

BOOK REVIEW

Robert Mshengu Kavanagh. 2014. Zimbabwe: Challenging the Stereotypes., Themba Books, Johannesburg, South Africa, Pp 427. ISBN 978-1-5001-8624-1

The strongest point of this book is its guiding stance that ‘no simplistic assumptions can do the story of Zimbabwe justice.’ Writing the book from this stand point, Kavanang’s (2014) was sure to start and end on the correct note, not neutral but objective. In 30 chapters and 427 pages, the author pictures Zimbabwe through various eyes: his own, the witness, the victim, the perpetrator and the sympathizer’s eyes. The story is told in a conversational language that is next to how it happened, a language full of code switching. He switches from English to Shona to Ndebele and to languages of the region with a lot of ease despite him being white. The strategy of code switching is used such that what one language misses the other will pick and conjure up particular emotion, memory and feeling.

In picturing the story of Zimbabwe, Kavanang (2014) reads through the land issues, *Gukurahundi*, sanctions, corruption, government of national unity, elections, the media, war in the Congo and the informal economy. The writer categories Zimbabwean historical episodes into decades and he discusses four decades. The introduction to the book is lucid, condensed, impeccable and oozes with historical content of what Zimbabwe passed through from independence.

Having lived in Zimbabwe since 1984, Kavanang is a Zimbabwean at heart. Thirty-three years of sojourn would qualify him to write about Zimbabwe in a book like what he did. He says, over this period, he has seen Zimbabwe going through the most dramatic and significant events in the history of Africa. He emphasizes that any judgment on what happened to Zimbabwe needs to be contextual and needs one to consider the bigger picture.

As a participant and observer, Kavanang analysis is also guided by the fact that he is an African, a supporter of the revolutionary struggle in Africa for independence and sovereignty and a Socialist. He speaks on new terminology that has evolved with the economic hardships in the manner that Nyawo and Chakawa (2016) have interrogated the amelioration and dimelioration of vocabulary in contemporary Zimbabwe. Kavanang picks up words and constructions such as; load shedding and the *magetsi/zesa yadzoka* glee associated with the coming back of power after a whole

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day of its absence, *zvigubhu* for carrying water or fuel denoting shortage of essential liquids in the country everywhere as well as the word million referring to the amounts of money one had to have to for very local transactions.

As portrayed in this book, *Zimbabwe Challenging the Stereotypes*, in the period from Zimbabwe's independence to date there has been challenges with power, water, fuel, cash, inflation, peace, basic commodities and food. He also bemoans the collapse, decay, dilapidation, desertion and dysfunctionality of places of convenience that used to be well stocked, manned and looked after in the olden days. Most of these places lie as white elephants today and are along Zimbabwe's highways. Most painful to the author's heart is Masvingo Wimpy *en route* to the gateway Beitbridge. Mshengu feels that the convenience stop was well located along the Harare-Beitbridge road but in the period of crisis the place was empty and devoid even of people. AIDS and the diaspora had wiped people from the face of Zimbabwe and Masvingo was a cosmos of what was in the bigger picture.

According to Kavanang's (2014) analysis, when the new black government succeeded the white government, the new government inherited a baggage that would haunt it not too long into its tenure. When the ZANU-PF led government thought they had it all under control, the rot from the old system had started to erode the very foundation on which the new government rested. What defined Zimbabwe's situation at independence can be paralleled with a Shona saying '*mviromviro yemhanza mapfeka*' meaning great events are foreshadowed in little signs. The history of the beginnings of what comes to be known as Zimbabwe that include the Mwenemutapa Empire, Nguni invasions, the Pioneer Column, The First Chimurenga and Christian Missionary activities, Zimbabwean education and the associated brain drain, urban and southwards drift bring us to questions of legacy, identity and inheritance. These are questions that are echoed in Ndlovu-Gatsheni's *Do 'Zimbabweans' Exist* (2009), a pointer to disturbances at different historical epochs in the existing relative cultural and linguistic homogeneity. More contemporary, the Lancaster House Agreement, elections and reconciliation compounded the already dangerous and precarious situation.

Kavanang (2014) observes that while the majority of Zimbabweans would be proud of and unite around their ancient history, their new name, national symbol, flag and totem, ethnic homogeneity two groups did not share the same feeling that is the Ndebele and the white. The unrequited feeling of belonging and oneness would prove to be an albatross around the neck of the ZANU-PF led government. As a transition from white governance to black governance, the Lancaster House Agreement was a euphoria, a honeymoon that would fizzle away before the bride and the groom have had enough of it. ESAPS hastened this end. Its abrupt end ushered in contradictions,

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realities and myths. Mugabe's government had to find a quick fix solution to handle the realities.

There was growth, transformation and change in other areas of life as well such as in education where by 2010, the University of Zimbabwe, was no longer the only university in the land, nine more had surfaced. Mind you, those who had benefitted from the old system were not placated. Political attitudes were very different from one class, ethnicity, gender and region to the other.

Soon the war in the Congo, the fast track land reform, the Movement for Democratic Change, sanctions, corruption, the 2008 and the 2013 elections, would change the political and economic terrain of Zimbabwe. A terrible beauty was born. Going forward the corruption scourge must be fought before it destroys the future that should be handed to a beautiful vibrant youth that is coming up.

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