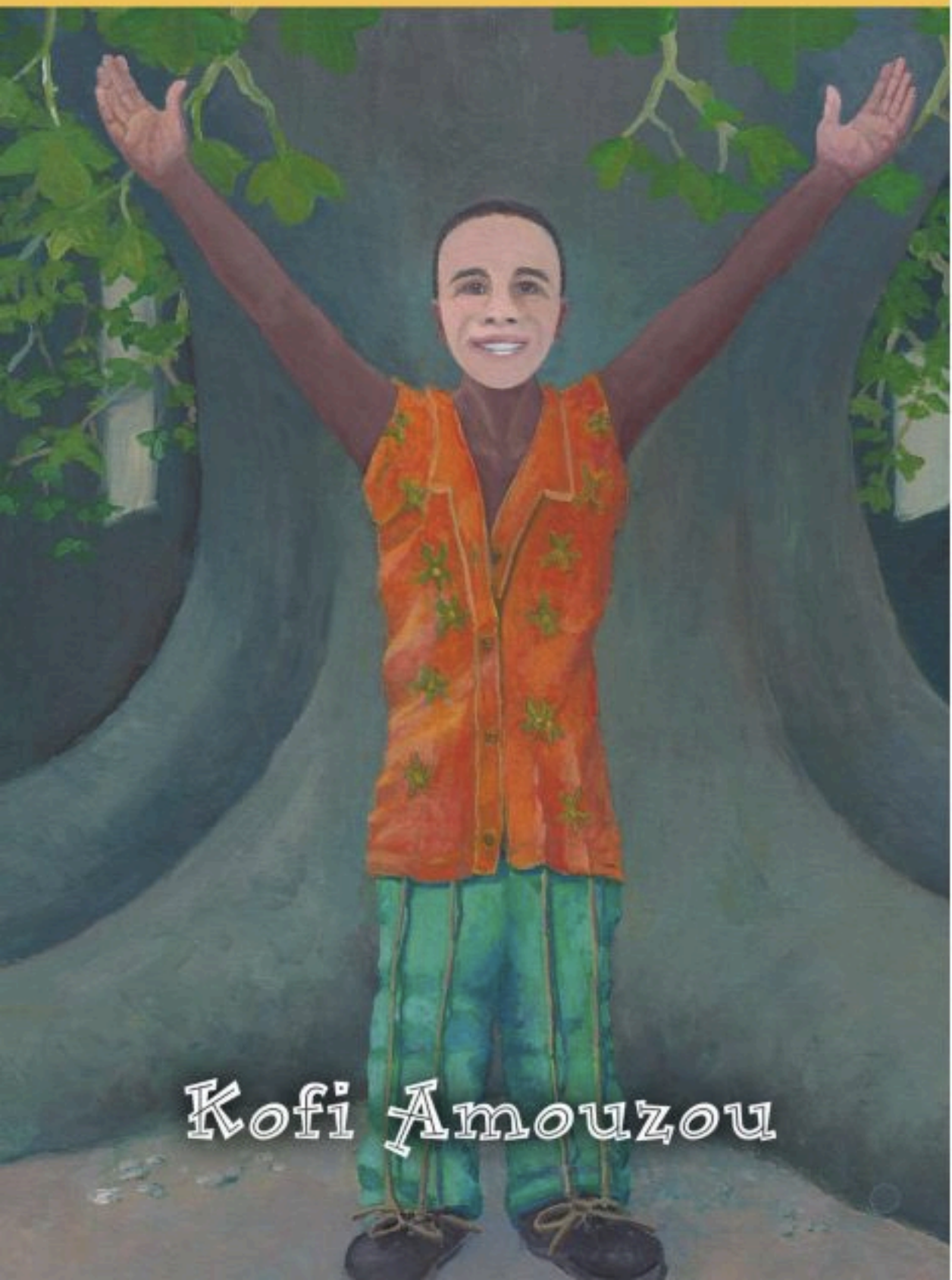
Kofi, a Child of Lavié



Kofi Amouzou

It costs a dollar a year for Kofi, a Child of Lavié, to go to school. In his African village, that is a lot of money. When Kofi turns thirteen, the worst happens. His parents have no money to pay the fees. Out of school, and facing a future of working on the farm he hates, he despairs. What happens next tugs at the heartstrings as Lavié comes to his rescue in an unexpected way.

Kofi,
a child of Lavié

by Kofi Amouzou

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To Liam, Seth and the children of Lavié
Live your best dreams

author's note

KOFI, A CHILD OF LAVIÉ is an authentic story. I really did grow up in a remote village named Lavié, a collection of mud and clay houses with straw or tin roofs built into the African hills. Every day, when we weren't in school, my six siblings and I made the two-hour walk in flip-flops to the farm to help with back breaking work. In the evenings we danced to the rhythms and melodies of the nightly drum circle. Percussion from wood-carved drums, the calling of cowbells, and the wailing cries of bugles punctuated the dusk. On Sundays, we washed our clothes and bathed in the town stream after worshipping publicly in church and privately to the legba, the gods that were in everything: the fire, the rocks and the trees.

Our elementary school was a public school, but it wasn't free. It had a school fee of one dollar a year per student. Coming up with seven dollars a year presented a real hardship for subsistence farmers like Mom and Dad; I was perpetually in fear that they couldn't pay to keep me in school.

Through the years, Mom and Dad used their ingenuity to pay the fees, turning unsold cassava into more marketable gari; doing logging work; and even, taking a turn as a magician.

When I was thirteen, what I had long been afraid of actually happened; there was no more money to pay the fees. Out of school and facing a future without that important education, I drifted into despair. What happened next could only have happened in Lavié.

The names of all my family members are authentic, but because I was unable to get their clear consent, I have slightly changed the first names of friends and elders.

The voice you hear in this book is the voice of my memories, my true life experience as a native child. But here and there, you will notice that my uninvited adult voice creeps in. For example, I compare my mother's skin to "New York City in a power outage." This particular metaphor comes from my fascination with the August 14, 2003 blackout when a dark night stole over the city that I now call home. That black night recalled Lavié and reminded me of that "flashlight that Papa never let me play with." Another is likening "the day's sky…full of clouds" to "bed sheets." This speaks to my first real bed sheets provided to me by my wife – Megan Amouzou, toi et nul autre.

Kofi Amouzou
NEW YORK, 2014

kofi, a child of lavié

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Chapter

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ready for school

When I was four, Papa started hassling me about learning the alphabet in the evening time after we returned from the farm. He believed that if he could labor all day and still have the strength to teach us, we children must also be able to work all day and still have the strength to learn. Papa went on to set aside time for me to learn numbers by counting my fingers and toes, and time to learn

how to write my own name. After that, he taught me the names of some countries and their capital cities. We practiced by the light of a kerosene lamp that spoiled the clean air with its numbing smell. Repetition was the study practice Papa taught us children, and he expected us to learn quickly. It took me weeks to recover from his impatience when I couldn't remember the capital of Ethiopia.

"Addis Ababa!" he called out. "We went over this before." The smell of kerosene always reminds me of this failure.

Mama had a story about each of us. The one she liked to tell about me was taking me to school for the first time. It all started one Sunday, in early September, when I was about four and a half years old. I came home from the evening drum circle that had taken place at a home next door. Mama sat on her stool by the cooking tripod in the kitchen, getting over a head cold. The kitchen was filled with the bitter smell of the mixture of healing herbs and roots that I had always disliked. Pieces of mahogany bark, a few roots and some green leaves were spread all over the floor.

On the tripod over the shallow hole of the pale orange cook fire, a pot was slowly coming to a boil. A horrible taste snuck its way into my mouth and down my throat, jolting me with a sudden sneeze. When my eyes opened, they landed on the clear rising smoke that swirled up above the pot and made shadows dance on the wall behind Mama.

As I watched the pretty dancing shadows, the drums and songs from the drum circle played in my head again. I heard the bugle, the wood-carved

drums, the assortment of percussion sticks, and the black cowbell. As the songs began rising over the playful drumbeats in my mind, I could see the seated drummers holding their drums between their knees. They hit the drums with their bare hands, I watched as their knees moved the drums up and down to make the sounds that rang the melodious tuneful rhythms. I began to dance.

"Kofi," Mama called out.

The drumming faded away instantly. My feet froze. Mama's voice echoed in my ears, giving rise to a worry I knew all too well – the worry that she would make me drink a calabash full of the bad-tasting beverage before I went to bed. The smell of the boiling medicine hung thick in the air. Mama held her hand out to me. But the thought of the bitter taste held me back. She reached out, held my hand and led me out of the kitchen.

"Papa wanted you," she said in a hoarse voice.

Now I wondered if bigger trouble than a calabash of medicine was waiting for me.

Papa was in his wooden chair under the grapefruit tree between the kitchen and the front door to his room. A vibrating sound was coming from his direction. Mama paused as if Papa's snores were communicating some meaning to her.

Papa was bare-chested, and was very asleep. A double-A-battery-operated aluminum flashlight and a pack of 555 cigarettes were at his feet. Mama shook him to wake him up. Papa stopped mid-snore and opened his eyes, blinking in the dusk until he settled on me.

"You'll be off to school tomorrow," he mumbled.

"It's too early for him," Mama interrupted him.

"No, it isn't," Papa insisted.

Earlier in the evening, Papa had hid his smile, when he found out that I no longer needed help to write Kofi Amouzou, using my signature "Ƹ" for "z".

"The child is only four. Six is what's required."

"He could be six. I wouldn't say it's impossible to prove it until we have tried. I'll see this with the school officials myself," Papa told Mama.

"He has a birth certificate, remember?" Mama pointed out.

"I don't think so," Papa said to Mama. "We already went over this. He'll be signed up. I'll make sure everything is OK."

In the glow of the moonlight, I was admiring the flashlight that Papa never let me play with. I heard them say that I would be starting school the next day. I heard that I was six years old, and not four. But there was the flashlight, as tempting as ever. I stepped closer and sat by it at the foot of Papa's chair.

"Ready for school?" Papa leaned down to ask me.

"Yes," I said to him, looking at the flashlight.

"Will you help him with the age requirement thing?" Mama said to Papa.

"Yes," he replied.

"Stand up," Papa told me.

I stood up. Papa told me to raise my hand as straight and as far up as I could. Then he wanted me to wrap my arm around my head and try to

touch my ear on the other side of my head. I tried, but I couldn't do it. I didn't have six-year-old motor skills. Papa said try again. I still couldn't do it. He said to try again. I tried one more time followed by another attempt, and then another one. And I was still trying until my finger touched the top of my ear on the other side of my head.

"You'll be starting school tomorrow," Papa said again and sat back satisfied.

Monday morning felt odd, there was something about it. Many of us were at the brook collecting water with our Mamas. Everyone was rushing to finish the house chores before seven.

School was to start at seven-thirty. Neighbors were calling out to their children to get ready and on time on this first day of school.

"Kofi, hurry up! Kossi, you are too slow sweeping the kitchen floor! Yao, you still haven't taken a shower yet?"

For the first time, Mama was doing the same with me, rubbing my skin with cream and dressing me. We arrived at the École Primaire Publique Centrale a short while later.

The sky wasn't pretty, it looked like it was going to rain. There were many children, and they were all standing in line by their Mamas. Mama asked me to sit on a rock under a tree near one of the classrooms. She went inside the classroom in front of the people in line. When she came back out, a bearded man was with her. I felt his curious eyes looking at me, like I was an exotic creature he had never seen before, and then he went back in with Mama. When Mama came back out a few

minutes later, she was by herself. She held my hand and we left the school compound and returned home.

Mama talked to Papa in his room behind closed doors when we got back. The door to the École Primaire Publique Centrale had been closed in her face. A little bit later, I went back out with Papa.

We walked in the same direction as many other children and their Mamas. Some children were crying. Others were jumping as if they were happy to go to school for the first time. A few other children were just holding their Mamas' hands. There were older kids too, they were holding hoes and machetes, and walked along with us in the direction of Lomnava.

Shaded by mango and palm trees, the school yard at Lomnava was smaller than the one at the other school. Three small, straw-roofed shelters with no walls held rows of benches. Little girls with aluminum buckets of water were scrubbing the benches with sponges while boys whacked the weeds around the classrooms with machetes. Bigger children were clearing the school's soccer field that was covered in grass as tall as I was after a long summer of growth.

Under a mango tree next to a classroom a man in sunglasses sat at a desk. There was a large, thick notebook on the desk in front of him along with a stack of money. Another man stood nearby, a stick in his hand. In front of the man at the desk was a long line of grown-ups and children.

We took our place in the patient line behind other families, they were all Mamas with their school-aged children.

"Monsieur Seth, bonjour," the man called out to Papa, his sunglasses perched on his forehead; now was our turn. Papa's name was Seth but his friends called him Seti.

"Que puis-je faire pour vous? What can I do for you?" the man asked Papa further.

"I want to sign him up for school," Papa pushed me forward.

"How old is he?" the man asked, looking at me like he could tell I wasn't old enough.

"About six," said Papa.

"His birth certificate?"

"He doesn't have one just yet," replied Papa.

"He must have one before we can sign him up," the man told Papa.

"He's ready for school. We can check with the age test, can't we?" Papa appealed.

"OK Monsieur Seth, OK," the man got up, and came out from behind the desk. He patted my head and asked if I was ready for school. I said that I was ready, and he called instructions to me.

"Raise your hand up as straight and as far as you can," he told me; and I did.

"Now, wrap your hand around your head and try touching your ear on the other side," he said further; I did that too, and my fingertips touched my ear on the other side of my head.

"C'est bon. That's good," he said.

Like all the kids who were able to reach their ears that day, I proved that I was old enough to

start school. Papa and I were in the group of new students by the time Mama joined us.

She smothered me in hugs, paid my school fee before she and Papa left me behind to start school.

Chapter

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orange boy

There was lots of learning at school. But playing and dancing were more fun than learning how an "s" was formed. The letter "z" and my "ƨ" were the same in my eyes. The "ƨ" was easier to write, even if it was incorrect. But really, I preferred practicing "s" and "z" in school to farming.

"Nothing is hard about farming," Papa said.

Papa made me believe that if I dropped a seed just about anywhere, it would grow into a fruit-bearing tree.

"That's all there is to farming," he said.

Once when I accidentally swallowed an orange seed, I thought an orange tree would be growing out of my head. I was eating an orange that Grandma had given me.

"Grandma, Grandma, I swallowed an orange seed!" In a complete panic, I ran to her. Grandma was Papa's Mama.

"Oh, no… It'll grow in your tummy," she said credibly.

"I don't think so," I said doubtfully.

"Why not?" she now asked me curiously.

"My tummy is too small," I replied.

"It'll come out of your head when it gets bigger and have oranges," she explained soundly.

"My head?" I asked frighteningly.

"Yes," she replied. "And people will follow you, wanting to pick an orange."

"For real?" I desperately wished not.

"For real," Grandma held. "And you'll be the orange boy in town."

"Orange boy, no!" I cried, checking my head.

To my relief there was no tree – not yet. Grandma said it wouldn't happen right away.

"When will it happen?" I asked her.

"Who knows?" she replied.

The thought that a seed would grow out of my head troubled me. I was full of worry; not just about how to walk around with a tree growing out

of me, but also about how to hold my head up, how to get in our room, and how to fit in my bed.

I carried that worry long after Grandma had told me that the whole thing was a joke.

My only surviving grandparent, Grandma was like a precious gem to us children. She had this smile that pulled us together. The brightness of Grandma's smile could beat any hatred ever known to mankind. She understood something larger than I could make out too. At times, I thought it was something like arithmetic. But if it really was arithmetic, it must have been her very own, and not what we were learning at school, because she had never set foot in a classroom.

Grandma only had her green thumb, but it took her way past just farming, for she had the skills in herbs in her hands, like an expert in herbal healing. She was a respected bush doctor well known beyond Lavié's borders. Grandma could even tell the future.

"Worry not," she often told us. "There'll come the time…"

There always seemed something clairvoyantly deep in everything Grandma said. Like occultism. But week to week, as life still remained the same, Grandma's fortunetelling began to beg the question of when. When would this day come?

"Nature's time. Nature runs forward to that day, that time," she said as if to shepherd us children safely through the world of childhood, that world of here and now.

We children liked to crowd Grandma's room where she entertained us with strange questions.

"Suppose you are sitting in a globe of light," she asked, "how wide is the surrounding dark from the circle of the light?"

Sometimes she would want us to guess "how many kernels of corn a chicken eats in the course of a lifetime;" and we would ride on the constant quest of finding the answer.

"An edgeless dark shadow. Seven hundred, one thousand, one million, or just lots of kernels of corn," we speculated.

Grandma never told us what the answer was.

"Keep searching," she said.

Many years later, I would learn that these questions Grandma liked to ask us were called Fermi questions, named after Italian physicist Enrico Fermi. A Fermi question seeks just a rough estimate of a quantity that's difficult or impossible to measure directly. So, now I began to believe that Grandma asked these questions to divert us children so that she could do her work. And she was actually always busy.

Grandma's room was like a magician's training cave. It was in this workroom where she estimated, searched and built what eased the sick. The room was decked with a horde of small hard earth pots with a variety of ground herbs and roots in them, all neatly arrayed. Each potent pot held stuff of a particular medicinal use. There were small white pieces of cloth, the size of a handkerchief too. Each of them carried prepared stuff with a specific preventive or curative power. Neat rows of bottles held concoctions that provided energy, fitness and well-being. Colorful

collections of sacred items – we children were warned against touching them – brewed the magic of keeping bad spirits and enemies away from those bothered by them. There were many herbs dried from another season.

People from near and far came, seeking Grandma's help – help to ease the sick, to care for the weak, and to save a child's life. They trusted Grandma and they wanted her presence.

Grandma said that her work of healing was fueled by the blessing of Grandpa.

"Grandpa who?" I asked.

"Papa's Papa," she said. "He passed."

The words, that Grandma said, stopped me in place confused.

"Why is his blessing still alive?" I asked her.

"The dead aren't dead," she said, her thumb flicked up and her index finger pointed in the air toward the sky. "They are up above looking after us." Grandma's peaceful smile faded instantly.

"Papa was about ten when Grandpa died," she said, grief filling her eyes. "Grandpa was a hardworking man, and he died doing what he loved – farming. He had many farms and every year, they produced lofts full of corn, yams, peanuts and beans. Grandpa believed that the chicken that digs for food doesn't go home hungry. So he dug, working at the farms. One day, alone in his cornfield, he fell from a tree whose branches he was pruning with a machete to let the sun shine on his crops. One of his legs fractured," Grandma said, illustrating with her hands. "The exposed bone lodged in the dirt as he hit the

ground. He managed to pull it out, clean the wound as much as he could and push the broken bone back, joining the pieces in the leg. Heading home that fateful day to seek help, he dragged the leg along for about a mile before meeting people who brought him to the village dispensary."

Grandma paused for a moment to collect herself; then she sighed, and when she spoke again, her voice was quiet.

"There, he died; I miss him," she said.

A chill passed down my spine as if to remind me that hoeing the farm could actually be fatal.

It costs a dollar a year for Kofi, a Child of Lavié, to go to school. In his African village, that is a lot of money. When Kofi turns thirteen, the worst happens. His parents have no money to pay the fees. Out of school, and facing a future of working on the farm he hates, he despairs. What happens next tugs at the heartstrings as Lavié comes to his rescue in an unexpected way.

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