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Madrinhas | 2018 | Amilton Neves (courtesy of the artist)

MOZAMBICAN “MADRINHAS DE GUERRA”: A STORY TO BE TOLD

Rui Trindade

[*Madrinhas de Guerra*](#), ‘Wartime Godmothers’, an exhibition by the young Mozambican photographer Amilton Neves (1) that appeared in the 2018 Maputo Fast Forward festival, has the merit, among other things, of bringing to public attention a theme that many continue to consider ‘delicate’ even 40 years after independence.



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That Neves' very subjects – the Mozambican women he photographed – refused to attend either the opening of the exhibition or an organized debate on the subject tells us something about the discomfort that the theme still engenders. The (little) media coverage the exhibition received was another eloquent symptom of this discomfort: circumstantial references to the exhibition appeared in the press but there was no attempt to develop the subject or even interview the 'Godmothers' themselves.

Apart from Amilton Neves, Luis Loforte (a Mozambican who had been a member of the Portuguese colonial army) and the historian António Sopa spoke at the debate. The discussion made clear the total absence of historical investigation worthy of that name into the National Women's Movement (1961-74) initiative that saw women participate in the colonial war as "*Madrinhas de Guerra*." Their role was to support Portuguese soldiers on the front lines.

The exhibition had a long gestation period. As Neves explained to Christine Cibert (2), the curator, in the exhibition text: "the idea came to me because of a famous speech by Samora Machel in which he says: 'In the long term, the *Madrinhas de Guerra* are *explosive*, we must end this organization in our society.' When we asked our mothers or aunts about the *Madrinhas*, they did not want to talk about it. They just said it was something that had happened, but didn't go into detail. That is why I decided to engage with this almost-forgotten topic so that it is not just the older generation who remembers, or assimilated people or former soldier. Everyone should know this history, and yet most people are completely unaware of it."

Amilton Neves began by looking for information and researching in photographic archives. But the turning point in this process (which had been unproductive) and the real trigger for the photo project he had conceived happened almost by chance: "One day I met a person who had belonged to the Portuguese Army, who had had a Mozambican *Madrinha* who was still alive and lived in Mafalala (a neighbourhood in Maputo). He took me there to meet her (she has since died) but it took me three years to convince her to let me take a picture of her. It was only then that I became determined to take the project forward. More than anything because it was a huge challenge. After letting me photograph her, she introduced me to other *Madrinhas*. Over the next three years I visited 50 other *Madrinhas*, who still live in Maputo, and who I went to photograph."



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In the post-independence period, these *Madrinhas* immediately became blacklisted as people who had “compromised” with the colonial regime, and were marginalized and ostracised in Mozambican society. Many fell into poverty or at least into a state of a precarity in which they still live. And over the years a blanket of silence has grown over this history.

Somewhat surprisingly, the exhibition, on show until the end of February in the Maputo Fortress, has proved to be an unexpected success with audiences. The reasons for this attendance are clearly worth studying, even though a significant number of visitors are from younger generations. (This was also clear at the debate, where many students were eager to learn more about this episode in the country’s history). But one of the reasons for this success, if not the main one, lies in the images’ force, in the disturbing way these women challenge us.

As Christine Cibert writes, “Thanks to the work of Amilton Neves, we are led to participate in a very personal and intimate journey. We cross old wooden or zinc walls, and small, modest doors and go into the dilapidated houses of elderly Mozambican women. It is in this private space that we will meet them, get to know their life, revisit their past and listen to history of this muffled episode in the history of Mozambique. But who are these women? How old are they? What are their names? What are their lives like? The atmosphere of these spaces seems at once timeless, silent, calm and stripped bare. But what does that silence really signal? Nostalgia? Fear? Shame? Rage? Guilt? Is it just shyness? Or also resignation? Or relief? Is there a desire to laugh or to cry? What is the true extent of their sense of loss? The loss of their past, their lives, their reputation, their dignity, their love? Will they agree to speak with us, to give voice to the feelings that they have carried for so many years hidden deep inside? Will they agree to share their testimony with us before it is too late, and it is forgotten, or will their stories live on? Regardless of all they may have lived or done - and even in their harsh living conditions - these elderly women remain beautiful, elegant, dignified, and inspire in us a compassion not unlike that which we feel for our mothers, grandmothers, aunts. It makes us want to take care of them, protect, cherish and embrace them.”

Thanks to this photo-documentary project, Neves has finally raised an issue that for too long has been shrouded in obscurity. Hopefully, the book that the photographer intends to publish of the material he has collected over the years will represent an opportunity to begin to contextualise this subject historically.



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(1) Based in Maputo, Amilton Neves has been working as a freelance photographer across Africa. His work has already been shown beyond Mozambique, in Ghana, Portugal, Brazil, Ethiopia and Canada. The "Madrinhas de Guerra" project had a first (though partial) showing at the Nuku PhotoFestival in Accra, Ghana, in September 2018.

<https://www.lensculture.com/amilton-neves>

(2) Christine Cibert has been an independent art curator for more than 20 years, and has organized numerous exhibitions of painters and photographers in the different countries she has lived: France (where she is from), Japan, Cambodia, North Korea, Switzerland and now Mozambique.

<http://www.christinecibert.com>

Translated by **Alexandra Reza**

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