

Image as Memory: A Visual Testimony from a DRC in Crisis

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Photographer

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Who is Pamela Tulizo, and what is your artistic background?

I am Pamela Tulizo, a documentary photographer specializing in staged photography. I have been working as a professional photographer for about five to six years, based in Goma, in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo, where my career took off. My journey began in journalism, but I quickly felt limited due to the editorial constraints that prevailed in newsrooms. These restrictions prevented me from exploring certain issues with the freedom I wanted, raising a fundamental question within me: How can I express my ideas authentically without being constrained by a rigid framework?

That is when I turned to photography. Having already been somewhat familiar with the camera, this transition felt natural. However, in Goma, there were neither photography schools nor academies of fine arts like those in Kinshasa or Lubumbashi. In addition, there were hardly any female documentary photographers to guide me. As a woman who grew up in Goma, I have always known that the women of my city possess remarkable strength and resilience. Yet, this essential aspect of their existence remained largely overlooked. There was no documentation highlighting their engagement in the economy, their role in development, or their involvement in family and educational spheres. This observation drove my commitment: I wanted to be the ambassador of these women, to tell their stories, and to showcase their power and beauty through my lens. When I decided to become a photographer, I had to inform my family. My father was firmly against it, considering this profession to be reserved for men. According to him, as a woman, my future should be limited to marriage and motherhood. This moment marked a decisive turning point in my life and career. His words triggered a multitude of reflections in me: what is my role in society? Is my role pre-determined by cultural and social norms? I understood that if my father thought this way, other women from my generation were probably facing similar situations, dreaming of a different future but encountering the same barriers. Faced with this ultimatum – choosing between photography and my family – I decided to keep going anyway. For nearly two years, this decision caused family tensions. Fortunately, my mother discretely supported me, covering for me whenever I had to attend a training or a photography-related event. To fund my studies, I multiplied my service delivery: weddings, birthdays, anything that could bring in an income and allow me to move forward. This episode of my life deeply influenced my artistic approach. Today, all of my work is centered on

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exploring female identity, the role and position of women in contemporary and ancestral societies. Through my photographs, I address women's rights, gender equality, development, and the evolution of the female condition. My approach stands out for its emphasis on the strength, beauty, and power of African women, transcending generations.

I am interested in the female figures that shaped the history and identity of African women. Following this, I pursued photography studies at the [Market Photo Workshop](#) in South Africa. This training was a turning point in my artistic approach; it did not transform it but rather refined it. Before this training, my documentary work focused mainly on portraits or street photography.

However, over time, I became aware of a gap in my storytelling. There were essential elements that I could not capture through documentary photography alone. A force, a presence, a power emanated from my subjects, but they often escaped the raw image. This is how I integrated staging into my artistic approach. It allows me to shape my narrative according to my vision, infusing it with beauty, color, and composing scenes that reinforce the message I wish to convey.

Today, I consider my art to be a film, but its narrative is expressed in still images. I always begin with a question or an issue, then I gather testimonies and stories. I reinterpret these stories through my photography, with each image gaining symbolic and narrative depth.

Eastern DRC is once again plunged into war. As a Congolese woman, how do you experience this umpteenth tragedy? What role can an artist play in response to horror?

I am an artist, I am a photographer, and that is all I can offer to the world. The current situation in Goma is horrifying, particularly for women. When a conflict breaks out, they are the first victims, with sexual violence being used as a weapon of war. Women and young girls endure multiple forms of suffering: Not only are they instrumentalized in the conflict, but they also have to face insecurity, forced displacement, massacres, poverty, and disease. They are therefore burdened by deep trauma, fueled by the unpredictability and brutality of these events. This time, I was in Goma when the violence erupted, and for the first time, the war truly reached the heart of the city. It was no longer just fighting on the outskirts or a few kilometers away: The conflicts were here, in the streets of Goma. It was an indescribable reality, a daily horror. I saw a two-year-old girl deeply traumatized, and I (myself) was shaken by the bombings, killings, and the omnipresent fear. As an artist, my role is to document this tragedy in my own way. Of course, journalists are already doing their fieldwork, but for the first time, I felt that the international press was not showing the full extent of the drama. Usually, I am among those who denounce the negative image conveyed about Goma through the media. However this time, it was not about a misrepresentation: It was a deafening silence. Faced with this situation, all I can do is testify. I want to denounce and tell the story through my art. The work will soon be released: a photographic series inspired by what I saw, heard, and felt. Turning these testimonies into images is how I engage, giving a voice to those who suffer, and ensuring that this story does not fade into oblivion.

Find the full interview on our website: www.globalafricasciences.org