

Things Fall Apart - Film & Exhibition Information

The film “Things Fall Apart” by Nigerian executive producer Francis Oladele is based on the novel by the same name by Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. Created in 1971 in Nigeria, little was known about the circumstances and the creation of the film until the rediscovery of documents in the estate of late cinematographer Jason Pohland in Berlin.

The exhibition, a cross-cultural collaboration, showcases the long lost documents of the making of the film “Things Fall Apart” that were found in the estate of the Berlin filmmaker Jason Pohland (1934-2014), the connection and struggle between Africa and the West, between generations and cultures, and also the story of Nigerian-Atlantan collaboration lost for 50 years, the shaping of modern, global Atlanta and Sister Cities relationships, the Black film industry, African royalty, and ATL-local changemakers.

The premiere of the pre-Nollywood movie “Things Fall Apart” in Atlanta in 1974 draws direct connections to the historic election of Maynard Jackson as Atlanta’s first Black mayor, as the Nigerian co-producer, legendary filmmaker Francis Oladale, was the brother-in-law of Mayor Maynard Jackson. Moreover, the premiere is directly connected to the founding of the Mayor’s Office of Cultural Affairs and the establishment of the Atlanta-Lago Sister City partnership, both of which celebrated their 50th anniversary just recently.

The premiere also triggered the creation of the first “black-oriented” film distributor in the USA.

The current German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier described the movie as the decisive impulse for him to go into politics.

FILM PLOT:

When Obi Okonkwo completes his studies in England and returns to Nigeria, he finds himself in a country marked by rapid industrialisation and deep political change. In a time of social upheaval, Obi represents modern Nigeria.

Through his eyes, his own expectations, those of his environment and the woman he loves become visible. And the disappointment of these expectations. Obi experiences the spreading corruption, the dominance of the Europeans and the conflicts with the values of traditional societies. In flashbacks, his struggle is interwoven with that of his grandfather Okonkwo. The latter experiences the first foreign influences in his village of Umuofia, from the arrival of the Christian missionaries to British colonialism.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

Nigerian executive producer Francis Oladele (1932-2015) established *Calpenny Nigeria Films Limited* – the first independent film production company in Nigeria – in 1965 with the intention of providing a platform for artistic expression in a more profound way and opening the Nigerian arts to an international audience. His debut film *Kongi’s Harvest (1970)* already set standards. Oladele succeeded in hiring the American Ossie Davis, a close friend of Malcom X and very active in the civil rights movement, as director for this first project. *Things Fall Apart*, Oladele’s second feature film, is another key part of the beginnings of Nigeria’s Pre-Nollywood movie industry. The film, made by a few international but mostly local crew members, was directed by German director Jason Pohland.

In Germany, the film opened the so-called Africa Days in Bonn in 1971 under the patronage of

the then German Foreign Minister Walter Scheel. A newspaper report from October 1971 stated: “The participation of the Federal Foreign Minister in the opening was of special significance inasmuch as the Federal Foreign Minister started his trip to five West African countries immediately afterwards, so that the Africa Days practically expressed the growing importance of the German-African partnership within the framework of the overall concept of German foreign policy.”

In the US, the premiere is a socio-political event. The film premiered a full four years after production in Nigeria. Correspondence in the production files reveals that one of the reasons for this delay was an apparent difficulty in finding a distributor for the film.

Under the patronage of Maynard Jackson, the first African-American mayor of Atlanta, the African-American society attended the premiere in 1974. Chinua Achebe and Francis Oluade, Maynard Jackson’s brother-in-law, are among the guests, and the media reports on the reception afterwards with two hundred guests.

The photographs show Chinua Achebe on set, the Ugandan princess, lawyer and later diplomat Elizabeth of Toro, who shortly after shooting the film becomes Uganda’s foreign minister; the 1899 in Lagos born actor Orlando Martins – Nigeria’s first international film star – in his last role as Obierika; John Sekka, the popular Senegalese actor in the leading role of Obi Okonkwo; co-founder of Lagos *Freedom Park* Iyabo Aboaba in her role as Bisi.

Some crew members later made great careers: the still photographer Stephen Goldblatt became a director of photography, shot Batman films and was nominated twice for an Oscar; the assistant editor Alhaji Arulogun became one of Nigeria’s pioneer broadcasters and later headed several ministries for the state government of Oyo State; Ivan Sharrock, the sound mixer, won two Oscars.

EXHIBITION

February through April 2025

Gallery 72

72 Marietta Street NW, Atlanta, GA 30303

CURATORS

Akinbode Akinbiyi - based in Berlin is one of the well known African photographers. His photographs of everyday life in African cities brings viewers closer to urban life in Africa and conveys an impression of its undergoing rapid change. Akinbode Akinbiyi is also an intercultural mediator through his curating work. He has curated a number of exhibitions for the *Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen*, including Spot on ... *DAK’ART* (2009). A pan-African project he co-initiated has also made him an important mentor of young photographers from Africa.

Gisela Kayser - After twenty-five years and three hundred exhibitions of documentary, political and artistic photographs at the *Willy Brandt Haus* in Berlin, she has experience like few others in this field. As artistic director and managing director of the *Freundeskreis Willy Brandt Haus*, she and her team were responsible for the cultural program of the house and gave important impulses to the social discourse. She accompanied and supported other exhibition projects in museums and galleries as a curator, was a jury member at various award ceremonies at the Berlin University of the Arts, a nominator at the International Center of Photography New York and a jury member of the Alfred Fried Photography Award 2019. Since July 2021, Gisela Kayser has been working internationally as a freelance curator for selected projects.

HOSTS & ORGANIZERS

Kultur Ensemble Atlanta (Goethe-Zentrum & Alliance Francaise of Atlanta)

Modern Film Archives, Berlin

City of Atlanta Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs & Gallery 72

City of Atlanta Mayor's Office of International & Immigrant Affairs

German Federal Office for Foreign Affairs / Consulate General of Germany in Atlanta