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Cabo Delgado in Peace:

Memories and Forebodings*

SÉRGIO SANTIMANO, PHOTOGRAPHS
Independent photographer, Uppsala, Sweden

PAOLO ISRAEL, TEXT
Department of Historical Studies, University of the Western Cape
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5322-0929

Abstract

In 1996, Mozambican photographer Sérgio Santimano travelled to Cabo Delgado to carry out photographic work, with the objective of documenting the province in a time of peace and renewal. His travels resulted in the exhibition, *Cabo Delgado: A Photographic Story about Africa (Cabo Delgado: uma história fotográfica sobre África)*, which consolidated his international renown. In this photo-essay, we revisit a selection of Santimano's photographs on Cabo Delgado, with the aim of offering an image different from that of devastation and death which has dominated the national and global news since an Islamist insurgency erupted in the province in October 2017. While providing a pathway into memories of Cabo Delgado as a place rich with life, history, culture and individuality, Santimano's photographs also offer eerie forebodings of the present.

Keywords

Cabo Delgado, photography, peace

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In 1995, 'on a cold winter evening in Uppsala, taken by a great nostalgia (*saudade*) for Mozambique', photographer Sérgio Santimano wrote a project to apply for a prestigious Swedish grant for the arts.[1] Born in Maputo, then Lourenço Marques, in 1956, Santimano worked extensively in independent Mozambique as a photo-journalist, under the guidance of Ricardo Rangel, especially for the *Domingo* newspaper and the influential news agency AIM.[2] In 1988 he moved to Sweden together with his wife, where he took a course in art photography that focussed on visual storytelling. For his final project, he worked on a study of a woman disabled and displaced by the civil war that for sixteen years had torn the country apart. The woman sold goods in a Maputo informal market. After the end of the war in 1992, Santimano traced her back to her home in Inhambane. The result was his first individual exhibition, '*Caminhos,* The long and winding road', which travelled internationally and was featured in the prestigious *Revue Noire*.[3]

The new project focussed instead on the northerly province of Cabo Delgado. After dwelling on the destructive effects of the war, Santimano aimed to capture the exuberance of peace and reconstruction – 'the life of people, the circulation, the culture'. Why Cabo Delgado? Santimano had travelled there in 1980, documenting the First National Festival of Song and Traditional Music.[4] He knew that the province was rich in history – being the cradle of the struggle for national liberation – and home to a dazzling diversity of artistic expressions. He was also eager to get to explore in depth a reality as removed as possible from the capital, Maputo, where he had grown up. In 1996, Santimano was notified that his project had been selected, one of three among five hundred applications. In that same year, he packed his bags to travel to Cabo Delgado, in two stints of two months each. The result was the exhibition 'Cabo Delgado: A Photographic Story about Africa' *(Cabo Delgado: uma história fotográfica sobre África)*.[5] Several of the photographs taken there would become landmarks of Santimano's artistic production, catapulting him to international renown.[6] According to his own reckoning, this was also the first project in which he moved past the photo-journalistic paradigm imbibed with Rangel – based on 'proximity, emotion and political engagement' – to embrace more complex compositions and encompassing storytelling.[7]

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1 All citations are taken from an interview carried out with Sérgio Santimano via digital communication, on 12 October 2023, while he was in Lisbon and I in Pemba. Santimano and I previously interacted concerning the photographs that he had taken in Muidumbe, one of which was used as the cover of Paolo Israel, *In Step with the Times* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2014).

2 On the milieus of 1980s photography in Mozambique, see D. Thompson, *Filtering Histories: The Photographic Bureaucracy in Mozambique, 1960 to recent times* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2021).

3 See Santimano's own brief autobiography at https://www.flickr.com/people/sergiosantimano/. The exhibition *Caminhos* was accompanied by a text by Calane de Silva. On *Caminhos*, see R. Assubuji and P. Hayes, 'The Bridge and the Photograph in Mozambique: Giving Form to History', forthcoming.

4 On this festival, see S. Morais, 'Do mato ao palco: A construção da nação em Moçambique através da música,' *Anuário Antropológico*, 47, 1 (2022), 208-227.

5 The Portuguese '*história*' covers both 'story' and 'history'. I have opted to translate the title with the former, given Santimano's insistence on storytelling as method.

6 For instance, see the prominence of the Cabo Delgado photographs in S. Santimano and M. Panguana, *Sergio Santimano, photographe* (Montreuil: Editions de l'Oeil, 2005).

7 Santimano mentions the influence of Sebastião Salgado, Henri Cartier-Bressons and especially Josef Koudelka on his new style, as well as the idea of 'telling a story through images' that he learned in Sweden. On proximity as a trope in Southern African visuality, see P. Hayes, 'Power, Secrecy, Proximity: A Short History of South African Photography', *Kronos: Journal of Cape History,* 33, 1, 2007, 139–162.

The method by which Santimano proceeded to gather the material – informed by his experience in photojournalism – could be qualified as serendipitous or picaresque. As illustrated by the snippets of interview that accompany the photographs, he roamed about the province without much planning, catching car and boat rides, accepting the hospitality of acquaintances, following threads, seizing opportunities, always awakened to the possibilities of the moment, the fleeting image, the flash of recognition. In reaching out to his photographic subjects, he tended to draw on emotional connection, rather than an ethnographic or historical register.[8] He eschewed the obvious or the monumental – especially the great mythos of the liberation struggle – in favour of the intimate and the unexpected. The emphasis lay on visuality, movement and affect, rather than contextual reference. In a way, the method reflected the affirming theme of the project and the spirit of the place at the time:

> My intuition was to collect positive images of the province and its culture and history. I was there passing through with a camera and a very awakened eye. I woke up very early – still at night – because I only photographed in black-and-white, and the light was very intense. And I started photographing in the first hours of the day and stopped in the middle of the morning, when the daylight was intense, and then photographed again at the end of the day. And I did these travels by public transport – well (*enfim*). Wherever I went I was well received and treated kindly (*acarinhado*).

Santimano's photographs map a territory I have also known intimately, just a few years later, though from a different position and perspective.[9] Travelling across Cabo Delgado in the early 2000s, you could not help but feel the fragrance of hope blossoming all round. The province had just emerged from a long cycle of relentless violence: over two hundred years of slavery, which ended only in the first decade of the twentieth century; subjugation and conquest by the *Companhia do Niassa*, a ruthless multinational to which the Portuguese had sublet the exploration of the northern part of their territory; colonial domination proper, with its regime of forced labour, humiliation and abuse; a liberation war which for over ten years had subjected its own people to militarisation, ideological indoctrination and summary executions; more revolutionary violence once the movement had become a ruling party, including public trials, purges, floggings, forced relocations and reeducation camps; a civil war in which the rebels had burned, maimed and forced children to slaughter their families; and the retaliation of the governmental forces, which had plundered and slaughtered in their own right.[10] The legacy to overcome was tremendous, but healing was underway. People travelled, traded, told stories. Cashews, mangoes, fish, goats

8 Patricia Hayes argues that Mozambican photographers were more at ease with affect compared to their South African counterparts, P. Hayes, 'Reopening Time: Provisional Notes on Photography in Southern Africa (1970–1990s)', unpublished paper.

9 For which see Israel, *In Step with the Times*.

10 This is not the place to dwell in depth on a history of Cabo Delgado, for which see E. Medeiros, *História de Cabo Delgado e do Niassa (c. 1836–1929)* (Maputo: Central Impressora, 1997).

and tomatoes moved along with the people. Houses sprung up, fields grew. Laughter and the booming of drums – that perennial African technology of play and peacemaking – sweetened the evenings. The old sores sometimes burst open, as when a group of protestors were arrested and let to die of asphyxiation in the prison of Montepuez in the aftermath of the 1999 elections; or when the youths of Muidumbe revolted against the government for selling their flesh to witch-lions.[11] The ghost of the betrayal of the national bourgeoisie – the selling out of the former socialist elites to predatory capitalism – loomed large. But corruption and plunder were not yet endemic or blatant, and the work of reconciliation resumed after each outburst of violence. Cabo Delgado felt like a happy place, headed somewhere.

Alas, things would pan out otherwise. After an initial surge of enthusiasm for the discovery of massive mineral resources – gas, graphite and rubies – the province was swept by a new tide of war when an Islamist insurgency broke out in October of 2017. The coordinates of this 'new war' aligned with those of similar insurgencies on the continent and elsewhere: a lethal mix of local grievances, youth disempowerment, ethno-political cleavages, international jihadist indoctrination, ruthless capitalist extraction, illegal smuggling economies, endemic State corruption and entrenched histories of violence.[12] In the years that followed, taking advantage of the fragility of the Mozambican military, the insurgency gained momentum, resulting in massive destruction and the displacement of almost a million people. The war drew Cabo Delgado under the spotlight of the global media, however flickeringly. News of a jihadi war attracted the attention of the international press and of a host of experts and consultants with little or no previous knowledge of Mozambique. While the military and aid organisations lay claim to the 'bare life' of increasing numbers of internally-displaced people, an outpouring of reports framed the events in the usual terms of security threat, humanitarian disaster, conflict resolution, poverty mitigation, social cohesion and similar developmental buzzwords. As Jacques Depelchin has cogently argued for the case of World Bank reports, such prose functions as a silencing device.[13] The visuality that accompanies such news and reports is shaped by familiar tropes of violence and victimhood. The stock images all look alike: soldiers strolling in an abandoned village, charred huts, torched trucks, bodies concealed by a tarpaulin, refugees carrying bundles on their heads, tearful widows, famished children, empty eyes.[14] With very few exceptions, in this reporting prose and journalistic

11 On the rebellion at Montepuez, see P. Nacuo, *Caso Montepuez: Grande Reportagem* (Maputo, Mozambique: Noticias, 2001). On the lynchings at Muidumbe, P. Israel, 'The War of Lions: Witch-Hunts, Occult Idioms and Post-Socialism in Northern Mozambique', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 35, 1, March 2009, 155–174.

12 For further detail, see the introduction to this special issue. On 'new wars' see M. Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, 3rd edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

13 J. Depelchin, *Silences in African History. Between the syndromes of discovery and abolition* (Dar es Salaam: Mkuki Na Nyota, 2005).

14 These observations refer to the images published to accompany reports or newspaper articles. To my best knowledge, no photographic reportage – humanitarian or otherwise – on the war in Cabo Delgado has been done, with the exception of the work of photographer António Cossa, which is still unpublished (personal communication, 13 March 2024); and the photo-essay presented in this issue, highlighting women's empowerment, T. Tomé and C. Trinidade, 'Our Stories: Cartography of a Conflict', *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 50, 2024. Different forms of visuality are circulating in the subaltern sphere of social media, for which see in this issue P. Israel, 'Violence and the Voice Note: The War for Cabo Delgado in Social Media (Mozambique, 2020)', *Kronos: Southern African Histories*, 50, May 2024, 1–35.

visuality, the emphasis lies so strongly on death and destruction as to obscure any other aspect of life in Cabo Delgado. The place and its people are stripped of history, culture and individuality. No report, for instance, has made anything of the fact that Cabo Delgado is a land of artists. The history of the liberation struggle, which has so profoundly marked the subjectivity of a generation, is reduced to a liability in a 'conflict driver' strategy game. All that remains is 'bare life': the naked, suffering body of the refugee.[15]

The immediate impulse of revisiting Santimano's work is to reactivate a different memory of Cabo Delgado and its people, as a place filled with light, life, depth, nuance and feeling. The sixteen photographs presented below loosely follow Santimano's itinerary through the province, which may be more fictive than factual, given his fluid memories of his times there – an indeterminacy that reflects his rhapsodic, emotional, non-ethnographic approach.[16] From Pemba, the provincial capital, we move to the island of Ibo and nearby Quirimba, site of a flourishing cloth industry before the arrival of the Portuguese and later headquarters of the *Companhia do Niassa*. Then to Pangane, a fishing village at the core of Mwani culture, today hotspot of the insurgency; to Macomia, in the heart of the province, a crossroad and melting pot of cultures and people; to Mocímboa da Praia, a port town plugged into the multi-centenary history of the Swahili coast; to two unspecified locations in the interior, probably near the town of Montepuez, today centre of ruby mining; to Mueda, heartland of the liberation struggle; and finally back to Pemba, for a final outburst of creative joy. Almost thirty years down the line, Santimano's photographs conjure magnificently the spirit of Cabo Delgado in the aftermath of war, the layering of trauma and enthusiasm, melancholia and hope. They also bear witness to a unique moment in the history of the province – a flickering moment of hope suspended between chasms of destruction.

While always grounded in the emotional immediacy of an encounter, the photographs are also imbued with allegorical potential. There are ruins and horizons, movement and meditation. The quality of the smiles – hopeful, expectant, enigmatic, battered, culminating in the youthful explosion of enthusiasm of the drummer that concludes the sequence – give pause for thought.[17] The deep lines in the sand drawn on the beach of Mocímboa da Praia evoke the centenary history of crisscrossing and circulation in the Indian Ocean, the threads of the *longue-durée* bearing onto the present. In Ibo, the portrait of a local *dona* with combed hair stares back from a rain-scoured book, while heavy clouds gather over a cemetery gate. A battering rain is at once something to take cover from and a promise of life and renewal. The contours of the natural fortress where the liberation struggle was fought, with its lush vegetation, unfold as the background to the daily labour of the women who carry water on their

15 G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988). Agamben takes as point of departure Anna Arendt's work on refugees.

16 Santimano presented me with twenty-two images that he considered the most beautiful or relevant in his Cabo Delgado collection. We whittled down the photographs to sixteen, also trying to achieve a balance in terms of the representation of the different places and cultures of the province.

17 A youthful quality retained into adulthood is the precious gift of the 'playful person' – the drummer, the dancer, the musician.

heads up the slope in heavy buckets. There are pauses of self-care, where stillness and silence take a soothing quality. A boy with an intense stare lazing on a tree-trunk, clouds mirrored in the lake over which he is suspended. An absorbed young woman who voluptuously smears her face in *msiro* bark-paste.

At times, these allegories offer eerie forebodings of the present. What does the sailor at the helm of the dhow spy on the horizon? An old man holds a broken Christ as battered as he is – a picture tragically reminiscent of the one taken in the mission of Nangololo in 2020 after it was burned down by insurgents.[18] Children are particularly invested with anticipation. A young bride meets her future with pouting lips and expectant closed eyes. Her godmother's gaze, though, is filled with sadness, as if she knew what the future holds truly in store. Children take a lift from a moving truck: after the inevitable fall, someone is left behind, and the smiles fade. A child is swallowed alive by a crocodile, even as he laughs. The child holding a clay camera – Santimano's own projection, filled with joy and the power of imagination – functions as a direct premonition of the desire for the image embodied in the ubiquitous presence of the digital camera and social media in Cabo Delgado.[19] In an image almost unbearable to look at today – when 'slitting our necks as if we were chicken' has become a commonplace expression – a domestic moment gets flooded with dark omens. Whether these forebodings stem from my own projection, the reverberations of past violence into the present, or photography's mysterious power of layering time, I cannot tell.[20]

18 P. Israel, 'Violence and the Voice Note'.
19 Ibid..
20 In the words of Shawn Michelle Smith, 'The photograph encapsulates a temporal oscillation, always signifying in relation to a past and a present, and anticipating a future.' S. M. Smith (ed) *Photographic Returns: Racial Justice and the Time of Photography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 4.

Pemba to Ibo

This was the seaman who brought me from Pemba to Ibo island. It was a trip, he said, that should have lasted seven hours, and which ended up lasting twenty-four hours. So I stayed with him for twenty-four hours and – obviously – there would be such an… introspective, profound picture of my relationship with him. Because he was the only person who was in the boat. It was him and me. He must have had a sail… I don't remember. His gaze towards the horizon is fantastic.

Ibo island

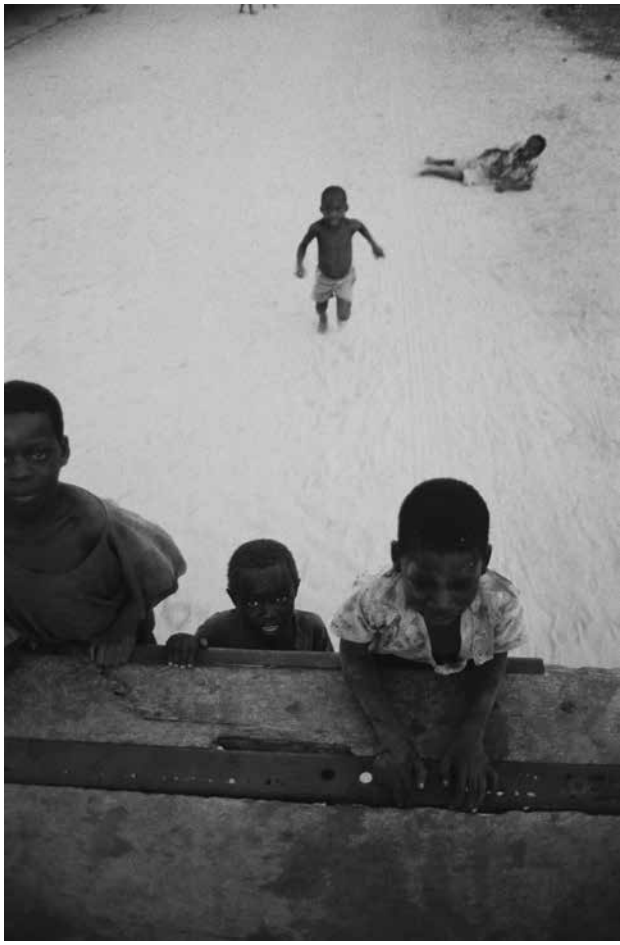
This cemetery is very ancient. The person whom I photographed is a local, from an important family – a very well-known person from Ibo. She is a *mestizo*. There is much mixing in Ibo. The fundamental idea was to show that there is a very ancient history in Cabo Delgado, which sinks its roots into colonialism.

Ibo island

This is a wedding… It's a ritual that is done the day before a wedding. A women's ritual that Mwani people do. In the house there were only women – men were not admitted. I managed to get in because she was the sister of someone working in the district directorate of culture. He told me: 'My niece will get married.' And I said: 'It's not really the wedding I want to photograph.' I knew that there would be traditional rituals before the wedding. I got into a room just before she appeared. I shot this very quickly and then this photo turned up in the negatives.

Ibo island

This was the man who took care of the Church of Ibo. I saw the statue of Jesus Christ on the floor or in a box, on the side, and I asked him to grab this wooden crucifix that was on the floor, and did this portrait. For me, this photo represents a bit… the desolation in which Mozambique was left after the war. Because the war practically destroyed the country's social tissue. It was a war of terrible devastation. This photo, with the sad, tired air of the man, the broken Jesus Christ, represents this. It's an image of desolation.



Quirimba island

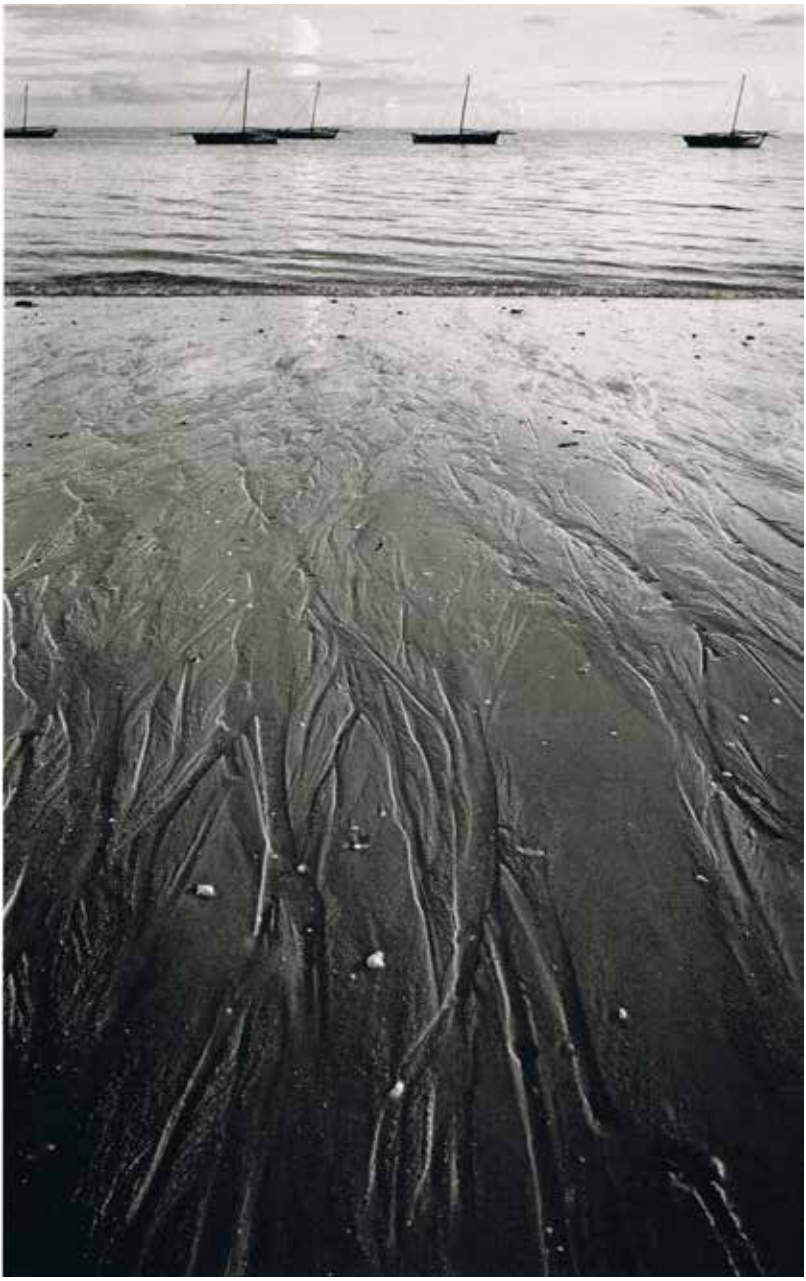
I stayed in Quirimba island a day or two… I drove around in this little truck, I don't know where I was going, and saw this movement of children, getting hold of the truck. And as a photographer, this was a very strong visual moment, with the movement of the children running at the back. And I took this photograph. As a positive photograph. This was a way of having fun, getting a lift from a truck. It was also something new for me. There is a moment of happiness here, that children can have even in the midst of difficulties. Then, one of the children fell. But you can't say it's sad. Children fall and then pick themselves up.

Macomia

I was in Macomia – headed to Pangane, I believe – waiting for a lift. I sat below a hut, when it started raining. I stayed there and suddenly I saw this woman putting out buckets to gather water. And visually, for me, this was fantastic. The woman's movement, the rain, the thatch – I was half inside the hut – and I did this click. And because everything was in negative, only after developing I could see the movement, the rain. And this is an African reality – the importance of rain, of water, the bucket.

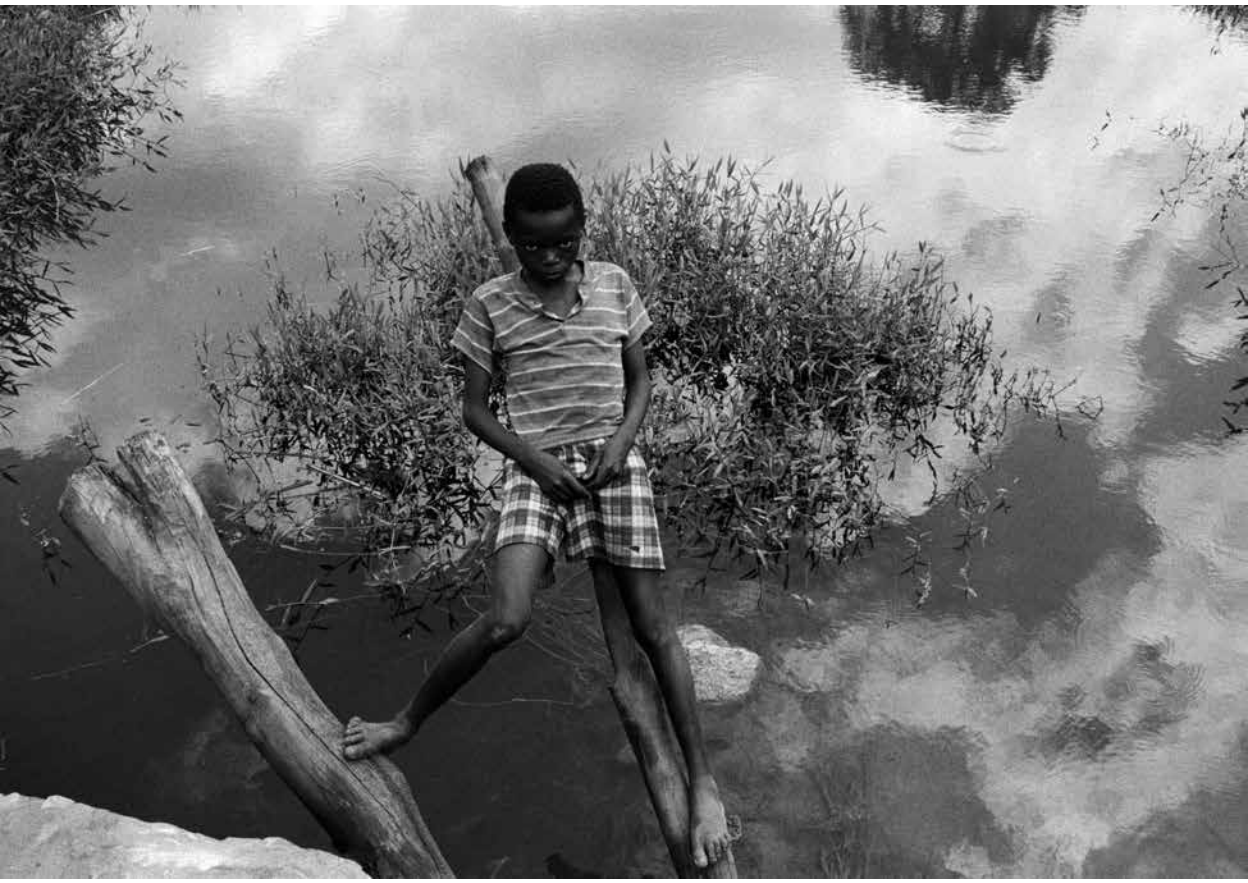
Pangane

There isn't much history about this photograph. I was there with this friend of mine – Ana, a Swedish woman. They also painted her in *msiro*.



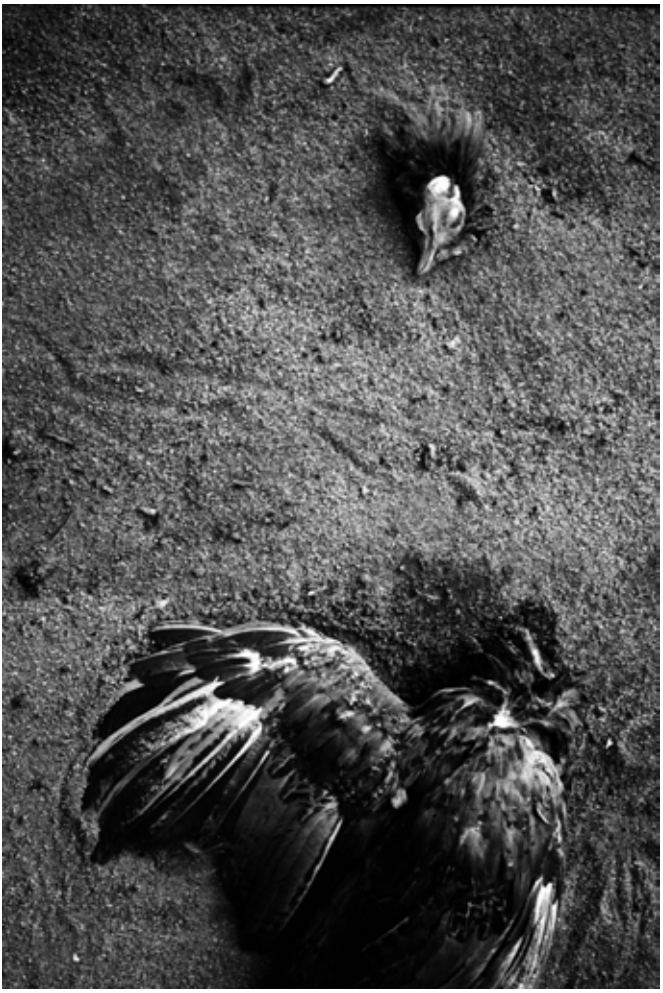
Mocímboa da Praia

This is from Mocímboa da Praia. I was by the sea… and only after developing I realised that it was a nice photograph because of those… how would you call them… those pathways that the water draws on the sand. It has a very Indian Ocean feel.



Montepuez (?)

To tell the truth, I don't know where this was shot. I think that it must have been in Montepuez or thereabout. This kid was resting. He must have done a pause, going home, perhaps he was coming from school, something like this. But he was lying on this pole, above a lake – and visually it was fantastic. But as I said, the object of this report was to document the life in peace in Mozambique, and that photograph symbolised peace, tranquillity, calm. And this photo I would call 'the pause' – a boy's pause on his way home, or to school, I don't know.



Somewhere in the interior

This… I don't know in which area of Cabo Delgado this picture was taken. It must have been in the interior. I know that I had travelled many hours to get to this place and meet I don't know who… And I was hungry. And I asked my host to see whether they could fix me something to eat. And he said: 'I'll try to fix you a chicken.' And I know that for this chicken – or rooster – to get there, it took almost two hours. And then they did this whole ritual of killing the chicken. I saw the head of the chicken on the floor, and I photographed it. For me it's something symbolical, which can show something about the violence that exists in the province… I don't know, it's a very symbolic photograph. When I went to Bamako, with this Cabo Delgado project, when the President of Mali inaugurated the exhibition – that was an international festival of African photography – when he saw my work, he stopped on this photograph. He pointed at the picture: 'What is this photograph? Is it a ritual?' I told the president: 'No, this was my lunch.'

Mueda

This is the Mueda plateau, the view, to that expanse of Cabo Delgado. In the headquarters, in the town of Mueda, I stayed there a few days and I understood that the women went down, taking half an hour or more, I think, and there was a spring, below, where the women fetched water. I went until there, and I know that normally this was only a women's job and men didn't go there. But I went there, as a photographer, and I didn't have many problems. And I did one photograph of the women washing [their faces] and another one, a broad view, of them carrying these thirty litres or I don't know how much, in buckets on the head, and climbed this plateau, which would take them at least half an hour. With all this weight of water.

Muidumbe

This *mapiko* mask was taken in the village of Matambalale, in the district of Muidumbe. In this village, I lived five days, and I got to know that they danced this kind of *mapiko* and they did this performance for me. And for the people of the village. And it was during this performance that I saw for the first time a *mapiko* with animal heads. A friend brought me there. And when I first saw this, I thought: 'These people must have been so tremendously isolated, so cut off from everything because of the war, so given to nature, that they have almost turned wild. The only thing that they must have seen in years is wild beasts, and that's what they dance.'

A popular neighbourhood of Pemba

This was done in Pemba, in the city of Pemba, in some neighbourhood, I don't recall the name. I was with a Swedish friend, who was looking for something, sitting in the back of a pickup, when suddenly I see this child, with this clay camera. *Epa*, I jumped right away from the pickup and I took this photograph in black and white. I generally say that this is my self-portrait, because of the happiness that the child exudes, with his smile, with the camera in front of the eye. It's me. It's my energy, my sensibility… When I was doing these photos in Mozambique in the post-war, this is the positive energy I had. And for me it's a photo that is a metaphor of photography itself. Photography is the imaginary. That camera is made of clay, but it does take photographs for the child. The child uses it to take photographs, and imagines the photographs. I don't know how to explain, but this is a pinnacle of photographic, creative, imaginary interpretation… I don't know – it's all there, in that clay camera.

Pemba

This was in Pemba. There was a cultural group, dancing. This man is a drummer. And this photograph, after being developed, I realised the quality of the expression of this drummer. His expression, his eyes, as a drummer… And to me – not only to me, more broadly – this photo represents the vitality, the good energy, that Mozambican culture possesses.