

# The film archive as a polyphonic network – a montage on the Mediateca Onshore project

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→ **MEDIATECA ONSHORE** The MEDIATECA ONSHORE is an arts and culture platform in a socially and ecologically sensitive area in Guinea-Bissau. As a venue, it hosts archives, workshops, seminars, production and community gatherings. As a network, it acts as a hub for transferring local, South-South and mundializing knowledge through performing arts, archival practices, moving image and digital media. It articulates practices in the fields of art, agroecology, traditional knowledge and media as contribution to social, economical and environmental justice.

## Opening lines

It's not easy to describe the Mediateca Onshore project as it is growing over the years, uniting an ever-wider variety of initiatives and sub-projects: It is a work in process in which numerous actors have participated since its inception. The opening quote is taken from a website that is one part of it.

Here, other text passages from the same website and two previously published texts by Filipa César and Tobias Hering form a kind of montage. Montage, in the sense of a multiplicity of voices bringing together the various text forms and perspectives of the authors and other participating actors, seems a most appropriate way to present the project and reflect its character.

Filipa César and Tobias Hering are key players in and co-founders of Mediateca Onshore. Tobias Hering's text *Before "Six Years After". Notes on the re-emergence of a film archive in Guinea Bissau* (first published in 2012, republished with annotations in 2014), which frames the montage, is based on conversations with Filipa César – the "you" in the text establishes and maintains a level of direct communication. On that level, but not only, it is connected to César's *A Grin Without Marker* (2016). Various encounters, activities, and thoughts recorded by the authors complement and comment on each other. Hering's and César's are two voices that in turn refer to many other participating actors and intersecting discourses, forming a multi-layered complex that is in motion and centers around a film archive.

**Before “Six Years After”. Notes on the re-emergence of a film archive in Guinea Bissau, a text by Tobias Hering read together with *A Grin Without Marker* von Filipa César and parts of the website Mediateca Onshore**

The following text was originally published in October 2012 on the occasion of Filipa César’s exhibition *Luta ca caba inda* at Jeu de Paume in Paris.[1] This exhibition was part of a gradual (and still ongoing) process of artistic production and curatorial proposals triggered by the re-emergence of a film archive in Guinea-Bissau.

[...]

Reconsidering the ‘aesthetics of ruination’ brought to mind a remark by Sana Na N’Hada, one of the Guinean film-makers whose collected works are kept in this archive. For the first public screening of material from this archive in Berlin in 2012, Sana had prepared a live commentary to the silent footage of *Six Years After*, a film that was meant to review the first six years of independence of Guinea-Bissau but was never finished. After a series of images showing the ruins left by the liberation war, military debris and Portuguese statues in pieces, he said: “This was our heritage.” At this point in time, 32 years after *Six Years After*, the remark inevitably became equivocal. It simultaneously referred to the remains of centuries of oppression and to the now faded remains of this film archive reappearing on a cinema screen in Berlin. In both instances, however, ‘heritage’ is the name for something that engages us with the future. And so does the archive: the question of the archive is not a question of the past, but a question of the future, ‘the question of a response’. Archives are “...what ties knowledge and memory to the promise.”[2]

[...]

Re-evaluating the film production in Guinea-Bissau in the decade of decolonization – the 1970’s – is a collective rediscovery rather than a historiographic mission with a definite end. This is not only because every History contains an indefinite number of stories – as this film archive once again reminds us – but also because of the many blanks, insufficiencies and omissions represented by the archive itself. The bulk of the material it contains are unedited film reels and sound recordings for films that were never finished.

Furthermore, by the time this material was digitized in Berlin in 2012, it only represented an estimated 50% of what had originally been produced. The other half had perished during the frequent relocations of this archive, had disintegrated under the effects of the vinegar syndrome or had otherwise become unrecognisable over the years.

Furthermore, when charting the gaps and blanks of the archive, one must also take into account the precarious circumstances under which this cinematographic endeavour took place in Guinea-Bissau. Four Guinean students – three men and one woman – had trained in Cuba to become film-makers and had started working in Guinea-Bissau during the final phase of the liberation war against the Portuguese colonial regime. Their technical equipment was extremely limited, film stock and audio tapes were rare and their availability often depended on the generosity of foreign film-makers. Whatever footage was produced was sent to Conakry to the headquarters of the

PAIGC, the African Party for the Liberation of Guinea–Bissau and Cape Verde. From there it was meant to be sent to film labs in friendly countries, for example Sweden and Algeria. When Sana Na N’Hada went to Conakry after the end of the war to recover the film reels, he realized that many of them had not been developed and that others had never returned from the labs they had been sent to or were not traceable anymore. Many hours of film footage – shot to commemorate a place, an event, or a state of transition – have thus probably never reached the archive.

At this point in the recapitulation, however, the perspective on the archive must shift or maybe furcate: while lamenting losses is one way to react to these stories, another must be to recognize and appreciate what survives – as well as the sheer fact that they came into being. Early on, Filipa César – provoked by the arrogant assumption of Portuguese archivists and the FIAF (the International Federation of Film Archives) that nothing relevant was to be found in the archive in Bissau – insisted on cherishing what *was* there rather than mourning what wasn’t.  
[...]

**[From Filipa César *A Grin Without Marker*]**

Later I got in touch with the Head of archives at the Portuguese Cinematheque. They knew about the Guinean archive, and had even sent dozens of new canisters to Bissau to re-accommodate the films, but for many reasons, also connected with diplomatic tensions and the financial crises, they told me: “the archive is irrelevant”. Their arguments were the deeply fragmented and ruined state of the collection, holding mainly unfinished films or unedited footage, and finally most of its reels were eroded copies of foreign films existing in better state in other archives. They were right about everything. Nevertheless that sentence entered a resonance field in my mind. [...]

“Irrelevant” became this rugged matter of rrr, raw, rough, rhythm. Material word-decomposition follows up on etymological break down. The prefix “i” in “irrelevant” is the resistance to relevant – I can visualise the “i” operating on the signifier, relevant both through the shape of “i” as serif font and through the negative meaning, as if a palm–oil press would squeeze the potential salience or elevation of “relevant” back to the ground, close to humus. The double “r” in the word produces the texture of an eroded soil or furrowed field. The sap extracted from that “i” pressing “relevant” frees the nectar of power and immortality – ambrosia. “Irrelevant” is the becoming mortal, becoming humble[3]. “Irrelevant” became a word–energy, the frequency and intensity of the non–power. The word performing the gesture of throwing empty bottles out of the window, when meaning is not signification, but rather the very action performed by the signifier (Deleuze & Guattari 1980/ 2013).

Relevant, re-Levant, where the sun rises again, a Mediterranean land east of Italy. Irrelevant, no-Levant, no rising of the sun, *Sunless* [4].

Etymologically unfolding the word “relevant” – it derives from prominence, distinctness, or vividness due to contrast; the projection of a figure from the ground or plane on which it is formed, as in a sculpture, giving the appearance of a third dimension. Adjectivised, “relevant” means pertinent to the matter at hand, depending upon, helpful, or to lessen, lighten, relating to relieve. The logic of relevance operates within a vertical, hierarchical, power relation system in which relevance always performs the task of sustaining this verticality through imposed stratification. Something is relevant to a system if something assists that system to fulfil a task.

“The archive is irrelevant” is spellbound, it also means – this archive does not assist a certain system to achieve a certain goal. [...]

## 1. To open an archive

You[5] have entered the archive before you opened it. You saw a room with metal shelves. Stacked on the shelves were cartons, cans and plastic boxes in different sizes of the kind that typically contain film reels. They were not countless, but there were more than you could count in the few moments you had on that first occasion. You took two photographs in the room. They were meant to prove that there was something here / in there – that the archive existed. People you had talked to (in Lisbon) said that, if anything, the archive would only hold import films from former socialist countries or foreign films about Guinea-Bissau of which better copies would also exist elsewhere. There would be very few if any local productions, they predicted. The archive in Bissau, you were told, was of little interest. But of little interest to whom? You found that interesting.

Because there were different stories. You met people (in Bissau) who knew all along that the archive had existed and that if anything had survived the frequent assaults of weather and war, its contents would be precious. But precious to whom? Among those you talked to were Flora Gomes and Sana Na N’Hada whose names are known in the world of film, especially Flora Gomes, several of whose films were shown at the festival in Cannes. Flora Gomes and Sana Na N’Hada: two filmmakers from Guinea-Bissau who had once entered their trade as if accepting an inheritance and who had learned it as militants. They met in a ‘pilot’ school which Amílcar Cabral had set up in Conakry in 1964. Conakry had already been liberated from French rule and Ahmed Sékou Touré had had his famous face-off with Charles de Gaulle.[6] In Conakry something had already begun.

Flora Gomes: “We had a grant back then. Whenever a term ended, a group left Conakry for Cuba to continue their training, because it wasn’t possible to finish grammar school in Conakry. I wanted

to study something related to physical education, and I was very close to a schoolmate, Sana Na N'Hada, who wanted to be a doctor. But the two of us ended up being sent by Amílcar Cabral to the Cuban Film Institute [ICAIC] to learn how to make movies. For me, it was an adventure to be doing something which I'm not sure you could actually call 'making films'. There were four of us at the time: Josefina Lopes Crato – so you see, one of us was a girl – and José Bolama (these two are dead now) and Sana Na N'Hada and myself. We left Cuba and returned to Conakry in 1972. The 1973 proclamation of independence was being prepared at the time. To ensure we weren't sitting around doing nothing and because there was no filmmaking infrastructure in the country, we were sent to Dakar to work with one of the pioneers of African cinema, Paulin Vieyra from Benin, who was the first African to be admitted to the IDHEC (Institut des hautes études cinématographiques) in France. He was our mentor in Senegal for almost two years, a time that coincided with the assassination of Amílcar Cabral.”[7]

“The political history of African decolonization is a compelling narrative filled with plots, protagonists and antagonists, formal and aesthetic pleasures and dramatic moments. It would seem to be something out of which great art could be made.”[8] Manthia Diawara wonders why so little of this narrative has made it to cinema screens: “Why has it been so difficult – if not nearly impossible – to represent decolonization in African cinema?”[9] And he goes on to state that among the many reasons “for this incommensurability between the political history of the continent and its artistic history,” the “most critical [...] are those related to the production and the reception of politics on the one hand and the cinema on the other.”[10]

Sana Na N'Hada: “The last time Amílcar spoke to us was on December 22, 1973 in Dakar. He died a little less than a month later. We had to film in liberated areas and remain in the bush for three months. We entered slowly into the North – here – and talked to local people, filming what we saw. We had been going for three days when, one afternoon, we came to Morés – the central guerrilla base – and heard over the radio that Cabral was dead.”

[...]

Sana Na N'Hada: “We set up the national film institute in 1977. The idea was to make films here in Guinea. Films had been made here before; just not the type one normally went to a cinema to watch. The Portuguese geographical society had made a lot of films – and I'm not sure if the Portuguese army hadn't also – but the four of us were the first Guineans to make a film for local people. We started filming with reels that people had left behind. Sarah Maldoror left some here and I managed to use them to make a film called *Fanado*. I arranged the financing from Swedish TV and it was shown here, in Ireland and in Sweden in 1984. Flora then made Guinea's first full-length movie called *Mortu Nega*. We all had to collaborate; there weren't enough of us to make a team.”

In his essay in *The Short Century*, Manthia Diawara focuses on Francophone African cinema, but he also mentions *Mortu Nega*, “a notable independence story of the people of Guinea-Bissau. While

most of the documentaries about decolonization in the former Portuguese colonies were produced by film-makers in exile or by European directors, *Mortu Nega* was produced in Guinea-Bissau after independence, as the history of the people's struggle for freedom.”[11] *Mortu Nega* – the first, the exception? The film was made in 1987 and its story is set sometime between 1972 and 1974. The moment in Morés recalled by Sana Na N’Hada is actually restaged in *Mortu Nega*. The Steadicam shot, hovering as if stunned, takes in the silence into which the radio keeps repeating the message: ‘Cabral assassinated’. None of the men and women we see in this fiction carries a camera, but we know now that in reality some did.

[From Filipa César *A Grin Without Marker*]

During the rainy season of 1999, after the civil war in Guinea Bissau, the audiovisual material stored at the Film Institute was thrown out of the window into the streets of Bissau. Only weeks later the filmmakers themselves (Flora Gomes, Sana Na N’Hada and Suleimane Biai) rescued what remained of it, escorting it as they could through years of neo-colonial instability (Nkrumah 1965). Its ruined and fragmented state became a chance – instead of looking at the material as something precious, we thought of it as a moving body, a projectile that we were able to accompany in its flight – an aeronautic drive, a matter of nomadology, an abdication of history.

On your first visit to the archive you didn’t have the chance to open the cans to see what was inside – let alone to see whether the content was interesting and for whom. All you could do was take those two photographs. The second photograph is a close-up of two stacks of film boxes on a shelf. Zooming in, most labels become decipherable: a film about Fátima[12] with French commentary, a film about Portuguese immigrants in France, and a box labelled ‘Centro Islâmico de Gabú’ (Islamic Centre of Gabú),[13] another ‘Contratipo Entrevista Amílcar Cabral’ (copy of an interview with Amílcar Cabral). Several boxes are marked as containing footage of Cabral’s brother Luís – who became the first president after independence – on diplomatic missions to Eastern Europe, Gambia and the USA. One label seems to point to the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC) and bears the number ‘1967’, probably referring to the year. Two boxes are labelled, ‘Filme não identificado’ – unidentified film.

[...]

## 2. To remember the first image

I wanted to talk to you about first images. I thought of the first photograph of the archive, which in fact had been the first image I had seen of your project and therefore my ‘doorway’. When I asked for a first image I was also hoping to trigger other images: earlier images inherited from your childhood in Portugal, from cinema or television, images of Guinea-Bissau during the war –

which in Portugal is usually referred to as the 'Colonial War' and in Guinea-Bissau as the 'War for Independence' –, expectations of what a film made in Guinea-Bissau would look like. Images, therefore, which could have been confirmed or contested by the images in this archive. I have a feeling that we tend to forget what we had imagined before somebody showed us a first image. The first image is likely to erase our imagination. That's a problem with images and that's why I asked.

[From Filipa César *A Grin Without Marker*]

My involvement in the long-term collective project *Luta ca caba inda* was less dependent on my curiosity for these cinematic genres, but rather unintentionally, the result of a suction force, pulling me into the magnetic field of a web of conditions, urgencies and magical encounters. The Portuguese colonial war, despite ending just before my birth in 1975, was a latent presence in my childhood, casting shadows of fear, subversion and cryptic intensities. My father was the channel, after his failed desertion to Paris, he had served in the military in Portuguese Guinea between 1967 and 1969. I was introduced to an imagery of resistance to Salazar's regime – underground subversive political literature, the illegal emigration of deserters and political activists and a revolution through the radio transmission of a coded song. But for many years I thought this was a story disconnected from the rest of the world. Something that resided in my apartment, animated by certain props – a military uniform, blue batik fabric, an African wooden sculpture. A tale, rather than history.

That changed in 2003 when I was bewildered by my first encounter with *Sans Soleil* by Chris Marker. There were images of Guinea and a spellbinding voice talking about the Portuguese / Guinean conflict: "Why should so small a country and one so poor interest the world?" – and further – "Who remembers all that? History throws its empty bottles out the window". A French filmmaker knew about that war and also knew that the country inscribed in my fantasy did not interest the world. I knew that Guinea was the place where my father had fought on the wrong side – mistaken by the communist ideals that militants should infiltrate the colonial military and subversively undermine its power – with dignified intentions that didn't prevent him from getting implanted there in a sunless gloom. Happiness is but awareness of misfortune. The stage of the haunted tale became a geopolitical spot – Peter Pan showing up at the window – hey, you can jump with the empty bottles.

You said that you didn't enter the archive so much with expectations as with hopes – or rather wishes. The wish to prove that Flora Gomes, Sana Na N'Hada and Suleimane Biai were right when they spoke about a productive period of militant filmmaking in Guinea-Bissau between 1972 and

1980. You also said that you wished to see images of Amílcar Cabral. You, too, wished to find *The Return of Amílcar Cabral*. You were hoping to see what you had been told didn't exist and what still isn't shown in schools and on television.

Nevertheless, there had been earlier images of Guinea–Bissau. Television images of the Colonial War, for example, shot by a French crew commissioned by the Portuguese government. They were meant to convey the glory of an orderly military operation but they ended up documenting a disaster, Portuguese soldiers dying on camera. You told me that these images only appeared on television over twenty years later, in the 1990s. Among the first images were also the scenes in Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* depicting a carnival and a market in Bissau. You knew these images but you told me that it was only after you had had the chance to talk to Marker a few years ago that you took a closer look at the film's credits.

Sana Na N'Hada: "In the 1980s we started to work with outsiders. We received visits from filmmakers from Sweden and France and Chris Marker was among them. He came here in 1979 and we all worked together for more than a month or two. We travelled together with Chris, and he taught us about editing. To me, he is a teacher, a great source of wisdom and a great friend. I had some film which I wasn't sure was still in good condition. It was carnival time and

I was just going to film two reels, but I ended up filming three. I gave them to Chris to develop. He liked what he saw and kept them. He then travelled to Japan where he filmed other scenes and put them all together to make the film, *Sans Soleil*."

[...]

#### Chris Marker

After his departure from Bissau, Chris Marker encouraged his friend and co-editor Anita Fernandez to continue what he felt was a promising collaboration with young Guinean film-makers. Fernandez went to work with them in 1980. Collectively they produced the short film *Un balcon en Afrique* ('A balcony in Africa'), which ironically reflects on Fernandez' role as a European woman 'stationed' in Bissau. Fernandez also started to conceive with the group a documentary about the women of Guinea-Bissau. Like many others, this film remained unfinished after the coup d'état of November 1980 had deposed President Luís Cabral and had discouraged the young film-makers' dedication to the Instituto Nacional de Cinema e Audiovisual (INCA) for years to come.

Nevertheless, Anita Fernandez continued to work with Sana Na N'Hada and Flora Gomes, co-writing the script for the latter's *Po di Sanguí* (1996) and editing Sana's *Xime* (1994). In November 2012, Sana Na N'Hada reconnected with Anita Fernandez in Paris on the occasion of a public screening of archive material from Bissau at Jeu de Paume. In June 2013, Anita Fernandez came to Berlin to present *Un balcon en Afrique* as well as footage from the unfinished film about women gathered from the archive in Bissau. The screening took place in the framework of the 'Living Archive' project at cinema Arsenal.[14]



### 3. To write from memory

One always writes from memory, especially when writing about moving images. It is virtually impossible to write while one sees, because the eyes won't let you. First one sees, then one writes. While I write, the images move on and some of them escape me. Maybe others see them, but I don't because I am taking notes about the images I saw before.

[...]

In what sense can this archive be said to be part of the 'collective memory' of Guinea-Bissau? What is a collective memory and how do images become part of it? Most of the cans on those shelves held unfinished films, unedited footage shot on various occasions all over the country between 1972 and 1980. Most of the footage appears to be shot on 16mm positive film. The make is usually Kodak. Much of it was shot by Flora Gomes, Sana Na N'Hada and their two late comrades. As they were mostly working together, they often appear in the frame holding the clapperboard, a lamp or the microphone. There were a few finished films on the shelves – but most of these were imports.

[...]

Noticeably, among the finished films in the archive was 'The Return of Amílcar Cabral' (*O regresso de Amílcar Cabral*) [...]. It is a newsreel documentary about the transfer of Cabral's body from Conakry to Bissau. *The Return of Amílcar Cabral* might be the only one of these films that actually had an audience at the time. Some films had obviously been undergoing editing or postproduction. Among them was *A luta ca caba inda* ('The struggle is not over yet'), from which you borrowed the title for your own project. But the vast majority of the archive consists of unedited footage without sound. The sound recordings are shelved in another room next-door. I memorise here what you told me, describing something I haven't seen. A room next-door with audiotapes piled on top of a pallet on the floor, in small cardboard boxes manufactured in Sweden and East Germany. Did you show me this image or did I imagine it?

From the bare facts of this archive it can be concluded that most of the images it holds were never shown; they never had an audience. How can an unseen image be part of a collective memory? Is it an image at all if nobody has ever seen it? This question might now be irrelevant as regards those images which have been salvaged and digitised in the meantime. But it is a haunting question with regard to those images already dissolved by the vinegar syndrome – literally erased from the film strips, or turned into a sticky paste over the years, as you put it. An archive is always erected on the soft ground between memory and amnesia. Just as an image can erase memory, an erased image can commemorate amnesia. But where do unseen films go in the memories of those who shot them?

[...]

→ *spell reel* A film by Filipa César, made in 2016/17 in collaboration with the Guinean filmmakers Sana Na N'Hada and Flora Gomes, as well as many allies: an imaginary journey on which this fragile matter from the past operates as a visionary prism of shrapnel, with which to look through. Digitised in Berlin and screened at various locations – in what would come to resemble a transnational itinerant cinema – the archive herein convokes debates, storytelling and forecasts. Screened in villages in Guinea-Bissau as well as European capitals, the silent reels are now a place from which people may search for antidotes to a world in crisis.

## 5. To look at ruins

In his essay *L'archive brûle*, Georges Didi-Huberman argues that, considering the unfathomable loss of memories and traces, we might as well rejoice over every single image that survived the fires which destroyed so many archives. In the face of the absence of those other archives, however,

...we should be wary [...] of identifying the archive available to us, however prolific it may be, with the acts and deeds of a world of which it cannot be more than a few relics. The essence of the archive is its gaps, its 'holey' quality. Now, frequently, the gaps are the result of deliberate or unconscious censorship, of destruction, attack, or auto-da-fé. The archive is often grey, not just because of the time that has lapsed, but the ashes of all that surrounded it and has burned. It is in discovering the memory of the fire in each sheet that has not burned that we have the experience – described so well by Walter Benjamin [...] – of a barbarism documented in each document of culture.[15]

Every object in an archive tells many stories and one of them is the story of the archive itself. When I shared with you this quote by Georges Didi-Huberman, I was thinking of the white gaps on the film strips from Bissau and the grey stains they left on hands and machines. You pointed out that for you the story of this archive is the admirable effort that brought it into being rather than its gradual destruction. The 'essence' of this archive is not the gaps, because the gaps have not resulted from violence comparable to the barbarism Didi-Huberman writes about.

This archive smells of vinegar, not ashes. It is not grey; it is white, hazy blue, pale green and a well-known sepia tone. These are not the colours of total extinction but of gradual ruination. Georg Simmel, in his essay *The Ruin*, observed that ruins have a tendency to take on the colours of their surroundings, an effect which he ascribes to "the long common destinies, dryness and moisture, heat and cold, outer wear and inner disintegration, which they have encountered through the centuries." [16] Simmel's concern in this essay is with gradually ruined buildings in which we tend to see embodied time and fugacity and which we contemplate as aesthetic objects. Still, the text came to mind when I noticed the colours of the archive and how they, too, seem to tell of nature "merely exercising a right which until now has remained latent but which she never [...] has renounced," [17] namely, the right of the material to take its natural course, to decay.

Along with an unfinished past, this archive also has an unedited future. Several reels of film were apparently meant for a film titled *6 Anos Depois* ('Six Years After'). It appears to be the only film shot in colour. The reel you showed me must have been shot a few years after the war. Curiously it bears scuff marks, which typically testify to frequent projection, although these are obviously raw, unedited takes. After the appearance of the clapperboard (held by Flora Gomes) each take is a static shot of the remains of a Portuguese military base: debris of bombed buildings, abandoned army vehicles, impressive stacks of disused mortar shells and piles of wrapped bundles of what appears to be fuse cord. Several shots show the same statues of Portuguese colonisers that you had filmed in Cacheu – broken apart, grotesquely maintaining their mutilated postures. One can tell that time has passed from the trees and bushes which have started to grow over the ruins. This seems to be the images' message: time has moved on, these weapons will not kill anymore. Nature will cover them soon.

[...]

→ **abotcha** The village (tabanca) of Malafó is located about 90 km from Bissau, on the northern bank of the Geba Channel, in the Oio region (central Guinea-Bissau). The river basin is surrounded by a forest of savannahs and floodplains, a wetland that leads to the sea, making it an excellent place for developing agricultural and fishing activities. The area is immediately adjacent to the natural park 'Parque Natural das Lagoas de Cufada', run by the Institute for Biodiversity and Protected Areas (IBAP). The management of the Malafó School, its parents' association 'Associação de Pais e Encarregados de Educação' (APEE) – No Ria Bolanha, as well as the local community all believe that in order to prevent that acquired knowledge gets quickly forgotten over time, it is not enough to learn how to read or write. They strive to develop their own literary and academic knowledge as well as general culture by setting-up a local public library. The vision of the Mediateca Onshore came from the encounter between Geba Filmes, the luta ca caba inda collective and the Malafó community. The building of the Mediateca Onshore was constructed between February and August 2021.



Archive#1    Archive#2



Archive#3



Archive#4



Archive#5



Archive#6



Archive#7



Archive#8

## 6. To tell a story again

This will be the last chapter in this transitional protocol. While we were having these discussions, you were coming to terms with the task of doing something with these images. The question was not *whether* to do anything, but *what* to do with them.

Images are there to be used, you said, and what interests you is how they work on you and on others. "I don't think there is a 'safe' position where we could speak from without risking contradictions. And if there were, I wouldn't be interested in holding it. One is always vulnerable when entering an unknown area." You are considering experimenting again with an arrangement which you had already applied to the film about Cacheu,[18] the fortress which played a crucial role in the slave trade from Guinea-Bissau: a projection of images runs in the background while a

performer relates a contemporary discourse on what can be seen, badly seen or not seen at all. You want to collaborate with several performers, with people who, this time, are not meant to represent your alter ego but who will be acting on the basis of their own relations to these images. One of those you invited is Grada Kilomba.

Grada Kilomba is a Portuguese writer and academic living in Berlin. “Writer, poet, lecturer and psychologist with origins in the West African islands São Tomé and Príncipe, she was born in Lisbon, where she studied clinical psychology and psychoanalysis.”[19] She left Portugal for many of the same reasons that you did, but she had others, too.

I cannot help remembering how the street where I grew up in Lisbon, officially named *rua Dr. João de Barros*, became known as *rua dos Macacos* – ‘The Monkeys’ Street’. Sometimes it was called ‘República das bananas’, an imaginary nation inhabited by monkeys. In the eyes of whites, we the Blacks, were ‘monkeys’ who had recently arrived from formerly colonized Africa. On the one hand, the grotesque fantasy of classifying us as monkeys, reveals the need to assert our position as inferior – as outside humanity. On the other hand, the need to imagine our street as an illusory separate country reveals this forced incompatibility of Blackness and Portuguese-ness. [...] Every time we left our republic or ‘ghetto’, we were asked, ‘Where do you come from?’ as a reminder of where we should be.[20]

This is a memory from a country which was proud to have recently liberated itself from a totalitarian regime. The time of this memory would have been about the time when *Six Years After* was meant to be finished.

This text ends at the *beginning* of a process, the further course and duration of which cannot be anticipated. In one of our last conversations you said that you are not considering the archive as a means of ‘taking revenge’. Indeed, the difficulty of the task seems to be accepting such a heritage, ‘whether we want it or not’, without entering what Derrida has called ‘the fatality of vengeance’.[21] This, however, does not constitute an easy argument for reconciliation. Neither revenge nor reconciliation seem to be proper gestures when entering a heritage: the former accepts the past as a curse, while the latter assumes that the past can be put to an end in the present. For the time being, the task as regards this archive seems to be what Manthia Diawara has occasionally observed in more recent African cinema, which is “struggling to make sense out of all the contradictory voices coming out of the past.”[22] And the voices to these images are still resting in their boxes.

[...]

[From Filipa César *A Grain Without Marker*]

*Luta ca caba inda* is a Creole expression which means “the struggle is not over yet”. It is also the title of an unfinished film in the collection, thus cursing the accomplishment of the film, of the

struggle, and eventually of this project too. We appropriated the title and its curse for a series of screenings and discursive events used to channel the contents of the fragmentary corpus, and to welcome its conflicts. In this text, “we” always means the Guinean filmmakers and the crowd that built an alliance from the first cataloguing of the materials in Bissau, through the digitisation in Berlin, up to the participation in multiple screenings and discussions in dozens of locations in the past four years. *Luta ca caba inda showed itself to us as an irrelevant irreverent force that claims: I am not from yesterday. It is a projectile that is travelling for decades, centuries and offered the chance to join the journey.*

The transfer of the film and audio reels onto digital matter was not an action of institutional preservation of the audiovisual material. The experimental digitisation occurred in 2012 in collaboration with the Arsenal – Institute for Film and Video Art in Berlin and its copies are held both there and at the National Film and Audiovisual Institute in Bissau. The analogue material was sent back to Bissau in January 2013. Facing an otherwise irrelevant archive, we had to create our own techniques, rules, ethics and praxis as “new archivists” (Derrida 1995 / 1996). The digitisation of the archive was a process of documenting our passage through that audiovisual matter – a dated molecular transfer. There was no attempt at restoring the material to any hypothetical original state[23]. None of these words – recovering, restoring, preserving – apply to *Luta ca caba inda*, which is about film materials as agents of today.

[...]

We stopped calling it an archive and instead a collective milieu, an assemblage of shrapnel. To deal with the shrapnel of colonialism means to deal with all the violence that comes through it; it means embracing the conflicts related with a permanent “decolonisation of thinking” (Viveiros de Castro 2012) as a condition and as a never-accomplishable task.

→ ***Luta ca caba inda***

→ **mediateca**

#### Closing lines

The film archive from Guinea-Bissau is proof that no archive can be regarded as a contextless collection of media. Despite or rather because of its changeable state, this film archive raises essential questions about how to deal with colonial history, specifically in connection with the medium of film, its materiality, its collective production process, its characteristic potential for documentation and/or illusion-making, its accessibility and availability. In addition, however, this archive has its very own, individual character:

“This archive is defiantly irrelevant for the purposes of History [His-story] writing, instead it expands a space to connect, discuss, and tangle a web of empathies, kinships (Haraway 2015) and cine-families[24].” [César 2016: 70]

In matters of reappraisal and digitalization, as well as international promotion and awareness-raising, the Arsenal – Institut für Film und Videokunst e.V. (Institute for Film and Video Art) in Berlin has been an important collaborator. Its multi-layered approach to the subject of the archive in the *Living Archive* project was described in an article by Stefanie Schulte Strathaus in *MAP #5 Archiv / Prozesse 2*. In September 2021, Mediateca Onshore was presented as part of the Arsenal's "Archival Assembly #1" program. This presentation of the website, which offers essential access to the project's origins, growth, and activities, and the conversations between Filipa César, Flora Gomes and Marinho de Pina, demonstrated the multifaceted nature of the project as an "entanglement of networks" (César) and so also the peculiarity of the project in the context of what a (film) archive can or should be. Current activities, such as the completion of new premises in 2021 and their use by on-site actors, bring to light an idea of the archive as an artistic instrument by means of which past events can be actualized, transformation processes assisted, and active participation made possible.

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[1] [editor's note: *Before "Six Years After". Notes on the re-emergence of a film archive in Guinea Bissau* is cited in the 2014 version. This revised version of the text appeared in the online journal *View*. The English version of the text was edited by Anna Canby Monk. <https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/2014/7-postcolonial-image-archives>, 10.6.22]

[2] Jacques Derrida. *Archive Fever*. Chicago 1998: 30.

[3] Referring to Sana Na N'Hada's comment about learning how to be humble through voluntary work in Cuba.

[4] This made me recall film titles with the word "sun": *Soleil Ô* (Med Hondo, 1969), *Sans Soleil* (Chris Marker, 1982), *La petite vendeuse de soleil* (Djibril Diop Mambéty, 1999), *Mille Soleils* (Mati Diop, 2013), *In the Year of the Quiet Sun* (The Otolith Group, 2013).

[5] [editor's note: Hering's text is based on interviews with Filipa César.]

[6] Sékou Touré pushed for a 'No' vote in the French Union Referendum and, as a result, Guinea was to become the only French colony to decline to become part of the new French Community. His answer to de Gaulle was: "We prefer poverty in freedom to riches in slavery."

[7] This and all subsequent quotes by Flora Gomes, Sana Na N'Hada and Suleimane Biai are from *Between the first and second shots*, edited by Filipa César in the context of Labor Berlin 5, hosted by the House of World Cultures in Berlin, 2011. *Between the first and second shots* can be considered a precursor to which this text is a sequel.

[8] Manthia Diawara. "African Cinema and Decolonization". In: Okwui Enwezor (Ed.). *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994*. Munich 2001: 346.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.: 348.

[12] Fátima is a town in Portugal and the country's most prominent destination for religious tourists and catholic pilgrims.

[13] Gabú is a town in the East of Guinea-Bissau.

[14] [editor's note: The text is part of the text version 2014 by Tobias Hering as additional information.]

[15] Georges Didi-Huberman. *Das Archiv brennt*. (trans. A. Canby Monk) Berlin 2007: 7–8.

[16] Georg Simmel. "Two Essays: The Handle, and The Ruin". In: *The Hudson Review*. Vol. 11 No. 3 / 1958: 383.

[17] Ibid.: 382.

[18] Filipa César's *Cacheu* (2012) consists of one single shot and was filmed without interruption and editing on one roll of 16mm film. The montage process preceded the shooting, so that the image produced is the result of a performative assemblage between text, acting, projected image and framing by the cameraman and director of photography, Matthias Biber.

[19] Grada Kilomba. *Plantation Memories – Episodes of Everyday Racism*. Münster 2010 (back cover).

[20] Ibid.: 65 f.

[21] Jacques Derrida, op. cit., 25.

[22] Manthia Diawara, op. cit., 349.

[23] [editor's note: see quote in reference 15.]

[24] The idea of "cine-fils" by Serge Daney, a son of cinema, a family without genetic roots and their implicit exclusions, based on alliances, common interest and preoccupations.

#### Photo Credits

Archive#1\_Still from *Guiné-Bissau – 6 Anos Depois*, INCA. Sana Na N'Hada, Josefina Lopes Crato, José Cobumba and Flora Gomes, 1972

Archive#2\_Drone view of the construction of the Mediateca Onshore, Malafo. Marinho de Pina, 2021



Archive#3\_Reels from the unfinished film *Luta ca caba inda*. Filipa César, 2012

Archive#4\_Rali di DJunta Sintido, organized by GTO, Bissau, Mediateca Onshore, Malafo. Filipa César, 2021

Archive#5\_Still from *O Regresso de Amílcar Cabral*, INCA. Sana Na N'Hada, Josefina Lopes Crato, José Cobumba and Flora Gomes, 1976

Archive#6\_Aristides Pereira, Julius Nyerere, Luís Cabral, INCA. Sana Na N'Hada, Josefina Lopes Crato, José Cobumba and Flora Gomes, 1976

Archive#7\_Still from *Spell Reel*. Filipa César, 2017

Archive#8\_View from the INCA archive. Filipa César, 2011