

FILMS FOR AFRICANS

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THE Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment is approaching the end of the two years' period for which finance was granted by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Details of the organisation and some of the achievements of the Experiment have been given in previous articles of SIGHT AND SOUND, and a full report will be published at the conclusion of the Experiment. On this occasion I wish to look to the future, in the light of the experience gained from the Experiment.

There appear to be three main uses of the cinema in regard to the Native population of Africa. It can be used:—

(a) For general enlightenment—propaganda for better standards of living, housing, health, agriculture and animal husbandry.

(b) For healthy entertainment, together with cultural development, to interpret the new world to the African and relate the new knowledge to his present conditions.

(c) As an aid to education in the classroom.

The first two are closely related and story films can be used for purposes of propaganda and entertainment at the same time. Some people object to this mixture, but many who have seen our films consider this type to be most valuable and effective. The Native rather expects, at any rate he does not resent, the presence of what he calls "faida" or profit in a picture.

We have found, extraordinary unanimity among those best qualified to express an opinion as to the possibilities of the film for spreading new ideas about health, sanitation, agriculture, cattle mastership and other matters of import to the African. Heads of Government Departments, Government and Missionary Educationists, Agricultural, Health and Veterinary Officers, educated Africans and Anthropologists, who saw our films, were enthusiastic regarding their potential value and are prepared to give assistance in any efforts for putting the production of further films on a permanent basis. One rather pleasing comment from a Native is worth quoting: "It is certainly simple to learn when you see because the things seen are not difficult to understand. The cinema such as this which could speak directly to the audience in terms and scenes well understood and realised will no doubt make a native learn something which he had been unfortunate enough to study in the classroom."

The third use is a different proposition about which as applied to Africa we know very little. We can only say with some certainty that films for this purpose must be specially made with the co-opera-

tion of the teachers and lecturers who are going to use them. It will be no use trying to fit into courses for African pupils films made for other purposes. The use of teaching films will be greatest in the more advanced schools. The teacher in the small "bush" school, however, will be able to make good use of a projector and films for his community work.

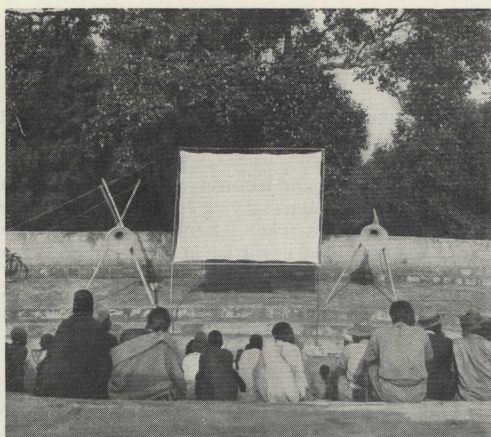
Lack of suitable films

There are very few films in existence which are suitable for showing to Africans. Educational films usually assume a knowledge which the African does not possess, and have an alien background, the effort to understand which will absorb much of the pupil's attention. "Interest" films for western audiences rarely deal with matters of real interest to the African. Story films, when they have been cut to pass the Censor for exhibition to Africans are often almost unintelligible and they have the same disadvantage of an alien background.

The special requirements of more or less primitive communities as yet unaccustomed to the moving picture and living in an environment very different from our own, must be considered if any constructive use is to be made of the cinema. We have found that the presentation must be simple and logical. More time must be given to most of the shots than is usually desired, especially if the setting is unfamiliar. Educational and propaganda films must deal with the problems of African daily life in an African setting, showing methods of dealing with them which are within the means of the local population. Story films should have an African setting or a back-



From a film of an Initiation Ceremony Dance



Film show at Githinguri, Kenya

ground and plot which are within the comprehension of the African.

All this is not to say that the African should only see films taken in Africa. The Natives, especially those with some education, are vastly interested in the white man and his ways. It is, however, desirable that films of Europe and other parts of the world should be specially taken, or at any rate re-edited, for exhibition to Natives. They should be designed not merely for entertainment but also with a view to explaining the white man and other races to the African. The scenes chosen should be those likely to be of particular interest to him. They must be taken from an angle which makes them intelligible. Buildings should usually be taken from a low angle with something in the foreground to show their size. Pictures taken from the air of buildings or of crowds, as for instance of the Jubilee procession and on-lookers, mean nothing to them. They are not interested in beautiful scenery. A butcher's shop has a greater appeal. An ordinary London film for western audiences would probably not include pictures of road repairing, of a policeman on point duty in a traffic centre, of the streams of people at a railway station in the morning and evening, going to and returning from work, of a huge park of cars or the crowd at a cup-tie final. All these would be of interest to the African. He is astonished to see vast crowds of white men and women, almost incredulous of gangs of white men doing hard manual work.

In the selection of scenes consideration should also be paid to their significance in building up a true conception of the full and varied life of the west. There is a great danger that the impression given to other races by the type of western film which they usually see may be that the white man does little but visit horse-races and night-clubs, attend ceremonies, make love and so on, and that, apart from amusing himself, his only interest is making money. The African should be given films which show the more simple home and rural side of western life and which taken

all together give a more true and balanced idea of the white man's life and character.

We now come to the question, how is Africa to be provided with the films it needs? There are two novel factors to be considered. First, there is a unique opportunity in large parts of the continent to use the cinema constructively from the start. In British East and Central Africa, at any rate, the field has been barely scratched. Secondly, it must be faced from the start that no great profits are to be made for many years to come, so that economy in production and distribution will be necessary.

If full advantage is to be taken of this opportunity, it is clear that there must be some organisation for the production of films which has the welfare of the African as its main objective, and production must be on lines which will ensure the maximum efficiency consistent with the funds available.

It is suggested that each country with colonial interests in Africa might have some organisation for the production and distribution of films for Africans. The films should be of all kinds, instructional in the broad sense, and entertaining. Libraries would gradually be built up and facilities for interchange might be arranged.

Problems of production

I will now endeavour to propound some of the questions and problems which appear from our experience to need consideration before any permanent organisation can be evolved.

The Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment is producing only 16 mm. films. It has been urged that 35 mm. film should be used and reduced to 16 mm. size for schools and other institutions requiring small and inexpensive apparatus for projection. There is much to be said for this if the greatly increased cost can be covered. If the quality of the films is high they could probably be used widely in the standard size by cinemas which already have standard equipment installed. Commercial cinemas in South Africa and on the Coast, also Mine and Town Location cinemas, might be glad of them. Even if designed primarily for Africans many of the films would doubtless have an appeal to backward races in other parts of the world. Some would be of interest to western audiences and might serve the valuable purpose of helping to explain the black man to the white, thus creating more sympathetic relations between the two races.

Sound would be the main difficulty in the extension of the range of the films. Sound on film, to which all cinema goers are now accustomed, is far more satisfactory than sound on disc. The cost, however, of sound on film in several languages would be prohibitive, and it is difficult to see any alternative for Africa to our present method of sound on disc, which makes it possible to use the same film with commentary in an unlimited number of languages. It would always be possible for a country's production staff in Africa to collaborate with some commercial firm in producing a few pictures with sound on film suitable for exhibition to Africans.

It has been suggested that silent films should be

used. The difficulty here is that for illiterate audiences captions and titles are useless. Those Africans who can read in their own language could understand a silent film if the titles were in their own language, but this would mean re-editing the film for each language area. So far as British colonies are concerned the number, in East Africa at any rate, who could understand titles in English would be infinitesimal. The use even of Swahili would be limited.

The only real advantage of confining production to silent films would be on the score of economy. And even in this connection it is probable that entertainment films would lose so much of their attraction that there would be little hope of making the production of films to a large extent self-supporting from rentals. Unless Governments are prepared to bear the whole cost, this aim which seems quite practicable, must be kept in mind. For propaganda purposes much more explanation can be given by running commentary than is possible with titles, and expert commentary which is an integral part of the film display is more effective and less disturbing than the interpolations of a commentator who might often be far from expert.

Another suggestion has been made that it would be cheaper and more efficient to do most of the film production at home, sending out an expert cameraman to Africa to take merely the scenes necessary to give local colour. So far as the processing and editing of the films is concerned this may be true, though I see certain difficulties. In regard to the photography I consider this proposal quite impracticable. For entertainment films designed for western audiences it may be possible to fake scenes in studios and elsewhere which will deceive many people who know Africa. Even Africans, who would definitely not be deceived, might not care how the thing was done provided the story were sufficiently entertaining. For propaganda films, when one is trying to demonstrate to the African that he can do this or that in better

ways, because, as he sees in the picture, his fellow Africans have already done so successfully, any suspicion that the picture was a fake would be fatal.

A procedure that does appear to be practicable is that a large number of scenarios should be prepared in detail well in advance, and that all the shots which must be taken in Africa should be decided upon. A competent agent in Africa would then choose the places at which the shots should be taken and arrange with the District or Departmental Officers or other persons concerned for the staging of them. An expert cameraman could then be sent out from home and with the help of the agent in Africa could take all the necessary pictures in the course of a tour of three or four months. The films might be sent home to be processed and edited and 16 mm. copies could be made. Sound could be added later.

Moulding the future

The unique opportunity which now presents itself of using the cinema constructively for the benefit of Africa, and thereby of the world, will not last for long. The African is awakening, clamouring for education and in dire need of all the help and guidance which we can give him. The economic possibilities of commercial exploitation are small at present but they will increase with the growing prosperity of the Natives in some parts of Africa. It is of vital importance that the constructive work should start and the field be effectively occupied before the taste of the Natives has been debauched by inferior types of films. Censorship, though important and necessary, is at best a negative form of safeguard. What we want is not merely to keep out undesirable films but to create a large and continuous supply of good ones.

Technical efficiency is essential and the help of the experts in film production will be necessary, but the control of policy, especially in the preparation of scenarios, must be kept in the hands of people whose main interest is humanitarian and not economic.

The film will be only one among many influences which are gradually changing the environment and the ways of living of the African. I submit, however, that it is going to be a potent influence for good or evil and that it will be an almost criminal dereliction of duty if we fail to make proper use of this tremendous power which lies to our hand.

SOUTH AFRICA FILM ADVISORY BOARD

A South African Film Advisory Board has been established with the assistance and approval of the Union Government as a result of the report submitted to the Minister of Education on the need for a Film Institute in South Africa. At its first meeting it was announced that the four education departments had made grants amounting to £800 to the Film Library, that two film officers had been appointed by the Union Education Department and a Committee set up for the certification of educational films for duty free importation. The functions and activities of the Board will be fully dealt with in the next issue of SIGHT AND SOUND.



Filming at Vugiri, Tanganyika Territory