

" MORE THAN JUST A NUMBER "

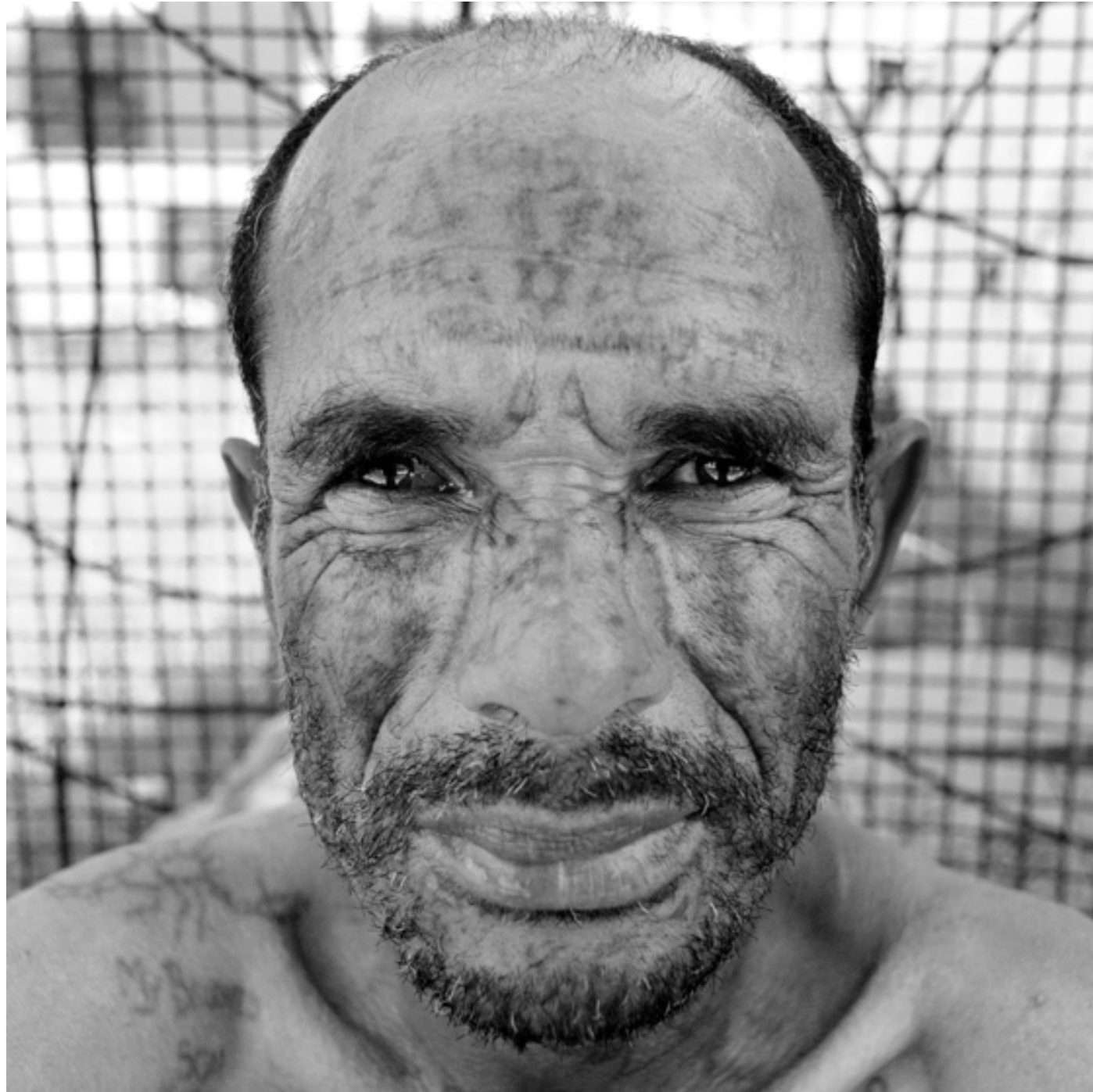
(# !)

A look inside the history, mythology and future of one of Africa
and the world's most complex criminal organizations.

Capetown Jan 2011



Photography: Philipp Engelhorn
Text: Sean Robson



The feature looks at its birth as a group of robbers and bandits through to its development as an anti-apartheid movement and onto its current make-up as a full fledged criminal organization motivated by drugs and cash.

South Africa's Number Gangs are more than a gang of prisoners using their combined muscle to dominate the South African prison system. A mix of religion, mythology and politics, the Number is made up of three separate camps known as the 26, the 27 and the 28 with each having its own colours, flags and roles in the greater organisation and prison.

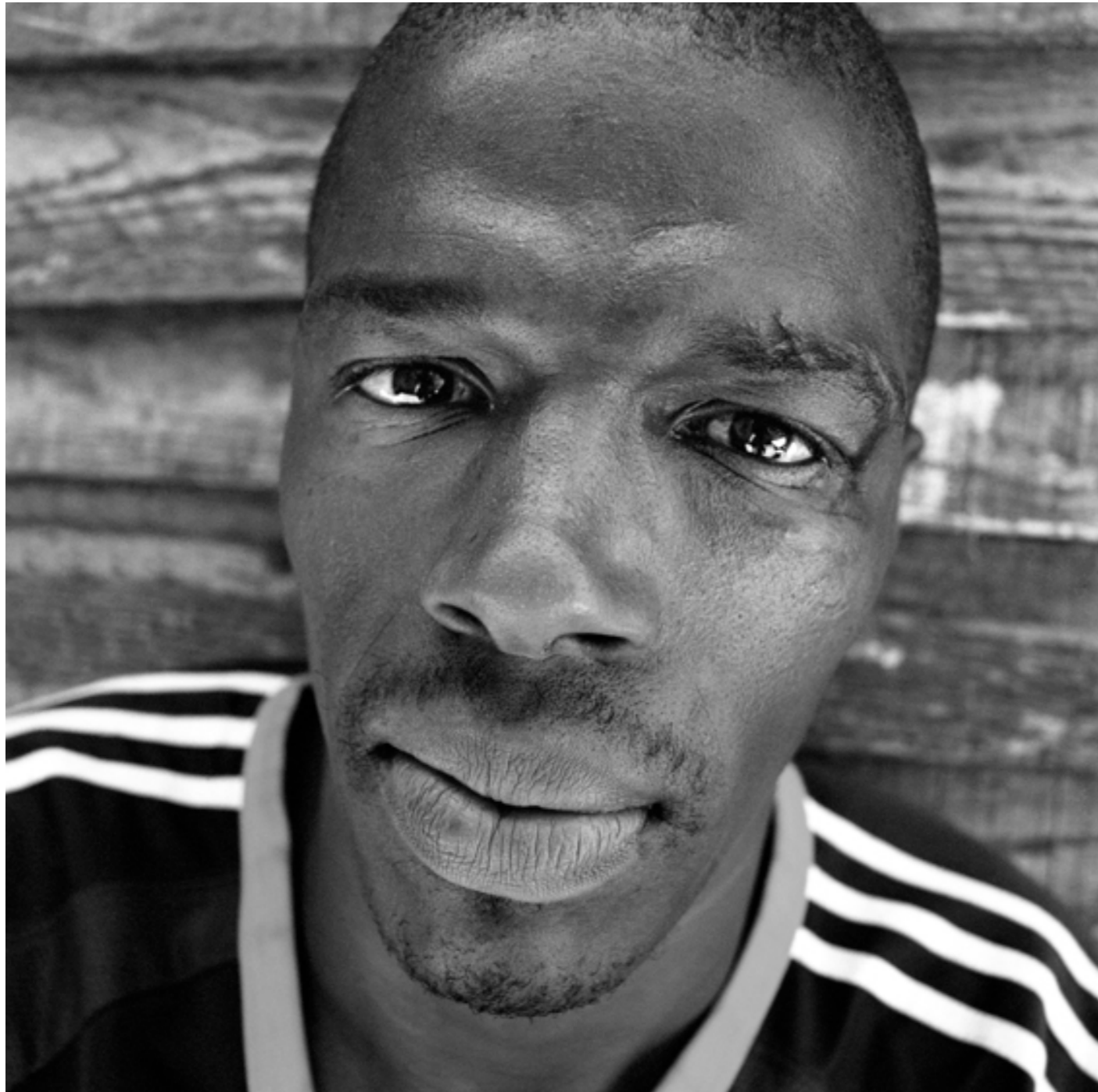
The Number shares many commonalities with gangs across the world and in particular a number of parallels can be drawn with the US based Latin Kings. Originally begun in the 1940's by immigrants from Puerto Rico the Kings started off as a social organisation aimed at protecting and strengthening the immigrant community in Chicago before later becoming a criminal gang.

The South African Gang claims its birth as far back as 1824 and can in many ways be seen as a window into South Africa and its evolution as a country. The gang began as a means to give a disenfranchised group, initially blacks, a way to strike back at those they perceived as the oppressors while allowing them to legitimise their criminal activities.

One of the most interesting vignettes is how during the apartheid years the Number developed into what was known as Wet Slaaners (Law Hitters) and made their move against the government by fighting for their rights inside prison. The piece meets some of these men and finds out about their lives inside prison and their subsequent disappointment with the evolution of the Number as it is today. This feature consists of interviews with over 25 individuals from both the black and coloured communities, ranging in age from 17 to 60. Former prisoners, young gangsters, and disillusioned elders from the Number all have a story to tell which amounts to a fascinating and complex look into an organization which has become an integral part of South Africa's Western Cape and its communities.

Please see attached doc for full lengths Synopsis !

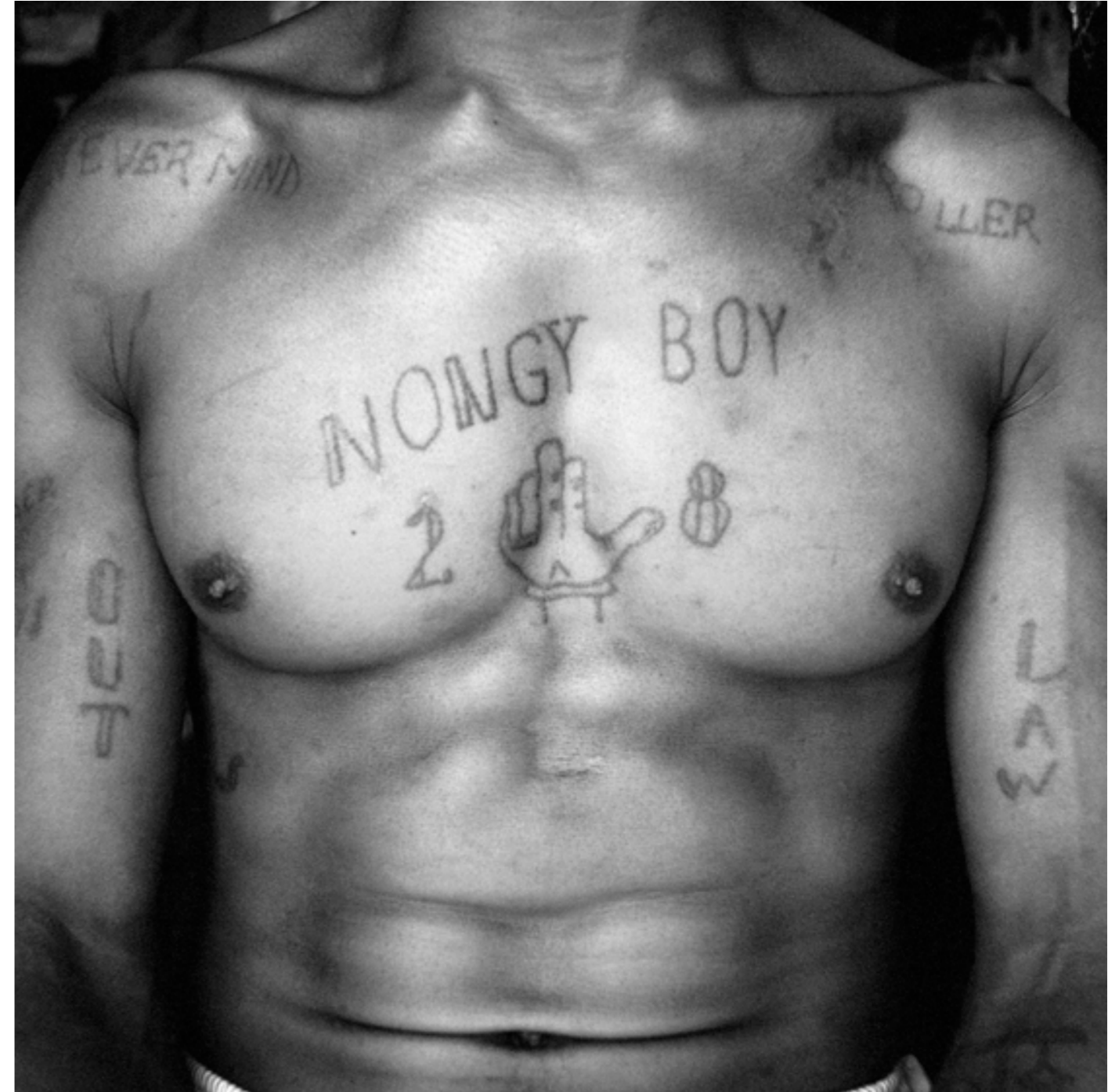




"Speech"
Mr. Sipiwe 36Y
Member #28

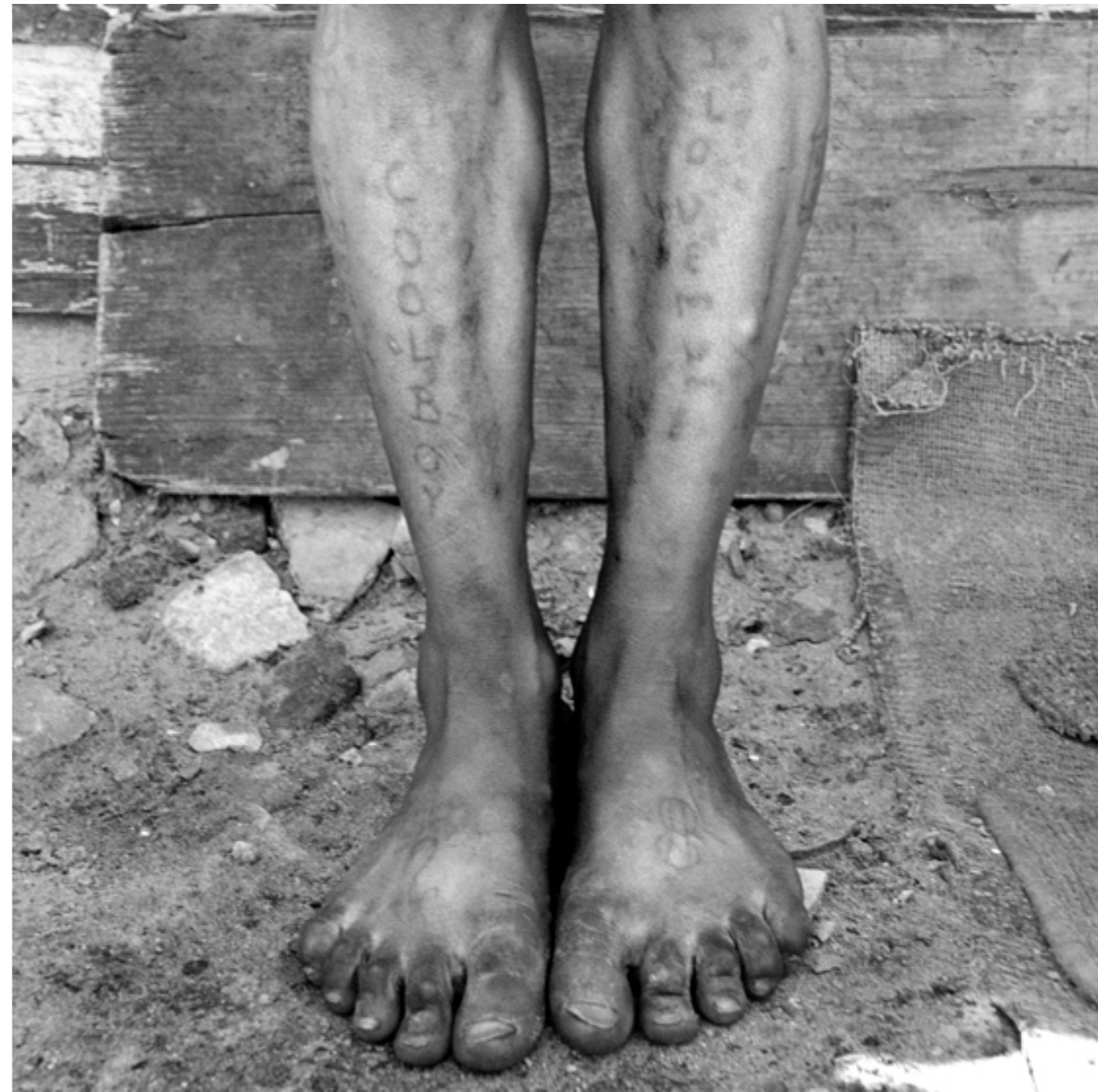


"Nongy Boy"
based on Nongoloza (the founder of #28)

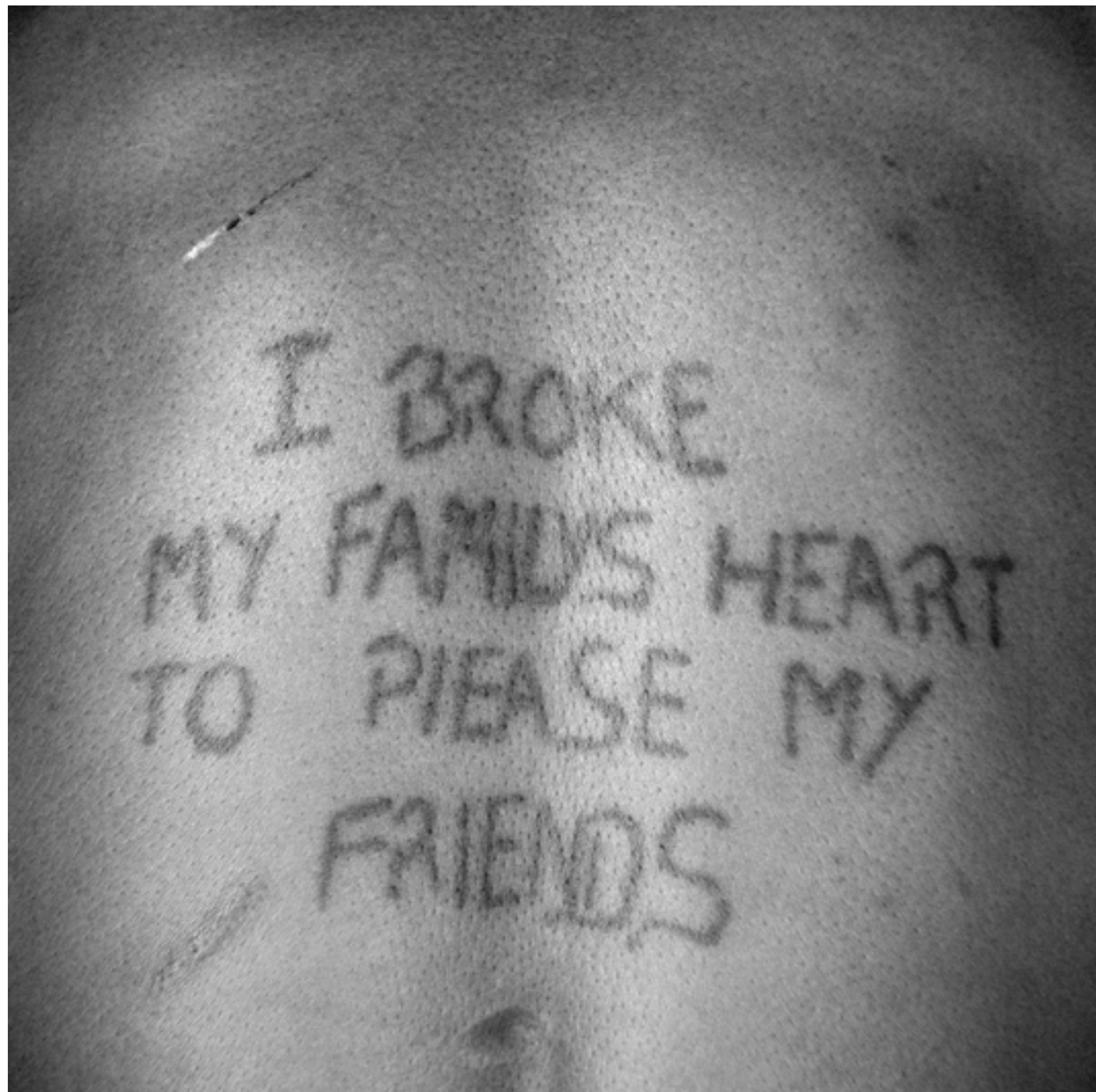




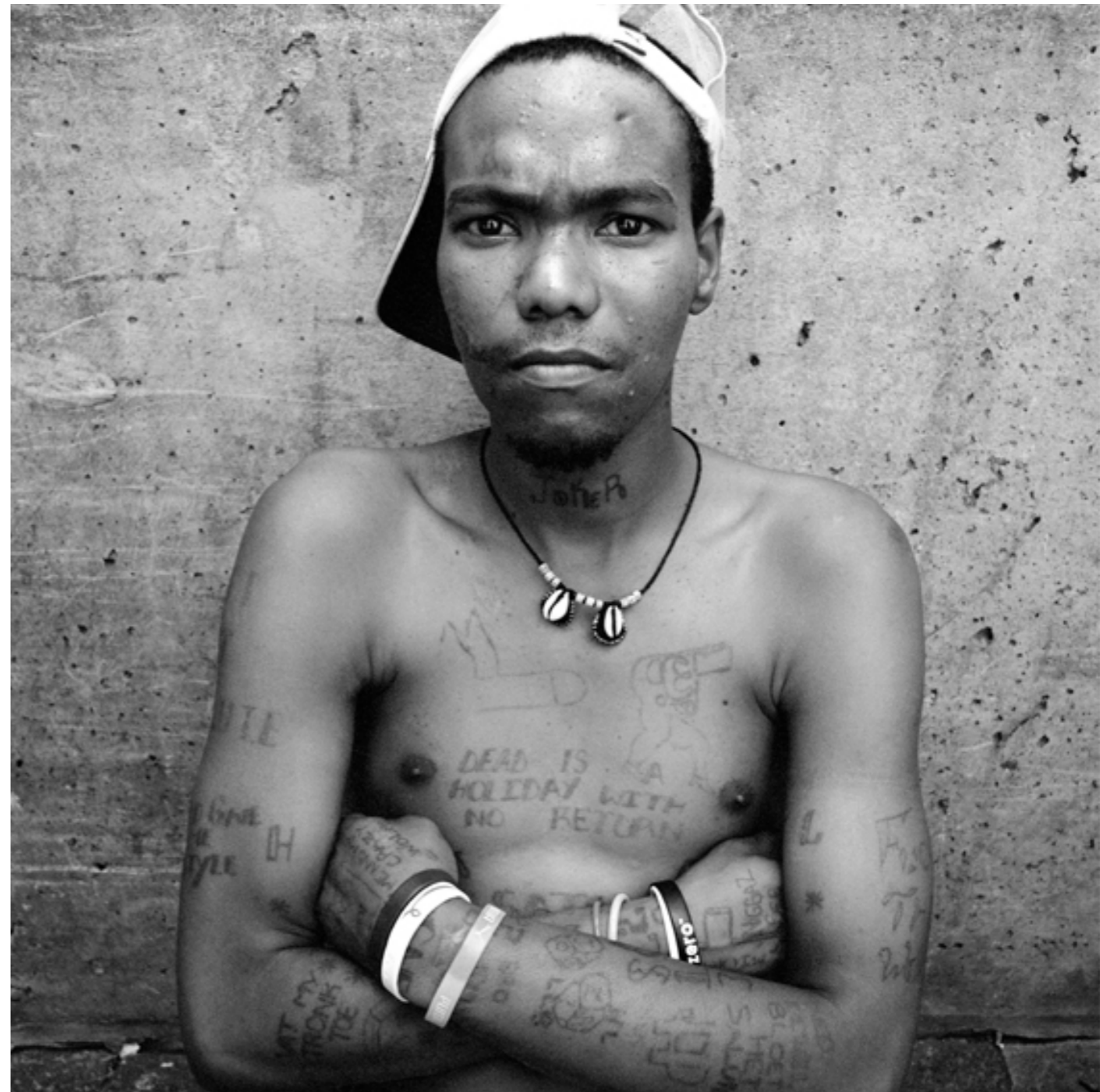
Manie 20Y
Member of "HL" (Hard Living Street Gang)



"Coolboy" and "28" on the feet



"I broke my families heart to please my friends"

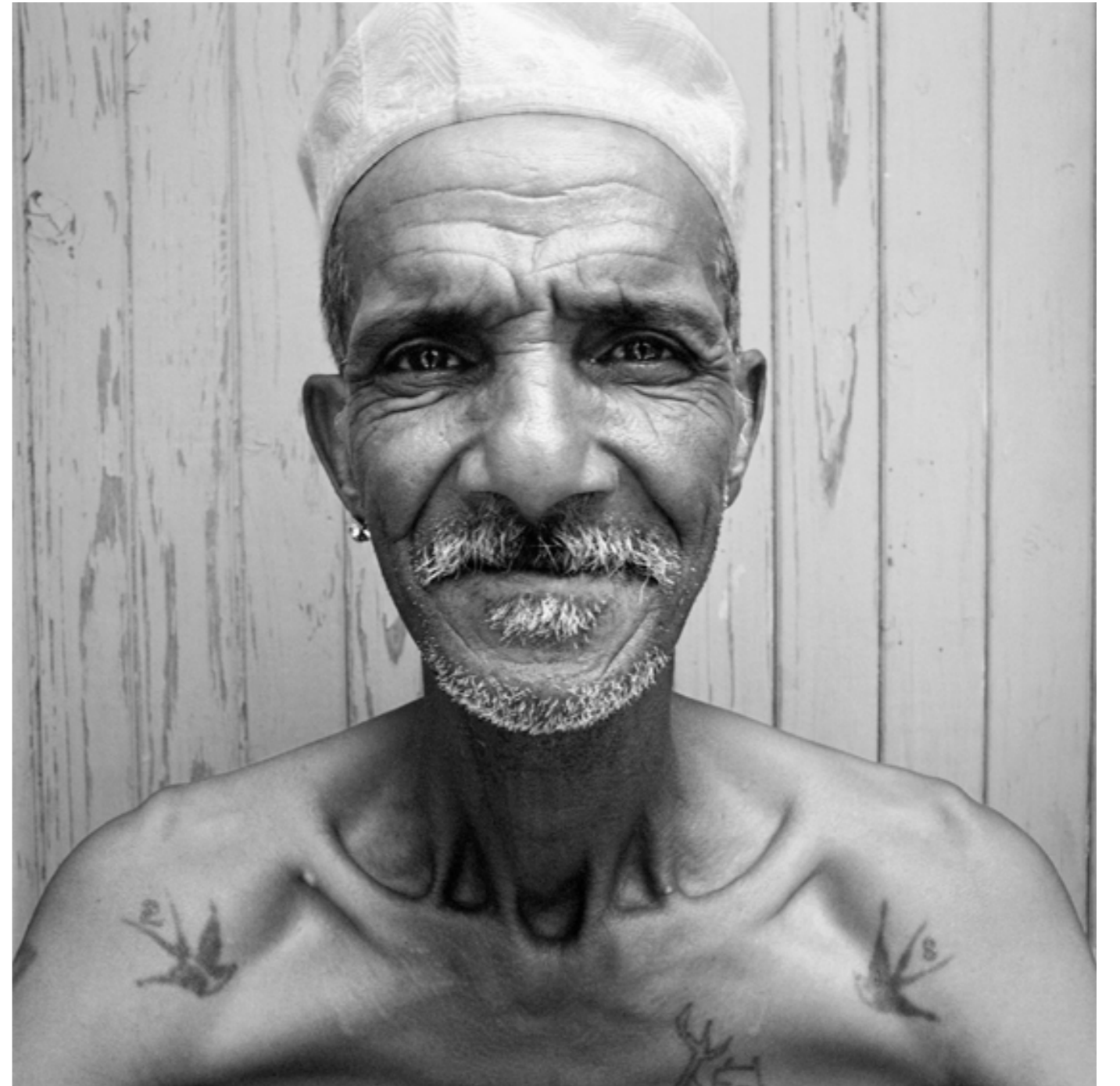


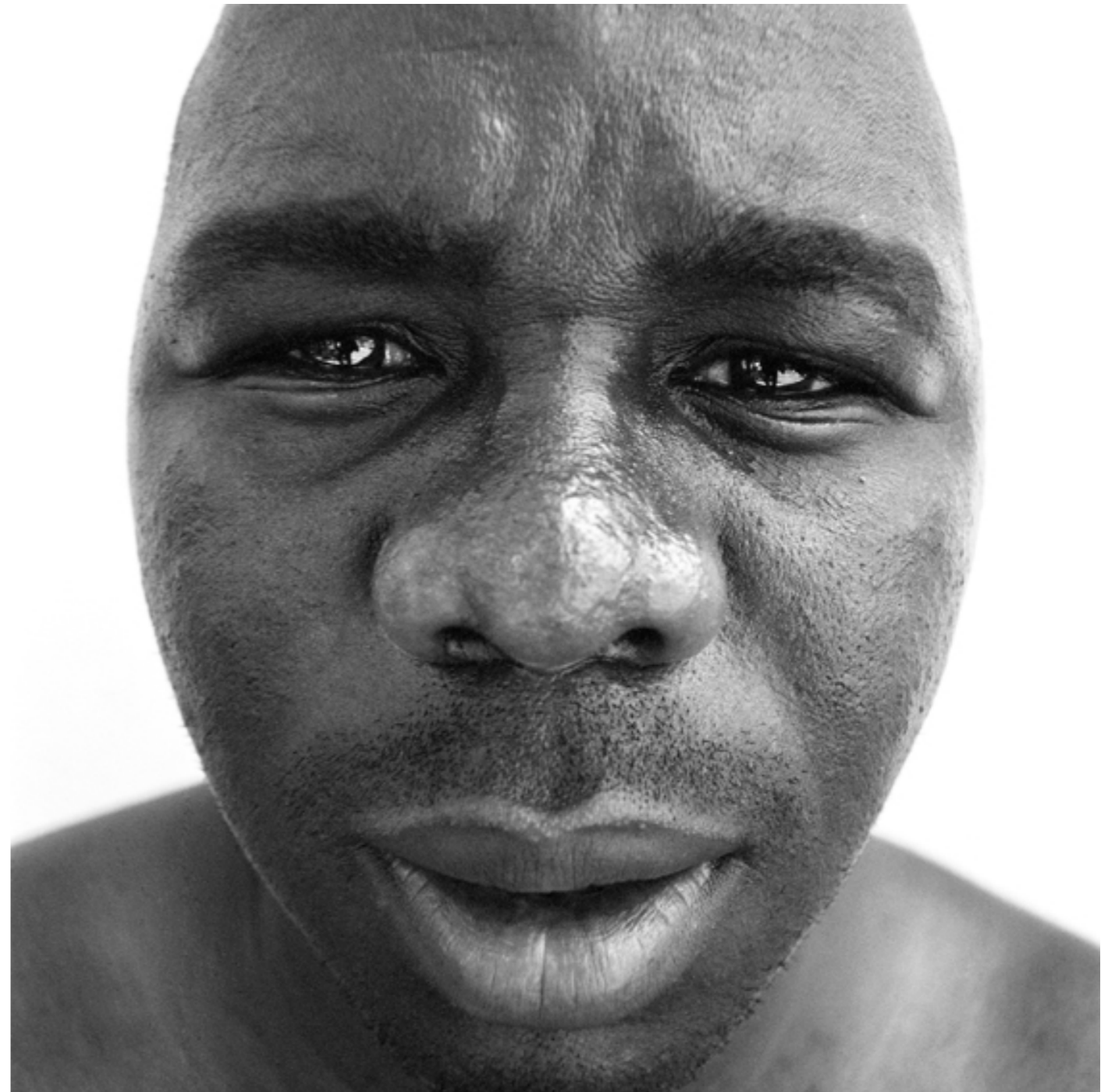


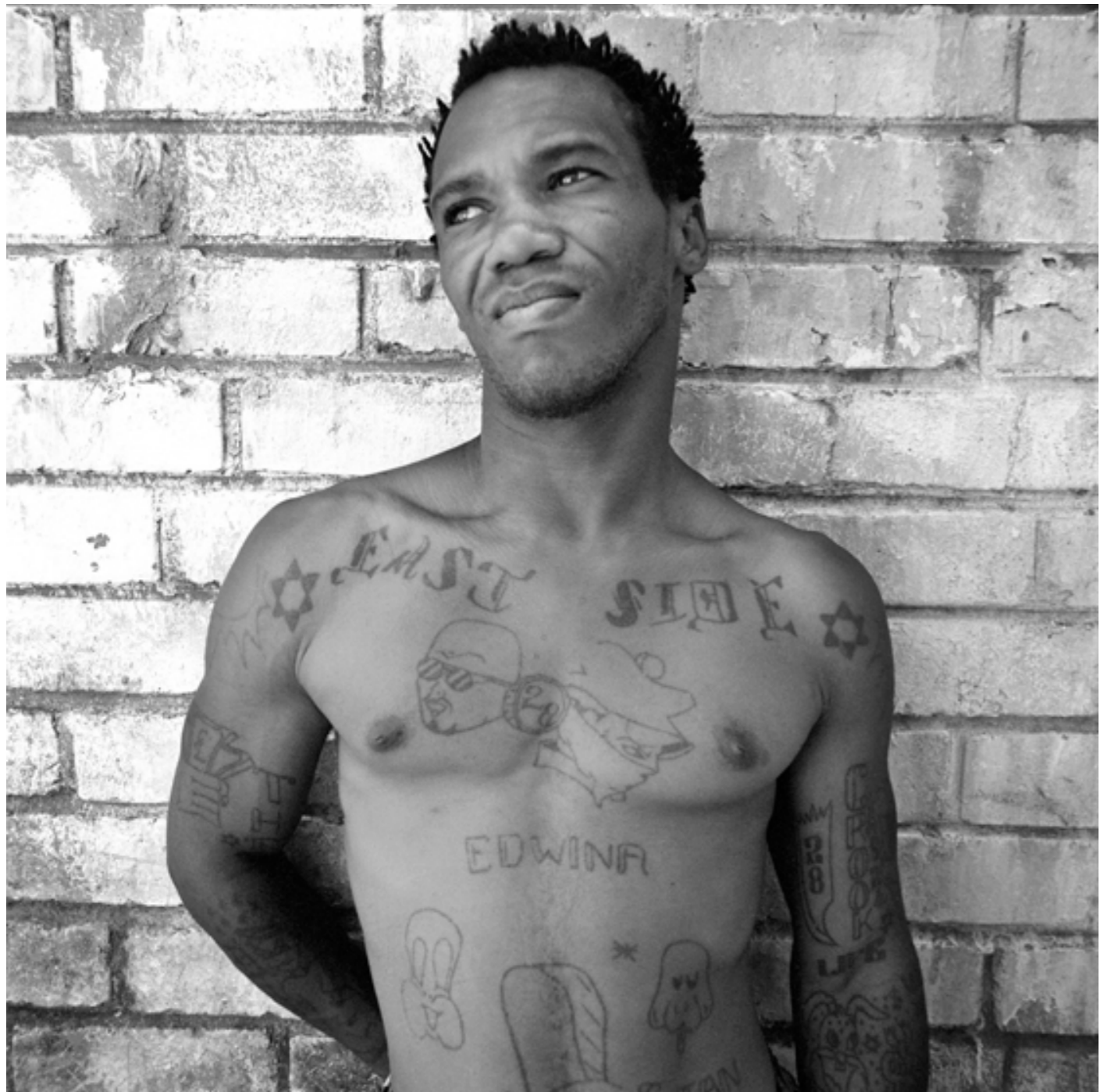
"9 mm is the weapon of choice here in the townships, before (in the old days) it was all about knives, man to man fighting ! Guns were considered for pussies !"



" D O G"
Mr. Bukhar Hassan 59Y
Member #28







Story Outline:

- Who or what is the Number?
- History of the Number
- The Father of the Number 'Paul Mambazo' and birth of the 26,27 and 28
- The comparison of South Africa's evolution and the Number
- Wetslaaners (anti-apartheid)
- Religious and mythical overtones
- The comparison between coming into the Number and African initiation
- Blacks to Coloureds
- Evolution of the Number
- Gangsters, drugs and money
- What the future holds for the Number

Quote excerpts:

- 'I worshiped Paul Mambazo as a God'
- 'The Number as I know it is an organisation. An organisation the inmates planned because they saw that they were being oppressed'
- 'According to me the Number is skelm, corrupt. There are guys who use the Number outside here but that's wrong'
- 'When Nelson Mandela was released we said to each other the Number is dead'
- 'I can walk through any other gang territory because I defend myself with the Number'

What the future holds and perhaps repercussions for continuing to allow the Number/these gangs to thrive in South Africa. Aside from the interesting history, how does this story relate to modern day South Africa? For example, how were they contained during the World Cup, (was that not even an issue?) Do they hold any political sway? This may be covered in your actual article, but I think you need to offer a line here about how you extrapolate the story into something that is more macro and concerning for South Africa's stability and future.

Philipp Engelhorn is a German born, US educated, award winning photographer based in Hong Kong since 8 years.

His assignments and personal projects have taken him to the most remote places on this planet. He has been to Africa many times and was always intrigued by the Cape Town Gangstas.

Sean Robson is a freelance journalist based in South Africa who explores Africa searching for the stories that go untold and need a voice. A former sports and business writer he is most passionate about the societal and political issues that are shaping the African continent. Simply put he is willing to go anywhere and do anything.

For any inquiries on this story
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