

## REFRAME: BREAKING THROUGH THE WHITE GAZE, PHOTOGRAPHIC TRADITIONS IN AFRICAN COUNTRIES

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# Reframe: Breaking through the White Gaze, Photographic Traditions in African Countries

## **\_Abstract**

This *\_Perspective* in the form of a photo essay introduces *Reframe*, a documentary photography project that sought to challenge Western stereotypes and colonial narratives surrounding Namibia. Prompted by a viral image from 2016 and the problematic media responses it generated, the *\_Perspective* traces how dominant representations of Namibia have historically erased its people in favor of empty, romanticized landscapes. *Reframe* responds by empowering Namibian photographers to document everyday life from the inside, culminating in exhibitions in Windhoek and Berlin. Through this exchange, the project constructed a decolonial visual practice and promoted a more complex and self-determined view of Namibia's social realities.

## **1\_Introduction**

In 2016, a photo of a woman from the Himba tribe in a Namibian supermarket circulated on social media. She was wearing the usual red-ochre-colored body protection and had her hair covered in a mixture of ochre and grease, resembling pictures in calendars and travel guides. Nevertheless, a media outcry followed. Lower-tier, sensation-seeking tabloid newspapers went as far as to suggest that the woman was looking at washing powder because of the mud on her skin.<sup>1</sup> For many people in the West, it was unimaginable that a woman could follow such traditions and enter a modern supermarket at the same time. For them, it was an oxymoron whose elements were too far apart to exist together. This scene is witnessed almost every day, even in Namibia's capital, Windhoek. A scene that almost everyone who lives in Namibia has seen and can imagine. This example epitomizes a larger problem in the Western perception and documentation of African countries, including Namibia. Apart from the pictures of the Himba people—an indigenous tribe in Namibia—travel guides and calendars rarely depict people. Spectacular savannahs, endless expanses, towering dunes, or the Etosha Pan—these are the images that a Western audience associates with Namibia. These are landscapes that can be romanticized. Anyone looking at the history of photography will not be surprised by the iconographic expectations of the Western public. The camera came to the African continent with the colonial rulers. And with it, the white gaze.

Although almost everyone owns a camera today, there is comparatively little documentary photography in Namibia, especially practiced by Namibians, not visitors.

Even two well-known photographers who documented the Namibian liberation war did not originally come from Namibia. John Liebenberg was a South African photojournalist who depicted Namibia's bloody liberation struggle in Ovamboland and later went on to cover the civil war in Angola. Next, Tony Figueira was a photographer of Angolan-Portuguese descent based in Windhoek documenting the protests leading up to Namibia's independence as well as Sam Nujoma's, Namibia's founding father, return from exile. There has always been a social hierarchy and intimacy involved in the relationship between a photographer and their subject. But there is a lack of Namibian photographers taking an active part in documenting Namibian everyday life. This means that narratives are strongly characterized by an outsider and often Eurocentric perspective. Parachute journalism, in which Western journalists are flown into countries to report on pressing issues before ever having set foot in the place, plays a significant role in this, too. Thus a cascade of biases is created that can hardly be overcome, especially as societal constructs such as race, gender, and class play into it.

## **2\_Reframing Documentary Practices**

To counteract this and lay the foundation for a new photographic tradition, the idea for *Reframe* was born: to promote documentary photography about Namibian people by Namibian photographers. The idea was to bring Namibian photographers together through a three-week workshop, which resulted in an exhibition in Windhoek in November 2022 and in Berlin in September 2023. *Reframe* was launched by photojournalist Julia Runge. In addition to her as project manager, Hildegard Titus, Namibian photojournalist, and Lisa Ossenbrink, German-British journalist, have also been involved as coordinators. Julia Runge founded the Reframe Kollektiv e.V. association in Berlin in 2023.



Fig. 1: The organizers and the participants of the project, © *Reframe*

Through professional training, young Namibian photographers were given the tools to tell and visualize their own stories. The participants were 14 young photographers from Namibia aged between 17 and 37, selected after a call for applications through their portfolios. They were given the task to create a photojournalistic essay on the theme of ‘Home of Mine.’ They depicted a range of topics of a social and political nature—for example, they showed the everyday life of street vendors and drag queens, or the way in which Black hairstyles and salons are both political and personal. For three weeks, they participated in a structured program consisting of seminars, excursions, feedback on photographic work, and individual support in selecting and

compiling the photo essays. Documentary photography was presented as a genre and taught in theory and practice in a graspable way. The vernissage at Café Prestige in November 2022 in Windhoek was so well attended that visitors sometimes had to wait outside. Café Prestige was known as a safe space for all Namibians, especially those who wanted to showcase their creativity, often hosting exhibitions by Namibians. *Reframe* was able to run for three weeks. All participants greatly improved their photographic work and demonstrated that documentary photography as a genre was well understood. Through their diversity and the realities of life displayed, new images and new stories have emerged that are first-hand accounts rather than narratives by foreign journalists and photographers.



Fig. 2: A photo from the *Reframe* workshop, © *Reframe*

### **3\_A Shared, yet Complicated History**

*Reframe*'s aim was to use art in a political context to illustrate the history of colonialism. The wounds that have been passed down from generation to generation can still be found in Namibian society today. As part of the city partnership between Berlin and Windhoek, *Reframe* has shed light on the historical intertwining of Germany and Namibia. The works were exhibited in Windhoek and Berlin in order to initiate a new discourse on the relationship between the two cities and the two countries. Namibia was known as 'Deutsch-Südwestafrika' and was a German colony from 1884 to 1915. Historians generally accept that up to 65,000 of the 80,000 Ovaherero and at



least 10,000 of the 20,000 Nama were killed by German settlers between 1904 and 1908 after members of the groups rebelled against colonial rule.

The exhibition travelled from Windhoek to Berlin in 2023, where it was shown at Fotogalerie Friedrichshain. Several of the exhibiting photographers from Namibia were invited to Berlin for this event. For the audience in Berlin, this meant gaining an insight into a different reality of life, which for some at first glance could not be further away from theirs. The connections between Berlin and Windhoek often only become apparent on closer inspection. But they are there. The exhibition of Namibian works in Berlin can help to build bridges between Namibia and Germany, to help the German public gain understanding of the situation on the ground, and to arouse interest in the country and its culture. These are all cornerstones for a historical reappraisal that is not only initiated ‘from above,’ but also takes place between people. Hardly any medium is better suited than photography to provide insights into other lived realities. What is more, as storytellers, photographers are empowered to tell their own story with a camera, free from stereotypes, prejudices, or the German perspective on Namibia.





Fig. 3: Photos of the Berlin exhibition vernissage at the Fotogalerie Friedrichshain, ©  
*Reframe*

*Reframe* has evolved into Reframe Kollektiv e.V. and is currently working on a variety of projects that involve both German and Namibian counterparts. The biggest one currently is “Drag Beyond Borders,” a project bringing together queer drag artists from Namibia and Kenya to push the boundaries of how the world perceives them.

## REFRAME EXHIBITION 2023

### Artist Statements

**Elago Akwaake**

#### **HOME IS A DRAG**

The project “Home is a Drag” illustrates Namibia’s growing drag scene and shows the political nature it exhibits. In Namibia, men are criminalized by a sodomy law under which same-sex sexual activity is prohibited. The performers at Drag Night Namibia know what they are risking when they go up on stage—but drag is more than performance art, it is more than putting on a show; drag is resistance and the ability to be yourself. The thriving Drag Night shows that there is a community that supports the LGBTQI+ community in Namibia. There is a movement towards more tolerance and openness in society, especially among young people, but (more) conservative voices still echo loudly in influential institutions such as ministries and churches.







Fig. 4: A selection of photographs from the project “Home is a Drag,” © Elago Akwaake

### **Sheugnei Cloete**

#### **SUBURB OUTSIDE THE CITY**

Located approximately 60km outside of the capital, just off the B1 road on the D1320, Groot Aub was declared a suburb of Windhoek in 2017. There are approximately 6,000 inhabitants in Groot Aub. They are mostly small-scale farmers and pensioners. In the beginning, Groot Aub did not have enough electricity and water, but since 2004 the Regional Council has increased their supply. This small community also has a clinic and police station as well as a primary school and high school that celebrated its first ever matric farewell in 2021.





Fig. 5: A selection of photographs from the project “Suburb outside the City,” © Sheugnei Cloete

**Steven de Beer**

### **KAMUHAKA**

My project for the theme “Home of Mine” was to focus on a man selling ice cream on the streets with his bicycle. I named my project “Kamuhaka,” meaning ‘to sell’ or ‘to work.’ The project “Kamuhaka” revolves around Alberto David, who has been working as an ice cream vendor for over 50 years. His job is physically demanding—a battle with the searing heat of Windhoek’s streets on a bicycle. The 63-year-old travels

extensive distances to make a living and support his family. Schoolchildren meet him with joy and excitement, embracing the icy coolness he brings along. I took a deep dive into my own childhood memories when I would buy ice cream from Alberto in 2012; that is why I decided to focus my project on him. There is no denying that Alberto is a well-known public face around Windhoek, yet he does not get the recognition he deserves. I have talked to many people I know and to many strangers as well. The number of people who recognizes his face but do not know his name is astonishing. Through my project “Kamuhaka” I am putting a name to the face; people know but also do not know. I am giving him the recognition he deserves, because his job is not easy, it is not fun, but it is all he has and all he has known for 50 years. I wish to inspire you to support the hard-working locals and help them in any way possible.







Fig. 6: A selection of photographs from the project “Kamuhaka,” © Steven de Beer

### **Laimi Pauvaneko Hawala**

#### **HOME IS A THEATRE**

This project is centered on the National Theatre of Namibia (NTN) and its creatives. To many creatives, the theatre is their safe space, it is where they spend most of their time, it is like a second home to them. This project captures the freedom that comes with being in a theatre and expressing oneself through dancing. I chose this topic because I want to embrace theatre culture in Namibia. I have a great appreciation for art and through this project, I want to tell the story of artists who have chosen arts as a career path.



Fig. 7: A selection of photographs from the project “Home Is a Theatre,” © Laimi Pauvaneko Hawala

### **Natache Sylvia Ilonga**

#### **KASINO STREET OFFICE | STEFANUS**

The project concept, now in its second chapter, is an exercise of visually documenting the intimate stories of Windhoek City car guards rendering services in the CBD and Chinatown areas, through environmental portraiture. Although not a formal job title, car guard services are a niche response to a rise in parked-vehicle-related crimes in Windhoek City, which in turn has resulted in a positive impact on the livelihood of the

car guards. Also, their role has become something of an essential service in a car-centric city, both loved and hated. But I think it is important that they are recognized and legitimized through various respectable forms, including as human beings. The collection of visual work is an intimate story about Stefanus, a former welder and father from Khorixas, but homeless in Windhoek City. He has guarded parked cars every weekend for nearly a decade, whilst also offering car washing as an extra service. His story is one of exploring street life knowledge learnt, friendships made, and a cautious granting of an audience, that is, permission to access a day in his street office.







Fig. 8: A selection of photographs from the project “Kasino Street Office | Stefanus,” © Natache Sylvia Iilonga

## **Saara Iita**

### **HOME AWAY FROM HOME**

In a world characterized by constant movement and evolving identities, the concept of home transcends physical boundaries. “Home Away from Home” is a collection of photographs that seeks to explore the multifaceted essence of belonging and the emotional connections we forge with places beyond our own places of birth. This series’ endeavor is to capture the intricate interplay between familiarity and foreignness, as experienced by diverse individuals in unfamiliar environments. Through the lens, we delve into the stories of those who have found solace, purpose, and a sense of identity in items; while distant geographically, they have been able to become integral to their personal narratives in relation to that of Namibia. Amidst the images, you will encounter fragments of lives transposed through personal belongings, where the convergence of culture, memories, and aspirations gives rise to unique expressions of home. In the era of globalization, the definition of home has expanded, no longer confined to a single address. “Home Away from Home” celebrates the resilience of the human spirit, highlighting the adaptive nature of individuals as they weave threads of connection between their past and present, their heritage and

exploration. It is an ode to the wanderers, the seekers, and the dreamers who redefine the meaning of home with every step they take.







Fig. 9: A selection of photographs from the project “Home Away from Home,” © Saara Iita

## **Esther Kambonde**

### **HOME OF THE INFORMAL FORMAL**

Open markets have been at the center of economic activities in Namibian society for decades, if not centuries. The project “Home of the Informal Formal” showcases the essence of open markets, looking for authenticity among the workers that are called

‘unskilled’ –despite being highly skilled in their line of work. The body of work centers around the informal sector of Katutura, a township of Windhoek. Often, people are forced to work in the informal sector to make a living and combat unemployment. This creates a sense of community and family among them. Open markets have come a long way from being unorganized and crowded, and instead there is order amidst the chaos. Open markets present convenient shopping opportunities, and are a great setting for socializing and meeting different people from all over Africa under one ‘roof,’ all with the common goal of feeding their families. Open markets deserve proper recognition and funding as they have the great potential to create a larger base for other entrepreneurs.









Fig. 10: A selection of photographs from the project “Home of the Informal Formal,” © Esther Kambonde



## **Martha Mukaiwa**

### **SALON**

“Salon” is an intimate snapshot of Black women’s hair salons as an idiosyncratic and dynamic safe space for Black women and girls. Mukaiwa’s monochrome series is inspired by her mother’s salon when Mukaiwa was a child and the need to have her hair done in Namibia during her holidays from boarding school in South Africa as well as before or after her international travels as an adult. Shot in various Namibian salons, these somewhat sacred parlors are rendered places of beauty, business, humor, connection, solitude, or respite. From girlhood to adulthood, one’s preferred salon or hairdresser can be a home away from home as one sits back, often for hours, and has a precious moment to themselves amidst a local and global reality of rampant sexual and gender-based violence, patriarchy, harassment, and gendered oppression. On the other hand, Black women and girls’ hair—whether it is presented in its natural state, braided, with extensions, cropped, or colored—can also be a point of discrimination and stereotyping as well as a prejudicial marker of ‘professionalism,’ competence, and worth. The reality of this scrutiny, emphasis, and the politics of Black women and girls’ hair can positively and negatively color one’s lived experience and make the salons—where one chooses the hairstyle that will be negatively or positively perceived by society—a traumatic, scarring, and unpleasant experience. Many Black women and girls will have stories of how, in one way or another, their hair had to be ‘tamed’ to be presentable to society. This was commonly done through scalp-burning hair relaxers, damaging chemicals, or through the pain and pull of tight braids and plaits. The Black salon experience encapsulates all of these negatives and positives at the same time and to varying degrees. Black (hair) salons are places of beauty, artistry, and power, of confession, community and therapy, of safety, and sometimes pain. From the time that Mukaiwa was a girl to her womanhood, Black women’s hair salons, with their unique mood, scenes, and language, are a home of hers.





Fig. 11: A selection of photographs from the project “Salon,” © Martha Mukaiwa

## **Shili Munyama**

### **SUBVERSIVE SPACES**

This documentary series revolves around young subversive individuals who make up Namibia’s youth culture. These individuals, confident in their ability to be unique with their self-expression and participation, represent the root of my exploration of subversive youth culture in a post-apartheid Namibia. Through their uniqueness, they were able to find, build, and connect to homes outside of their habitual ones. Places in the city of Windhoek that were once in some cases sites of violence against their



present-day selves and the ideas, opinions, personalities, identities, and expressions that accompany them have now been changed, evolved to be some of the most accommodating spaces for young creative people from completely different backgrounds.





Fig. 12: A selection of photographs from the project “Subversive Spaces,” © Shili Munyama

### **Janet Mwatongwe**

#### **KONIMA KIISHI KOMESHO / THE PAST IS NOT THE FUTURE**

My photo documentary series is called “Konima Kiishi Komesho” meaning ‘the past is not the future’ in my language. My project is about historical sites and how they still impact our day-to-day lives. For my body of work I have captured not just buildings



but also portraits of modern-day people in front of historical sites and asked that they tell the stories of how these specific places still impact them and the lives of their families. I hope their stories touch you as they have me.





Fig. 13: A selection of photographs from the project “Konima Kiishi Komesho / The Past Is Not the Future,” © Janet Mwatongwe

## **Olivia Nghaamwa**

### **HOSTEL LIFE**

My project’s title is “Hostel Life.” The photos in this project were taken around The University of Namibia’s Unam hostel, which has been a home to me for the past four years. Unam hostel has been my place of comfort since my first year of study. I had so much fun doing this project and having to engage other students, of whom some even ended up being my friends. I chose this topic because I want to embrace the love and comfort I got from living in the hostel. And also to acknowledge hostels as safe places for students.



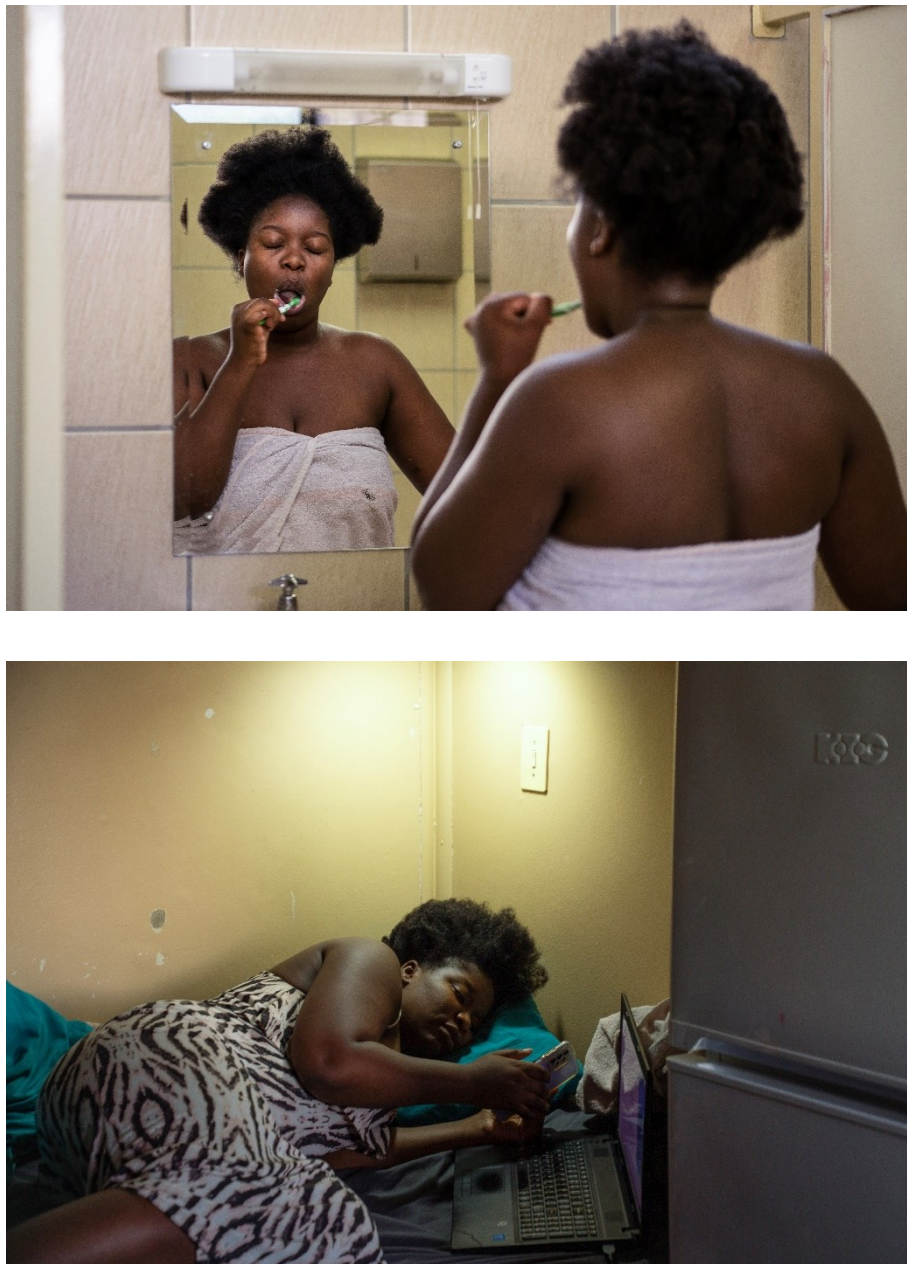


Fig. 14: A selection of photographs from the project “Hostel Life,” © Olivia Nghaamwa

## **Rachel Sakeus**

### **COME AS YOU ARE**

“Come as You Are” explores the different loc (=‘dreadlocks’) phases in one’s loc journey and presents the different loc textures, colors, shapes, and sizes through portraiture of Namibian youth. The roots of Rastafarianism can be traced back to the 18th century among the Black slaves in America. This religion then turned into a pan-African movement for the return to Africa. I would like to see now, many years later,

how this narrative fits in this day and age with the Namibian youth and to tell their stories. The aim is to showcase all the textures of hair and to tell the stories of Namibian youth and their relationship with hair. I am connected to this project not only through my locs and being a Namibian youth but also for the fact that I want to capture Namibian youth and locs in a soft, elegant way, free from stereotypes and oppression.







Fig. 15: A selection of photographs from the project “Come as You Are,” © Rachel Sakeus



## **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> Laura Connor, “When Two Cultures Collide: Amazing Photos of African Tribeswoman Making Trip to the Supermarket, in *Mirror*, September 3, 2016, <<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/two-cultures-collide-amazing-photos-8761461>>; Hannah Ferrett, “SHOP TIL YOU DROP: Two Worlds Collide as African Tribeswoman Shops in a Supermarket Wearing Traditional GOAT SKINS,” in *The Sun*, September 3, 2016, <<https://www.thesun.co.uk/living/1721261/two-worlds-collide-as-african-tribeswoman-shops-in-a-supermarket-wearing-traditional-goat-skins/>>.