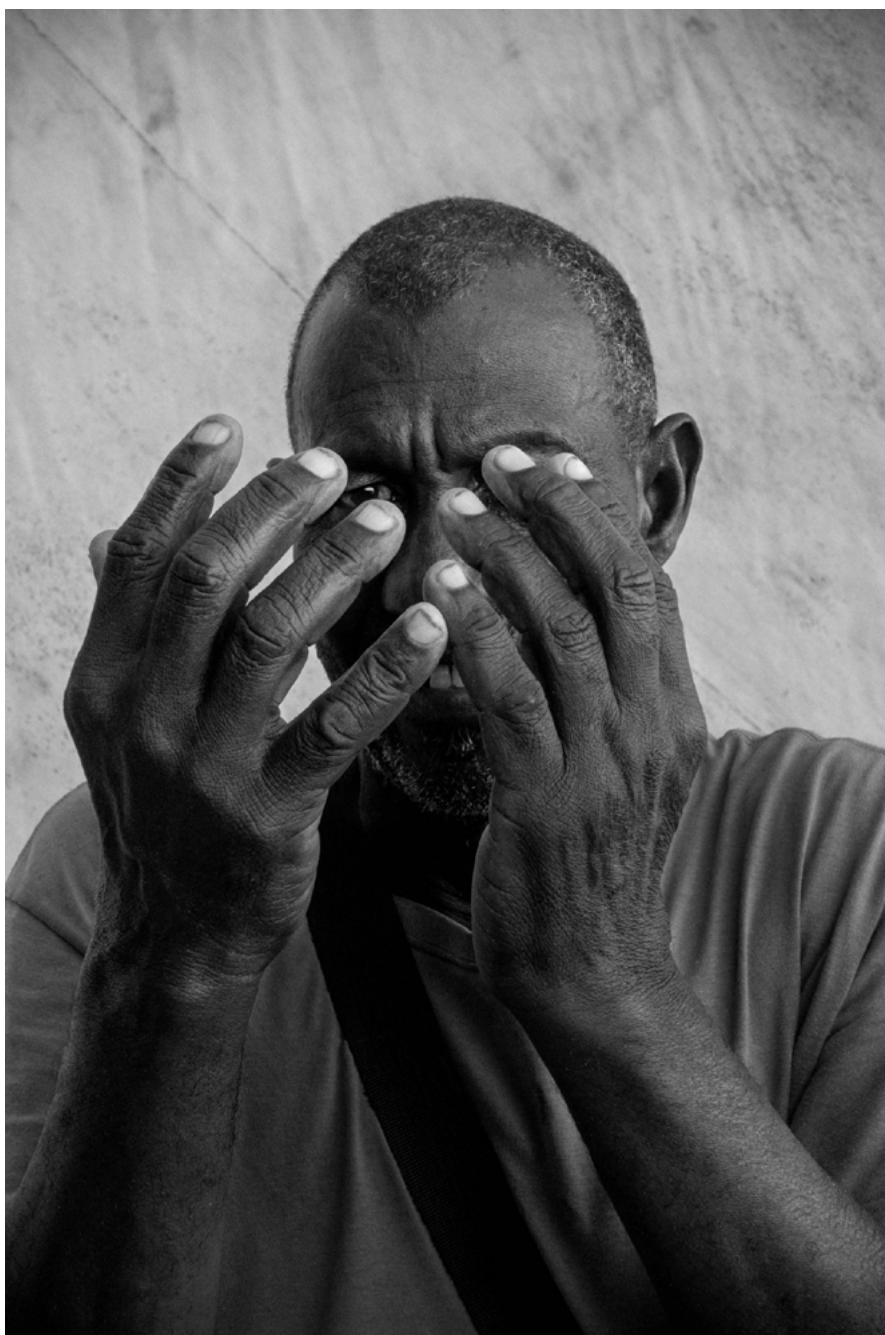


Raphaël Levy - photographer and director
7, rue Louise Thuliez - 75019 Paris | +33 6 18 99 76 79
air.levy@gmail.com | www.raphaellevy.net | [@airlevy](https://www.instagram.com/airlevy)

NYUSO

(*FACES* in Kiswahili)

*social cartography of Lamu:
a traditional island society
facing the currents of globalization*



Title: **NYUSO** (*FACES* in Kiswahili)

Subject: **Insights into the cradle of swahili culture**

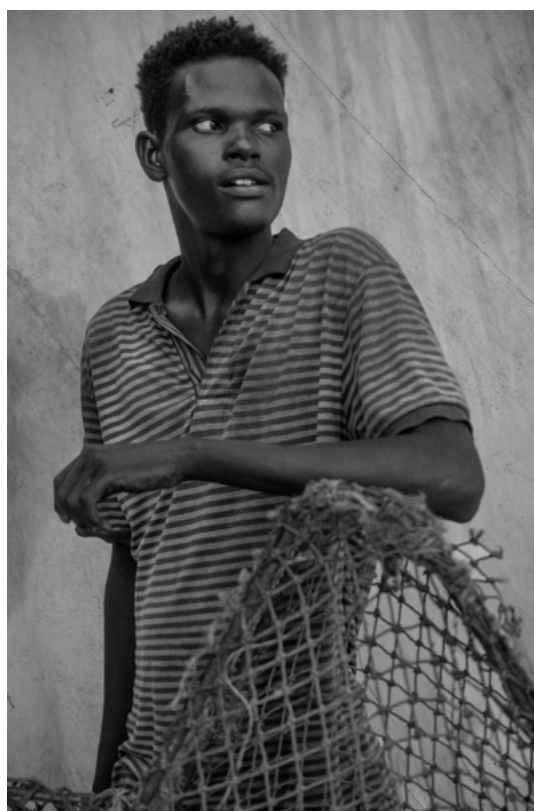
Location: **Kenya, Lamu archipelago, islands of Lamu, Manda, Pate and Kiwayu**

Category: **Visual anthropology**

Genre: **Social portrait**

NYUSO | Abstract

Lamu is a world at the margins of both Islam and Africa. On Kenya's northern coast, this Swahili archipelago has absorbed Arab, Indian, and Chinese influences for centuries. A UNESCO World Heritage site since 2001, it embodies a sanctuary of traditions exposed to the winds of globalization. This photographic project engages with debates on the preservation of intangible heritage: how do traditions contribute to cultural preservation? Does globalization weaken or strengthen this society? Will it adapt or disappear? Faced with inevitable transformations, photography becomes a tool of preservation. After thirty-five years of presence, this society has accepted me without my ever feeling fully integrated. Neither foreign nor local, this cultural in-betweenness is the cornerstone of my artistic practice. Anthropologist Sarah Chouraqui, who shares the same intimate knowledge of the place, will conduct parallel interviews and provide in-depth contextualization to these life stories. Our objective is to show how visual storytelling, when rooted in deep cultural understanding, can bridge the gap between communities and audiences worldwide.





Director and photographer supported by Apple, lives and works in Paris. Represented as a director by Quad Productions (Paris) and MyAccomplice (London).

Solo exhibition *Tiens, j'ai pensé à toi*, at La Villette, Paris, 2025
Duo exhibition *Smala*, at gallery Au Roi, Paris, 2024

Genesis

In 1989, I was eleven and living in Paris when I discovered Lamu. In high school, an encounter with Raymond Depardon during a screening of *Afriques: How's It Going With Pain?* shaped my professional path. When my family framework collapsed, Lamu became an anchor. Navigating the layers of Swahili society shaped me as both a man and a photographer. After high school, I hitchhiked through Ethiopia for five months, during which I transitioned from photography to video. Influenced by Chris Marker's work, I edited my first travel film upon my return, launching my career as a filmmaker. In 2005, I went to Lamu to collect DV footage of island life during the rainy season. This unreleased archival material will be an integral part of the immersive exhibition envisioned for *Nyuso*. In 2023, having to leave the place definitively pressed me to find an artistic gesture to close this chapter of my life. I conceived of a mobile studio, which I set up in the village of Shela. Knowing its inhabitants for decades allows me to photograph them as I converse with them. What each person offers by coming to pose is the fruit of a friendship that transcends our worlds, and I see this project as a tribute to our fraternal relationship. Two years of reflection and exchanges with Sarah Chouraqui around this first series of portraits have allowed the project to mature. As I envision it today, its completion has become essential to my journey as an artist.

Beyond aesthetics, the portrait captures ways of being—posture, expression, physiognomy—as revealing social markers.

The setup

I designed a mobile studio using a dhow sail—a traditional local sailing vessel—to evoke the maritime culture that has permeated these islands for centuries. By isolating each subject from their living environment, it references this iconic element of the landscape while intensifying the face-to-face encounter.

Black and white, a universal visual language

Monochrome gives the image a timeless dimension where only clothing details and certain accessories allow us to situate the era. This choice also focuses attention on the subject while giving it a symbolic dimension.

Slowness as method

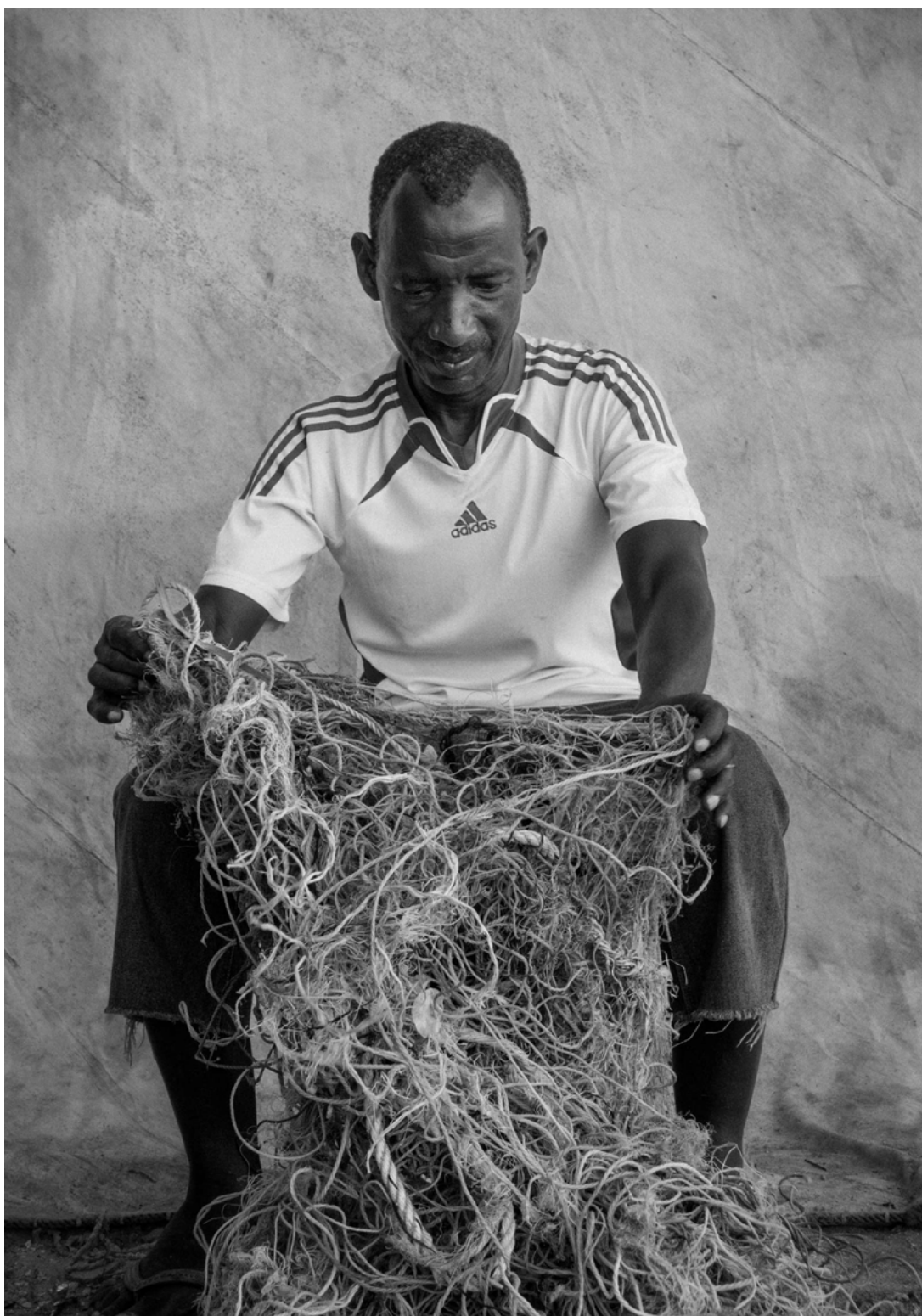
Each portrait is a moment of shared experience where minutes unfold according to a temporality very different from contemporary photographic immediacy.

Women's private spheres

Sarah Chouraqui's presence alongside Raphaël Levy makes it possible to set up the studio inside homes and photograph women. These portraits in private settings are essential to include the less visible part of Swahili society while respecting its cultural codes.

Revealing totemic objects

Each photographed subject is invited to bring an object representative of their activity or skill. These accessories bear witness to the diversity of local trades and expertise: fishing tools, artisanal instruments, ritual or domestic objects. Each material element adds a narrative dimension that transforms physical representation into anthropological storytelling. These objects, photographed with their owners, constitute a material archive of the archipelago's traditional knowledge and skills.





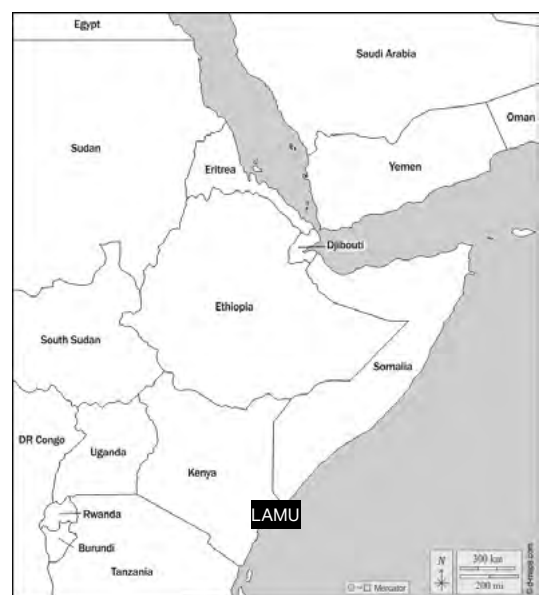


Sarah Chouraqui

PhD candidate in anthropology at EHESS

Lives and works in Paris

I discovered Lamu at age ten and later met my partner there, the father of my son, born to a father from the island and a European mother. Integrating into his family opened me to the world of Swahili women. I learned to understand their customs, their sense of modesty, and the omnipresence of religion in their daily lives. My anthropological work approaches motherhood as a political institution: Swahili women occupy social and moral positions that exceed the domestic sphere to which they are often confined. «Being a mother» encompasses a set of practices through which individuals care for one another, revealing the moral, social, and political dimensions of dependency and care for others. It is a central modality of Swahili female power. I began my fieldwork when my son was six months old. This experience profoundly shaped my view of the contemporary Western world. When Raphaël Levy invited me to collaborate, our shared paths became complementary. Societies like Lamu offer a perspective on Islam that differs from contemporary media representations. Here, an Islam fused with African rites and traditions has been developing for centuries. By approaching it as a diversified symbolic system, our intention is to show the Walamu's deep attachment to their beliefs and to present religion as a living force in dialogue with the world around it.



LAMU ISLAND

Lamu Town

The historical and commercial heart of the archipelago, a town where anonymity becomes possible and where traditional craftspeople, merchants, and new populations from the mainland coexist. Women enjoy greater autonomy there.

Shela

A dune-backed village perceived as urban space due to its proximity to Lamu town and dense commercial and tourist activity. While exposed to external influences, residents preserve their traditions while benefiting from unique economic prosperity that attracts mainland workers from different tribes.

Mararani

A recent village with the feel of a free zone, refuge for an alternative crowd of Giriama, Kikuyu, and Swahili people, where palm wine bars and open-air nightclubs bear witness to a countercultural spirit unique in the archipelago, marginal and fragile.

Matandoni

An artisan village specializing in palm weaving and dhow construction. Hidden behind the mangrove, away from tourist routes, it keeps pace with the unhurried rhythms of traditional craft that endures, unperturbed, in singular simplicity.

MANDA ISLAND

On this island of fertile soil, cultivating the land is an endeavor that calls upon ancestral techniques and ingenuity to compensate for the absence of water. It is also a way to step away from the social life of Shela village and reconnect with nature.

Luo village

Skilled and physically strong, the Luo quarry coral from Manda Island, the main construction material alongside mangrove wood.

MOKOWE

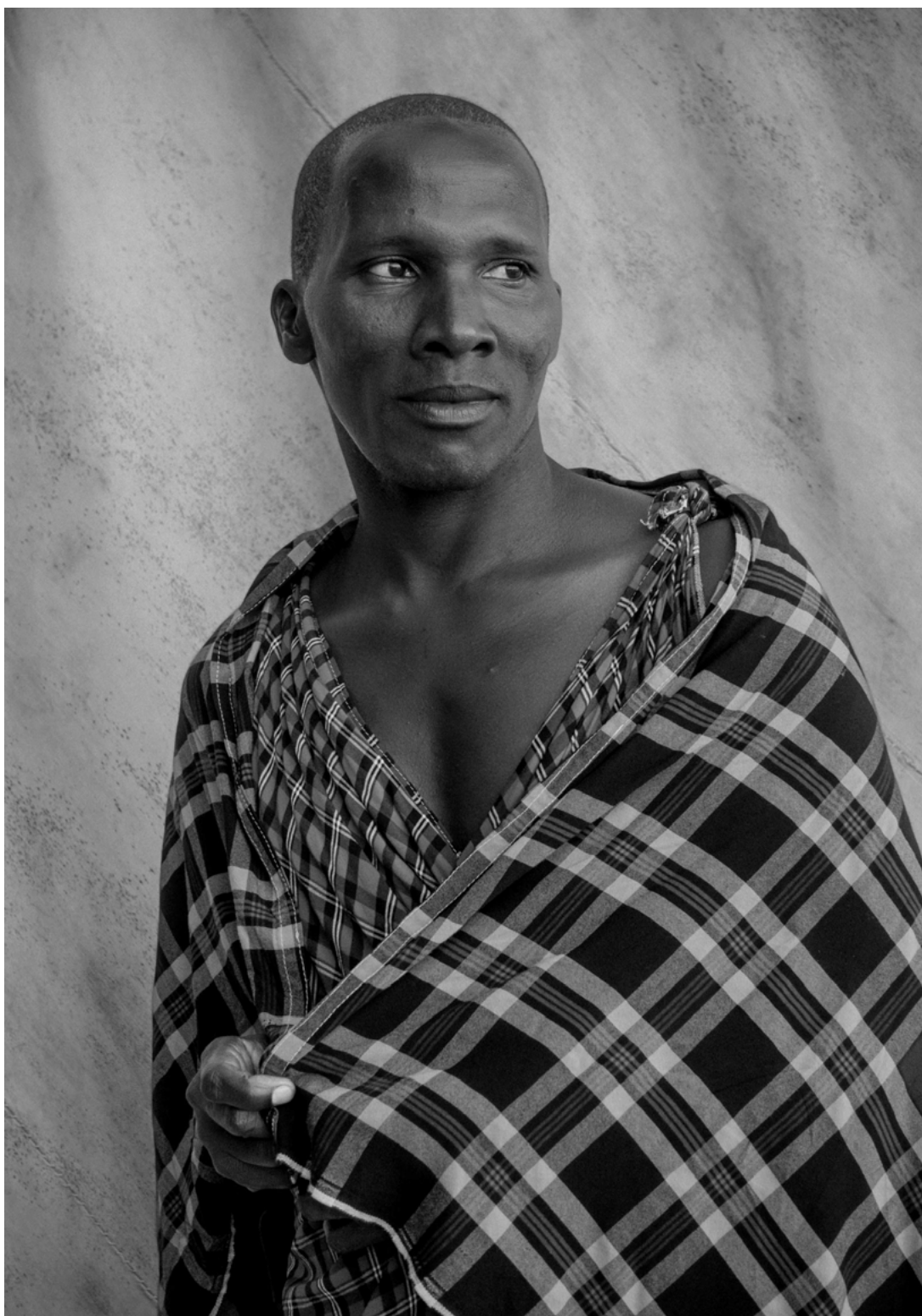
An umbilical cord to the mainland, this embarkation port reveals the migratory and commercial flows that feed the archipelago. As an obligatory passage point, it concentrates exchanges between island tradition and mainland modernity.

PATE ISLAND

Centrally located in the archipelago with direct Indian Ocean access, the island was historically a major hub for trade and cultural exchange along the East African coast, rivaling Lamu itself. Today, residents of Pate, Siyu, and Faza villages live mainly by fishing, in near-total self-reliance.

KIWAYU ISLAND

Adjacent to the Somali border, it is the most remote from Lamu. Like Pate, it is considered rural, with a scattered population and minimal infrastructure. The island's two fishing villages exist in self-sufficiency, untouched by tourism.

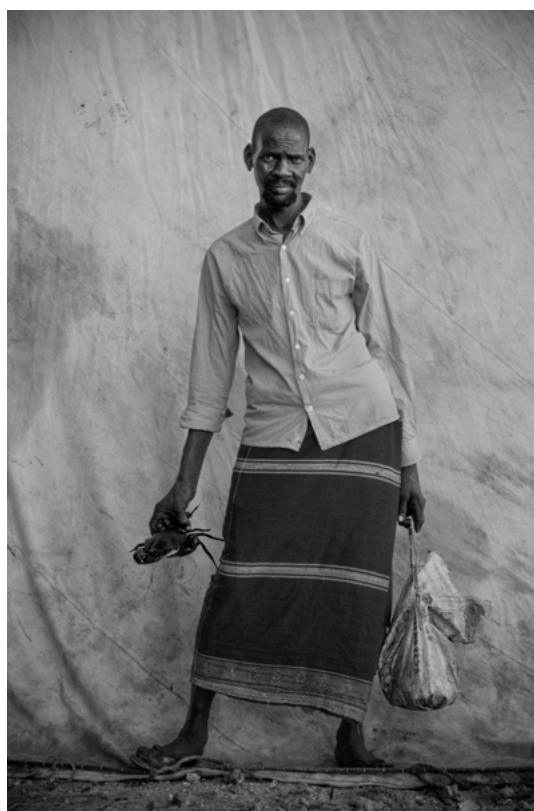


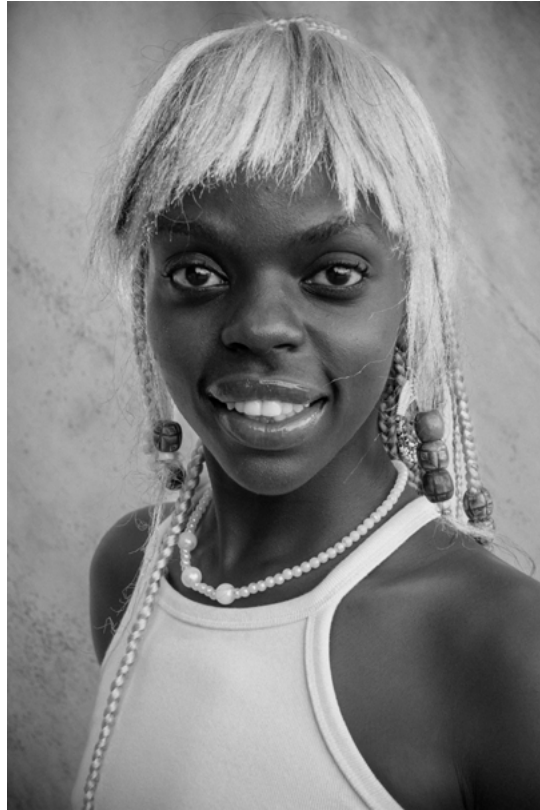
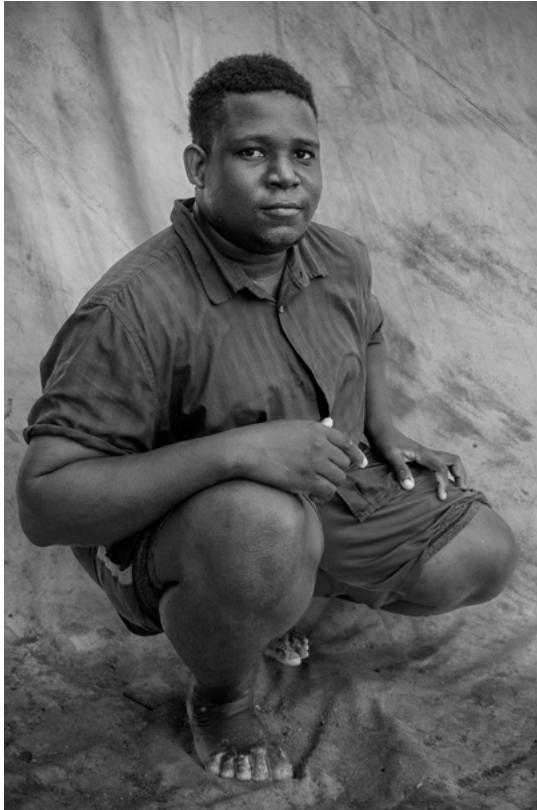
Raphaël Levy | 7, rue Louise Thuliez - 75019 Paris | +33 6 18 99 76 79
[email](#) | [website](#) | [instagram](#)



Raphaël Levy | 7, rue Louise Thuliez - 75019 Paris | +33 6 18 99 76 79
[email](#) | [website](#) | [instagram](#)







Nyuso is an act of resistance against cultural erasure at the intersection of art and visual anthropology. Through these faces exposed in front of the dhow sail, an entire millennia-old maritime civilization finds its contemporary voice.



The production phase, which corresponds to the short-term objectives, is planned for early 2026 over a three-week period. Once the photography is completed, partnership development for long-term objectives and post-production will be funded through a crowdfunding campaign on the dedicated platform *Ulule*.

To finance the production phase, we need your contribution, which can take the form of a donation—on-site and in-kind—corresponding to project needs (transportation, local accommodation, boat, meals...) or co-production, by directly funding specific budget items. Donors will be associated with the project through public acknowledgment and thanked with rewards in the form of a book and/or numbered and signed prints.

Short-term objectives

- Build a corpus of approximately 300 portraits covering the entire archipelago
- Create a typology of totemic objects representative of local skills and expertise

Long-term Objectives

- Create an exhibition installation of the portrait collection integrating multimedia elements—sound excerpts, interview fragments, DV archives filmed in 2005
- Participate in photography festivals and international contemporary art fairs
- Publish a book featuring the photographs and interview excerpts
- Establish an archive for Kenyan and international institutions
- Return to the photographed communities with installations adapted to local public spaces

Production budget

- Ticket Paris-Nairobi-Lamu	1 500 €
- Local transportation	1 500 €
- Local assistance, 2 full-time staff	500 €
- Accommodation	1 500 €
- Team meals	1 000 €
- camera rental	3 000 €
- Misc. equipment & expenses	1 000 €

Total 10 000 €

*It is often said that observation modifies the observed reality.
It also modifies the observer.*

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History*, 1952



thank you for reading

Raphaël Levy | 7, rue Louise Thuliez - 75019 Paris | +33 6 18 99 76 79
[email](#) | [website](#) | [instagram](#)