Honey has long played a central role in southeast Angola. In precolonial times, it served as a currency for trade and bridewealth payment. Later, during the Portuguese occupation, honey became an important commodity for export. With the independence of Angola and the subsequent civil war (1975-2002), it changed into the main source of food energy for the rural populations isolated by the conflict: a tonic for life in hostile times. Today, honey continues to be at the centre of everyday life in southeast Angola, whether for its medicinal attributes, economic value, nutritional qualities, or associations with identity and territorial claims.

I conducted fieldwork in the Municipality of Chitembo, in southeast Angola, between 2011 and 2014. While researching idiosyncratic processes of value formation, I realized how honey was an essential, though seemingly paradoxical, component in people’s lives: in some contexts, an economic valuable, and in other contexts, something invaluable. I asked people about the honey they collect, consume, and sell; about what the honey means to them and which stories they could tell me about it. As “an invaluable,” it was difficult to grasp the significance and implications of the honey through words. I adjusted my research and concentrated on the people’s actual interactions with the sweet, viscous fluid. From then on, I spent most of the time in the forests, and in silence.

Honey collection is a quiet enterprise among the trees. The occasional words men utter during that activity, their movements and bodily presence, melt with the ordinary tones, smells, and contours in the forest. Sound, odour, and visuality stand out in this composition. The potency of these sensations in framing such an activity suspends verbal representations from their dominant role in human undertaking. Words, I came to realize, are subordinate qualities in the process of (understanding) honey collection.

Back in the villages, the honey continues to affect its social surroundings, exerting influence in the drought of verbal communication. The honeycomb that stays in plastic buckets outside, under the sun rays for liquifying, seems to retain and emanate the human silence of its origins: the silence of the forests. It inspires respect, esteem, admiration, but also contact, placid satisfaction and joy. Indeed, the buckets containing the honeycomb are more than mere human-made matter; they are provisional marks of human accomplishments with the honeybees, the weather, the forests; they are human accomplishments with the land.

The photo sequence that I present conveys the absence of words that characterizes people’s interactions with the raw honey in southeast Angola. I show, not tell, an ethnographic story about such interactions. My intention is to provoke a type of anthropological knowledge devoid of words and, thus, to transmit the kind of human-honey relationships I experienced, as well as the methodological mode of presence that I employed in this topic. In this way, I wish to challenge the relationship between words and knowledge-making that pervades in ethnographic communication. I took all the pictures with a small silver Lumix, and, in most cases, quickly. The persons depicted agreed with the photos – happily.
Although they are intended to connect you to the places and moments of the people’s interactions with the honey, the following pictures should not be interpreted as mere description, but mediated ways of looking at the phenomenon. I hope this photo-story does more than transmit the interpretations and subjectivities that pushed me to this experimentation. I hope it inspires you to surpass them.