

It Was Photography That Discovered Me: A Conversation with Dário Pequeno Paraíso

Interview by PATRÍCIA MARTINHO FERREIRA

Translated from the Portuguese by ADI GOLD

Dário Pequeno Paraíso (Lisbon, 1991) is a Portuguese visual artist born to Santomean parents. In 2014 he moved to São Tomé and Príncipe and created the “Dário Pequeno Paraíso” brand. Aside from featuring his work in commercial projects, Dário has shown his photographs in group and solo exhibitions in São Tomé and Príncipe, Portugal and Guinea-Bissau and produced several documentaries. He is currently working on projects that address the legacy of colonialism portraying the people, stories and spaces forgotten by the Portuguese empire.

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Patrícia Martinho Ferreira (PMF): You have said, in some interviews, that it was photography that discovered you. Can you explain this idea? What drove you to start taking photos?

Dário Pequeno Paraíso (DPP): Photography did indeed discover me. It’s funny to think about this phenomenon—to be discovered by an art and reexamine myself through its forms and elements. When I discovered São Tomé, I found myself rediscovering the world. The people, the smells, nature. All these became new and virginal to me (a half-African, half-European being) and photography invited me to sit at its table and describe all of my new experiences. Photography discovered me and I discovered myself.

PMF: In his travel book *Sul*, Miguel Sousa Tavares writes that São Tomé and Príncipe, I quote: “isn’t exactly a country, it is a project of the gods who were betrayed by humans. From colonial slavery to independence, which has already seen twenty years of illusion, there has been a repeating contrast between exuberant nature and the people who destroy it. As if the islands were too perfect for the human condition.” (1998: 111). Having chosen to relocate and document the archipelago, do you find this observation resonate for you?

DPP: Definitely! These islands were the culmination of a Nature-Human coexistence and, unfortunately, we are not immune to “the rule” of humans to exceed the limits of their position and take over nature. Ten years have passed since the first time I saw São Tomé and Príncipe—the work of the Gods—beautiful, whole, uncharted, virginal in many ways. I had never seen such a place before.

PMF: The Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado says the photographer does not photograph with their camera, but with their entire culture. Do you recognize yourself in this idea? How do you photograph in São Tomé and Príncipe? And in Guinea-Bissau, where you have recently done some work?

DPP: The camera is merely a means to an end. I photograph with my doubts, my pain, my uncertainties and certainties. I photograph with all my love and sorrow. When I capture the moment, I let a small part of my soul leave me. I let my culture and my surroundings help me to capture and perpetuate that moment. In São Tomé, Guinea-Bissau, Cabo Verde, Brazil, Cuba and all of the places where I have photographed, I have the same exercise—to be as close as possible to the people, to remove the prejudices of these new places and discover their stories.

For example, I am well aware of the violence and crime associated with the world favela. When I was in Bahia, Brazil, I had the opportunity to see and experience a favela in a way that showed a different side of it from the negative part it is known for worldwide—I saw a united, solidarity-filled hard-working community.



Figures 1, 2, and 3. Bahia, Brasil, 2021. Photographs by Dário Pequeno Paraíso.

PMF: In 2018, as part of a collaborative project, you put together an exhibition on women in São Tomé and Príncipe and, in 2020, the documentary *Estamos aqui* portraying women from Guinea-Bissau. What values are you interested in promoting by making space for these protagonists?

DPP: I try to communicate that independently of our cultural or physical differences, we might all go through the same challenges, are all equal. What makes us human and unites us is not found in the solution, but in the problem. If we could be aware of that from the beginning, the solutions would be universal, for everybody.

PMF: There is a critical and postcolonial/decolonial approach apparent in your photographs. In which ways have you given visibility to São Tomé and Príncipe's colonial legacy? Are there a couple of photographs you could comment on specifically, to illustrate this?

DPP: I have a passion for human beings. Their forms fascinate me. Understanding the sense behind their forms and movement is even more fascinating. This is how my process begins for making the colonial legacies visible. The colonial legacy

begins and ends in the people. People who have been “transformed” into colonial products and then, after years of cultural brain-washing, abandoned. My focus is on the people who, today, have cultures and practices shaped by this colonization.

These two photographs are good examples of the colonial legacy that is still visible on the islands today. In São Tomé you can still find people working in cacao. São Tomé and Príncipe used to be the world’s biggest producer of cacao, an achievement obviously made possible by slave labor. Laborers from the colonial era still have no other skills except for working on cacao plantations.

The second photo is of an actor in Tchiloli, a play based on a Portuguese text, combined with expressions of African art, music, movement and the drama of tragedy. These kinds of cultural manifestations are part of daily life for the Santomenses.



Figures 4 and 5. Dama do Tchiloli, São Tomé, 2021. Roça Diogo Vaz, São Tomé, 2019.
Photographs by Dário Pequeno Paraíso.

PMF: Some of your photographs suggest deep reflection on themes that are central to the work of other Afro-Portuguese artists and authors, for instance themes of identity, memory, migration, diaspora, borders, ecology and environmental sustainability. Where do you situate yourself in the conversations about the Portuguese post-empire?

DPP: In a place of oblivion and abandonment. Almost no one speaks of these subjects in the Portuguese context. I feel I am one of the few who raise questions in a straightforward and raw way. Even within our afrodiasporic community, I feel there are a handful of individuals who are positioned to speak on the post-empire, but do not. There is little support, assistance, cooperation, or understanding. I try

to bring a serious and responsible reflection on the subject of post-empire. We are [I am] the remains of an empire. A now ghost-empire. We are late in delivering what has happened, and still happens, to the world of the living.

PMF: Your photographs include architectural elements that evoke ruins of the colonial empire, but you seem to be most dedicated to expressing the human dimension, photographing faces, gestures, and activities. What is it that you are most interested in photographing?

DPP: I think that people—that is, the human dimension—are also in some way patrimonial elements and they, too, illustrate the concept of ruins of a colonial empire. The traditions, movements, gestures and faces carry the pain and suffering of ruins. All of the things you described interest me.

PMF: In July of 2021, you had an exhibition in Lisbon titled “Unsa Kaxi” meaning “Always at Home” in Linguié, the creole spoken on Príncipe island. What does the word “home” mean to you? In what places are you “always at home?”

DPP: In my experience, home is the state of utmost transparency, intimacy and calm in a person’s life. The place in which we feel ourselves to be ourselves. The only place where fears, uncertainties and pain are transformed. Home does not erase them but, in it, they can undergo change. When I photograph, it means I am able to reach a new home, since someone opened their door for me and allowed me to get to know the precious spaces and objects that reveal their state of truth, transparency and love.

PMF: You have photographed predominantly in black and white but have some series in color. What goes into these choices? Also, you seem to dialogue aesthetically with other photographers of Lusophone geographies, for example Sebastião Salgado, Eliseu Cavalcante, Inês Gonçalves and Mauro Pinto, among others. Who are your main influences in the field?

DPP: I increasingly photograph in just black and white. I feel there is a truth of form and space that is lost with colors. Inês Gonçalves was the first person who made me consider photography. The voice of the forgotten, the “voice” of those

who haven't got one. There is no doubt I consider Inês a mentor. Sebastião Salgado imparted to me the more global notion that problems are everywhere. He was my great inspiration for working with black and white and for using a more critical gaze, one of social intervention.

PMF: In São Tomé and Príncipe, and also in Guinea-Bissau, general access to writing and book culture continues to be scarce. Could the visual arts fill this gap? I am thinking of your photography and videography, but also of painting, for example, in the work of artists such as Kwame Sousa ou René Tavares.

DPP: Yes. These could increase and, in some ways, help enable greater access to the arts. But it does not fill the gap. Both Kwame and René are very complete in their expression, but they do not fill the space that the literary arts would fill for the country's culture.

PMF: What are some of your current projects?

DPP: I am currently working on a book of black and white photographs focusing on the concrete and abstract legacies of colonialism, with photos from Brazil, São Tome and Príncipe, Guinea-Bissau. In the beginning of 2023, I have a plan to emancipate this ghost-empire in its very capital—I want to bring photographs and videos to the media center of Portugal. I have a vision of colonial exhibits in old structures of the New State. I'd love for this to be a catalyst for productive dialogue about the colonial empire. It is especially meaningful for me to exhibit in Lisbon—in the city where I was born, and which was once the center of the colonial empire.