, according to the official version it was also a military struggle between Zimbabwean people of SUPER-ZAPU army (a mix of former members of Southern Rodhesia army, deserters of ZIPRA and political dissidents against Robert Mugabe) and the 5th Brigade, a special Mugabe’s military troup, trained in North Korea, which responded directly only to the presidential orders. SUPER-Zapu was supposedly supported by South Africa which had an interest in destabilizing Zimbabwe. The same happened in Angola with the dissident group of RENAMO and in Angola with UNITA. The Mugabe’s Fifth Brigade was almost 350 ex ZANLA fighters and they wore a red berrit with the uniform. The Gukurahundi war in Matebeleland provoked the death of almost 20 thousands Ndbele civilians, found in mass graves.
11. Fictional and real characters of the novel

*We are all Zimbabwans now* ends with the suicide of “comrade Manyeche”, fictional Mugabe’s minister of Education and ex guerilla fighter who has just confessed to Florence, Elias Tichasara’s woman, of having been himself the real and hidden driver in her partner’s car accident. Apparently he committed suicide for a sexual scandal but his death to the readers of the novel sounds as an admission of guiltiness in the Elias’ murder. Apart from Robert Mugabe, most of the characters are fictional except for Elias Tichasara and Professor Callistus Dlamini.

As the same author has revealed, Elias Tichasara is Josiah Tongogara, the commander of Zanla, who really died in a car accident in 1979 in Mozambique six day after the Lancaster house Agreement on the ceasefire. According to a 1979 CIA briefing, Tongogara was at that time a “potential political rival to Mugabe” and the federal agency suspected a murder rather than believing to the accidental car crash of the official version. Tongogara’s wife has never seen his corpse and no autopsy have ever been made or pictures released. He has also been defined by Lord Carrington, chairman of the Lancaster house talkings, as a “moderate force” compared to Mugabe. During the Lancaster meetings, the Zanla commander was in favour of a “power sharing” with the unity of Zanu and Zapu, a solution that, at that time, was advered by Robert Mugabe. Prof. Dlamini is instead inspired by Stanlake Samkange, a Zimbabwean prominent historian who also wrote novels set in the liberation wars. As Samkange, Dlamini lives in a real English castle in Harare and drives a Rolls Royce. “Since in my book Professor Dlamini engages in an intrigue in which the real Professor Samkange never took part” explains Kilgore “I elected to change the name”.

12. The historic source of the novel

Which are the sources of the novel? Apart from being himself a witness at the Zimbabwe Gukuruhandi war, the novelist based, also among the others, on a recognized report by a national, non-governmental human right organization of Zimbabwe: Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe. In March 1997, the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe compiled the report on the situation in Matabeleland and the Midlands during the period of 1980-1988 titled *Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace*. The report was based on the human rights abuses orchestrated by Prime Minister Robert Mugabe’s North Korean-trained Zimbabwean Fifth Brigade in the civil war known as the Gukurahundi. The publication of the report was possible because Zimbabwe had been enjoying a period of stability and national unity since the *Unity Accord of 1987*, when Zanu and Zapu parties merged in Zanu-PF.

13. A second Gukurahundi?

In 2005 Mugabe government started the Murambatsvina operation. It was the demolition of thousand of slums where poor people lived. There has been an act of denunciation by the United nations. According to the opposition party, MDC, it was a sort of act of punishment and intimidation because most of the electors came from the slums and it happened some weeks after the general election. “Drive out rubbish” operation was the demolition of illegal housing in slum areas across the country to “restore order and for sanitary reasons”. 700 thousand of people lost houses and livelihood while almost 2.4 millions of people were indirectly affected:

---

35 Ibidem as note 21.

ISBN: 978-605-64453-0-9
‘The President is quoted as saying, “Our cities and towns are a real cause for concern. Apart from the failing reticulation systems and broken roads and streets, our cities and towns, including Harare, the capital, have become havens for illicit and criminal practices and activities which just could not be allowed to go on……From the mess should emerge new businesses, new traders, new practices and a whole new and salubrious environment. That is our wish and vision.”’

References:


---

38 Robert Mugabe, President of Zimbabwe. Ed.Note
39 Ibidem. p.88

ISBN: 978-605-64453-0-9


16. United Nations, Mrs Anna Kajumulo Tibajuka, UN Special Envoy on Human Settlements. Issues in