



Ruud Gullit's Barber

By Oyunga Pala



Stadhouderskade is a teeming thoroughfare in the heart of Amsterdam, part of the city centre ring connecting Amsterdam-West to Amsterdam-South. It begins at a bridge over the Amstel river, snakes for two kilometres alongside a series of canals, running past the historic Vondelpark, Leidseplein, the Amsterdam Marriott and several national monuments like the iconic Rijksmuseum.

It was one of the first streets I became acquainted with when I moved from Nairobi to Amsterdam two years ago. At the intersection of Stadhouderskade and Ferdinand Bolstraat street, situated between the distinct Heineken Brewery and a small sex club called *Tour De Boton*, sits a nondescript barber and board store with a cool name.

Shortcut & Hardwear

It is a small lifestyle shop that sells snowboarding gear and urban street wear. Inside, past the racks of clothes and merchandise, at the back of the shop, hidden from street view, is a single barber chair facing a full-length mirror. One side of the mirror is dominated by a charity poster advertising a relief effort in India. On the other, hangs a large and colourful snowboard with the image of Chairman Mao staring back.

This is my barber shop and my barber, a middle aged man named Brian, is an institution on this street. He has been in the same location for 30 years and has the laidback demeanour of a man who has cultivated an unhurried life. It is the vibe you stumble onto when you escape the chilly autumn

streets into the cozy interior of the barber shop. There is always some music with a deep bassline playing. Typically, you will meet his friends who drop by to say “*Hola*”, a collective of Spanish-speaking South American brothers who greet you with the warmth of people who grew up in the sun.

For Africans abroad, a barber who knows how to handle black hair is a lifeline.

Brian draws his heritage from African, Chinese and Indonesian ancestry. He is Dutch but his roots are in Suriname, a nation four times the size of the colonial master’s homeland that was once part of the Dutch colonial empire. Before I arrived in the Netherlands, I could not place Suriname on the South American map, sandwiched as it is between Guyana, French Guiana and Brazil; nowadays, it is the Surinamese cultural footprints that guide me through Amsterdam’s foreignness.

Shortcut & Hardwear has grown to be more than a barber shop. It is a black space where I find anchor as I explore Amsterdam through a network of spaces that evoke feelings of “home”.

I am a Kenyan writer, a former newspaper columnist who moved residence from Nairobi to Amsterdam. I am the father of two young children, one of whom is a pandemic baby. They might speak Dutch as their first language and never master Kiswahili. I am living in the post-Covid-19 reality in a transformed, physically distant city of QR codes, PCR tests, vaccination certificates thrown in the face of anti-vaxxer protests, and the daily drumming of xenophobia and nationalism on social media.

The coronavirus has had an effect on this city. I once knew a freer Amsterdam, the epitome of personal liberty where tourists smoked joints in front of the police and public sex did not even raise eyebrows. I have watched it transform into a 1.5 metres society, marked by glass barriers in public spaces and where citizens hoard toilet paper in a gut response to an existential crisis.

Much like Stadhouderskade where construction works are ongoing, Amsterdam is undergoing rapid social transformation and I struggle to make sense of this new world I find myself in. The city is in the midst of a radical shift to overhaul its infrastructure in the wake of climate change while its cultural foundations, which were once thought to be entrenched and secured, are challenged by vocal minorities. On Twitter, behind the facade of a city on the shores of the North Sea moving to the rhythm of its bicycles, trams, and boats, I catch a glimpse of a city now confronted by the anti-islamic and anti-immigration rhetoric of Dutch politician Geert Wilder, the notoriety of Thierry Baudet, known for his anti-COVID restrictions and anti-Europe sentiments, and the audacity of Sylvana Simons, the founder of the anti-racist political party BIJ1.

The Dutch Puzzle is the title of a book written by Duke de Beana from a Spanish ambassador’s viewpoint and published in the 70s. Decades on, I have also found a low country of paradoxes, perhaps best illustrated by the coffeeshop located across the road from a church building. I may have been primed for the much-touted Dutch tourist attractions, its Red Light District and its coffeeshops, but one quickly becomes blasé after the initial culture shock.

Netherlands, a culturally liberal society and the first country in the world to legalise same-sex marriages, is also a place that celebrates a Christmas tradition where the Dutch Santa in white appears on a boat trailed by his black-faced sidekick, *Zwarte Piet*, to the delight of the kids. This supposedly benign cultural festival in a country with a gory slave trading past, is vehemently defended as a Dutch thing that outsiders could never understand.

Europe is a place where privacy is a right. Sierra Leonean columnist Babah Tarawally said it is where you learn to become an individual first. I feel it the most on the metro, during rush hour in a

train full of individuals where eye contact is deliberately avoided and aloofness is the norm. Navigating Amsterdam as an African man has been confusing. For a long time I was the eager new arrival who tried to acknowledge every black brother on the street with a solidarity nod and wondered why some of my black brothers did not respond to my spirit of *ubuntu*.

What did I really see other than pigmentation?

I did not have the foggiest clue about the vast representation of Global Africa on the streets of Amsterdam and despite my bred-in African credentials, I was learning to see my blackness anew.

Your black worldview changes when you begin to notice resonance with the diversity of people of African heritage congregating in the Netherlands. I have met men from the Caribbean islands of St Vincent, Aruba and Curaçao who reminded me of family members in Kenya. I have struck instant rapport with an Ethiopian Uber driver, a Jamaican clothing store attendant, a Ghanaian delivery man, a Congolese-Dutch columnist who spoke Kiswahilli, an African American poet from Charleston, a Guyanese who spent his youth in Uganda under Idi Amin, and a Tanzanian sister at a lifestyle store who exclaimed in excitement, "*Jirani!*" "*My neighbour!*", when she discovered that I hailed from Kenya.

Not a single one gushed about a wildlife safari or a golden sunset over the Maasai Mara.

I recently spoke to an African man whom I had seen selling newspapers outside supermarkets around the Amstelveen suburb. He said he was from Biafra, not Nigeria, and as soon as I told him I was from Kenya, he complained bitterly about the betrayal of Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra who was abducted in Kenya and deported to Nigeria.

"Why are you Kenyans not behaving like Africans?"

I knew the context of the word *behave*, a rebuke to post-colonial Africans living in Europe who are prone to forgetting the struggles of family left behind in the motherland. Yet, if you stay in a place long enough, it changes you. A Moroccan taxi driver told me as much, about the lure of the Dutch lifestyle and how difficult it is to let go of the comfortable life.

"It's hard to leave. The system works, you can make progress and invest back home. Then the women join you and you start to make babies, now they are Dutch and they grow up to be told to go back home by the racists because they are not Dutch enough and when they arrive home, they are reminded they are no longer Moroccan, they have become Dutch".

I am 15 minutes early for my monthly haircut. Brian is busy cutting a client's hair. Burna Boy is the musical mood of the moment. From the window, I watch the traffic zoom past on Stadhouderskade, processing a new set of city sounds. Clanky bicycles on cobblestones, trams squealing on the rails to a slow stop, and the recurring siren of a speeding ambulance. The streets are covered in leaf fall, the trees are naked, a sure sign that winter is coming.

The Netherlands is a flat country with no natural barrier against the assault of the North Sea winds that sweep across unrestrained. On my weather app, I pay attention to the codename Orange warning of unusual coastal activity. I used to complain about the weather to friends back home in Nairobi until I had an encounter at the Irish pub on Leidseplein whilst taking shelter after getting caught wrongly dressed in the icy cold rain. I wouldn't stop whining about the duplicitous Dutch summer, causing a lean, sinewy stranger in workman clothes to blurt out,

"You are not made of cotton candy and sugar. It's just water!"

Fair point.

Now I have accepted that the weather is shit and I am learning to be a weathered rock of all seasons.

My turn arrives and I take a seat on the barber chair. Normally a man of few words, Brian is in a chatty mood today. He complains about the construction work on his street, and how bad it is for business, and then we talk about football. The Dutch did not have an impressive UEFA Cup run last season and I ask what happened to the spirit of the flying Dutchmen of my youth, the magical trio of Ruud Gullit, Frank Rijkaard and Marco Van Basten. To which he answers,

"Gullit was here."

"Where?"

"On this chair, in the morning, he came for a haircut before a TV appearance in Qatar . . . he is a busy guy. . ."

He tells me about the Dutch football legend, a childhood friend he played ball with on the streets of Amsterdam Old West. Gullit no longer sports dreadlocks and has morphed into a celebrated TV sports commentator.

"He is a funny guy, he was complaining about relatives back in Suriname, always finding a way to ask for money".

What were the chances, I wondered, that I would share a barber with Ruud Gullit, the foremost disciple and master of the Dutch brand of total football, the international superstar from the Netherlands that I admired as a teenager.

Dunia ni duara. The world is round.

-

This piece was first published on oyungapala.com

Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on [Twitter](#).