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## **View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.**

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*Before Six Years After. Notes on the re-emergence of a film archive in Guinea-Bissau (based on conversations with Filipa César)*

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## **Before *Six Years After*. Notes on the re-emergence of a film archive in Guinea-Bissau**

**(based on conversations with Filipa César)**

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. 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. I thank the editors of *View* for the opportunity to revisit this text, especially since the reprint was occasioned by an ambivalent trace which the text itself had left in their call for papers. Introducing the critical scope of this issue, they had quoted a sentence from it:

"These archives smell of vinegar and not of ashes. They are not grey. Their colours are white, light blue and green, and sepia. These are not shades of total destruction but rather of an ongoing decay." This poetic description by Tobias Hering concerns African film archives, their condition, and our (lack of) memory of them. It might also reveal a certain aspect of a Western way of thinking which forces us to represent postcolonial countries as colourful and entropic landscapes of ruin.

I was gripped by this unexpected echo of something I had written and I was concerned by the criticism suggested in the context. On second thoughts, I noticed that the quote was slightly inaccurate. Where it reads "these archives"

I had actually written "this archive", evoking a specific site in Bissau rather than generalizing on 'African film archives' as is suggested in the call for papers. Yet,

instead of easing the discomfort the criticism had caused by putting the blame on the misquotation, I felt it was necessary to take seriously the observation suggested: my way of thinking and writing about this film archive might be drawing on problematic predilections. The point made is valuable: noting the smells and



**View of the archive at INCA, January 2011. © Filipa César**

colours of a derelict film archive risks continuing a tradition of aestheticising – rather than politicising? – the traces of anti-colonial struggle. I cannot dispel this impression, and I don't wish to.

Reconsidering the 'aesthetics of ruination' brought to mind a remark of 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, 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 but which 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 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."<sup>1</sup>

Being given the opportunity to republish this text brought of course the temptation to revise it and to eventually adjust what with hindsight might appear inaccurate or embarrassing, or to add what further research had yielded in the meantime. Together with the editors we decided, however, to leave the original text intact, merely to add some additional annotations and to write this preface. The text represents a stage in an ongoing process. 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 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 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. While this archive made me first and foremost think of Georges Didi-Huberman's observation that 'the essence' of any archive is 'its gaps', I must now admit that

### Suleimane Biai

The original footnote reads:

"Suleimane Biai is a filmmaker living in Guinea-Bissau; he studied cinema at the EICTV (Escuela Internacional De Cine y Televisión: 'The International Film and TV School'), Cuba and has been assistant director to Flora Gomes and Sana N'Hada over the past two decades." Meanwhile Suleimane Biai has become a constant collaborator in this ongoing project and his credits must be amended: he is one of the speakers in Filipa César's single-take film *Cuba* (2012) and both have co-directed the subsequent films *Uma Cabana* (2014, produced for a parallel exhibition at the Venice Biennial of Architecture), and *Regulado* (2014), a double-screen video installation first presented at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein in May 2014. Suleimane Biai is not only a film-maker, but also works as the *régulo* in the area around his native town Farim, which means that he has assumed the duties of the head and conciliator of the community. In the end of 2014, together with Sana na N'Hada and other participants from Bissau, Filipa César and Suleimane Biai organised a mobile cinema to several places in Guinea-Bissau as a means to 'return' the archive material to a wider public in the country itself.

Suleimane Biai, a film-maker from Guinea-Bissau who became a crucial and dedicated actor in this project, has described its stakes more accurately: "The archive is somewhere and one day it is bound to turn up." The only change in the original text reprinted here has been to shorten its ending; to leave out a list of open questions pointing to future research, some of which have turned out to be trivial or based on mistaken assumptions. I prefer to let Suleimane Biai have the last word here, describing not only where we still are with this archive but also where it might take us in the future.

## 1. To open an archive

When we first met to start working on this text you said: "If we start with me entering the archive, we start right in the middle." Entering an archive is usually preceded by entering a contract, or at least an agreement. In this case the archive was entered between two sentences, through an aside by Carlos Vaz.<sup>2</sup> He said (you told me):

"We should have the film *The Return of Amilcar Cabral* here."

"What do you mean by 'here'?"

"*Here* - in the archive room of the INCA. I can show you."

One beginning of this project, it seems, was the announcement of a return.

To open an archive means to deal with a predicament which Jacques Derrida has described: that 'to be' essentially means 'to inherit'.

Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task. It remains before us just as unquestionably as we are heirs [...], even before wanting or refusing to be, and, like all inheritors, we are in mourning. In mourning in particular for what is called Marxism. To be, [...] means [...] to inherit. [...] There is no backward-looking fervour in this reminder, no traditionalist flavour.

Reaction, reactionary, or reactive are but interpretations of the structure of inheritance. That we are heirs does not mean that we have or that we receive this or that, some inheritance that enriches us one day with this or that, but that the being of what we are is first of all inheritance, whether we like it or know it or not.<sup>3</sup>

You 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 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 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.<sup>4</sup> In Conakry something had already begun.



Flora Gomes holding the clapper-board for *Guiné-Bissau, 6 Anos Depois*, 1980 (unfinished film). © INCA Guinea-Bissau, José Cobumba, Josefina Crato, Flora Gomes, Sana na N'Hada

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 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 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."<sup>5</sup>

"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."<sup>6</sup> 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?"<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup>

Sana 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."

Manthia Diawara reminds us that politics, just like cinema, is produced; he argues that the means of production of African cinema today are largely defined by the means of production of neo-colonial politics. "Meanwhile, every artist in Africa knows that the victory of independence, no matter how brief it was, represents Africa's best moment."<sup>9</sup> 'Meanwhile' /at the same time: like two images projected on top of each other, like two soundtracks overlapping. To create such double exposures, however, the second image is indispensable.

Sana 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* as “...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.”<sup>10</sup> *Mortu Nega* – the first, the exception? The film was made in 1988 and its story is set sometime between 1972 and 1974. The moment in Morés recalled by Sana 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.

1988

*Mortu Nega* was shot in 1987 and it premiered in 1988.

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 Fatima with French commentary, a film about Portuguese immigrants in France, and a box labelled ‘Centro Islâmico de Gabú’ (Islamic Centre of Gabú),<sup>11</sup> another ‘Contratipo Entrevista Amílcar Cabral’ (copy of an interview with Amílcar

‘1967’

The ‘1967’ box is probably the one which later turned out to contain one of the few 35mm reels in this archive. A short, roughly edited film showing foreign students doing ‘voluntary farm work’ somewhere in Cuba. Interestingly, among those chopping down weeds with machetes can be seen all four Guinean film students, José Cobumba, Josefina Crato, Flora Gomes, and Sana na N’Hada. The vaguely comical scenario in an



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.

overgrown field was probably staged for the camera by Dervis Spinoza, the cameraman working with Santiago Alvarez, whom Sana na N'Hada identified in one of the shots.

While you photographed, you noticed the smell of vinegar in the room. Anyone dealing with film archives knows this is not a good sign because it indicates an advanced state of decay inside the film cans. You smelt the images before you saw them but, needless to say, the smell is not visible in the photographs you took. It was too early to open the boxes, yet possibly already too late.

## 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.

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 N'Hada and Suleimane



Amílcar Cabral and Ahmed Sékou Touré at the "Week of Information" at Palais du Peuple, Conakry September 1972 (unedited footage). © INCA Guinea-Bissau, José Cobumba, Josefina Crato, Flora Gomes, Sana na N'Hada

### Chris Marker

After his departure from Bissau, Chris Marker encouraged his friend and co-editor Anita Fernandez to continue

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 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*."

what he felt was a promising collaboration with young Guinean filmmakers. 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 filmmakers' 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 gathered from the archive in Bissau. The screening took place in the framework of the 'Living Archive' project at cinema Arsenal.

Early images sometimes reach us late. My own memory of *Sans Soleil* was so fractured that I had to watch the film again to know what we were talking about. This made me remember a remark by Serge Daney who said that, "...cinema only exists to bring back what has already been seen once – well seen, poorly seen, unseen."<sup>12</sup> What struck me about *Sans Soleil* this time was how deliberately this film stares at its own future with oblivion. The cats, the candles, the computers, the many eyes looking at the camera. All these images claim to be purely present, even though they were probably shot over the course of several years and gathered across distances. The light they radiate is already a reflection from the white-out of oblivion. Every image is taken to capture a presence and every image burns to be remembered and trembles at the prospect of being forgotten. But how can we not look at an image in retrospect? What else can an image do than recall something we had forgotten, even if that something is the future?

### 3. To write from memory

One always writes from memory, especially when writing about 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. When I look again I know that I missed something, but I hope that my notes will later help me bridge the gaps – remember, in a way, that which I haven't seen. Memory is not a storage room to enter and choose from. Images come and go, and only when we remember them do we notice that we have seen them before. Some will never return; we will forget to remember them. And when we forget, we also forget that we have forgotten.

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

#### 1973

Regarding the *Weltfestspiele der Jugend* in East Berlin, Sana na N'Hada subsequently specified that he himself had been part of the delegation from Guinea-Bissau and had been filming extensively throughout their visit in Berlin. A four-minute reel from this footage was identified among the archive material in Bissau, but Sana recalls that he was asked to deliver his footage to DEFA, the East German State film production company, to be used in the production of the film mentioned in the text. A thorough research for this footage in the German Federal Film Archive is still to be conducted and can hopefully take place on the occasion of Sana's next visit to Berlin.

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 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.

The first film we watched together was a DEFA production documenting the '*Weltfestspiele der Jugend und Studenten*' ('World Festival of Youth and Students') held in East Berlin in 1973.<sup>13</sup> We watched it without sound on a computer screen during its real time digitisation at the Kornmanufaktur in Berlin. I vaguely remembered having seen this film before, but I didn't recognise much of it and I wouldn't have recognised the regiments of the 'Amílcar Cabral Youth' on a stage in East Berlin defying a war that wasn't yet over. We did notice the East Berlin architecture – the airy façades and bulky arches of socialist modernism. Later, we recognised similar architecture in another film *A semana da informação* ('The Week of Information'), which was shot in the *Palais du Peuple* in Conakry in September 1972.

This was probably the first and only occasion on which the four young filmmakers, who had just returned from Cuba, were actually filming Amílcar Cabral. Between these images and those shot in East Berlin, Cabral was assassinated. He didn't live to see the unilateral proclamation of independence of Guinea-Bissau a few months later.

Images of this ceremony appeared in another film, Fernando Matos Silva's *Acto dos Feitos do Guiné* (1980), which we had watched together some six months before in the archive of the Arsenal Institute for Film and Video Art, Berlin. Curiously, as in the scene in *Mortu Nega* described above, the camera records faces and postures while a voice is heard from a loudspeaker. In *Mortu Nega*

### Lennart Malmer

Sana na N'Hada emphasizes the equally important role of Swedish filmmaker Ingela Romera who accompanied Lennart Malmer on his repeated trips to Guinea-Bissau. The two of them also hosted Sana in Sweden while he was editing 'The Return of Amílcar Cabral' (*O regresso de Amílcar Cabral*), the film mentioned again in the following paragraph. It was actually edited in their house. The footage of Amílcar Cabral which Sana used in this film was taken from Swedish television archives and had been shot by another Swedish documentarist, Rudi Spee.

### newsreel documentary

Apparently, when writing this text I hadn't fully seen *O regresso de Amílcar Cabral* yet. It is much more than what the term 'newsreel documentary' might suggest. It is a visual and acoustic epitaph for Amílcar Cabral, a collective film shot

the voice announces Cabral's death whereas in this scene the voice is Cabral's own and it announces Guinea-Bissau's independence – before the fact and after his death. The first scene is fiction, the second is not. Speaking with Matos Silva in Lisbon shortly after, you learned that the footage he used was shot by the Swedish documentary filmmaker Lennart Malmer. As a cameraman and cutter and as a link to Swedish postproduction facilities, Malmer played a crucial role in contributing to the beginnings of a cinema in Guinea-Bissau. In a number of pans from his footage one can actually see Flora Gomes and Sana N'Hada working with their own cameras and microphones. A 16mm reel of *Acto dos Feitos do Guiné* was also found in the Bissau archive, along with the remains of the footage that Flora Gomes and Sana N'Hada had shot that day.

Noticeably, among the finished films in the archive was 'The Return of Amílcar Cabral' (*O regresso de Amílcar Cabral*), the film which Carlos Vaz remembered. Others remembered it too. 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?

by the four Guinean film-makers and edited by Sana na N'Hada in Sweden (see annotation above). Sana says that the film was made with a large diaspora in mind, the thousands of Guineans who had fled the country during the war and who were still living in exile. Inevitably the dominating theme of 'return' and the depiction of an independent country paying a solemn tribute to a great leader make the film appear as a pledge to return from exile and help build a new country. The heavily worn look of the print suggests that it travelled widely, and Sana recalls that it was often shown in diaspora communities in Europe and the US.

#### never shown

See annotation above. The question just how little of the footage which the four film-makers produced in the 1970's has ever been seen by an audience should probably be treated with more care than I did in this assumption. *O regresso de Amílcar Cabral* was actively distributed. Footage shot by Sana na N'Hada, Flora Gomes and their two late comrades can be traced in a number of films dealing with Guinea-Bissau specifically, or the decolonization period in general. I mention some such examples myself in the text and who knows what other appearances of 'found footage' from Bissau are bound to turn up in the future?

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?

#### 4. To propagate a future state

Clearly from the 1960s on, a propagandistic cinema should have been established which would have celebrated the independence victories in the various countries. The merit of such a cinema would have consisted in the teaching of the history and ideology of independence. Like all propagandistic art, such a cinema would have been produced and distributed by the state.<sup>14</sup>

Contemplating African cinema, Diawara comes to re-evaluate propaganda: he refers to the failure of cinema to turn Patrice Lumumba and Kwame Nkrumah into the public heroes they deserved to be. In both cases, he argues, the coup d'état came too soon and allowed for a quick rewriting of history in the interest of new rulers. "In asking how people could have had such a short memory of colonialism in Africa that they would accept the demonization of those who fought for freedom and welcome the former colonizer as a saviour, I began to understand the power and the limits of propagandistic art."<sup>15</sup> This is an argument about the time it takes to establish a public image and it is also about the fact that no image is ever produced naturally, but rather according to who has the power to do so. In any case, the argument is that



Still from *O Regresso de Amílcar Cabral*, 1976. Foreground from left to right: Aristides Pereira, Sana na N'Hada (with camera), Luís Cabral, Ana Maria Cabral (widow of Amílcar Cabral). © INCA Guinea-Bissau, Lennart Malmer



a propagandistic image is not by definition 'a lie'.

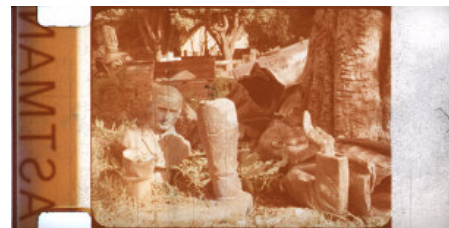
Still, it feels strange to say, "There should have been propaganda." The liberal-minded don't want to be harassed by propaganda. But what's so dangerous about propaganda when we believe we can recognise it? Isn't the concern with propaganda always a slightly paternalistic concern about the shortcomings of the Other who might fall for it?

Flora Gomes: "Amílcar didn't want cheap propaganda. I remember how, in the early 1970s, a French filmmaker made an exaggerated documentary and he refused to endorse it, saying that it had nothing to do with our struggle. Maybe that was the way it was in Vietnam, but it wasn't like that in Guinea-Bissau. Just to show that Cabral never settled for things that were beyond his reach, he wanted Portuguese colonialism to be portrayed faithfully and true to the facts."

What would a propaganda film from Guinea-Bissau have looked like? When you were finally able to watch the digitised footage from the archive, you said you realised how meticulously the liberation process had been documented. "The militant struggle, the unilateral declaration of independence, the replacement of the army ranks, the gazes, the insecurity in people's eyes. Later the change of the currency and the introduction of new money – all the important elements of what it

means when a country is liberated are meticulously and consciously documented." You told me that you showed some of this footage to Harun Farocki and that he described it as being constantly the same gesture: representation, representation, representation. "Yes, representation, and even propaganda. What else would they be?" Amílcar Cabral is officially honoured in Guinea-Bissau. Streets, schools, institutions bear his name and the day of his death is nationally commemorated. He is honoured for liberating the country, but not for his project. "Many people in Guinea-Bissau have a longing for Cabral," you said, "but few remember what he wanted."

What was his project according to these images? An African socialist project, a unification project, a nationalist project, a from-the-country-to-the-cities-project



Footage from *Guiné-Bissau, 6 Anos Depois, 1980* (unfinished film). © INCA  
Guinea-Bissau, José Cobumba,  
Josefina Crato, Flora Gomes, Sana na  
N'Hadar

- a project well worth criticising, but also a project which many supported for their own valid reasons. This is not counting the dead but the living. The meaning of 'propaganda' in Diawara's argument seems to be that in a particular historical moment images are not meant to show facts, but to propagate a future that hasn't quite arrived yet. They are images made to remember what people imagined. They are devoid of content, because they are gestures describing a space to be filled, an empty space.

In this sense, *A semana da informação* was meant to become a straightforward propaganda film, 'faithful' and 'true'. Cabral guides his guests through a showcase of Guinea-Bissau's bright, socialist future; a future that hasn't fully arrived yet, because the liberation war which is fought to clear the path is still waged a few hundred kilometres north. But here is Cabral: casually dressed, like a curator (you said), gentle, hospitable, a leader already of a nation that didn't quite exist yet. Hosting his hosts, Cabral receives Sékou Touré and his wife. The singer Miriam Makeba and her husband – former Black Panther 'prime minister' Stokely Carmichael, who had moved to Conakry and started to work with Touré in 1969 – can be seen entering the building. The gradual liberation of Guinea-Bissau from Portuguese occupation allowed Cabral to present his guests with products from already-liberated farms and local weavers. He also shows weapons captured from the Portuguese army, and once – exhibiting the same tranquillity with which he has presented the woven textiles – he gently unfolds a Portuguese flag, taken down from some colonial outpost or military depot. We can only imagine what effect these images could have had, had they been distributed as was no doubt intended. To imagine is only the least we can do. And it is not only Cabral who radiates from a future light; everyone in these images from Conakry in 1972 is beaming with optimism and pride, boldly displaying their hard-won freedom alongside portraits of African leaders.<sup>16</sup>

## 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

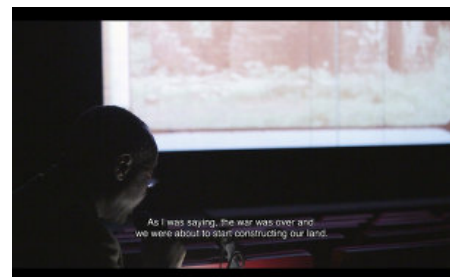


of the absence of those other archives, however,

...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.<sup>17</sup>

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."<sup>18</sup> 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...,"<sup>19</sup> namely, the right of the material to take its natural course, to decay.



Cinema Arsenal, Berlin, November 2012: Sana na N'Hada giving live commentary to scenes from *Guinée-Bissau, 6 Anos Depois*. © Filipa César

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.

Taking the Simmel provocation yet further, I note that he credits the aesthetic pleasure derived from a ruin to a sense of 'returning home', a feeling of 'peace': "...expressing this peace for us, the ruin orders itself into the surrounding landscape without a break, growing together with it like tree and stone."<sup>20</sup> It is safe to say that this is the gaze operating in the images from *Six Years After*. The message is 'peace'; these images were meant to be embedded in a narrative about striving farms and people who have taken their affairs into their own hands. Today these images of ruins have become ruins themselves. Now it is us looking at them, some forty years later, reading the title 'Six Years After', imagining the sepia as a lush green and noting that this footage was never seen by anyone except those who shot it and maybe the person who developed it in Lisbon or Stockholm. What kind of peace could possibly be derived from these ruins? And what about aesthetics? Is it significant to note that the re-naturalisation of these ruins seems to come full circle with the beginnings of Amílcar Cabral's politicisation as an agronomist?<sup>21</sup> At least it seems that a politics derived from the soil – something which nourishes, shelters and provides graves – has less to fear from nature taking its course than the bombastic displays of capital cities.

## 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,<sup>22</sup> 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."<sup>23</sup> 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

### Grada Kilomba

Grada Kilomba subsequently became the co-author, together with Diana McCarthy, of one of the performative single-take films which Filipa César produced in relation to the archive material from Bissau. *Conakry* (2013) has Kilomba and McCarthy reflecting on images taken from the footage labelled *Semana do informação* ('Week of information'), which is described above.

asked, 'Where do you come from?' as a reminder of where we should be.<sup>24</sup>

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'.<sup>25</sup> 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."<sup>26</sup> And the voices to these images are still resting in their boxes.



Cinema Arsenal, Berlin, June 2013:  
Anita Fernandez reading a private  
letter from Chris Marker. © Filipa  
César

Suleimane Biai: "A part of Guinea-Bissau's archive is, I think, somewhere between Bissau, Portugal and Sweden. What Sana told me is that when they arrived from Guinea-Conakry in 1974 after independence, they packed what they had filmed to send to Stockholm to be developed. It was all put on a plane and part of it vanished between Bissau and Stockholm. Nobody knows if it is still in Bissau, in Lisbon or in Stockholm and nobody has taken responsibility [for the loss]. The archive is somewhere and one day it is bound to turn up."

## Footnotes

- 1 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 30.
- 2 Carlos Vaz is the director of INCA (Instituto Nacional de Cinema e Audiovisual), the Film and Audiovisual Institute of Guinea-Bissau.
- 3 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. P. Kamuf (New York – London: Routledge, 2006), 67–68. [Emphasis original].
- 4 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."
- 5 This and all subsequent quotes by Flora Gomes, Sana 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.
- 6 Manthia Diawara, "African Cinema and Decolonization," in *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Munich: Prestel, 2001), 346.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid., 348.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Gabú is a town in the East of Guinea-Bissau.
- 12 Serge Daney, *Postcards from the Cinema* (Oxford–New York: Berg, 2007), 90.
- 13 DEFA – Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft – was the East German state-owned film company.

14 Manthia Diawara, op. cit., 348.

15 Ibid., 348 f.

16 Stokely Carmichael later took on the name Kwame Ture as a double-homage to Sékou Touré and exiled Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah, whose student he had become in Conakry.

17 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Das Archiv brennt*, trans. A. Canby Monk (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2007), 7-8.

18 Georg Simmel, "Two Essays: The Handle, and The Ruin," *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 11 No. 3 (1958): 383.

19 Ibid., 382 .

20 Ibid., 383.

21 Amílcar Cabral graduated in Agronomy in 1950 at the Instituto Superior de Agronomia, Lisbon. In 1952, he was sent by the Ministério do Ultramar (Ministry of the Overseas) to Guinea-Bissau to work at Pessube Farm with the task of undertaking a major agriculture census in the country. This led him to travel throughout the country, getting to know people and the farms and thereby gaining a special insight into the social reality of the country. This was a decisive moment in Cabral's political awareness.

22 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.

23 Grada Kilomba, *Plantation Memories – Episodes of Everyday Racism* (Münster: Unrast, 2010), back cover.

24 Ibid., 65 f.

25 Jacques Derrida, op. cit., 25.

26 Manthia Diawara, op. cit., 349.