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Photography in Madagascar: Magical realism as an ambiguous space

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**Photography in Madagascar:
Magical realism as an ambiguous space**

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B. A. Communications (Hons)

Communications and Creative Industries

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ABSTRACT

The visual component of this project consists of a photographic representation of my experience in a *Vezo* fishing village on the southwest coast of Madagascar. In the exegesis, magical realism provides a theoretical framework to describe both the use of the photographic medium and the content of my images.

Away from both the rigid narratives of modernity and its realist perspective and from the sceptical nihilism of extreme postmodernity, magical realism allows for an ambiguous space in which expression and subjectivity are interconnected with empirical reality.

Moreover, this concept which acknowledges a plurality of small and, sometimes contradictory, narratives to inter-dependently co-exist is useful to describe the syncretism of the presence of the supernatural that is embedded in the *Vezo* everyday life.

I dedicate this project to Beatrice Stotzer as a token of appreciation for her loving support. I would like to thank her for our crazy adventure in Madagascar and for sharing her knowledge about this amazing place.

I would also like to thank my supervisors, Mr Max Pam, and Dr Dennis Wood for their valuable guidance and encouragement and extend my appreciation to the technical staff of SCAM for their ongoing assistance.

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INTRODUCTION

For almost two months I shared a home with a Malagasy family in the fishing village of Andrevo where I participated in daily activities. I went to church on Sundays and visited *tsombas* (trance healers) during the week. I also pulled water from the well, went fishing with the men from the family and collected sea products with the women and children. According to Astuti (1995), who studied among these fishing communities, to be Vezo is to live along the coast and struggle with the sea. Appropriately, the word Vezo is the imperative of the word 'paddle' in the local dialect. The *laka* – an out-rigger dugout pirogue equipped with a rectangular sail and detachable mast – is essential to the livelihood of the Vezo. Before reaching the age to be part of fishing expeditions, boys play with miniature models of laka made from left over balsam wood and plastic bags. The girls follow their older siblings to gather sea products, often collecting undersized specimens. The expansive ocean provides a dramatic contrast to the crowded village, which can often feel claustrophobic with its clustered houses, crying babies, and foraging pigs.

While in Madagascar, I quickly realised that it was essential to adapt to a different pace. Having little control of the day's events, I had to rely on contingency, and learn to 'go with the flow'. Staying in one place for a long period of time as opposed to being continually 'on the move', however, allowed me to follow the rhythm of the people, and to adapt to the unpredictability of their lifestyle. The wind, tides and currents determine where the Vezo go and what the Vezo do. The sound of the waves breaking on the outer reef establishes what kind of fishing will be suitable (for instance, individual line fishing or collective fishing with a big net and spear gun). In accordance with my surroundings, my methodology was based on contingency, serendipity and spontaneity. According to Muecke (2004, p. 16), who developed a theory based on contingency during his fieldwork in Madagascar, to embrace contingency is to recognise multiple and hidden causes. "The contingent is thus about the potential as it links things unexpectedly together. It does not continue the objective positivism of an anthropological practice... rather than collecting facts, it works by way of connection and articulation".

Carrying my analogue camera at all times¹, I photographed aspects of life in Andrevo as they unravelled. As much as possible, my photographs are the outcome of a dialogical approach – an interactive process between myself, known as the *vazaha* (foreigner), and the Vezo fishing people.

At times, taking photographs affected what was happening: people would stop what they were doing to pose and/or run into their house to put on their best clothes. Often people would request to have their portrait taken. Asking for consent obviously affected the immediacy of some of the images and as a result there is a degree of awareness and engagement with the camera. But on other occasions, for example, during fishing expeditions, my presence was intermittently forgotten. Within these variables, my visual project consists of a myriad of images depicting a variety of situations in which the Vezo were always active and willing participants rather than passive subjects.

I was interested in capturing aspects of quotidian life, and did not deliberately search for spectacular, exotic or traditional subjects (as for instance Barbieri (1995) has done in his representations of Madagascar). Nor did I focus solely on the bleak aspects of life in the village, photographing the sick, disturbed or violent (as represented by Gilden (1996) in Haiti). While I include some gruesome images of large fish being slaughtered and a boy with an unidentified skin disease (images 1 & 2)², it is the vitality and colour of the village that dominated my experience and therefore my visual representation (images 3 & 4). People in the village were generally happy and relatively healthy; our encounters were mostly warm and joyful. The use of colour film rather than black and white also grounds my images in the present.

¹ Digital was not an option as there was no electricity.

² Unless specified, images are my work.



image 1



image 2



Image 3



Image 4.

I also quickly learnt that everyday activities were infused with the supernatural presence of ancestors and various spirits that, among other things, help people to cope with life's unpredictability. Perceiving reality as contextual, cultural, and multi-dimensional, I aimed to utilise the fragmented and ambiguous potential of the photographic medium – shifting my work from a purely descriptive and instrumental endeavour to a more speculative and expressive one. As well as emphasising the subjectivity of my representation, this interpretive approach also alludes to the existence of other dimensions. By choosing this kind of orientation, I also wanted to disassociate myself from the idea of being an 'all-seeing', transparent and detached observer.

Photography – particularly in a country of the Majority World – raises problematic issues of representation linked to authenticity, authorship and truth. These issues have been thoroughly discussed in postcolonial, postmodern and poststructuralist discourses. For instance, Barthes (1981, p. 15) argues that in photography, "the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation." For my exegesis, I searched for a malleable concept away from both the nihilism of extreme postmodernity and the rigid structure of modernity³ and its realist paradigm. As a theoretical framework, "magical realism" exceeds and escapes ideas of rationalism and realism often associated with photographic documentary, leaving room for a plurality of 'realities' and for the expressive aspects of the medium. Applied to the photographic medium, magical realism provides an original framework that helps to structure the multiple issues of representation.

Chapter one sets up the oppositional paradigms often used to discuss the complex and unresolved debate about photographic representation, especially in relation to documentary images. Hall (1997, pp. 81-88) for instance, proposes documentary as objective representation and documentary as subjective interpretation. At one end of the pole is the objective/realist perspective, in which the documentary photograph is conceptualised as an objective mirroring of 'reality'. This perspective reflects ideas and

³ I am using the dichotomy modern/postmodern as a theoretical tool to define a conceptual shift of values and ideas that occurred in Western epistemology toward the second half of the twentieth century. It has been challenged by scholars such as Giddens (1991) who argues for a 'late modern age'.

values associated with modernity, the Enlightenment and positivist beliefs in which factual knowledge of the world is recordable, linear and unified. Postmodernity, on the other hand, has seriously challenged these classical notions of truth, reason, authenticity and objectivity. No longer favouring the western grand narratives to explain the world, knowledge is based on notions of pluralism, fragmentation and relativism. In photography, this other end of the pole stresses the subjective and expressive aspects of visual production. Yet, like Jameson (1990) and Edwards (1997), I believe that these binaries should not be read as oppositional but as interdependent.

Disrupting dichotomies such as modern/postmodern, objective/subjective, descriptive/expressive and us/other, the oxymoronic concept of magical realism highlights the fertile hybrid space created by the coexistence of these binaries. This theory will, therefore, provide a base to discuss the representation of the daily life I experienced among the Vezo in Andrevo.

The definition of magical realism is clarified in chapter two. Initially coined in the art world to describe a particular aesthetic, and most commonly associated with Latin American literature to also describe ideological content, I will adapt the concept to the photographic medium in order to analyse its hybrid nature. The work of Pedro Meyer (1993) and Ralph Eugene Meatyard (1974) exemplifies magical realist characteristics. In chapter two I also examine the main critiques of magical realism, especially in relation to a post-colonial context. In defence, it is argued that this concept is not a mode of representation or thought limited to a so-called prescientific mentality or to a specifically indigenous context. The relevance and use of magical realism in the western high-tech world is illustrated by numerous examples.

In chapter three, I analyse my own visual project in relation to magical realism. This concept is applied in the analysis of both the medium and the content of my photographic endeavour.

CHAPTER 1

PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

Photographic images have often been interpreted within a realist perspective – the belief in the camera's purely transcriptive ability. This realist paradigm was particularly evident during the early days of photography, but according to Hall (1997, p. 82) it is "still routinely in play whenever we open a book or magazine or newspaper."

Emerging in the 1830s, photography was both shaped by and a shaper of modernist values. At the turn of the twentieth century, modernity could be characterised by a belief in positivism and the Enlightenment – the idea that science and technology are able to advance our capacity to understand and dominate the physical and social world through the acquisition of factual knowledge. Within this discourse, culture is perceived as unified and coherent while knowledge is represented as linear. Notions of progress, purity, rational thought and truth were used to describe a world thought to be made up of 'facts' which could be communicated to others in an objective way, "free of the complex codes through which narratives are structured" (Wells, 1997, p. 78). In this context, the camera, as a new technology, was believed to trap factual representations of societies, and was instrumental in ordering the world according to European monolithic narratives.

Ryan (1997) describes how the photographic medium was a powerful tool in the building of colonial empires and was employed for various purposes such as in exploration, military campaigns, hunting expeditions and ethnography. For example, the recording, classification and identification of 'racial types' naturalized evolutionary theories in which the white European male was represented as belonging to the summit of intellectual, moral and cultural status. This was established by theories of physiognomy and phrenology (the reading of 'character' from physical features) and the measuring systems of anthropometry. Spencer (1992), in *Some notes on the attempt to apply photography to anthropometry during the second half of the nineteenth century*, provides examples of anatomical portraits and describes how the photographic image was an instrument for a 'measurable' scientific datum (image 5). In that sense,

photography helped to classify the ‘natives’, to structure the Empire, and consolidate its power. This realist perspective is an extreme example belonging to the ‘objective’ paradigm of photography described in the introduction.

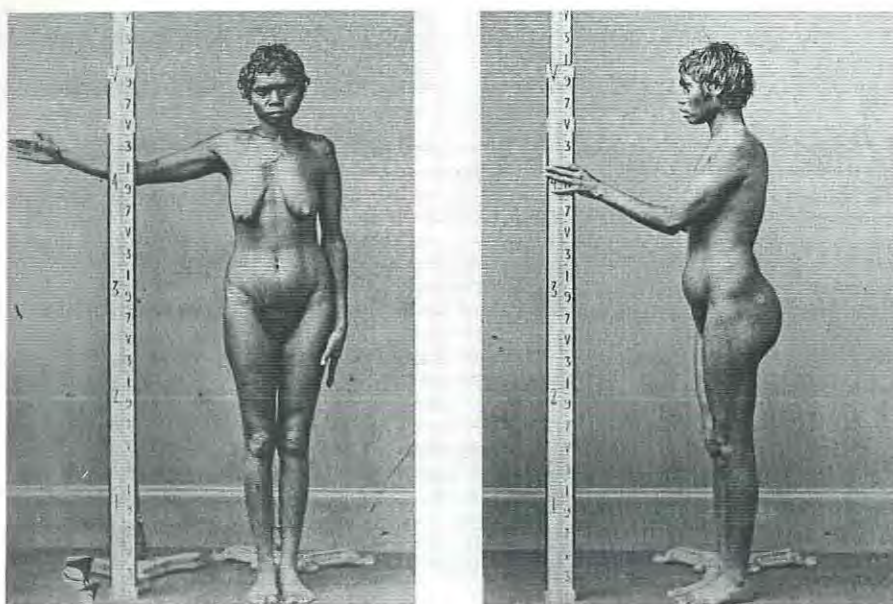


Image 5, photographer unknown.

These constructed and culturally biased photographs, however, blatantly contradict their theoretical propositions based on positivism and verisimilitude. Clearly, as Banks and Morphy (1997, p. 7) pointed out, “there is much evidence to support the view that in particular cases images were constructed to fit a particular scientific paradigm or interpretive agenda”. Interestingly, while categorising the natives in such an objectified way, Europeans were, at the same time, producing a reflection of their own belief system, as well as a record of the colonial relationship⁴.

In Madagascar, the images taken between 1853-65 by William Ellis, a missionary for the London Missionary Society (LMS), are some of the oldest photographic documents representing the country and its people (image 6). Dressed in European attire and using props such as books to convey Western notions of ‘progress’ and ‘civilization’, these representations aimed to warrant the work of the LMS and to influence public opinion in Europe, showing that the Malagasy ‘barbarians’ could be civilized.

⁴ Postcolonial critiques are presented in the second chapter.

These images provide a clear example of how photography was used historically as a tool for justifying and enforcing European grand narratives of progress and evolution. They also illustrate the selective nature of the photographic medium. Ellis often embellished and edited the negative plate, reducing the darkness of skin tones and the thickness of lips in order to please the Malagasy nobility and to better convey his assimilation project (Peers 1997, p. 28).



Image 6, William Ellis.

While modernity can be defined as an instrumental and rationalized viewpoint that aimed to control and order the world with 'objective representations' and 'factual knowledge', postmodern theory, on the other hand has brought a radical change in ideas and values concerning representation. Decentralising Western established criteria, it has challenged classical notions of objectivity and reality. Eagleton (1996, p. vii) describes postmodernity as:

a style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the idea of universal progress or emancipation, of single narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation. Against these Enlightenment norms, it sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of dis-unified cultures or interpretations which bred a degree of scepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the given-ness of natures and the coherence of identities.

The scepticism vis-a-vis objectivity and reality has led to a crisis in representation and has resulted in the self questioning of people involved in many disciplines such as

photography, humanities, social science and science in general. Giddens (1990) labels this self-questioning 'reflexivity'.

In regards to photography, this postmodernist orientation stresses the subjective, contingent and ambiguous aspects of the medium and raises questions of authority and authenticity. Postmodernists denounce the assumption of a knowable and recordable world in which facts, or in the case of photography 'visual truths', can be communicated in a transparent way. Baudrillard's (1988, p. 170) concept of the simulacrum provides an extreme example of the subjective and constructed nature of representation and meaning. To put it simply, this theory presupposes that by the endless circulation of images, the mass media has neutralized reality to the extent that the image represented "bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum". Defined as the final destruction of meaning, the simulacrum is situated at the extreme end of the subjective pole described in the introduction.

On the other hand, Sekula (1982) defines photographic communication within a kind of 'binary folklore', between a 'symbolist' (subjective) folk-myth and a 'realist' (objective) folk-myth. Every photograph at any given moment of reading, in any given context, leans towards one of these two poles. The opposition between these two poles is as follows:

photographer as seer vs photographer as witness, photography as expression vs photography as reportage, theories of imagination (and inner truth) vs theories of empirical truth, affective value vs informative value, and finally, metaphoric signification vs metonymic signification (p. 108).

A different perspective is given by Jameson (1990, p. 14), who suggests that the polarisation of visual production should not necessarily be read as oppositional, as "realist versus expressive, document versus art, but as objectively related and dialectically interdependent phenomena". Similarly, Edwards (1997) challenges the positivist/realist position and argues that the strength in documentary photography lies in the ambiguous space of postmodern discourse and the characteristics of still photography – its fragmentation, dislocation, non-narrative line (often perceived as

problematic in the representation of 'reality'). Evidently, there are components of 'realities' that require a more evocative, multi-dimensional, even ambiguous expression than the realist documentary paradigm permits. This is only possible using a discourse in which objective and subjective agendas come together. By admitting expression and subjectivity into cultural representations, Edwards suggests "the viewer has a space and is conscious of the ambiguity of the image which allows access to the *experience* of a situation in all its complexity rather than the pretence of surface understanding" (p. 60) (*italics in original quote*).

Clearly, representations are always problematic and not reducible to a clear-cut binary paradigm. In order to situate my own photographic representations, I searched for a malleable conceptual framework that would acknowledge the dialectical tendencies described above by Edwards and Jameson – away from both the sceptical nihilism of extreme postmodern theory and the static positivism of the ultra realist perspective.

Magical realism, a concept that emphasises the co-existence and interaction of stark oppositions has provided me with an avenue to express the inter-dependant relationship of these binaries in photography. Liberated from the rigid boundaries imposed by modern thought, and from the scepticism of extreme postmodern ideas, this theory allows for an ambiguous space.

CHAPTER 2

MAGICAL REALISM

Definition

It is believed that the term 'magical realism' was coined in the 1920s by German art critic Franz Roh in response to post-expressionist painting. For McMurray (1981, p.7), it is "a movement that sought to capture the beyond-rational, inner meaning of immediate, exterior reality." Aiming to challenge habitual perceptions of their surroundings, magic realist painters looked at common objects and life around them and attempted "to portray the strange, the uncanny, the eerie aspects of everyday reality" (Menton, 1983, p. 13). While realist in their approach, the paintings possessed a strange or dreamlike quality communicated through specific painting techniques. Similarly, many of my images of everyday life in Madagascar acquire an intangible atmosphere through specific photographic techniques, whether it be the result of a certain angle, light, exposure etc.⁵

In the literary sphere, Alejo Carpentier modified the term in 1949 to conceptualise the mingling of the fantastic and the realist in his novel, *The kingdom of this world*. Magical realism has since become closely associated with Latin American fictional writings, in which, according to Baker (1997, online), "normal, everyday events co-exist on the same level as supernatural, extraordinary and even fantastic events whose authenticity is never questioned". Often thought of as the 'grandfather of magical realist writing', Marquez brought this literary mode to the attention of a wider public with his popular novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) that has been translated in twenty six different languages. Magical realism differs from pure fantasy: it is grounded in a realistic setting and *extra*-ordinary events are not highlighted or made strange but seamlessly interwoven within the 'ordinary' happenings of everyday life.

⁵ this will be elaborated later in the chapter

This literary technique permits the co-existence of different 'realities'⁶ and has been particularly useful to writers from postcolonial countries. Subverting existing structures of power, the in-betweenness of magical realism encourages resistance to monolithic political and cultural structures imposed by Western imperialists (Parkinson-Zamora and Farris, 1995, p. 6). For instance, in Latin America and the French Caribbean, magical realism has become an ideological tool for the construction of a local hybrid identity based on traditional beliefs in the supernatural that are often linked to people's African origins.

Due to its unbounded and fluid characteristics however, the magical realist concept has exceeded its initial geographical, ideological and disciplinary confines. In the introduction to their edited work on magical realism, Parkinson-Zamora and Farris (1995, p. 5) generally agree that it is a "mode suited to exploring and transgressing boundaries, whether the boundaries are ontological, political, geographical or generic". The literary mode is no longer limited to writers from Latin America or to those who have a postcolonial background.⁷ Moreover it has also been used to describe work within various disciplines such as cinema and theatre.⁸

Whether magical realism is conceptualised in a pictorial, literary or theatrical context to describe aesthetic and ideological content, its hybrid nature allows for an ambiguous, irrational dimension to the world that challenges the rigid structures of rationalism and realism. This concept does not emphasise the depiction of a mimetic reality but rather it focuses on detail and on the complex felt experience of human beings. In that sense, it allows for an expressive representation that "works both within and against the aesthetics of realism" (Chamberlain 1986, p. 17). These underlying characteristics inspired me to adapt magical realism to the photographic medium.

⁶ reality as a social and cultural construct

⁷ For instance, *The passion* by Jeanette Winterson.

⁸ For example, the films of French director Jean-Pierre Jeunet (*Amelie, A Very Long Engagement*), American director Tim Burton (*Edward Scissorhands, Big Fish*) and Malagasy director Raymond Rajaonarivelo (*Quand les étoiles recontrent la mer*). In theatre the plays of Rivera have also been described as magical realist (*Marisol and other plays*).

Magical realism and photography:

The medium

In chapter one, I discussed some of the dualities (objective and subjective, mimetic and metaphoric, expressive and informational) often associated with photographic representations and theory. In my view, these binary oppositions can co-exist interdependently. Just as magical realism has been used in literature to represent the simultaneous existence of different worldviews, it can also help to conceptualize the dialectical relationship of these binaries. In general, this concept acknowledges the space that is created by the fusion of what were traditionally viewed as oppositional elements. This term can help to illustrate the ambiguity that is inherent in every photograph: while photographs are contingent, subjective and constructed, they are nevertheless based in some external 'reality' or 'fact'. For instance, while I do not claim that my images are objective, they are nevertheless based on the authenticity of my experience. As perceptively described by Sontag (1978, p. 69), photographs are "pellets of information and clouds of fantasy." In this context photography can be analysed as occupying what Winnicott, in psychology, has identified as the 'paradoxical third space' being neither inside the world of fantasy (completely subjective), nor entirely outside in the world of shared reality (objective). Rather it partakes in both these positions at once (Winnicott cited in Davis and Wallbridge, 1983, p. 163).

The hybrid nature of photography has been metaphorically illustrated by Fukagawa⁹ in Photofile (2003, p. 14) where he suggests that :

Photography has been more like a fish in the sea than a bird in the sky, for it has remained a slippery image rather than something rigid and elevated. It floats in a watery medium, an unknown realm where live mysterious creatures...hopefully in the future the fish might grow legs

like a fictional creature by Joan Fontcuberta...If it could survive and evolve further it may even develop wings and fly into the sky...
Photography is essentially a hybrid.

⁹ Masafumi Fukagawa: chief director for department of photography in Kawasaki City Japan.

The hybrid dialectical nature of photography – being interdependently realistic and creative, subjective and objective – is also well exemplified by Pedro Meyer in *Truths & Fictions: A Journey from Documentary to Digital Photography* (1993). According to Snow (1996, p. 28), the combination of ‘straight’ documentary photography and digital manipulation in the work of this Mexican photojournalist has been labelled the “visual translation of South American literature's magic realism.” Just as fantastic elements in literature are seamlessly integrated within a realistic setting, Meyer uses digital technology to combine images so convincingly that it is not always easy for a viewer to tell where reality ends and artistic expression begins. Meyer, however, argues that manipulation begins at the very moment when the original picture was made and “everything else that follows is only ensuing stages of further manipulation” (Meyer cited in Snow, 1996, p. 30). Meyer’s montages were first exhibited in October 1993 around the beginning of the digital revolution in photography and challenged the idea of ‘visual truth’ usually associated with documentary photography. Digital technology has facilitated the ways in which images can be altered and, more than ever, brought the debate on visual authenticity to the forefront.

From an early age, Pedro Meyer was lured by the magic of the photographic medium: “I was seduced by the magic of the image coming up on the those little white sheets of paper as they lay in the developer,” Meyer explains (Meyer interviewed in Snow, 1996, p. 28). That same interest in technological magic would eventually lead him to digital photography.

As well as being helpful to describe the photographic medium, magical realism can also be related to photographic content.

The content

Based on the world around him, Pedro Meyer fabricates his own realities to express his social commentary. However, he claims that while the images are fictions, they do not

lie¹⁰. In his opinion, the fictive elements enhance the understanding of social realities. For example, digital technology has facilitated the amalgamation of a meaningful background to the original image of the ‘walking billboard’ which he felt was limited by its setting (image 7). The American icons, such as baseball and the city



Image 7, Meyer.

skyscrapers of New York depicted in the new background, provide an environmental reference to the Russian immigrant, expanding the content of the image and making his statement more eloquent (although interpretation will always vary depending on the viewer). Meyer's images have been at the centre of the complex and unresolved debate about truth and fiction. In response to these issues, Paul de Man (cited in Hutcheon 1988, p. 113) argues that “the binary opposition between fiction and fact is no longer relevant: in any differential system, it is the assertion of the space *between* the entities that matters.” Like the work of magical realist painters and writers, Pedro Meyer's images exemplify this ambiguous space by challenging one-dimensional ideas about the representation of reality.

Moreover, just as the degree of fantastic elements interwoven into the reality of magical realist literature varies, the degree of manipulation that can categorise a photographic image as magical realist also fluctuates. Meyer only subtly alters his straight representations of the USA in order to intensify and refine meaning. His images taken in Mexico, by contrast, are more heavily manipulated. In these latter images, according to Green (1993, CD), he is not simply working with surface, but rather “he is seeking a means of bringing to the visual spectrum aspects of spirit and emotion that go beyond the surface world. He is attempting to see what the eye cannot normally see.” While some of these images superimpose representations of angels and devils to symbolise spiritual beliefs of Latin America, it can be argued that photographs that convey aspects of an *extra*-ordinary ‘reality’ – and can be therefore classified as having magical realist characteristics – do not need to be so explicit and can simply entail a distinctive mood,

¹⁰ Similarly, in *The Passion*, Winterson (1987) repeats “Im telling you stories. Trust me.”

atmosphere, moment, or detail that can effectively transport the viewer from his or her habitual perception of the world to a magical realist realm.

Although every image is to some extent, the creation of the photographer, the degree of manipulation varies from image to image. Photographs can possess a magical realist characteristic with, in comparison to Pedro's work, very little manipulation at all. For instance, in some of my images camera techniques are used to reveal motion that could not otherwise be perceived (images 8 & 9). Some of my other work possesses strange visuals that I did not deliberately manipulate, and the magic that lies beneath the surface is subtly suggested. The intense yellow illumination (image 10) from the early morning sunshine creates a surreal lighting as well as intriguing shadows on a Vezo family and it highlights the fishing net with an almost supernatural colour.



Image 8



Image 9



Image 10

In that sense, the camera is a useful tool to communicate the magical, elusive, strange fragments of everyday life – whether abroad or at home. Rivera (interviewed in Simons 1993, p. 45) who is a playwright of magical realist theatre explains that “it’s all in the details. If you choose the details of everyday life carefully enough, and examine them with enough clarity, they can seem magical on their own”. In the fast-paced environment in which we live, photographs can ‘freeze’ peculiar moments that would otherwise be overlooked.

What I have loosely labeled ‘Magic’– the irrational/illogical/mysterious/astonishing/uncanny dimension of the everyday world – has been, according to Freud’s well-known research, largely repressed in our modern society. Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) have also argued that the very notion of modernity and scientific enlightenment, is founded on the demystification of the world. Magical or animistic modes of thought are repressed in favour of a view that sees objects only as instrumental for human knowledge and control. In Madagascar, however, I realised that belief in supernatural powers of the ancestors and various spirits is integrated in people’s everyday lives. Being an important aspect of daily existence, they help to explain life’s predicaments and paradoxically bring meaning to unexplainable phenomena. Yet, I am aware that using the term magical realism in Madagascar (a country that has been colonised by the French for 70 years) risks being criticised as another neo-colonial endeavour.

Critique and defence of magical realism.

Within a postcolonial context, critics of magical realism have pointed to the danger of imposing a system of order in much the same way colonial powers have imposed their idea of order on a mostly subjugated people. Mullan (2004, online) argues that the oxymoron ‘magical realism’ is associated with the colonial binaries of us/other, east/west, coloniser/colonised that raise issues of power. Hence, in this perspective, everything that seems uncanny or unfamiliar to Western eyes will be interpreted pejoratively as ‘Magic’.

On the other hand, Baker (1997, online), describes magical realism as a fertile hybrid space where opposite and conflicting properties are nevertheless complimentary. The 'dual spatiality' provided by the hybridity of binaries contest colonial narratives "making problematic any notion of a single unified world view or reality." In this interpretation, 'magic' has no negative connotations.

Clearly 'magic' can be interpreted as representing the exotic, the different, the wild, the 'other' and can lead to the romanticising of the postcolonial subject. Once again this subject is incarcerated in a 'pre-scientific', 'traditional' past and can even be perceived as having a 'primitive mentality' described in evolutionary, and hence negative terms by Levy-Bruhl (1922). In other words, the colonised subject was (and still is) often represented as an 'exotic' creature, or as Westerners' silent 'other' frozen in time, unable to represent himself or herself. These themes are central to the work of Edward Said (1978, 1985) who has written many influential postcolonial critiques. In *Orientalism reconsidered* Said (1985, p. 17) explains how Europe has built its own identity by contrast with an invented irrational and primitive Orient, "as the age-old antetype of Europe, as a fecund night out of which European rationality developed, the Orient's actuality receded inexorably into a kind of paradigmatic fossilization". This can also be applied to the role of Africa in the construction of European modern identity.

In photography, this 'fossilization' of the 'exotic other' is illustrated by the pictures of Gian Paolo Barbieri (1995). It can be argued that this photographer often fabricates his images to portray his fantasies of 'traditional' Madagascar. While Ellis constructed his images for Christian propaganda, Barbieri's images are determined predominantly by aesthetic and expressive considerations. According to Tournier (1995, p. vii), Barbieri aims to capture the "perfection of form and the stern austerity" of the Malagasy. Through romantic black and white photographs, he expresses his nostalgia for the past and for the 'exotic'. At its worst, such representations objectify, stereotype and incarcerate 'the other' in the past¹¹. An abundance of sensual nude bodies, often covered in perspiration conveys his erotic fantasy of 'the other'. In the introduction, Barbieri

¹¹ evident in postcards depicting 'traditional' native people.

(1995, p. iii) explains that he aims to record the “decisive moment – be it a moment of history or one of emotion and beauty”. His nostalgia is clearly evident in reconstructed scenes of the ‘past’. An ancient funerary ritual of extracting ‘juices’ from a corpse provides an example of a dramatic, reconstructed photograph inspired from a custom that is no longer practiced (image 11).



Image 11, Barbieri.

While I make no pretence that my images are objective, they are not as constructed and staged as those of Barbieri and Ellis. As already mentioned, my visual project is defined by a more spontaneous, contingent and dialogical methodology. In contrast with Barbieri’s work, I have only focused on the present and the quotidian. Although concerned with myth and magical elements of ‘reality’, it can be argued that his work does not belong to a magical realist framework because his images are not based on everyday life and are oriented towards spectacular aspects of the past.

I have not used magical realism to stereotype or incarcerate the Malagasy as ‘traditional’ or ‘primitive’. As discussed above, the concept has been effective as a ‘decolonising agent’ in the past and become an important international trend in contemporary fiction. It is no longer limited to representation in postcolonial countries, however, and has been used in many Western contexts in which the particular narrative is devoid of any

colonial underpinning. A few examples may illustrate this. Set in 18th century France, the protagonist in Suskind's *Perfume* (1985) has a supernatural and obsessive sense of smell. The dead make a regular appearance in the popular American television series *Six feet Under* (2001-2005), created by Alan Ball (*American Beauty*)¹², a controversial program that challenges American cultural consciousness. In Australia, writer Peter Carey, interweaves supernatural phenomena and realism in his depiction of Australian suburban lives in his novels *Bliss* (1981) and *Illywhacker* (1985). Like Pedro Meyer, by unsettling the boundaries between the irrational and rational, these authors use metaphor and magical phenomena to add a new dimension to their social critique and representation.

The enigmatic world created in the images of American photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard can also be classified as magical realist. Taken between 1955 and 1972, his unique vision was revolutionary for its time. Tannenbaum (1991, p. 59) explains that Meatyard's aim was to combine his interest in the "scientific nature of the camera vision and the spiritual essence behind the visible world". Each of his images possesses something slightly askew, unhinging any notion of a rational objectified world. Masked figures casually inhabit ordinary American settings as if they belong there.

In other work, he experiments with camera techniques that fully utilize the expressive potential of the medium. Of particular interest are depictions of everyday scenes photographed in such a way that they take on a new dimension, such as the image of three girls dancing in the living room while their parents rest and read the paper (image 12). Keller (2002, p. 108) suggests that "this may also be part of the tribe's Sunday afternoon ritual.



Image 12, Meatyard.

¹² Another magical realist film.

Capturing the figures against intense sunlight, Meatyard's camera distorts their form and movement, increasing the shamanic atmosphere of the scene". His images highlight the mystery of everyday existence, and are a testimony that magic and rituals are not limited to indigenous and sacred context.

Similarly, my emphasis on the ambiguous aspect of reality is not specific to my photographic images in Madagascar. For example, the image of my father roller-blading in the Perth suburbs (image 13) has characteristics of magical realism "whose purpose is to penetrate objective reality and reveal the mysterious and poetic qualities underlying the daily lives of a community or a people" (Mc Murray, 1981, p. 18). A combination of the dramatic light just before a storm in the late afternoon, the striking shadows, the angle and the blurred motion heighten a surreal and mystical atmosphere. I aim to portray the magical elements that exist in even the most 'banal' or 'un-exotic' settings (although what is 'banal' or 'exotic' is also a matter of perspective).



Image 13

Importantly, the idea of 'magic' is not specific to the 'exotic' countries of the Majority world or to a so-called prescientific mentality. In our modern world technology has become so advanced that high-tech objects seem to take on lives of their own and become magical in the process. Rutsky (1999, p. 175) explains that, "as technology becomes more complex, more dense, and less comprehensible in its entirety, it begins to 'appear' as an autonomous, uncontrollable, even supernatural other". Ironically, attempts to depict this new sense of technology draw from those magical, animistic or supernatural discourses previously excluded by western modernity's instrumental view of technology and of the world. Gibson (1986, p. 180) also explicitly links cyber-space, artificial intelligence, and by extension digital technology in general, to a "return of precisely those animistic or magical beliefs repressed by modern scientific technology".

In a high-tech world that surpasses the rational understanding of most individuals, technology can no longer be conceived simply as an object under human control. Appropriately, these 'pre-scientific' models provide a framework from a position other than that of control and mastery. Words such as avatars, wizards, demons and sprites have become a standard part of the computer networking and 'mudding' lexicon. In this new chaotic postmodern era, one can analyse the return of repressed discourses as recognition that, in a high-tech world, humanity's relation to technology should be less a matter of control than one of openness; what Rutsky (1999, p.176) explains as "letting go of the sense of mastery that has defined the human subject". Magical realism, as a mode of representation and thought, freed from the rigid structures of rationalism, is therefore a suitable framework to acknowledge the chaos, ambiguity, and paradoxes of both our postmodern high-tech world and of life in the Vezo village.

Magical realism has also been utilized to describe alternative states of consciousness (ASC). Haitian novelist, Jaques Alexis (1956) and his literary successors found themes for their magical realism in the ready-made supernatural universe of *voudou*, a religion whose rituals are immediately fused with the world of everyday reality. Gilden's photographs on the subject were particularly influential to my depictions of *tsombas* (trance healers) in Madagascar: both the content and the way in which Gilden has used

the medium reflects the ambiguous and expressive tendencies of magical realism (image 14).

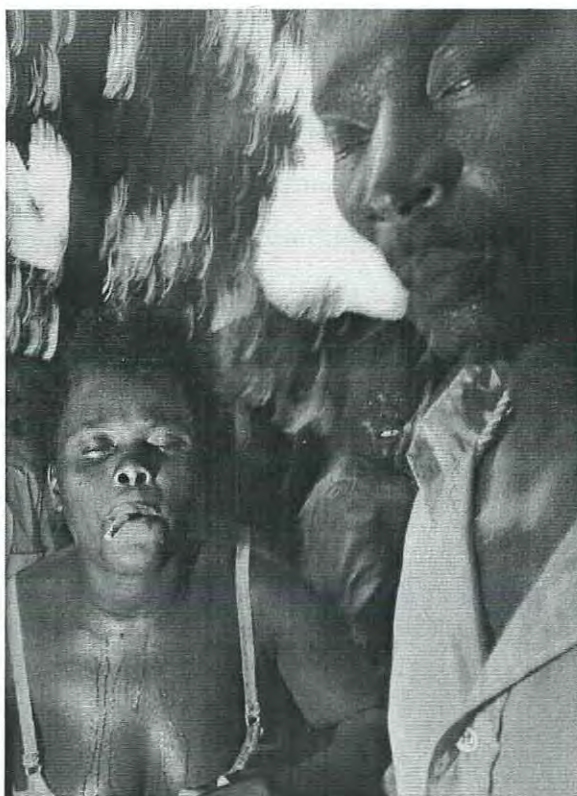


Image 14, Gilden.

Similarly, both the content and the use of the medium in my work in Madagascar possess the magical realist tendencies I have described in this chapter.

CHAPTER 3

MADAGASCAR: MAGIC REALISM

While I am wary to impose a Western concept to the Malagasy context, I find magical realism effective to describe a way of life in which the supernatural is profoundly embedded within the quotidian.

Pierrot Men, a local photographer I met in Fianarantsao (central Madagascar) has effectively captured these magical realist aspects of everyday life. In his book *Madagascar: la grande ile secrete* (2003), he depicts everyday scenes of the Malagasy at work and at leisure. These images have a poetic, dream-like quality capturing a unique mood and pace. According to Françoise Raison-Jourde, who provides an historical background and an insightful analysis of Men’s images, “here the dream is not limited to the night, dreams have affinities with the diurnal world. This awaken-dream is well-known to the healers and to the diviners” (2003, pp. 6-7, my translation). The Malagasy world is inhabited by gods, witches, ancestors, and other spirits, and the living do not exist independently from these entities. Men captures shadows, reflections, and fog to enhance this ambiguity (image 16 & 17: Men). In many scenes, people’s faces are hidden leaving room for the viewer’s imagination and interpretation. Displaying a visible empathy toward the people he photographs, Men’s images are not as dramatic as Barbieri’s representations. The rhythm and sensitivity of his work induce a unique mood that subtly evokes the omnipresence of the supernatural.



Image 15, Men.



Image 16, Men.

The ancestors in particular are an important point of reference and structure to many areas of everyday experience in Madagascar. In his chapter on “the ways of the ancestors”, Mack (1990, p.76) writes that, “the vitality of the living is seen as derived from the ancestors. Their blessings are the source of human well-being”. During my stay, I was told numerous stories that illustrated these beliefs. For example Nene, a middle-aged woman from Andrevo sadly explained that her husband and son disappeared at sea after they were caught in a storm during a fishing expedition. She believes that their premature death was the final retaliation of a disgruntled ancestral spirit who cursed her husband’s family for many generations, only ever allowing one child to survive.

Importantly, Mack (1990, p. 76) makes explicit that the affinity with the ancestors is not an inheritance of the less educated, rural communities who live encased in tradition. Neither are the ancestors a ‘cultural baggage’ slowing down an inevitable move toward modernization because “to Malagasy, the ancestors are a part of development and progress rather than an impediment on them”. Ceremonies associated with the ancestors are not just the practice of remote communities or the urban poor, but take place on the outskirts of the Capital organised by businessmen, doctors, university lecturers etc. Mack further explains that the ancestors remain a vital point of reference for all Malagasy and “do not anchor Malagasy in unalterable ways. They give continuity and direction in a changing world” (p. 77). As mentioned earlier, magical realism is particularly useful to describe this syncretic space.

In Western Madagascar, every village has at least one tsomba. Heirs to traditions of ‘esoteric lore’, these possessed healers can sometimes have enormous prestige. Followers ask for blessings and advice relating to matters of illness or other misfortunes that are often linked to vengeful supernatural forces. Tsombas also prepare talismans and amulets for protection. In contrast to western medicine, healers look to treat the cause of illness or ‘misfortune’, not just the symptom.

Offering the usual payment for spirit possession rituals (rum, cigarettes and a little money) I visited two tsombas during my stay in order to both receive blessings for my honours project and to take photographs. Perline was my neighbour and a well-known tsomba. Possessed by Papanarivo, a sailor who died at sea, Perline,

momentarily emptied of her own self, could become a vessel for this wandering spirit (image 17).



Image 17

After donning a red beret and a white gown, the symbol of her particular spirit, Perline burnt *rami*, a native fragrance, in her terracotta incense burner. Staring blankly into a mirror covered with white clay esoteric symbols, she called down the spirit which was already lured by the rami fumes. Talking with a different voice in a different dialect, she asked what was the purpose of our visit. Apprehensive about taking photographs in a situation so far removed from my comfort zone, I asked whether Papanarivo would be upset if I took some photographs during the ritual (some spirits are well known for their violent and unpredictable nature). Papanarivo, through Perline's mouth, replied that he did not mind to be photographed. I chose to double expose this scene to visually convey Perline's double persona. As a result, her translucent profiles overlaps and her distorted shrine displays lucid shapes, adding to the enigmatic and hazy atmosphere.

While people show a great respect for the spirits, this kind of private possession ritual is usually very unspectacular, and is carried out with very little fuss. People came and went while the rituals were taking place. Outside Perline's room a woman continued to peel manioc (image 18). Like the definition of magical realism in literature, these rituals involving the supernatural are an integral part of, and are seamlessly interwoven in, the fabric of everyday life.



Image 18

In similar circumstances, Grandpere Dadalahy's spirit allowed me to take photographs in the small village of Ankilibe. His blurred figure represents his elusive identities (image 19). In this case, a skiing beanie and blue sunglasses were symbolic of the very animated and playful spirit that had possessed him. The close up of his hand and bowl depicts the magic silver water he had prepared for me to drink as part of my blessing (image 20). A long exposure creates the shade of an aura around the bowl and helps to communicate the magic qualities and power associated with the concoction.



Image 19



Image 20

The common Malagasy saying –‘Sunday to church and Monday to the tsomba’– illustrates well the cultural syncretism that exists among the Vezo. The photographs of the Catholic priest (image 21) outside the local church and Grandpere Dadalahy (image 22) from the same village also illustrate this cultural amalgam. Moreover, syncretism exists *within* the tsomba rituals. For instance, Dadalahy wears a Christian medallion and an ancient German coin across his chest. This co-existence of elements that were traditionally viewed as incompatible can also be related to one of the main characteristics of magical realism.



Image 21

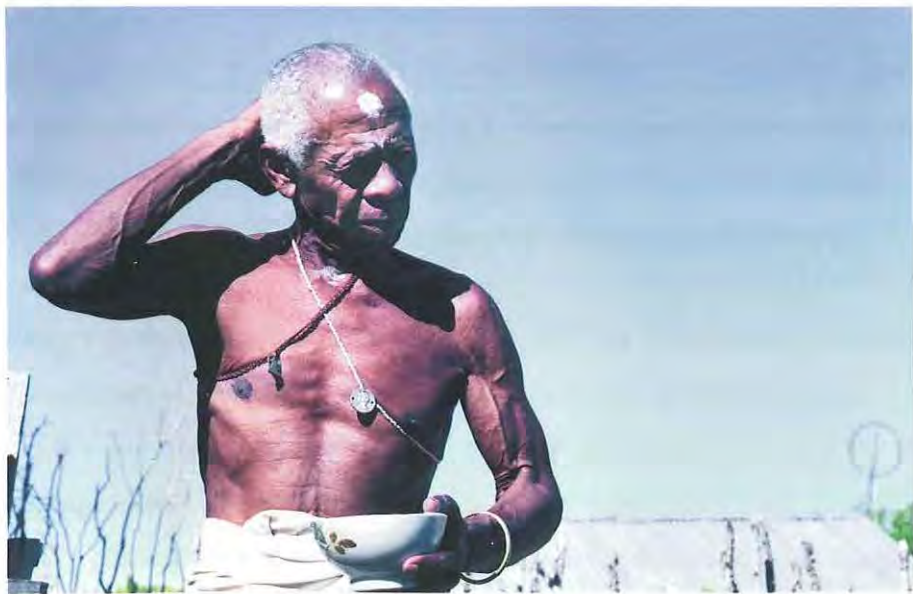


Image 22

Marked by a white flag that indicates the omnipresence of spirits, small houses (called *anjomba*) are present in almost every Vezo village and permission must be granted to enter these sacred areas. In the image below, the early morning lighting and the rich blue sky enhanced by a polarising filter help to create a mystical/obscure atmosphere around a man kneeling in front of his *anjomba*.



Image 23

This mood, however, is not limited to my depictions of explicitly supernatural subjects. An ambiguous atmosphere is also evident in images of everyday work and leisure. Fishing is an unpredictable and dangerous livelihood and successful fishing is believed to be directly affected by the blessing of supernatural forces.

Many images convey this ambiguity and provide an interpretative space for the viewer: fragments of everyday activities are revealed as close-ups (image 24), Vezo fishermen are silhouetted (image 25), the faces of children are out of frame or blurred (images 26 & 27). In contrast to the purely descriptive aims of conventional documentary photography, these images have a more speculative function alluding to another realm that lies beyond what can be perceived visually. Similarly, Sontag (1978, p. 23) believes that the ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: “there is the surface, now think – or rather feel, intuit – what is beyond it.”



Image 24



Image 25



Image 26



Image 27

Importantly, my work is self-reflexive. In some images I have photographed myself (images 28, 29, 31) or deliberately include my shadow (image 32) to emphasise my presence, and hence the subjectivity of my representations. By putting myself into context, I aim to highlight a dialogical experience and erase any pretence of being a transparent observer. Similarly, photographers such as Gilden and Meatyard sometimes include their shadow to stress the constructed nature of their work. The deconstruction of transparent modes of authority is indicative of postmodern trends and has affected all areas of representation.



Image 28



Image 29



Image 30



Image 31



Image 32

My images are not what could be labelled ‘straight’ documentary photography – rather they are expressive fragments of my experience that convey an intangible atmosphere representative of both my subjective perspective and the ambiguity of ‘reality’.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the adaptation of the magical realism concept to the photographic medium provides an original theoretical framework that acknowledges the dialectical relationship existing between objective and subjective paradigms in documentary photographic representations. It allows for an ambiguous space in which expression and subjectivity are interconnected with empirical reality. Moreover, it also provides a basis to analyse the content of my images of everyday life in a Malagasy fishing community.

To the best of my knowledge there has been no particular focus on the visual representation of this marine population and of their tsombas. Undoubtedly, further research on this unique topic of public and private tsomba possession ceremonies could be undertaken.

In addition, a contingent and dialogical methodology also provides a viewpoint away from ideas of mastery and control, typified by the recording of 'facts' in a unified grand narrative. Magical realism on the other hand, allows for a plurality of small and sometimes contradictory narratives to interdependently co-exist. Photographs are also narratives that contribute to individual interpretations of the world. As Dufour (2004, p. 4) points out, "each [photograph] reveals another facet of the 'real' adding to the image bank from which we construct our contemporary existence and extend our understanding of the world". My photographs are a hybridisation of realism and expression that form a visual bricolage of my experience in Andrevo. From these visual fragments and individual inter-textuality, viewers can construct their own meaning and personal impressions of life in a Vezo village.

If individuals look at the world around them more closely, and through the right lens, it is likely that they will find magical realism in some part of it and glimpse at the mystery that breathes behind things.

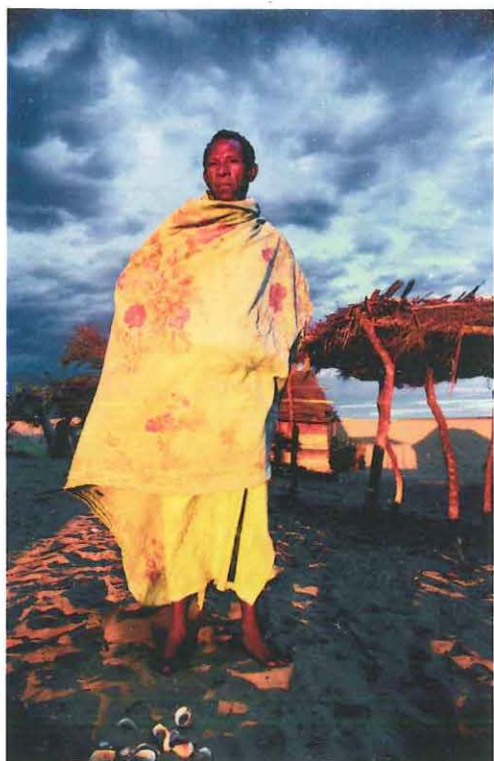


Image 33



Image 34

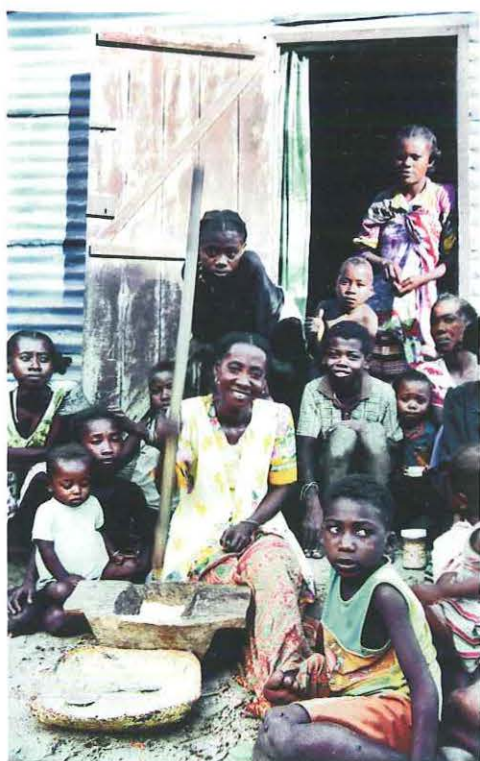


Image 35



Image 36



Image 37



Image 38



Image 39



Image 40

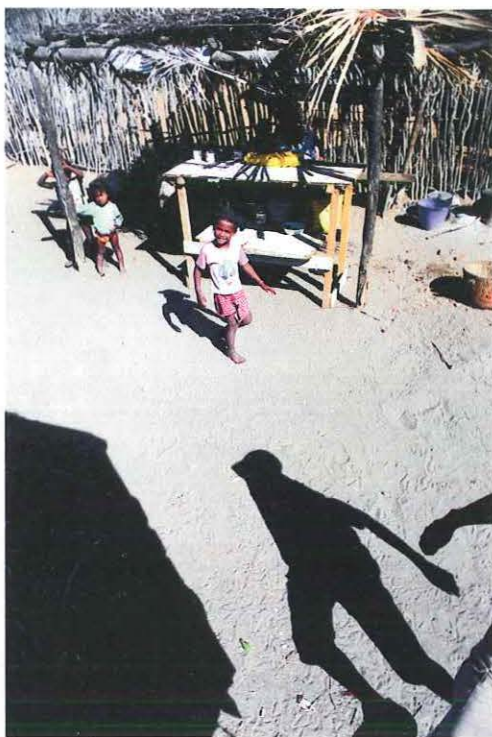


Image 41



Image 42



Image 43



Image 44



Image 45



Image 46

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