

NYAOPE.
EVERYTHING
YOU GIVE
ME MY BOSS,
WILL DO

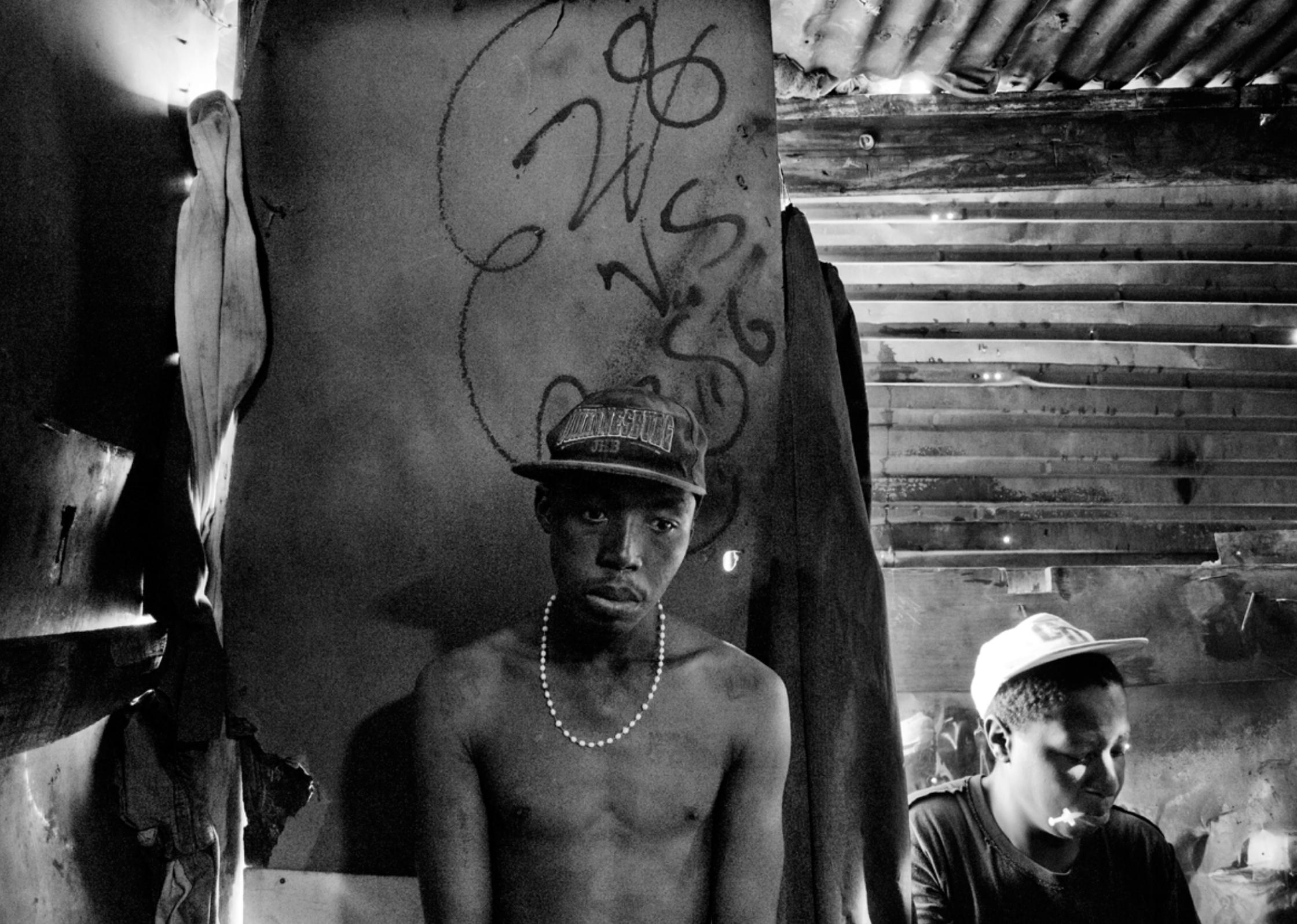
LINDOKUHLE SOBEKWA



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will do

With an essay by Sean O'Toole







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The Unflinching Witness

By Sean O’Toole

South Africa has a long tradition of news reporting. It is worth briefly recounting as a way of contextualising Lindokuhle Sobekwa’s essay on township drug abuse. The country’s first newspaper, a pro-government mouthpiece, was established in 1800, although it was only 24 years later with the launch of the *SA Commercial Advertiser* that an independent press was born. During the years of high apartheid (1948-90) news reporters and photographers often found themselves at odds with government. Partly this had to do with the muckraking traditions of reporting here, but it was also an outcome of witnessing the impoverished material circumstances of everyday South Africans against the backdrop of a cruel system. Despite his youth, Sobekwa undoubtedly slots into this vigorous and unapologetic tradition. His essay on nyaope users unflinchingly witnesses the complexities of present-day South Africa, where the country’s youth face bracing poverty and widespread unemployment.

Youth unemployment is a major social problem in South Africa and is a key socio-economic challenge. Around 3.2 million youths are unemployed. This represents nearly two thirds (63%) of the productive workforce aged between 15 and 34, a 2014 report by the Brookings Institution revealed. Tellingly, given the somnolent action depicted in Sobekwa’s essay, these very high figures include youths who are not actively looking for a job. They are sometimes referred to as “discouraged work-seekers”. With economic growth sluggish, prospects for future work remain slim, leaving many youths to improvise.

Informal work is however perilous and, without a family network for support, youths from impoverished circumstances are forced to live contingent lives. Sobekwa’s

essay offers a study of personal collapse seen against the backdrop of larger economic circumstances. Although set in Thokoza, where he was born and schooled, the situation Sobekwa depicts is commonplace across many urban and poor black settlements across South Africa. This statement needs clarification. Despite South Africa’s transition to a non-racial democracy in 1994, many facets of formal apartheid remain in place, notably the quarantined living circumstances that still define South African cities. In a 2013 speech President Jacob Zuma referenced many of these communities during a sombre appraisal of the country’s social problems.

“Alcohol and drug abuse in particular are slowly eating into the social fibre of our communities,” Zuma told a gathering in Newcastle. It was Youth Day, nominally a day of celebration, although the subject of speech suggested otherwise. “Drug and substance abuse have serious implications for the millions of citizens because they contribute to crime, gangsterism, domestic violence, family dysfunction and other forms of social problems.” Parents, he added, were at a loss and in pain as children as young as eight were being snared in the net of drug abuse. But what drugs? According to the 2014 World Drug Report, cannabis remains the most common illicit substance used in South Africa. It also noted that there has been an increase in the use of methamphetamine and heroin, a low-grade variant of the latter is typically mixed in with cannabis and antiretroviral drugs to make nyaope.

But drug abuse is merely part of a complex set of problems defining life in Thokoza, an apartheid-era settlement created in 1957 outside Alberton, southeast of Johannesburg. Sobekwa was born in 1995 in Natspruit, a settlement just

north of Thokoza. His father, who died in 2004, was a carpenter. His mother continues to work as a domestic help. He spent his early childhood living with relatives in the Eastern Cape, a rural Xhosa-speaking enclave, before returning to Thokoza in 1999 to pursue his schooling. He attended Buhlebuzile Secondary School in Thokoza. Uninterested in football, he joined the choir and participated in Zulu dance classes. Although born five years after the violent clashes initiated by Zulu-speaking hostel dwellers on largely Xhosa settlements in Thokoza and Katlehong, Sobekwa says aspects of his neighbourhood’s “previous predicament” continue to endure.

He witnessed them first-hand at school, mostly as clichés spread around the schoolyard. “Xhosa people are liars and Zulu people are cowards,” he offers as an example. But, he adds, for the most part, calm prevails. Conflicts in Thokoza, as elsewhere across South Africa, now tend to focus on national rather than local ethnic identities. The larger Ekurhuleni region – an amalgamated metropolitan area established in 2000 that encompasses Thokoza – is a notorious hotbed of anti-immigrant violence. But neither these two social problems, ethnic rivalry and xenophobia, are the focus of Sobekwa’s essay. Rather, it is the scourge of low-grade drug abuse that has increasingly beset black settlements across South Africa.

While its constituent elements of nyaope are hardly new, the origins of this drug are hard to track. The first reliable mention of nyaope is from 2006, by journalist Hazel Friedman who writing under a pseudonym in the book *Hijack!*, describes nyaope as “all the rage with the youngsters in Soweto, Mamelodi, Soshanguve and Atteridgeville,” black settlements surrounding central Johannesburg and Pretoria.

Also known as “whoonga” and “Taiwan”, Sobekwa heard of nyaope in 2009. His decision to focus on this addictive street drug grew out of an encounter with a nyaope user on a Thokoza street in 2013. Already a participant in the *Of Soul and Joy* photography project initiated by Rubis Mécénat a year earlier, Sobekwa was walking with his camera when a neighbourhood youth asked him to take some photographs with his crew.

“I was nervous, but I told myself if they try anything I would run away with my camera,” says Sobekwa. “I held my camera very tightly.” That evening, reviewing his photographs, he was struck by the access he had been given. “I showed them to my mentor who said it could be a good project.” Central to the success of this essay is the unrestricted access Sobekwa was given to a shack owned by a youth named Mabuthi. His makeshift dosshouse is a place of retreat, of narcotic pleasure and fitful sleep. It is also where the users photographed by Sobekwa return after days spent begging for money and foraging for scrap metal to sell. Sobekwa quickly learnt that working with his subjects required improvising. When they wandered off, so did he. When they said no, he left. “You can’t work according to a pre-planned schedule,” he says.

Mabuthi first started smoking nyaope after his family abandoned him. Not everyone shared his impoverished circumstances. One user, Lukhanyo, comes from a stable family without any financial problems. “Now he looks like a street kid, like this abandoned person, a social outcast,” says Sobekwa. Although many of his photographs focus on the uncomplicated domestic habits of drug users – idleness, argument, drug use, and collapse into narcotic sleep – he also followed them around Thokoza’s flat

industrial landscapes. Along the way he met a white drug user, Jerry, who he also photographed (but did not include in this essay). The repetition of the routine, of constantly entering and exiting Mabuthi’s shack, created a bond of sorts between the photographer and his subjects, a bond of intimacy not dependency. “I learnt a lot from those guys, not just how bad they are,” says Sobekwa.

Urban drug abuse is not a new phenomenon in South Africa, but during the apartheid years its frequency was heavily policed and localised. As a result, there are no significant bodies of photographic work locally portraying the degradations that come with sustained drug abuse. Still, Sobekwa’s candlelit interior studies possess affinities to earlier studies of social hardship. I think particularly of Drum magazine photographer Jürgen Schadeberg’s 1955 photograph of a four young gamblers squatted on a street corner in Sophiatown, a former slum in central Johannesburg. Sobekwa’s work evidences the same attention to mood, pose and lighting.

Photographs of drug addiction share with pictures of poverty a certain generic sameness. Bare circumstances mirror bare lives. A key difficulty for any photographer here is avoiding repetition and sameness. Photographers essaying drug abuse have found various ways around this. Nan Goldin, for instance, chose to hone in on particular protagonists, notably Greer Lankton and Cookie Mueller. In the manner of Larry Clark in Tulsa, Sobekwa’s Thokoza essay is defined by its focus on a fragile family, a family created by circumstance rather than biology. But, in distinction to both Goldin and Clark, Sobekwa’s essay ‘Nyaope’ is not an autobiographical portrait. He is not implicated in these photographs; he is not a nyaope user. Rather, and this

is crucial, he considers himself a dispassionate observer, a documentarian motivated by a belief that his photographs might have an educational value.

“I hope people, especially youth, will learn a lot from the project: how dangerous this drug is,” he says. The twinning of photography with social purpose is hardly new. In South Africa, members of the Afrapix collective of photographers, active during the 1980s, viewed photography as a means to express solidarity with social activism. Lewis Hine is an older expression of this belief. “Photography has always been a tool to teach people about life,” says Sobekwa. “I learnt history through photographs. Mandela. June 16. I believe that photography can be a tool to teach people.” Working with his mentors, he purposefully set out to produce an essay that would not only teach but also dissuade. “Don’t do drugs. It is hell. I have seen a lot of ugly things that happen when people use nyaope.” Although compelled by an anti-drug message, Sobekwa’s work is not propaganda. His photographs speak of the subtle complications of circumstances in a community he personally knows and lives in. Perhaps it is this that accounts for his essay’s defining quality: the raw dignity he allows his subjects.

LINDOKUHLE SOBEKWA

Lindokuhle Sobekwa was born in 1995 in Katlehong Johannesburg, South Africa. He currently lives and works in Thokoza. In 2012 he was introduced to photography in high school through the *Of Soul and Joy* project. He then joined Live magazine as a part time photographer. His work has been exhibited, among others, at the Kalashnikovv Gallery in South Africa and at the No Man's Art Gallery in The Netherlands, in South Africa and in Norway. In 2013, Sobekwa was part of the group show 'In Thokoza' organised by Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund at the Ithuba Arts Gallery in Johannesburg. His essay 'Nyaope' was published in 2014 in South African newspaper the *Mail & Guardian*.

OF SOUL AND JOY PROJECT

Of Soul and Joy project is a social art initiative undertaken in 2012 by Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund in Thokoza, a township located in the southeast of Johannesburg in South Africa. The project aims to expose the students of Buhlebusile Secondary School to Photography as a vocational skill and as a means of engagement for meaningful employment. It acts as a visual platform and a skills development programme through workshops led by renowned photographers.

Lindokuhle Sobekwa joined the project in 2012.

The project was initiated in 2012 with Easigas and in partnership with Nikon South Africa.

LINDOKUHLE SOBEKWA - Nyaope. Everything you give me my Boss, will do

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Published on the occasion of the exhibition

FREE FROM MY HAPPINESS

by South African photographers

SIBUSISO BHEKA TSHEPISO MAZIBUKO LINDOKUHLE SOBEKWA

At The International Photo Festival Ghent 2015

Sint-Pietersabdij (Saint Peter's Abbey), Ghent, Belgium

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An Exhibition within the framework of the *Of Soul and Joy* project

A Rubis Mécénat Cultural Fund initiative

Essay by Sean O'Toole, journalist, art critic and editor living in Cape Town

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