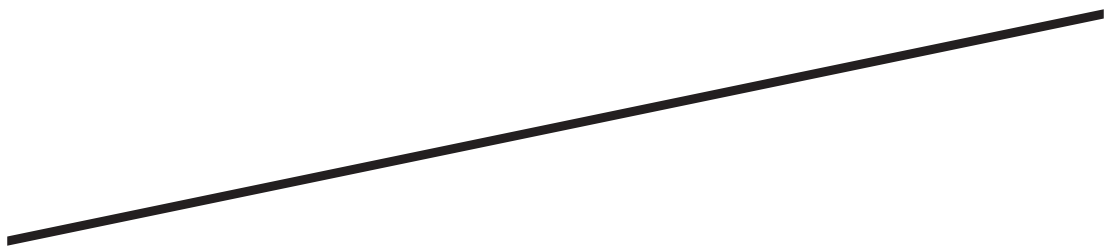


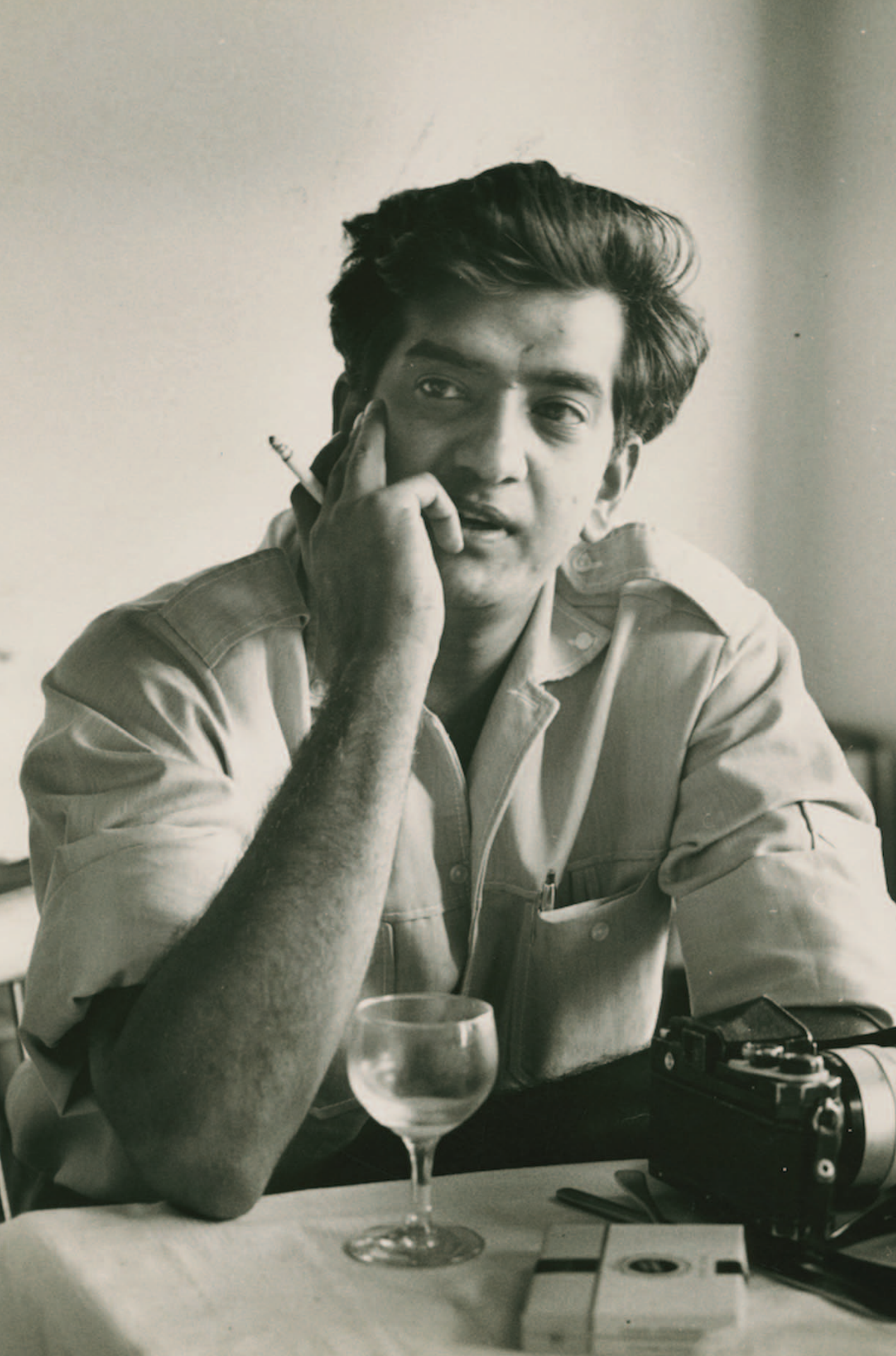


PRIYA RAMRAKHA **A PAN-AFRICAN** **PERSPECTIVE** **1950-1968**



An exhibition of the work of Kenyan photojournalist, Priya Ramrakha, which chronicles his documentation of anti-colonial and post-independence struggles from 1950 to 1968.



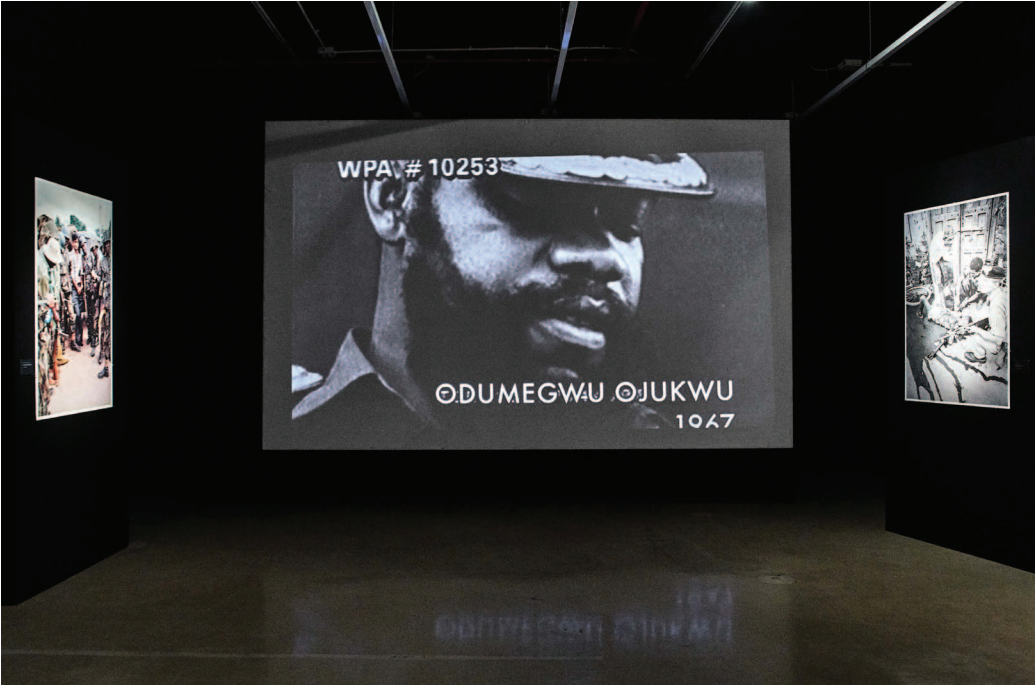


PRIYA RAMRAKHA **A PAN-AFRICAN** **PERSPECTIVE 1950-1968**

5 October 2017 to 1 November 2017

FADA Gallery
University of Johannesburg

Curators Erin Haney and Shravan Vidyarthi, in association with the
Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre (VIAD),
Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Johannesburg



Priya Ramrakha | A Pan-African Perspective 1950-1968

The Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre (VIAD), Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Johannesburg (UJ), hosted the inaugural exhibition of the work of African photojournalist, Priya Ramrakha, which chronicles his exploration of anti-colonial and post-independence struggles from 1950 to 1968. Showcasing a collection of photographs that illuminate watershed moments and political movements in Africa and the United States (US), this exhibition offers audiences a chance to rethink key political and historical narratives, and revisit the struggles, celebrations and lived experiences of the independence era in Africa. Vidyarthi's award-winning documentary film entitled *African Lens, The Story of Priya Ramrakha* (2007) was screened as part of this exhibition at the FADA Gallery, University of Johannesburg.

This conversation to follow between the curators, Erin Haney and Shravan Vidyarthi, broaches some of the questions addressed during the related colloquium presented by VIAD entitled, *Inhabiting the Frame. Documentary & Subjectivity in the Anti/Postcolonial Visual Archive*, 9-10 October 2017.

EH: As audiences, UJ students and the formidable range of South African photographers in attendance at the colloquium have been responding to Priya Ramrakha's photography here in Johannesburg, we have heard many people saying 'I haven't seen anything quite like this'. Many of these comments get to the core of the absence of cliché and the element of surprise in Priya's images. Attending this there is a deep curiosity about who Priya was, and how his path defied so many boundaries and obstacles of his time, and how these challenges are reflected within his images.

Prior to this, you and I have had ongoing conversations about how Priya was, like others in his family, a kind of an outlier and risk-taker with a deep curiosity in a world that was quite rigidly constrained and circumscribed in colonial-era Kenya; and that he also seemed to channel those social strands of optimism and progress from the African, Indian, and international anti-colonial movements underway. Of course a photographer doesn't need to be inherently outsider or subversive in order to produce great work. But from what you have said, all accounts point to his exceptional ability to put all kinds of people at ease and get close to his subjects without threat or alarm. Yet, in many ways Priya was just that – an outsider who defied expectations and went his own way – convincing the public of the importance of political leaders and events by heading straight for the key moments, and often, the dangerous situations. He convinced national and global audiences through his images.

SV: Priya's sense of himself – this is a question that I still struggle with: what can we know of him given how much of his life's story remains unknown. In my family we knew of Priya, and knew that he was a well-respected photojournalist. He was a cousin of my father. We knew that he died young, covering the frontlines of the war in Biafra in 1968. There were a few issues of *LIFE* magazine with his photos that we had around the house. But we knew very little of his life beyond that. We don't have any recordings of his voice or on video, and we don't have much of his own words in diaries or substantive writing.

The range of places that Priya could travel to, and the broad scope of the subjects he managed to photograph in such a short time span is remarkable. Those are key parts of his biography and history. But beyond those photos in his family collections and ours, we also had very little sense of even where his photos were when we first started to explore his story. This was an essential source of his narrative that was missing.

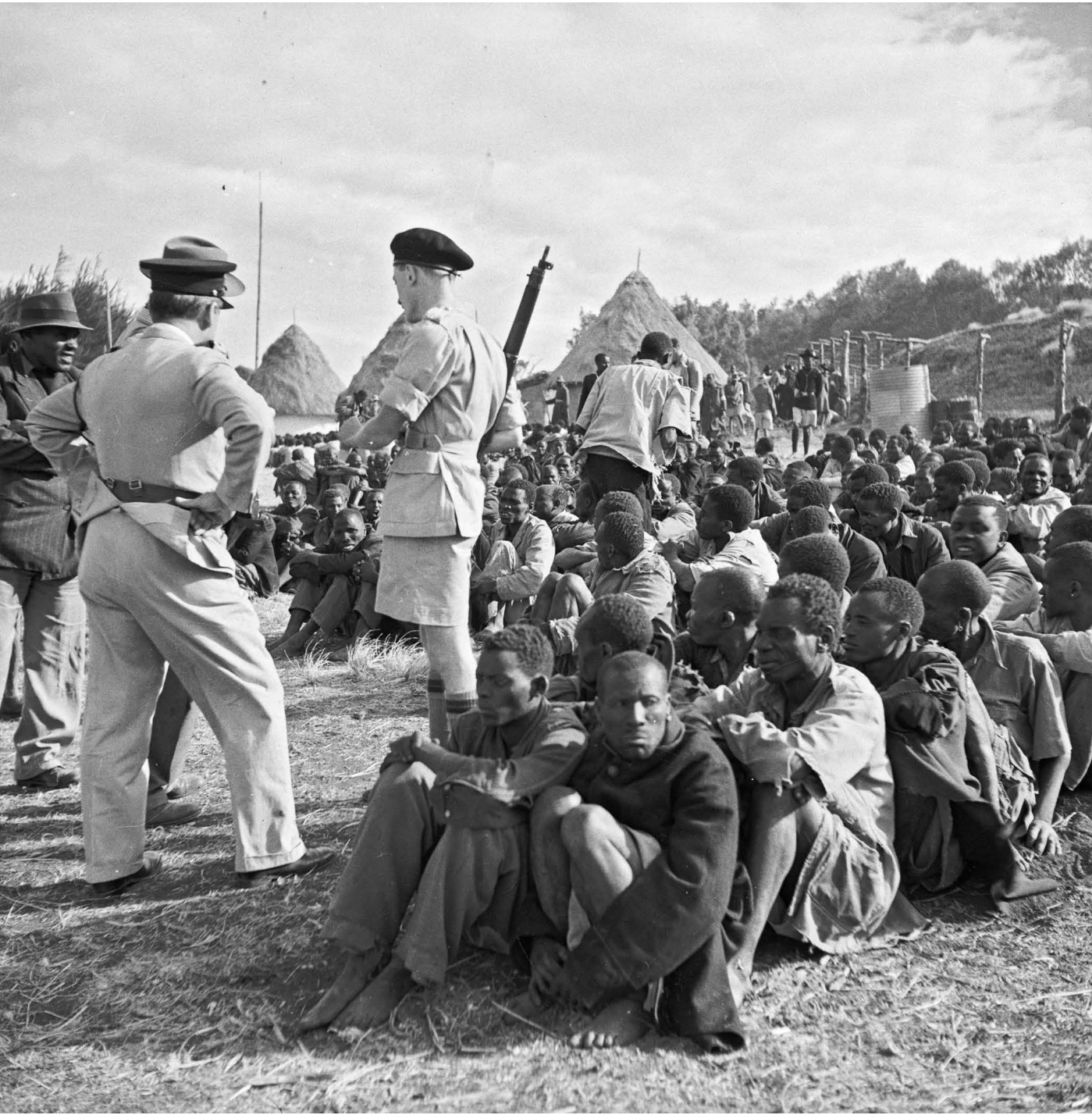
(Front cover)
Priya Ramrakha
Bicyclists
1950s
Nairobi, Kenya
Courtesy of Priya
Ramrakha Foundation

(Inside front cover)
Photographer unknown
Priya Ramrakha
1968
Biafra
Courtesy of Priya
Ramrakha Foundation

(Top left)
Priya Ramrakha
Installation view
Photo by Anthea Pokroy

(Bottom left -
foreground left)
Priya Ramrakha
Installation view
British attack in Aden
April 1967
Yemen

(Bottom left -
foreground right)
Priya Ramrakha
*French Somaliland
independence
referendum*
March 1967
Photo by Anthea Pokroy





I started to piece together Priya's life story first by interviewing journalists who knew him well, and complementing those with interviews with his family and friends, and centering on the small number of his photos in family collections. These later became the basis for my documentary film, *African Lens: The Story of Priya Ramrakha* (2007). That research, including work on the images located at the time, began in 2004. It was only after the film started screening that we managed to recover thousands more prints, negatives and albums from Priya's family and friends across Kenya, the US and Europe. It took me and a team of people in Kenya and the US working almost a decade to begin to assess and organise the contents of this collection. And this has been a series of surprises and discoveries, based on an archive that was totally obscured, or even presumed lost. So the fact that these photos are now on display for the first time in more than 50 years, has been thrilling.

EH: Even while Priya left no written records as to his intentions or views as to what his work and his photographs could do, in your film you make a strong case for the deep influence of politics and anti-colonial effort in shaping his career path and drive. The segregation and the deprivations of African Kenyans, and the disparities between them, Indian Kenyans and British settlers under the colonial system of the colour bar was something Priya would have seen and witnessed daily. In the 1940s and 1950s, the efforts of those African and Indian freedom fighters, as activists, leaders, would-be citizens who worked together and joined forces towards independence were communicated and spurred on by the anti-British press. One key figure in those movements was Priya's uncle GL Vidyarthi, who as Editor of the *Colonial Times* newspaper was fined and imprisoned for sedition, and whose press published other rebellious Indian and African newspapers. Priya's early photographs tested the systems of press freedom and propaganda in Kenya at a crucial moment, in the earliest years of the anti-colonial war known as Mau Mau, and the government's response declaring the 1952 State of Emergency.

SV: Right. There are fascinating examples of this, where Priya's photographs of the same event are storylined in different ways. A spread of Priya's photos of a Royal agricultural show for the colonial paper *The Citizen* features white audiences and dignitaries, whereas a spread covering the same event in the *Colonial Times* focused on segregated and shoddy facilities for non-white Kenyans at the show, with captions that comment directly on Kenya's racist colour bar, access to land, and political rights.

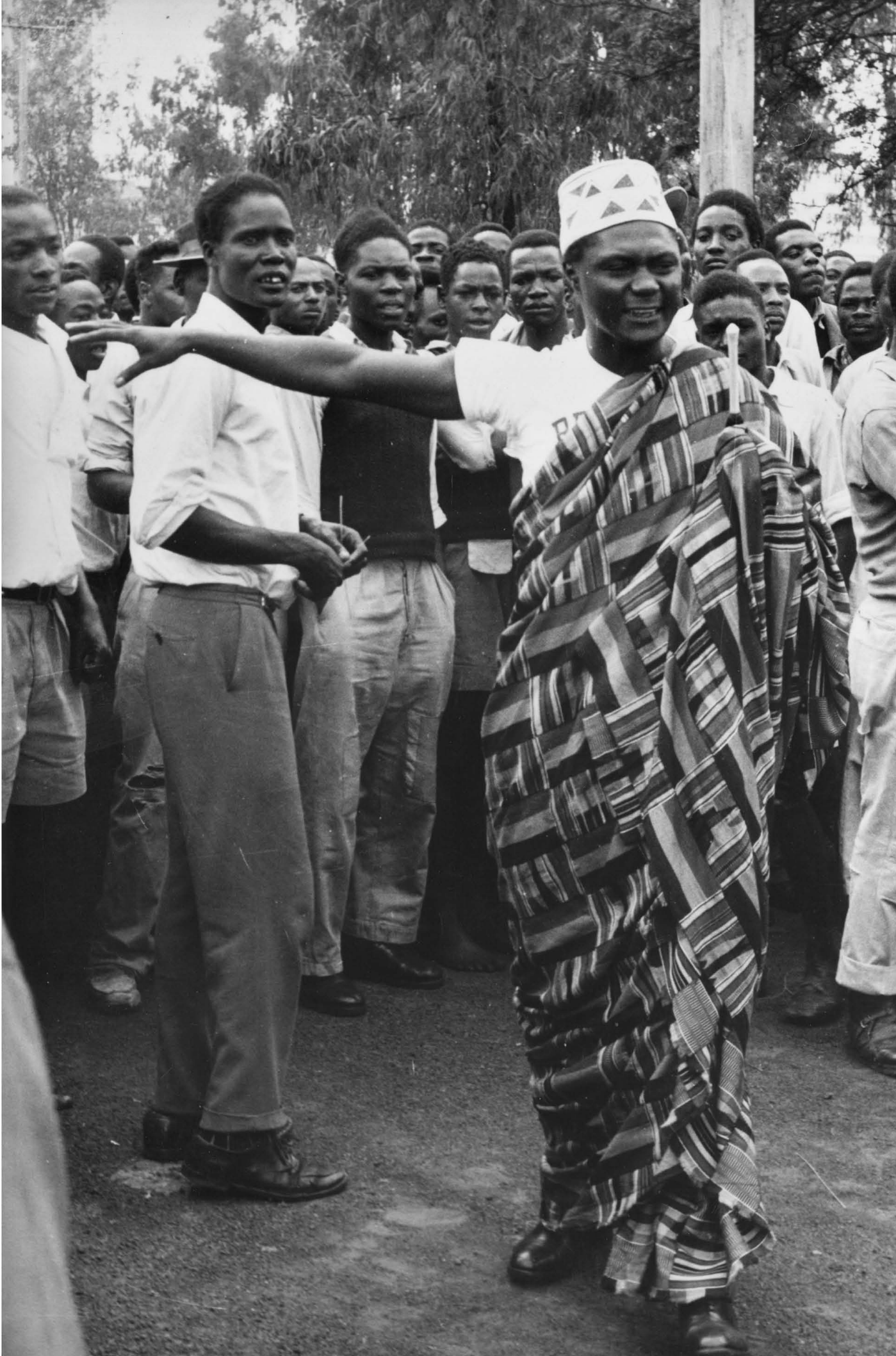
Even before that, the early guerilla incursions of Mau Mau were nearly impossible to adequately cover in the free press, and especially after 1952 when the rebellious presses were effectively gagged and others simply closed down. In 1952 Priya was only 18 when he travelled to photograph one of the earliest atrocities – the Lari massacre. He captured the rounding up of innocent Kikuyu and Embu people during Operation Anvil in Nairobi, which included members of his family's staff and friends. The colonial regime tightly controlled photo-ops of detained prisoners in camps, and all of these were critical lessons in press freedom – none of those photos were publishable in Kenya. Later on his work for the East African office of *Drum* magazine was quite heavily policed. Safer subjects, such as Jomo Kenyatta in prison, or the rising star Tom Mboya and his fellow pan-Africanist leaders who went on to negotiate independence – these images were printable. But at that time it would have been impossible to publish around the dirty war colonial Kenya and Britain waged in Kenya's prison camps, and scenes of the prisoners and torture were of course hidden from public view.

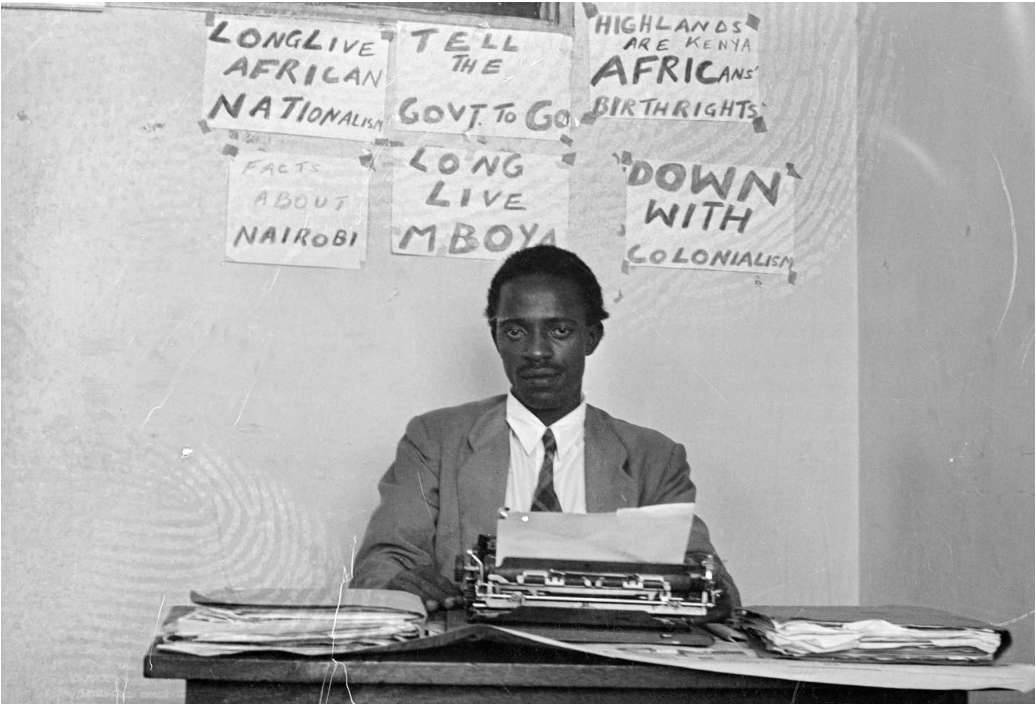
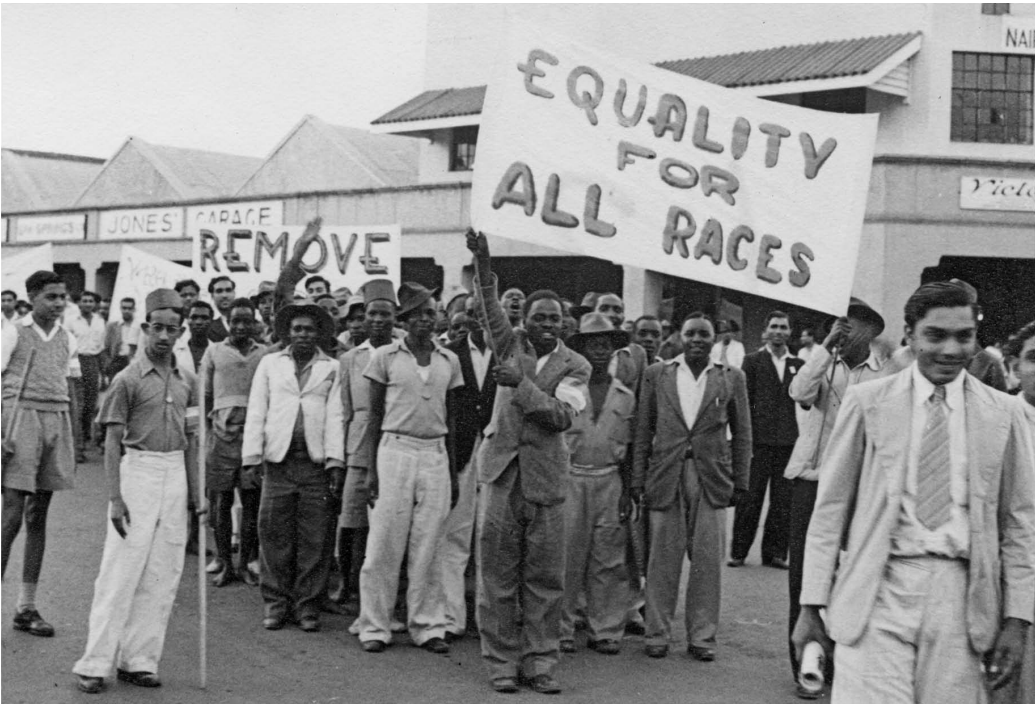
EH: Later on, Priya travelled to the US. He trained in Los Angeles (LA), and during that time was also publishing with *Time* and *LIFE* between 1960-1963.

(Previous spread - right)
Priya Ramrakha
*Kenyan subjects detained
in camps under the State
of Emergency*
c. 1953
Kenya
Courtesy of Priya
Ramrakha Foundation

(Previous spread - left)
Priya Ramrakha
*Kikuyu lining up for
summary hearings in
detention camps*
1954
Kenya
Courtesy of Priya
Ramrakha Foundation

(Right)
Priya Ramrakha
*Tom Mboya organising
protestors*
c. 1958
Nairobi, Kenya
Courtesy of Priya
Ramrakha Foundation





The lessons from the kind of work he would have been commissioned to do, or what kinds of important stories needed to be told, was not necessarily more straightforward there either, right?

SV: Yes, certainly these would have been very much dictated by the editorial constraints – American demand for content from Africa tended towards the exotic, and at best, photos and stories that tried to convey and capture what unfolding independence meant in terms of geopolitical strategy and the Cold War.

Also, while he was in the US, Priya had a new opportunity to photograph the everyday scenes that of course looked very different than what was at home. More freedom to mix with people, more freedom to move around. But he was also drawn to leaders, to the civil rights movement, so there are pictures of Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, Kennedy and Nixon's presidential contest and the edges of political protests around race as they played out in LA and New York. These were resonating with the new wave of leadership coming to the fore in Africa, and of course we know many of these leaders were constantly interacting with and supporting each other within the continent, Europe and the US. So Priya's photos captured some of those greats, but also people who were the activist and cultural vanguard, such as the South African singer Miriam Makeba, who was supporting the education of the young generation of African students who were studying in the US – raising money, supporting South African efforts in various ways. It's when we see the variety of the people he photographed that it becomes so clear what stories might have been told through his images – the stories he believed were relevant and significant, and how rarely those aligned with editorial demand or possibility.

EH: Even though Priya was compelled by those stories around experiences of race, civil rights, anti-colonial struggles and the experiences of independence, he was not the only photographer doing this. It's more landmark that as one of the first photographers to work for *Time* and *LIFE*, he was one of the first photographers from the continent to do so while moving across so many national boundaries at such an unprecedented level. (At least this is true at the time of this writing, and we imagine other photographers will emerge as scholarship and support of local photographic and historical archives continues). In South Africa, there was Ernest Cole, Peter Magubane, Bob Gosani, Alf Khumalo and so many others who were such important photographers, whose work was contemporary to that of Priya's, and which marked similar paths, but they couldn't travel across these colonial and national borders as working press photographers.

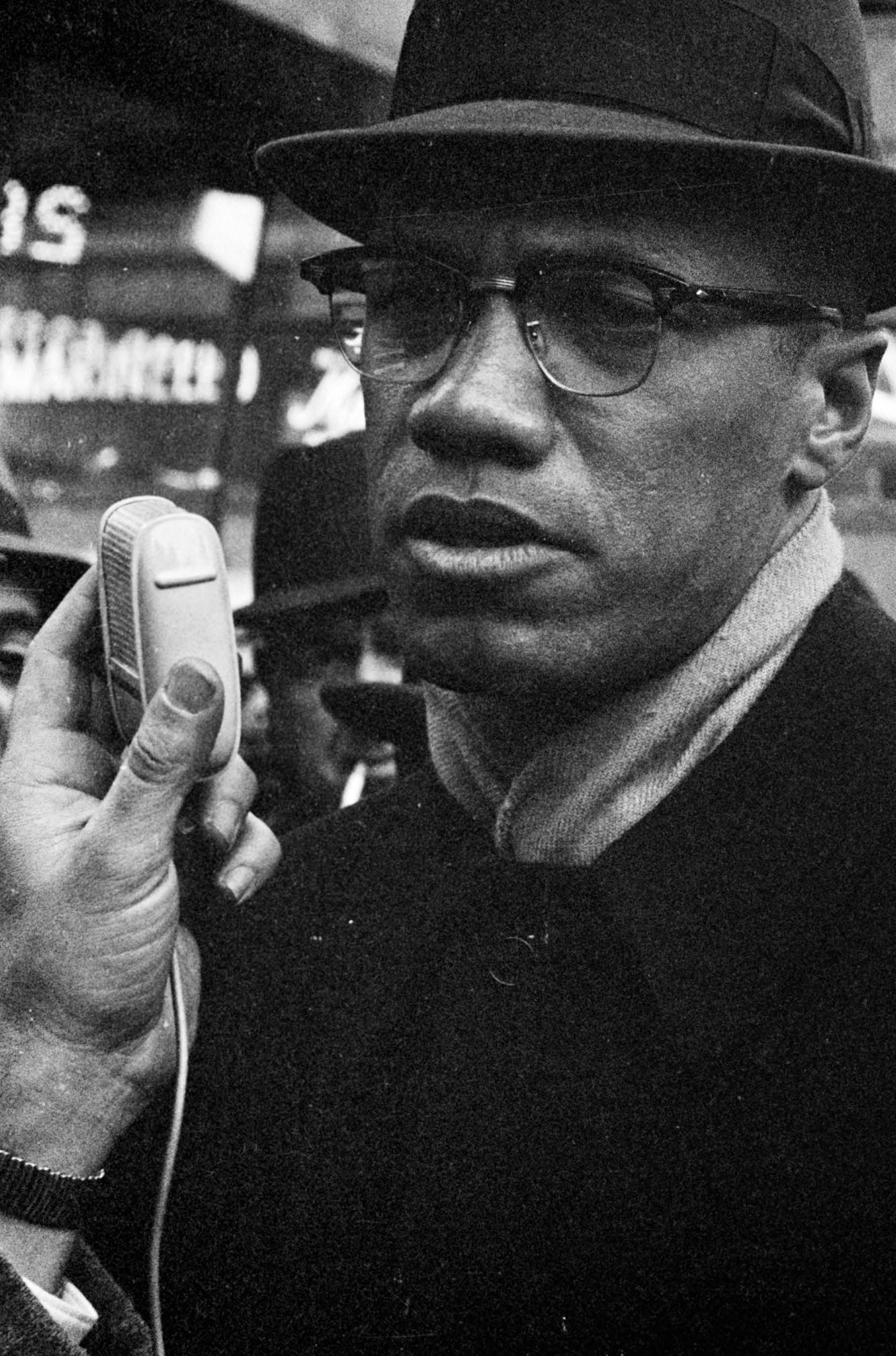
SV: Priya's movement was as an outlier in many respects as he had a British passport thanks to the accident of Indian descent and birth in colonial Kenya. He covered a Rhodesian Front banquet for Ian Smith, gaining admittance to the white-only party using his *Time/LIFE* press pass. But you know, heading to cover Biafra from the UK he needed to fly via Sao Tome, a Portuguese colony, where he faced discrimination as an Indian, even with his British passport – there are telegraphs from the *Life* editorial team trying to work around that. So there's lots there, of his own tremendous effort to just move around and access a given place.

EH: You've said that Kenya doesn't celebrate its heroes. That Tom Mboya, so many key people and efforts have been obscured, not mentioned, forgotten in the divisiveness and political turmoil that ensued in Kenya after independence, and especially during the time you were growing up there. That the role of Indian Kenyans in that lead up to independence, and the disappointments that followed, are but two of the many things that this archive

(Top left)
Priya Ramrakha
Protestors in Nairobi
1953
Nairobi, Kenya
Courtesy of Priya
Ramrakha Foundation

(Bottom left)
Priya Ramrakha
Newspaperman
c. 1953
Nairobi, Kenya
Courtesy of Priya
Ramrakha Foundation

(Following spread)
Priya Ramrakha
*Malcolm X and Nation
of Islam protestors*
1960
New York, USA
Courtesy of Priya
Ramrakha Foundation





offers today's audiences. So there are really important possibilities in this work for Kenya, but also as we are seeing, in South Africa, and for United Kingdom, American, and global audiences.

SV: To think of his work as a photojournalist, during this most intense of eras, the extraordinary breadth of subjects he covered is really inspiring to me. But when we go through the material, it is quite obviously not all political. There is so much of his relishing everyday visions, of bicyclists on the streets, of a father cradling his baby, of beautiful women. It was really a wide array, he was constantly looking around and connecting with the world via his camera. The everyday stream of the world that is there in his archive is wonderful to see. So to think of his work as simply political, or even straightforward or divided along those lines, is maybe too simplistic. His work is just so much more complex, ambiguous and expansive for that.

About the curators

Shravan Vidyarthi is a filmmaker and photographer based in New York and Nairobi. His documentary film *African Lens – the Story of Priya Ramrakha* (2007) won best African Film at the 2008 Zanzibar International Film Festival, and again at the Kenya International Film Festival. Vidyarthi's films have screened at the National Gallery and MoMA, on PBS, and have been featured in *The New York Times*.

Erin Haney collaborates with artists on photo and media histories, politics and creative institutions around the continent. Recent projects include her work with resolutionphoto.org, and curating the exhibition *Sailors and Daughters* on the photography in the Indian Ocean world for the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art. The exhibition became available to view online in 2015, and will end in 2020. Haney teaches at the Corcoran School of Art & Design, Washington DC, and is Research Associate at VIAD, University of Johannesburg. Her research appears in *Aperture*, *Hyperallergic*, *Critical Interventions*, and her solo-authored publication *Photography and Africa* (Reaktion, 2010).

(Top right)
Priya Ramrakha
*President Jomo
Kenyatta's address on
Independence Day 12
Dec 1963*
Nairobi, Kenya
Courtesy of Priya
Ramrakha Foundation

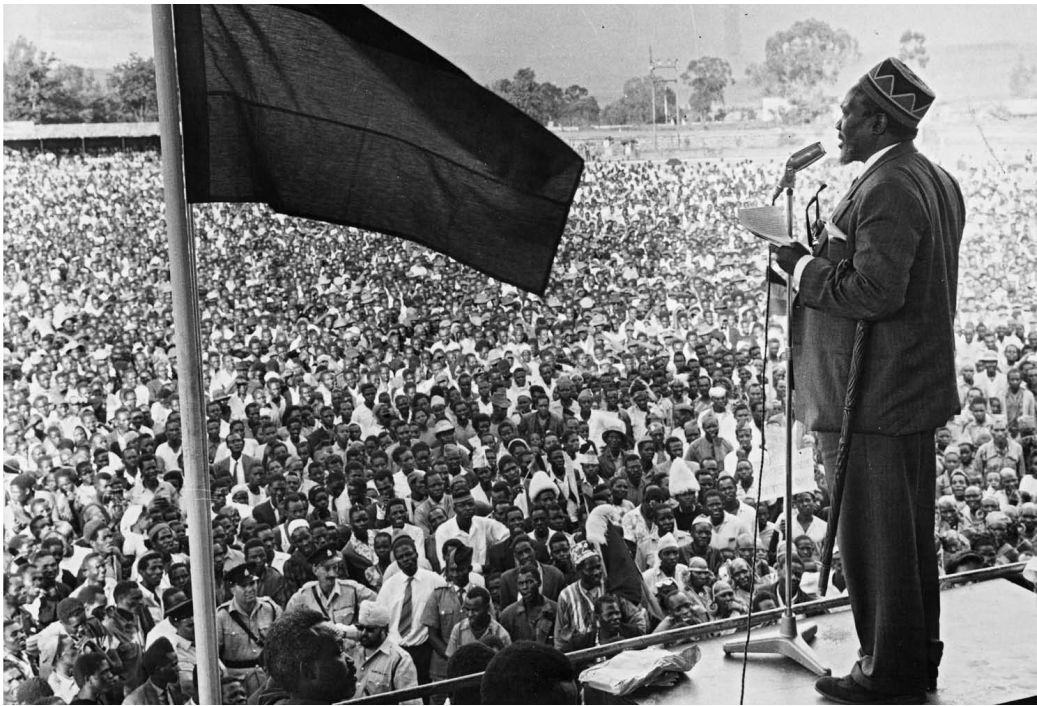
(Bottom right)
Priya Ramrakha
*International press corps,
Independence Day 12
Dec 1963*
Nairobi, Kenya

(Following spread)
Priya Ramrakha
*Musicians and singers
1966*
Accra, Ghana
Courtesy of Priya
Ramrakha Foundation

(Following page)
Priya Ramrakha
*Rev. Dr. Martin Luther
King Jr
1960*
California, USA
Courtesy of Priya
Ramrakha Foundation

(Second last spread)
Priya Ramrakha
*British attack in Aden
April 1967*
Yemen
Courtesy of Priya
Ramrakha Foundation

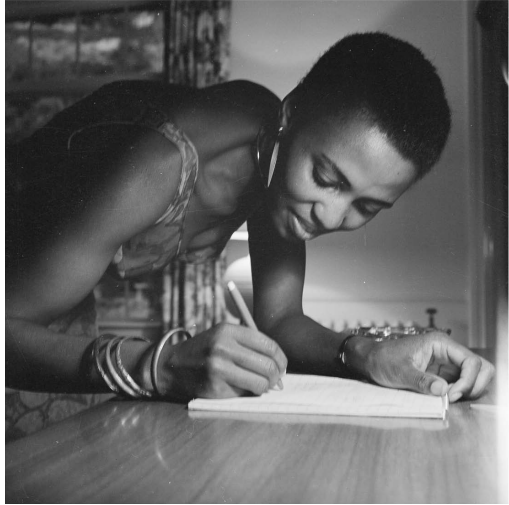
(Last spread)
Priya Ramrakha
*Soldiers in training,
Nigerian Civil War
1966*
Enugu, Nigeria
Courtesy of Priya
Ramrakha Foundation











Priya Ramrakha
Miriam Makeba
1962
Los Angeles, USA
Courtesy of Priya
Ramrakha Foundation











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