



Ogutu's Dutch Blues: Notes of Kenyan Native Son

By Isaac Otidi Amuke



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1 THE ELEPHANT

Are We Here Yet?

The 2011 performance at Nairobi's *The Theatre Company* opens with two Mau Mau fighters stuck in Mt. Kenya forest. It is 1983. They are unaware Kenya gained independence 20 years ago. The two fighters, Mahela and Githai, re-enact the Mau Mau oath of allegiance, an annual tradition they have practiced the entire time they lived in the bush. Their enduring memory of life before this moment, is of the night they were dispatched to kill a British settler. They went as far as the white man's bedroom, but developed cold feet. Now, 20 years later, they believe they are cursed for violating a cardinal Mau Mau oath - to kill the enemy. And are convinced that they can only get atonement by finding and killing an alternative white man.

The sound of an approaching vehicle interrupts the dreadlocked Mau Mau fighters obsessing over the oath. Two African American tourists emerge, accompanied by a white tour guide. Due the colour of his skin, Mahela and Githai decide that the tour guide is a colonialist and the accompanying African Americans his home guards - members of indigenous Kenyan communities who chose to

collaborate with the British, branded traitors of the independence struggle. When the African Americans spot Mahela and Githai, they ask the tour guide whether the two-dreadlocked men are cast members for a skit and part of the entertainment package for the tourists seeking a full colonial misadventure experience. The confused tour guide mumbles a response as the two fighters presuming they are under attack, strike and capture the group. With a captive white man in their hands, Mahela and Githai debate on whether to kill him to cleanse themselves of the curse. Moments later, the two African American tourists break loose, make a sprint for the forest, and in the ensuing fracas, Githai accidentally shoots the white captive.

That performance, *'Are We Here Yet'*, marked Kenyan thespian Ogutu Muraya's debut as a scriptwriter.

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The Merry Wives of Windsor

In April 2012, a 26 year old, Ogutu woke up in his London hotel to good news. The *Guardian* newspaper had given the Kiswahili adaptation of William Shakespeare's *'The Merry Wives of Windsor'* translated by Ogutu, a Five Star rating. This was the highest accolade of any of the 37 Shakespeare performances delivered in 37 different languages at the [Globe to Globe Festival](#) - the biggest festival on Shakespeare's works held during London's Cultural Olympiad. Apart from translating the play, Ogutu was part of the cast and [The Guardian](#) singled him out for naughtily embodying his character, Mistress Quickly.

"Such was the power of the performances, the way the cast seemed to live their lines, that the language barrier hardly mattered... the Swahili had an earthy gusto, an air of languor and sunshine that made Shakespeare's prose seem prissy and verbose," wrote the *Guardian's* Andrew Gilchrist.

"It ended, of course, with a dance, the crowd up on their feet clapping along as the company took their bows. A young girl sitting near me, who had been laughing throughout, was almost overcome. "To see Shakespeare in this setting, in Swahili, in England, it's fabulous," she said.

Ogutu and the seven cast members, including Tanzanian poet and thespian Mrisho Mpotu, who played the lead character, had left Nairobi for London on a shoe string budget. They had bought an assortment of second hand clothes for their costume, having only been able to afford proper attire for Mrisho. On arrival in London, they attended the technical rehearsal for Shakespeare's *'Measure for Measure'*, performed in Russian. What they saw made them decide they stood little chance at making an impression on the London audience. They had never performed in such a state of the art theatre. The group's confidence took another hit when they attended the Maori performance of Shakespeare's *'Troilus and Cressida'*. At the end of the show, the New Zealand cast performed the haka, the war dance popularized by their All Blacks rugby team.

It therefore came as a pleasant surprise that the East Africans made a lasting Five Star impression on the London audience.

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DAS Graduate School

Fresh off *'The Merry Wives of Windsor'* high, Ogutu submitted an application to DAS Graduate School (Academy of Theatre and Dance formerly known as DasArt), the prestigious experimental art institute and appendage of the Amsterdam University of the Arts. The main pitch on Ogutu's portfolio, beside the Mau Mau piece, was that he had translated Shakespeare's *'The Merry Wives of Windsor'* into Kiswahili, and been part of its cast during London's Cultural Olympiad. The rejection letter, was accompanied by an email observing that Ogutu had a Shakespearean aesthetic, therefore advised him to instead apply to a British arts school, where he stood a better chance of admission.

Ogutu became aware that translating Shakespeare into Kiswahili and performing the same was not necessarily the most progressive thing for him to do. A member of the London audience observed that he "understood Shakespeare better in Kiswahili than he ever did in English", making the point that by translating Shakespeare, Ogutu had facilitated the export of the Empire's culture to its former colonies and delivered it in a language and manner that was both agreeable and accessible to the former subjects. The translation had added a cultural richness to Shakespeare and to the validation of English literature in the former colonies.

Fortunately, Ogutu landed a month long residency in the Netherlands in September 2013, where he was to spend time interacting with arts institutions. Before his arrival in the Netherlands, Ogutu announced that DAS rejected his application during the school's previous intake and he was keen on giving it another shot. The residency granted Ogutu's wish and he ended up spending two weeks at DAS.

DAS is not your traditional performance school. The conversations dwelled on his future prospects as a performing artist, since DAS mantra was unhinged experimentation and imagination, seeking to break boundaries to produce artists grounded in practice. The more time he spent at DAS, the more Ogutu felt it was where he belonged. DAS admitted between seven and nine students for its two-year graduate program, and Ogutu knew it was not going to be easy gaining admission. He worked on a new application, and in early 2014, received news that he had made the shortlist. He travelled to Amsterdam for a three-day audition, went through a slew of interviews and made the cut second time round, joining DAS in September 2014.

Before admission, Ogutu had to bring a new birth certificate for the process of residency in Amsterdam. The old one was not accepted. He had to pay three times the tuition fees his European classmates paid at DAS, and underwent tests for Tuberculosis every six months. He concluded that for African to gain acceptance in Europe they had to be wealthy, healthy and brainy. The visa application process on its own had become a sort of state sanctioned eugenics, a manmade exercise of natural selection. One of his instructors put it differently. He told Ogutu of the Dutch policy of discouragement - a subtle code for institutional racism - where a myriad roadblocks are placed on the paths of outsiders.

4

Royal Dutch Shell

Barely a semester into his studies, Ogutu suddenly wanted to abandon his Dutch expedition and opt out of DAS. The reason behind this trepidation was that the school had relocated to a North Amsterdam property, hitherto occupied by the oil giant Royal Dutch Shell. Ogutu noted that the grounds that were previously an industrial part of Amsterdam had now been gentrified, comprising newly minted edgy arts institutions, incubators for start-ups, hotels, hostels, a film museum, an underground nightclub and high end apartments. A consortium of the City of Amsterdam now owned

the 100-acre property that once housed the largest Shell laboratories in the world. The consortium donated part of the estate to DAS Graduate School, among other institutions.

In an attempt to speak truth to power, Ogutu's first school project, *'A Clarification of My Internal Politics'*, sought to question DAS' relocation Shell's pseudo museum. He sought to interrogate why DAS would want to go anywhere near an ethically stained multinational like Shell, without critical reflection. Through the performance lecture, Ogutu juxtaposed Shell's reputation in the Netherlands against its misdeeds in Nigeria, particularly in Ogoniland, where it was accused of gross environmental degradation in a [UNEP report](#). In 1995, Sani Abacha's regime executed Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others for agitating against Shell's activities, resulting in a 2009 out of court settlement with Shell paying \$15.5m to the Ogoni nine and one other victim and \$5m going into an Ogoni education trust fund. Through act of artistic protest, Ogutu hoped, idealistic, that his project would bring DAS back to its senses.

Ogutu's art project received a lukewarm reception, critiqued for its artistic merits, shortfalls and belittled. Ogutu wondered whether he was naïve to presume society would sit up whenever he presented what he considered radical thought as his classmates and instructors did not necessarily center their practice on the sociopolitical. Disillusioned, Ogutu slipped into depression. He thereafter wrote to DAS, opting out of his studies, unable to navigate his new realities. DAS offered Ogutu a month during the December 2014 break to reflect on his decision. As if extending an olive branch, DAS bought Ogutu's ticket to Nairobi, after he applied for an emergency grant.

This feeling of powerlessness was not new. During his undergraduate International Relations studies at Nairobi's United States International University-Africa, Ogutu felt the program taught everything about what was wrong with the world but never offered solutions. Therefore in the pursuit of meaningful change, he embraced the arts, growing to become The Theater Company's creative director and later joining DAS, only for him to realize late in the day that *"the complexities of life proved immune to the artistic antidote."*

5

James Baldwin

Back in Nairobi, Ogutu sought out three Kenyan artists who had lived overseas, in search of understanding of his artistic struggles. The writer Binyavanga Wainaina told Ogutu his struggle was familiar, that he was going through a formatting process, advising Ogutu to seek sunshine whenever he could, telling him winter messed people up. The performance artist Sitawa Namwalie told Ogutu those Amsterdam years were his induction into the art world, for him to find his place in it. The publisher Muthoni Garland asked Ogutu to read American writer and activist James Baldwin, mainly *'Notes of a Native Son'*, reflections on Baldwin's days holed up in Paris.

Finding Baldwin was the best thing anyone could have done for Ogutu. Reading Baldwin instantly unlocked Ogutu's world, and from that point on, his projects at DAS either revolved around the work and person of Baldwin, or the happenings around the Congress of Black Writers and Artists held in Paris in September 1956, that Ogutu gleaned from Baldwin's works. Ogutu returned to Amsterdam in January 2015, somewhat reenergized. For his second semester project, he produced a short theatre piece titled *'Nobody Knows My Name'*, borrowing explicitly from one of Baldwin's book titles.

The piece centered around Café Tournon in Paris, a hugely popular meeting spot for African

American artists, some of whom were part of the Harlem Renaissance, who had since sought refuge in Paris. The twist in Ogutu's piece, picked from Baldwin's writings and of others around the 1956 Congress, was that the CIA, French intelligence and other infiltrators such as the KGB had made inroads within this particular Paris group of Black writers and artists as part of the cultural Warfare. Ogutu's main character, is a Black writer dealing with writer's block as he tries to write about his time at Café Tournon. He is unable to make headway because he can no longer tell what was real and what was an enactment of the intelligence agencies, in spite of the glimpses of purity and authenticity at the café.

The idea of a meta-narrative about a Black writer trying to write a story about events of his life in a foreign country where he had sought refuge and escaped his home country's hounding, reflected Ogutu's frame of mind. In this case, Café Tournon was the symbol of the physical space abroad and the place where failure lurked, trailed by a mixture of anxiety and paranoia. It had taken Ogutu years of applications and rejections, in the hope of an admission into DAS. Yet at DAS, where he was supposed to thrive, he remained in a state of paralysis.

6

Fractured Memory

In his final year project at DAS, Ogutu sunk deeper into the happenings at the four day 1956 Black Writers and Artists congress in Paris, in a performance piece he titled '*Fractured Memory*'.

The piece, broken into four parts, each representing a day at the congress, opens with a scene of the reading of an emotive letter sent by WEB Du Bois, who could not travel to Paris because he was denied an American passport. Du Bois warns that part of the American delegation is state sponsored infiltration and that revelation causes tension at the congress. On the second day, Martinique poet and politician Aime Cesaire delivers a rousing speech on the relationship between colonialism and culture, going as far as labeling African Americans as colonised subjects. To counter Cesaire, Ogutu brings in Baldwin, who points out that Cesaire does not own up to his own personal effects of colonialism, seeing that he was addressing a congress of Blacks gathered in Paris speaking in French.

The third serving dwells on confrontations happening at the Congress, ending with the realization that there was no consensus on how to liberate people of African descent from colonialism, apartheid, segregation and exploitation. In the fourth section, Ogutu recites a poem that introspects on the agitations at the Congress. For each of these segments, Ogutu layers them with contemporary and historical issues in Kenya such as mistrust, anger, division - reiterating that the challenges of Paris 1956 still bedevil the Black people in Africa and elsewhere.

In November 2016, Ogutu performed '*Fractured Memory*' at the Batard Festival in Brussels. After the performance, Tunde Adefioye, an American-Nigerian curator representing Brussel's Royal Flemish Theatre came looking for him. Tunde was deeply moved by Ogutu's performance and offered him a performance slot at the Royal Flemish Theatre in March 2018.

On New Year's Day 2018, aboard a KLM flight from Amsterdam to Nairobi, Ogutu's state of mind oscillated between elation, anxiety and indecisiveness. Earlier, in September 2017, he was selected as one of 15 artists in residence by the City of Amsterdam. The program, dubbed the Three Package Deal, funded by the Amsterdam Fund for the Arts, came with a €22,500 stipend that covered living expenses, an artist studio and a research budget for a theatre production, to be showcased after the

residency. Upon graduation from DAS the previous year, Ogutu was granted a one year visa, usually provided to graduates from Dutch institutions. That one year in Amsterdam post-graduation became a haunting experience. Despite the relief he had found in James Baldwin and his work, Ogutu still had to put up with a sense of not belonging as he wrestled with questions of race and racism, and how this affected his life and work. The residency came with a two year visa, meaning Ogutu had to decide whether he had the stamina to survive Amsterdam.

Here was a man debating whether to continue with the residency or opt out. It was a huge honour to be selected, and he was cognizant of the fact that benefactors who he did not want to disappoint had put up a strong case for him in the process. Ogutu took the entire month of January 2018 to make the decision to return to Amsterdam and take up the residency, partly prompted by the need to return to Europe anyway since he was already slotted to perform *'Fractured Memory'* at the Royal Flemish Theatre in Brussels.

7

The Life and Works of Leopold II

Ogutu arrived in Brussels on March 8, 2018, a day before his performance of *'Fractured Memory'* at the Royal Flemish Theatre. Noah Voelker, an American classmate at DAS who was now a collaborator, accompanied him. They checked into two spacious studio apartments, before proceeding to the theatre to check on the technical elements of the performance. The show, performed in English, had French and Dutch surtitles (as subtitles are known in theatre) to attract both the city's Dutch and French speakers.

As Ogutu and Noah went through the technical motions of the show, a staffer at the theater told them about *'The Life and Works of Leopold II'*, a performance which was being staged on the night of March 8. The show would take place at the main theatre as the anchor performance, followed by Ogutu's performance on March 9 at an adjoining box theatre. He would later discover that the pairing of the two performances was to ignite a dialogue on colonialism and decolonization. *'Fractured Memory'* was lined up as a hesitant partner in a weird post-colonial dance with King Leopold II's misdeeds in the Congo.

Earlier the same day, Ogutu sent Tunde Adefioye - the theater's curator who had booked Ogutu's show - a text message requesting tickets for *'The Life and Works of Leopold II'*. Tunde told him the show was sold out, but that he would seek out some connections. He never got back to Ogutu. It later emerged that Tunde preferred Ogutu did not watch the Leopold II show, possibly suspecting the performance's racist undertones would expectedly elicit an unpleasant reaction. Ogutu reasoned that Tunde meant well and wanted to stick to his institution's program while shielding Ogutu from triggers that would affect his performance. Unknown to Tunde, the theatre's staffer went to the box office and worked out two tickets for Ogutu and Noah to watch the Leopold II show.

In Ogutu's narration, the opening scene featured the only black cast member cleaning the front of the theatre using a vacuum cleaner, moving around the stage and into the audience, creating confusion as to whether he was part of the performance. Then the rest of the cast took to the stage, with African characters played by white actors wearing black faces. The King of Congo was depicted as an ape-like creature, and whenever the white actors playing as Africans spoke, their speech was deliberately sluggish and inaudible, as if not representations of actual humans. The actor playing

King Leopold II produced a belching sound whenever interacting with Africans, implying that in communication with Africans, one resorted to a range of grunt sounds outside of ordinary speech. In representing African children, their voices became hoarse and croaky.

As the English surtitles streamed past and Ogutu married them to the acts on stage, he got agitated. To Ogutu's dismay, the worst was yet to come after the performance, when the predominantly white audience gave the cast a standing ovation. The cast moved backstage but as the audience was still clapping, came back on stage to soak in the accolades. Ogutu felt sick to the stomach, not knowing whether to be surprised or disappointed. To this audience in Brussels, the portrayal of Africans as primitive sub-humans passed for art.

From the theatre, Ogutu did not speak to anyone. He went straight to his apartment, and could not sleep that night. The following morning at 9am, Noah was at the theatre, ready to do a test run of *'Fractured Memory'*. He sent Ogutu a text, asking whether he was on his way. Ogutu said he was.

The moment Noah set his eyes on Ogutu he knew something was amiss. Noah also knew it all had to do with what they had watched the previous night. There was no denying that the show was racist. Noah and Ogutu had a little chat, sharing views on the show. Ogutu told Noah he was not sure he wanted to perform *'Fractured Memory'* in such a racially toxic environment. Noah said he understood, but asked Ogutu to give it further thought. Ogutu walked into the theatre set up for his performance. The moment he walked in, he instinctively knew he would not be performing that night. He told Noah he was going to take a walk back to the apartment, and that by the time he got there, he would relay his final decision.

By the time Ogutu got to the apartment, his mind was made. He was not performing.

When Tunde Adefioye heard about Ogutu's decision, he requested a meeting. Ogutu asked for an hour as he called Amsterdam, where Veem House of Performance was handling his travel and other logistics. He informed them of his decision to pull out, asking for arrangements for the next available train back to Amsterdam. Tunde was devastated, admitting that he too shared in Ogutu's frustrations of *'The Life and Times of King Leopold II'* portrayal of Africans. The theatre's business manager reached out to Noah, asking for a meeting. Ogutu declined.

By the time Noah and Ogutu arrived in Amsterdam, the main newspapers in Brussels had picked up the story, as a cancellation message had to be sent out by the theater. Journalists wanted a comment from Ogutu, for the next day's papers. Feeling under weather, Ogutu took his medication and passed out. By the time he woke up, the journalists' 5pm deadline had lapsed. They went to print without his comment. Phone calls and solidarity messages from friends and industry players started streaming in. By the evening of March 9, Ogutu had to release a statement. He consulted the team at Veem, before making a stinging, succinct Facebook post. The Royal Flemish Theatre on its part issued a defensive counter statement, citing artistic freedom. Tunde wrote a conciliatory piece, hoping Ogutu would have an opportunity to perform at the theatre sometime in future and to contribute to the decolonization discourse. The theatre's artistic director tried reaching Ogutu through Veem, intending to issue a personal apology.

In his statement, Ogutu bitterly protested the placement of *'Fractured Memory'* next to a hyper-problematic piece framed as part of an exercise in the critical reflection on colonialism. The use of racist slurs such as nigger, the apish characterization and imbecilic mannerisms attributed to Africans, the racialized costumes and sexualization of the black body, and the use of the black face - all in Ogutu's words - were some of the unacceptable devices deployed to demean the dignity of

black people.

It was as if Ogutu was having an artistic epiphany. All his readings of Baldwin crystallized before his eyes. There he was, a Black artist in Brussels, encountering blatant racism within the very artistic spaces he had hoped to find elevated discourses on culture, race and race relations. Like Baldwin, he now had to react directly to these acts by carving out his own responses. Ogutu had to now live his politics, and mature as a protégé of Baldwin's work.

Three days later, on March 12 2018, Ogutu boarded a Nairobi bound KLM flight, booked a month earlier. Unlike during his New Year's Amsterdam to Nairobi flight when he was torn between moving back home or taking up the City of Amsterdam residency, he now felt a sense of artistic purpose. He had taken up the residency and premiered his next show, *'Because I Always Feel Like Running'*, that aptly captured his nomadic tendencies. Brussels may have devastated Ogutu, but it simultaneously awoke the urgency within him.

8

Because I Always Feel Like Running

The person who helped Ogutu clarify his thoughts was Anne Breure, the director at Amsterdam's Veem House of Performance. Breure forwarded Ogutu's name to her coalition of arts organizations back in 2017, proposing him as a potential artist in residency. With his nomination under consideration, Ogutu retreated to his little Amsterdam studio for two months, July and August 2017, where he conceptualized his next performance project, dedicated to the residency. The piece, titled *'Because I Always Feel Like Running'*, investigated the building blocks in the lives of East African long distance runners. Ogutu's research narrowed down to Ethiopia's Abebe Bikile, Kenya's Kipchoke Keino and Tanzania's John Stephen Akwari.

By looking at the lives of these three at their height on the track, Ogutu intended to develop a piece exhibiting the spirit of sacrifice, excellence and resilience. He might as well have been projecting his own life. At the end of 2017, Ogutu had already done dummy performances of the show at the Veem House of Performance in Amsterdam, the Spielarts Festival in Munich and a follow up show in February 2018 in the city of Gronigen.

By this time, Leila Anderson, a South African artist who was a year ahead of Ogutu at DAS, became one of his closest collaborators, urging him on whenever Ogutu encountered performance-related anxiety.

Previously, like when he performed at the Batard Festival in Brussels in 2016, Ogutu would lock himself up the entire time, only leaving his room to do his show then retreat, never wanting to interact with the outside world. He was now less reclusive thanks to Leila. When Ogutu returned to Amsterdam at the end of January 2018 after taking a break in Nairobi to contemplate whether to carry on with the residency or not - and to spend time with his ailing mother, his only surviving parent for a long time - he pinned six A3 spreadsheets on the wall of his bedroom. He stuck six yellow sticky notes on each of the spreadsheets, and in each sticky note, he chronologically listed the events that had shaped his life for the last decade.

He started out with the 2007/2008 Kenyan post election violence, which inspired his Mau Mau piece, but which had directly affected his family. His name, Ogutu Muruya - with Ogutu coming from his Luo ancestry and Muruya coming from his Kikuyu lineage - was seen as an oxymoron since it collapsed the two politically antagonistic communities into one entity. He was neither Luo enough

nor Kikuyu enough for as long as he could remember, and the 2007/2008 ethnic violence put his family on the spot including from neighbours who debated whether they were Luos or Kikuyus. Depending on where one was, being either Luo or Kikuyu could mean life or death. He listed migration, in relation to his move to DAS, and listed his time at DAS under studies. The list kept growing as Ogutu applied specificity.

From each sticky note Ogutu originated a web of arrows pointed into the A3 spreadsheets, where he wrote detailed notes on what ramifications each of the items listed on the sticky notes had brought into his life. By the time he was done, the white A3 surfaces were filled with acres of hardly legible text. Looking at whatever he had written, Ogutu concluded that there was nothing more to be squeezed out of that decade. He had come full circle. He took photos of the spreadsheets and saved them on his phone, before picking his bags and heading to Brussels on March 8 2018.

Brussels through *'The Life and Works of Leopold II'* had already set the mission on how to jumpstart his next ten year cycle, confronting him with the question of race and racism afresh. It was now all up to him.

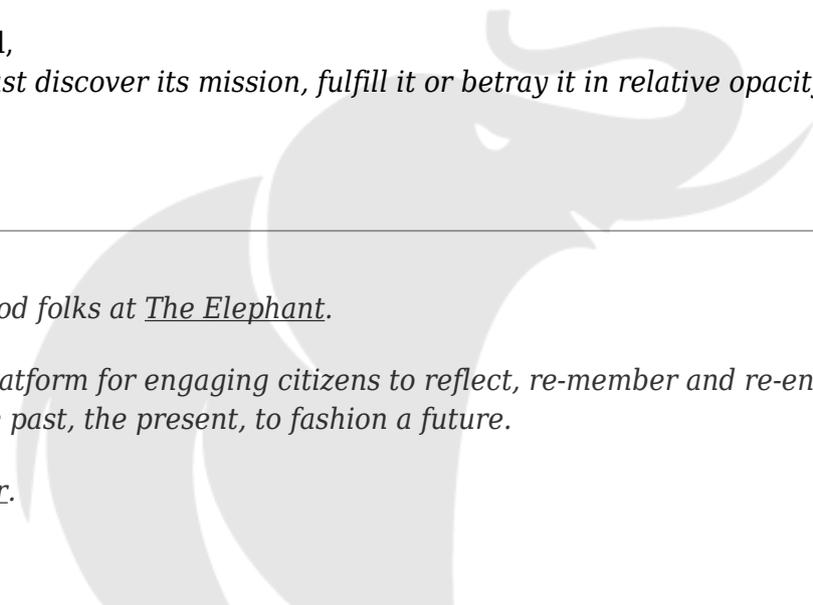
As Franz Fanon said,
Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it in relative opacity.

The End

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