

Mário Macilau

On Faith



Mário Macilau: *On Faith*

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Ed Cross, 19 Garrett Street, EC1Y 0TY

Ed Cross is pleased to present *On Faith*, photographs from Mário Macilau's ongoing *Faith* series exhibited as a discrete body of work for the first time in London.

Recently awarded the 31st prestigious Roger Pic Prize, the series documents animist practices (based on the belief that everything has a soul or spirit) within traditional religions in contemporary Mozambique. From the sacrifices of animals like goats and chickens to rituals performed before the birth of a child, from priests possessed by spirits to dolls entrusted as intermediaries between humans and the natural world, Macilau's camera bears witness to systems of belief that reflect his viewer's personal universe back at her from unfamiliar angles.

Specialising in long-term photography projects and series that address the complex realities of human labour and environmental conditions, Macilau's practice is characterised by his unique choice of subjects and ability to connect with them. Often using portraiture as his starting point, the artist strives to unlock broader perspectives on specific issues. Featuring isolated communities increasingly imperilled by climate change, the documentary as well the aesthetic function of Macilau's work is more important than ever.

Macilau started his journey as a photographer in 2003 from the streets of Maputo, becoming professional when he traded his mother's cell phone for his first camera in 2007. For the artist, photography has the power to reveal stark truths about life, encouraging the development of a social conscience in Mozambique and beyond.

Imaging Resilience

by Sean O'Toole

Mário Macilau is best known for his creative-documentary photography exploring contemporary social issues in Mozambique. His new body of work, *Faith*, which examines the remarkable endurance of traditional animist practices in Mozambique, represents a striking addition to his lauded archive. Born into modest circumstances, Macilau took up photography as a profession in 2007, at age 23, when he exchanged a mobile phone for an analogue Nikon camera. His earliest work focussed on the lives and struggles of individuals living in marginalized communities in the nation's capital, Maputo. This focus determined the compass of Macilau's subsequent socially motivated photography.

Macilau's mature practice is distinguished by the expansive timeframe in which his projects are realised, consistent use of black and white, preference for portraiture and full embrace of collaboration and performance as viable methods for exploring social issues. Importantly, there is solidarity built into his choice of subjects, which in the past have included street children, e-waste pickers and the elderly – “the ghosts of society” as Macilau stated in 2014. While energised by his everyday encounters with Mozambicans, his photos shun the conventions of naturalism so much a part of photojournalism. Macilau's ambition has been to develop a way of showing and telling that exceeds the bare circumstances of life in one of the poorest and most underdeveloped countries in the world.

Underlying all of Macilau's work is an urgent question. “How,” asked the photographer in 2019, “do humans sustain themselves and adapt to shifting environments, when their labour, their lives, and, by extension, their relationships, are all affected by that environment?”¹ The materialist answer is resilience. Macilau is familiar with the hustle of a hardscrabble life. He left school early in order to provide for his family, this after his father abandoned the household to seek

opportunity in neighbouring South Africa. He started out hawking his mother's biscuits. However, as Macilau's impressive body of work examining traditional faith and ritual in Mozambique makes clear, self-reliance alone won't answer the question he posed in 2019. Faith also needs to be accounted for.

Faith and ritual, though intimately connected, are also distinct concepts. Over the years, ritual has emerged as an important aspect of Macilau's work. His photography has explored how rituals and cultural practices within communities – be it rag picking in urban dumps or subsistence fishing in the Indian Ocean – shape identity, spirituality and social dynamics. Macilau's concentrated focus on faith in the work shown here is, in many respects, a natural extension of his interest in ritual. Faith, though, is a voluminous subject. Rather than tackle the entirety of religious expression in contemporary Mozambique, Macilau has opted to look at the exercise of traditional animist rituals, typically as they materialise in unregulated, open-air spaces.

The endurance of these longstanding indigenous practices, which are many and diverse in their expression, has been shaped and reshaped by Mozambique's tumultuous history. A brief recapitulation of this history is helpful in locating the essential *jouissance* – as opposed to mere anthropological truth-telling – of Macilau's images of faith. Mozambique is a majority Christian country, with more than 40 per cent of the population identifying as followers of Roman Catholic, Pentecostal and Anglican strands of Christianity. Muslim believers constitute roughly a fifth of the population. There is no official data on animist religions.

Mozambique has a diverse range of indigenous animist religions practiced by different ethnic groups, including the Makonde, Tsonga/Shangaan, Chewa and Yao peoples. Although varied, there is a common belief in ancestral spirits and supernatural beings, as well as the worship of natural forces. While there is a specific cultural context to the masked and pregnant woman in his work titled *God bless my son*, 2015, Macilau is not motivated by the need to particularise the ethnic nuances of animist rituals in Mozambique. The photographer is more interested in what binds all its various expressions; how the many rituals, animal sacrifices and offerings are connected by a common aim of maintaining harmony and favour with ancestral spirits.

The prevalence of these practices, which Macilau began concertedly documenting in 2015, is remarkable given the tragic arc of Mozambican history. During the Portuguese colonial period (1505-1975), Catholicism was the dominant religion imposed by authorities. Indigenous religious practices were often suppressed or discouraged, and forced conversions to Catholicism occurred in some instances. Indigenous religious leaders and practices faced discrimination and repression. The widespread uptake of formalised western religion in Mozambique forms part of the context to Macilau's strikingly diverse photos in *Faith* and keys into a wider public debate among artists and intellectuals.

The author Mia Couto frequently incorporates elements of animism into his magical-realist stories set in postcolonial Mozambique. His imaginative detective novel *Under the Frangipani* (1996) is, in part, narrated by a "night spirit", or *shipoco*, which inhabits the body of a police inspector investigating a murder at a former slave trading post. A fisherman explains to the detective why Christianity proved so popular:

We weren't beaten by force of arms. What happened was that we Mozambicans believed the spirits of the new arrivals to be more ancient than our own. We believed that the spells of the Portuguese were stronger. That's why we let them govern us. Who knows, maybe we found their stories more enchanting? ²

Notwithstanding the successful conversion of many Mozambicans to Christianity, representatives of the Christian church in Africa frequently voiced their exasperation at the persistence of ancient practices. "Animism, with everything that implies, has proved to be a more immovable rock than we cared to admit at first," a church leader told delegates at an interdenominational parley in Johannesburg in 1954. ³

Mozambique's independence in 1975, while unquestionably a liberating event, nonetheless witnessed the continuation of colonial-era biases against animism, albeit based on different dogmas. The new socialist government of Samora Machel promoted atheism and viewed religion as a potential threat to its ideology, which combined Marxist-Leninism, Maoism and Ujamaa-style African socialism in the hope of forging a new subjectivity and sense of citizenship. ⁴ Religious institutions faced restrictions, and many churches, mosques and temples were closed or confiscated. Animism, which in the rubric of the new government formed part of a constellation of so-called "backward practices" in need of reform, was also suppressed.

The ruinous civil war that erupted in the wake of independence, and which lasted from 1977 to 1992, exerted its own toll, both on formalised religions and spiritual practices more broadly. Mozambique's transition to a multi-party democracy in the 1990s saw efforts made to promote religious freedom and tolerance. The Mozambican constitution guarantees freedom of religion. Animist practices, which extend to the use of traditional medicines, have received state backing. It is in many senses a pragmatic engagement by the state. Four out of every five Mozambicans use traditional medicine for primary health care. In 2010, Mozambique created its own Institute of Traditional Medicine and, subsequently, the Ethnobotanical Development Centre, which researches medicinal plants.

These and other interventions by the Mozambican state are, for Macilau, encouraging: they signal acceptance of animism. At the same time, he is disappointed by the Mozambican state's abdication of its duty of care and encouragement of faith as a palliative in the absence of functional state services. The claim to, and the promotion of, faith-based resilience by governmental institutions, says Macilau, is "appallingly disingenuous".⁵ This opprobrium is matched by his genuine admiration for the adherents and practitioners of Mozambique's traditional animist faiths. Given the weight of the historical persecution of animism, there is still a fugitive quality to the pursuit of animist beliefs and rituals. This fact partly informed Macilau's desire to "explore the hidden identities that exist around our corners".⁶

It is not just the past that has exerted torsional stresses on Mozambique's ancient cultural practices, lending them a furtive quality. A 1956 report of the National Council of the Churches, an ecumenical partnership of 38 Christian faith groups in the United States, noted the destructive ferment of western secular civilisation, with its exaltation of material as against human values, as the biggest obstacle to missionary work in Africa. "The Gospel must be proclaimed against a background of animism, Islam and the neo-paganism of materialistic, irreligious western culture."⁷ Macilau has similarly spoken of how Mozambique's neo-liberal order, which gained pace in the 2000s, introduced new systems of capitalism that have accelerated social inequalities and eroded faith in a higher power or force.

It is important to note that Macilau approached his project as an outsider, in other words as a documentarian. Macilau is a patient observer. Trust is a fundamental part of his gently interventionist

process. “Photography can put up a mental and emotional fence between you and your subject,” he said in 2017. “Holding a camera can install a divide between human hearts, because people often think that photographers are entering their houses and taking photographs of their secrets and privacy without actually getting to know them.”⁸ This notion of privacy extends beyond the homes of subjects like Carla Zandamela, a traditional healer who keeps a crucifix in her home in Nova Mambone, 850 km north of the capital. I’ll return to this adaptive feature of animism shortly.

Many of Macilau’s photos were made in outdoor spaces used by animist worshippers, notably on Mozambique’s abundant coastline. Place matters in thinking about art, no matter how circumspect a photo might be about its place of origin or the circumstances of its creation. Place is also a key hallmark of southern urban theory. It is worth briefly expanding on this mutual interest in place, as it has the potential to broaden an appreciation of Macilau’s *Faith* project. Grounded yet also speculative in character, southern urban theory is the product of a loose constellation of urban geographers interested in the empirical character and logics of notionally peripheral cities across the postcolonial world.⁹ What can we learn by closely observing the practice of the everyday in apparently chaotic urban contexts defined by infrastructural deficits and abundant poverty? Implicit in this question is the recognition that existing canons of knowledge and histories of practice are inadequate in reckoning with the world’s urban present and future.

The production of new theory is the explicit aim of writers like Gautam Bhan, Teresa P.R. Caldeira, Filip De Boeck, Edgar Pieterse, Ananya Roy and AbdouMaliq Simone. “While cities of the north are often narrated through authoritative knowledge, or Theory, cities of the global south, are often narrated through ethnography, or idiosyncratic knowledge,” states Roy. “While Theory is assumed to have universal applicability, ethnography is seen to be homebound, unique, lacking the reach of generalisation.”¹⁰ This is also largely true of contemporary art from Africa, which is frequently explained by means of anecdote and anthropology rather than a coherent set of practices with shared social histories and economic circumstances, leitmotifs, epistemologies and conceptual traditions.

Faith contributes to, but more importantly expands on, the existing output of photography from Southern Africa occupied with faith.

Macilau has appreciatively commented on the work of South African photographers Ernest Cole, Sabelo Mlangeni, Santu Mofokeng and Andrew Tshabangu, all of who recorded how faith in Southern Africa is marked by “contingency”, “informality”, “precarity” and “hustle” – concepts central to southern urban theory. Of course, southern urban theory is at best a tool for drawing out latencies in Macilau’s photographs such as the fragile locus of faith in outdoor settings. Syncretism, which refers to the fusion of different religious practices, is another fertile line of enquiry. After all, many of the practices documented by Macilau have been improvised and adapted. The photos in *Faith* describe how the world is actually lived and endured following centuries of cross-cultural exchange. Seen in this light, *Faith* can hardly be construed as parochial.

In an interview with the Angolan architect and curator Paula Nascimento, Macilau attributes the endurance and survival of animist practices to a sense of a community. His subjects all share, he says, “something in common, the same norms, human values, identity and traditional beliefs.”¹¹ They believe, he adds, that non-human entities – animals, plants, inanimate objects – possess a spiritual essence or soul. It is a form of belief, or faith, which accepts that there is “no separation between the spiritual and physical world and that spirits exist not only in physical objects but also in phenomena such as water, mountains, and wind.” There is salutary optimism in this kind of faith in the natural world, especially now, in these ecologically unstable times. It is a painful kind of optimism too. “If only I could live forever in liquid form, a wave falling on the beach, a river when it reaches its estuary, the sea in its infinity,” offers one of the accused in Mia Couto’s *Under the Frangipani*. “No wrinkles, no pain, all of me cured of time.”¹² Isn’t that the fundamental hope of faith?

Footnotes

- 1 Ruth Cooper (2019) '#AfricaMonth: Q&A with photographer Mário Macilau', *BizCommunity*, 13 May: www.bizcommunity.com/Article/196/484/190695.html
- 2 Mia Couto (1996/2001) *A Varanda do Frangipani/ Under the Frangipani*, translated by David Brookshaw, 2001, David Philip Publishers, Cape Town, pages 61-62.
- 3 *New York Times*, December 8, 1954
- 4 See Juan Obarrio (2014) *The Spirit of the Laws in Mozambique*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- 5 Mário Macilau (2023) *Faith / Fé*, Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg, page 6.
- 6 *Ibid.*, page 62.
- 7 *New York Times*, November 30, 1956
- 8 Mário Macilau (2017) 'Growing in Darkness', *LensCulture*: www.lensculture.com/articles/mario-macilau-growing-in-darkness
- 9 Gautam Bhan, 'Notes on a Southern urban practice', in *Environment & Urbanisation*, 2019, p. 15.
- 10 Ananya Roy (2014) 'Worlding the South: Towards a Post-Colonial Urban Theory', in *The Routledge Handbook on Cities of the Global South*, ed. Susan Parnell and Sophie Oldfield, Routledge, New York, page 16.
- 11 Macilau, *Faith / Fé*, page 64.
- 12 Couto, *Under the Frangipani*, page 80.



Fig.01: *Untitled*, 2022



Fig.02: *Untitled*, 2022



Fig.03: *A boy with a goat*, 2018



Fig.04: *Untitled*, 2022



Fig.05: *For sale*, 2018



Fig.06: *Jojo Alfredo*, 2018



Fig.07: *Toy*, 2018



Fig.08: *Untitled (8)*, 2017



Fig.09: *Untitled (9)*, 2017



Fig.10: *Francisco André*, 16, 2020



Fig.11: *Boy with a fish II*, 2022



Fig.12: *God bless my child and send him safely in to this world*, 2015



Fig.13: *Invisible faith*, 2018



Fig.14: *Carla Zandamela, 34 years old, 2021*



Fig.15: *Two boys with a fish*, 2018



Fig.16: *The cross man*, 2017



Fig.17: *A crucifix chest*, 2020



Fig.18: *A candle man*, 2021



Fig.19: *Untitled*, 2022



Fig.20: A goat, 2020



Fig.21: *Image of God*, 2018



Fig.22: *Gift*, 2018



Fig.23: *Sacrificing*, 2015



Fig.24: *A group of people lying down, 2022*



Fig.25: A hoe, 2019



Fig.26: *Flying spirit*, 2020



Fig.27: *Animism and Christianity in the same ritual*, 2015



Fig.28: A man wearing religious attire, 2021



Fig.29: *Fishing net*, 2019

*All images are printed using archival pigment on cotton rag paper.
Most are available in four sizes: 33 × 50 cm, 60 × 90 cm, 80 × 120 cm
and 133 × 200 cm. Please enquire for edition details and pricing.*

Mário Macilau (b. 1984, Mozambique) lives in Maputo, Mozambique. Selected exhibitions include: Songs of the Present, Musée de la Photographie de Saint Louis, Senegal (2018); Afrique Capitales, La Villette, Paris (2017); Pavilion of the Holy See, 56th Venice Biennale (2015); Making Africa, Vitra Museum, Weil am Rhein (2015); Discovery Show, Fotofestiwal Łódź, Poland (2015); Pangaea: Art from Africa and Latin America, Saatchi Gallery, London (2014); The African Art Auction, Bonhams, London (2013); Recontres Picha, Biennale de Lubumbashi (2013), The Biennale Arts Actuels, Saint-Denis, Réunion (2013); Pan-African Exhibition, Recontres de Bamako: Biennale of African Photography, Mali (2011); VI Chobi Mela Photo Festival, Dhaka, Bangladesh (2011); and Lagos Photo, Nigeria (2011). Macilau won the Roger Pic Award 2023, was shortlisted for the 2019 Mast Award, a finalist of the Unicef Photo of the Year in 2009, and the Greenpeace Photo Award 2016, and is in the permanent collection of the Pompidou Centre.

Macilau is the winner of the Roger Pic prize 2023 for his series *Faith* and received a special mention in the Quai Branly Museum Prize 2022. His work features in Tate Modern's group show *A World in Common*, opening summer 2023.

Sean O'Toole is an award-winning writer, editor and curator based in Cape Town. He co-edited *The Journey: New Positions on African Photography* (2020), which featured Mário Macilau's work and received a *New York Times* critics' pick for Best Art Books of 2021.

Ed Cross works with emerging and established artists across and beyond the African diaspora. The gallery seeks to stage conversations – between practitioners, international audiences and as guided by its artists – to amplify voices historically silenced, and to create space for their independent development. Since launching in 2009, Ed Cross has held exhibitions across the world: from New York to Paris, and London to Lagos, the gallery continues to build on its values of cooperation and curiosity in its new permanent space at 19 Garrett Street, London.

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