

# *The Vagina Monologues:* "I Am Glad They Have Banned It"<sup>1</sup>

By Sarah Mukasa

"I am glad they have banned it." So said a colleague who walked into my office the day after the news came out on the banning by the Media Council of the play *The Vagina Monologues*.

"Why?" I asked her quietly.

"Because now we can clearly see what we are up against. How dare you women celebrate your womanhood, condemn sexual oppression, and the abuse of women's bodies. And you not only dare to do this, but in public also. What? You look at it from their point of view. Don't you know that your vaginas are dirty, obscene, distasteful, vulgar, and evil? Don't you know that these "things," no matter how much they suffer, should be kept private? Haven't you yet understood that the only ones who can talk with authority on these matters are men who think that way about you, and women

who think that way about themselves? Really, you women, where do you get the nerve to talk about vaginas in public? Don't you know this is not how "respectable" women behave? You have embarrassed good women everywhere. Our cultures are sacrosanct. They should never be questioned or challenged. You who have done so are morally corrupted."

We laugh.

So, is it our cultures or our religions that we are worried about?

Well, both. We should safeguard our African Christian, cultural values against the surge of western immorality!

So, when, for example, the Christian religion says we are all made in the image of God (that is every single part of our bodies), does it mean that it is wrong for

us to refer to the vagina as vulgar, dirty and distasteful, because we are denigrating the image of God?

Well, no, because culturally this is how we refer to these parts of the body.

Oh, so, it is wrong for us to challenge these socially constructed practices, even though we may be dishonouring God in adhering to them?

Well, yes. In this case, yes. We think.

Which case is that? The case in which the issue touches on the rights of women, of course. Here, we always refer to that which sits comfortably with patriarchal notions of what a woman's place should be. Women are used to this (even those who were opposed to this play). They have steadfastly challenged patriarchal cultural practices and norms. They have gone to school, own property, left abusive marriages; some have even chosen not to marry. But now many of them turn and point the finger to those who dare to challenge the last and most insidious bastion of patriarchal oppression: the notion of women's bodily integrity and autonomy. The idea that a woman's body is hers and hers alone to do with as she chooses is scary

to so many of us that we quickly hide behind some of the very defence mechanisms we have long challenged. Culture. African cultural values.

I think that we should be very careful how we fashion our arguments. Hiding behind cultural relativism has been the very tool used to stamp our oppression in the past. When we do this, we pander to racist and sexist stereotypes about what is African culture. We paint a picture of this fossilised, immovable, intolerant, reactionary, monolithic culture. Let us also not forget that, in the past, these arguments have been used to safeguard dictatorial regimes. Concepts such as human rights, democracy and gender equality were all once referred to as "western and alien concepts." So, whilst we Africans were stuck in oppressive, repressed, dictatorial, cultural systems, the West was showing us the way forward? What absolute garbage. The fact of the matter is that the oppression and exclusion of peoples, on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, and so on, is a universal practice that each society justifies with slick explanations of culture, religion, and what have you. And just as it has been practiced in every society, so has it been resisted.

"Corruption of our values by Western immorality is one of the biggest challenges of our time," said the good Minister of State for Information Dr. Nsaba Buturo in his press briefing statement. I am sure he believes it. But, really, some of us think that as compared to the subjugation of our economies to the West, this is a stroll in the park. But there you have it. This is where the minister concentrates his energies. And

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not very well, one might add. Let's look at subscription TV and what it frequently beams into our homes. No bans there. Let's look at all the salacious print media that is around for everyone to see. No bans there. What about all those watering holes dotted around the city, which feature goodness knows what? No, no bans there. What about the corruption

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that is endemic in our society that denies so many their right to basic social welfare? Nope. No moves there, either. Has he managed to get all those government officials and employees who have abandoned their children to at least pay child support? Last I heard, that was not on his radar. In fact, no action anywhere, except for where some women want to stage a play called *The Vagina Monologues*. Ahh.

Of course, we have heard from a number of those who have seen the play and have condemned it as pornography from the West. I cannot argue with their experiences; it is pointless to do that. If I do, so, I silence them and relegate them to the back of the beyond as someone completely unimportant. Their view is important, and they can exercise their right to stay away. But I hasten to add that several others have seen the play, myself included, and have been liberated

by it. Our views and experiences have simply been ignored and silenced by the bully boy tactics of some of our ministers (whose backgrounds we are all really keen to know) and their cronies.

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"The message is good, but you should have packaged it differently," some now say. Hello? Have you been on the moon? What have women's organisations been doing all these years? *16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence*. Seminar after seminar. Tree after tree chopped down to produce report after report that presents these issues to fit comfortably with people's sensibilities. And where are we? As I write this, these reports sit, gathering layers of dust in a number of people's offices. In the meantime, the crisis escalates (this is by the government's own reckoning).

"Say it in vernacular!" others scream. They throw this as the biggest defence against staging the play. Well, as I recall, a number of this same group argued for "gender-sensitive language" in the drawing up of the 1995 Constitution. This principle document now uses "he" and "she," "woman" and "man," as the case warrants. Why did they do this? Language, they argued, is patriarchal in nature. It is socially constructed, and it reflects societal and cultural norms. Quite right, too. And, by the same token, I say that any language that refers to the essence of womanhood, the vagina (by that, I mean, that which distinguishes a woman from a man) in ways that are

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derogatory should be questioned and challenged, and not protected and defended.

Then there are the “Pastor Sempas” of this world. With them, one should waste as little energy as possible. So I will not bother much, except to say that someone from the police please enforce the ban and throw this man in jail. He has been reading at will the very excerpts from the play that were banned by the Media Council, for all and sundry to hear. And, boy, does this man shout! “The bandit is enjoying this!” remarked the members of the play’s cast as we laughed and listened to him read the script on the radio a few days after the play had been banned (he actually reads quite well). But here’s the thing. This man has had the opportunity to read the book from cover to cover. And having done so, he arrived at his own conclusions about the play. Fair enough. But what he then seeks to do is to deny others the same opportunity to make up their own minds, by calling for the play’s ban.

Well, this is after all in keeping with the tradition in the wave of charismatic

churches that is sweeping this nation. Any man (for they are usually men) who can shout beyond a certain decibel can set up a “church.” Moreover, in this church, he is free to preach what he chooses in the name of God. Many a wealthy lifestyle by our “Pastors” have been funded from the proceeds of the congregation’s sweat. “Bring no coins here!” they shout. “God only wants notes!” They expect absolute obedience from their followers. They tell the congregation what to think, do and say—some even whom to marry. They have killed their congregations in Kanungu, and have hoodwinked women into believing they are carrying miracle babies in Kenya. They hold night vigils for “healing” and “curing” the sick of HIV/AIDS, to exorcisms. The term “Born Again” becomes the new mantra and license to engage in some of the most iniquitous and scandalous behaviour imaginable. But no matter, if people choose to go to these churches, I do not have the right to stop them. I recognise and respect their right to do it. That they do not extend to me the same right to watch *The Vagina Monologues* is neither here nor there. One of us has to be principled.

Incidentally, someone called up on one of the TV stations to ask the “good Pastor” Sempa why his church is littered with used condoms every time he has night prayers. I have never seen anyone look as pitiful as did this man. Actually, for a moment, he looked like a frightened mouse. But only for a moment. For this man is nothing but a slick performer if you like that sort of thing. Quickly, he gathered himself together and hid

behind a barrage of slanderous attacks on Isis-Women's International Cross Cultural Exchange (a co-host of the V-Day Campaign in Uganda). This is a very morally upright man of God, after all.

I regret very much the government's handling of this play. But I also know that you cannot keep a social movement down, certainly not through actions such as these. Those in power forget very quickly that the generation, examination, debate, and dialogue of ideas are the hallmarks of a democratic society. Drunk with power, they use the long arm of the state to silence people in ways that are so transparently unfair and unjust (and, incidentally, very highly immoral). They plant a seed that germinates quietly underground. You cannot suppress ideas just because they upset your sense of propriety. And then to lean on the apparatus of the state to do this is so outrageous and, in the long term, highly damaging. Leaders who pander for cheap popularity at the expense of principled governance lose very quickly the respect even of their most ardent supporters. For, deep in these leaders' subconscious echoes that tiny but persistent voice: "Today, it has been the turn of so and so. Tomorrow, might it be me?" Don't take my word for it. Let us examine our histories very carefully.

The positive side to all this is that this play and the issues it is trying to raise have reached a wider audience than would never have been possible had the state not interfered the way it did. "You mean these ministers and all have banned the play? Ahh, then there must be something good in it for women" is the common reaction. Radio stations; listserves; arguments; counter-arguments; discussions in living rooms, on *matatus*, in the market place; with parents, children, siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles—the play is everywhere. Young people have been exposed (as it were) to the hypocrisy of the older generation. They have watched as scoundrels, wastrels, wife batterers, runaway dads, swindlers, idlers, extortionists, and playboys have formed a most unholy alliance with men of the cloth to see this play banned. And they have watched in utter disbelief those in the women's movement who have joined this band of merry men. It is the pedagogy of the oppressed, we try to explain. Oh, no, it is not, they say. It is downright dishonesty, opportunism, and immorality.

But all that is the past. The play is banned and that is all that matters now. Or, is it?

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*Sarah Mukasa is Programmes Manager for the East and Horn of Africa at Akina Mama wa Afrika*

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**Endnote**

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