



Unidentified man, Central Africa, 1953

## Hector Acebes

Photographs in Africa,  
1948–1953

Isolde Brielmaier

Like so many foreign photographers, Colombian cinematographer and photographer Hector Acebes journeyed to Africa in search of the ultimate adventure. He set out to document the exotic, seeking excitement and beauty in the unfamiliar and immersion in a culture vastly unlike his own. But what emerged from his lens was different from the typical images of the African continent produced and circulated by many of his contemporaries.

In 1948, 1949, and 1953, Acebes traveled alone through the northern, western, and eastern regions of the continent, stopping in cities and small towns, where he stayed in local lodgings or in the back of his truck. He returned to his studio in Bogotá in late 1953 with nearly 200 rolls of film. On first view, Acebes's photographs present a strikingly distinct vision. His bold portraits of individuals reveal a strong cinematic bias and a novel connection between the photographer and subject. It is this powerful engagement between Acebes and his subjects that makes an exploration of his work, images, and position within the broader tradition of photography and representation in Africa important and worthwhile.

In his own words, Acebes explains that his “exchanges of attitudes, ideas, and feelings” with people were a significant aspect of his visits to port cities and desert towns throughout Africa. Through these exchanges he became intensely interested and involved in representations of individuals. In turn, his self-conscious approach and his awareness of the dynamic encounter between a photographer and his subject became integral to his compositions. Many of Acebes's portraits reveal a process of negotiation, in which the direction of a shot or the position of a subject emerged through a mediation. He was interested, he explains, in creating cinematic-like presentations of faces and personalities. His portraits are thoughtfully composed, sensitively capturing texture, background, light, incidental detail, and shadow.

Acebes preferred to use a Rolleiflex camera instead of the more nimble 35 mm Leica, the camera of choice among his professional colleagues.<sup>1</sup> He explains that unlike a 35 mm camera, which is held up to the eye and pointed like a gun, a Rolleiflex seemed less intimidating to people. Acebes could compose an image on the ground glass and then look up in