# ‘It is all about bringing the archive back into visibility’

## *Ichi: Marks in time*

**Paul Basu, Christopher Thomas Allen & Harriet Crisp**

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Ichi*:* Marks in time *(2023), shown as part of the 2025 Royal Anthropological Institute Film Festival, follows the return of photographs of men bearing facial scarification marks called* ichi *to the Umudioka community in Neni, Anambra State, Nigeria, where they were taken by the British anthropologist Northcote Thomas in 1911. The reintroduction of the photographs sparks an exploration of the histories and experiences of* ichi *and associated cultural practices by descendants of those photographed. The film illustrates the multiple affordances of the photographs, unravelling a straightforward reading of the colonial archive and building on ideas explored in Basu and Allen’s earlier film* Faces|Voices *(2019). The film was made collaboratively with the community in Neni and emerged from relationships built during fieldwork for Basu’s [Re:]Entanglements project. Vivid in colour and rich in musicality, this creative documentary is a joyous celebration of cultural heritage initiated and shaped by the community itself.*

*In the interview that follows, Basu and Allen discuss community collaboration, the multiple affordances of anthropological collections and the joy of opening up archives. The images from* Ichi: Marks in time *that accompany this piece appear in the sequence they occur in the film, creating a parallel narrative that moves from the breaking of kola through the history of* ichi *scarification to its contemporary revival. Quotations are from film participants, including on-screen speech or voice-over narration where indicated. The film is freely accessible online at re-entanglements.net/ichi. Ed.*

**Harriet Crisp (HC):** ***How did you come to work together?***

**Christopher Thomas Allen (CTA):** Paul and I met many years ago when I did a project called *Domestic archaeology*, exhibited at the Geffrye Museum in 2006 (The Light Surgeons 2006). Since then, we have stayed in touch. We collaborated on a couple of other projects before he invited me to participate in [Re:]Entanglements. That led to a series of films and then this longer film spilled out of that process.

**Paul Basu (PB):** *Domestic archaeology* really chimed with me. I came from a film and television background before working in anthropology, so that has always been a strand of interest. I am particularly interested in exhibition and multiscreen installation, going beyond film to think about how audiovisual elements are combined in exhibition spaces. That is what drew me to Chris’s work, particularly his live cinema projects. When it came to integrating audiovisual work into the [Re:]Entanglements project, Chris was an obvious person to approach about collaborating.

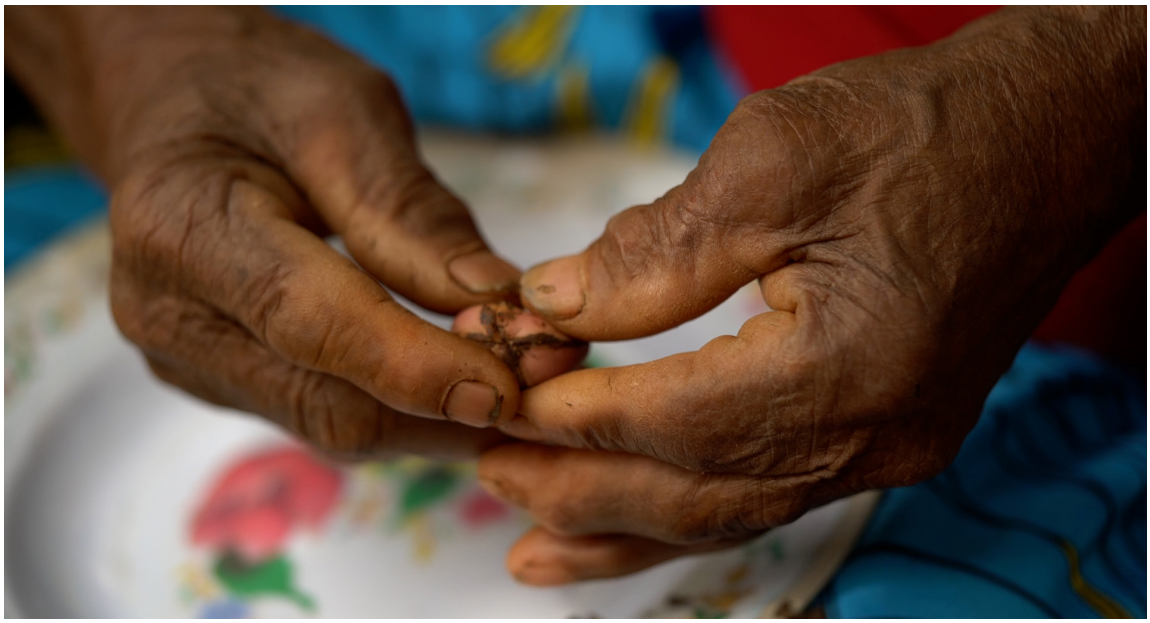
**HC:** ***The film was a collaboration with the Umudioka community of Neni, Anambra State, Nigeria. What was your process of collaboration?***

**PB:** One of the exciting things about this film is the fact that it was generated from the community, rather than the usual situation of reaching out to communities to get people involved in a project, where there is the danger of extractivism and the question of how genuine a collaboration is.

As part of the broader fieldwork for the [Re-]Entanglements project, my colleague George Agbo and I were travelling around southern Nigeria and Sierra Leone in the footsteps of the colonial anthropologist Northcote Thomas, bringing back historical anthropological photographs, digitized sound recordings and photographs of material culture collections to communities. The title of the AHRC [Arts and Humanities Research Council]-funded project was Museum Affordances. I was interested in what these historical ethnographic archives afford today for the descendants of those who were the subjects of Thomas’s anthropological surveys (Basu 2021).

When we visited Neni, in Anambra State, Nigeria, we had many photographs that were taken in that area of men with scarified faces. They really struck a chord with the local people because they recognized it was an archive of their ancestors’ work. They explained that there had been a revival of the so-called *Mma-nka* festival in the 1970s, which celebrates this heritage, and they had set up a small museum space.

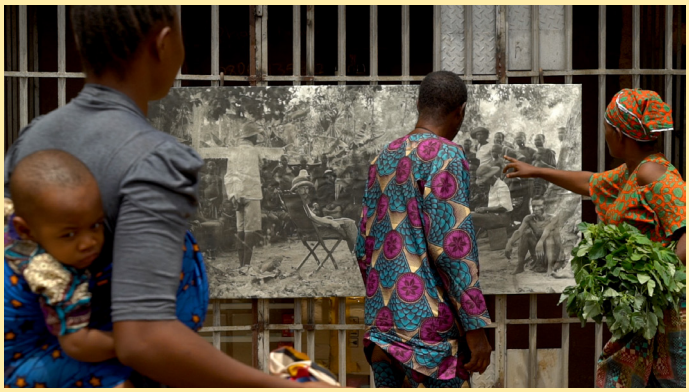
Later, Chiedozie Udeze, whose great-grandfather was among those photographed by Thomas, approached me and said the community would like to do something more with this material. The last people who had *ichi* scarifications were elderly men, and there was a rec-



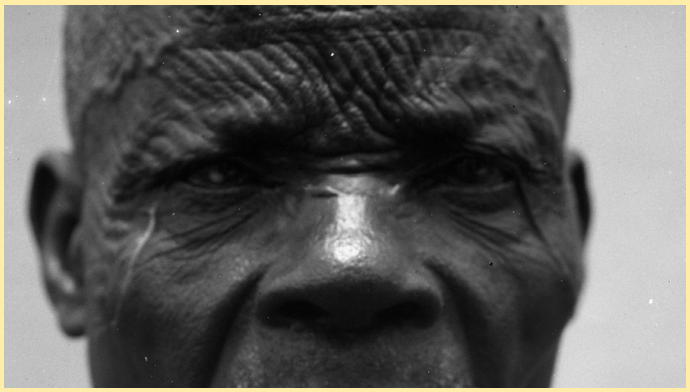
*‘Before you do anything in Igboland, you must use* kola*. To welcome all your visitors, you use* kola*. … You must use* kola *to call God, our ancestors, our living creator.’ – Prince Chukwunonso Umeokonkwo (Voice-Over).*

All stills from *Ichi: Marks in time* (2023), directed by Paul Basu and Christopher Thomas Allen.

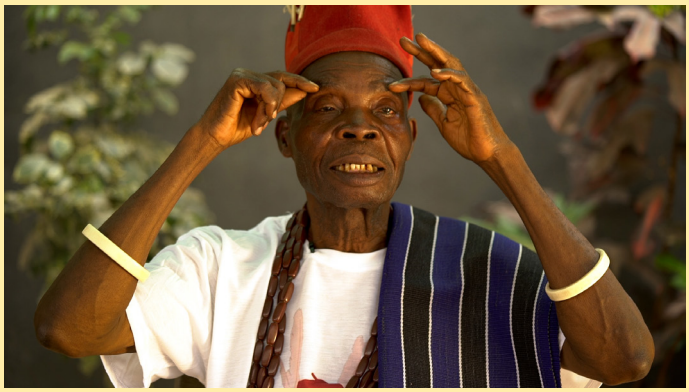
*'My name is Nze Eyisi Ebuluo II. I am a native of Neni, Anambra State, Nigeria. My ancestors came to this town many generations ago. We are the Umudioka people. Descendants of Akikpo.' – Nze Eyisi Ebuluo II (Voice-Over).*



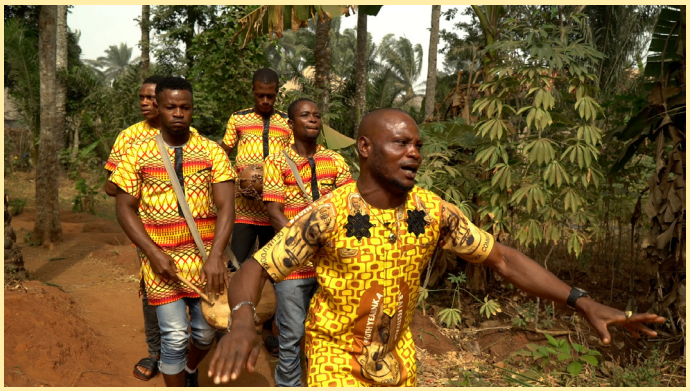
*'In 1911, over 110 years ago, the British government anthropologist Northcote Thomas visited Neni. During that time, the anthropologist took many pictures of our people … Their families are still here, still living in Neni.' – Nze Eyisi Ebuluo II (Voice-Over).*



*'Northcote took photographs of prominent people … including a picture of my own grandfather, Eyisi Ebulue. I am named after him. It is the only photograph of my grandfather. Without it, I would not know him.' – Nze Eyisi Ebuluo II (Voice-Over).*



*'Many of the men in the photographs have scarification marks on their faces. They are called* ichi. *… When I was young, many people had* ichi *marks on their faces. It is a very significant thing.' – Nze Eyisi Ebuluo II.*



*'The feast of* Nka-Dioka. *Let's go to Umudioka. I have come with the drums. I return to my community, Neni … I have a story to tell you about Umudioka, Neni.' – Sunny Igabor Musical Group (Song).*

*'My ancestors were the custodians of* igbu ichi. *God created in those days and Umudioka people protected. If we don't want you to go out as a slave, we do the carving on your face and no British slave master will buy you. Once he sees you, no, no, no … this one is not for sale.' – Ejike Ubanagum Mgbemena (Voice-Over).*

*'What is* igbu ichi*?* Igbu ichi *is art …* Igbu ichi *is pharmacology … We did not learn it from your university! Our God opened our eyes and showed us the leaves in the bush.* Igbu ichi *is also surgery. For you to perform the art, you have to know human biology. What we are removing then was the outer membrane. If you cut the skin and go down to the inner membrane, the person will bleed to death.' – Ejike Ubanagum Mgbemena.*

*'And do you know what? Let me tell you another thing. Before we put knife on your face, we will consult our ancestors. We have to go to the shrine. Before they do* igbu ichi *on you, the entire household must be cleansed.' – Ejike Ubanagum Mgbemena (Voice-Over).*

*'Umudioka people were artists. They beautify people. They decorated the human body, just as carvers decorated wooden doors.' – Nze Eyisi Ebuluo II (Voice-Over).*

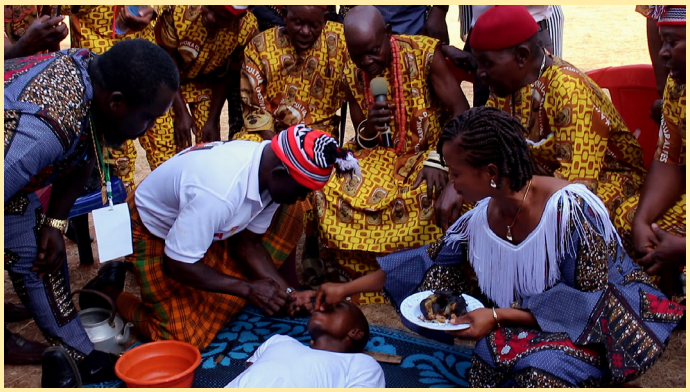
*'Umudioka people were travellers. We travelled throughout Igboland beautifying people. We cut* ichi *marks on men and what is called* mbubu *on women. As we travelled, we also settled in different towns.' – Nze Eyisi Ebuluo II (Voice-Over).*

*'There are very few people alive today who bear the* ichi *marks. They are mostly very old and frail. They are the last men … the last who know what it means to have their faces cut'. – Nze Eyisi Ebuluo II (Voice-Over).*

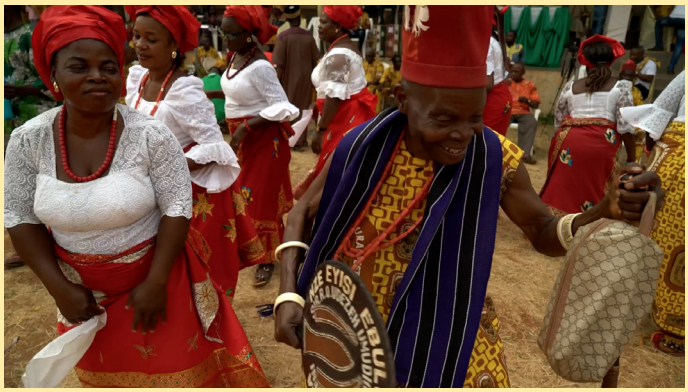
*'Charms were prepared and put on him so that the child would not die in the process, for it is a delicate procedure.* Ichi *cutting is a challenging task. It is not a simple thing.' – Nze Edwin Ezeokoye.*

*'He must walk the invisible spirit paths, and the visible spirit paths, and come back again.' – Nze Edwin Ezeokoye (Voice-Over).*

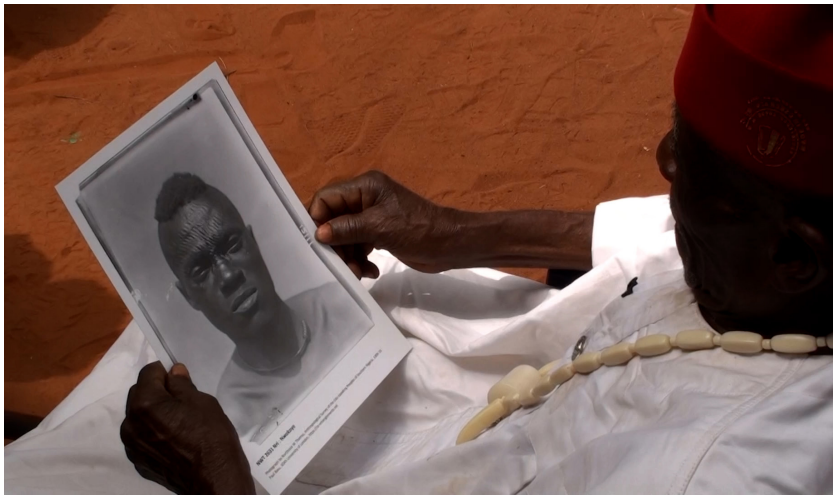
*'This one … you cut it here and here, and do it this way. It is called* diokpala ichi. *When this cut is completed, then it comes here to the right side … It is* ososе diokpala*.' – Ichie Lazarus Umeokolonkwo.*



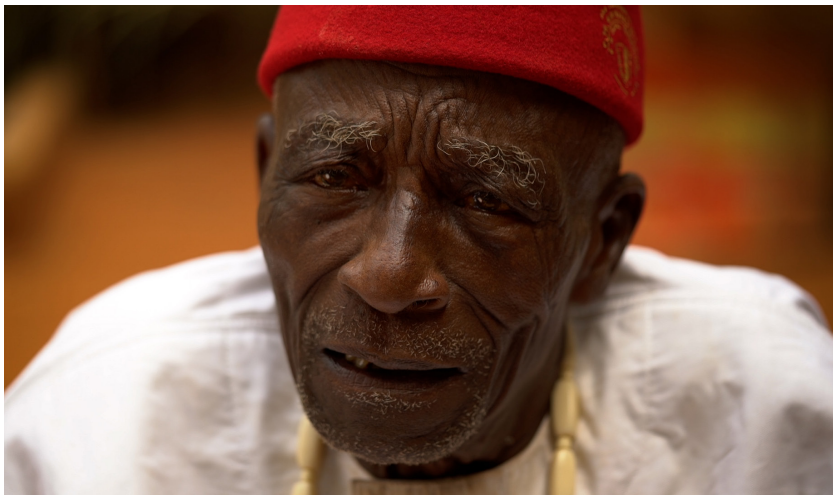
*'Every December 31st … It is open to the public to come and watch our* Nka-Dioka *festival. They come mostly to see how we tattoo people on the face. Today, it's only making the signs, not practically made. We give a certificate. It represents the artificial* ichi*.' – Nze Eyisi Ebuluo II (Voice-Over).*



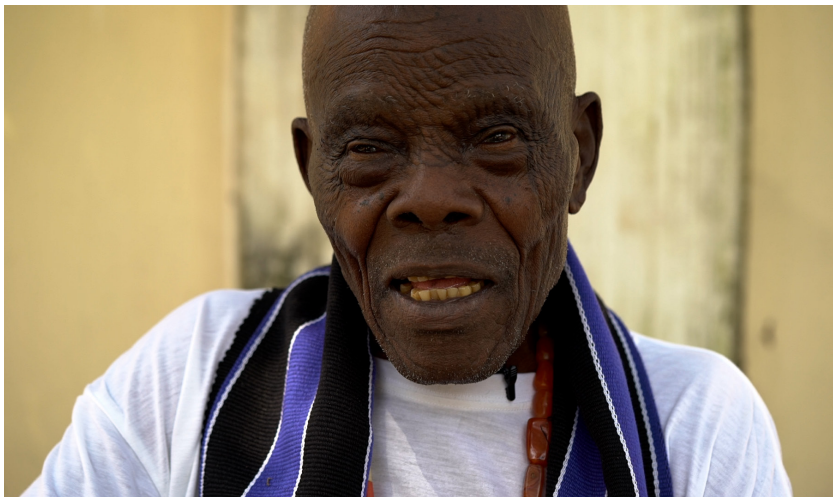
*'I feel happy because many people are visiting the festival to come and watch our culture. It is very important to young ones to know the culture of the Igbo people.' – Nze Eyisi Ebuluo II (Voice-Over).*



*'When Northcote Thomas took those photographs of our people,* igbu ichi *was at its height. Our traditional culture was intact. However, within 25 years, the practice had stopped.' – Nze Eyisi Ebuluo II (Voice- Over).*



*'Christianity came and abolished the* ichi *practice. People would no longer survive it.* Ichi *has become extinct.' – Ichie Lazarus Umeokolonkwo.*



*'All those with* ichi *in my town,. They are all gone. I am the only one left. If it is possible for the dead to be resurrected, I would wish that my brothers would reappear, so that we shall meet again.' – Chief Ododika Chidolue.*

ognition that they were nearing the end of their lives. The idea of a film recording their experiences emerged. Originally we intended to make a shorter film, wholly funded by a local charitable organization, the Eyisi Ebuluo Foundation, but it eventually developed into a feature-length documentary and we supplemented these funds from the AHRC grant.

Community collaboration was absolutely integral to this. We would not have made this film had it not been a desire of the community to do it. It was not part of the original plan of the [Re:]Entanglements project. It emerged out of the relationships that we had built through fieldwork. It was a joyful experience, not least in the way the community gathered together to make the film happen and being welcomed as honorary members of the community for a while.

**HC:** ***You have just mentioned the joy of the filmmaking process, and I think that comes across in the film. It has a sense of liveliness, rhythm and celebration. How was this achieved?***

**PB:** One element that contributes to this is capturing something of the vibrancy of the festival, with its singing and dancing, its masquerades and drumming. Another key thing is the way the film – indeed, the history of the Umudioka community – is narrated by a song written and performed by Sunny Ubah.

**CTA:** I think the musicality and joy came partly from the fact that aspects of the festival were re-enacted especially for the film. The actual festival took place on Boxing Day, when we could not be there. Some local videographers shot some material then, but it was restaged so that we could get right into the action.

**PB:** There is a musicality to the culture. There is a whole repertoire of songs and music associated historically with the making of the *ichi* marks. One of the most special memories I have was when we stumbled upon members of the Ichi Cultural Troupe informally rehearsing some of the songs. The interaction between that group of men who were practising their dance was just wonderful. It invades the film.

**HC:** ***Christopher, much of your work has involved found-footage filmmaking and live cinema. I can see a connection between this and the reuse of archival material and the exhibition events in the film. Do you see this project as a continuation of your wider practice?***

**CTA:** My whole career has been around exploring the relationship between sound and images, particularly music and moving image, and applying these ideas to the creation of immersive spaces. I have been a pioneer of what you could call VJ [video jockey] culture in a sense. In that world, the act of taking one thing and remixing it reflected what was going on in music. Over the years I got frustrated with the endless abstraction of working in the music industry and in the club environment, where sometimes the visuals become wallpaper.

I wanted to apply my creative practice to bring more meaning into these spaces and to tell stories. When the DV [digital video] camera became accessible and FireWire allowed you to edit your own video, I stopped sampling other people's films and started filming the world around me. I created my own archive from travelling and gathering audio interviews, and these became the bases of our live cinema performances.

Later, I worked with many different archives, including the British Film Institute's extensive collection. So, when Paul approached me, the idea of working with archives was not unusual to me. Paul introduced me to the idea of affordances, the latent energy that these archives contain. I felt it related to what I had been doing in various ways: finding things, recontextualizing them, unleashing them on audiences and making them relevant in a new way, opening up new readings and connections with the past in the present.

**HC:** ***Paul, you write about the latent possibilities of museum objects and archival images through the theory of affordances. This notion differs from the idea that these items are dead once they enter the museum or that they have a continual presence. Your concept puts emphasis on the person interacting with the object. Has your thinking developed through the making of this film?***

**PB:** I have drawn upon Gibson's theory of affordances and applied it in relation to collections and archives, specifically anthropological archives and collections (Basu & de Jong 2016). It shifts the focus from what something is, to consider what something makes possible or might make possible. It is a way of acknowledging the coloniality of these materials, but also recognizing that they are not only defined or contained by the colonial context that produced them.

I find a lot of recent discourse around museums and archives very reductive, and I have tried to expand our understanding of this difficult material by attending to the latent possibilities, meanings and significances it has for different stakeholders, including exploring what decolonial affordances these colonial collections might have. As you say, with the notion of affordance, it is not an intrinsic property of a thing, it is emergent, it is relational. The film itself is a great example of this, demonstrating how bringing these photographs back to the community can activate their hidden affordances in relation to the community's own interests and projects. It was their recognition of these possibilities that led to the film being made and to a mutually enriching collaboration.

**HC:** ***The film illustrates the affective power of photographs. Roland Barthes' idea of the 'punctum' (1981), the way that a photograph can sting the viewer, came to mind as I was watching the film. Why do photographic images hold this power, and how does it compare to that of text or sound?***

**PB:** Different archival media afford different things. Another important thing to remind ourselves of is that what these photographs or sound recordings were perceived to afford in 1909 to 1915, when Thomas was doing those surveys, is very different from what they might afford in 2025, or in 2020, when we made the film. That is the dynamism of affordances; it is not something that is fixed. What taking a photograph back to the descendant community in Neni means or makes possible in that cultural context may be very different from another context: for instance, if you showed me a photograph of my own great-grandfather. That is because the meaning of photography is also culturally specific, particularly in relation to the representing of ancestors.

**CTA:** Spending so much time looking at the photographs in the [Re:]Entanglements project, I was struck by the theatrics of the way they had been set up and the numbering of things, as well as the beauty and quality of the images. They act as a window into a past and they connect people through time.

**HC:** ***Where has the film been shown?***

**PB:** Chiedozie Udeze organized the first screening in Neni, where the film was shot. It was very important for this to happen and for those who participated in it to see it first. Unfortunately, Pa Odidika Chidolue, the last man with *ichi* marks in Neni, who features in the film, died before it was finished, but clips of the film screened as part of his funeral. It was then screened at the Abuja International Film Festival in Nigeria, and in a few other festivals, but we are still hoping to find a distributor.

**CTA:** Distribution has been difficult. It is lovely that it is now at the Royal Anthropological Institute Film Festival.

**HC:** ***I recently saw Errol Francis (2025) speak, and he proposed that the ownership, control and circulation of images of museum artefacts is as contestable as the holding of physical objects. How does your film contribute to this dimension of the discussion on decolonial practices in museums and archives?***

**PB:** It is all about bringing the archive back into visibility. The trouble is, how do you do that? A lot of that is done digitally. That does not mean a great deal for a lot of people, particularly in African contexts. To know that you can locate a photograph on an online museum database entails a whole set of knowledges and intentions. That was why fieldwork was the heart of this project. The very basic thing that we did was to print copies of those photographs and invest time and resources into trying to trace those close to the subjects. Often, for elderly people in communities, the subjects are their grandparents, great-grandparents. There is still a bridge there into understanding the worlds that were documented 110 years ago or more.

It is not just about the act of return either. There are the most amazing sound recordings, but they are inaccessible for many reasons. There is an inaccessibility issue of the wax cylinders, since the technology is now obsolete. They have now been digitized, but the digital recordings are also very difficult to engage with. They are so crackly and the dialects spoken in different towns have changed so much. It requires an intense kind of listening, which we were able to do by taking these materials to communities. The first response would often be: 'That is not our language.' It is the tenacity of saying, 'Let us just listen again,' and then suddenly someone would catch something. And then from there it would open up (SOAS Radio 2020).

Access is a very difficult thing, and there is a need to connect that to an ethnographic sensibility. It takes time, patience and attentiveness to explore the affordances of these materials. It is not about projecting, defining or determining what those affordances might be. It is about creating an opportunity for people who are close to that material to discover them. So much of this restitution debate is about violence and guilt. But it should also be about joy, possibility and creativity. The return of these materials, like the photographs returning to Neni, is often a matter of celebration. There is a real joy and pride in the community in Nigeria in having made this film and having their culture and heritage screened internationally.

**HC:** ***What do you think Northcote Thomas would make of your film? This question is perhaps a bit silly, but I think it opens up thinking about how anthropology and the wider world have changed since these photographs were taken.***

**PB:** It is an interesting question, not something that anyone has ever asked me before. Thomas was a somewhat tragic character. The surveys that were the context of this material being gathered were considered a failure. He was dismissed not only by the colonial authorities, but also by the younger generation of anthropologists at the time, such as Malinowski. By relooking at this material, the [Re:]Entanglements project has recognized the extraordinary nature of what he was doing. He is placed in the category of outdated, pith helmet-wearing colonial anthropologist, stooge of colonial government, and so forth. But, actually, the work that he did – and it takes a very close and attentive reading to see this – is remarkably subtle, and, I would even say, ethically done.

Even with his Victorian mindset, he understood and respected the cultural logics that structured the worlds he encountered. He was a remarkable linguist too. It is easy to dismiss these characters, particularly in retrospect from this decolonial moment. There is a need to attend open-mindedly to archives and to not just reproduce that narrative. I think he would have been pleased that someone at last valued what he was trying to do, and I think he would have been pleased not only that his photographs found their way back to West Africa, but that they mean so much to the descendants of those he photographed. He was deeply interested in reincarnation, and the return of the ancestors through photography would have intrigued him. ●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