

Mr. George Pearson then discussed *The Making of Films for Illiterates in Africa*, outlining the history of the Colonial Film Unit and describing its methods of film-making, both in careful psychological approach and in the resulting practical technique. He spoke of plans for the future, in particular the training of African film technicians, and of the ultimate purpose of the films—to arouse in the Colonial people a great pride of country, of traditions and of race; in short, to foster that character building which is at the root of all effort to raise the illiterate from his unenlightened world.

A paper was given by Mr. A. Izod of the Central Office of Information, who dealt with *Some Special Features of Colonial Film Production*, such as special campaign work, research on the possibilities of cartoon technique for unsophisticated audiences and on the use of indigenous music in films. He spoke of the development of static cinemas and the importance of research work.

Finally Mr. K. W. Blackburne, C.M.G., O.B.E., Director of Information Services, Colonial Office, spoke on *Financial Problems and Future Policy in British Colonies*. He stressed the importance of building up projection facilities as well as of film production. He drew attention to the founding of the Malayan Film Unit in 1946, and the recent formation of the Central African Film Unit, operating in Northern and Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. He spoke of the serious problem involved in financing all these additional activities but hoped intelligent planning would solve it in time.

The afternoon was devoted to discussion and questions which were answered by the morning speakers and by Mr. W. Sellers. Speakers from the audience included officials and students from Malaya, South Africa, Gold Coast, Nigeria, Uganda, and the West Indies.

## The Gambia

*By the Director of the Camera Unit at work there*

THE Gambia is a strip of British territory running roughly due eastwards from the mouth of the Gambia river on the extreme west coast of Africa to a point about 300 miles up that river, and is entirely surrounded by French territory. It is bounded on its north side by Senegal, which is part of the southern edge of the great Sahara Desert, and on its south side by the Casamance.

It is a place of peculiar problems and difficulties.

Perhaps its outstanding feature is its flatness. Bathurst is only about eighteen inches above sea level, and levels throughout the whole country do not vary more than a few feet. One result of this is that there are about half a million acres of mangrove swamp stretching along both sides of the river; for over 100 miles from the mouth of the river, these swamps

are tidal and partly salt. In the upper reaches of the tidal area there are two distinct periods during the year, one when the swamps are preponderatingly salt, and the other when they are almost entirely fresh. A peculiar feature of the country is the large number of creeks or *bolons* as they are termed locally, which have the appearance of tributaries particularly when the tide is on the move, but which have been caused by the movement of water away from the river and not by the flow of streamlets towards it. Many at one time were enormous mangrove swamps; but the slow tidal movement among the roots of the mangroves has slowly deposited earth until the area has become insufficiently wet for the mangroves to thrive. These have slowly died off while the upgrowth of deposited soil has quietly continued. Grass which flourishes best in damp rather than saturated soil has replaced mangroves. The natural processes of nature have caused the general level to continue to rise slowly, and now, in the present stage, grass grows on relatively dry soil. These stages can be traced in bands along the bolons and the river itself, but the general impression of flatness remains. In the rainy season all these deposited areas tend to degenerate into impassable quagmires which isolate whole communities. In one area where filming was being done the general level did not vary more than 1½" for many miles around.

The Colony itself, which is the town of Bathurst and the immediate few surrounding square miles, almost entirely consists of a sandbank island separated from the mainland by a creek; the Colony boundaries are actually on the mainland. The capital is much overcrowded as expansion is prevented by the surrounding swamps; but work is in progress to drain and dry these areas to provide for expansion for housing and crop-bearing land. The rest of the area, a long narrow strip not more than about 30 miles at its widest point, constitutes the Protectorate. Outside the swamp-deposited areas the soil is mostly sandy and provides a very unstable foundation for roads, which are so uneven and interrupted in character that car speeds are limited to 15 miles per hour.

Strange as it may seem, the people of the Protectorate mostly live a few miles away from the river rather than on its banks. Although excellent edible fish abound, a large proportion of the community exclude fish from their diet; they have little knowledge of fishing nor have they much interest in any aquatic pursuits.

A river steamer service has been established and plies frequently, particularly in the trading season; groundnut cargoes are loaded as far up as Kuntaur, which is over 200 miles from the river mouth. The fatigue of up-country road journeys may be diminished by conveying one's truck on the steamer to a convenient river port and then moving out from there.

The Africans themselves provide great contrasts. The tribe in and around Bathurst, the Wollof, who are the descendants of slaves rescued

and deposited on the coast by the British, consider themselves the aristocracy. They have had educational precedence, and are the chief source of government clerks and officials. Some who have received higher education have qualified as doctors, lawyers and so on.

The majority of the rest of the African community are illiterate and primitive in their outlook. Among the main tribes are the Jola, descended from the original inhabitants of the country. They are very hard-working farmers whose women think nothing of walking over 20 miles a day to take palm oil and other products into Bathurst market. They are peculiar in that they use a long spade for cultivation.

The Mandingo are well distributed over the lower portion of the Gambia. Farther up the river you find an increasing number of Mauretians, who are black-haired and swarthy, and dress in blue turbans and robes after the Arab fashion and have a reputation as cattle thieves. One also encounters Fula, members of the ubiquitous Fulani cattle nomads, and of the same racial origin as the Emirs of Kano.

Owing to the presence of tsetse fly, cattle are of poor quality. As they lack strength, they are not a success as beasts of burden. Few of the people are meat eaters so there seems little to encourage animal husbandry. Milk yield is very low indeed. As the country is predominantly Mohammedan, pigs are not bred except by the pagan Jolas. Fowls are kept, but the Africans rarely eat either birds or eggs, preferring to sell them to those interested. There are a few sheep and innumerable goats.

Crop cultivation is a very hard business and, due to primitive methods, poor soil and the small rainfall, there is actually a hungry season lasting about three months and ending about the beginning of December. During this period food is so scarce that many of the people rapidly lose weight. Owing to this condition of affairs, child mortality is heavy. In the hinterland many of the peasants still cultivate with crooked wooden sticks. As a result they scratch only the surface, turning it over and over again, year after year, until it has been worked right out.

The main cash crop is groundnuts, which are grown outside the swamp areas. Rice is grown in the swamps, but the influx of salt tidal waters creates particular difficulties in the lower reaches of the river. Here it is found necessary to propagate the young plants in nurseries, watering them in laborious fashion. Then, when the appropriate time of the year arrives, all the young shoots are transplanted by hand to the tidal swamps by the women of the tribes. An important food crop is coos, several varieties of which appear to thrive well; millet is grown in certain areas. Cassava is also produced, while tomatoes grow in profusion in many places. Bananas, carefully cultivated in garden plots, can be grown only with difficulty, and some paw-paw and oranges are available. Leaves and fruit from the Seko tree (baobab) are used for food in some communities, and rope is made by stripping the bark at the base of the trunk.

The standards of living in Bathurst are much higher than on the mainland; there fish and meat are often included in the people's diet. As there is no grazing land in the vicinity of Bathurst, cattle are driven down from the hinterland into compounds set aside for the purpose, and slaughtered soon after arrival.

When the camera unit first arrived in the Gambia at the beginning of November, both temperature and humidity were very high, but the harmattan came very soon after to dry the atmosphere, so that our photographic experience is confined almost entirely to these more favourable conditions.

So far it has not been found that any great variation from technique such as would be used on a sunny day in England, is required here. In spite of the drying wind, the fact that Bathurst is surrounded by water ensured a degree of humidity not unlike that in England, so that to a great extent one is not troubled by hard unlit shadows, the major problem when photographing in some tropical countries. One difficulty is that, according to the prevailing direction of the wind and other factors, the humidity level can vary widely within the compass of a few hours, and, unless one watches all the signs rather carefully, some shots may be over-exposed and much flatter than expected. Some slight modification of exposure may overcome this effect and appropriate filters can be used to eliminate the haze.

Up-country and away from the sea, humidity is perceptibly lower, but, as far as can be ascertained with the aid of exposure meters and practical tests, no very special problems are presented. It is quite evident, from results already obtained, that good photographic quality is more easy of attainment in Gambia than in some of the other African Colonies.

As actors, the people have their limitations, probably due to their low level of sophistication. Action has to be explained most patiently to them step by step so that they learn just one thing at a time. They are also inclined to forget rapidly. Having rehearsed one man and then another, one finds the first one has often forgotten his piece when it comes to combined action. There is also the usual difficulty about clothing. In spite of the most careful and detailed instructions to the contrary, one has to watch closely for changes of attire when filming is continued on another day.

But on the whole they are a most cheerful people, and very willing indeed to make themselves useful in the making of films, particularly when it is explained to them that by doing so they will be helping fellow Africans.

Several large schemes have now been started with a view to raising the general level of prosperity and happiness of the population of Gambia as a whole. It is most inspiring to realise that, in however small a way at first, the making and showing of films must contribute considerably in that work.