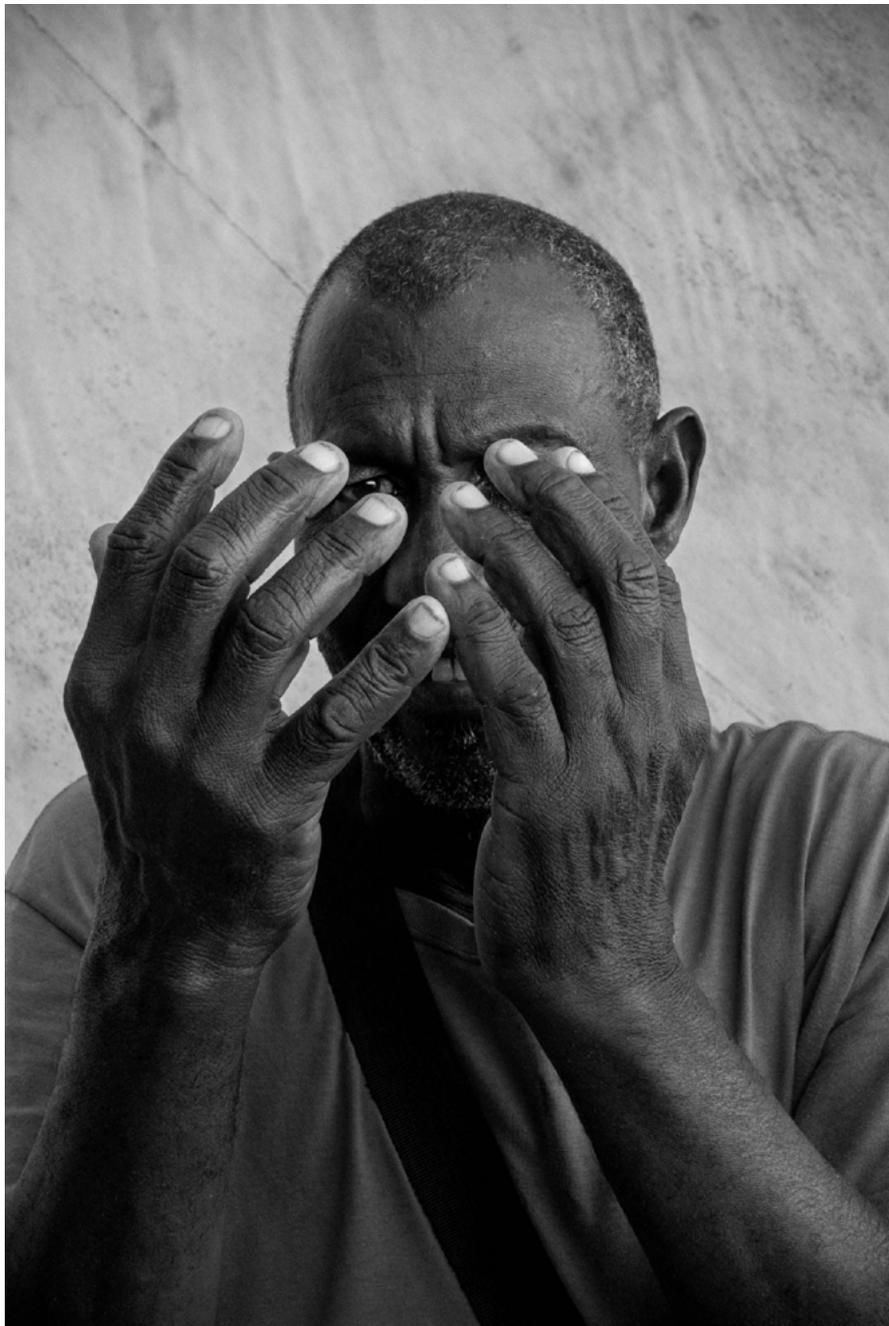


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NYUSO

(*FACES* in Kiswahili)

*social cartography of Lamu:
a traditional island society*



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

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

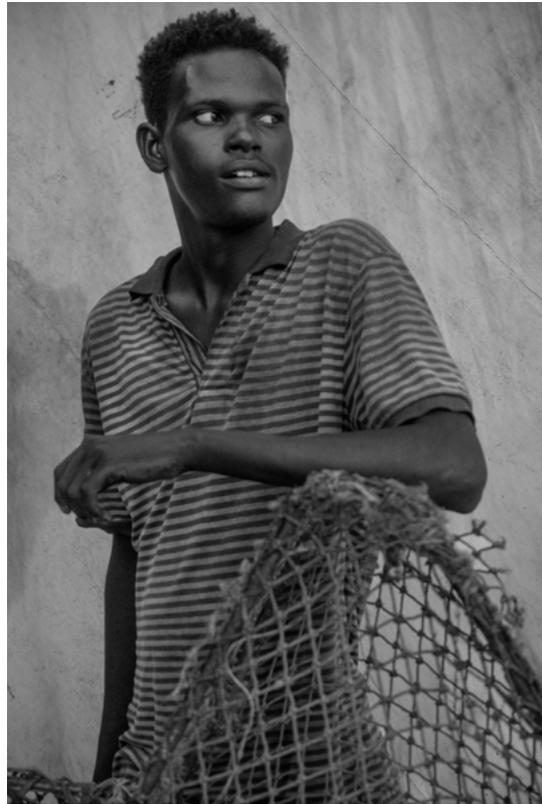
Location: **Kenya, Lamu archipelago, islands of Lamu, Manda, Pate and Kiwayu**

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 traditional sanctuary exposed to the winds of globalization. This project seeks to address questions about the place of tradition in modern societies and confronting inevitable transformations, photography becomes a tool of preservation.





Director and photographer supported by Apple, lives and works in Paris, represented as a director by Quad Productions in Paris and MyAccomplice in 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 years old 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?* set me on my professional path. When my family structure collapsed, Lamu became my anchor. Navigating the layers of Swahili society shaped me as 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, weaving a living thread between the portraits.

In 2023, having to leave the place definitively triggered 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. My approach pays tribute to this fraternal relationship. Two years of reflection on this first series of portraits have allowed the project to mature, and as I envision it today, its completion has become essential to my journey as an artist. I am convinced that this traditional island society in ferment holds powerful truths that I am deeply committed to revealing.

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

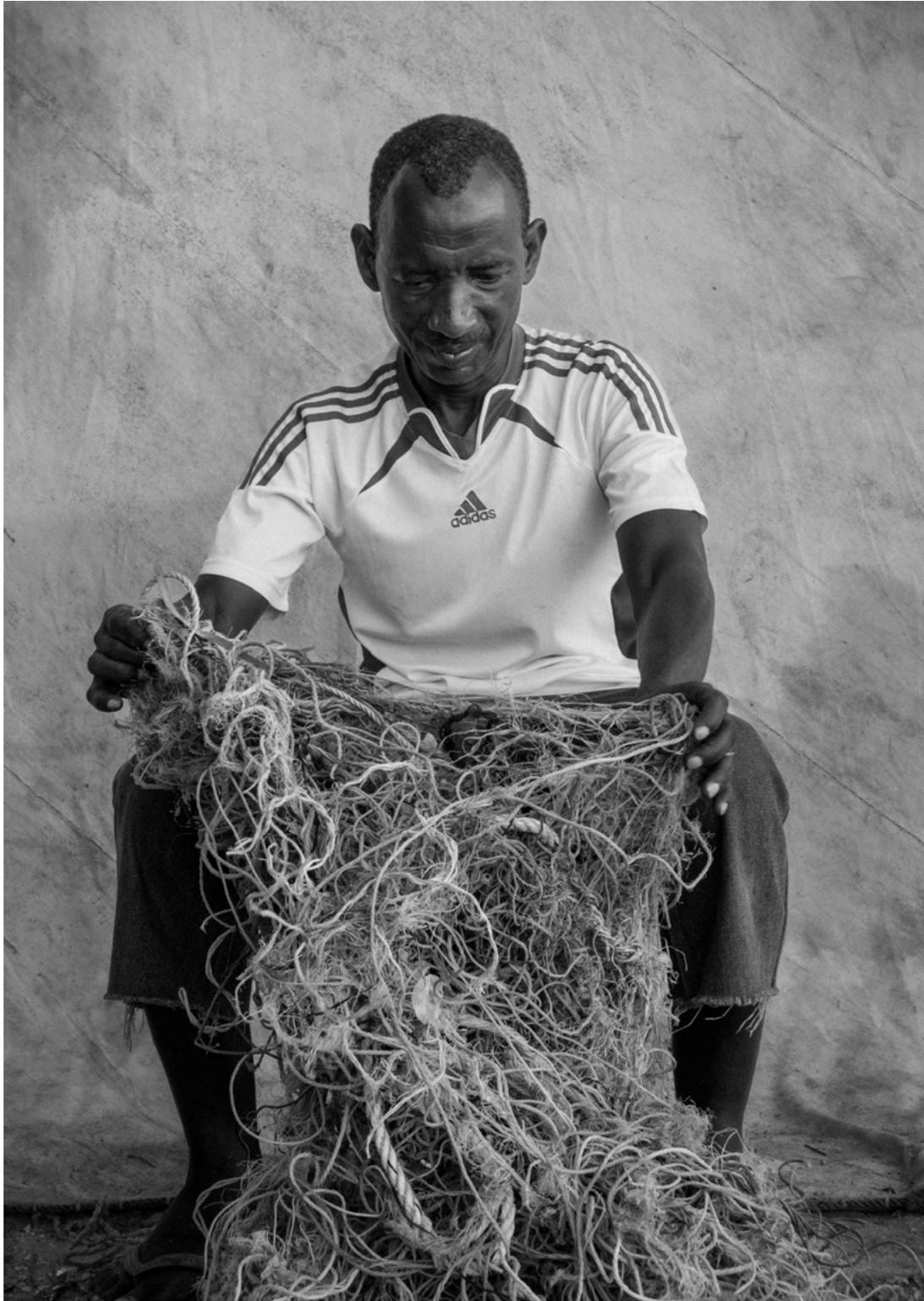
Monochrome gives the image a timeless dimension where only clothing details and certain accessories allow us to situate the era. This choice also focuses attention on the subject while giving it a symbolic dimension.

Slowness as method

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

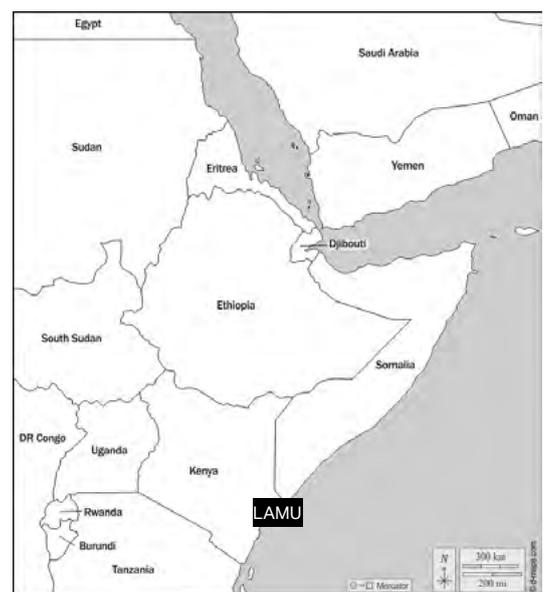
Revealing totemic objects

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.



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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

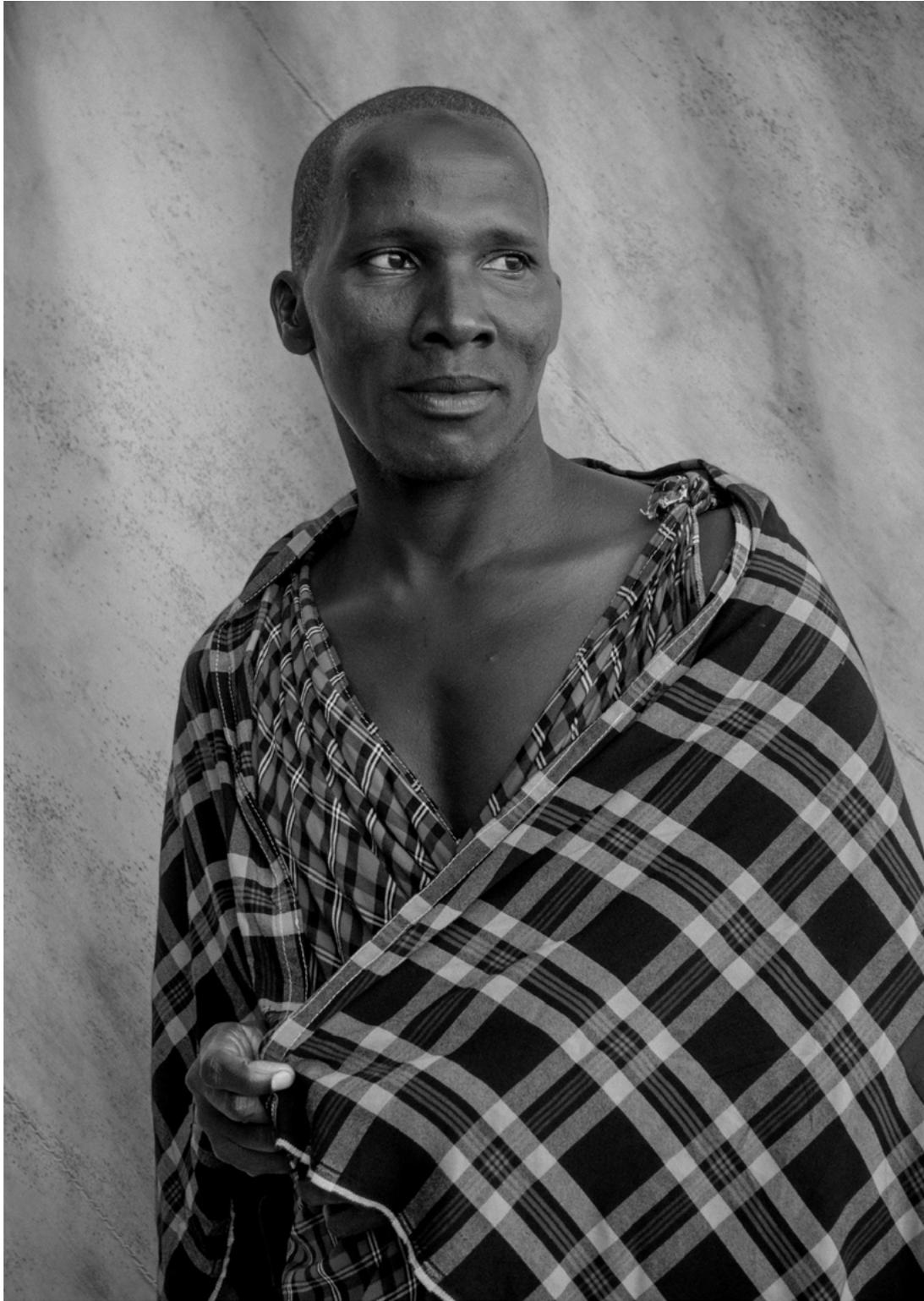
An umbilical cord to the mainland, this embarkation port reveals the migratory and commercial flows that feed the archipelago. As an obligatory passage point, it concentrates exchanges between island tradition and mainland modernity.

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

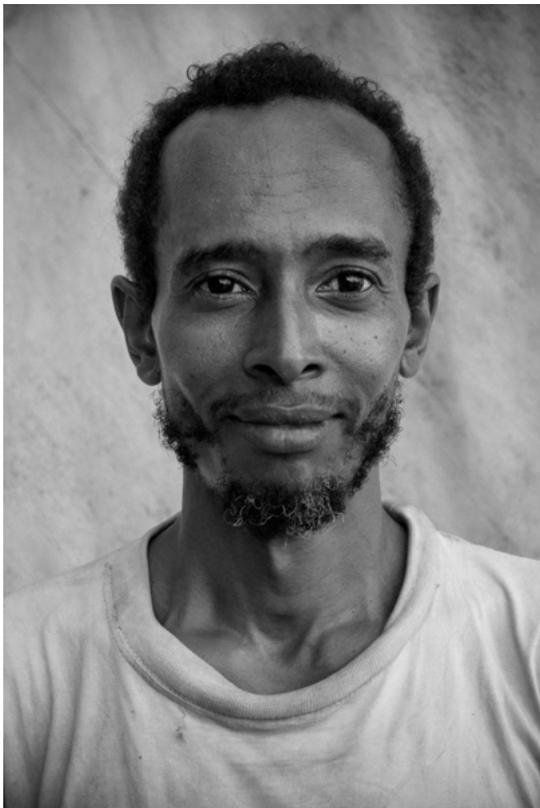
Adjacent to the Somali border, it is the most remote from Lamu. Like Pate, it is considered rural, with a scattered population and minimal infrastructure. The island's two fishing villages exist in self-sufficiency, untouched by tourism.

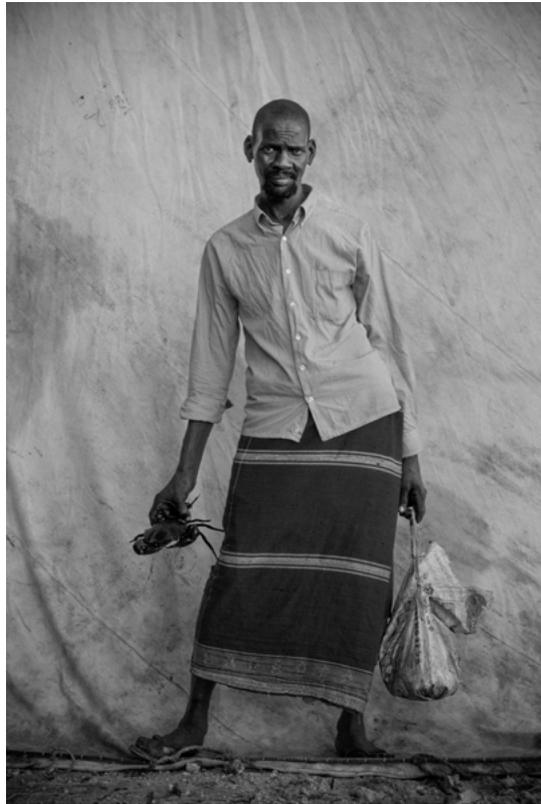


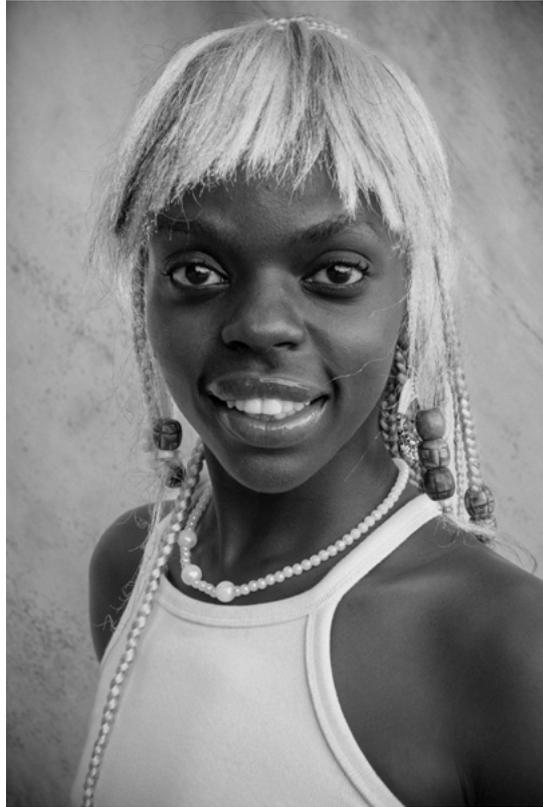
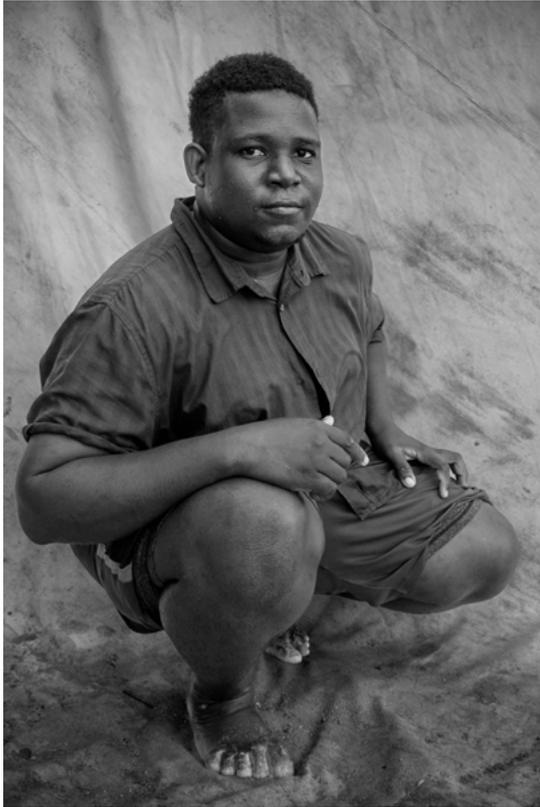
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NYUSO | in conclusion

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.



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This project is designed to develop in collaboration with one or more cultural partners. I envision three distinct phases: production, which corresponds to short-term objectives over a three-week period, post-production and the design of the exhibition and distribution materials.

Short-term Objectives: Production (First semester 2026)

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

Medium-term Objectives: Post-production

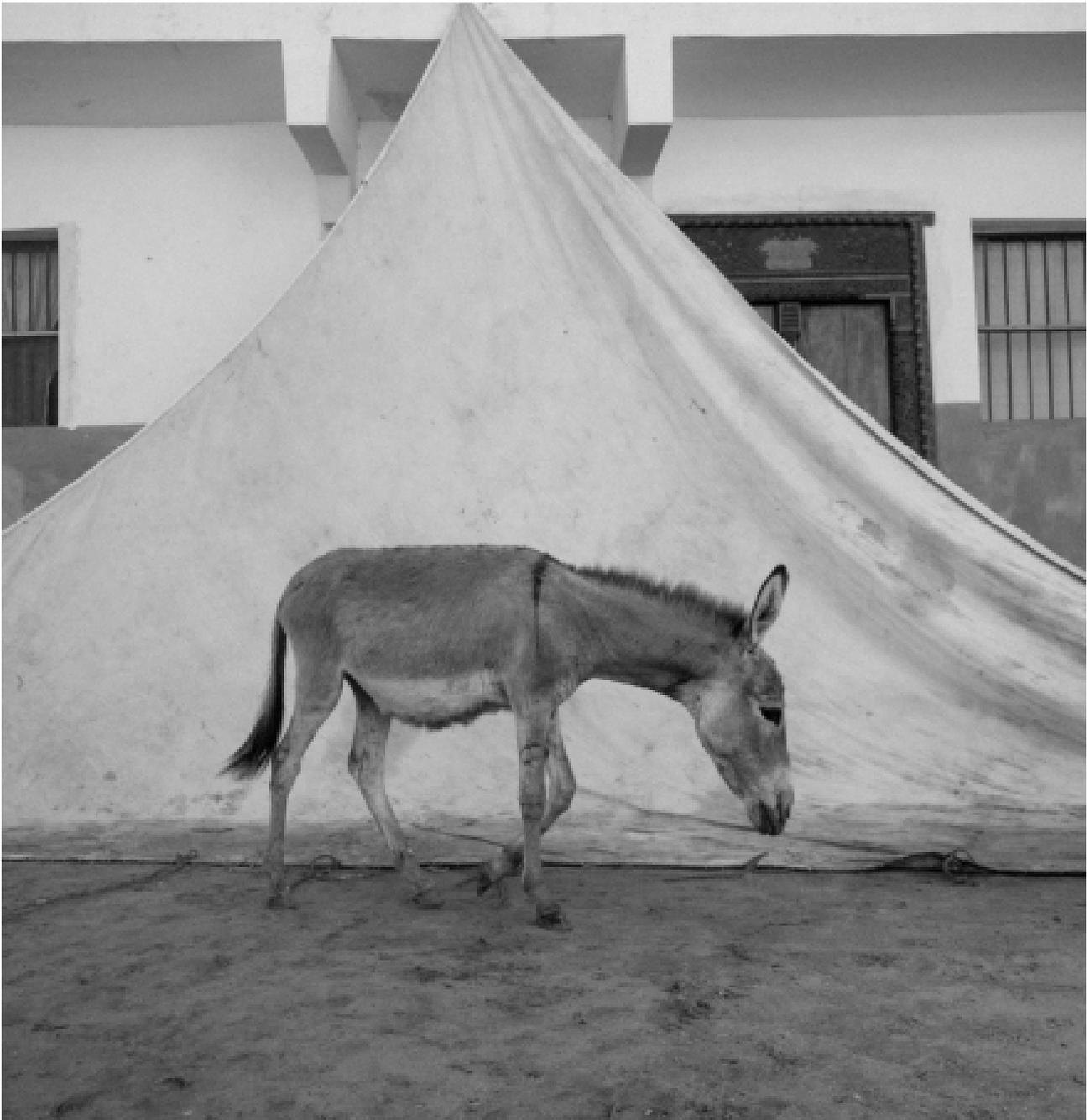
- Selection and images process
- Video editing
- Sound design

Long-term Objectives: Publishing and Exhibition Design

- Create an exhibition installation incorporating 2005 DV archives and 2026 material
- Participate in Paris Photo 2026
- Book
- Establish an archive for Kenyan and international institutions
- Return to the communities with installations adapted to local public spaces

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

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



thank you

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