

‘Natives are not critical of photographic quality’: Censorship, Education and Films in African Colonies Between the Wars

Rob Skinner

The inter-war years saw the initial stages of a brief, but fascinating, episode in the history of British film-making. In a curious conjunction with the narrative of empire, the question of the potential use of cinema as a tool for colonial education and propaganda occupied the minds of a select group of enthusiasts from the late 1920s until the early 1950s. This article focuses on the emergence of this interest in film and empire, from the Imperial Conference of 1926 until the late 1930s.

Following a virtual halt in British film production in late 1924, an ‘alliance of patriots, producers and the [Federation of British Industry]’¹ began to press the government to intervene to protect the film industry. As part of their campaign, the ‘films question’ was placed on the agenda of the 1926 Imperial Conference. The cinema, it was argued on the eve of the conference, affected the British empire in various ways. As a ‘medium possessing a psychological mission’, the cinema had promoted American products through a form of ‘unconscious’ propaganda.² The potential of the imperial market for the British film industry could not be ignored, and the Conference needed to construct a policy that would ‘shake off or relax the American stranglehold’ and ‘supply British pictures for British people which will win a market on their merits within the Empire and secure a share of foreign policy’.³

The economic aspects of cinema and film distribution were the predominant concerns of the debate, but in the document prepared by the Colonial Office on the subject for the 1926 conference, two ‘subsidiary points’ were noted.⁴ The first point, that ‘instructional’ films could be a powerful method of spreading knowledge of the ‘conditions and resources’ of empire, was an indication of what would later become the dominant issue. The second point was however, for the late 1920s at least, the more pressing. It was the issue of film censorship, the concerns over films ‘of such a nature as to give the native races very unfavourable impressions as to the characteristics and habits of the white races.’⁵

As Rosalind Smyth notes, concerns over commercial domination and projection of an ‘unsavoury’ image of Europeans were combined in what ‘was seen as a threat to the British *imperium*’⁶; a threat that was most vociferously proclaimed by Sir Hesketh Bell, ex-governor in Northern Nigeria and Uganda. In a letter published in the *Times* in October 1926, Bell deplored films showing ‘incidents of the most sensational nature’, in which ‘crime of every category’ were depicted, which he thought provoked ‘disrespect’ among colonised peoples. There was, however, a greater danger:

*The deplorable antics of white women in a state of almost complete nudity, their prolonged osculatory performances and general immodesty are all calculated to have a shocking and dangerous effect on coloured youths and men in the earliest stages of culture who have hitherto been led to consider the white man’s wife and daughters as patterns of purity and virtue.*⁷

It is hard not to be impressed by Hesketh-Bell’s simultaneous combination of ‘colour’ and ‘culture’ with the fear of miscegenation. Crime was bad enough, but what cut to the core was the challenge presented by a sexualised white female to the ‘natural’ order of colonial society.

In Bell's estimation what was required was strict censorship, one that took account of the difference between the 'strong meat' deemed palatable for white cinema audiences and the special sensitivities of 'primitive people of colour'. Bell suggested the possibility of creating two versions of films, one suitable for western, one for colonial audiences. It is telling, perhaps, that Bell concludes his article by noting the general suitability of British films, in comparison with 'foreign' (that is, American) films. Censorship in the colonies, grounded as it was in racial assumptions and couched in terms of white 'responsibility', was also a way of providing a 'much-needed degree of encouragement and protection to our own struggling film industry.'⁸

The broad consensus of opinion among leading church and missionary figures seemed to be in agreement with Bell's position,⁹ that a 'very great watchfulness' over films shown to African audiences was required. Nor was this desire to negate the dangerous influence of the cinema confined to missionaries and colonial officials, the secretary of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society urged for 'perpetual vigilance', while the President of the African National Congress, the Reverend Mahabane, agreed that 'some film selection was desirable till the general level of education among Africans had been raised'.¹⁰ Although some in the Colonial Office questioned 'whether the farcical actions of whites are likely to excite native contempt',¹¹ there was a widespread belief in the need to exercise censorship in order to prevent 'the exhibition of any film or section of film which is open to objection whether on general grounds or in view of the special character and susceptibilities of the native people.'¹²

Following the 1927 Colonial Office Conference, Leopold Amery appointed a Films Committee to deal specifically with the issue. To guide the deliberations of the committee, a circular despatch was issued in October 1927.¹³ The central question in the circular enquired whether governments would be prepared to provide financial assistance for an organisation co-ordinating the production and distribution of films in British territories. Despite widespread agreement, in principle at least, to provide financial support for a central organisation, responses to the Colonial Office circular illustrated a wide range of approaches to film policy. Some officials saw no potential in the cinema, either as a danger or a tool for education, simply because the opportunities for Africans to encounter cinema were so small. Furthermore, and more tellingly, the governor of Tanganyika asserted that not only did cinemas not exist, but 'owing to the native problem, it is not our policy to go out of our way to encourage them.'¹⁴ Many territories had no systematic approach to censorship, with responsibility for the cinema often undertaken by local police officials, while elsewhere censorship was exercised by committees of colonial officers.

Perhaps the most established system for colonial censorship was that of the administration of the Gold Coast, where a film Board of Control had been set up in October 1927. The board, presided over by the Secretary for Native Affairs and the Inspector-General of Police, also included representatives of customs, prisons and educational departments as well as staff from various schools and representatives of the major church missions.¹⁵ The Board provided a list of 'objectionable' scenes, which included murders, abductions and petty crime as well as more general criminal activities such as those 'likely to suggest new ways of evading the law and escaping detection' and 'methods of perverting to criminal use modern inventions and improvements'.¹⁶ The Board also argued that attention had to be paid to films that, despite being passed by the British Board of Film Censors, were deemed entirely unsuitable for African audiences. One particularly striking example was the Board's reaction to the silent serial *The Branded Four* (Duke Worne, 1920). Objections were raised to a range of scenes, from those depicting abduction and torture – 'clamping a man in a

machine and heating the iron of a special shape for burning out his eye', to even more dangerous behaviour – the 'mis-use of a fire escape to gain access to a roof for criminal purposes'.¹⁷

Some colonial administrations advocated segregation, not only in terms of cinema exhibition, but also with regard to film censorship. A dual standard of censorship was suggested by the Kenyan government's Select Committee on Film Censorship, which concluded in its report not only that 'a clear division should be instituted between the presentation of films to Africans and to members of other races', but that Africans were not 'in a position to understand or appreciate the European or American environment depicted in films.' European children, however, were believed to be able to understand such scenes, which meant that it was possible for European children to 'attend the exhibition of a film not readily intelligible to an African.' The committee came to the remarkable conclusion that, although it proposed a special certificate for films suitable for African audiences, a separate certificate for European children was unnecessary because most went to the cinema with their parents, who were 'therefore in the best position to judge the fitness of a film'.¹⁸

The Colonial Films Committee first met in early 1929, and its report, presented to the Colonial Office Conference of 1930, marked a distinct change in emphasis in colonial film policy. It concluded that colonial governments should begin experimenting with the use of film in education, although it noted that 'careful handling' was required in order to avoid 'a slipshod method of acquiring ill-digested information'.¹⁹ Education Department staff should be trained in the use of film equipment, schools equipped with film projectors and mobile cinema vans provided. In terms of censorship, colonial governments should establish censorship boards (as the Gold Coast had already), while consideration would be given to establish a central Board of Censors in London, to deal specifically with the suitability of films for colonial distribution.²⁰

With so many members of the committee representing various official organisations to promote British trade, it is unsurprising that the report's conclusion begins by noting the potential of expansion, that colonial territories could become a major market for British films. In 1930 only thirty-eight cinemas catered for a population of 36 million in British Africa, and the committee argued that 'many of these people are in a primitive state, but it does not follow that the use of the cinematograph may not spread even in the more primitive communities'.²¹ The Film Committee's report, then, did indeed represent a change from a vision of film in a colonial context that gave primacy to its negative and 'demoralising' effects to a more optimistic vision of the future of the cinema as both a 'progressive' force, but also a new market opportunity for British business.

One result of the report was to promote a number of proposals for the establishment of organised experiments in the production of educational films for African audiences. One such proposal was authored by Geoffrey Barkas, who suggested that the establishment of a small official bureau to make films for dependencies would ensure a 'constant supply of films calculated to suit their specific requirements'.²² Another proposal worthy of note was that of J Russell Orr, ex-Director of Education in Kenya. He proposed the establishment of a chain of cinema houses 'for the advancement of adults and children of native races in subjects relating to general information, education and science, methods of industry and commerce, and general entertainment of good quality.' His scheme required colonial governments to provide no financial assistance, but merely a 'suitable site of 200 x 120 ft for the erection of a Cinema House in a well populated native area of a selected township'.²³ The cinemas would eventually be handed over to local cooperatives, which would show programmes comprising news and magazine reels; education and science films; health

propaganda; agricultural improvement; and the development of imperial trade. Despite receiving a favourable response from the Colonial Office, Russell Orr's mobile cinema houses were doomed not to grace the African landscape.

At this stage it is difficult to divorce colonial film policy from the wider picture of official British attitudes to the cinema. The discussions set in motion by the Colonial Office provided an important contribution to the Commission on Educational and Cultural Films, who reproduced large parts of the Colonial Committee's report in their own 1932 report, *The Film in National Life*. Leading to the establishment of the British Film Institute in 1933, the report marks the emergence of a lobby concerned with the 'cultural' dimension of films, and paid a great deal of attention to educational films. Furthermore, the Commission's Secretary was none other than J Russell Orr. In 1932, then, thinking on colonial films both involved, and affected, the mainstream of British opinion in the field of cinema.

With the establishment of the British Film Institute, the forum for debate on colonial cinema was broadened, particularly after the setting-up of the BFI's Dominions, India, and Colonies Panel in 1934. The panel's remit was 'to ascertain what education and cultural films are available both for the Dominions and Colonies, and to consider how these might be classified for recommendation to different parts of the Empire'. The Panel also considered, given the support of the Colonial Development Fund, 'the possibility of conducting one or more experiments in various Colonies, to ascertain the psychological effects of different types of film.'²⁴ One such experiment had already been conducted, on behalf of the Colonial Office's Advisory Committee on Native Education, by Julian Huxley when he travelled to east and central Africa in 1929. In his account of the journey, Huxley described how he tested the responses of African schoolchildren to three films that he had obtained from the Empire Marketing Board (EMB). The films were designed to test the children's ability to understand films of different levels of 'difficulty'. After successfully exhibiting the films in Tanganyika and Uganda, Huxley came to the conclusion that education was the 'intellectual hormone' that could stimulate the development of Africa, and the cinema was one of the central media of this process:

*The African enjoys the film with an almost childlike delight; he will come to see a film where he would not attend a lecture; and in the present state of his development, what he can see on a film makes a much stronger impression upon him than what he can hear ... there is no aspect of native welfare which could not quite legitimately be encouraged by them in this way.'*²⁵

Another of Huxley's encounters during this tour was with Dr. Paterson, Director of Medical Services in Kenya, an experience he would later describe as a 'medical whirlwind', from which he took away an impression of the insanitary conditions of Africans living 'their old tribal life'.²⁶ Paterson's most impressive work, according to Huxley, was that of the Medical Department's campaign to eradicate hookworm on part of the Kenya coast. In two years, 49,000 people had been treated, and film taken during the campaign had been used to encourage further participation.²⁷ When the BFI panel went as far as to set up a sub-committee to investigate the production of instructional films for East Africa, it was suggested that Paterson should submit a recommendation to the panel.²⁸ Paterson's plan for the 'production of a more prosperous peasant' was approved in principle by the BFI panel, but it was destined to be overtaken by another scheme - the Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment (BEKE).²⁹

The BEKE, which took place between 1935 and 1937 in East and Central Africa, was a direct result of the investigation into the effects of industrialisation in the copper-mining region of Northern Rhodesia undertaken by J Merle Davis, Director of the Social and Industrial Research department of the International Missionary Council (IMC). The enquiry,

whose findings were first published in 1933 in the book *Modern Industry and the African*,³⁰ was a response to increasing concern amongst missionary organisations about the effect of urbanisation and industry upon 'traditional' African societies. The resulting report presents an authoritative statement of the position of liberal Christian concerns regarding African society in the early 1930s. The authors of the report provided both a detailed summary of the social and economic conditions prevalent in the region, as well as a manifesto for action to address the social change attendant upon rapid industrial growth.

One way of introducing positive benefits to the experience of migrant labour in the copper mines, according to Davis, was through education. In his account, the 'well-controlled conditions' of mine locations presented a 'commanding educational opportunity' for instruction in the nature of government and taxation, the place of Africa in the world, hygiene and sanitation.³¹ In essence, the mines represented the imposition of alien patterns of life upon African society, and it was necessary to tutor the 'native' in the ways of the modern world, establishing new schools as well as introducing mass adult education. But it was the moving picture that aroused most enthusiasm:

*It maintains a freshness and vigour that rivets the interest as no other form of instruction. The cinema can be used in the teaching of every variety of subject: hygiene, sanitation, Government administration, religious and moral instruction, economics, agriculture, art, child nurture, land utilisation, trade and commerce, geography, travel, natural science, physics, biology, physiology, astronomy, etc. etc., may all be depicted with success.*³²

The cinema was particularly suitable for Africans, whose 'intimate dealings with Nature had sharpened their ... capacity for noting details, and for remembering and describing them.'³³ In an environment suitable for open-air displays, large numbers could benefit from this form of instruction and the film projector could form an important part of the equipment of African missions. Yet Davis also noted that the cinema was an expensive tool, and co-operation between governments, large industries and missions would be required.³⁴ Calling for further experimentation in the use of cinema, he re-iterated the widespread fears of commercial cinema, and the need for 'wholesome films'.

A proposal for a Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment was produced by the IMC in the year following the publication of *Modern Industry and the African*, although not to the immediate approval of the Colonial Office. When the proposal was brought before the BFI's Dominions, India and Colonies panel, its Colonial Office representative, RT Vernon, described the scheme as 'altogether too ambitious a project for an experimental exercise', advising the BFI against involvement.³⁵ Vernon, clearly upset by the failure of his own similar scheme to secure funding, suggested that it should be left 'to the Carnegie Trustees to give it the coup de grâce'.³⁶ To the contrary, the Carnegie Trust responded enthusiastically and agreed to fund the project, producing somewhat of an 'about turn' in Colonial Office opinion.³⁷

The BEKE proposal was at heart a re-iteration of Davis' earlier thoughts on the subject: the hypothesis underlying the experiment was that the speed of introduction to western 'civilisation' demanded 'visual and mass education' and that:

*[The] universal dramatic sense of the Bantu, together with his love of entertainment and keen sense of humour are factors that lend themselves admirably to the production and appreciation of African-made films.*³⁸

Overall, the cinema was vaunted as supremely fitted to deal with the problems of African society, as well as a tool of education, it was:

*[A]n active factor in the area of inter-racial understanding and of creating those mental attitudes and judgements that form a basis between peoples for sound relations and also for misunderstandings and unfounded estimates of one another.*³⁹

The experiment was therefore intended to establish the cinema as a method of bridging the gap between what Davis described as ‘Young Africa’ and ‘Old Africa’.⁴⁰ On the one hand, film was envisaged as a way of introducing the benefits of modern ‘civilisation’ to rural African society, while it also had the potential to conserve the ‘best’ in traditional culture.

The BEKE project was overseen by Davis and an advisory council chaired by Lord Lugard and T. Drummond Shiels, the chairman of the BFI’s Dominions, India and Colonies Panel. The project’s field officers consisted of Major LA Notcutt, an ex-plantation manager who had experimented with the use of film on sisal estates in east Africa. Notcutt, who had been charged by Davis to provide an estimate of the costs of the project, became its Field Director, while GC Latham, who had been Director of Native Education in Northern Rhodesia, was appointed Educational Director.⁴²

Arriving in Africa in mid-1935, the experiment was based in an old sanatorium at Vugiri in Tanganyika, where Notcutt and his team, with a number of African assistants, produced the bulk of the BEKE’s film productions. Latham took the films on extensive tours across Tanganyika, Kenya, Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland and Uganda, before returning to England to report to the Advisory Committee in April 1936.⁴³ It was proposed that the second stage of the experiment would establish a number of smaller film units based in schools, necessitating further funds. When mining and industrial companies and the Carnegie Corporation refused to provide additional financial assistance, the second stage of the BEKE was salvaged only by a limited allocation of funds from the Colonial Development Committee and the governments of Tanganyika, Kenya and Uganda. The terms of this grant required the BEKE to supply a number of films dealing with agricultural improvement, which Notcutt was able to begin in August 1936. With a diminishing staff, an uneasy relationship with the east African governments, and increasing financial difficulties, the BEKE stumbled to a halt in May 1937, having produced thirty-five films and exhibited them to a variety of audiences throughout east and central Africa.

The films produced by the BEKE bear witness to the preoccupations of colonial administration and the message takes precedence over its mode of delivery. Notcutt’s approach to the films stressed the need for specialised experience of the issues dealt with by the film, rather than specialised experience in film-making: ‘it is easier to train a practical sociologist to be a film producer for native films than to train a film producer to be a native sociologist.’⁴⁴ The BEKE thus drew upon the services of a number of colonial officers, with Dr CR Philip of the Kenya Medical Department being seconded to the project in its early stages. This co-optation of colonial officers, combined with Notcutt’s belief that ‘natives are not critical of photographic quality’,⁴⁵ enabled a considerable reduction in the costs of production and resulted in a series of films that, while apparently unimpressive in terms of cinematic quality, highlight the general concerns of inter-war policies of ‘trusteeship’.

The films reveal a fixation with commercial agriculture, medicine, and improving standards of housing and ‘hygiene’; in essence, encouraging the adoption of European forms of economic exchange, medical practice and lifestyle. Predominant among these themes was the question of agriculture, and the desire to ‘stimulate native production’.⁴⁶ The final group of films promoted the use of crop-rotation, fertilisers and other ‘improvements’ in peasant agricultural practice. Some, such as *Coffee under Banana Shade*, *High Yields from Selected Plants*, *Cattle and Disease* and *Artificial Insemination of Cattle*, dealt with specific problems

of arable and livestock farming; while *Marketing Export Native Maize*, and *Coffee Marketing* sought to promote change in the social and economic practices of farmers.

Another element of the BEKE's films on peasant agriculture, reflecting more widespread concerns of the inter-war period, was the question of soil erosion. Conservationist fears of the creation of rural wastelands in Africa, drawing upon experiences across the globe (and especially in the United States), were emerging as a powerful influence in agricultural policy during the 1930s.⁴⁷ Notcutt attempted to approach the subject by combining an instructional film, *Soil Erosion* with a fictional narrative, *Gumu*, which related the tale of a poor farmer whose employment as a gardener for a European plantation owner provided him with knowledge of 'the principles of soil enrichment',⁴⁸ and consequent success and prosperity upon his return home. A third film, showing the work undertaken to counter erosion at Machakos in Kenya, was produced with the assistance of Dr Philip. The question of soil erosion was thus of enough significance (at least in the eyes of colonial officials) to figure among the anxieties of Medical, as well as Agricultural Officers: 'no real progress could be made with the health of the Natives', argued Philip, 'when their very existence was being threatened by the loss of their soil through erosion.'⁴⁹

The instructional films of the BEKE, both those concerning agriculture and health, may be viewed as attempts to directly intervene in peasant society. However, it remains unclear as to the extent to which its efforts succeeded. Part of the project was to determine the effectiveness of film-propaganda on African audiences, yet the conclusions drawn by Notcutt and Latham seem based more upon assumptions than systematic observation. The first BEKE film, *Post Office Savings Bank*, in its original form, showed a petty thief paying for his behaviour by falling to his death whilst attempting to escape. The reaction of African audiences was that such a punishment appeared a little severe – one commentator noted that by that time it was usual to try thieves in court, while another suggested that the thief's killer 'should be brought to justice to show that he may not take the law into his own hands.' Despite being presented with sophisticated responses, Latham and Notcutt drew the conclusion that 'care must be taken that wrong-doing is always punished. If anything wrong is shown as happening in a film without disapproval being clearly expressed, the Native is apt to think that we approve of it.'⁵⁰

The BEKE encountered divided opinion over the content of film programmes. One side of the argument was that, as rural Africans were only just being introduced to the cinema, and did not anticipate amusement, it was both practical and desirable to show only educational films. The opposing point of view, held by a majority of observers, was that, as elsewhere in the world, audiences in Africa required entertainment, as well as purely educational films. Any organisation set up to produce educational films should also make entertainment films, Latham argued, which could 'be of greater influence than the former in the building up of national character.'⁵¹ British observers also questioned the technical quality of the BEKE films. As has been stated above, Notcutt and Latham were convinced that technical quality was not an issue when dealing with rural African audiences. When it came to lighting, for example, Notcutt admitted that little attempt was made to create an 'attractive picture', because 'we found that native audiences require, at present, nothing beyond a clear picture.'⁵³ The attempt to ensure clarity in the films meant that Notcutt took care to incorporate scenes linking contrasting locations that would not have been required by western audiences, 'for whom titles and commentary can do all that is necessary.'⁵⁴

Notcutt and Latham's report concluded with the recommendation that a central organisation should be established in London in order to co-ordinate the work of local production units. A supply of propaganda, educational and instructional films would thus be maintained, under government control, in order 'that primitive populations may become

accustomed to healthy programmes of films ... before their taste is vitiated by unsuitable films.'⁵⁵ To a significant degree, then, the fears expressed by Hesketh Bell in the late 1920s remained a fundamental concern. Yet, the BEKE was in many ways ahead of its time, and no major attempt to produce instructional films *in* Africa would take place again until after the Second World War.

Colonial Governments were unimpressed by the BEKE however, and Latham's proposals for the continuation and institutionalisation of the BEKE were rejected by the Colonial Office. To mobilise film as a tool in colonial development, as Smyth has argued, was far more difficult an exercise than using the cinema 'in defence of the Empire'.⁵⁶ However, the focus of interest had shifted during the 1930s from censorship and control of film distribution to schemes aimed at employing the cinema as an educational tool. Although initial explorations of the potential of cinema had been undertaken by individuals and organisations associated with the British film trade, the actual experiments in the use of film associated with individuals and organisations whose primary concern was with the 'responsibilities' of colonial 'trusteeship' and the apparently detrimental effects of the modern world upon rural African societies. Despite the interest shown by organisations such as the BFI and the IMC, attempts to utilise the cinema as a medium of education in Africa appeared to have stalled by the end of the 1930s, and it was not until the latter stages of the Second World War that interest in the educational use of the cinema would be revived.

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