

## War and Photography

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### Amulets and Dreams: War, Youth and Change in Africa

edited by Omar Badsha

photographs by Guy Tillim and Omar Badsha

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I live in Britain. So, for the most part, there are two sorts of photographs of Africa that I see in the mass media. They may be described as the horrific and the terrifying. The first category is made up of pictures of famine or disease or the effects of war and mass murder. The second consists of pictures of men (it is usually men, although for added spice it is sometimes women) with guns, knives, ammunition belts, axes and—for real commercial possibilities—some elements of “traditional magic”.

Pictures that broadly fall into these categories can sometimes be powerful and valuable. There is a basic witnessing of events (including famine and war) which, even if in an unclear and partial way, heightens our awareness of the world. I think of the photographs of the atrocities committed by Italian and US troops in Somalia during 1993–4, or some of the pictures from Rwanda in 1994, or some of the pictures of the impact of HIV/AIDS. At the pinnacle of achievement in these categories are, for example, Sebastiao Salgado's pictures of the Malian famine. These are pictures of solidarity rather than of charity that do so much more than make you feel sorry for, and superior to, the subjects.

But if such images are all you see, then there is a huge void. Africa can seem to be a continent of unfathomable horror, a place only of endless barbarity and universal torment. Wholly absent is the element of African people living their lives in the context of “normality”—the twenty-first century reality shaped by history and present-day globalisation.

I do not mean of course that I crave twee domestic scenes, or just idyllic landscapes. What's missing is photography which intertwines the “ordinary” and the way that the ordinary is violated.

There are masters to draw on. The South Africans who worked for *Drum*—people such as Bob Gosani, Peter Magubane, G.R. Naidoo and Lionel Oostendorp—produced brilliant work in the 1950s and 1960s. Their stories on prisons, mineworkers, a children's hospital and the drowning of a “Coloured” boy were based on hard work, persistence, wonderful pictures and questioning politics. Jurgen Schadeberg has also produced decades of wonderful work. More recently Santu Mofokeng, Makgotso Gulube and Taryn Miller can be added to the list.

But there is not nearly enough of this. Far too often, Africa is represented by pictures which have been grabbed by a photographer stepping from a helicopter without any background or understanding or empathy. And it shows. I am often reminded of Brecht's quote from 1931:

The incredible development of the picture reportage has hardly been a victory for truth about the conditions in the world: photography in the hands of the bourgeoisie has become a cruel weapon against the truth. The immense picture material that is spewed out by the printing presses every day and that seems to have the characteristics of truth, serves, in reality, only to obscure the facts. The camera can lie as well as the linotype machine.<sup>1</sup>

Brecht also wrote that “You should make the instant stand out without in the process hiding what you are making it stand out from”.

In this context, the work of Guy Tillim, of which this book is an excellent example, is hugely welcome. Tillim, born in Johannesburg in 1962, went to the University of Cape Town and graduated in 1983. He soon began working as a freelance photographer

and then joined Afrapix, the progressive photographers' collective. He has worked for Reuters and Agence France Presse and received numerous awards, including most recently the Leica Oskar Barnack Award for his work, *Jo'burg*. This book brings together some of his work of the last five years from Sierra Leone (2001), Angola (2001/2), Mozambique (2001), Eritrea (2000) and Burundi (2002).

Tillim's picture of a school in Koidu in Sierra Leone is one of the most effective pictures. In a shattered garage, a class of around sixty children sits on the floor in front of their teacher. The view is from behind the children, so we cannot see their faces but we can sense their rapt attention from the angle of their shoulders and their heads. In the foreground is the garage's floor—dark, dirty and covered with pieces of debris. At the other end of the room the blackboard and the teacher are framed in the sunshine from outside, an image of hope and enlightenment but also of great defiance and of seizing every opportunity to develop.

These themes of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances continue in Tillim's Angolan pictures. “The War Damaged Ministry of Education in Cuito” shows a boy climbing upwards towards a hole in the ceiling, the opening bathed in light while everything else is in darkness. It is not an easy climb, but his body is straining powerfully and we have no doubt he will succeed. It is an image of resolve, effort and hope.

This sense of hope has frequently been noticed in Tillim's work. Peter Machen for example has analysed it and located it in the fact that much of Tillim's work is of immediate post-war scenes, places where there is a sense of deep relief that the conflict has ceased. But Tillim does more than show people glad that they have seen the worst of a war. It seems to me that he deliberately stresses moments of struggle, individual or collective, in desperate situations. And these moments of resistance are extraordinarily uplifting.

The picture “Isoble Diolino, Teacher at Kuito Primary School”, shows a pupil holding up his work to the magisterial figure of the teacher in a classroom whose walls are pockmarked with bullet holes. But there is another child, who, arms splayed wide, looks to be celebrating (or is it just stretching?) in front of the blackboard. It can be read as a feeling of rejoicing at the possibility of a new life and the magic of learning. Note also that we learn Isoble Diolino's name. She is not a nameless teacher but a real person, with dignity and a thereness.

One of Tillim's pictures from Mozambique, “War Veterans Near Beira”, has a similar quality. Two one-legged men converse in the left side of the picture. In the right side two men, each with an arm amputated, walk hand in hand along a path. These are not figures of pity but of survival.

But Tillim does not ignore the continuing suffering and difficulties in people's lives. The picture of “Belavista, Luanda” centres on a young figure in the landscape of a squatter camp. It has defiance, but also

shows extreme poverty, the toughness of people who own nothing. The picture “Street Children at Their Shelter, Luanda”, has the power of a man's arm filling a third of the frame, but in the centre are the bodies of two men (sleeping? drunk? dead?) lying on the ground—and their bedding is the thin sheets of cardboard from packing cases.

One of the most disturbing pictures is “Sex Worker and Her Boyfriend, Luanda”. A young woman's face is full of deep sadness, not simply of grief at her situation but a pent-up anger and resentment and not a little fear. We can see only part of her boyfriend but can imagine his feelings of bitterness and anger.

The pictures from Eritrea are brutally realistic about the waste and cost of war. The corpse in “Battlefield, near Adi Quala” focuses on a single body, merging in his camouflage into the rocky background, but unmistakably dead.

In “Refugees Displaced by Fighting to ‘Safe Area’ Camp, Kuito”, Tillim takes a fairly standard “African disaster” scene and gives it a powerful twist. The picture oozes with anxiety, the child slung on his mother's back is awkward and almost corpse-like, several figures are captured in jerky movement, on the move and unrelenting. And there is also the profound ordinariness of the people. Many of them look alike, and are dressed alike, people I might find in my road in Hackney, east London. It says, “They are like you, imagine yourself and your children here.” That's powerful.

Tillim's pictures of Sierra Leone show a development in his pictures of child soldiers. In some, taken at wide angle, emphasise the painfully young fighters and their weaponry. In some the rifles and munitions utterly dominate. But in others, cropped much more tightly, the weapons are hardly visible or are completely absent. I find these much more compelling images. I look at the child's face and am much more aware that this is indeed a child. In other photographers' work the focus is on the weaponry carried by the child soldiers and this distracts from the message. It is interesting that Tillim's later work (for example of the Muji Muji militia in the Democratic Republic of Congo) employs the same close-cropped technique to emphasise the vulnerability of the children.

One of my favourite pictures is from the Angola series. “Wedding, Luanda” shows a beautifully dressed couple in all their finery processing past a watching group of ordinarily dressed people. They are not smiling. They are blank-faced, perhaps resentful of those with enough money for such show. It is not an image of everyone uniting to wish the happy couple all the best. It crackles with the sense of class, of rich and poor.

There are also two “television pictures” which are very effective. “Residents of Keren Watch the News Announcing the Fall of Barentu” from the Eritrea series has a family looking at a television where a newsreader is announcing a turn of events which might transform these people's lives. The caption, which tells us that Barentu is just 80 kilometres away, helps us to share their

sense of foreboding and worry. The other, utterly wonderful, picture is from Angola and is called “September 11, Tete”. An adult and two children are involved in their own concerns, their own problems. In the background, a television is on and shows the tower of the World Trade Centre on fire after one of the planes has crashed into it. For these Angolans, who have suffered so many years of war and brutality, 9/11 is nothing remarkable, nothing particularly arresting.

I must also mention the contribution to the book of the editor, Omar Badsha. He was born in Durban in 1945 and grew up in a Gujarati Muslim family. His grandparents emigrated to South Africa from India in the late 1890s. A self-taught artist and photographer, Badsha played an active role in the South African liberation struggle, as a cultural and political activist and trade union leader.

Badsha's political activism began in the early 1960s while at high school and he was in the forefront of all the major anti-apartheid campaigns in Natal and the Western Cape for close to four decades. He suffered periods of detainment, harassment and was denied a passport for close to 25 years after the banning of one of his books.

In 1987, he established the Centre of Documentary Photography at the University of Cape Town. In the Cape, he was one of the founding members and chairperson of the Cultural Workers Congress, an affiliate of the United Democratic Front (UDF). After the unbanning of the ANC, Badsha served in a number of capacities in the ANC and was head of the ANC Western Cape Department of Arts and Culture. He was instrumental in establishing Afrapix, the photographic agency and collective.

He edited what is perhaps the seminal book on life in South Africa in the 1980s: *South Africa: The Cordoned Heart*. He has much fewer pictures in the book reviewed here than Tillim, but they still add to the whole product.

A photographic book cannot be judged simply on its pictures. This is because photographs are incomplete. They do not tell us everything about the world. It is true of even the best photographs that they are fragments of a wider truth and cannot show fully why something is occurring. A picture of a starving child does not tell us about the structures of power which created famine. A picture of a sorrowing family does not tell us that the victim they mourn is a war criminal or a popular hero—or perhaps both. Therefore the most creative photographers have always tried to see the way that pictures and words interact. Richard Cross, the photojournalist who died in 1983 on the Honduras/Nicaragua border, put this well:

I think photographers sometimes are very short-sighted in looking at causes. They are interested in the more dramatic symptoms of the problem rather than the cause of the problem. I would opt much more for telling the story with a lot of images and text that tries to relate what has been going on in El Salvador with what has been going on in the last 50 years in the world. This requires good in-depth photojournalism. Which means that a person has to be dedicated enough to spend quite a long time with a story. And photographers have to take the initiative to try to have more control over the use of their photographs and they have to get more interested in the potential for combining images to make stories and to combine images with text.<sup>2</sup>