

DOCUMENTARY NEWS LETTER

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FILMS FOR PRIMITIVE PEOPLES

A NEW TECHNIQUE

Acknowledgments are due to Mr W. Sellers, and to the Editor of the *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, for permission to reprint the extracts from the commentary to *Machi Gaba* included in this article.

LARGE AREAS of our Colonial Empire are inhabited by illiterate, semi-literate, or otherwise backward populations. The problem of education—in its widest sense—has been looming larger and larger in past years, and steps have been taken both by Whitehall and by local administrations to get rid of financial and technical difficulties in this important field. The use of films can of course be only a part of any educational scheme, but it is clear that in many colonies, and particularly in Africa, it can play a much larger part than might originally have been expected. In the vast areas covered by Kenya, Tanganyika and Uganda in the East, and Nigeria and the Gold Coast in the West, the first urgency is for simple instruction and propaganda as regards more hygienic living conditions and the prevention of disease. Next comes the need for general (elementary) education and the improvement of agricultural methods (for nearly the entire population lives by the soil). Finally, it is necessary to broaden their knowledge of the world around them and of their place in it, if the avowed British policy of advancing all Crown Colonies to a self-governing status is to become anything more than a hollow catchword.

Results To Date

Already experiments have revealed the practical value of films. Notcutt and Latham in East Africa carried out their Bantu Education scheme, whose interesting results were formulated in their book *The African and the Cinema*. And in Nigeria the work of Sellers, under an enlightened Health Department, has proved over a period of years that films, properly planned and used, are in the first line as adjuncts to all campaigns in health instruction, let alone more general educational schemes. These and other experiments have proved clearly that films for natives must be regarded as a highly specialised subject. Many technical tricks which are the commonplace of English educationals and documentaries must be jettisoned, and much simpler systems must be substituted. This means that existing English educational films are of little use except for more advanced natives, who usually represent a very small proportion of the population. For the great majority, special films must be made.

Production Methods

In Nigeria, Sellers has formulated certain essential rules which must be followed in making films for primitive populations:

1. The general tempo must be slow, and the length of individual scenes must be twice or

three times as long as is usually considered necessary for English school audiences.

2. The content of any given scene must be very simple in its composition, because natives view all objects on the screen with equal interest, unless the important object is clearly emphasised. Close and mid shots are therefore preferable to long shots.

3. Strict accuracy is vital in portraying native habits and customs. Mistakes at once turn a serious film into a comedy.

4. No camera tricks of any sort. Continuity must be clearly maintained in all changes of scene, even if it means using three shots where one would normally do for audiences more used to film technique.

5. Films must be made as silents. A master commentary is then written, and is added by a native commentator, or by disc records, through a microphone during each performance. This system is vital, owing to the great variation in local dialects.

Distribution

The distribution of the films must perforce be by travelling vans. When a van arrives at a village the show is announced through the loud-speaker, and (in Nigeria at least) an audience of anything from 2,000 to 15,000 can be rapidly collected. Before the film is shown, its story is first explained in simple terms through the microphone. After it is over, a short talk follows, punching home the main message of the film. During the actual showing, one of the commentator's jobs is to get the audience to shout answers to questions about what is happening on the screen. Here is a sample. It is part of the commentary to *Machi Gaba*, a cleanliness film produced by Sellers in Northern Nigeria:—

Commentator: "Here is a very dirty house. Who is that man? He is a farmer, but he is not walking very quickly, and he does not work very quickly. There is something the matter with him. What is the matter with him?"

Audience: "He is sick."

Commentator: "Yes. Sick people cannot work properly. That man's sickness, it is more than likely, is caused by all this filth and dirt that you see lying about his house, and a great deal of the sickness in the town is caused by the filth and dirt that the people allow to lie about all over the town. We do not blame the people; they have never been told properly that dirt brings sickness. Here is a very dirty house. They are foolish people who live in that house. The man is a weaver, but he is not working very quickly; in fact, now he is leaving his work altogether. Oh, poor man! If he lived in a clean house, it is more than likely that he would be

healthy. Yes, poor man, you had better lie down until you are better. No more work until you are better; sick people cannot work. People who live in dirty houses are often sick. Make yourself comfortable, poor man; you will be there for some time. I should lie down if I were you. Are you sorry for this man?"

Audience: "No! We are not sorry for him!"

Commentator: "Why are you not sorry for him?"

Audience: "Because he is a dirty man and lives in a dirty house."

Commentator: "Now the cause of that weaver's sickness may be these old and useless water pots and calabashes which have been left lying about. They hold water, and mosquitoes breed in that water, and mosquitoes bring sickness . . . (etc.)"

A Centralised Plan

There appears to be little doubt that such methods, modified or altered as required for different areas, could form a reliable basis for a native cinema operating widely throughout the Colonial Empire. A central organisation in London would be needed, preferably under the direct control of the Colonial Office. This central body would co-ordinate the work of all colonial film-departments, facilitate the interchange of films and ideas, and advise on technical and educational methods. At first two types of film

would be produced. Films like *Machi Gaba* would be produced on the spot by men who had previously received technical training in Britain. But films about Britain would be produced over here by men seconded from the colonies, who alone would be capable of making them correctly. This last point is vital. The simplest films about English life will be outside the native's comprehension unless they are carefully and closely related to his own limited experience. Experimental films of this type are, it is understood, already being made, and when completed should be a valuable guide to the validity of this method of creating a closer sympathy and understanding between colonial populations and ourselves.

Economics

Such film schemes have a special merit—that of economy. Only a moderate capital investment would be needed for 16 mm. apparatus, disc-recorders, and a sufficient number of travelling cinemas. The annual production and distribution cost would be comparatively small, for the scheme calls for no full-size film or apparatus, and disc-recording is cheap and easy. It is to be hoped that because of—rather than in spite of—the war, steps will be taken to put some such scheme into operation. It would accord well with the increasingly enlightened attitude which has in recent years been so marked a feature of the Colonial Office.

NEWS FROM CANADA

The National Film Society of Canada has joined the Association of School Film Libraries (U.S.A.) as its official affiliate in Canada, and as a result the Association is expanding itself into an international organisation and extending its activities into wider fields. The National Film Society of Canada is similar to the Association in that it is a non-profit organisation with a membership of educational institutions co-operating to promote the educational and cultural uses of motion pictures. It receives financial support from the Rockefeller Foundation and enjoys the active endorsement of the Canadian Government. Four branches of the Film Society's film library are now in operation in Vancouver, Edmonton, Saskatoon and Toronto. These libraries supply educational films to schools, universities and study groups at a nominal cost. They are not established for the purposes of supplying the full needs of their districts but rather to encourage educational authorities to acquire libraries of their own. These units contain examples of both American and British films used for classroom and general educational purposes. Pursuing its policy of promoting better international relations through the use of the film, the National Film Society is arranging for a national distribution of the publicity and good-will films of foreign countries through the same service.

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