

## Book Review

*Walukagga The Black Smith*, Samuel Kasule (2018), Kampala: Wavah Books Ltd., 2018, 170pp, ISBN 978-1-910755-22-8 (pb)

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In a post-dramatic and post-truth world, the onus is most frequently on theatre artists to use traditional fables and myths to re-interpret and propose new solutions to social and political questions that would otherwise draw the sanctions of constituted authorities and tyrants. In African writing, the recuperation of myths and history is becoming more popular to contest and subvert received forms, and in the process, create a balanced appraisal of the past. Many of the writers go beyond assessing the past though; there is a resurgence of activism that appropriates myths and substantially embellish them to mediate the theatrics encoded in oral traditions.

African settings are rich in myths, legends, dilemma tales and dances, perhaps not more than the rest of the world but the manner of engagement with these elements among African people is unique. In Africa, it takes a madman to counsel a tyrant and relieve the yokes of oppression on the shoulder of brave warriors, wise sages and fearful subjects. One of such narratives is *Walukagga, the Black Smith* by Samuel Kasule. Kasule has taken a folk narrative and constructed a drama that contests the tyranny, violence and the cycle of political criminality.

*Walukagga the Black Smith* is a drama derived from the oral tradition of the Baganda people about a tyrannical Chief whose rule is ended by the intervention of a madman. Written in Luganda and translated to English language – both published in this volume – *Walukagga* is a re-visioning of the popular traditional story of Walukagga to address the contemporary issues of corruption, oppression and political uncertainty on the African continent. It is more than an adaptation of the folktale however; rather, it is a re-reading and re-presentation of a people's mode

of dealing with societal aberrations, scourges and anathemas.

Set in the suburb of a bustling city, where Walukagga the blacksmith maintains his workshop, next to a drinking parlour, which also serves as the meeting place and gossip centre for the community, the play opens with a madman, Majangwa, pondering the intricate workings of a close circuit television camera. Right at the outset, we are introduced to the contemporary toys of the modern age, alerting us that this *Walukagga* is not the familiar oral tale, but a re-reading with sinister undertones. Instead of a Chief, we have a Governor – a war veteran who has usurped the management of the city and turned the people into withering and abject subjects. As a Governor, he rules the city with violence and exhorts illegal taxes indiscriminately. He also has arms and sponsors youths to carry out criminal ventures in his behalf, including drive-by shootings. His main interest seems to be the creation of violence in the city.

Not satisfied with the control of the city, Gavana the Governor wants to acquire the land where Walukagga's workshop is sited because the latter is more famous as a competent professional. The governor sets out to humiliate the blacksmith so he could easily gain the land. He commissions him to build a robot which has human attributes. However, following the advice of Majangwa the madman, Walukagga requests five huge pots of human tears and five large sacks of human hairs – ingredients for making the robot. Gavana's inability to procure these items lead to his downfall.

Walukagga is a protest play that addresses inflammatory themes of land, economic exploitation and gun violence, especially 'drive-by shootings', in a country grappling with the technological advancement of the digital age. Kasule exposes the old forms of political chicanery and its inability to understand the undermining nature of modern technology. As the playwright states in the Preface, "the play is translated into English to enable (not disable) understanding and reading by non-Luganda speakers... to reach a large audience" (p. 9)

The Luganda version, *Walukagga Omuweesi*, was first produced by Bakayimbira Dramactors at Theatre Royal, Kampala, Uganda in January 2017. It was directed by Charles Senkubuge.