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"Gone Are The Days": a social and business history of cinema-going in Gold Coast/Ghana, 1910-1982

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Dissertation

“GONE ARE THE DAYS”:
A SOCIAL AND BUSINESS HISTORY OF CINEMA-GOING IN
GOLD COAST/Ghana, 1910-1982

by

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To Nellie Hayes, 1915-2013 – True believer
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(Order No. )

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation presents a comprehensive business and social history of cinema-going in urban Gold Coast/Ghana from 1914 to 1982, the local beginning and end points of mass participation in that form of leisure. Local business owners invested capital and energy to create an audience for a new leisure form, and they built the sector from a single screen in 1914 to more than seventy cinemas by the early 1960s.

Entrepreneurs confronted state regulators, whether colonial or post-colonial, who viewed the cinema as a negative force to be managed – but never embraced. Officials feared that the emergence of a popular leisure form could challenge their efforts to impose particular models of behavior. Successive governments characterized the cinema as a potential source of criminal inspiration. Officials treated expatriate entrepreneurs of the post-war period with equal disdain, profiting from their business know-how but rejecting them when expedient.
As the gatekeeper for foreign films, most of which came from the US, the state had a position of considerable legal power. Governments regulated imports, developed censorship policies, and policed screenings. They could not, however, restrain the popular imagination. Ghanaians embraced the cinema from its inception, seeing in it a cheap leisure outlet in urban areas that were reorienting social and familial lives, as well as a means for reflection on their modern selves. Where officials feared imagery of luxury, adventure and romance on the big screen, Ghanaians saw the opportunity for comparison and analysis in addition to rich entertainment.

Ghanaian audiences created their own cinema-going culture. They thrived on constant rotation of new films and old favorites to the point of forcing compromise on an American industry eager to impose its own business model in the early 1960s. Ghana’s status in the vanguard of African independence prompted internal and external observers to analyze local cinema-going culture to understand and to control the audience in the cheap seats. However, the urban audience fought against this impulse, seeing in the cinema space a place to configure new relationships and to give voice to a joyous engagement with a vibrant, ever-changing art form.
# Contents

Acknowledgements.................................................................................................................. v

Abbreviations........................................................................................................................ xii

Note on Names and Currencies............................................................................................... xiii

Introduction............................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter One - Mental and Physical Geographies of Cinema-Going in Gold Coast/Ghana, 1910-1970s ........................................................................................................... 21

Class and the Cinema, 1910s to 1930s ..................................................................................... 23

The Cinema as a Modern Experience, 1930s-1950s ............................................................ 32

The Social Standing of the Cinema in Mid-Century Ghana .................................................. 44

Debating Modernity in the Gold Coast, 1950s-1970s .......................................................... 52

The Geography of Ghana’s Cinemas, 1920s-1960s ............................................................... 54

Chapter Two – Policing Film Content in the Gold Coast...................................................... 66

An overview of British colonial censorship ............................................................................ 70

The introduction of film censorship regulations in the Gold Coast ....................................... 77

Who were the Gold Coast censors? ....................................................................................... 80

Local versus imperial decision-making, 1920s-1930s ............................................................ 89

Gold Coast censorship in action, 1920s-1930s ..................................................................... 106

New concerns: censorship in the 1940s ............................................................................... 113

New rules for a new era: the 1952 censorship legislation .................................................... 127

Chapter Three – The Cinema Business in Ghana from Origins to Ubiquity, 1910-1960 ........................................................................................................................ 134

The Origins of the Cinema Business in the Gold Coast – 1910s-1920s ............................... 138

Changing technology and exhibition practices, 1930s ....................................................... 150

The Beginnings of the Boom: New Owners on the Scene, 1940s ....................................... 155

A New Player on the Cinema Scene – the Government, 1950s ................................ .......... 169

No Smooth Sailing for West African Pictures, 1950s-1960s ............................................. 179

Financial Challenges: Import Licensing and the Dollar Allocation, 1940s-1960s ............ 190

Chapter Four – The American Film Industry in Ghana, 1945-1965 ................................. 202

Early market research – 1910s to 1940s .............................................................................. 204
Hollywood’s New Postwar Export Model ................................................................. 209
Hollywood on “safari” – Assessing the Market, 1960-1962 .................................... 214
Establishing a Hollywood Outpost in West Africa .................................................. 218
A Bump in the Road: The Ghanaian Censorship Crackdown ................................ 221
AMPECA and Ghanaian Officialdom .................................................................... 235
AMPECA’s Early Operations: Forecasts Meet Reality, 1962-1964 ........................ 240
Hollywood Settles In, 1960s .................................................................................. 254

Chapter Five – Managing Audience Enthusiasm: Elite and Administrative
Anxieties, 1930s-1980s ......................................................................................... 262
The view from the cinema seats, 1950s ................................................................... 264
Back in time: early commentary on the Gold Coast cinema audience, 1920s-1930s 269
Under the Microscope: the Gold Coast audience in the 1950s .............................. 275
Newspaper debates on the cinema, 1950s-1960s ..................................................... 286
Regulating Youth at the Cinema, 1950s .................................................................. 294
Official concern shifts, 1960-1970s ..................................................................... 303
“Gone are the Days” – The last boom and bust, 1970s-1980s .............................. 307

Epilogue .............................................................................................................. 318

Bibliography ........................................................................................................ 323

Curriculum Vitae .................................................................................................. 347
Abbreviations

AFRAM: Afro-American Films, Inc.
AMPECA: American Motion Picture Company (Africa)
AMPTP: Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers
BBFC: British Board of Film Classification
CPP: Convention People’s Party
IDC: Industrial Development Corporation [Ghana]
JFK: John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston, MA
KNA: Kenya National Archives, Nairobi, Kenya
MHL: Margaret Herrick Library, Los Angeles, CA
MPPDA: Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America
MPAA: Motion Picture Association of America
MPEA: Motion Picture Export Association
PRAAD: Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Accra, Ghana
SCD: St Clair Drake Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY
UGCC: United Gold Coast Convention
WBA: Warner Bros. Archives, Los Angeles, CA
Note on Names and Currencies

Until March 6, 1957, Ghana was known as the Gold Coast. The two names are used here based on whether the events described take place before or after the date of independence. Where a process occurs throughout the period of the dissertation, the name Ghana is generally used.

Until 1958 Ghana’s currency was the British West African pound, a monetary unit it shared with Nigeria, Gambia, Sierra Leone and British Cameroon. This currency was replaced by the Ghanaian pound. The new currency was used until July 1965 when it was, in turn, replaced by the Ghanaian cedi.

The British West African and Ghanaian pounds both followed the then-current British system of currency division into pounds, shillings and pence (one pound was worth twenty shillings, and each shilling was worth twelve pence). Ticket prices in Gold Coast for the period up to 1965 are expressed as pence (3d for example) or in shillings and pence (3/6 for example), in line with the prices listed in advertising materials and archival sources.
**Introduction**

The glory days of the cinema business in Ghana ran from the middle of the 1920s to the late 1970s. During those five decades, the cinema was unrivaled as a cheap source of evening entertainment in Ghana’s urban areas, especially for younger audience members. However, the centenary of the commercial cinema, celebrated across much of the globe, never arrived in Ghana. By December 1995, the hundredth anniversary of the Lumière brothers’ first public cinema screening in Paris, there were no longer any cinemas operating in Ghana.

A few venues continued to screen low-grade American action flicks, second-rate Indian films, and the product of the new Nigerian and Ghanaian video film industries. Those cinemas used television screens rather than the projector reels that had preceded them, and most other picture houses had been converted to non-cinema purposes, often churches.¹ The remaining venues were crumbling away: the old seats were stacked at the back of the theatre if they had not been removed and sometimes the buildings were no longer enclosed so people and animals wandered through.

In Ghana, it would be more apt to speak of the half-centenary of cinema as a public and profitable institution, at least in terms of the country’s intersection with the major overseas film industries. While the development of an indigenous video film industry from the late 1980s put Ghanaians in control of film content for the first time the

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¹ On December 28, 1995, the hundredth anniversary of the world’s first commercial cinema screening, four of Accra’s old theatres were screening action films from the US that did not get a cinema release in their country of origin, Indian films that did not even merit a title in the newspaper, and, at the Rex, a production called *Sarah 2*, a video film from Nigeria or Ghana.
audience experience was very different: video films played in much smaller clubs or private yards and no longer provided the collective experience of the large cinemas. While the video filmmakers could respond to Ghanaians’ local interests in ways that Hollywood and Bollywood never did, the demise of the cinemas reduced the audience’s level of participation in a global film culture even if that culture was dominated by overseas industries.

In some important respects, the story of Ghana’s cinemas parallels that of their counterparts across the globe, but deferred in time. While urban Ghana retained a vibrant cinema culture until the late 1970s despite deep economic distress during that decade, the subsequent decline in cinema attendance in Ghana mirrors that which occurred in the United States and the United Kingdom after the Second World War. In those countries, audiences reached a peak in 1946 and began a precipitous fall thereafter due to demographic change and competition from both radio and television. The major difference was that Ghana’s decline was far more definitive, taking with it almost every big screen in the country.

Audience attention in Ghana began to wane in the late 1970s with the growing impact of home video machines and cheap pirated copies of overseas films. These allowed for a low-cost viewing experience for audiences affected by Ghana’s prolonged economic downturn. The cinemas were already reeling from the impact of the VCR, but the extended curfew on night-time activities introduced shortly after Jerry Rawlings came

There are exceptions: some of the high-end video productions have theatrical premieres at Accra’s multiscreen theatres, and may even have a short theatrical run.
to power in 1981 crippled many venues. That restriction impacted all nightlife from 1982-1984 but the high fixed costs of cinemas, with their large buildings and expensive equipment, were difficult to sustain for any length of time when paying customers were unable to attend. Uncertainty about the duration of the curfew made overseas distributors reluctant to sign contracts with Ghanaian owners, who were in turn nervous about their own business prospects.

In many cases, by the time the curfew came to an end there were no cinemas to re-open. A few venues soldiered on with video projectors but many of those urban Ghanaians who had adjusted to the idea of providing their own entertainment during the curfew period could not be persuaded back to the theatres to watch the same videos there at a higher cost. This was unlike the North American and European countries that managed to retain a sizeable cinema exhibition sector, even seeing some modest expansion from the late 1970s when cinema owners invested in large multi-screen cinema projects. By contrast, more than twenty-five years elapsed before Ghana opened a new cinema in 2008.

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This project is a social and economic history of cinema-going in Ghana, a period that crosses from the late colonial era to the first decades of independence. The history of cinema as a commercial venture in the colony and independent nation is restricted by shifts in political leadership but traces its own chronology. As such, the cinema provides

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3 David Afriyie Donkor, “Spiders in the City: Tricksters and the Politics/Economics of Performance in Ghana’s Popular Theatre Revival,” (PhD dissertation, Northwestern University, 2008), 121.
a distinctive lens through which to examine Ghanaian society in the period from the
1920s to the 1970s. In particular, the cinema’s omnipresence in Gold Coast urban life
after 1945 opens numerous pathways into social, business, and political history,
including: colonial and post-colonial regulatory mechanisms; the day-to-day leisure
activities of urban populations; the participation of marginal locations in major global
commercial flows; business sectors dominated by expatriate business networks; local
entrepreneurial activity both within and without the cinema walls; processes of urban
expansion; and the ways in which urban residents of Ghana experienced non-work life in
their cities.

This dissertation seeks to contribute to an alternative strand of Ghanaian history in
which progress toward independence is one among many drivers and in which the
division into colonial and post-colonial spheres is rendered complex, even messy.
Ghana’s long and gradual progress toward self-rule and eventual independence created an
extended political and social discussion centered on the idea of Ghanaians assuming
control over their own destinies. While the trajectory was forward-looking, the process
moved in fits and starts and business owners displayed considerable uncertainty about the
outcome, aligning themselves with various political actors as they assessed the probable
final outcome and their place in the new dispensation.

The key antecedent for this approach within Ghanaian social history is Emmanuel
Akyeampong’s 1996 work on the use of alcohol in Ghana from 1800 to the near-present,
which is also essential in terms of examining intergenerational tensions created by new
forms of urban social structure.\textsuperscript{5} Catherine Cole’s study of the concert party phenomenon and Nathan Plageman’s work on highlife music find their own alternative chronologies of late colonial and early independence history without ever discounting the importance of political change in terms of the possibilities and obligations that affected performers, business people, and audiences before and after independence.\textsuperscript{6}

These Ghana-centered works also make important contributions to the growing literature on the history of leisure across Africa. The primary focal points of this literature to date have been studies of music, sport, and the production and consumption of alcohol, though many works are also invested in describing processes of political development.\textsuperscript{7} A number of studies, such as Phyllis Martin’s rich history of the numerous overlapping forms of leisure in colonial Brazzaville, have looked along the leisure spectrum in a specific location, though Martin’s work does not cross the threshold of independence.\textsuperscript{8}

This project is the first full-length study of the social and business aspects of cinema-going in a colonial and post-colonial African location and stands at a little-

\textsuperscript{5} Emmanuel Akyeampong, \textit{Drink, Power, and Cultural Change: A Social History of Alcohol in Ghana, c. 1800 to Recent Times} (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1996).


traveled intersection between African social history, business history, and cinema history. Nineteen years ago the cinema audience was a rare feature in almost all cinema history irrespective of the location under scrutiny, and that prolonged absence led to pleas from senior scholars for greater attention to this essential component of the commercial cinema industry. Knowledge of the African audience still trails behind its counterparts elsewhere, and this project is to a degree a response to that original call.

There are several informative studies of reactions to films made by government-run cinema units, including most notably James Burns’ full-length 2002 study *Flickering Shadows*, which deals with Zimbabwe before and after the advent of majority rule, and the 2011 essay collection *Film and the End of Empire*, but there are only very limited traces of the experiences of African audiences at commercial theatres. Burns does what he can to find the African cinema audience in Zimbabwe's archival records but the single most vivid account of the African film viewer experience during the colonial period remains Hortense Powdermaker’s description of film-going in mine-town theatres on the Zambian Copperbelt.

A half century later first-hand testimony of events like those described in Powdermaker’s work is difficult to come by, while even her fascinating account has

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9 The historian Laura Fair is developing a book-length project on cinema-going in Tanzania, with the working title *Reel Lives: The Business and Pleasures of Movie-going in Twentieth Century Urban Tanzania*.


important holes including the titles of the films she saw and the distribution practices that
affected film choice in that particular location. Charles Ambler has built on
Powdermaker's study in important ways in his work on cinema-going on the Zambian
Copperbelt, suggesting the ways in which local audiences developed a particular set of
viewing interests despite the heavy restrictions imposed by censorship and the challenges
of comprehending films made many thousands of miles away in a language that was
often unfamiliar.

Where this project differs from some of its predecessors is in its focus on the
development of the business of the cinema and the cultivation of the audience, including
with respect to the choices made by Ghanaian distributors and exhibitors on commercial
grounds. They needed to translate their specialized knowledge of local interests into
straightforward business questions: could they acquire a film at a good price, and how
could they manage relationships with external suppliers and internal regulators? The
accurate contextualization of local experiences is critical to inserting the African
experience into commercial cinema history. At the same time, the know-how of owners,
whether African or expatriate, forms a key part of this project as they navigated a
changing business environment. The state’s direct involvement in the exhibition sector

13 Notwithstanding such missing details Powdermaker was, by her own account, a great fan of the movies
and wrote an anthropological study of the Hollywood studio system. See Hortense Powdermaker,
14 Charles Ambler, “Popular Films and Colonial Audiences: The Movies in Northern Rhodesia,” *The
American Historical Review* Vol. 106, No. 1 (2001), 81-105. Of course, if they survived the censor’s
scissors the films may not have been all that incomprehensible: Hollywood studios worked to ensure that
their products would appeal to the widest possible audience. See, for instance, Ruth Vasey, *The World
According to Hollywood, 1918-1939* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997) and Kristin
lends the Ghanaian experience particular interest, not least because it yields a rich source of archival materials. By contrast, private business archives are non-existent since the cinema businesses closed in the 1980s or early 1990s and aside from a handful of photos families have not retained records of their cinema businesses.

While the straightforward division into colonial and post-colonial phases is rendered more nuanced in this telling, the transition to independent rule in Ghana is not abandoned as one of several structuring principles. As with other Africanist scholars seeking to complicate independence-bound narratives of modern African history, I continue to link the experience of cinema-owners and cinema-goers to critical moments of political change. I use aspects of everyday life experience to shed light on reactions to political developments but also demonstrate how changes in political leadership could constrain or liberate entrepreneurial activity and non-work time. Histories of African music, in particular, often emphasize an explicit connection between political change and social history since music is well-placed to reflect on major events: the gap between an event and its commemoration in song might be as short as a few hours and political parties could act as patrons to musicians, who could then act as a conduit for ideas of nationalist or party politics, while performers and politicians shared a stage on occasion.

While political movements made regular use of cinema spaces in Ghana for rallies and meetings and local voters cast their ballots in cinema halls from the 1950s onward, there was almost no cinema production in Ghana during the period of this study (film production, in the most generous definition, totaled half a dozen feature-length films plus several dozen short films from 1930-1980). Commercial films from overseas did not
respond in a direct sense to Ghanaian political developments, even if on occasion local newsreels or informational materials might form part of urban cinema programs, increasingly so after independence. For this reason, there are sometimes striking continuities at moments of political upheaval, with the cinema even being used as a tool to manage urban populations’ leisure time at periods of stress. The censor’s reins might be loosened at precisely the moment when tighter control might be expected in order to remove one source of potential popular discontent.

There may also have been limited mental overlap between the most devoted cinema-going population and those engaged in energetic political discussion since the politically-active middle-class professed little interest in the cinema while many of urban Ghana’s most assiduous cinema-goers were too young to vote. Nonetheless, that audience could still be impacted by political change: the history of Ghanaian cinema censorship law is tied to shifts in the country’s constitutional basis, including with respect to the inclusion of African voices within the censorship apparatus. Elite Africans in colonial Ghana cast aspersions on the interest of lower-class audiences, particularly young people, in the movies, repeatedly characterizing youthful viewers in terms of near-criminality. Their concern about the impact of the cinema on the young is reminiscent of the moral panics that occurred in Britain both before and after the Second World War.15

In addition to discussing the experience of Ghana’s cinema-goers against the backdrop of late colonial and early independence politics, that audience is situated in

15 Sarah Smith, Children, Cinema and Censorship: From Dracula to the Dead End Kids (London: IB Tauris, 2005). The high point of control of the British juvenile audience was in the 1930s, and British officials used censorship and other legal mechanisms to regulate youthful free time.
relation to a set of global economic and informational flows, often determined in New York, Los Angeles or London. These outside influences further complicate the narrative by following their own unrelated chronology: while independence brought direct interest from Hollywood, it was the African independence wave of 1960 rather than Ghana’s own experience of 1957 that raised overseas antennae.\textsuperscript{16} The industry’s internal distress drove the search for markets and the array of now-independent countries in Africa appeared to offer expansion possibilities at the right moment in time.

By the early 1960s, the cinema was so ubiquitous as to be almost banal in urban locations in Ghana: the American industry felt there was no real competition from any other entertainment form in West Africa.\textsuperscript{17} The declaration of interest by Hollywood at that period created new regulatory and revenue-generating possibilities for the Ghanaian state. The colonial state had always been in the position of controlling material that entered the Gold Coast and, from 1925, had a full censorship bureaucracy that reviewed and certified every film that played in the colony’s commercial theatres. Despite the careful control of film content, the colonial administration exercised a light touch in terms of financial regulation of the cinema sector, even erring on the side of passing questionable films rather than risk damaging the prospects of the colony’s fragile film exhibition sector in the late 1920s and 1930s.

By contrast, the independent government was much more active in asserting itself with respect to the business, not least because the state itself owned a major chain of

\textsuperscript{16} Seventeen African countries, most of them former French colonies, became independent in 1960.
cinemas. During the first decade after independence, different sectors within the administration exercised control over the cinema business by doling out cinema licenses and building sites in new communities, by severely restricting censorship and banning so many films that some cinemas struggled to put on a show each night, and by controlling import licenses and foreign currency. These restrictions affected the state-owned chain as much or more than its private-sector counterparts, providing insights into the negotiation of power within the Nkrumah administration, and providing a vivid illustration of Fred Cooper’s post-independence “gatekeeper state,” in which various factions compete to regulate the intersection between the nation and the external world, often in self-defeating ways.\textsuperscript{18}

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By contrast with the audiences for colonial documentary and propaganda films, the everyday viewers of the commercial cinema are largely absent from the small current literature on cinema-going in Africa. This project is an attempt to re-balance this given that commercial cinema was a far more significant phenomenon in urban locations. Ghanaians used the films they saw to inform and even shape their evolving sense of identity as urban residents, and patched together a viewing experience that was certainly influenced by the constraints of overseas industry trends and supply lines but which remained local in its expression.

\textsuperscript{18} Frederick Cooper, \textit{Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present} (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2002).
Colonial administrators responsible for censorship embraced many of the same contradictions as their counterparts in film education/propaganda units when it came to issues of content: they saw African audiences as both unsophisticated and too sophisticated and were unable to resolve that paradox. They assumed that lower-class Africans, and illiterate audiences in particular, would understand film content quite literally and would translate what they saw onscreen into their behavior outside the theatre. At the same time, many colonial officials thought that these same unworlly audiences – in the parlance of officials – could make sophisticated extrapolations from brief onscreen depictions. In such an environment, officials believed that a hint of female leg or a buffoonish British drunkard could convince credulous audiences of dissolute European mores. The real issue here, whether articulated or not, was the question of European prestige rather than African comprehension, but at heart these contradictions stemmed from an inability to conceptualize the African audience as being modern in nature, shaped by processes of colonialism and technological change that were inherently part of an experience of social modernization as well as by their own indigenous social experiences.

African audiences themselves had no such difficulty with crafting a sense of their own modern status as viewers, and many people embraced the cinema precisely because of its visibly modern connections, especially in the urban setting: the cinema was a new technology associated with migration to the city, and it opened a window to a cosmopolitan culture that audiences could use to reflect on their own local experiences of life. This remained true even when African audiences were watching films that had been
half-forgotten by their original American and European audiences: they accessed a common set of experiences that rendered them, even while still under colonial rule, citizens of the world in another sense. They created images and understandings of the distant world through their cinema-going, while also turning those images inward to aid in self-examination in addition to deriving great pleasure from their evenings at the pictures. From a very early point in Ghana’s encounter with the commercial cinema, local audiences expected that movies would provide them with both entertainment and education.

Tracing these phenomena through audience experiences is an inevitable challenge, as subsequent chapters will make clear. Where archival records may provide detailed material on censorship or other forms of control they present us with only a partial and filtered record of audience experiences, as James Burns has observed for the case of Zimbabwe, assuming officials even took the time to report on what they saw in cinemas, both onscreen and in the audience. European and African journalists wrote limited accounts of local audiences, and cinema owners made little attempt to catalog audience reactions in any systematic way though their programming decisions can give us some cautious insight into local preferences over time.

Cinema owners in Ghana kept a large stock of films on hand, sometimes as many as several hundred titles, unlike their counterparts in the major film markets. This meant they could react to shifts in audience interest or re-play a big local hit, and local exhibition practices placed them in a position of relative power with regard to programming choices. Whereas the Hollywood studios tied theatres from Boston to Boise
to a particular release schedule, Ghanaian cinema owners could program from a stock of 200 or more titles by the late 1950s. Some titles from the Ghanaian exhibitors’ stock libraries almost never appear in cinema listings, suggesting that they did not prove popular with audiences and that owners did not persist in showing these titles; where individual film print rentals might cost only a small amount, there was little business downside to such practices.19

Cinema is also a means to examine Ghana’s medium-sized business sector, which expatriate businessmen from Lebanon and India dominated in the post-war years. While early entrepreneurs in the cinema business were either British or African, by the 1950s there was almost no remaining indigenous involvement in cinema exhibition. These expatriate businessmen had to negotiate between African political and social demands and the administrative controls imposed by colonial and post-colonial governments, often finding themselves in a fraught middle ground where they were neither beloved by their customers nor fully trusted by their contacts in the administration. This project examines how this status affected businessmen in one distinct sector across several often tumultuous decades; many business owners had interests outside the cinemas, which helped them to deal with periods of financial strain. Owners of mid-size businesses have a limited presence in the historiographical record, whereas market traders and large

19 WBA File Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous to December 31, 1962. MPEA Memorandum No. 217 West Africa, March 29, 1961. The memorandum describes the numbers of films needed to service the Ghanaian market. The document suggests that Hollywood could barely keep up with demand and certainly was not using Ghana as a dumping ground, as was the case in other locations such as Germany in the postwar period. The difference there was that Germany had the potential to develop its own film industry and American dumping was a deliberate strategy to undermine German prospects.
multinational concerns such as mining and retail have been the subject of more extensive research in Ghana during recent decades.\textsuperscript{20}

In business terms, the cinema entrepreneurs are exemplars of a particular socio-economic tranche sandwiched between the many small-scale entrepreneurs of the marketplace and the large enterprises that had their roots overseas. The men (and they were all men) who invested in the cinema sector emerged from the general merchant sector: they owned fixed businesses that required more capital than most market sellers and they traded in goods such as cars, timber, or cloth. They then identified the cinemas as a suitable new area of entrepreneurial activity. By the late 1950s, these entrepreneurs were in direct competition with the state’s own cinema chain, and this opens avenues to explore business relationships with clientelist political networks from the late colonial period onward: state ownership was no guarantee of success in an environment where the ability to cultivate and sustain governmental connections, including through financial largesse, counted greatly. At every period, the most successful cinema entrepreneurs had strong political connections, sometimes created by the routine interplay between the merchant and political classes in a small elite social world.

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\textsuperscript{20} Peter Garlick’s work in the 1960s and 1970s is the rare exception, examining the businesses and social role of mid-size entrepreneurs of both Ghanaian and expatriate backgrounds from an economic perspective. Peter C. Garlick, \textit{African Traders and Economic Development in Ghana} (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971). For detailed accounts of the working and home lives of market women, see, inter alia, Claire C. Robertson, \textit{Sharing the Same Bowl: A Socioeconomic History of Women and Class in Accra, Ghana} (Bloomington: University of India Press, 1984) and Gracia Clark, \textit{Onions Are My Husband: Survival and Accumulation by West African Market Women} (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994). Both books suggest that women’s scope for free time activities was circumscribed by commercial and domestic obligations. There is almost no mention of paid leisure activities like nightclubs or cinema (this may also reflect the writers’ interests). In addition, Robertson’s book deals with an earlier period: most of her subjects were born in the late nineteenth century.
The dissertation is structured as follows:

The first chapter delves into the question of what it meant for audience members to go to the cinema in Ghana and for owners to build that audience. It draws on conceptions of modernity and cosmopolitanism as audiences defined their relationship to a new leisure form that depended for its existence on technological innovations. Colonial officials and elite Africans each had their own distinct views on how a modern population should behave, with educated Ghanaians debating these ideas in great depth in the years leading to independence. Those debates make clear that there was no simple binary between colonial and African views: the educated African elite was not united in its view of behavioral standards, though most educated Africans professed to take a dim view of the boisterous popular cinema audience.

Chapter Two considers the legal framework against which film exhibition and cinema-going took place in Ghana. The primary focus is on processes of censorship, particularly during the well-documented colonial period. The Ghanaian experience of film censorship was more nuanced than in many other colonial locations, and for most of the period from 1925-1957 the censorship standard in the Gold Coast was like that which prevailed in Britain: the colony’s censors took their primary guidance from developments in Britain rather than elsewhere within the Empire, where stricter standards often applied. Imperial censorship existed across a broader spectrum than acknowledged by current scholarship, which tends to emphasize strictness of outcome. There were also non-colonial locations such as Ireland and Australia that implemented intrusive censorship apparatuses at the same time period, by comparison with which the Ghanaian audience
enjoyed a good deal more administrative trust. Censorship provided an important mechanism by which the colonial state and its successor could regulate imported content, acting as a gatekeeper for external influences, but for the most part it exercised this power with caution as the colonial administration negotiated the gradual inclusion of African voices in the political process. Against that backdrop, excessive censorship would have sent a mixed message about the state’s ability to trust Africans to make decisions in their own best interests.

Chapter Three provides a comprehensive history of the exhibition business in Ghana from its earliest origins in the mid-1910s to the boom of the 1950s, immediately before the American industry established a West African outpost. Not only did the 1950s mark the considerable expansion of the cinema network in line with urban population growth in Ghana, but the cinema business attracted the direct attention of the state, which acquired the country’s second-largest cinema network in 1956. The state’s ownership of a chain of cinemas provides a means by which to explore political clientelism in the early post-independence period: comparing the state and private sector experiences sheds light on the ability of different actors to benefit from their relationships with the government.

Chapter Four explores Hollywood’s attempts to cultivate the Ghanaian market in more direct fashion, piecemeal at first in the 1940s and 1950s, and then on a more organized scale from around 1960 when the industry identified West Africa as one potential area for market expansion at a time when the traditional profit centers of the United States and Europe had entered a steep and sustained decline in terms of audience interest. The American industry’s own records, including those related to the
establishment of a sales office in Lagos that was assigned to oversee all other English-speaking markets in West Africa, are key to this portion of the project. The chapter traces the process of American studio engagement and explores the efforts of the Hollywood industry to impose what they saw as modern business practices on West African distributors as well as to cultivate new post-independence audiences, with a focus on an emerging African middle class. This forms part of an effort to insert the film business in Africa into the broader global film history in which it has barely featured until this point, with the exception of a few references to the larger, segregated South African market.\textsuperscript{21}

The chapter also explores the ways in which the post-independence Ghanaian state manipulated export regulations and censorship practices in the context of its relationship with the United States. As these policies shifted, the local cinema exhibition business, including the state-owned theatres, suffered intermittent collateral damage.

Finally, Chapter Five returns to elite and administrative concerns with the audience, with a focus on the 1950s. The approach of independence led to interest in the Ghanaian audience experience from official, academic, and journalistic angles. The management of the audience’s zestful embrace of the cinema was a source of constant anxiety at the official level, and in the 1950s colonial administrators, both African and European, focused in particular on the experience of Ghanaian youth. Audiences

\textsuperscript{21} See, for instance, the important surveys in Thompson, \textit{Exporting Entertainment} and Jarvie, \textit{Hollywood’s Overseas Campaign}. The South African market was very different for white and black audiences, both in terms of the films available and the audience experience of the cinema space. There remains no comprehensive cross-racial study of the cinema-going experience in that country though there are valuable studies of South African films. The key work on the early history of South African cinema-going, with a near-exclusive focus on the white population, remains Thelma Gutsche, \textit{The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940} (Johannesburg: H. Timmins, 1972); the work was completed in 1946 but lay unpublished for 25 years.
themselves showed far less concern, and many lower-class adults viewed the cinema as a benign distraction at a time when they as adults were pushed to greater extremes to ensure their own livelihoods, including compromising on how closely they monitored their offspring’s leisure time. After independence, attention shifted again, with censorship loosened from the mid-1960s and a paradoxical final golden age for Ghanaian movie-goers against an ever-more alarming economic outlook.

The archival base of the dissertation blends records from the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) in Accra, the Warner Bros. Archive (WBA) and the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles, the David O. Selznick papers in Austin, and the St. Clair Drake Papers held at the Schomburg Center in New York. As another historian noted in a recent paper, numerous archival documents with a direct bearing on Ghanaian social history are often more easily found outside Ghana. I also make extensive use of newspaper and periodical sources from 1914 through the early 1970s, with rich newspaper records available for the 1930s, 1950s, and 1960s. Newspaper letter columns are a valuable source of information about ephemeral aspects of the local cinema-going experience, and columns by local journalists supply additional details. The daily listings of films shown each night are important in establishing the

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22 The St Clair Drake Papers might more aptly be called the St Clair and Elizabeth Drake papers; in addition to her logistical, editorial, and other support of her husband's research, Elizabeth Drake, a trained sociologist, completed numerous projects of her own including one on Ghanaian responses to American films.


24 The unreliable availability of archived newspapers is a source of great frustration: I was unable to trace copies of any daily or weekly newspapers for early 1948, a period of economic boycotts and violent disturbances in Accra that were key to development of Nkrumah’s policies on self-rule.
range of pictures projected as well as the frequency with which titles reappear. They function as a useful method of cross-checking information about contracts and exhibition practices as reported in other sources. Finally, I have mined a wide variety of Ghanaian biographical and other secondary sources for general references to cinema-going and other forms of leisure.
Chapter One - Mental and Physical Geographies of Cinema-Going in Gold Coast/Ghana, 1910-1970s

Early in 1951, the owners of Kumasi’s Rex cinema opened their doors with great fanfare.¹ This was Kumasi’s second Rex theatre: the first Rex was the name used by Prempeh Assembly Hall, a social venue constructed in 1938, on the nights when the Hall showed films. As one of the few large gathering places in Kumasi, Prempeh Hall was at the center of political life and nightlife in the Gold Coast’s second-largest city throughout the 1940s. The new Rex was a freestanding cinema venture, testament both to Kumasi’s growing population and the desire for more cinema screenings than Prempeh Hall could accommodate. With 1,500 seats it was a veritable palace of the movie age, substantial even by the standards of the large open-air theatres that predominated in the Gold Coast at the time, for Accra had only one venue of comparable size in the mid-1950s.²

The owners of the Rex trumpeted their affiliation with the West African Picture Company, a Lebanese-owned business that was both a rival theatre group and a conduit to the Hollywood supply line with operations in Gold Coast, Nigeria, and London.³ This affiliation was supposed to guarantee up-to-date products for the Kumasi cinema-goer. In

² Several other venues in the capital could hold around 1,000 spectators, and the smallest Accra venue at the time had 500 seats. Ioné Acquah, *Accra Survey: A Social Survey of the capital of Ghana, formerly called the Gold Coast, undertaken for the West African Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1953-1956* (London: University of London Press, 1958), 153. There were larger cinemas in Nigeria, including the 2,250-seat Scala in Ibadan, a covered venue (ticket prices were substantially higher at the Scala than elsewhere in Nigeria). WBA File Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous 1/1/63 to 12/31/64 16579A, Memorandum from George C. Vietheer to AMPECA Board, May 28, 1963.
³ PRAAD RG3/5/63 Board of Control For and Censorship of Cinematograph Films, Correspondence from West African Pictures Co., July 22, 1946; also David O. Selznick papers, Harry Ransom Center for the Humanities, Austin, TX: Box 717, Folder 10, correspondence from Baraland Limited, London.
reality the first films that played at the Rex looked very much like those at most of the Gold Coast’s other cinemas of the time: Westerns of the second or third rank and much older top-line films such as *Gunga Din*, a boisterous colonial adventure already a dozen years old.\(^4\) Whatever the truth of the company’s connections to the broader Hollywood production structure, the West African Picture Company operated on the principle of spending as little as possible to acquire as many films as it could and this affected what was available to Gold Coast cinema-goers.

Despite the antique films on offer at the Rex in 1951, over the course of several decades Gold Coast cinema exhibitors returned to the idea of tapping into global cultural currents even when it was untrue that their films were the latest or the greatest offerings. It was not until well into the 1960s that exhibitors in independent Ghana could contend that their theatres offered patrons new and high-quality viewing fare, at least when it came to representing the output of the American industry. That the idea nonetheless retained a good deal of currency suggests something about the ways in which local business owners thought that their customers would react to claims that they could, by crossing the threshold of a particular venue, be participants in international trends.

This chapter asks what it meant for entrepreneurs to open the doors of a cinema business in Gold Coast/Ghana and what it meant for audience members to step inside. In the pre-war period, the cinema was almost exclusively an urban experience, tied in with the innovations of city living for a growing population. The modernity of the cinema

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\(^4\) *Gunga Din* (1939, US, directed by George Stevens); loosely inspired by a Rudyard Kipling poem, the film was set in India around 1880.
experience was central to audience participation and enjoyment, with distinct class markers to the ways in which the Gold Coast population embraced that enjoyment: elite commentators and colonial officials expressed their concern as to whether the cinema represented an opportunity or a threat to the social order. These debates increased in tempo through the 1950s as the colony readied itself for a new political order, and conduct on the street and in the cinema was a major locus for discussion of the appropriate behavioral standards of a modern, independent citizenry.

**Class and the Cinema, 1910s to 1930s**

Popular audiences embraced the cinema from its earliest days in the Gold Coast colony and they learned to read, interpret and enjoy American and European films with ease. In sharp contrast to accounts from British settler colonies in Africa, early observers of Accra’s cinema audience do not suggest that viewers found the cinema strange or unsettling. The Gold Coast archive has no tales of audience misinterpretation such as the suggestion that African audiences took the large size of the mosquitoes in educational films at face value, though such oft-repeated colonial yarns may well have been apocryphal.  

Elite Africans and colonial administrators both had concerns about the impact of the cinema on the moral and criminal behavior of lower class audiences.

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precisely because they felt that the audience members understood what they were seeing only too well.

Elite Africans in the Gold Coast had a far more ambiguous relationship with the cinema as viewers themselves, shifting from an initial enthusiasm when the first cinema opened around 1914 to an arm’s length attitude by the 1930s. The educated African class endorsed many of the forms of control that the colonial state used in its own attempts to regulate the enthusiasm of the cinema audience. They were early participants in processes of censorship, which were in turn a response to the increasing popularity of cinema-going in the late 1920s, and yet they were also the first champions of the cinema in the colony.

In the 1910s an African-owned newspaper could cite the mere presence of the cinema in Accra as evidence that the city was a cosmopolitan spot in comparison with other locations in West Africa: “We said that Accra is up-to-date. It has a racecourse, and its appointments are as lively and as exciting as you can wish to see anywhere. (...) Moreover, Accra boasts of a Cinema Show of no mean order.”6 A few years later, another Gold Coast writer noted that until the construction of Accra’s cinema, attendance at the picture shows was “was a special privilege of those of our more fortunate brethren who could afford to visit England.”7 The comment suggests that whereas in the past modern life could only be experienced by those able to travel to the metropole, the cinema was helping to change this.

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6 The Gold Coast Leader, January 26, 1918.
7 The Gold Coast Independent, October 21, 1922.
Those who sought to cultivate the educated audience in the Gold Coast made consistent use of advertising language designed to flatter readers and to appeal to their desire to be treated as modern citizens of the world. In the 1930s, when the expatriate owners of Accra’s Sea View Hotel opened a weekly cinema, their advertising focused on the relative freshness of their films and their brand-new projection machinery. The hotel was a popular watering hole with Europeans as well as with members of the African elite in Accra. Unlike most cinemas in the colony at the time the venue presented recent films at every showing, many of them made in Britain rather than the US. The owners formulated their advertising to suggest that by entering that venue not only was the audience member part of contemporary elite culture across the globe but he or she was also being entertained by the newest and best in technical innovation.

The Sea View’s advertisements emphasized that they were showing “up-to-date films supplied by West African Pictures Company [with] picture and sound reproduction by the installation of the most modern type of projector and 'talkie' apparatus.” A decade after the arrival of the talkies in 1927, many of Gold Coast’s cinemas still showed silent films, some of which were twenty years old, including programs that consisted of multiple episodes from serial films that had been stitched back together. The Sea View thus worked from the moment of its first screening to distinguish itself within the local

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8 *The African Morning Post*, October 20, 1937. West African Pictures is the same company as that which later opened its own theatres in Gold Coast but at that time it was primarily an owner of theatres in Nigeria with a distribution arm in London.

9 This was not the only way that exhibitors showed serial films locally. Often a single episode could form part of a bigger program, and the censor expressed concern about serials where an audience might see a crime-heavy episode divorced from the subsequent, morally uplifting, conclusion. PRAAD ADM/11/1/1278 Letter from President, Board of Control, to Alfred Ocansey, October 10, 1927.
cinema scene with respect to its setting and content, making an effort to develop an upper market tier made up of both educated Africans and European elites. While the Second World War brought the endeavor to an abrupt end, it was a harbinger of the ways in which the America industry would seek to appeal to the same small elite group in the 1960s.

The focus on sound film also underlined the gradual nature of the transition to talking pictures across the globe. While that conversion was complete by around 1934 in the United States and even earlier in the United Kingdom, there were still many silent-only venues in Latin America, Asia, and Africa at the end of the 1930s. Where the Sea View emphasized its projection technology, other Gold Coast venues sought to highlight the non-cinema aspects of their evening entertainment, including live music, in order to sell an overall evening experience that depended far less on a specific film or on a recent technological innovation. The variety of distractions could compensate for the fact that these venues still showed silent films in the late 1930s. The Sea View did most of its advertising in newspapers owned by Alfred Ocansey, who also owned a string of film theatres, but the Sea View’s front-page ads outshone the small interior listings for the newspaper proprietor’s own venues, underlining the hotel’s efforts to reach a well-off clientele.

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10 Nathan Golden, *Review of Foreign Film Markets During 1936* (Washington, DC: United States Department of Commerce, 1937). The Department of Commerce produced identical reports for foreign film markets during the subsequent two years. File PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 includes details of all theatres with and without sound in 1938; there were 11 theatres across the country, four of which held screenings on most days.
The Sea View’s advertising copy implies that the ticket-buyer might appreciate not only the availability of sound films but also the particular qualities offered by the modern projection apparatus. The cinematic apparatus – cameras, projectors and, later, sound systems – and the activity of movie-going are quintessentially modern technological developments, invented at the very end of the nineteenth century and spreading across the globe within a few years.¹¹ These advertisements attempt to capture the sense of technological marvel, pre-supposing that those reading the newspaper would place value on this irrespective of their understanding of the technology.

Newspapers like *The African Morning Post*, which almost all cinemas of the 1930s used for advertisements, might be read or heard by a wide swathe of the population but were written by and first intended for the small population of educated and high-status Africans. The pages are filled with social news about elite members of the African community and their offspring: successful merchants, those with traditional titles, lawyers, educators, journalists, or members of the clergy. Their trips overseas, their exam successes, their weddings and other social occasions are chronicled in the pages of newspapers in the 1930s, alongside the activities of the senior members of the colonial administration (and the British royal family). In addition, the newspapers gave ample coverage to the most popular elite African leisure pursuits of the time, such as ballroom dancing and literary clubs, with detailed accounts of particular competitions and public lectures. The Sea View’s advertising was directed first and foremost at this audience. The

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venue’s high ticket prices were also designed to exclude many members of the population, even if they received some information from the newspaper.

The language of these 1930s advertisements recalls Tom Gunning’s suggestion that the machinery of the cinema itself was an attraction for viewers in the early silent period in Western countries. The same sales techniques persisted in attempting to persuade audiences to attend feature films well into the sound era. As the historian Ana López notes, in Latin America in the early years of the twentieth century such technological attractions were important to what she refers to middle-class consumers – well-off members of society – in defining themselves as cosmopolitan citizens of the world, before cinema became established as a source of anxiety for its (perceived) negative impact on members of the lower classes. This anxiety eventually transformed the elite relationship to the medium, including in Gold Coast.

Anthropologist Jeffrey Himpele traces similar behavior in Bolivia: that country’s small bourgeoisie tried to mark its status by “seeing (and being seen at) the first national debuts of globally-distributed films. Having the earliest access to the newest merchandise (…) allowed them to appear as if they were participating in an international bourgeois

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class.”¹⁴ The Bolivian bourgeoisie attended performances in circumscribed areas of the city for it did not wish to be associated with the poor-quality materials, and venues, that were available in popular districts. Cinemas that appealed to different audiences used different forms of advertising and other measures to attract consumers. This was no less true in the Gold Coast: genre or quantity were key to some audiences – that is, showing several films in an evening or choosing longer pictures – where markers of quality were essential to sell tickets to other potential cinema-goers. These techniques reinforced invisible barriers to different audiences: it meant that people were not liable to venture to venues that did not appeal to their interests. To some extent a venue’s offerings were even calibrated not to appeal to certain classes of viewer since that would have undermined the location’s social standing in the eyes of other audience members.

The Sea View’s advertising and pricing were designed with these exact objectives in mind, for by the late 1930s many elite Gold Coasters saw the cinema not as a sophisticated, cosmopolitan entertainment but rather as a source of concern. By that point, the cinema’s success with the colony’s popular classes was clear, and many elite commentators saw little merit in the flickering screen.¹⁵ They used the phrase “cowboy films” as shorthand for material they deemed to be devoid of merit: in the 1920s and 1930s the Western was by far the Gold Coast’s most popular genre, filling every theatre with the exception of the Sea View, which focused on British dramas and comedies. The

¹⁵Elite views of the cinema were not means monolithic, of course. As Stephan Miescher notes, where an educated man like E.K. Addo might disapprove of the “moral content of the movies,” many of his peers attended performances at the Mikado in Nsawam. Stephan Miescher, *Making Men in Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 90.
behavior of those audiences who took the Western to their hearts, sometimes whooping and screeching as fistfights and gunshots punctuated the action, seemed to elite observers in direct opposition to the standards of behavior they felt appropriate in the evolving colony of the 1920s and 1930s, where Africans gained their first, limited role in government.

Among the advocates of increasing self-rule for Africans was Alfred Ocansey, the major pre-war cinema innovator in the colony and his prominence on the cinema scene complicated elite unease with the medium (Chapter Three provides a fuller account of Ocansey’s business interests and background). Notwithstanding the fact that Ocansey posed a challenge to early European dominance of the cinema exhibition business, elite Gold Coasters were less than enthusiastic about the kind of picture his cinemas purveyed. This left Ocansey himself in an awkward position. His newspapers extolled elite values such as educational accomplishments and literary clubs and promoted their own vision of appropriate modern behavior, and he drew on ideas of metropolitan success in choosing venue names, most obviously with the flagship Palladium. Editorials in Ocansey’s newspapers warned against recourse to traditional beliefs, such as the use of magical charms for success in examinations, with the owner’s editors deeming the persistence of such beliefs seen to be a source of harm for “the rising generation.”16 Nonetheless, he made extensive use of his newspapers to promote his cinema ventures: articles and editorials commented on any expansion of his network even though the audience was the

same non-elite population that was otherwise castigated in the columns of his newspapers.¹⁷

Ocansey’s publications rarely featured coverage of films themselves in the 1930s, whereas regular columns analyzed trends in elite ballroom dancing and literature, and his newspapers included coverage of sporting events that were of interest across the socioeconomic spectrum, from football to horse-racing, were far more common. This suggests that there was not a lot of value in devoting space to the cinema for readers of the newspapers, though the reasons may have been complex. The primary readership of those particular newspapers may not have attended the cinema often, or cinema may have been seen as the ultimate disposable entertainment, not worthy of extended commentary. While there was only a very limited tradition of critical writing on the cinema at the time, news and gossip about the stars of the cinema were hugely popular in other parts of the world, and sustained a significant press sector.¹⁸

Just as Ocansey complicated the picture of elite African discomfort with the cinema, the colonial administration could not be counted as an ally with respect to condemnation of the medium. While colonial officials were concerned by filmed images, particularly those which suggested the sensational delights and thrills of urban life, they hesitated to prohibit them outright, as the history of cinema censorship in the Gold Coast, discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two, makes clear. To some degree, this parallels colonial officials’ discomfort with other forms of censorship, including of the press,

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¹⁸ By the 1930s, for instance, the Hollywood gossip columnist Louella Parsons was already a nationally syndicated figure in the US, with her great rival Hedda Hopper beginning her own column in 1938, while the fan magazine *Photoplay* was both popular and influential throughout the 1920s and 1930s.
though there the usual pattern is reversed: Accra-based officials who adopted a lenient
approach to cinema censorship often called for greater restriction of newspapers and
found themselves tamped down by their counterparts in London, whereas officials in
Britain urged stricter control of films in colonial locations. Members of the African elite
were far more likely to argue in favor of a complete prohibition on access to films.

The Cinema as a Modern Experience, 1930s-1950s

The modernity of the cinema experience underpinned initial elite enthusiasm for
the cinema in the Gold Coast. In most locations, the emergence of mass cinema-going
was associated with overlapping and parallel industrial, technical, legal, and social
changes. Cinema historian Ben Singer’s valuable study *Melodrama and Modernity*
examines cinema-going in the United States in the first two decades of the twentieth
century and stresses that the cinema came into being at a period marked by great
technological transformations and rapid urbanization. These contemporaneous
developments led many early observers to link the cinema to phenomena of technological
and social change in North America and Western Europe.

A number of social critics in the early part of the twentieth century went so far as
to posit a direct link between the content of cinema and what they viewed as the intense
experience of early twentieth-century urban life. They believed that most films were

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21 Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity*, 9-10. The idea that the city could be a place of intense sensory experience found expression in some films, including director F.W. Murnau’s extraordinary diptych
sensationalistic because they emerged from an intense urban production environment and were embraced by urban populations in a kind of feedback loop. This notion was given its primary intellectual expression by Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin and is known as the “modernity thesis” within cinema studies. As Ben Singer acknowledges, historians of the cinema have subjected the modernity thesis to considerable criticism, in particular for its failure to recognize the complexity of narrative structure and content that characterized cinema from the mid-1910s. Where the thesis retains greatest relevance to this project is in its exploration of cinema-going as part and parcel of an experience of social and business modernization.

Singer examines the experience of cinema-going in large urban areas in the United States, discussing the early decades of cinema production and consumption along with mass-market literature, theatre, and other popular entertainments of the period. While he focuses on a period some two decades before the development of a substantial urban cinema audience in the Gold Coast, there are striking similarities between the social conditions that prevailed in each location when cinema became a mass urban pastime. These phenomena include substantial urban population growth and migration; the “proliferation of new technologies;” the extension of bureaucratic and legal institutions (in the Gold Coast this took the form of the colonial state); changes in the influence of the extended family for new urban residents; and the availability of new forms of communication and amusement.

Sunrise (1927, US) and City Girl (1930, US), both of which suggest that city life could be overwhelming to rural visitors.

22 The most consistent critiques of the thesis have come from David Bordwell. See David Bordwell, On the History of Film Style (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
In Singer’s reading, these developments were linked to, and even perhaps dynamized by, capitalistic endeavor. While capitalism as experienced in the Gold Coast as a whole was quite different to that of the United States given that rural agricultural labor and other extractive forms were far more common than industrial wage labor, the increasing urbanization of the Gold Coast created substantial groups earning their incomes as petty traders and employees of small- and mid-size commercial concerns. The colonial administration also created salaried positions for over 4,000 people by the late 1920s, the vast majority of whom were concentrated in Accra, and this number continued to increase in the 1930s. Most employees of the colonial administration had working lives with distinct non-working leisure hours, making them ideal audience members for early evening screenings at the cinema in the 1920s and 1930s.

The use of the term “modernity” in cinema studies applies in this context to a specific set of developments in relation to an urbanizing audience in the 1910s and 1920s but the word has a far wider usage in histories of Africa, including in discussions of British colonial history. The competing and overlapping conceptions of the term have created considerable room for confusion in the context of British colonialism: as Fred Cooper comments, the “word modernity is now used to make so many different points that continued deployment of it may contribute more to confusion than to clarity.”

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In studies of the history of colonialism, “modernity” is frequently deployed as a concept that explains to some degree the colonial project, and specifically the ways in which colonial powers held up a model before colonized peoples, “something to which the colonized should aspire but could never quite deserve.” This is an important component of other aspects of British rule in Ghana, including the colonial administration’s plans for the expansion of cities such as Accra and Kumasi. However, the commercial cinema exhibition sector was only within the direct control of the British colonial state in the Gold Coast for the briefest of periods in 1956-1957, after self-rule had been implemented and full independence was on the immediate horizon.

In the Gold Coast the colonial state was thus almost never in a position to employ the cinema, at least in the commercial incarnation experienced by urban residents, as a direct part of its project of proposing a model of citizen/subject behavior. Instead, the commercial cinema proposed a counter-narrative that could threaten colonial efforts to shape the narrative of appropriate behavior. While a variety of British colonial regimes funded their own film units for propaganda purposes and made use of commercial entertainments to entice audiences to watch pedagogical or propagandistic materials, they spent a great deal more time combating the imagery of the commercial cinema, which

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often seemed to confound their efforts to present an upstanding picture of Western life and culture.\textsuperscript{27}

In general, however, the use of the cinema as an educational, informational or propaganda tool ran parallel to experiences of the cinema for urban audiences, who were not necessarily exposed to the preferred official cinema images with any great frequency. During the colonial period, despite relatively close regulation of their sector independent cinema exhibitors in Ghana were under no obligation to project anything other than the films (feature films, short subjects and newsreels) that they had themselves imported and sent for censorship. It was not until the early post-independence years that the state began to oblige cinema owners to show official films, such as informational/propaganda films about government projects including the Volta River Project or reels that extolled the virtues of President Nkrumah though if owners in the 1950s thought a Gold Coast Film Unit picture might be attractive to audiences they were happy to show it.\textsuperscript{28}

The Minister of Information and Broadcasting after independence claimed that such films were “not only of high standard but are also popular,” an interesting juxtaposition, but that they were not shown commercially “due to lack of enterprise and consideration of Government endeavors on the part of the cinema proprietors.”\textsuperscript{29}


owners remember this differently, and claimed they projected such material as a matter of obligation. While it is difficult to know whether these films were truly popular, surveys of cinema-goers conducted in the 1950s do repeatedly cite colonial and similar educational films as being memorable. In addition, some cinemas highlighted the latest programs of “Gold Coast Films” in the publicity flyers they distributed each week; in the mid-1950s, the Globe cinema in Accra even programmed a series of such films as a full Friday night program.\textsuperscript{30} This suggests that even if audiences were not always convinced by the intended message, they placed a great deal of value on the opportunity to see aspects of local life on screen despite the propagandistic context, extracting what was of interest to them without necessarily absorbing the desired message. In this respect, the Gold Coast Film Unit and its post-independence counterpart were at least attempting to engage directly with a Ghanaian audience, unlike the makers of films in Hollywood or other overseas locations.

Until 1956, the cinemas in the Gold Coast were exclusively financed and controlled by private business, and they often projected filmed images that conflicted with the picture of European and American life that officials wished to paint. In the Gold Coast, those same officials remained reluctant to censor such images in too heavy-handed a fashion for fear that they would face accusations that they were not placing adequate trust in the African population. It was precisely the perceived modernity of onscreen Western life and mores that concerned officials, who tended to take the view that African

\textsuperscript{30}St Clair Drake Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York (hereafter SCD), Box 81, Folder 7, Globe Cinema Programme for the Week Commencing 16\textsuperscript{th} January 1955.
audiences would interpret what they saw onscreen literally. This revealed the deep-seated tension between the differing senses of cinematic modernity: as much as the cinema was a positive representation of technological innovation, with the possibility to reach far more colonial subjects than newspapers or other written materials, its depiction of modern European/American behavior, warts and all, could present a threat from the official perspective.

Whether or not audiences were compliant in adopting the “right” form of modernity, colonial officials could do little about their own overall discomfort with the commercial cinema given that they saw the medium as of such great utility in other contexts. They felt that the cinema was among the key means to educate their colonial subjects in what officials saw as new, more appropriate ways of thinking. Not only was the cinema a modern technology but because of colonial views on the nature of the African mind it was for many officials the method par excellence of communicating with a population they deemed at best illiterate and at worst primitive.

Numerous officials held the belief that Africans were impressionable viewers, so much so that the cinema could be a hazardous educational tool if not deployed with care. That was the thinking that led William Sellers, a health official in Nigeria in the 1930s, to develop his own filming style. Sellers’ short films contain minimal camera movement and the most basic of editing techniques, removing most of the common narrative tropes of commercial cinema with which urban viewers were already familiar.\(^{31}\) Sellers also suggested that illiterate people scanned the screen in ways that appear to parallel the

\(^{31}\) Burns, *Flickering Shadows*, 39-42.
process of reading, that is, from side to side and top to bottom, unlike literate people, who he thought could absorb the entire image at one time. Sellers developed his theory following screenings where some viewers focused on minutiae in the corners of the screen rather than the intended primary subject but does not choose to explore the apparent contradiction whereby non-literate viewers treated the screen as a page of text.

While Sellers took things to an extreme his views were by no means atypical: L.A. Notcutt and G.C. Latham couched their subsequent film experiments in East Africa in the mid-1930s in similar terms. Sellers, Notcutt and Latham all wrote in detail about their work, with their ideas influential on many of those who later took up the task of making colonial education films – with the notable exception of the Gold Coast. All three were highly critical of the potential impact of the commercial cinema, particularly American films, in Africa. In Notcutt and Latham’s 1937 book on the subject, they wrote that “There is much that is silly and sordid in the life of the West, but white people have other interests than money making, gambling, crime and the pursuit of other people’s wives and husbands.” Like Sellers, Notcutt and Latham were convinced that African audiences, especially in rural areas, could not deal with quick cuts or special visual effects.

32 Fred Pratt has a useful, brief account of the colonial film story, covering particularly the work by Sellers, Notcutt and Latham. See Pratt, “‘Ghana Muntie!’,” 20-25.
The great irony in all of the work by colonial filmmakers is that they almost always paired their educational films with Hollywood shorts like those of Chaplin and Lloyd. They needed to attract an audience even though the screenings were free, and they found that people were much more likely to attend when they knew they could also see fast-paced comedies sprinkled in between the plodding educational efforts. Notcutt and Latham also acknowledged, very briefly, that it would be very difficult to “produce a constant flow of [colonial film] stories with any grip in them in which these subjects [crime and violence] are entirely absent,” even though such material was otherwise of great concern to them in the commercial cinema.\(^{35}\)

Despite the efforts of colonial filmmakers, Ghanaians during the colonial period constructed their own ideas of what “modernity” and “modernization” meant, with multiple possible meanings in competition at times. A recent essay collection explores this tension between modernity and modernization in the African context, and casts the idea of modernization as a form of spectacle in its own right, a concept used by both colonial and post-colonial governments in Ghana.\(^{36}\) This was particularly apparent under Nkrumah’s leadership, including through the use of filmed images to project a specific vision of the state, but lay behind at least some of the educational films of the colonial era with the presentation of “new” and “modern” techniques of agriculture as well as health and education information.


\(^{36}\) Peter Bloom, Stephen F. Miescher, Takwiyyaa Manuh (eds.), *Modernization as Spectacle in Africa* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2014).
In the early 1960s, the Ghanaian state used a network of mobile cinemas to project informational films or newsreels that featured the president against backdrops such as the Tema port project or the Akosombo Dam and officials compelled commercial cinemas to show similar material before their screenings began. These short films drew on existing techniques of cinematic propaganda developed under British rule while developing a specific local identification between the leader and the modernizing projects he oversaw. Most of the technicians in the early phase of post-independence government cinema had been trained by British filmmakers and had a sophisticated grasp of film language that was unusual in the colonial context, and may also have made cinema audiences more accepting of these films since they were more sophisticated in technique than the comparable material in circulation elsewhere.

Where the colonial film units in other British colonies of the 1950s continued to craft films using the deliberate and repetitive style that they believed was necessary for African viewers to apprehend their messages, the director of the Gold Coast Film Unit, Sean Graham, made no such concessions. He was convinced that local audiences had the same grasp of film language as their counterparts in Europe or North America and rejected the theories that governed other colonial film units. Audiences could establish a distance from the images onscreen and analyze what they saw with no difficulty.

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37 Sean Graham was born in Germany and came to Britain in the 1930s; his birth name was Hans Friedrich Eisler and his parents were from “well-established Jewish families.” He worked briefly for the documentary filmmaker John Grierson in Britain’s Central Office of Information and then spent almost a decade in colonial Ghana, from 1948-1957. See Sandon, et al., “Changing the World,” 524.

Graham’s rejection of the standard colonial film view came several years before the British anthropologist Peter Morton-Williams undercut the racialized theories that dictated the deliberate presentation of information by other colonial film units.\textsuperscript{39} Morton-Williams did his field research in rural parts of Nigeria in 1952 and argued that in his observations in Nigeria even those watching commercial films for the first time understood the syntax without assistance, testament to Hollywood’s skill in appealing to the broadest possible audience. Morton-Williams emphasized that audiences had no difficulty with cuts from one scene to the next, a key concern of colonial film theorists, who nonetheless continued to defend their views.\textsuperscript{40} As late as 1954, Sellers, writing in the journal \textit{Colonial Cinema}, continued to argue that “illiterate people” needed an different kind of cinema, one with shots and scenes of greater length, and with all “action” filmed at very deliberate speed.\textsuperscript{41}

The Gold Coast Film Unit pictures supervised by Sean Graham, while problematic on other levels including the ingrained paternalism of the narration, are far more visually sophisticated than their counterparts from other locations in Africa because Graham himself was a well-trained film professional rather than a colonial cinema dogmatist: his films are brisk and contain the expressive angles and dramatic cuts

common in commercial American and British cinema of the 1940s and early 1950s. The
evidence of the films themselves suggests that Graham found the Gold Coast audience to
be no less worldly than its British counterpart: *The Boy Kumasenu* could be grouped
within the semi-documentary style of filmmaking that was a popular American crime
genre in the late 1940s, with voiceover narration often used to provide exposition.\(^\text{42}\) Still,
budget restrictions meant that the Unit could only produce a small number of films, and
the mobile cinemas often made use of older, less complex material produced in other
colonies as well as straightforward newsreels from the UK.\(^\text{43}\)

Local meanings of modernity could be elaborated in careful contrast to notions of
colonial modernity, which had a very different agenda even if it granted viewers a degree
of cosmopolitan knowledge. As Catherine Cole notes, at least some Africans under
colonial rule defined their sense of modernity as *not* being the unquestioning adoption of
British attitudes.\(^\text{44}\) In some cases this may have manifested itself as a preference for non-
British films, although any economic impact of such decision-making would be difficult
to perceive in a market so saturated with American pictures through most of the colonial
period. A preference for or against British cultural products had a class dimension,
however. Educated or high-ranking Africans adopted modes of dress, discourse, and
business closer to those of the expatriate population and lower-class Africans perceived

\(^{42}\) The early police procedural *He Walked By Night* (1948, US, directed by Alfred R. Werker and Anthony
Mann) is an example of the kind of film that might well have been an influence on Graham. *The Boy
Kumasenu* (1952, Gold Coast, directed by Sean Graham).
\(^{43}\) PRAAD RG7/1/1058 Gold Coast Film Unit General 1952-1953 Establishment of Priorities for Films to
Be Made by the Gold Coast Film Unit, February 11, 1952.
\(^{44}\) Cole, *Ghana’s Concert Party Theatre*, 56-7. Cole draws on the play *The Blinkards* by Kobina Sekyi,
which she suggests “provides an astonishingly prescient analysis of what modernization and civilization
meant and could mean for Africa.”
such figures as being aligned with the colonial apparatus in many respects.\textsuperscript{45} The Sea View, which had ticket prices that excluded all but a few Africans specialized in British films during the 1930s and reinforced this connection.

Catherine Cole’s work suggests an alternative path to modernity involving careful reflection on whether an aspect of European culture is useful in the African context before a decision was made on the utility of adoption. She also notes that the introduction of more elements from Ghanaian folklore or the switch from English to Akan language could be construed by concert party practitioners as modern innovations in relation to the colonial period.\textsuperscript{46} This idea also underpinned the Nkrumah government’s efforts to “modernize” musical practice, through the implementation of “changes that would better align artists’ practices with an invented version of national culture,” though this was as much political pragmatism as a reflection of a consistent philosophy given that Nkrumah changed course on matters of Africanization and indigenization with some regularity.\textsuperscript{47}

\textit{The Social Standing of the Cinema in Mid-Century Ghana}

To go to the cinema in the Gold Coast in the middle decades of the twentieth century meant to partake in a leisure form that still had the sheen of the new about it: the

\textsuperscript{45} As Stephanie Newell notes in her analysis of African journalists’ legal strategies, however, familiarity with British cultural and legal frameworks did not necessarily mean acceptance of those structures, with some journalists and their legal representatives manipulating the British system in their own defense. Newell, \textit{Power to Name}, 84-5.

\textsuperscript{46} Catherine M. Cole, “‘This is actually a good interpretation of modern civilization’: Popular theatre and the social imaginary in Ghana, 1946-1966,” \textit{Africa}, Vol. 67, No. 3 (1997), 363-88. See also the discussion on African modernities in Dmitri Van den Bersselaar, \textit{The King of Drinks: Schnapps Gin from Modernity to Tradition} (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

post-1945 boom in both population and cinema attendance brought the first experience of
the movies for many recent urban migrants. The cinema brought together people from a
wide variety of backgrounds, ages, and walks of life for it was cheap and widely
available in the Gold Coast’s cities. Younger Africans were quick to take up the cinema
habit as it allowed them a social outlet that was within their limited means. As much as
social welfare officers were concerned about the influence of motion pictures many
parents also saw it as a benign method of managing their children’s time, and few
objected to their children’s attendance at midday or after-school screenings.

Modest ticket prices were key to the cinema’s success. They ensured that the
cinema remained popular across different age groups despite numerous competing
attractions in town. Cinemas were geographically accessible to a large proportion of the
population and unlike sports or the concert party and music circuits the cinemas were not
dependent on a particular season or day of the week. By contrast, music clubs, dancing,
and concert parties all had higher ticket prices, creating a distinct class difference
between leisure forms. They also tended to be weekend entertainments since they often
went on late into the night. The efforts of entrepreneurs to keep pace with expanding
urban populations by quickly opening new venues or expanding existing theatres
underlines the sustained popularity of the cinema.

The cinema brought together privileged Europeans and Africans with far less
privileged residents of the same cities. While social interactions between elite Africans
and Europeans were by no means infrequent in colonial Gold Coast in other leisure
contexts such as sporting contests or in the more expensive hotels and restaurants, the
cinemas were unusual for their cross-class appeal. They also brought Europeans into parts of Accra where they no longer lived, for the more exclusive residential quarters that developed from the 1920s in the outer ring areas of the city did not have their own cinemas.\textsuperscript{48}

Regular cinema-going was an activity unique to the urban segment of the population through the middle of the century. Notwithstanding rapid postwar growth in major cities, the Gold Coast was still a rural colony in 1950, with just 15\% of the population living in urban areas.\textsuperscript{49} The cinema may have exercised a particular appeal to those new to the urban environment, for simply to purchase a cinema ticket could give audience members a sense of their participation in a modern activity that depended on technological innovations like the projection machinery, the electricity that made it run, the print advertising that kept the audience informed, and the bureaucratic rules that allowed the cinemas to function as businesses.

The cinema offered newcomers to the city a broad range of choices unavailable in villages: given sufficient means, urban dwellers could go to a new film every evening, and could choose between multiple venues if they were close enough together. Unlike in small villages the cinema did not come to the audience, but rather the viewer had to make

\textsuperscript{48} The 1908 outbreak of bubonic plague was critical to this change for the measures that colonial officials implemented to deal with the possibility of future outbreaks included the segregation of the hitherto intermixed European and African populations, which had a significant impact on the composition of the central Accra population. The development of new settlements also saw the significant expansion of the city north and east of the traditional Ga heartland. John Parker, \textit{Making the Town: Ga State and Society in Early Colonial Accra} (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2000).

decisions about when and where to attend. These contrasting experiences marked the integration of new residents into a new daily reality that was often quite different to that of their non-urban lives. Whether they grew up in the city or the country, the moment the screen lit up in a Gold Coast cinema audiences were transported thousands of miles away. As the anthropologist Brian Larkin notes, during the colonial period to step into the cinema more or less anywhere in Africa was inevitably a “translocal” experience, “a stepping outside of Africa to places elsewhere.” This sense of dislocation was common for audiences in those many parts of the globe that did not have their own filmmaking industries.50

The contrast between urban and rural experiences of life was a common theme of conversation in the Gold Coast, for there was a constant process of exchange between city and country due to seasonal migration. Many rural residents had short-term experiences of city life, or even lives divided between the two environments depending on the time of year.51 Juvenile court officers picked up village runaways at the cinema, youngsters who had developed a taste for the pictures during short urban stays. They would invest considerable resources to return for another big-screen fix. One ten-year-old, among many similar cases, saw his first films during weekend visits to Accra with an older brother. Back home, he got restless and took off on his own for several days.52

50 Larkin, Signal and Noise, 124. This “stepping outside” of one's daily reality was a feature of cinema-going even in countries which had a substantial production industry, such as the United Kingdom. Many American audience members watching gangster or musical films were also stepping well outside their own routines even when the language onscreen was closer to that of their daily experience.
The first Gold Coast feature film, *The Boy Kumasenu*, spun a tale of naïve boys lured to the big city by bright lights, nightlife and easy money. The film itself may have been an ironic source of urban attraction for such youngsters during its extended run on the colony’s screens in 1952 and beyond for it was a major hit with local audiences who had little experience of seeing themselves on screen, particularly in an urban context. Demand for the film meant that the Gold Coast’s government-owned mobile cinemas brought *The Boy Kumasenu* into remote villages where feature films were a rarity, creating a new source of fascination with the pictures. When the protagonist of Perry Henzell’s 1973 Jamaican film *The Harder They Come* arrives in Kingston from the hinterland, he has but a single wish, to visit that city’s famed Rialto cinema. One of his new acquaintances even asks, “What do you know about Rialto, just come from country?” before the group heads off to see Franco Nero in *Django*. It is not difficult to imagine new Accra residents of the 1920s or the 1950s making a similar beeline for Ocansey’s Palladium or Captan’s Odeon, respectively: the fame of such venues had spread far beyond the growing city.

For rural residents who had only seen intermittent film screenings arranged by the colonial administration, one of the most striking aspects of the urban cinema-going experience was the need to buy a ticket. As Brian Larkin notes, for urban audiences, the cinema was an experience where the commodity itself became a kind of spectacle – that

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53. The film’s director, Sean Graham, suggests that the Lebanese owners were quick to show his films as they were very successful: “Because they were local films people literally queued to get into those films and they ran for five or six days.” Sandon et al., “Changing the World,” 526.

54. *The Harder They Come* (1973, Jamaica, directed by Perry Henzell). *Django* (1966, Italy, directed by Sergio Corbucci) was a violent but popular Western that spawned dozens of sequels and imitations, several of which appeared on Ghanaian screens in the late 1960s and early 1970s.
is, where the mere fact of attendance could be at least as important as the actual film seen. This accounts to some degree for the tolerance of audiences in the Gold Coast for screenings where the sound was inaudible or where the age of the film could render the action confusing through breaks and splices (censorship cuts, by contrast, were not common). Larkin notes that to focus on a reading of cinematic history that prioritizes the urban, ticket-buying public fails to account for those audiences who experienced cinema as something not designed “as a means of generating value but (...) produced by the government to train citizens,” and often supplied to those citizens at no charge. Those programs might also include mainstream entertainment films that were also shown without charge as an inducement to audiences. Larkin’s comments are a useful corrective to the notion that the cinema, and particularly the cinema audience, has a unified history.

While this dissertation focuses on urban locations, scholars have begun to challenge the straightforward notion that urbanity and modernity inevitably went together, or that the one was required for the other, at least as this applied to the cinema. One collection of essays on European cinema audiences and modernity expands consideration beyond the major cities of Europe to small-town Belgium, Sweden, and the Netherlands, among other locations, suggesting that cinematic information flows could

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55 The continuity between colonial film screenings and my own experience as a primary school student in Ireland in the 1970s is startling: we would watch a scientific or other educational film accompanied by a Looney Tunes cartoon, with the entire program projected on an old 16 mm apparatus.
create new fluidity in categories of “urban” and “rural,” creating commonalities with audiences who had otherwise different life experiences.\textsuperscript{56}

In addition, while much of the more theoretical work on early cinema reception has focused on the metropolis as an undifferentiated whole, detailed research on audiences of the past suggests that many viewers circumscribed their own cinematic geography, restricting themselves to local theatres in ways that suggest mentally restricted villages within the city. This in itself poses a further challenge to the essentialism of the cinematic modernity thesis, which pre-supposes a kind of monolithic audience experience of the city.\textsuperscript{57} Jeffrey Himpele, for instance, gives a compelling account of the very different audience experiences of cinema-going in La Paz, Bolivia, suggesting that individual neighborhood cinema audiences had very different interests, such that the local managers had a vital role in ensuring programming that would be acceptable to the nearby population.

Individual theatres in Ghana also sometimes catered to quite specific audience preferences, particularly on the fringes of Accra, creating dedicated neighborhood audiences. Theatres in Osu and La screened a disproportionate number of Westerns in the 1950s, while the same theatres showed large numbers of Italian action spectaculars in the early 1970s, including “spaghetti” Westerns and sword and sandals epics. These venues


\textsuperscript{57} Trevor Griffiths, \textit{The Cinema and Cinema-going in Scotland, 1896-1950} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). Evidence from the Boston area also suggests a strong contrast between the routine hyper-local experience of attending the cinema located within walking distance, and the rare “special occasion” outings to the large theatres located in central Boston. This phenomenon lasted into the 1960s where theatres survived. See, for example, Edward Dente Interview, 2002, Lost Theatres of Somerville, Digital Collections and Archives, Tufts University, Medford, MA.
were cheaper than the central Accra theatres, which may have impacted programming choices, with Italian films less expensive to rent than American product in the 1970s. Most other theatres rotated through virtually all genres over time, however.

Nonetheless, even if urban residents may have circumscribed their lives in ways that mimicked village life, the cinematic experience of residents of the actual village in Ghana were very different. While there is no question that many rural Ghanaians had seen films through everything from church shows to colonial propaganda units to occasional commercial entertainments from travelling showmen, such screenings were almost always intermittent occurrences, somewhat out of the ordinary and entirely out of the control of the members of the audience, who had no opportunity to become habitual cinema-goers. These experiences provided a useful, and often enjoyable, window into locations and ideas that went well beyond the village, but the difference from urban experiences of cinema was underlined by the fact that there was frequently no admission charge in the villages and audiences might attend as much for the sense of novelty as for any specific interest in the content of the program. Of course, the simple fact that screenings were less frequent or lacked any element of choice does not mean that people invested less importance in these outings; indeed, the opposite may have been true.58

Even for urban Ghanaians, there was little direct interaction between the content of the films people saw and their daily life experiences. The American film industry worked to produce films that would work in the widest possible range of settings but

58 Researchers on cinema history in Flanders note the sense of occasion in village cinemas, with people dressing up “in their finest clothes when going to the cinema” irrespective of the film itself. Philippe Meers, Daniël Biltereyst, and Lies Van de Vijver, “Metropolitan vs rural cinemagoing in Flanders, 1925-75,” Screen, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2010), 272-280.
made no effort to capture the experience of African urban life for the continent as a whole was a very marginal market through the end of the 1950s. Even colonial filmmaking units did not take urban life as a subject with any regularity, and then not until close to independence. The 1952 feature *The Boy Kumaseenu* has numerous vivid scenes filmed in Accra’s nightlife haunts and court system and made a deep impression at the local box office, but the film stands as the exception to the rule. Earlier films, such as *Amenu’s Child*, which was designed to educate mothers about the colonial clinic system and nutritional standards, or films with titles like *Pig Farming*, are far more representative. They focused on village life and agricultural techniques, and the city, if it was present at all, was depicted as a negative influence despite the fact (or perhaps because of the fact) of rapid urban population growth.

**Debating Modernity in the Gold Coast, 1950s-1970s**

The link between urbanity and modernity, or new ideas about being modern, manifests itself in numerous different facets of Ghanaian life from the 1920s onward, with newspapers giving a vivid sense of the ways in which urban residents, or at least those urban residents who took it upon themselves to write to newspapers, felt that their governments failed to live up to the promise of modernity. The small news items, which

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59 The Motion Picture Export Association (MPEA) divided overseas markets into ten categories based on revenue. South Africa was a category IV market, comparable to Mexico, Belgium, or Argentina, with annual revenues in the late 1950s of around US$6 million. The only other named African market was the category VI Egypt, which generated less than half of the revenue of South Africa; all other African territories were lumped together in category X, which generated around US$5 million annually. WBA, file MPEA Foreign Markets Questionnaires 1958 16535B, letter from Eric Johnston (?) to Jack Warner, November 24, 1958.

60 Rosaleen Smyth, “Images of Empires on Shifting Sands: The Colonial Film Unit in West Africa in the Post-War Period,” in Grieveson & MacCabe, *Film and the End of Empire*, 155-175.
were often reported by unpaid local “correspondents,” and the letters pages are filled with commentary on matters pertaining to sanitation, electrification, road quality and lighting during the 1950s.\textsuperscript{61} There is a particular emphasis on the first of these, with articles and letters noting the construction and improvement of a variety of sanitation measures but also complaining about the lack of such measures in both the largest cities and in smaller towns. The presence or absence of proper sanitation was seen by both colonial officials and those who contributed to letters columns as a measure of the modernity of any particular location, and such concerns and criticisms bridge the transition from colonial rule to independence.\textsuperscript{62}

The quality – or lack thereof – of Ghana’s roads and the driving standards of its motorists also exercised many letter writers.\textsuperscript{63} From the 1920s onwards they reported on unpleasant roadway experiences such as aggressive behavior, ill-trained taxi and bus drivers, or the aftermath of accidents.\textsuperscript{64} There was a good deal of continuity between the


\textsuperscript{62} Examples are legion: \textit{The African Morning Post}, 14 October 1937; \textit{The African Morning Post}, 23 October 1937; \textit{The Daily Graphic}, 23 September 1952; \textit{The Daily Graphic}, July 14, 1956; \textit{The Daily Graphic}, August 29, 1956. Concerns about sanitation and how it interacted with notions of modern life and civilization had a lengthy history in Ghana. Behind many discussions on sanitation lay not only a concern with literal cleaning up but also, as the historian John Parker notes, a “desire to rid the town of activities deemed unsuitable for the seat of imperial power.” Over time this concern to regulate certain African customs, or even to remove them from the city, formed part of “the modernizing discourse of the literate—and increasingly Christian—local elite.” Parker, \textit{Making the Town}, 100 & 120.

\textsuperscript{63} There are complaints about drivers and road standards almost every week in the letters columns of the 1950s, while news articles often included pictures of wrecked cars. See, for instance, \textit{The Daily Graphic}, February 26, 1958, which included a multi-page section on safer driving with statistics, basic driving tips, and details of “Controlling Traffic – The Modern Way,” that is, with traffic lights, roundabouts, and so forth.

\textsuperscript{64} Advertisers in the motoring field often picked up on the idea of modernity in a more technological sense, advocating for innovative products and often using the word “modern” in their copy. Goodyear, for example, exhorted car owners to “Be Modern!” by using their products. \textit{The Daily Graphic}, July 19, 1956.
concerns of colonial officials and the African elite readers of Gold Coast newspapers:
British administrators’ diaries are filled with references to the quality of the roads, which
the officials often closed in order to make repairs.\textsuperscript{65} Ideas and ideals of modern behavior
and infrastructure are thus in almost constant circulation in print form, stretching from a
point long before independence to several decades afterwards.\textsuperscript{66} Newspaper sources
suggest that one portion of the population was engaged in a process of near-constant self-
examination, a calibration of standards as to what constituted participation in a modern
society. In its own way, that was a current of thinking that Hollywood would seek to tap
into more directly after 1960, particularly in its attempts to appeal to African elites with
new theatres and high-end product that was off limits, at least in terms of the price of a
ticket, to a less wealthy segment of the populace.

\textit{The Geography of Ghana’s Cinemas, 1920s-1960s}

Whatever people’s mental mapping of their cinema experiences, the big-screen
outings of urban residents took place in a specific set of physical spaces. While bearing in
mind that the arrival of cinema did not coincide “with marked urbanization in all
countries” observers of early cinema-going linked the phenomena of urbanization and
mass popularity of the cinema in Europe and North America, and the same proved to be the case in Ghana.\textsuperscript{67} There was a direct link between the rate of urban growth in Ghana

\textsuperscript{66} These are by no means the only areas where discussion of “modern” behavior came up for debate; among other topics, sexual morality was also debated in the pages of newspapers before and after independence. Henry Ofori wrote at length on such matters. See, for instance, \textit{The Daily Graphic}, June 28, 1956
and the increase in the number of cinemas in urban areas, creating a close correlation between the changing conceptualization of urban leisure and the developing infrastructure of the city. Over time, new roads and transport possibilities such as cheap shared buses changing audiences’ relationships with neighborhood cinemas.\textsuperscript{68}

Not only did the increase in the number of cinemas in long-established locations such as Kumasi and Accra track with the change in population, but smaller towns added cinemas as soon as they reached critical mass, at least if they had mains electricity. This phenomenon occurred most often with towns located close to Accra or Kumasi since they were within easy reach of established film distribution circuits: a cinema company could add another stop to its weekly route if the cinema was on a major road between two existing cinemas. It took longer for more distant locations to be integrated into the plans of the major distributors, since they transported reels of film around the country by truck on a complex schedule. This excluded the northern towns from the main cinema circuits until the 1950s, though they were served by mobile cinemas, both state-run and private, on a less predictable basis.

Throughout the twentieth century, Accra was the major pole for Ghana’s cinema exhibition business: the city had the first cinema, the first competition, and the largest number of venues at all periods, with venue locations reflecting urban development in the city. In the early part of the twentieth century, Accra had a distinct entertainment district in the area around Jamestown and Ussher Town, the city’s original Ga heart, close to the

\textsuperscript{68} Acquah, \textit{Accra Survey}, 153-154.
city’s main market, Makola. The area did not enjoy the most positive reputation with colonial officials, who characterized the district as being crowded and unsanitary (the first of these charges as certainly accurate), and while it was a working class district it did attract many visitors from other areas eager to sample the Jamestown nightlife.

By the 1930s, there were three competing cinemas located within a few city streets of one another in the crowded center of the old city. This remained the prime entertainment zone until well after the Second World War, when entrepreneurs began to investigate and invest in the developing areas of the city a mile or two further afield. Even as the owners established new beachheads throughout Accra, they did not neglect the central entertainment district. The Captan family opened the imposing Opera Cinema near the main Makola Market shortly after the war, with the family patriarch designing the location to resist the possibility even of an earthquake. The thick walls would have been appreciated by neighbors during late-night screenings given that the venue is located in one of Accra’s most densely-populated areas.

Several of the new suburban cinema location choices reflected the development of affluent populations in areas like Adabraka, was still bushland as late as the 1930s. By the 1950s, Adabraka played host to the Roxy Cinema in its central district, while at the northern fringes there were several high-end theatres around Circle, which developed as a

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69 The first Makola market dates from 1924; prior to that date, Salaga Market, located 1 km south, was the most important market in Accra. Claire Robertson, “The Death of Makola and Other Tragedies,” Canadian Journal of African Studies, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1983), 470.

70 Plageman, Highlife Saturday Night, 105.

71 Interview, Munir Captan, Accra, October 23, 2012. Accra is not an earthquake-prone city as a rule, but there were several major tremors in the 1930s around the time the Captan family first went into business in Accra. The strong earthquake of June 22, 1939, in which seventeen people died, left a deep impression.
new entertainment pole for a more moneyed clientele.\textsuperscript{72} The cinemas in the Adabraka/Circle area were distinctive in that most of them were fully enclosed, unusual among the new cinemas of the 1940s and 1950s, though the Opera was also roofed. The Opera may well have been developed as an indoor theatre primarily to permit the venue to screen films to the school audience during daylight hours, although it is difficult to confirm this. It is clear from advertising records, however, that the Opera was not the flagship of the Captan chain since it showed lower-grade films: well into the 1970s, many young people knew the Opera as “twe” because of its noontime screenings.\textsuperscript{73}

Entrepreneurs could promote the enclosed cinemas as a modern innovation, replacing the open-air venues that had hitherto been most common in coastal Ghana. Open-air African cinemas were a source of considerable curiosity for overseas observers from the 1930s through the 1950s, though by the end of that period the spread of drive-in theatres in the US had reduced the novelty factor.\textsuperscript{74} Open-air theatres were common in southern Europe by the 1930s, often operating on a seasonal basis, as the American film industry was well aware, but journalists presented the African versions as a curious spectacle despite the fact that they were quite mundane in many non-African locations.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{74} Phil M. Daly, “Along the Rialto,” \textit{The Film Daily}, October 6, 1936. James Forsher, \textit{The Community of Cinema: How Cinema and Spectacle Transformed the American Downtown} (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 79. Drive-in theatres gained slowly in popularity through the late 1940s, but mushroomed in the 1950s, with numerous indoor venues closing as the drive-in ate into the market. George F. McCray, “McCray Joins Africans in Recreational Activities,” \textit{The Chicago Defender}, February 1, 1958.
\textsuperscript{75} Margaret Herrick Library, Department of Special Collections, Los Angeles, California (hereafter MHL). Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers (hereafter AMPTP) Records, 16.f-157 Foreign film markets 1957-1961. Motion Picture Export Association Memorandum No. 431 Greece – Motion
At the other end of the economic spectrum, the Captan family and others opened new venues in areas of migrant-fuelled growth. Business owners added further cinemas in what were then more isolated districts within the broadening city – Osu and La acquired their own screens, and later Nima, Kaneshie, and Accra New Town all played host to theatres of their own. Most of these cinemas were within just a mile or two of one another and were located in ethnically or geographically homogenous areas whose populations did not overlap. The Nima community was largely made up of migrants from the north or from outside Ghana, and its cinema screened a far higher proportion of Indian films. In the crowded city, some districts were so segregated from each other that theatres could co-exist within walking distance and still not compete to any significant degree. Such distinct neighborhood identities were not unique to Ghana. Despite its very high degree of ethnic homogeneity at a comparable period, most residents of Dublin, Ireland attended only their local theatre, unless they took a rare trip into the city center for a film.\footnote{My own father, an inveterate cinema-goer in the 1950s and 1960s in the Irish capital, remarked that he often followed the film rather than the venue, whereas in suburban areas in particular the opposite was generally true. Pat McFeely, interview, January 22, 2013.}

The most notable absence from the expanded theatrical networks in Accra in the 1950s were the Ridge and Cantonments areas, reserved largely for European residents after the Second World War. These areas were far less dense in their construction, and by all indications never hosted cinemas though embassies and cultural institutes based in

\footnotesize{Pictures, Entertainment 35mm, May 29, 1957 (reported by US government representative in Athens). See also WBA, file MPEA Memorandums Sept. and Oct. 1963 16628A, Turkey, October 31, 1963.}
these areas did have some screenings, usually of more offbeat or non-English-language fare. These screenings proliferated from the late 1950s.  

The pattern of cinema location was similar in Kumasi, where the population was also large enough to support numerous venues. Kumasi’s early cinemas were in the central area of the city close to the main markets and the railway, with additional venues then opening in later years in new developments, though the central Zongo district also added its own theatre in the postwar years. Sekondi-Takoradi also sustained multiple venues, although one of the more popular spots, the Gyandu Palace, was located on the fringes of Sekondi out by the sports stadium. The same venue regularly hosted boxing matches, and an evening there provided a respite from the crowded city streets. Notwithstanding the less convenient location, the venue appears to have been popular with a wide spectrum of viewers. A British expatriate banker wrote with some enthusiasm of his evenings there in the early 1950s and noted that whereas most people paid for the open-air seating, those willing to part with two shillings could sit under a covered balcony: the segregation was largely economic and the balcony seating was popular with the “cream” of local society, expatriate and African.

In smaller towns, the cinemas tended to be located right in the center of town – Tamale’s theatre was next to the post office and the police station – and the site was

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77 The pattern of growth in some areas but not others can be observed in other African locations. For instance, between 1957 and 1959, six cinemas opened their doors in Kinshasa. “These movie theaters, which flourished all over the city except in the ‘European’ neighborhoods (…) soon became favorite meeting places of Léopoldville’s youth, especially those youngsters at the margins of the colonial urban order.” Filip De Boeck & Marie-Françoise Plissart, *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City* (Ghent: Ludion, 2004), 36.

usually designed to facilitate easy access from outlying areas, near transport nodes. When planning additional cinema openings in the 1950s, West African Pictures made a point of noting the ease of motor vehicle access from surrounding villages, so that the small population of the town where the cinema was to be located could be complemented by the thousands of additional residents living just a short taxi or bus ride away.

The association between markets and cinemas was strong in both large and small urban locations. In smaller towns, it is unsurprising that cinema owners would locate their venues next to the pre-existing markets given the overlap in transport. However, even in much larger locations, a great many cinemas are located near to central or neighborhood markets, a pattern that Brian Larkin observed also in Kano, although there he suggests that both cinemas and markets bridge the divide between segregated areas, whereas in Accra many cinemas seem to serve their specific neighborhood, with its distinct population.79

In addition to the cluster of cinemas near the central Makola market, later cinemas opened very close to the markets or commercial centers of Nima, Accra New Town, Sabon Zongo, Kaneshie and other districts in Accra. The Oxford cinema in Accra New Town backed directly on to the Mallem Atta market, while the same company’s Opera cinema was located at commercial hub downtown (today, the entrance to the cinema is barely visible behind shop billboards and market stalls). Nima’s Dunia cinema, built in

79 Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 132-134.
the mid-1950s, was located directly opposite that district’s most intensely commercial street, a densely packed area of stalls and fixed stores.\(^{80}\)

The cinema business remained heavily concentrated in the southern half of the country until the 1950s, with few venues much further north than Kumasi. There were occasional ventures stretching far to the west and in the mining communities, though they often appear to have been short-lived in nature, such as the venue at the Tarkwa Hippodrome that occasionally rented films from West African Pictures in the late 1950s. Other proposed ventures were reported in the newspapers but do not appear again in either archival or newspaper sources, suggesting that they may never have succeeded. Such hiccups do not seem to have dampened enthusiasm elsewhere in the country, however, with the medium clearly popular in those communities with frequent migration back and forth to the cities. In 1947, for instance, the traditional Tongu Confederacy made a plea to the government in Accra to be provided with its own purpose-built cinema, on the basis that the district, already off the beaten path, was poorly served by the mobile cinema system. The President of the Confederacy specifically appealed to ideas of “progress” and education in his request, and even suggested that his people were being deprived of some of the benefits they were supposed to enjoy as British Subjects.\(^{81}\)

The post-colonial state laid great emphasis on the cinema as a social institution and encouraged the construction of cinema buildings in new or expanding communities including the port cities of Tema and Takoradi. The state allocated a site for an air-

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80 The state-owned West African Pictures provided some financial assistance to the owner of the Nima cinema, a Mr. A. Homeidan. PRAAD RG7/1/1656 West African Pictures Company Monthly Management Report September 1956, dated October 13, 1956.
81 PRAAD CSO/15/8/29 Static Cinema – Request by the Tongu Confederacy.
conditioned cinema at Tema at an early point in the town’s construction, while smaller village resettlement plans also included cinemas as essential components of the new infrastructure arrangements.\textsuperscript{82} The authorities went a step further in the case of Akosombo, the town established near the Akosombo Dam as part of the Volta River Authority. The local community center included the Dam cinema from 1964, and the venue proved to be “a major attraction. The programming at the community center (...) reflect how the VRA sought to establish recreational facilities fit for a modern city. Many of [these activities] required electricity,” an issue that stymied some earlier cinema projects.\textsuperscript{83} The Dam cinema opened relatively late by Ghanaian standards, just before a new wave of films from Hong Kong began to appear on local screens, and an audience member recollected that he saw primarily “Indian films, Chinese films, Bruce Lee films.” Another viewer commented that Sundays at the Dam were reserved for Indian films and that this meant it was necessary to arrive especially early given the films’ popularity, not least because on that day all members of a family might show up to a screening.\textsuperscript{84} The infrastructure projects at Tema and Akosombo were quintessential projections of the modern state, although the cinemas may well have been more prosaic tools of social


\textsuperscript{84} Joint interview with Nene Doku Atteh, Rev. Dr. Mercy Wood and others, conducted by Stephan Miescher, Akosombo, February 15, 2008. I am very grateful to Stephan Miescher for sharing this unpublished material.
control designed to occupy the large new populations when both settlements lacked leisure outlets.\textsuperscript{85}

While today many cinema halls have been turned into churches, with a smaller number converted to banks or other similar venues when they have not been allowed to crumble into disuse, even at the height of their popularity they were frequently used for other purposes.\textsuperscript{86} On occasion, they might serve as venues for church services, but more often they were employed as locations for major sporting events such as boxing, as well as for political events. Today, the same spaces may also be used for sporting purposes, usually for watching European soccer matches on large screens.\textsuperscript{87} There is also a lingering continuity with politics for numerous cinemas are used as polling places, a practice that dates back to at least 1964, when Accra’s Regal, Olympia, Ophir, Plaza,

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \hspace{0.5cm} \textsuperscript{85} Numerous recently-arrived residents of Tema commented on the lack of entertainment in the new community in the late 1950s. SCD, Box 68, Folder 13, Ghana Interviews.
\item \hspace{0.5cm} \textsuperscript{86} The connection between cinemas and houses of worship exists in numerous locations, and perhaps serves as a commentary of a kind on the worship of the silver screen: a rapt audience stares at a performer at the front of the venue. The only remaining cinema in Somerville, MA, near my home, now hosts Sunday-morning services before the first screening of the day; at one time, that city supported fourteen theatres. See Somerville Museum, “Lost Theatres of Somerville,” accessed January 28, 2014. http://www.losttheatres.org/. To extend the personal note, the cinema that sits at the end of the street where my parents live in Dublin (Ireland) is now a Sikh temple; my father attended screenings there in the 1960s. Closer to the focus of this research, many of Lagos’s former cinemas have also now been converted to churches. See “Gradually, the cinemas return in Nigeria,” published 19 February 2009, accessed July 24, 2013. http://www.modernghana.com/movie/4024/3/gradually-the-cinemas-return-in-nigeria.html. An enterprising cinema fan in Edinburgh noted that it is not all one way traffic, for that city’s Filmhouse, host of the city’s film festival, was once a church. See David Cairns, “Phantom Electric Theatres of Edinburgh #1,” June 17, 2013, accessed June 17, 2013. http://dcairns.wordpress.com/2013/06/17/phantom-electric-theatres-of-edinburgh-1/. That must have been a difficult pill to swallow for those in Scotland who had sought, in earlier years, to keep the Sabbath movie-free. See Griffiths, Cinema-Going in Scotland, 154. Two of the Somerville theatres mentioned above were also churches in their pre-cinema incarnations.
\item \hspace{0.5cm} \textsuperscript{87} Jeffrey W. Paller, “Informal Institutions and Personal Rule in Urban Ghana,” African Studies Review, Vol. 57, No. 3 (2014), 134-5.
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Orion, Dunia, Palladium, Royal, and Globe cinemas were all used in that year’s referendum voting along with numerous schools and community meeting places. While many of the venues have not operated as cinemas for decades, they are still used as landmarks by other businesses providing directions to customers. Accra’s street numbering and naming systems are haphazard at times, at least from the outsider’s perspective, with map data incomplete or confusing, and in such circumstances cinema buildings continue to function as effective points of reference for surrounding businesses. The Palladium theatre, now over ninety years old, remains an important waypoint in downtown Accra, used by tourist guides as both a meeting point and stop on walking tours: one of the key events in Gold Coast’s 1948 disturbances took place outside the building, a major intersection that had considerable space for crowds to gather at the heart of the oldest part of Accra. That venue was hugely popular from the day when it first opened its doors, spurring further cinema growth and raising the profile of cinema-going to such an extent that it was one significant factor in the development of the Gold Coast’s first film censorship regulations in 1925.

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The popularity of the cinema and its place in the local imagination caused constant concern for elite African and colonial observers, seeing a need for control and
regulation where audiences saw a cheap, convenient source of entertainment in the Gold Coast’s growing cities. Those focused on regulation found it challenging to understand the audience’s embrace of the modern movie experience, and the popularity of the cinemas went hand in hand with increased attention from successive generations of colonial administrators and members of the African educated elite, just as they subjected other urban transformations to similar scrutiny. The next chapter explores the legislation that the colonial administration elaborated in order to control both the cinema business and its enthusiastic local audience, with concern shifting over time from the adult audience to the juvenile viewer and the latter’s behavior outside the cinema walls.
Chapter Two – Policing Film Content in the Gold Coast

At the climax of a farcical scene in the film *Cupid Express*, a woman’s coat parted to reveal she was wearing just her underwear underneath. The filmmakers intended the audience to erupt with laughter but Gold Coast cinemagoers were never given the opportunity: the censors intervened and banned the film on the basis of the single, brief shot, an image that provoked extensive debate among those responsible for censorship in the colony. That incident, in 1930, was emblematic of the tensions between different philosophies of control of cinema images, as well as between business and administrative interests in the Gold Coast, characteristic of the early years of both censorship and regular cinema exhibition.

The views of colonial officials regarding the appropriate conduct of cinema audiences both within and outside the cinema walls, as well as their assumptions about the links between cinema images and subsequent behavior, underpinned the colony’s censorship regulations. The calibration of behavior was a concern shared by colonial administrators, their colleagues in the police and military, the many non-governmental participants in the censorship process, including European missionary representatives and educators and elite Africans drawn from the fields of law and education. The various actors did not share an identical conceptualization of what constituted suitable imagery for the African cinema audience and their negotiations over time provide insights into evolving standards of what they deemed modern behavior in the Gold Coast.

Local censors also acted as gatekeepers to global discussions on censorship from the 1920s onward, and represented Gold Coast views in the debate on censorship across
Britain’s overseas empire. They had a close-up view of the tensions between imperial versus local efforts to set the tone on matters of cinema censorship. In addition to sketching the broader context of British colonial censorship, this chapter details the regulatory framework in Gold Coast as it evolved from the 1920s to the 1950s and develops case studies of censorship regulations in action during periods of stricter control. It also examines the composition of the censorship board, particularly in the context of large-scale legislative changes in the Gold Coast such as the introduction of new constitutional measures in both 1925 and 1946, part of the colony’s long process of transition to self-rule and independence.

The tensions that the censors navigated, and sometimes provoked, were never static and reflected strong individual personalities within the censorship board on occasion: British and African officials, as well as members of the clergy, were able to exert considerable local influence on the scope of censorship decisions depending on their own views with respect to the necessary degree of control as well as their level of familiarity with censorship debates in Britain or the US. The internal censorship debate in the colony almost always centered on the question of the appropriate severity of regulation, for few involved with censorship in the Gold Coast suggested abandoning the review process.

Although regulation was assumed, the focus of that regulation shifted substantially over time, redefining the terms of the debate on appropriate levels of censorship. In the late 1920s, the colonial authorities were concerned both with the regulation of the physical spaces of the cinemas and with defining the parameters of
censorship at a time when the cinema was still a relative novelty in terms of its impact on urban Gold Coast viewers. This was especially the case for the sound cinema, which began in 1927. By the mid-1940s, when the commercial cinema business in the colony had expanded from its humble origins, administrative concern about audience reactions extended to the depictions of everything from romance to crime to the need for respect for the agents of the empire, now assessed against a new backdrop of pro-independence agitation in the Gold Coast.

In the first two decades of censorship in the colony, the local censors were pulled between a desire, in London, for a greater degree of metropolitan control that could impose consistency across many, or even all, British colonies, and colonial officials’ own instincts to make decisions at the individual colony level. On the ground, officials felt the need to navigate between the imposition of controls on film content and a wish to allow a new and fragile business sector to flourish. The latter was a concern not least because of officials’ regular personal contacts within the small elite social/business circle in the colony, giving an insight into the peculiar constraints that could impinge on policy outcomes within a restricted social world. These underline the fragile hold that officials exercised over local business networks in the early years of cinema in the Gold Coast.

By the 1940s, however, the cinemas were firmly established and visibly profitable businesses in the Gold Coast. Censors were far less concerned about the financial impact of a few decisions to ban films. The fact that the cinemas were by that point largely owned by Lebanese businessmen may also have played a role in whether to be lenient or strict: that community occupied a sometimes difficult middle ground between colonial
officials and African viewers, embraced by neither group. The Gold Coast censors were also more comfortable with their own role vis-à-vis metropolitan practice after the war. Over time they had been granted a considerable degree of latitude in their decision-making and in addition British censorship itself shifted from a position of extreme caution in the 1920s and 1930s to a situation in the early post-war years where British films themselves included the more realistic portrayal of human relationships (the adulterous couple of Brief Encounter or the working-class drama of It Always Rains On Sunday) or crime (the brutal violence of Brighton Rock and the dissection of gangland loyalties in They Made Me A Fugitive).¹

At the beginning of the 1960s, as will be explored more fully in Chapter Four, a new element came into play: the use of censorship as a method of making a political point in Ghana’s post-independence relations with the United States. The young state used all of the tools at its disposal in an attempt to establish its own footing in an otherwise lopsided engagement with the superpower, which remained the primary source of films on Ghanaian screens immediately after independence even taking account the increasing popularity of Indian cinema from the middle of the 1950s. The government’s efforts to control the cinema business in that period also attest to its efforts to assert itself as a new gatekeeper for foreign imports that could be a source of official concern on the socio-political level but which might also generate considerable revenue for the state.

¹ Brief Encounter (1945, UK, directed by David Lean); It Always Rains On Sunday (1947, UK, directed by Robert Hamer); Brighton Rock (1947, UK, John Boulting); They Made Me A Fugitive (1947, UK, directed by Alberto Cavalcanti). The Australian state of New South Wales took the rare step of banning Brighton Rock, which was set among race-course gangs, in 1948, but there is no evidence of a ban in Gold Coast. The Sydney Morning Herald, July 10, 1948.
An overview of British colonial censorship

Cinema censorship in the British Empire has been the focus of extensive historical research in a wide variety of locations including Malaya, India, and Tanzania. Colonial film censorship was a bureaucratic process by its nature, even considering the thorough archiving policies of most British administrators, and in most locations colonial censors bequeathed extensive archival records, one reason for historians’ repeated attention to the subject. By contrast, the scattered range of post-independence censorship records in Ghana – even where available, records are archived in unrelated files – creates an inevitable end-point to the assessment of state attempts to control film content, as well as complicating any effort to contrast pre- and post-independence censorship processes.

Existing scholarship by and large takes the view that cinema censorship across Britain’s empire shared one consistent feature, irrespective of the location and the specifics of the local legislative apparatus: it was strict in nature, and sometimes heavy-handed. In the settler colonies of southern Africa, censors were quick to wield their scissors, with some evidence that they rendered the film narrative incomprehensible on occasion. The difference in the degree of censorship in various colonies linked to where each colony fell on a spectrum of views regarding the intellectual capacity of the local

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3 See Burns, *Flickering Shadows*, 170-171 and Ambler, “Popular Films and Colonial Audiences,” 81-105. Burns cites a report by the anthropologist Boris Gussman, who suggested that many of the films passed by the censor in Southern Rhodesia in the 1950s were sorely lacking in continuity due to excisions.
audience to process what was depicted onscreen and to (self-) regulate its behavior in ways that were acceptable to the colonial rulers.

As the film scholar Monika Mehta suggests, censors within Britain often imagined that cinema-goers belonged to one of several categories requiring special attention – “a vulnerable child, an immature adolescent, or a prurient, uneducated lower-class adult,” with the colonial spectator by extension “similarly deemed puerile and volatile,” and thus in need of close regulation. Such policies drew on theories of the racial inferiority of colonial audiences although these views were by no means the only voices in the censorship debate in individual colonies. In the Gold Coast, the rhetoric of adolescence was most often used in reference to actual adolescents rather than to adult African audiences, placing censorship in the colony at the more liberal end of the policy spectrum. This was a key factor in the light censor’s hand in the colony over most of the period from 1925-1957.

Even where censors displayed a more liberal cast of mind with respect to the intelligence of African audiences, they retained paternalistic notions that they had a duty of care to their subjects. This undergirded their continued attention to film content and was similar to the attitude that prompted the American Production Code, which was produced in 1930, around the same time as much British colonial censorship regulation. This was also the point that marked the coming of sound, with the new technology seeming to present renewed risk to the morals of the uneducated. In addition to their moral concerns, some British colonial officials expressed anxiety about any hint of

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4 Mehta, *Censorship and Sexuality in Bombay Cinema*, 27.
Americanization against a backdrop of increasing American economic dominance.

The American Production Code was, as the film historian Thomas Doherty comments, “a polished treatise reflecting long and deep thought in aesthetics, education, communications theory, and moral philosophy,” which was intended to have a “progressive and reformist” spirit of protection and uplift.\(^5\) The same was true of the rules of the British censor from the 1920s, although those were an official government doctrine whereas the Production Code was an industry self-regulatory mechanism authored by two Catholics (and implemented most famously by a third, Joseph Breen, throughout the 1930s). In the Gold Coast, various missionaries – most of them Protestant – served on censorship boards during the 1920s and 1930s, and took the most cautious stance on many censorship panels. One of the defining features of all of these mechanisms was the assumption that cinema-goers needed to show deference to the central authorities in their lives, whether religious or civil. In practice the Gold Coast censors rarely cited issues of respect for the Crown and its agents as reasons for censorship, suggesting that this was more a matter of concern in the imagination of those who first formulated policy in London rather than a day to day issue in the films in circulation in the colony.

In most British colonies, the primary function of cinema censorship regulations was to regulate images of criminal activity as well as depictions of interactions between European and non-European populations, particularly where those images might cast Europeans in a less than positive light. The American silent film *West of Zanzibar* was

controversial in several British colonies for this reason, as explored in greater detail below. In many colonial locations, there were more specific and thorough efforts to control any scenes that depicted non-European men in situations with European women that censors thought audiences might interpret as having a sexual element, however innocuous or non-sexual: in 1929 the censors in Tanganyika restricted a film called *Do or Die* to non-Africans only on the basis of scenes featuring the imprisonment of women, because the crowd scenes included members of different races.⁶

At times, censors cut or banned sexual imagery of all kinds, irrespective of the identity of the participants, fearing such material could incite sexual violence by male colonial subjects. As Brian Larkin comments, the idea of “Nonwhite subjects gazing at images of white actresses generated an unnerving threat to expatriates sharing that same uncomfortable social space.” Frantz Fanon, as Larkin notes, explored this European anxiety in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, although by the time that Fanon was writing in 1952 the censors’ preoccupations in most British colonies had shifted from the regulation of matters of sexuality to issues of political liberation.⁷

By contrast, other British colonial locations laid greater stress on the control of material that local censors thought might create tensions between different religious or ethnic groups within the colony, with their focus not just on relations between Africans and Europeans but on any perceived fault lines in the local community. Such concerns contributed to the Kenyan ban on the British film *West of Zanzibar* (unrelated to the

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earlier American film) in 1954, even though the film was shot on location in the colony. Some members of the Kenyan Arab community were aggrieved by their depiction in the film, which suggests that Arab ivory traders corrupted an otherwise peaceable tribe, and one Arab character, a sinister lawyer, expressed his views on the value of African lives in brutal, racist terms.

While the assessment of general strictness is accurate for much of Britain’s colonial empire there is considerably less evidence that censorship was excessive in all African colonies when compared to the British domestic situation. The standards that were applied to domestic cinema censorship in the UK and United States, the main sources of films in the British market and English-speaking African colonies, were already quite stern by the time that most colonial locations introduced and revised censorship legislation in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, the censorship backdrop in the UK in the 1930s was such that even an animated Disney film such as *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* received a certificate deeming it unsuitable for unaccompanied children under the age of 16: the censor felt that scenes featuring a witch could be traumatic for

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8 *West of Zanzibar* (1954, UK, directed by Harry Watt). The ban occurred in somewhat farcical circumstances, after the announcement of a gala premiere in Nairobi with the governor as the guest of honor. The event was cancelled after the ban went into force. KNA, file OP/1/820 Col. Brown to Cowley (? The name is partly illegible), August 22, 1954. The British film was also the subject of some concern in Northern Rhodesia, but was shown without incident on Zanzibar and was even promoted enthusiastically in Nigeria as one of the African actors, Orlando Martins, hailed from that colony. Martins was sufficiently well-known elsewhere that his image was used to sell a variety of products, such as toothpaste, in Gold Coast newspapers. *Daily Graphic*, May 25, 1956.


younger viewers.\textsuperscript{11} The Gold Coast censors were also quite sensitive to supernatural material on occasion, with their concerns not always limited to children and adolescents. They feared that audiences might interpret sequences such as transformation from one state to another – human to animal, for instance – in literal terms. As a consequence, they were cautious about allowing the release of material in the horror category although such films were already the subject of additional care in the UK through the use of a special classification for most of the 1930s and 1940s.

Over the course of the 35 years from the first introduction of legislation in 1925 to the very early independence period, film censorship in the Gold Coast remained in line with the standard in place in the United Kingdom. In the local context this meant enforcing a standard of moral conduct elaborated in the US and Britain on an African audience, notwithstanding longstanding local debates on appropriate conduct in a changing society, as explored in the previous chapter. These debates were only relevant to colonial officials where they happened to bolster the views of the Gold Coast administration, one reason that officials cultivated some members of the African elite with already close ties to the colonial apparatus to serve on the censorship boards.

Africans in American and British cinema were most often depicted as ignorant, credulous tribesmen through the first half of the twentieth century rather than as potentially modern actors, and the logic of censorship in Africa frequently draws on such imagery, particularly in colonies where Africans did not themselves serve as censors.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} Sarah Smith, \textit{Children, Cinema and Censorship: From Dracula to the Dead End Kids} (London: IB Tauris, 2005), 1. \textit{Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs} (1937, US, directed by David Hand (supervising)).
American and European films could themselves create a false and yet powerful set of impressions of African peoples, with the subsequent deployment of those tropes by censors suggesting that European viewers could be as credulous as any others in terms of what they were willing to believe about Africans.

Such films – the *Tarzan* series is a good example – could nonetheless be popular with African audiences themselves, though this is not simply because the audience had absorbed an image of themselves created elsewhere (an image which relegated them to the background). Audience responses could respond to the straightforward entertainment value of genre pictures but also may have valued such films for the very brief glimpses they afforded of a world somewhat closer to their own, however compromised – while audiences were also apt to enjoy films precisely because of their problematic content, as targets of ripe commentary designed to elicit laughter from fellow cinema patrons. An otherwise solemn picture such as *Sanders of the River*, starring Paul Robeson, could be a major hit twenty years after its first release both as a straightforward colonial adventure with striking location footage but also as a potential source of comedy given the reputation of local audiences for quick-witted commentary at cinema screenings.¹³

The Gold Coast Censorship Board of Control was always thorough but rarely disruptive to local exhibitors. This benign approach provides a contrasting perspective on

¹³ PRAAD RG7/1/1656 West African Pictures Monthly Management Report, September 1956 (dated October 13, 1956). The writer claims that *Sanders of the River* (1935, UK, directed by Zoltán Korda) “broke every previous record in two nights.” The same month, *Tarzan and His Mate* (1934, US, directed by Cedric Gibbons) was another of the big hits, though it is not clear which version of the film was screened: over the years, three different versions, notoriously featuring Jane in various states of undress, were in circulation. For further details on the alternate versions of the film, see Mark A. Vieira, *Sin in Soft Focus: Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999),180.
strict colonial censorship practices in other colonies, though the peaks of censorship activity in the Gold Coast are suggestive of links to broader political developments in the colony. Decisions to tighten the censorship reins thus provide useful insights into periods of stress or administrative concern in the colony. Censorship records on banned, or otherwise problematic, films indicates that the three major periods of censor’s attention in the Gold Coast were in the first few years of official censorship (1925-1930), a brief interlude immediately after the Second World War, and in the early 1960s, when the Ghanaian state asserted its own view of the need for cinema censorship.

Each of these periods marked significant change in Gold Coast/Ghana’s broader political development: the colonial administration issued its first censorship regulations in 1925 immediately after the introduction of a new constitution, while the immediate postwar years saw a major upturn pro-independence activity and efforts on the part of colonial officials to accommodate the desire of Africans for greater self-regulation. The final period mirrors the stricter experience of the late 1920s, with a new set of censors asserting the right to make decisions about the appropriateness of material that could appear on the country’s screens. However, the backdrop was quite different, with Hollywood’s local presence in West Africa used to send a message to American authorities about Ghana’s independence of mind, and willingness to engage in robust negotiating tactics.

*The introduction of film censorship regulations in the Gold Coast*
Although there were regular film screenings in Gold Coast from the middle of the 1910s, the formal film censorship process in the colony dates from 1925. The administration promulgated the first of a series of Cinematograph Ordinances in 1912, but prior to 1925 these dealt with the granting of permission for the use of flammable films. One sentence in the regulations indicated that the District Commissioner had to approve a written description of the films in advance of the screening. The regulations included no parameters for approval of material and there is no indication in the archival record that this was anything other than a pro forma request for a copy of the descriptive text that appeared in the catalogs from which exhibitors chose films in the 1910s.

Many British colonies introduced embryonic cinema exhibition regulations at this period: Kenya, Nigeria, and Mauritius all introduced their first legislation in 1912, the same year that the British Board of Film Censors was established. Metropolitan policy changes drove the creation of regulations at the colonial level, though none of these locations had a notable cinema exhibition sector at the time: travelling enterprises showed films on an occasional basis in all of these colonies. Several of Britain’s Asian and Pacific colonies also established licensing and censorship laws in the 1910s. These locations revised or expanded their regulations in the wake of a major colonial conference on censorship and related matters in London in 1927, a gathering designed to exchange information on the rules that prevailed in various locations. Those colonies that had not already issued their own legislation filled the gap after the conference: Sierra

Leone, for instance, which had just a handful of cinemas, issued its own legislation in 1931, after the release of the Colonial Films Committee’s report in 1930.

Until 1925, there was no requirement whatsoever that officials view films before their public exhibition. The Legislative Council introduced censorship regulations against the backdrop of a broad new legal framework in the colony, the 1925 constitution. This instrument, introduced by then-Governor Frederick Gordon Guggisberg, gave Africans limited representation on the Legislative Council through the traditional chiefs, who gained the right to elect six unofficial members. The new arrangements gave no voice to the new class of “Youngmen,” the “middlemen brokers, motor transport agents, building and timber contractors, blacksmiths,” and so forth who had gained some degree of economic power on the back of the cocoa boom of the 1920s, nor to the clerk class that was not affiliated with traditional power but which had benefited from the broadening of education from the late nineteenth century and which formed the bulk of the lower-level colonial administrative apparatus.\footnote{Francis Agbodeka, “Sir Gordon Guggisberg's Contribution to the Development of the Gold Coast, 1919-27,” \textit{Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana}, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1972), 59.} The Gold Coast “Youngmen” objected strongly to their lack of representation in the new political structure, although the inclusion of African members on the censorship Board of Control may have allowed for some limited visibility for the educated African constituency without calling the composition of the broader political structure into question: early African members of the censorship board were legal figures, educators, and members of the colonial apparatus.
Who were the Gold Coast censors?

The demands of the censorship process required the empaneling of numerous potential censors. As a consequence a very substantial number of prominent officials, educators, and other elite professionals served on the censorship board for at least some period of time during the final three decades of British colonial rule. Despite this broad level of involvement in the practice of censorship, the exact composition of the Board was the subject of sustained, sometimes intense, discussion. African members – drawn from fields associated with the colonial apparatus such as the education and legal professions – were almost always present on censorship panels from the earliest days of formal censorship.

Colonial officials were well aware that, in Fred Cooper’s words, “Gold Coast Africans had been self-consciously debating what kind of political institutions best suited their unique and complex world,” and the constitution of 1925 was designed in part to head off a debate that might take a more concerted turn toward self-government by including at least some African voices in local decision-making.\(^1^7\) The same logic guided the inclusion of elite Gold Coasters in the censorship board, although it also gave these same figures new or additional access to the administration in a managed fashion, just as the colonial state gave grudging approval to other forms of leisure, such as the social clubs and dances organized by the colony’s educated middle-class men.\(^1^8\)

\(^{17}\) Cooper, *Africa since 1940*, 50.
While the colonial administration believed that managed inclusion could temper the demands of the educated African constituency, it did not eliminate their participation in debates on the future of the colony. In addition, the censorship board was a complex collection of personnel, with shifting alliances – members of the missionary group suggested greater restrictions while there is evidence that African members, including those otherwise inclined to a fairly strict disciplinary philosophy as educators, often took a more relaxed line with respect to appropriate content for their fellow subjects rather than absorbing the views of the administration without question.

The Board of Control included African members at least as early as 1927, when the lawyer J. Glover-Addo and the educator J.E.K. Aggrey, the first Vice Principal of Achimota College, were both empanelled, though there may have been African members on the board from the first promulgation of censorship regulations two years earlier since initial records appointed many board members by their professional affiliation (“a representative of the Gold Coast Police Force”) rather than always by name. J. Glover-Addo had been elected to the Legislative Council earlier that same year, as a member for the Municipal Council of Accra. He was also affiliated with the West African Farmers Union and the Accra High School. His presence on the Legislative Council was a direct consequence of the constitutional reforms of 1925, with service on the censorship board a further means of access to administrative decision-makers, as well as a signal that

19 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1278, Minutes of a Meeting of the Cinematograph Board of Control, June 20, 1927. See also The Gold Coast Gazette, April 30, 1927, 883. Aggrey died that same year in the United States. A member of the Achimota College staff was routinely included in the Board of Control’s membership roster following Aggrey’s death. Others closely associated with the College, such as S.E. Odamtten, also served on the censorship board at various times. The Accra Academy also contributed members of the board, including J.G.T O’Baka-Torto.
Africans themselves could take at least shared responsibility for certain forms of regulation, though they were of course hand-picked for this duty. Later, other prominent African figures such as Samuel O. Quashie-Idun, then the District Magistrate for Accra and later a judge in both Gold Coast and Nigeria, were also empanelled. During his time in Nigeria, Quashie-Idun was noted for his independence of mind, co-authoring a report on the 1949 Enugu colliery riots that was deeply critical of the colonial administration, but he left little record in discussions of censorship.20

There was a significant overlap between the African membership of the censorship board and those involved with the colony’s elite African social clubs, which were modeled in part on exclusive European clubs, albeit with their own distinct version of what constituted social success. J.W. de Graft Johnson, an educator who had lobbied the colonial administration to permit an earlier form of leisure, the dance club, in the 1910s, served on the censorship board in the 1930s, as did I.F. Ofori, who was affiliated with the Accra-based Young People’s Literary Club.21 De Graft-Johnson resigned in 1940 when he moved back to Cape Coast, and was replaced by H.H. Malm, an African serving as Assistant Colonial Secretary who had worked his way up from a clerk position thirty years earlier.22 Not all African members of the censorship board were as prominent, though: in 1939, the aptly-named P.G. Clerk, an office assistant in the Public Works

20 Gold Coast Spectator, May 28, 1938. Justice Quashie-Idun’s wife, Dinah Quashie-Idun, was later asked to serve on the Board after a 1947 expansion in the number of potential examiners; her husband was no longer on the board at that time. PRAAD RG3/5/303, October 1947. Their daughter Frances was involved with the Gold Coast Broadcasting Service in the 1950s. Daily Graphic, June 18, 1956.
21 Plageman, Highlife Saturday Night, 67 & 69-70.
22 PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Letter of June 17, 1940. Clerk is a fairly common last name in Ghana.
Department in Accra, was appointed to the board; he has left little other trace in the historical record. By 1947, the regulations for examination of films required that there be an African member present in order to constitute a quorum although this had long been the formal preference of those responsible for censorship in the colony, well before the substantive constitutional revisions of 1946 gave much broader elected African representation to the Legislative Council. At that point, African members were deputizing for the President of the Board of Control – always a prominent member of the British administration, most often the head of one of the government departments – thus placing members of the elite African community in direct and often final control of the decision-making on individual films. In 1952, there was a further increase in the number of African members on the board of potential reviewers, in line with the broader political developments that included the creation of a new 1951 Legislative Assembly with a majority of African elected members. It was routine for censorship panels to include multiple African members.

This was a stark contrast to the contemporaneous situation in Kenya, a settler colony where censorship hewed to a much stricter standard. While provision was made to add two African members to the censorship board in that colony from 1945, this was deceptive as the intent was only to have African members review films that originated in Africa. African films were to all intents and purposes non-existent in 1945 so no African

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23 PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Memorandum Director, Dept of Education to Colonial Secretary, July 25, 1939.
24 PRAAD CSO/15/8/1 Cinematograph Exhibitions: Suggested Increase of Board of Control, April 13, 1933.
25 PRAAD RG3/5/303 1947 Amendment to the Cinematograph Exhibitions Ordinance.
members reviewed a film until 1956. The Kenyan boards did empanel Indian and Arab members to examine films from India and Egypt; the Indian participants were all female.\(^{26}\) Whereas Kenyan officials believed that African members could not control filmed images for other Africans, in Gold Coast allowing Africans greater participation and latitude in decision-making formed part of the colony’s distinctive process of transition to independence.

The mixed racial composition of the censorship Board in Gold Coast from the earliest days of censorship may also help to explain why issues of race do not crop up with any frequency in the decision-making with respect to film content. Elite Africans were critical of attempts to enforce segregated leisure space in Accra from the 1910s, as explored in greater detail in the following chapter, and were concerned to ensure that the cinemas remained mixed social spaces; they could do nothing about the elite European social clubs, some of which did not admit African members until independence in 1957. For the most part, class rather than race was a much greater matter of shared concern for the censors, with African members of the board agreeing with the view of colonial administrators that their less educated fellow subjects required special attention in terms of what they could see at the pictures. That attitude put many members of the educated class in an intermediate position: not especially loved by those who found them to be arrogant and potentially disrespectful of traditional sources of authority in the Gold Coast, but also not always trusted by the colonial administration which perceived in them

\(^{26}\) KNA, file KA/5/31 Chief Secretary, Kenya Colony to Secretary of State for the Colonies, June 7, 1952 and June 27, 1959.
a potential long-term threat due to their growing knowledge of the operations of administration.\textsuperscript{27}

Even in the liberal context that permitted mixed-race censorship boards, diversity had its limits. Efforts by the colonial administration to include representation from the growing Syrian community on the censorship board in the 1940s proved fruitless, a reflection of that community’s complicated and sometimes controversial status between British and African interests (the word “Syrian” was commonly used in Gold Coast to refer to people of both Lebanese and Syrian origin, with the former being far more numerous in the colony). The Lebanese-Syrian community had been a presence in the Gold Coast since the middle of the nineteenth century, but the size of the population increased in the late 1930s. The arrival of a significant number of Syrian and Lebanese expatriates at the end of that decade was not met with universal acclaim in the colony.\textsuperscript{28}

While newspapers created something of a forum for debate about the potential positive aspects of this development, the general tone of press coverage was exaggerated, with reports of “hundreds of immigrants (...) pouring into the country every week” overstating the case. Other press commentary was openly hostile, with articles referring to the community as a “menace.”\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{27} Plageman, \textit{Highlife Saturday Night}, 68.
\textsuperscript{28} The Gold Coast experience was by no means unique: as early as 1899, traders in French Guinea petitioned the colonial governor to deal with what they termed Syrian “invaders.” Andrew Arsan, \textit{Interlopers of Empire: The Lebanese Diaspora in Colonial French West Africa} (London: Hurst & Company, 2014), 77-97.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{The African Morning Post}, November 26, 1937 and \textit{Gold Coast Spectator}, January 29, 1938. The tone adopted by the latter newspaper was particularly ironic given its strong support elsewhere for local events that refused to enforce any form of color bar.
These characterizations lingered a decade later when African members of the Board objected to the idea of adding Lebanese and Syrian representation to censorship panels. In 1946, when the District Commissioner for Accra expressed the view that “the Syrian community should be represented on the panel,” he received no support. Another official wrote that “African members of the Board appear to have their minds made up on this subject.”

Thus while Lebanese businessmen had made rapid inroads as owners in the colony’s small cinema sector by this point, members of the community were not trusted to take a role in supervising censorship in the colony. While there were suggestions that Lebanese censors would have had a conflict of interest when other Lebanese owned most cinemas, most objections reflected a more general mistrust of the expatriate community. Issues of conflict of interest had never come up despite close relationships between censors and owners within the small colonial elite, although none of the cinema owners of the pre-war period served on censorship panels.

The fundamental issue in African objections to Lebanese membership on the Board came from the African members’ perception that their own continued presence on the censorship board would be threatened by any change in composition. They reasoned that their numbers and their fragile hold on a limited degree of social power would be reduced if the administration included Lebanese-Syrian representation, although in reality it is difficult to imagine that the colonial government would have taken steps to reduce African representation at precisely the time when the 1946 constitution was granting the community an increased voice in the colony’s affairs.

30 PRAAD RG3/5/303 Minutes of a meeting of December 1945, dated 12 May 1946.
British officials did not push the point with respect to Lebanese representation in 1946, and at least some of them were happy to be able to cite African objections as an excuse to make no changes to the existing Board of Control. The difficult position of the Lebanese-Syrian community was underlined two years later during the disturbances in Accra, with some looters targeting Lebanese-owned shops for their alleged high prices and lack of African employees; that some members of the Lebanese community had joined the ranks of the colonial security force undoubtedly rendered the situation even more tense.

In the early 1950s, the censorship board expanded greatly, in line with the 1952 revisions to the censorship laws. Under the new regulations, there were as many as 89 potential panelists, and this time the administration included Lebanese panelists as representatives of the colony’s commercial community. Because the pool of censors was so large by that point, the censorship board empaneled Lebanese members on an intermittent basis. Lebanese panelists were never in control of individual censorship decisions since they were always in the minority when they did serve, but the fact that some of the Lebanese members were also cinema owners caused some controversy. A member of the Legislative Assembly suggested that this potential conflict of interest explained the “infiltration of bad films into the country.”31 This version of events ignored the fact that Lebanese owners were in a tiny minority and suggests that the issue was less one of film content than of accusations of political collaboration between the Lebanese

31 Gold Coast Legislative Assembly, Session 1953, Issue No. 3, Column 512, Question from Mr. B.K. Pohu, November 16, 1953.
community and both the colonial administration and new political parties at a time of considerable tension in the colony in the period of expanding self-rule. The following year, *The Ashanti Sentinel*, a CPP-affiliated newspaper, accused “Some Cinema Proprietors” of having no respect for the law, and suggested that (expatriate) owners were turning a blind eye to the admission of teenagers to gangster films in order to increase their profits, even though other members of the CPP were cultivating their contacts in the Lebanese community as sources of campaign and party largesse.32

The presence or absence of African and Lebanese members on the censorship board garnered most press attention, but the largest single group represented on censorship boards between 1925 and the mid-1950s consisted of British members of the Gold Coast administration, including career civil servants, military personnel, or police representatives. During the first two decades of local censorship, many British officials saw their censorship work as an unpleasant chore. Several members of the board stressed that they had no interest in the cinema except for their professional obligations.33 The censors’ disinterest was underlined when those reviewing appeals could not remember what they had found objectionable a few weeks earlier, attesting also to the numbing effect of near-constant screenings from the late 1920s.34 The attitude to the obligations of the censorship Board changed over time, in part because there was a notable improvement in the quality of films available in the colony. By the middle of the 1940s censors could also watch the films in the comfort of their own screening room and from

33 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1525 Letter from Harry Webster, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, to President, Board of Control, December 3, 1929.
34 PRAAD CSO/15/8/1 Note of December 24, 1929.
that point on, officials began to express a preference to be assigned to certain screenings: one official was an enthusiast of the Western genre even though officially, at least, “cowboy” movies were often a source of contempt.35

The ultimate administrative responsibility for censorship shifted several times from one colonial department to another over the course of 30 years in the Gold Coast, which resulted in disparities in the level and intensity of administrative attention: the various government departments were placed in different situations with regard to the African population. Where the Department of Native Affairs and the judicial apparatus were concerned with issues of control and regulation, the Department of Education was focused on the spread of literacy and new ideas and gave more credit to the abilities of the African population to make their own minds up about the materials they saw. This attitude also reinforced the idea that the Department’s educational efforts were successful, and that they were providing African populations with the tools that would allow them to become successful colonial subjects. Officials themselves debated which of the departments was most appropriate for oversight of the censorship process. The tone of the discussions reinforced the sense that officials by and large considered censorship to be an onerous duty that department heads would have been happy to bequeath to their colleagues. While they did on occasion call the entire process into question, they could not quite bring themselves to abandon their involvement in censorship.

Local versus imperial decision-making, 1920s-1930s

35 PRAAD RG3/5/61 Board of Control for and Censorship of Cinematograph Films.
In some respects the most striking feature of censorship in the Gold Coast over the period from 1925-1957 was the fact that it continued to exist at all at the individual colony level. Throughout this period the Colonial Office and other administrative arms of the government in London initiated discussions on the idea of a regional censorship board for all British colonies in West Africa on a regular basis. At their most ambitious, they proposed the wholesale imperial acceptance of the censorship certificates that British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) issued for film exhibition in Britain. On each occasion, the administration in Accra, like almost all of its counterparts in other colonies, exhibited a sustained desire to exert its own control over films imported into the Gold Coast, with successive administrations insisting that they alone were best placed to decide what was most appropriate for local audiences to see.

Not every official was convinced that this was necessary. From time to time, some British officials in Accra indicated that they could not see any need for local censorship, or local re-censorship since films had already been through a thorough process of metropolitan censorship. Indeed, as one official noted in later years, American films “are censored twice before they are shown in this country:” the American Production Code certified films at the point of origin, and the BBFC then reviewed them in London before they were exported to Accra.\(^{36}\) Given the dominance of the American industry until the mid-1950s, this repeated examination was true of the vast majority of films in the Gold Coast until almost the point of independence. However, a colony that

\(^{36}\) PRAAD RG3/5/303. Report on implementation of directions given by the Cabinet, from M.F. Kissane, Assistant Secretary, Department of Education and Social Welfare, to the Senior Assistant Secretary, January 13, 1953. This was true for films produced after around 1934, when the US Production Code was enforced with greater stringency.
had only just held its first full elections was not likely to cede a local regulatory power even if this meant that films were triple vetted in the process.

Whatever the views of individual officials about the need for censorship, the Gold Coast Board of Control itself stressed its unique knowledge of local conditions as the key justification for its existence. This was a common argument from those involved with colonial censorship, and was often became the primary justification for the local exercise of control. It was also an argument that was almost impossible for officials in London to contradict without appearing to be dismissive of the experience of those on the ground. The Colonial Office was concerned that what they saw as the minor issue of cinema censorship was taking up a disproportionate amount of administrative time in each colony: central censorship seemed the obvious solution to this problem. However, each time that London suggested a central censorship apparatus for the colonies as a whole it ended by with a meek acceptance of the assertion that in-country views, as expressed by the Board of Control and channeled through the Governor, needed to be taken into consideration.

The most sustained effort to implement a centralized censorship system for Britain’s African colonies came in the 1930 report of the Colonial Films Committee, which opined that “Tropical Africa” could be a special case with regard to film censorship. This belief arose partly because of the practical reality that at that time exhibitors in most African locations purchased or rented films without full knowledge of

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37 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1525, Letter from Secretary of State, Colonial Office, to Governor Gold Coast, November 28, 1930.
the contents due to logistical constraints, but also because of the Committee’s view that “Tropical Africa, with its many millions of primitive peoples, is in a different position from that of the rest of the Colonial Empire, and requires a specially stringent censorship.” The report implied that colonial officials would implement this stringent censorship, but the Gold Coast already had a mixed race censorship board made up of both colonial officials and local notables who had collaborated with success for five years by that point. Nonetheless, these more restrictive viewpoints may well have found some purchase in the colony.

A 1926 article in The Times, a piece that kicked off a sustained debate on imperial censorship, neatly summarized the arguments in favor of more stringent censorship in the colonies. The article dealt mainly with the Far East and was credited to “A Correspondent,” though it appears to be the work of Sir Hesketh Bell, a retired colonial official who travelled to that part of the world in a private capacity in 1926. He wrote to The Times in response to his own article, this time changing the focus to Britain’s African colonies. Bell became something of a self-appointed authority on cinema censorship and he served as a member of the Colonial Films Committee in 1930, submitting a dissenting minority opinion that suggested the Committee as a whole was not strict enough.

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40 Among other roles, Bell served as Governor of Northern Nigeria from 1909-1912 and as Governor of Mauritius from 1916-1924. He retired to Cannes, long before that city became associated with the film business. Cambridge University Library: Royal Commonwealth Society Library, Sir Hesketh Bell
In his first *Times* piece, Bell was exercised by Asian audience reactions to romantic scenes, and suggested that the cinema could bring imperial prestige down a notch or two if local audiences saw images of European misbehavior. In his second missive, Bell recognized the impossibility of banning the cinema outright and proposed that it would not be appropriate to ban films on the basis of a small number of problematic scenes, or to interrupt the narrative by snipping out the offending content. Instead, he recommended that producers make two versions of their films — “one for general exhibition and the other for display in countries where restrictions are advisable.” As well as allowing for a form of concealed censorship, Bell thought the process would favor British producers. There was a very limited history of producing alternative versions for censorship purposes, although for the most part this involved Hollywood studios re-editing their films rather than shooting individual sequences with different dialog or action: Bell’s proposal went much further.

Bell’s views were on the more extreme end of the censorship spectrum even for his time. Those responsible for censorship in Malaya, the location that first aroused his ire, dismissed his understanding of local conditions during his short visit – another assertion of the primacy of local rather than external knowledge. However, it is not difficult to trace opinions similar to Bell’s on the Gold Coast censorship board, particularly through Reverend Charles Kingsley Williams of Achimota College, the elite boarding school founded in 1924 by then-governor Guggisberg. Reverend Kingsley

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41 *The Times*, September 30, 1926.

became a member of the censorship board immediately on arrival in Accra in 1927, also the year that Achimota admitted its first students, and he made a concerted effort to define the parameters of appropriate censorship in the colony by writing to the president of the censorship board to outline his views.

Like Hesketh Bell, Reverend Kingsley had a deep-seated anxiety about relations between Europeans and Africans. He expressed particular concern about audiences seeing crimes committed by members of another race, something he felt was “likely to lower the respect which one race ought to be encouraged to feel for another.” European residents of Tanganyika were expressing similar concerns at the same time, centered on images of especially dissolute expatriates in the 1928 American film *West of Zanzibar*. The film narrates a tale of terrible but misguided vengeance, in which Lon Chaney establishes himself as the ruler of a small outpost in a jungle African location as part of a complex plot to debase those he believes to be responsible for his psychological and physical suffering, and drawing on imagery from Joseph Conrad’s 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness* though with much greater indulgence in stereotypical portraits of African characters.

Colonial settlers in Tanganyika felt that scenes of drunkenness and violence in the American film reflected “poorly on British colonial rule and the progress of civilization,” and also objected to scenes that depicted Africans as being trapped in traditional beliefs.

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44 *West of Zanzibar* (1928, US, directed by Tod Browning).
by European manipulation, including at the climax of the film, when credulous Africans believe that Chaney transforms his daughter into a skeleton in order to ensure her escape from a situation of great peril. The film is deeply cynical in its view of human relations and virtually none of the characters is worthy of redemption by the conclusion, with the film suggesting that the fetid African location is the chief source of moral corruption.

While the 1927 West of Zanzibar does, like Heart of Darkness, contain a critique of the behavior of Europeans in Africa, it is premised on the idea that Africa is itself a location of unique corruption, where a man could find it possible to live in a state of near-constant drunkenness or where he could entrust the raising of a child to the denizens of a brothel, so any critique of the damage caused by colonialism is, at best, hidden under multiple layers of stereotyping. Not a single African character has a meaningful identity, and most are craven, easily-controlled subjects. This further undermines the sense that there is a coded critique of the imperial project within the film. In any case, as film historian Lea Jacobs notes, extracting what might be subversive commentary through reading against the grain is a fraught process: it is a great deal more difficult to assess whether audiences would have shared, or even perceived, such subversive commentary. West of Zanzibar was remade a few years later as a sound film under its original stage title, Kongo, with similar results, although that version does not appear to have been shown in English-speaking Africa; it may not even have been released in the United Kingdom as there is no evidence it was reviewed in newspapers in that country.

46 Jacobs, Wages of Sin, 24-5.
Views similar to those held by Hesketh Bell and Reverend Williams crop up in the broader colonial discourse on film in the 1920s and 1930s, most often with respect to the impact of films on non-literate audiences. The potential impact of the cinema was both a challenge and an opportunity in the eyes of many involved with film in the empire. While officials in most colonies assumed that audiences were susceptible to the influence of Hollywood sensationalism (or, for that matter, British or German sensationalism), they often had equal faith that audiences would be impressed by the positive qualities embodied in colonial educational and propaganda films, whether designed to provide information on a specific topic such as good hygiene, or to extol the virtues of participation in the empire.

Indeed, they often took the view that “In an almost illiterate community the cinema is practically the only means of bringing instruction to the great mass of the people and, properly used, it is a very effective means for doing so.” The caveat that the medium needed to be “properly used” was, of course, significant, and officials suggested that there would be a need to establish an alternative exhibition circuit given the “small” commercial sector at that time. There are occasional intriguing hints of an alternate narrative. For example, in 1933, the Governor of Gold Coast reported to the Colonial Secretary in London that “The films exhibited locally, whether theatrical or educational,

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48 PRAAD CSO/25/1/33 “The African and the Cinema,” Observations. Committee on the Use of the Cinema for Instructional Purposes, April 27, 1939. The comments were a direct response by Gold Coast officials to a publication called The African and the Cinema, an account of the Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment (BEKE) that was carried out in British colonies in East and Southern Africa between 1935 and 1937. The project produced roughly three dozen of its own educational films, three of which have survived and can be viewed online at: Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire. http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/, accessed September 30, 2014.
having but little influence upon the audiences it follows that no marked results good or bad are distinguishable.” The same report noted that while few films on local screens could reasonably be described as educational, many were simply “theatrical,” that is, entertaining, with children as young as seven able to grasp the action and recount the plots afterwards.

The Governor’s view of the limited utility of the cinema as a means of influencing the Gold Coast population did not trickle down, and the general enthusiasm of officialdom for the educational potential of the medium was sustained well into the 1940s, with the Gold Coast’s Public Relations Officer commenting in 1947 that “In the present stage of development of this Colony the value of the moving picture cannot be overestimated. It provides factual proof of events and activities in a form readily acceptable to all classes of the community,” suggesting the power of the image to create a sense of the reality of events, with the representatives of the colonial state able, in a sense, to be present in the smallest villages. These comments came in the context of a report that suggested ways to establish the cinema as the “focal point of community life” for rural locations, and proposed to build on the work of the cinema van program that had been established in 1940 by constructing static cinemas in small towns. The administration placed particular value on such communications efforts against the backdrop of growing pro-independence pressure as a method to convey their own views of the appropriate ways in which to implement local political rule.

49 PRAAD CSO/15/8/1 Memorandum dated 1933.
The mobile cinemas projected mixed programs of newsreels, documentaries and short entertainment films. The administration was unable to afford the costs of renting full-length entertainment features while nonetheless recognizing that the inclusion of an entertainment component was essential to persuade people to actually attend the shows. The pilot program does not appear to have been expanded, however, perhaps because viewers were more sophisticated than officials presumed, especially given that the processes of constant back and forth migration between rural and urban locations meant that many viewers in village locations had little interest in the educational materials that formed the mainstay of any official cinema program. In addition, the pilot program proved to be quite expensive in terms of the fixed equipment and rental costs, meaning that the aim of using the cinemas as a local fund-raising mechanism for projects like libraries could not be fulfilled, for officials could not even charge enough in entry fees to cover their own costs.

In any case, even informational films could cause unexpected problems for the censor, a problem that would have recurred if the administration had its own network of small, permanent cinemas. For instance, a 1947 newsreel about a colliery disaster in Scotland, designed to ensure that audiences were up to date with news from Britain, created consternation when an audience of miners saw that some of the equipment at the affected colliery was similar to that which they used. The Gold Coast Chamber of Mines
objected that such incidents could further hamper their attempts to recruit underground labor.\textsuperscript{51}

While the censors reviewed and passed newsreels with few exceptions, the mobile cinema operators who projected the colliery newsreel did not take into account their audience on that specific occasion and officials then moved to suppress the film across the colony. The incident underlined the idea that the cinema could have a powerful influence on its audience, but also suggested that the audience could miss the intended message for reasons that the colonial administration might fail to anticipate, undermining the administration’s efforts to use the cinema as a tool of civic education (and of social control, for mineworkers who spent the evening at the cinema were easier to manage than those who spent the evening at drinking establishments).

Notwithstanding this potential for disconnect between official intentions and audience reception, the general administrative enthusiasm for the educational possibilities of the cinema was one of the major factors that restrained officials from exercising a more chilling effect on commercial exhibition, though on occasion an official here and there would suggest the complete prohibition of cinema in the colonies.\textsuperscript{52} Reverend Williams, who had an outsize early influence on the philosophy of Gold Coast censorship because he was industrious in his efforts to communicate his views to officials involved with the Board of Control, even hinted at “the prohibition of films representing any kind of crime whatever” – everything from sexual offences to theft – but recognized that any

\textsuperscript{51} PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Letter from Gold Coast Chamber of Mines to Colonial Secretary, February 25, 1947. The newsreel was likely reporting on an explosion at Burngrange colliery in January of that year, in which 15 miners died.

\textsuperscript{52} KNA, file KA/5/31 District Commissioner to Chief Secretary Nairobi, November 8, 1945.
such attempts would “lead to the exclusion of nearly all drama, certainly many of the
tragic masterpieces of the world, and all melodrama,” indicating that for all that his views
were restrictive he had a sophisticated appreciation for the complexities of film content
(as was also true of the framers of the American Production Code).53

While Reverend Williams had strong views on the impact of films on the African
population, others were less certain in their opinions. A few years later, the Acting
Director of Education, by then responsible for the censorship board, did not think that
“anyone is in the position to say what the influence on the cinematograph has on the
natives (sic),” a view rather more liberal than that which prevailed in other colonies.54
The same official suggested that Africans attended the cinema primarily to be amused
rather than to be instructed, a comment which appeared to be without judgment as to
whether this was a good thing or not. He did add, though, that at this particular time the
exhibition sector was small enough that “only a very small proportion of the population
has the opportunity of visiting and consequently being influenced by Cinematographic
exhibitions.”55

In a small administration, the strict or lenient views of a single official could have
a substantial effect on practice, independent of written policy, and while there may be a
number of contributory factors, after a relatively strict period in the late 1920s in the
immediate aftermath of the introduction of censorship legislation, the 1930s were
characterized by far greater freedom from censorship. This was partly because

53 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1519 Letter from Acting Principal [Reverend Charles Kingsley Williams], Achimota
College, to the Secretary for Native Affairs, 26 August 1927.
54 PRAAD CSO/15/8/7 Note from Acting Director of Education to Colonial Secretary, 30 January 1933.
55 PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Memorandum from Secretary for Native Affairs, 29 March 1933.
distributors had developed a sense of what the censors were likely to forbid, internalizing the parameters of local censorship in their business practices, but also because the rotating cast of people doing the work worked within more flexible guidelines under the tutelage of the president of the censorship board. In 1938, for instance, the board censored 319 films and rejected only four pictures. That was characteristic of the middle of the decade, with just eleven bans issued in the period 1933-1937; the censorship board did not keep records of the country of origin of banned films, which was a subject of some interest later in the decade when officials in London surveyed colonial censors more generally on this point, though it is likely most were American.  

While London did provide some overall guidance on censorship outcomes in Britain, officials in Accra were generally more interested in practices in other colonies. The members of the early Gold Coast censorship board, in particular, sought information about the nature of censorship in other British colonies in order to calibrate their own efforts. On their own initiative, they sought assistance from the Gold Coast’s central administration to obtain details of the censorship mechanisms then in effect in Ceylon, India, Nigeria, and Singapore.  

These efforts were grounded in a sincere desire on the part of the membership of the censorship board to inform themselves, with the ultimate aim of creating greater consistency of censorship outcomes in the colony. On several occasions, officials even

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56 PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Memoranda from Director of Education to Colonial Secretary, 5 January 1938 and 31 October 1939.
57 PRAAD 11/1/1278 Letter from Acting Vice-Principal, Achimota College, to President, Cinematograph Exhibitions Board of Control, 31 May 1929. At a later date, they also obtained information on censorship in Sierra Leone, which produced its own legislation in 1931, which looked very similar to the Gold Coast regulations.
proposed spending a portion of their home leave educating themselves on censorship policy in Britain. In 1929, for instance, the Secretary for Native Affairs planned to consult with the censorship authorities in London for advice given the local board’s lack of any formal training.\(^{58}\) Another official made a similar appeal in 1933, part of a general pattern of such requests from colonial officials, as the British Board of Film Censors assisted officials from Cyprus and Kenya in understanding British censorship methods around the same time.\(^{59}\)

The unpredictability of outcomes could even trouble the censors themselves, although mostly for reasons related to their personal relationships with cinema owners. The proprietors were few in number in any colony and since they were prominent members of the business sector they were well known to the censorship board members. The censors felt conflicted about imposing a ban, or especially a series of bans, when aware that their decisions would impose financial hardship for an exhibitor who might also be a social acquaintance.\(^{60}\) Proprietors made use of this knowledge, and were quick to suggest that bans, or even delays in censorship, would lead to “direct loss,” though this was not quite true since proprietors could continue to project other films: during this period they were never without films to exhibit on a given evening.\(^ {61}\)

More pertinently, Alfred Ocansey noted that in general it was very difficult for exhibitors to “know all the detailed scenes in a film before ordering” as the London-based

\(^{58}\) PRAAD 11/1/1278 Letter from Secretary for Native Affairs to Colonial Secretary, 21 May 1929.
\(^{59}\) PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Letter from Colonial Office to BBFC, June 23, 1933.
\(^{60}\) Censors in other British colonies were sensitive to the impact of their decisions on local businessmen: Burns, Cinema and Society in the British Empire, 5.
\(^{61}\) PRAAD ADM/11/1/1525 Letter from W. Bartholomew & Co. to President, Board of Control, January 2, 1930.
renters supplied only a brief synopsis of each film, while the broad language of the censorship guidelines could make the task of compliance even more difficult. At one point, for instance, Ocansey asked for clarification on the exact meaning of “criminal activities.” The Board took the view that this phrase might refer to scenes depicting murders, burglaries, thefts, forgeries, frauds, abductions, poisoning, “Wreckage of trains by placing stones or other obstructions on the rail,” and arson. As Ocansey himself remarked, this description cast a wide net indeed over film production of the 1920s, even if sexual offences were notably absent though adult content (whether treated seriously or in more lurid terms) was common in American films at that time.

The local exhibitors’ assertions about the unpredictability of colonial censorship are borne out by individual censorship decisions. Over several decades, films that were banned in one colony were released in others without any negative commentary. There were consistent areas of overlap, nonetheless. Concerns over the prevalence of Hollywood films were common almost everywhere the American industry inveigled itself. Even in its own domestic market, the American film industry was seen as a powerful agent of moral decay. Those responsible for censorship in the Gold Coast would have been aware that officials elsewhere were expressing similar concerns even if they did not know of each and every censorship decision in other colonies. Colonial censors in some countries even sought to influence the American industry directly, as the Gold Coast authorities knew from their own attempts to coordinate with their

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62 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1519 Letter from Alfred Ocansey to President, Board of Control, August 2, 1927.
63 See, for example, Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood* and Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin*. 

103
counterparts in London: censorship officials from Malaya visited Hollywood studios and informed them of what was acceptable in that colony.\(^{64}\)

All of this informal coordination with counterparts in other colonies did not lead to greater consistency of outcomes – for worse and for better, since Gold Coast officials did not indulge in the widespread cutting and banning that were features of the settler colony experience in both eastern and southern Africa.\(^{65}\) The variability of outcomes occurred even though most local censorship boards were basing their decisions on very similar guidelines, which were originally drawn up in London and then adapted for local circumstances. The criteria for objecting to a film in Gold Coast and Kenya, for instance, were almost word for word identical from the 1930s onward, although each of local censorship boards placed emphasis on different themes, and the lists of banned films varied substantially across the two colonies.\(^{66}\) As in many settler colonies, the Kenyan censors in the 1930s remained most concerned about any interracial content, whether or not it also included a sexual element. By contrast, the Gold Coast censors, who oversaw a much larger cinema business, were more anxious about property and gun crime than interpersonal relations. The Nigerian censors had their own distinct emphasis, closer to

\(^{64}\) PRAAD RG3/5/1429 Film Censorship in the United Kingdom, including materials on a visit by the censor for Malaya to Hollywood, October-November 1952. The censor, J. Evans, met with the Production Code administrator, Joseph Breen, MPAA officials, and studio representatives. He highlighted a number of films he viewed as problematic, including *The Sound of Fury* (1950, US, directed by Cy Endfield), a harrowing film that features scenes of mob violence. For their part, industry officials noted censorship problems in Formosa (Taiwan) with apparently innocuous films including those featuring the character of Francis the Talking Mule, star of seven features in the 1950s.

\(^{65}\) Burns, *Flickering Shadows*, 150-187.

\(^{66}\) KNA, file KA/5/31 Legislation Stage Plays and Cinematograph 1942-1959 Film Censorship Board of Kenya to Permanent Secretary Nairobi, June 24, 1959, outlining details of all films banned in that colony from 1942-1959. While some titles banned in Kenya are obscure short films, many others were released in Nigeria, Gold Coast, or other colonies.
that of Kenya than of their near-neighbors: they focused on “films or sections of films that are likely to arouse racial animosity,” anything liable to bring the Crown into disrepute, and interracial scenes.\textsuperscript{67}

Although they sought additional training while on leave, Gold Coast officials also had a good deal of material available to them detailing the strictness of the censorship process in London. The 1930 Report of the Colonial Films Committee in 1930 included summaries of British censorship decisions from the previous year indicating that the British examiner objected to 300 films in 1929, from the approximately 2,000 submissions reviewed.\textsuperscript{68} The censor later licensed 251 of these films for release after amendments, including “very drastic alterations.” The Colonial Films report concluded that the willingness of distributors to facilitate such amendments “proves the loyalty of the publishers to meet the Board’s requirements,” but British distributors complied with the requests of the censor out of self-interest. Without a censorship certificate it was almost impossible to exhibit a film and make money in the 1930s: very few local authorities in the UK permitted the exhibition of un-certified films. The same spirit of self-interest was behind the smooth relations between officials and exhibitors in the Gold Coast.

The censors in the UK were especially concerned to regulate the cinema experiences of working class viewers, for whom the cinema was the major leisure-time

\textsuperscript{67} PRAAD ADM/11/1/1525 Letter from Secretary, Town Council, Lagos to Administrator of the Colony, July 25, 1929. There were two censorship boards in Nigeria at the time: one for Lagos, and one for the remainder of the colony.

draw in the 1920s and 1930s. As the British media historian John MacKenzie notes, British regulators, like their colonial counterparts, assumed that the cinema had an important educational role with the potential to impact the mind of the viewer, whether for good or ill. Indeed, the cinema censors in Britain were attempting to uphold certain standards of behavior for the masses that were being undermined in other art forms, particularly literature. The hundreds of objections in London became just a handful each year on the Gold Coast, although the films reviewed on the Gold Coast would usually have been the versions already amended in line with the UK censor’s request so there would have been less objectionable material available for review.

Gold Coast censorship in action, 1920s-1930s

As already noted, property crime and gun violence were the greatest concerns for the Gold Coast censor in the first decade or so of regulation. On one occasion, the Secretary for Native Affairs commented that crime films were “practically the only type of film which has given us any trouble,” that is, the only kind of film where officials believed that they could trace a direct connection between onscreen content and the kinds of criminal behavior they observed in the colony. They assumed that such behavior was

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70 This contrasted with what occurred at the initial point of export of American films: even films that had been cut for the American domestic market in the late 1920s and early 1930s were exported in intact versions, which often resulted in the same film causing problems twice or more depending on what censors in different countries felt about the content. Vasey, World According to Hollywood, 140-1.
71 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1519 Letter from Secretary for Native Affairs to Colonial Secretary, March 23, 1928. The official notes that the Censorship Board of Control banned the exhibition three films out of 86 reviewed over the previous nine months. That contrasts sharply with the 289 banned films that were listed in Ceylon by early 1928. PRAAD ADM/11/1/1525 Letter from the Inspector General of Police, Colombo, Ceylon to Colonial Secretary, January 23, 1928.
provoked by cinema-going and even suggested that certain crimes would not have taken place without the imaginative assistance of the cinema.

Any film that might be interpreted as a criminal blueprint merited the censor’s full negative attention irrespective of its other merits. The censor banned films as varied as *On Secret Service*, a cheap serial picture, and Erich von Stroheim’s 1924 epic *Greed*, one of the great masterpieces of the late silent era, because they depicted criminal activity.\(^72\) In both cases, the quantity of crime bothered the reviewers: scenes of fighting and robberies punctuated every episode of *On Secret Service* and *Greed* involved “the frequent exhibition of the use of revolvers and stabbing with knives.”\(^73\) Gun crime was not common in the Gold Coast at this period, but the courts dealt with such incidents severely no matter the actual outcome of the crime and the censors were well aware of this practice.\(^74\) They did not view the gunplay in Western films in the same light: it often had a comic aspect in which many bullets flew but few people got hurt and was not always linked to the commission of crimes. In addition, most Westerns were set in the late nineteenth century, far from urban areas, and tended to evoke a time before the modernizing influences of urban life.\(^75\)

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\(^{72}\) Von Stroheim was a victim of the censor in many countries, most often for sexual or other transgressive content rather than the depiction of violence. Arthur Lennig, *Stroheim* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000); Lennig’s account provides numerous examples of censorship at the state level in the US, among other locations. *Greed* (1924, US, directed by Erich von Stroheim).


\(^{74}\) PRAAD SCT/17/5 court series records.

\(^{75}\) Some colonial administrators saw no issue with entertainment of this nature – in colonial Zimbabwe, those responsible for the cinema saw such vigorous action as analogous to watching boxing match. Burns, *Flickering Shadows*, 14.
"Greed" ran to 38 reels in its original version, with each reel lasting ten to twelve minutes. The Gold Coast Board of Control acted after seeing just five reels, which they deemed sufficient to make a determination on the merits of the film. That was a common practice in Gold Coast: the board rarely screened films in their entirety. Most often, they watched the first two reels, the last two and then one chosen at random in the middle.76 At the time, most imported feature films ranged from six to twelve reels in length, so the censorship review could involve watching less than half of a film. This disjointed practice may have contributed to the sense that censorship was a tedious obligation, for censors could not even derive narrative enjoyment from the films they watched. Such practices continued for more than twenty years: in the mid-1940s, the censor commented that “The first, two in the middle and two (or one) at the end are ‘traditionally’ considered to be key reels.”77

If an owner appealed the decision of the board to ban a particular title, the Board viewed the entire film rather than just the original selection. The appeal process was especially onerous when the film under appeal was of unusual length, as with "Greed"; the ban on the six-hour film was confirmed on the basis of “too much gun play.” In appealing the original decision of the Board Bartholomew’s theatre noted that "Greed" had been imported from Nigeria, and was shown there without incident in March 1930.78 The attempt to release this version of "Greed" is striking for the US release was far shorter:

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76 PRAAD ADM11/1/1278 Letter from Inspector General of Police to President, Board of Control, June 11, 1929 outlines this practice with regard to the film Super Speed (1925, US, directed by Al Rogell), with the censors viewing the first, second, and fifth reels (out of a total, in this case, of five reels).
77 PRAAD RG3/5/303 Minutes of a meeting of December 1945, dated 12 May 1946.
78 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1525, Letter from W. Bartholomew and Co., Ltd to President, Cinema Board of Control, 1 May 1930.
studio officials cut the film, in large part because of their belief that an audience would not pay to watch a film as long as that imagined by von Stroheim. However, the Gold Coast censorship debate suggests that the studio was willing to experiment with the original film, or something close to it, in other locations, perhaps because they were aware that local exhibitors sometimes cut films up for their own purposes, or reassembled serial episodes into long films, so the length would not have been as problematic.\textsuperscript{79}

The Gold Coast Board rejected any role for the decisions of censors elsewhere, and re-asserted its own local jurisdiction whenever owners tried to employ such arguments. Appealing to decisions elsewhere was always a poor strategy on the part of the owners, for it reinforced the Board’s sense that only it could make judgments on what was appropriate in the Gold Coast. In confirming the ban on \textit{Greed}, the Secretary for Native Affairs also noted that because censorship regulations in force in the Gold Coast at that time did not include an age component, all films passed by the censor could be seen by children. He deemed the film especially unsuitable for that audience due to a scene of “realistic murder” and a series of unsavory incidents involving the police, which had not been seen in the original, abbreviated, review of the film.\textsuperscript{80}

It was not until the 1950s that the Gold Coast administration amended the censorship rules to allow for age-based classification, although the censor tried on occasion to suggest the imposition such conditions in specific cases despite the absence

\textsuperscript{79} The film was cut into numerous versions, with the original director’s cut reputed to run to 42 or more reels. At the time, most feature films released in the US were 7-8 reels long. Lennig, \textit{Stroheim}, 219.
\textsuperscript{80} PRAAD ADM/11/1/1525, Letter from Secretary for Native Affairs to Director, W. Bartholomew & Co., 30 May 1930. The Secretary for Native Affairs made suggestions for more suitable material, including the Westerns that he thought were popular, as well as the British film \textit{Q-Ships}, about First World War efforts to deal with German U-boats. \textit{Q Ships} (1928, UK, directed by Geoffrey Barkas & Michael Barringer).
of a formal legislative basis, particularly if the Board felt that the film had other merits that would have made it appropriate for an adult audience.\textsuperscript{81} The introduction of age-based censorship certificates reflected the much larger population of young people attending the cinema without adult supervision in the 1950s, with administrators taking the view that this group was more likely to reproduce what it saw on the screen.

Despite these early appeal episodes, there was no formal appeal mechanism under the censorship legislation that prevailed through 1952.\textsuperscript{82} The authorities allowed informal appeals as a gesture of goodwill and put themselves to considerable effort to rule against most films a second time. This was part of the delicate process of negotiating with business owners who might also be social acquaintances. The issue of an appeals mechanism prompted varying views from colonial officials: where the Attorney General thought that such a mechanism would undermine the censorship Board of Control, the Secretary for Native Affairs thought it might lead to more consistent outcomes – exactly as the cinema owners wished.\textsuperscript{83}

The appeals episodes illustrate that those involved with censorship in the colony were not monolithic in their views, and the same was true within the individual examination panels. The discussions surrounding the film \textit{Cupid Express}, which have a

\textsuperscript{81} Minutes of the Board of Control Cinematograph Exhibitions, October 28, 1932. PRAAD CSO/15/8/1. Bartholomew’s Cinema objected to the decision of the Board to restrict a film entitled \textit{Chu Chin Chow} to adult audiences only. The film is of historical interest in that it was shot with an experimental sound system several years before the first official talking picture, though only a handful of specialized theatres could have shown the film using the sound process; it was released in the US as a silent film. \textit{Chu Chin Chow} (1925, UK/Germany, directed by Herbert Wilcox).

\textsuperscript{82} PRAAD CSO/15/8/1 Memorandum from Attorney General of January 29, 1930.

\textsuperscript{83} PRAAD CSO/15/8/1 Minute by Secretary for Native Affairs, February 10, 1930.
While several members of the Board, including the representative of the Wesleyan Methodist Mission, took strong exception to the film, most others felt that it could be rendered harmless with a single cut of a shot in which a woman threw off her fur coat and revealed that she was wearing just her underwear beneath. The Secretary for Native Affairs wrote, “actually that could not be described as indecent or immoral” and he asked his colleagues on the board to justify the reasons for their own objections in writing.85

The negative responses marshaled the common British colonial censorship tropes of the period, suggesting that the “white woman’s prestige must be lowered by such a film” and that “Hollywood relationships are almost on the African level. Such things depicted by Whites confirms their custom & makes social reform very difficult.” Although the film was in fact German, that industry followed Hollywood’s lead at the time both in terms of industry structure and content: the author of the letter suggests that the film depicted a moral laxness and a comfort with non-monogamous relationships that he saw as characteristic of contemporary cinema irrespective of its national origin.86

The Board members who saw Cupid Express had a heated discussion following the screening: some members invested considerable energy in trying to convince their colleagues that the controversial scene was comical rather than immoral, and that “the

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84 The film’s original title was Blitzzug der Liebe (1925, Germany, directed by Johannes Guter). Although made in Germany and featuring the German actress Ossi Oswalda the film also showcased the British silent star Lillian Hall-Davis.
85 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1525, Letter from Secretary for Native Affairs to General Superintendent Wesleyan Missions, September 11, 1930.
86 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1525, Letter from Wesleyan Mission to President, Board of Control, September 26, 1930.

111
African would see only the amusing side of the film.” 87 The two African members present at the screening, one a school headmistress, agreed with this interpretation of the film. While the general tone of the discussion suggests that most members of the censorship Board took a liberal approach to such content, they all shared the view that they could interpret material on behalf of the audience, and that they had an insight into the audience’s potential reactions. While on this occasion they concluded that the reaction would be one of amusement, they were convinced of their ability to predict when reactions would be less benign.

Notwithstanding the general view that the film was innocuous, the censors decided to ban *Cupid Express* after a second screening, likely because of the argument made by the Wesleyan Methodist representative who took the view that “if such a film as this passes the local board of censors, I fail to see why the censorship should not be left in the hands of the Police.” This was a canny argument almost guaranteed to ensure that the censors would reassert their cherished local control, even if it came at the expense of a couple of banned films. 88 When confirming the ban on *Cupid Express*, the Gold Coast authorities did inform the cinema proprietor that the Board had had opposing views on the film, a surprising revelation in that it proved that an arbitrary outcome was possible in any censorship review – exactly as the cinema owners argued all along.

The Gold Coast censors’ reaction to *Cupid Express* foreshadows the strict enforcement of the Production Code for American film producers a few years later.

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87 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1525, Letter from member [Bennett?] of the Gold Coast Police to President, Board of Control, 3 October 1930.
88 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1525, Letter from Wesleyan Methodist Mission to President, Board of Control, 26 September 1930.
Thomas Doherty outlines, the proponents of the Code hoped to extend “their surveillance beyond the visible world and into the space of the spectator’s mind,” that is, they wished to censor not only onscreen content but also ideas that might, once planted in the mind, flourish into something more suggestive. In the colonial context, this often went a step further, with even harmless films like *Cupid Express* suddenly having the potential to be “charged with undercurrents of sexual and racial tension” when colonial audiences watched them – and, perhaps more to the point, when Europeans sat with colonial audiences to watch such films. Europeans often found this to be a discomfiting experience, particularly when African or Asian audiences commented audibly on love scenes.

The decision to ban *Cupid Express* also highlights the profound contradictions at the heart of colonial metropolitan censorship. Censors characterized the audience as being so immature that cinema-goers might engage in undesirable sexual behavior, disrespectful attitudes toward the colonial apparatus, or outright criminal conduct on the basis of the mere representation of such material onscreen, but thought the same audience sophisticated enough that it could extrapolate from a brief shot an entire picture of the social universe of the film – and could then formulate a critique of that same social universe.

**New concerns: censorship in the 1940s**

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90 Larkin, “Circulating Empires,” 159.
The different groups represented on the censorship board in the 1920s and 1930s—colonial administrators, members of the clergy, African educators and lawyers—settled into a comfortable pattern within a few years of the establishment of regulations. They were cautious about imposing bans both in terms of the business impact of such decisions and because they wished to avoid the appearance of excessive intervention in local leisure. The most socially liberal members of the board accepted that some content was beyond the pale for their colleagues, in particular strong depictions of criminal activity and even mild sexual content. They acknowledged that on occasion they had to prohibit material but used this power on a limited basis. This ensured that their relationships with local entrepreneurs remained cordial enough that cinema owners did not raise complaints at higher levels of the administration: the censorship board arrogated to itself a certain degree of control over one small part of the colony’s life and behaved in ways that ensured this control was not jeopardized. That stability remained in place until shortly after the Second World War.

In October 1947, the Director of Education, who served as President of the Cinematograph Exhibitions Board of Control at the time, wrote to the management of West African Pictures Company concerning the banning of eight films over a period of several months earlier that year. This was an unusually high number by the censor’s standards, and far higher than in many individual years in the 1930s and early 1940s. The cinema manager contacted the Board to express his dismay at this strict turn in
censorship, and the written response from the Board provided detail rationales for all eight decisions.\textsuperscript{91}

The spate of bans came at a key moment of political change in the postwar colony, the establishment of the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) to discuss options for the Gold Coast's independence. This marked a major step toward self-rule for the colony.\textsuperscript{92} While the archival record does not indicate that the censorship Board drew a direct connection between its work and developments on the political level, administration officials would have been sensitive to any possibility of social unrest at the time, including reactions to the cinema. The UGCC was founded in August 1947 and Kwame Nkrumah returned to the colony in December of that year at the invitation of the UGCC leadership, marking the beginning of his own direct involvement in nationalist politics. The censorship board implemented most of the 1947 bans during the early weeks of the UGCC's existence, shortly before Nkrumah’s return, with the episode illustrative of the breadth of administrative anxiety at the period.

There was little doubt in the colonial administration as to the significance of the new political entity, though most of the banned films had no obvious political content. None contained subversive elements of the kind that caused concern in Kenya at a similar time period, such as scenes of railway sabotage, and the surviving documentation from the censorship board does not couch its decision-making in terms of the political content

\textsuperscript{91} PRAAD RG3/5/303 Cinematograph Exhibition Board of Control – Policy. Letter from Director of Education, Chairman, Cinematograph Exhibitions Board of Control, to The Management, West African Pictures Co. Ltd., October 15, 1947.

or implications of the banned films. Nonetheless, the tensions of that year, which also
included farmer discontent in the wake of the establishment of the Cocoa Marketing
Board in March, made the censorship board more cautious than usual. In imposing
enough bans to have a financial impact on the cinema business, the authorities may also
have been attempting to send an oblique signal to the Syrian/Lebanese owners of the film
theatres. Many ordinary Africans felt that the community was a contributor to the overall
pattern of post-war tensions through its hold on key commercial sectors, and accusations
of price-fixing and profiteering were common.93

The banned films varied in content and quality and came from four different
Hollywood studios. The Board rejected two films, *Son of Dracula* and *Dark Waters*, on
the grounds that they were “horror” movies, although the label is only accurate for the
former notwithstanding some superficial overlap between the two films, such as
atmospheric Louisiana plantation settings.94 *Son of Dracula*, a late entry in the American
horror cycle, was given an “H” (“Horrific”) certificate in the UK, but *Dark Waters*
received an “A” (“Adult”) certificate, indicating that it was suitable for an adult audience
without further commentary. The censor in the Gold Coast objected to close-up shots of a
man dying in quicksand in *Dark Waters*, certainly a dramatic scene though one that could
have been trimmed if it constituted the sole problem with the film, which deals with the

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93 Austin, “Working Committee of the United Gold Coast Convention,” 278. Price-fixing and profiteering
were contentious matters in Ghana, not restricted to expatriate owners: in the early 1960s newspaper
editorials accused Ghana’s small-scale African entrepreneurs, including store owners and drivers, of setting
“unreasonable prices.” See Jennifer Hart, “‘One Man, No Chop’: Licit Wealth, Good Citizens, and the
Criminalization of Drivers in Postcolonial Ghana,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*,
Vol. 46, No. 3 (2013), 373.
94 *Son of Dracula* (1943, US, directed by Robert Siodmak); *Dark Waters* (1944, US, directed by André De
Toth).
efforts of a group of con artists to cheat a woman out of her inheritance through psychological manipulation.

The British censors first used the “H” label from 1932, in the wake of controversy over the content of films such as Dracula and Frankenstein: those films were shown in studio-shortened versions in Britain. When first introduced, the “H” label was a warning appended to the “A” certificate. While intended as a means to indicate to adult guardians that a film was unsuitable for children, in practice the “H” designation may well have served as a flag that advertised thrilling content. The designation was employed through 1951 though it was not often assigned in Britain, especially after the American horror cycle began to wane in popularity in the 1940s. Horror films caused exhibitors difficulties in other locations around the same time. In 1948, the Australian chief censor, J.O. Alexander, expressed the view that the horror film “has no cultural value and its appeal extends to only a very limited section of the Community, a section whose mental health outlook should not be fed with films of this nature.” Alexander extended a de facto ban on the genre in the country, and a decade later, his successor extended the prohibition.

Films with the “H” certificate almost always ran afoul of the censor in the Gold Coast, which took the view that African audiences would not react well to themes of

supernatural horror, such as the gypsy magic and vampire apparitions of *Son of Dracula*, on the basis that they might interpret such content literally. Colonial officials struggled to understand non-Christian African attitudes to spiritual matters and may well have been aware of the mythological creature the *sasabonsam*, associated with the coastal regions of Ghana and its neighbors. The creature could be depicted with vampiric elements – it was reputed to feast on small children – and also with bat-like wings. Colonial officials were at least as concerned that African audiences might misinterpret content and conclude, among other things, that white men had the power to transform into bats or other animals for nefarious purposes. As Luise White has chronicled, officials often struggled to manage local beliefs about their own motives, and administrators would have shared stories from different colonies. Vampires were a particular source of anxiety in many colonial locations, for they linked to powerful tropes of control of one set of people by another: White recounts an incident where local confusion between red wine and blood sparked rumors about the conduct of European surveyors in a rural area of Tanzania, for instance, though she does not link such rumors to imagery from the cinema.

The censor’s attention was not limited to the small cluster of thrilling titles in 1947. The Board found a further four films – *Pillow of Death, The Glass Key, Texas*

99 Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). White notes that one reading of Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula* could suggest the “urgency of home rule for Ireland,” though it seems unlikely that this was in the censor’s mind, not least because of the distance between *Son of Dracula* and its original inspiration.
Masquerade, And Then There Were None – to be objectionable because of sustained or frequent scenes of violence, and because the films did not always bring the perpetrators of violence to justice. The President of the Board noted that these films might have a particularly strong effect on illiterate audience. It is not clear if the censors were uncomfortable with the dark comic tone of And Then They Were None, a more ambitious adaptation of an Agatha Christie novel, but they were certainly correct in characterizing the film as depicting a series of murders in some detail, often in ways that tweaked conventions established by the horror film the previous decade even if the film itself did not qualify as horror.

By contrast, in other cases the descriptions in the censorship record do not accord with the actual films. Pillow of Death, for instance, was the final in a series of low-budget thrillers that were a spinoff from a popular radio show of the 1940s. The censor’s report is unusually detailed about the film’s plot and commented “During the first five minutes of this film no less than six murders are committed. [There is] also a good deal of matter very unsuitable for illiterate audiences.” American cinema used a set of conventions that was designed precisely to appeal to an illiterate viewer, including new immigrants, with clear structure and editing to ensure that viewers understood the narrative progression. Just as colonial regulators both feared and embraced what they saw as the power of the cinema to inform an illiterate audience, US commentators saw the cinema as a powerful

100 Pillow of Death (1945, US, directed by Wallace Fox), The Glass Key (1942, US, directed by Stuart Heisler); Texas Masquerade (1944, US, directed by George Archainbaud); And Then There Were None (1945, US, directed by René Clair).
vehicle for assimilation – as well as a threat to public order. In that sense the Gold Coast censor was correct: if material was unsuitable, the local viewer was likely to pick up on it with ease.

As it happens, there are only three murders in *Pillow of Death*, all of which occur off-screen – and none of them take place in the first five minutes. Unless the censors confused two different films – always a possibility given that several films were sometimes reviewed on a single evening – it may well be that they were in fact more concerned with the supernatural elements of the film. These included disembodied voices and ghosts similar to those featured in *Dark Waters*, not to mention a bizarre incident of body snatching that the film attempts to present in a benevolent light. Banning the film on such grounds would have been consistent with the censors’ general discomfort at any hint of the supernatural.

*Texas Masquerade*, one of the many Hopalong Cassidy Western films, was, according to the censor, “the story of a feud between two Texas villages [with] an almost uninterrupted series of gun-battles, interspersed with the burning of villages, and contained a gruesome sequence showing a man being hanged.” The description suggests that the censors again paid cursory attention to the plotlines of the material in front of them. While the film does occur across two locations, there is no feud, and the hanging, while a serious incident, is stopped long before it has an opportunity to become gruesome. The overall tone of the film is light, as was common in the Hopalong Cassidy

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films: justice triumphs and the villains never rise above caricature. Many other films in
the series were shown in Gold Coast, as were dozens of similar “B” westerns. However, in the context of late 1947, with the authorities concerned to head off any hint
of civil unrest or the development of factions along class, ethnic, or regional lines, the
film’s plot may have seemed far less innocuous in the Gold Coast; the hanging did also
proceed just far enough to suggest to the audience exactly how such an act might be
accomplished.

The Glass Key, a proto-film noir based on a Dashiell Hammett novel, was the
most political of the films and that alone may have sealed its fate. The film’s portrayal of
criminality aroused the ire of the police representative on the Board because the gangsters
“escape punishment, but also in the end they remain the heroes of the film.” This was not
an entirely accurate account: the perpetrators of the film’s murders were all brought to
book, though the film’s pervasive atmosphere of political corruption went unchecked,
and the censor felt that “The inference which an illiterate audience might draw is that
crime on a large scale pays.” The film’s underlying proposition that the political process
could be corrupted by the wealthy and/or the criminal was a sensitive matter in a colony
where well-off Lebanese merchants, including cinema owners, were affiliated with the
interests of the Crown, although Nkrumah’s CPP moved to cultivate expatriate business
owners for political donations from the moment of its creation in 1949.

102 There were 66 films in the Hopalong Cassidy series; Hoppy Serves a Writ and False Colors both played
at Kumasi’s Rex Theatre in 1946 (The Ashanti Pioneer, October 30 and November 17, 1946), among others
in the series. The films followed a similar template and included regular gunplay.
The final film, a 1945 comedy called *It’s In The Bag* starring the American radio comic Fred Allen, fell into its own category.\(^{103}\) It was rejected as a “film of extremely poor quality. The Board was unable to discover any feature which might justify the exhibition of such very inferior matter;” they did not mention that the film’s plot was set in motion by a murder, treated as black comedy. The censorship board had a history of commenting on the quality of films, dating back to the 1920s, though it rarely took action on that basis alone.\(^{104}\) By 1957, the chief censor indicated that he would reject films of a low technical standard, including with respect to print quality, before they proceeded to a formal censorship review. Many films came to the Gold Coast after long journeys around the globe and the problem was that “with the long lengths of film removed through earlier breakage, etc., the sequence of these films is very disjointed.”\(^{105}\) This concern with narrative coherence marked a striking contrast between the Gold Coast and settler colonies, even in the late 1950s. Censors in Northern and Southern Rhodesia, as well as Malaya, garbled films to the point that they were “sadly lacking continuity.”\(^{106}\) While colonial audiences felt such decisions most acutely, the Irish censor in the immediate post-independence period, James Montgomery, also made substantial cuts “even if it

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\(^{103}\) *It’s In the Bag* (1945, US, directed by Richard Wallace); the film featured numerous radio stars of the period.

\(^{104}\) PRAAD ADM/11/1/1278 Letter from President, Board of Control, to W. Bartholomew and Co., 29 November 1928.

\(^{105}\) PRAAD RG3/5/62 Letter from W.J. Thurlow, President, Board of Control, to Mr. T.C. Nankani, Nankani Cinemas (GC) Ltd. and The Proprietor, White Stores, 9 February 1957.

\(^{106}\) Ambler, “Popular Films and Colonial Audiences,” 83.
spoils the story,” part of his assertion of a new standard of Catholic morality in Irish censorship after the withdrawal of British officials.\textsuperscript{107}

Gold Coast censors, by contrast, tried to preserve the integrity of the storyline even where this might result in the inclusion questionable material, such as “fights, shootings and beatings up.”\textsuperscript{108} Even when a board member objected to a particular scene, it might be retained on the grounds that it was “absolutely necessary for the story,” such as in the case of an objection by Rev. P.K. Dagadu to a scene early in the film \textit{Three Godfathers}. While Dagadu’s objection was noted, it was overruled and the film was passed after further discussions within the administration, which excluded the clergyman himself. Although the clergy were influential as members of the censorship Board, they did not always get the final word, particularly when British officials felt that they were being too strict. By pushing back against clerical views, British officials could present themselves as being more broad-minded to African members of the Board without sacrificing their position as preservers of benevolent oversight.\textsuperscript{109}

The Board’s primary motivation for providing more detailed accounts of censorship decisions to cinema managers in 1947 was to encourage the cinemas to communicate to their suppliers that the censor would ban certain kinds of film. Just after the war, that meant first and foremost films that could be thought of as horror or thriller

\textsuperscript{107} Kevin Rockett, \textit{Irish Film Censorship: A Cultural Journey from Silent Cinema to Internet Pornography} (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), 78.
\textsuperscript{108} PRAAD RG3/5/61 Memorandum on Board of Control Policies, 10 April 1952.
\textsuperscript{109} PRAAD RG3/5/61 Internal correspondence dated July 1, 1953 (initials illegible). The film was likely John Ford’s 1948 version of a story about three outlaws who undertake to care for a newborn, and starring John Wayne. The story had previously been told in at least five other films, under various titles, including a prior silent version directed by Ford.
pictures, though the chief censor added that “films in which murders, acts of violence, deliberate destruction of property (...) play an important part, are unlikely to be viewed with favour by the Board.” Perhaps seeking to head off counter-arguments before they were offered, the President also suggested that the manager make his suppliers aware of the fact that the Board “includes many Africans of education and judgment and (...) there is no cleavage of opinion between the European and African members.”110

While the censorship board may have been united at that particular time in late 1947, over time African members did not act in lockstep with their European colleagues. They were generally more permissive than members of the clergy, and showed considerable fire in defending their own role on the board from the challenge of Lebanese representation. The desire of members of the elite African community, particularly those with a long history of interaction with and service to the colonial administration, to preserve their own status may nonetheless have meant that they were not eager to challenge the status quo within the Board to any notable degree in the mid-1940s, whatever might be happening at the higher political level in the colony. Many of those leading the pro-independence charge represented a different constituency from the educated clerk grouping that contributed most African members to the censorship process, and the cleavage between the different interest groups became clear in 1949.

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110 PRAAD RG3/5/303 Letter from President, Board of Control to Manager, West Africa Pictures Co. Ltd., 15 October 1947.
when Nkrumah split from the UGCC, the grouping most closely aligned with middle-class interests.111

Despite such differences of emphasis, in the post-war period the general pattern continued to be one of careful scrutiny combined with judicious use of the censorship regulations – by colonial standards – to control what Gold Coast audiences could see. This more accommodating approach to censorship in the colony held up even at moments of greatest political and social strain. After the disturbances of 1948, which resulted, *inter alia*, from dissatisfaction with the re-integration of former servicemen, the price of basic foodstuffs, and the role of foreign business interests in the colony, the Board felt that increased vigilance would be needed in the conduct of its work but they did not make more frequent use of bans or cuts.

The 1948 disturbances came at the end of a more than a month of great tension, which began with a boycott of goods in foreign-owned stores – European, Lebanese, and Indian, although not all expatriate businesses were affected by the boycott, which focused on specific commodities. The boycott, organized by the Ga chief Nii Kwabena Bonne III, was due to end on February 28th, but protesters were met with violence and Accra’s population erupted, with rioting continuing over five days. During that period, numerous foreign-owned businesses were looted, with cinemas a notable exception. Nonetheless, the censors were cautious for some months in the aftermath of the riots, which included the arrest of Nkrumah and other notable pro-independence figures, who had been accused

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of organizing and managing the rioters. While individual censorship examinations may have been thorough there was no sudden trend towards an increase in bans or cuts, unlike the spate of bans the previous year. This contrasted with Kenya during the Mau Mau period, when there was a substantial increase in film bans despite the fact that there were far fewer cinemas in that colony, and where there was already an explicit racial element to censorship in that films could be approved for non-Africans only. Of course, the violence of the Mau Mau period was far greater, and longer-lasting, than what occurred in the Gold Coast in 1948, with the disturbances and their aftermath claiming around 30 lives.

While the early 1950s were calm by that measure, the period saw Gold Coast’s first partial popular elections. Nonetheless, censorship remained light in this period of profound political change because excessive policing of film content would have been contradictory to the spirit of increased trust in Africans as adult decision-makers. In the early 1950s, only a few films were banned each year, and the major cinema operators barely felt the censor’s hand at all: the censor imposed two bans in the first quarter of 1952, from a total of 142 films censored, both on minor operators who were importing especially low-grade material. The censor banned these films because it was in dreadful in physical state rather than because it was dreadful in content.112

The general pattern of thorough care in decision-making meant that those responsible for censorship were continually engaged in a kind of self-reflection as to the ground rules for their deliberations even if there were few negative censorship decisions.

At a time of very significant increase in the numbers of cinemas and cinema-goers, and profound change in the colony’s political structure, this led to a more thorough formalized overhaul of censorship regulations.

**New rules for a new era: the 1952 censorship legislation**

In 1952, the Gold Coast Legislative Council introduced new measures designed to tighten the existing cinema censorship laws, which the censorship Board of Control had used for almost 30 years without any significant modifications. While there were occasional minor legislative changes to the cinema licensing laws and to the composition of the censorship Board, there had been no amendments to the fundamental legal provisions for censorship of film content. However, in 1951, the Gold Coast elected its first majority African Legislative Assembly, with broad powers over the domestic legislative agenda. Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party dominated the Assembly: the CPP won 34 of the 38 directly elected seats, and could count on a majority of the 37 indirectly elected representatives.\(^{113}\) The conjunction between the new political landscape and the rapid post-war growth of the cinema sector led to a proposal to bring censorship laws up to date.

During the introductory debate in the Legislative Assembly the Minister of Defence and External Affairs, R.H. Saloway, suggested that the substantial increase in the number of cinemas in the Gold Coast since the Second World War was responsible
for a weakening of censorship policies and control of film exhibition more generally.\footnote{Gold Coast Legislative Assembly Debates, Session 1952, Issue No. 3, October 6, 1952, 126-130. Saloway, an experienced British administrator, was nominated directly by the colonial government and was not an elected member of the Assembly. He had represented the government in prior negotiations with Nkrumah's CPP.} Under the new legislation, films would be classified either for universal exhibition or for those over 16 only, the first time that the Gold Coast introduced age-based provisions for censorship. This responded partly to the concern that younger viewers were easily able to access the most adult content in the absence either of formal age-based censorship or of a willingness on the part of the cinema owners to police content themselves (not that there was any legal basis for such an expectation).

The new regulations established a single censorship Board of Control for the entire colony. In practice, there was only one Board at the time but the previous legislation had not technically applied to the entire colony, but rather to the coastal area and Ashanti. The Legislative Council did not wish to encourage any regional censorship variations of the kind that had sometimes proved problematic in India and Nigeria.\footnote{Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee, 105-130 and Nigeria Parliamentary Debates, 3 April 1963, 268-269. Where multiple censorship boards existed, distributors sometimes shopped around to find the most lenient option since the regional censor’s certificates were valid across the entire country.} Unlike in some other British colonies at the time, including Kenya and Tanganyika, there was also no explicit racial element to the censorship regulations in Gold Coast, either before or after 1952. In those East African locations, films could be passed for “non-African audiences only,” an option not available in the Gold Coast. Of course, in Gold Coast a film could be banned outright because the censor was uncertain of how African audiences might react and any racial basis underpinning the decision would thus be
concealed, at the price of also forbidding the film for European or other non-African audiences.\footnote{KNA, file KA/5/31 September 6, 1930}

During the debate on the 1952 legislative measures, which brought no open disagreements from the non-CPP members of the Legislative Assembly, either elected or appointed, deputies blamed the cinema for reported recent spikes in crime in Accra and Kumasi, with little acknowledgement of other possible contributory factors such as the major demographic changes then occurring in the country, or the persistence of post-war social tensions.\footnote{Salm, “The Bukom Boys,” 86-7.} The tightening of censorship rules did not end the debate on the possible negative influence of movies on Gold Coast audiences. Indeed, ministerial responses to parliamentary questions suggest a degree of weary familiarity with the arguments that critics of the cinema trotted out.

Other members of the Legislative Assembly had their own concerns with the quality of films entering the country. In 1954, C.T. Nylander asked the Minister of Education, who was by that point the official with overall responsibility for the censorship of films, whether he would “educate cinema patrons that the films shown at the cinema houses do not represent the ordinary standards of European or American life.”\footnote{Gold Coast Legislative Assembly Debates, Session 1954, Issue No. 3, November 9, 1954, column 28. Despite his concern for European prestige, Nylander was a member of the African elite, and later served as Minister for Education; during his term, he led the effort to replace British textbooks with Ghanaian materials. Jet, February 19, 1959.} However, the Gold Coast Minister, Mr. J.H. Allassani, made no attempt to assuage Nylander’s concerns and suggested that “cinema patrons are well aware that feature films, just as romantic novels (sic), are of an ‘escapist’ nature and do not always
attempt to portray the everyday life of men and women but rather the more sensational aspects of their lives told against a romantic and stimulating background.” Mr. Allassani might well have been anticipating Hitchcock’s future suggestion that drama is “life with the dull bits cut out.” The American industry was well aware of such complaints of sensationalism in their products, which were often voiced when foreign delegations visited Hollywood, but by the mid-1950s the American industry had begun to liberalize its own practices and the head of the Production Code Administration, Geoffrey Shurlock, noted that when foreign visitors “raise the point about American films distorting American life, I remind them first that our movies are fairy tales and not documentaries.”

Allassani’s faith in the abilities of African audience members to comprehend what they saw onscreen was by now routine in the Gold Coast under the auspices of the Gold Coast Film Unit, as discussed in the previous chapter, though not for the first time the Gold Coast was in the vanguard of policy across the British empire. By the mid-1950s, members of the censorship board also came to the view that local audiences were capable of making discriminating judgments about the films they saw. The Department of Information Services, responsible for censorship in the 1950s, produced a short brochure about its work in 1955, noting that 869 films were censored in that year with just 16

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rejected.\textsuperscript{122} That overall total included feature films, newsreels, and trailers for coming attractions; the focus of most censorship attention was on feature films.

The film scholar Carmela Garritano has concluded from the low number of restricted films that the censorship system in Gold Coast was ineffective and that exhibitors flouted the regulations by exhibitors. Garritano may assume that a much higher rate of film bans should have been expected in a British colonial context. This would have been true in many other colonies, but the figures confirm the longstanding pattern of evidence that the Gold Coast censors were quite sensitive to local conditions and that they used the blunt instrument of the ban with caution.\textsuperscript{123} Their self-presentation in the brochure was designed to assure viewers that they were careful but not heavy-handed.

Nonetheless, the idea that lower-class African audiences were susceptible to the malign influences of the movies persisted among a cross-section of politicians, administrators, and Gold Coast journalists. When \textit{The Boy Kumasenu} appeared in 1952 even positive newspaper critiques thought that the film could have a negative influence on impressionable viewers. Critics suggested that youthful viewers might miss the film’s message regarding the dangerous attractions of the big city and instead embrace those same attractions.\textsuperscript{124} That was by no means the only view of the film: some writers and a great many audience members were delighted at the opportunity, however flawed, to see people resembling themselves on screen at the movies. There were complaints in the

\textsuperscript{122} Department of Information Services, \textit{Advance of a Technique: Information Services in the Gold Coast} (Accra: Department of Information Services, 1955).


\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Daily Graphic}, October 7, 1952.
newspaper letters pages that the film was not being shown more widely, further evidence that the cinema sector could not always keep up with the audience’s desire for entertainment.\textsuperscript{125} Amusingly, one writer turned the colonial perception of African audiences around and suggested that if the film were shown in Britain, the impressionable English audience might assume that all Gold Coast lawyers were less than perfect based on the depiction of one of their number in the film.\textsuperscript{126}

In the wake of the legislative changes of 1952, the censorship process continued to operate as it had in previous decades: thorough, cautious and, in most respects, quite mild-mannered. The overwhelming majority of imported films made their way to Gold Coast screens even after the changes, though some films were now off-limits to younger viewers. The age classification system underlined the local censors’ new willingness to permit more adult material, in the same way that the American industry was beginning to loosen the restrictions imposed by its own Production Code. The introduction of more nuanced censorship legislation allowed viewers over the age of 16 to have access to a wider range of material, and emphasized that in the Gold Coast those adults who were now voting on their colony’s future could also make their own decisions on what was appropriate for them to see. In this respect, the censorship board’s decision-making moved in concert with the tone set by the broader British colonial administration, becoming more inclusive over the course of the 1950s as the transition to African rule was navigated. It was not until the early 1960s, several years after independence, that

\textsuperscript{125} \textit{The Daily Graphic}, July 29, 1952.
\textsuperscript{126} \textit{The Daily Graphic}, September 3, 1952.
censorship practice changed in ways that had a severe impact on both the cinema business and the cinema audience, as discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.
Chapter Three – The Cinema Business in Ghana from Origins to Ubiquity, 1910-1960

By 1960, Ghana had more cinema seats per head than any other sub-Saharan country except South Africa, with most cinemas located in the southern coastal cities.\(^1\) The popularity of the cinema ran ahead of the state’s ability to provide mains electricity in many smaller towns, even though they too were growing in population.\(^2\) This led to the concentration of cinemas in the largest urban areas: Accra hosted one-third of Ghana’s theatres in 1962, when the American industry did a comprehensive survey of the Ghanaian exhibition scene.

The cinemas of the early independence period were successful businesses with a distinctive exhibition culture. In 1959, West African Pictures Company, the cinema network owned by the brand-new Ghanaian state, had more than 250 films sitting in its storeroom, over 90% of which came from the US. West African Pictures circulated their stock throughout its own network of cinemas as well as to the independent theatres that had signed distribution contracts with the company. Audiences in one theatre in the network might treat themselves to Douglas Sirk’s critically-lauded melodrama *All That Heaven Allows* while others might choose *Congo Crossing*, a routine adventure film set

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in a fictional West African location – one of many American films with mock African settings exhibited to an African public, often with considerable success.³

West African Pictures was Ghana’s second largest cinema network at the time and the competing Captan chain had at least as many films in stock, probably many more given its oft-critiqued practice of buying up large numbers of films at low prices.⁴ The Captan contracts aimed to preclude the competitor cinemas from access to the films they held under contract for as long as three-and-a-half years, between the combined delivery time and the actual contract period.⁵ With so many films in circulation, the operators of each one of Ghana’s 70 or so cinema screens at the time could have chosen from among six or seven different pictures on any given day, a far wider choice than their American counterparts. This practice of rotating films on a daily basis suggests both the liveliness of the local viewing scene in urban Ghana and a distinctive set of cinema exhibition practices quite different to those that prevailed in the US or Europe. This created the circumstances in which local exhibitors asserted their own interests in contrast to the business model that the American industry attempted to implement from the early 1960s, as discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

⁴ In June 1960, Captan negotiated with United Artists for the Ghanaian rights to *The Chaplin Revue*, with UA offering the Ghanaian distributor exclusive rights to a further 100 films. PRAAD RG7/1/1656 West African Pictures Co., Monthly Report, June 1960, from Acting General Manager A.A. Ankrah, July 18, 1960. *The Chaplin Revue* (1959, US, Charles Chaplin) was a feature made by combining three silent shorts with new narration and connecting material from Chaplin. Warner Bros. also signed numerous contracts with Captan throughout the 1950s. WBA, File West Africa 1961 16615B, Letter from Sydney Rutter to Mac Greenberg, May 9, 1961, with details of all contracts signed from 1952 to 1960. The Captan contracts gave that company the rights to both Ghana and Nigeria, whereas other companies who worked with Warner Bros. also negotiated rights in Sierra Leone.
However, the success of local cinemas was not immediate. The cinema came early to the Gold Coast but the business culture took root slowly. This chapter traces the gradual growth of the sector from the 1910s through the 1930s, and its subsequent explosive growth in the post-war period. The broad expansion and the apparent profitability of the cinemas led the state to become involved with cinema ownership and management in 1956 but the success of the sector also prompted new legal mechanisms designed to regulate cinemas as well as to garnish some of profits generated by the enthusiastic urban audience. This was consistent with the way that the state sought to extract rents from other successful business sectors, with a special focus on import/export trades as Fred Cooper outlines in his theorization of the gatekeeper state. Cooper’s phrase is an effective description of the early independence state in Ghana, with different components of the administration attempting to profit from the success of the cinema business by imposing competing models of regulation that combined to self-defeating effect by cramping business development.6

The state’s direct involvement in cinema ownership creates a unique window through which to explore the nature of state-business relations in early post-independence Ghana. The successful or failure of business interests depended as much or more on business managers’ abilities to cultivate political contacts than on their status within or outside the state apparatus. Private businesses tended on the whole to emerge in better shape than did state-run businesses, which were more vulnerable to internal financial depredation. The private business-political nexus also went in both directions, with

successful business owners seen as key sources of party revenue in the lead-up to elections.

The state’s presence in the cinema business also suggests a wide variety of motivations for cinema owners, including straightforward financial success, access to political power, and even regulation of the flow of films entering the country through their control of contacts with external film producers, a theme that extends into the subsequent chapter as Hollywood took a more active role in managing its presence in Ghana after 1960. State ownership did not strike a death knell for cinema entrepreneurship for the state network remained limited in scope: the administration elected not to nationalize all cinemas meaning there were two distinct and competing models of management in operation from 1956 onwards. The government played these two models off each other for its own financial benefit through both transparent means such as formal regulation and behind-closed-doors deals with individual entrepreneurs.

State control was not automatically regarded as being a guarantee of the public good in Ghana, either, while the government also had to bear in mind the external perception of state ownership against the backdrop of Cold War tensions, with very different models of business control in East and West. To some degree, permitting the two models to operate in parallel allowed the state to reap the rewards of each – financial rewards from the private sector, political rewards from being seen to control a modern leisure sector – at different times. The two models of ownership also meant very different levels of responsiveness to audience interests, with private entrepreneurs displaying a greater degree of innovation and nimbleness in recognizing shifts in popularity.
The Origins of the Cinema Business in the Gold Coast – 1910s-1920s

The first regular movie screenings in Gold Coast colony took place in Accra shortly after 1900 when traveling showmen from other parts of West Africa began screening their wares in various coastal cities on tours that took place over a period of months. The Gold Coast’s first purpose-built movie theatre, constructed by the British businessman John Bartholomew on Station Road in Accra, dates from 1914, just seven years after the first purpose-built theatre appeared in the United Kingdom, illustrating the very rapid spread of cinema technology and film entertainment across the empire although the logistical and financial challenges of operating in a colonial location limited further expansion at that time. The outbreak of the First World War brought the cocoa boom of the early twentieth century to an abrupt halt and reduced the flow of money within the Gold Coast, not least because the cash-strapped colonial administration imposed new taxes. Bartholomew’s cinema continued to operate despite the changed circumstances but the economic conditions ensured that it had no competition for some time.

Bartholomew’s company was a well-known motor engineering and produce enterprise with additional interests in the cocoa business and exclusive importation rights to several major brands of truck and car. The new venture established a long-term pattern

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7 Gold Coast Leader, October 3, 1914. Other sources suggest 1913 as the year that the theatre opened, but press accounts suggest that it took some time for the new venture to open its doors after an initial announcement. Cole, Ghana’s Concert Party Theatre, 72.
of investment in the cinemas by those who had made their money in other fields: the start-up costs of projection equipment and space meant that cinema entrepreneurs needed some working capital. Bartholomew and a number of his expatriate successors claimed that their cinemas were not especially profitable, especially early on, suggesting that in part at least the venues were designed to bring prestige to small business empires. The cinemas functioned as an extended form of advertising for the other components of the business and their status as symbols of modernity and connection to a wider network of trade and culture could also transfer a degree of prestige to the business as a whole.

Despite Bartholomew’s own account of the cinema’s humble earning power, other sources suggest that the venue was a substantial success from its opening days, and in later years the cinema was known simply as “Bart’s.” At one point early in the theatre’s history Bartholomew risked the ire of his potential audience when he proposed to finance a horse-racing prize for white jockeys only, prompting an outcry in the pages of at least one Accra newspaper: “We may point out that Mr. Bartholomew has the Blackman to thank for his existence in this country. It may yet come to mean the setting up of an opposition Cinema House to break the monopoly which he exclusively enjoys and which has made him to lose his head. Let him beware.”

10 SCD, Box No: 66 [Ghana], Folder No: 1 Handwritten notes of interview with Mr. Barakat [no date, c. 1954].
11 There are trace mentions of other contemporary cinema venues in secondary sources, such as the Azuma theatre. Those locations generally presented a more diverse blend of entertainments, including concert parties and dances, and I have been unable to unearth direct evidence of the extent of their cinema activities. The Azuma theatre was originally a social venue created by and for Accra’s Afro-Brazilian population, descended from former slaves who returned to West Africa.
12 *Gold Coast Independent*, August 31, 1918. The newspaper was owned by Frederick Nanka-Bruce, who wore many hats – physician, journalist, politician. Nanka-Bruce was also keenly interested in horse racing.
Against the backdrop of continued economic pain at the end of the First World War, the threat remained an empty one for several years. The fact that other entrepreneurs waited until well in the 1920s to enter the cinema business may reflect their perceptions of Bart’s profitability, as distinct from the views of newspaper commentators or other local critics of the owner’s behavior. However, Bart’s first real competition was indeed from an African owner, Alfred Ocansey. As was the case with his predecessors, Ocansey’s involvement in the cinema trade was an extension of his own business empire rather than a direct response to Bartholomew’s social views, which Accra’s race committee rejected in any case, dropping the idea of a whites-only prize in response to elite African objections.

Alfred Ocansey completed his education at the Basel Mission School and later worked for the British trading company F. & A. Swanzy before going into business on his own account. Historian David Killingray has suggested that Ocansey’s move into the cinema trade was a long-term consequence of business shifts prompted by the Gold Coast’s loss of trade with Germany during the First World War. The impact of the war pushed Ocansey to expand his interests in the motor-vehicle sector, another business in which Bartholomew was already involved. Until the early 1920s, Ocansey’s business had been centered on cocoa, though this remained an important component of his activities in later years.


Ocansey was a central member of the small African elite of the 1920s and 1930s in Accra, operating a number of journalistic ventures in addition to his activities as a merchant, most notably the daily *African Morning Post*, established in 1934 as a forum for early nationalist views. For several years, Ocansey employed the Nigerian nationalist Nnamdi Azikiwe, better known simply as Zik, as editor of the newspaper. Zik returned to Nigeria after his 1936 trial and imprisonment on charges of sedition, a conviction overturned the following year on appeal. Zik later established the *West African Pilot*, a key anti-colonial journal in Nigeria.\(^\text{15}\) Ocansey was also involved in the 1930-31 cocoa hold-up, which was designed to challenge the control of the European cocoa-buying cartels. In that instance, it is difficult to disentangle Ocansey’s own business interests as an African middleman trader from his principled objections to the role of expatriate buying firms, notwithstanding the newspaper rhetoric of greater self-regulation for Africans.\(^\text{16}\)

Ocansey’s role in early nationalist debate, as well as in the business history of Ghana, has fallen into the historical shadows because he died before the high point of nationalist agitation in the Gold Coast in the late 1940s. His cinema network lasted until his death in 1943, with the individual theatres passing into a variety of other hands.

\(^{15}\) Azikiwe claimed that Ocansey himself had insisted on the publication of the article that led to Azikiwe’s trial. Entitled “Has the African a God?,” and written by I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson, the article was highly critical of European imperialism and civilization more generally. Leo Spitzer and LaRay Denzer, “I.T.A. Wallace Johnson and the West African Youth League,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1973), 413-452.

\(^{16}\) Sam Rhodie, “The Gold Coast Cocoa Hold-Up of 1930-31,” *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, Vol. 9 (1968), 105-118. Ocansey was one of the representatives of the Cocoa Federation who negotiated with the colonial authorities and the overseas firms who purchased the cocoa. As Rhodie notes, most of the Federation representatives were members of the local African elite; there was only one cocoa farmer among their number.
thereafter, sometimes as part of successor networks of theatres: from 1949, members of the Ocansey family leased the Capitol Cinema in Koforidua to Omar Captan, a major postwar figure on the local cinema scene.\textsuperscript{17}

Ocansey’s arrival on the cinema scene in the mid-1920s introduced a significant measure of competition for Bartholomew and, from the Accra audience perspective, a new element of consumer choice. Within a few years, Bart’s theatre slipped down the local pecking order and survived by offering the cheapest ticket prices for screenings of films that had already been shown at higher-end theatres. The threepenny seats were attractive enough to the least well-off audience members that they did not object to the occasional “Europeans Only” evening, for uniquely among commercial cinemas Bartholomew persisted in offering some racially exclusive screenings (though private clubs were segregated).\textsuperscript{18} However, those who could afford even the slightly more expensive sixpenny seats transferred their allegiance to cinemas run by African and Lebanese owners.

Ocansey’s first venue was the West End Kinema Palladium on Pagan Road, a short walk from Bart’s. The name of Ocansey’s venture was inspired by a trip that the entrepreneur had made to London, and consciously drew on an image of metropolitan modernity designed to appeal to the middle-class clientele that Ocansey wished to cultivate. The venue rapidly became a major focus of Accra’s social life, and siphoned business from Bart’s at the upper end of the market within weeks. The success of the

\textsuperscript{17} PRAAD RG1/2/137 Petition by the Solicitors of Samir Omar Captan, Letter from Ghana Police Force Criminal Investigation Division to Attorney General, March 23, 1977.
\textsuperscript{18} PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Cinematograph Theatres, 1938.
theatre prompted Ocansey to quickly branch out with other venues in communities not far from Accra. Unlike most other exhibitors in the 1920s and 1930s, there is no evidence that Ocansey claimed that his cinemas struggled with profitability. Instead, he drew on ideas of spectacle and success and emphasizing, in advertisements, the many attractions of a night out at an Ocansey cinema. This was part of an overall strategy of self-presentation as a highly successful African entrepreneur, skilled at navigating multiple business sectors and at negotiating between the business and administrative arenas. In such a self-presentation, whether the theatres generated meager profits was beside the point: investment in the sector was part of a strategy of visibility in Gold Coast’s social world, a way of gathering further legitimacy for an entrepreneur with origins as a low-level clerk in an overseas enterprise.

The businessman Charles Francis Hutchison rhapsodized about Ocansey and many other members of the Gold Coast elite in his book The Pen-Pictures of Modern Africans and African Celebrities in the late 1920s, devoting several pages of prose or verse to each entry, though in presenting a picture of the modern African elite he sometimes overstates matters, claiming that Ocansey operated the colony’s first cinema. Hutchison’s celebration of Ocansey makes specific reference to the latter’s success in modern fields of endeavor, for both men moved in circles that embraced an outward-looking modernity even as they cast aspersions on European business practices:

The cinema world of Europe would envy you your success,
All that you handle is Gog and Magog.

The West-end Kinema Palladium stands to your everlasting credit,
It vies with the best in the North, the land of luxury and sweet music.
The lights of Europe shine nightly at its gates,
And the gloom of Africa is dispersed by your wand.\(^{21}\)

By 1928, there were ten cinema exhibition venues in the Gold Coast Colony and Ashanti, though after the initial burst of expansion in the mid-1920s the number stayed stable for another decade.\(^{22}\) Notwithstanding Ocansey’s policy of rapid expansion the exhibition business remained fragile throughout the 1920s: businesses opened and closed in smaller towns, although the sector remained attractive to other African entrepreneurs for its visibility and the aura of modernity that it conveyed even when the financial results were mixed.\(^{23}\) In addition to the costs of a cinema ticket, local habits may have been difficult to overcome for entrepreneurs in new leisure sectors. In the late 1920s the Secretary for Native Affairs commented that the "African goes to bed early," a problem for a business that had to wait until after dark to start up, even if the comment is redolent of the condescending attitude of many colonial administrators. More tellingly, the official added that even in the larger towns “it is only on occasional Saturdays and at Christmas

\(^{21}\) Ibid. 318.
\(^{22}\) PRAAD ADM/11/1/1519 Letter from Secretary for Native Affairs to the Colonial Secretary, Accra, March 23, 1928. The letter noted that there were no venues in the north of the country, although it added that private venues that did not admit members of the public were not subject to licensing and censorship regulations.
\(^{23}\) The draper John Oyeniyi held cinema shows in Dunkwa in the late 1920s in addition to his primary occupation, a pattern followed by small-scale merchants in other towns. PRAAD ADM/11/1/1525 Letter from Secretary for Native Affairs to John F. Oyeniyi, February 21, 1930.
time that the theatres are well attended,” an observation with a more empirical
grounding.\textsuperscript{24}

The fragility of the local trade can also be judged by the responses of Gold Coast
officials to efforts to establish a minimum quota of British films in the colonies (and, by
extension, a maximum quota for American films). These proposals were in line with the
regulations impacting the British domestic exhibition business at the time: the
Cinematograph Films Act of 1927 in the United Kingdom imposed a 7.5% quota on the
exhibition of British films – that is, at least 7.5% of films shown in each cinema had to be
British-made – with the figure scheduled to rise to 20% by 1935.\textsuperscript{25} The Department of
Overseas Trade in London was keen “from the point of view of national and trade
propaganda” to have as many British films as possible exhibited overseas. This was at a
time when the American industry, through the Department of Commerce, was beginning
its own thorough investigations of even the most modest overseas markets, such as small
island nations with minimal cinema infrastructure.\textsuperscript{26} As part of the discussion of quotas,
and recognizing the already formidable strength of the American industry, the authorities
in London also sought to develop a detailed picture of the cinema exhibition sector in the
Gold Coast.

Quota proposals of this nature were circulated to members of the Gold Coast
censorship board as this group was best informed about matters cinematographic in the

\textsuperscript{24} PRAAD ADM/11/1/1278 Board of Control Cinematograph Exhibition, Memo from Secretary for Native
Affairs to Acting Colonial Secretary, September 14, 1928.
\textsuperscript{25} The 1938 Cinematograph Films Act renewed the quota system through 1947 in Britain, with the quota
for British films supposed to reach 30% by that year.
\textsuperscript{26} PRAAD ADM/11/1/1278, Letter from M.W. Donald. Department of Overseas Trade, to the Imperial
Trade Correspondent, Gold Coast, November 28, 1928.
colony, although the British quota system was not a method of regulating film content: it was designed to promote the creation of an indigenous (British) film industry on a scale comparable to that of a major Hollywood studio. Individual British producers or distributors also made occasional attempts to appeal to patriotic motives across the empire and contacted colonial officials directly in an attempt to “create a greater demand for British productions wherever the British flag flies.”

Officials and censors in the Gold Coast were not favorable to such quota proposals, whatever their possible value to the British film industry. The Gold Coast Director of Education in 1928 was a lone voice, expressing the view that increasing the percentage of British films was an important goal, presumably part of a broader policy of education of colonial subjects. Far more representative were the comments of a member of the censorship board, who wrote, “any such legislation would have the effect of considerably reducing our present slender chances of obtaining films of any educational value,” given the already substantial difficulties with obtaining high-quality pictures. In this context, “educational” meant mainstream commercial films that the official considered to have an uplifting character rather than films made for educational purposes such as short colonial health or agriculture films. Here, two competing justifications for

27 PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Letter from F.W. Green & Co. to Colonial Secretary, Accra, October 7, 1937. Green sought to put together a detailed picture of local exhibition standards, but seemed to be entirely uninformed as to the extent of cinema-going in the colony at the time. Business trumped the quota, though, as Green noted “I am not averse from assisting the local exhibitor in obtaining good clean American productions as part of his entertainment.”
28 PRAAD ADM//11/1/1278 Board of Control Cinematograph Exhibition, Memo from Director of Education to President, Board of Control, Cinematograph Films, July 10, 1928.
29 PRAAD ADM//11/1/1278, Letter from Acting Principal, Achimota College, to Secretary for Native Affairs, July 13, 1928.
empire come into conflict, with the civilizing mission given a greater priority than British economic interests in the colonies even if that mission had to depend on American films for its effect.

Within Britain, producers made most films designed to satisfy the requirements of the 1927 quota legislation on low budgets: they fulfilled the quota to the letter of the law rather than in the spirit of strengthening the industry. British audiences did embrace some of the films, such as This Man Is News, a comedy/mystery film modeled on the very popular Thin Man series of American films that was a significant hit in 1938; the main actor, Barry K. Barnes, briefly experienced stardom on the strength of a string of “quota quickie” appearances in the late 1930s. However, the quota films catered to popular audiences rather than providing the kind of educational material sought by Gold Coast officials. However, scholars have now begun to re-evaluate the significance of at least some of these films, where they survive at all, as many of them gave voice to performers outside of the London-dominated cinema mainstream, which suggests a class element to their poor reputation among elite British commentators in the 1930s.

Gold Coast officials were also concerned that imposing British quota films in local theatres could harm the economic outlook for those businesses, which censorship board members felt were still in their infancy at the time. The exhibitors used their knowledge of these views to make pleas for leniency on the part of the regulators when it

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30 This Man Is News (1938, UK, directed by David MacDonald); The Thin Man (1934, US, directed by W.S. Van Dyke).


32 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1278, Letter from Secretary for Native Affairs to Acting Colonial Secretary, Accra, 14 September 1928.
came to both quotas and content regulation. The management of Bart’s suggested that “even an African public will not pay to witness uninteresting films, i.e. films devoid of any plot or phases of a dramatic nature,” and went on to note that “since the advent of the films Censor Board (sic), our Cinema receipts have steadily decreased and we are now faced with the problem of closing the Cinema entirely or appealing to your Board to permit a little more latitude in reviewing films.”33 This suggests that within a few years of the opening of new cinemas in the 1920s there was a discerning audience in Accra, one which might switch allegiance to a different cinema if one venue suffered disproportionately from the hand of the censor and was forced to show the same old fare again.

The censors did allow room for the local trade to breath, making decisions at times on commercial rather than content grounds. As one official put it, “Cheap and tawdry old films which would never be tolerated in Great Britain nowadays form the principal item on the local programmes and although it is true that they are practically all of American manufacture we must first allow the [local cinema exhibition] industry to establish itself firmly before we place any further restrictions on its development.”34 The American film business was singled out for particular opprobrium, despite its enormous local popularity at the time. Cheap American Western films dominated local screens: the titles and plotlines were almost interchangeable, and few of the films popular in the 1920s and 1930s in the Gold Coast survive today. So negative was the reputation of the

33 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1278, Letter from W. Bartholomew & Co., Ltd. to President, Board of Control, June 18, 1929.
34 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1278, Letter from Secretary for Native Affairs to Acting Colonial Secretary, Accra, September 14, 1928.
American industry that at times officials assumed that problematic films from other locations were American, an easy enough mistake to make during the silent period when non-American films could be circulated with inter-titles and credits in English.

One final challenge to assessing the economic success of the local exhibition business in the late 1920s is the jaundiced eye of local officials in their presentation of the business sector to potential new entrants. While they tried to accommodate existing entrepreneurs, their overall belief that the cinema lacked sufficient educational value meant that they were reluctant to encourage significant expansion. In response to inquiries from Britain as to the possibilities for developing the local market in the late 1920s, the Inspector of Police commented that “In the Gold Coast there have been no new [that is, recent] films shown and are unlikely to be. They would be too expensive for proprietors here. The practice of renting films is not followed in West Africa owing to climatic conditions, rough handling and the length of time the films would be in transit and unavailable for display.”35 The president of the censorship board had suggested that moving to a rental rather than purchase system would increase the (improving) qualities of films in the colony, though he reiterated that the exhibition business was still at a very early stage of development in the late 1920s.36 Despite the lack of fervor for new external entrants to the market, there was no negative official reaction to Ocansey’s arrival on the scene, perhaps partly because officials were quite happy to have one competitor for Bartholomew, a man with a reputation for constant complaining as well as exaggeration.

35 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1278, Letter from Inspector General of Police to the Secretary for Native Affairs (President Board of Control), June 5, 1928.
36 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1519 Letter from Secretary for Native Affairs to the Colonial Secretary, Accra, March 23, 1928.
of the impact of negative censorship decisions. Officials had a much more cordial working relationship with Ocansey, who, in turn, had few problems with the censor.

**Changing technology and exhibition practices, 1930s**

Until well into the 1930s, Accra theatre owners often promoted films as a complementary early-evening attraction for other forms of entertainment. Dancing, a popular form of leisure for middle-class Africans and aspirants to that status, was the most common pairing.\(^{37}\) By contrast, in smaller towns film shows were an attraction in their own right, and a popular attraction at that: those locations did not have the same numbers of people able to sustain the more expensive hybrid entertainments on a regular basis: whereas cinema ticket prices in the 1930s usually started at sixpence, a night of dancing was at least a shilling. Nonetheless, when a new cinema opened the fanfare could include dance/film evenings in the first few weeks even in a small town.\(^{38}\)

Hybrid exhibition practices of this kind were not unique to Gold Coast at the period. In the silent era, mixed entertainments – with short films interspersed with live acts – were the norm for many urban American and British audiences already accustomed to the variety of the vaudeville theatre or the music hall. Later, cinemas in small American towns and in large European cities sometimes had more than one form of

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\(^{38}\) The opening night spectacular was not unique to Gold Coast. In 1928, the opening of the Ritz in Athens, Alabama, included an orchestral performance and speeches, though the films were clearly the primary attraction and there was no post-screening entertainment. The publicity materials made clear that the screening was of an up-to-the-minute Mary Pickford production. The overlap between cinema and newspaper proprietorship was also present in that case: the owner of the Ritz assigned the front page story of the newspaper he owned and edited, the *Limestone Democrat*, to the opening of the cinema. Rosenbaum, *Moving Places*, 7-10.
entertainment on the bill each evening in the 1930s, and it can be difficult on occasion to
determine which was intended as the primary audience attraction. In the US, towns in
Appalachia featured local musical acts on weekend evenings, when towns were filled
with customers while the Virginia Theatre in Champaign, Illinois paired movie
screenings with live theatre and other non-cinema events. As late as the 1960s, the
Theatre Royal in Dublin paired a live show that featuring comedy and music with a high-
profile film in its second run.

In the Gold Coast, films on such mixed-entertainment occasions may not have
been projected in their entirety, or could even have played in the background as the music
began. The bill of attractions often allocated just over an hour for the cinematic portion of
the evening, even where the film might last much longer. Advertising materials
nonetheless suggest that the theatre owners hoped to attract a significant number of
patrons to certain films rather than just to the subsequent dances, so strict adherence to
the published schedule may not have been important at those venues that offered their
patrons multiple attractions. In the 1950s, by contrast, all kinds of entertainments

39 Gregory A. Waller, “Hillbilly Music and Will Rogers: Small-Town Picture Shows in the 1930s,” in
Gregory Waller (ed.), Moviegoing in America: a sourcebook in the history of film exhibition (Malden:
Blackwell, 2002), 177. Steven Bentz, Virginia Theatre, e-mail communication, May 2, 2012. The
Australian film The Picture Show Man (1977, Australia, directed by John Power) is set in the traveling
cinema businesses of the 1920s in rural Australia, with cinema screenings routinely paired with song and
dance or circus routines.
40 Interview, Pat McFeely, January 22, 2013.
41 The film Civilization (1916, US, directed by Thomas H. Ince, Reginald Barker, Raymond B. West) was
part of the opening event at Ocansey’s Suhum venue in 1937. The screening was scheduled to start at 8:30
and the subsequent dance at 9:30, but the film was far longer than this window suggests. Even by the
standards of Gold Coast cinemas, that title was very outdated, though the new theatre was not initially fitted
for sound, which may also explain the choice of title. The Plaza Cinema Suhum and Accra’s high-end Sea
View cinema both opened in October 1937, and the opening film at the Sea View on October 31, 1937 was
the British hit Evergreen (1934, UK, directed by Victor Saville), starring Jessie Matthews. African Morning
Post, October 14, 1937 (Plaza Cinema) and October 28, 1937 (Sea View Cinema).
emphasized their strict start times in newspaper listings, another signal of attempts to enforce a different standard of behavior in the leisure industry. Former cinema owners indicated that on the whole screenings began promptly in the 1960s and later unless there was a technical or meteorological problem.42

Despite the persistence of alternative entertainment practices as the 1930s advanced the films themselves gradually became the primary attraction in the cinemas. While dancing remained hugely popular in Accra at the time, different leisure forms began to take on their own separate existences and occupied their own distinct venues. The public segmented by interest or economic level or by choosing one activity over another on certain nights. The hybrid entertainment was a more prominent feature of the Ocansey network and it all but disappeared from local practice after Ocansey’s death in 1943, though cinema venues could be used for musical or sporting purposes on specific evenings.

There was a wide degree of variation in ticket prices in Accra through the 1930s. The most expensive seats were those at the Sea View cinema, which were fourteen times as expensive as the cheap seats at Bar’s in 1937, and two to seven times as expensive as the seats at most of Ocansey’s venues, immediately segregating the audience in ways that suggest a conscious effort to appeal to the European and middle-class African markets on the part of the hotel’s expatriate owners. The African customers included lawyers, successful government employees, and the merchants who already made the Sea View a part of their social lives, as the hotel was already a very popular drinking spot for those of

means, both European and African. At least some Europeans took notice, with a "European correspondent" in *The Gold Coast Spectator* – yet another Ocansey newspaper – extolling the virtues of the new venue although the writer stressed that for the high price one paid the seating lacked a certain comfort.43

By contrast, Bart's had descended to the bottom of the cinematic ladder by the late 1930s, twenty years after it opened. The venue screened second-run pictures after the more prominent theatres elsewhere in the city had extracted as much revenue as they could. Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that the theatre, long past its glory days, was still well attended by those with the most limited resources. Patient or frugal cinema-goers, many of them very young, could wait a few weeks or months after a film’s appearance at the Sea View or the Ocansey venues and see the same film at Bart's at a lower price since the titles eventually cropped up there.44 Unsurprisingly, given the smaller market for the venue’s pricey tickets, screenings at the Sea View took place only once a week on average, although most other venues had far more frequent screenings at the time.

Despite a flurry of new activity in the late 1930s, there were still barely 3,000 cinema seats across the country as a whole by the end of the decade, and many of the

43 *The Gold Coast Spectator*, November 20, 1937. The Sea View tickets were generally 3s 6d, while Ocansey theatres had seats priced at 6d, 1s, 1s 6d, and 2s.
44 It is not clear when Bart’s ceased operations as a cinema. In 1962, the Ghanaian state explored the possibility of taking over the entire business, by then known as Messrs John Holt Bartholomew by virtue of an earlier merger. While the cinema properties are listed as assets in the state’s proposal, the businesses no longer appeared to be going concerns, and the description of the company’s business extends only to the motor trade. PRAAD RG7/1/1831 Takeover of Messrs John Holt Bartholomew and Co. Ltd.
venues were still not wired for sound a decade after the technology was first used.\textsuperscript{45} Sound was the first major technological challenge that the local business faced and while the process of conversion to sound was gradual across the globe the Gold Coast experience was still slow by world standards. In 1936, a US industry publication estimated that about 72\% of theatres in Africa and the Near East had been wired for sound, with the rates varying considerably from one territory to the next, but Gold Coast’s rate was less than 20\% at the time.\textsuperscript{46} However, within a year a further four venues had added sound capacity, including theatres in Kumasi, Koforidua, and Sekondi.\textsuperscript{47} The situation in the Gold Coast changed rapidly in early wartime, spurred by the arrival of overseas military contingents, who required cheap, convenient, and up-to-date entertainments.\textsuperscript{48} By 1940, the twelve cinema in or around Accra were all wired for sound, and each venue had at least six screenings per week.\textsuperscript{49}

The arrival of sound had an immediate impact on audiences: those who never read the intertitles of silent films suddenly heard a wide variety of American and British

\textsuperscript{46} *The Film Daily*, 17 February 1936, 17 and PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Undated listing, included with 1937 materials requesting a survey of local theatres.
\textsuperscript{47} PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Cinematograph Theatres 1938.
\textsuperscript{48} Conversion to sound was not immediate in other locations. While almost all American and British theatres were wired for sound by 1936, with Britain converting more rapidly, in 1931 many American consumers were still watching silent pictures even though no new silent films were produced after 1928. There were locations where silent cinema persisted much longer than West Africa. Even in 1936, just 10\% of the cinemas in Russia were wired for sound. Japan had its own idiosyncratic experience, where the local practice of *benshi* narration (live narration by performers who incarnated all of the parts and provided additional commentary) held back the switch to sound technology. Because of the local *benshi* tradition, many key Japanese directors of the period remained silent film practitioners far longer than their counterparts elsewhere.
\textsuperscript{49} PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Handwritten file notes dated December 5, 1940. Officials debated the figures, indicating that while most of the Ocansey cinemas operated daily, including Sunday, other venues only offered a few screenings each week.
voices, even if they did not encounter expatriate voices in the course of their daily lives. In Accra, English was already in wide use: tens of thousands of school graduates were proficient, and the growing colonial apparatus meant that even those who were not educated found reasons to acquire a working knowledge of the language. The urban population was more educated than its rural counterpart, with a much higher proportion of urban residents having completed six years or more of formal education and this included exposure to English.\textsuperscript{50} As early as 1938, before most cinemas had converted to sound, officials in the Gold Coast commented that “In the large towns the natives understand sufficient English to appreciate a ‘Talkie.’”\textsuperscript{51} In addition, patrons exhorted each other to “Go several times to a movie and you will understand it.”\textsuperscript{52} Those whose own comprehension was weak could rely on other audience members who were quite happy to repeat or summarize titles for their friends and neighbors, part of the overall tolerance for conversation in Gold Coast cinemas.\textsuperscript{53}

The Beginnings of the Boom: New Owners on the Scene, 1940s

After the Second World War, the cinema sector continued the expansion prompted by the presence of a large expatriate and military population during the war

\textsuperscript{51} PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Memorandum from Acting Director of Education to Colonial Secretary, June 3, 1938. Evidence from nearby locations suggests that these accounts of the Gold Coast experience were typical: a report on cinema screenings to schoolchildren in Lagos in 1939 comments that “the majority were able to follow most of the dialogue, and few points of the story were missed.” PRAAD RG3/5/1998 Cinematograph – Proposal to Introduce Use of in Schools. Reports on Schools Cinema, Lagos, circulated by Colonial Office, London under cover letter dated February 27, 1940.
\textsuperscript{52} SCD, Box 80 [Mass Communications in Tropical Africa], Folder 2, “Problems of Extension of Commercial Motion Pictures,” undated manuscript.
\textsuperscript{53} Interview, Wallace Blankson, Accra, October 23, 2012.
years. More often than not, the postwar venues were in the hands of entrepreneurs from Lebanon and India, new entrants to the cinema scene. While in 1940 most venues were still in African hands because of the dominance Ocansey’s network at that time, the Barakat family, which would come to have a central place in the industry within a few years, was already present in the colony. At first they had connections to just two cinemas, one of which operated bi-weekly. As with their predecessors, these new operators got their start in other businesses such as general commerce or import/export, and in that respect they were unlike expatriate cinema entrepreneurs in locations like Jamaica and South Africa. Owners there often had a long history of involvement with the cinema and moved to those countries with the specific aim of investing in cinemas.

This pattern of cinemas as a secondary business persisted in Gold Coast: later expatriate entrants to the sector also started out in unrelated fields though in all cases entrepreneurs were familiar with the import regulations and government departments that were key to managing a business dependent on a resource that came from outside the colony. Omar Captan, who would become the dominant cinema operator by the late 1950s, first opened his doors in Ghana in 1935 and founded a chain of textile shops in and around Accra before entering the cinema business in a very limited way during the subsequent decade. The Nankani family, like the Barakats, was involved in the

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54 PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Handwritten file notes dated December 5, 1940.
import/export trade as noted importers of fine Indian garments and textiles. They distributed Indian films across West Africa and owned a theatre in Monrovia.57

Lebanese and Indian businessmen were able to join the cinema scene due to the substantial population growth of the 1940s. The population of Accra, in particular, increased rapidly after 1945.58 This transformed the city and contributed to the formation of a large new class of migrants interested in all that the city had to offer. Even by that measure urban residents of Ghana displayed remarkable enthusiasm for the institution of the cinema. After all, Accra was not the only city in Africa that grew after the war, but few other locations had as many seats per capita nor did those seats appear to be filled as often.59 The passion of Accra’s population for the cinema is matched only by its enthusiasm for a wide variety of other leisure activities, although the low price of a cinema ticket compared to the dance venues or the concert party gave it a democratic edge.

By the end of the war almost all urban cinemas operated every night, a transformation from the intermittent pattern of many 1930s venues. The vast majority of the venues in Accra were open air, and they held just a single screening each evening. The practice of holding a single nightly show was driven by the need to wait until dark (around 6 p.m., year-round) to begin screenings in open air venues. That may also have been close to the limit of the market in the 1940s as it would not have been all that

difficult to squeeze in two showings before 11 p.m. if the audience for the first show was shepherded out to allow another in.\(^60\) Kumasi’s venues were more often enclosed due to the city’s higher rainfall totals but again a single nightly screening was the norm.

During Accra’s rainy seasons, particularly the longer summer rainy season, which spanned the months of June, July, and August, business tailed off if there were numerous wet evenings, due both to the rain and the lower evening temperatures.\(^61\) While the rains themselves affected the willingness of the audience to show up, owners did not always enhance their reputation for customer service. They refused to give refunds to audience members whose night out was washed away in a heavy shower and it was a rare owner who provided a refund in the event of a power cut.\(^62\) Unlike American cinema-goers in the age of the drive-in, outdoor cinema patrons in the Gold Coast were not often equipped with places to take refuge, and the film might not even be paused for the duration of the shower. By contrast, at least some of those attending dance venues in Accra in the 1950s and 1960s were affluent enough to have their own cars so that even in the rainy seasons the show could go on after the rain had passed and the still-dry patrons returned from

\(^{60}\) Based on my own observations, open-air venues in Burkina Faso continue to have two screenings on weekend nights today, and the second film is often a longer Indian film.

\(^{61}\) PRAAD RG7/1/1656 West African Pictures Monthly Report June 1956, dated July 15, 1956. In June 1956, seven nights of screenings were interrupted or curtailed by rain.

\(^{62}\) Ghana was not the only location where the film business had a seasonal variations: the American industry took careful note of those Mediterranean locations where more theatres operated in the summer period, or where a good period of autumnal weather could extend the season. MHL, AMPTP Records, 16.f-157 Foreign film markets 1957-1961, Motion Picture Export Association Memorandum No. 431 Greece – Motion Pictures, Entertainment 35mm, (reported by US government representative in Athens) May 29, 1957. Similarly, Turkey had 2,000 summer theatres and 750-800 winter theatres. WBA, file MPEA Memorandums Sept. and Oct. 1963 16628A, Turkey, October 31, 1963.
their cars; there was a clear socio-economic gulf between cinema-goers and dance-hall patrons.\textsuperscript{63}

In one or two of the most prominent Accra theatres, the single screening practice was also linked to the requirements of accommodating the film censor. Until the mid-1940s, the Cinematograph Exhibition Censorship Board of Control examined each film at the theatre that submitted the picture for review. The censor, too, needed to wait until after dark so the examination process began after 6:15 in the evening if the members of the censorship board showed up in reasonable time. Commercial screenings followed after 8 p.m. though the censor’s records suggest that members of the censorship board officials were keen practitioners of what they elsewhere disparaged as unpunctual “African time” when it suited them.\textsuperscript{64}

The censor in the late 1920s scheduled two screenings each week, though this was not always adequate to keep up with the number of imports even in the early years. By the mid-1940s it was normal to hold as many as four consecutive nights of screenings for the censor, usually Tuesday through Friday evenings, and sometimes on other evenings, too.\textsuperscript{65} The requirements of the censor and those of the management co-existed uneasily. While the management co-operated with the British-run administration in the 1940s and

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{The Ghanaian}, July 1958. The article notes that “The rains are down in Ghana now and the tempo of entertainment has slowed down throughout the country,” with both cinemas and night clubs hit fairly hard. The American industry’s research on European markets suggested that private car ownership negatively impacted cinema attendance, with car owners indulging in other forms of leisure; this seems to be borne out in part in Ghana, where car owners were likely to go to the music clubs. WBA, file MPEA Memorandums July & Aug. 1963 16628A, particularly the reports on Austria and Italy.

\textsuperscript{64} PRAAD RG3/5/303 Circular from Chief Secretary Gold Coast regarding changes in the schedule for censorship screenings, October 6, 1947.

\textsuperscript{65} PRAAD 11/1/1278 Letter from Acting Secretary for Native Affairs to Acting Colonial Secretary, May 25, 1929.
1950s, officials recognized that this was largely an issue of self-interest since the owners might not have any films to screen if they were recalcitrant in accommodating the needs of officialdom.

Not everyone involved in the screening process was helpful, whatever the attitude of the owners. The employees who ended up assisting the censors by opening the theatres and running the projectors did not always show what the members of the censorship board regarded as appropriate deference. Staff members routinely tried to hustle the members of the Board out before they had concluded their deliberations and on occasion they allowed friends to sneak in to see un-certified films from the back of the theatre.\(^{66}\) Ironically, to some extent this illicit behavior was facilitated by the practices of the censorship boards themselves: after some members complained about the failure of certain panelist to contribute to discussions about individual films, the members attending each screening were urged to sit together in a section of the theatre that was isolated from any potential interruptions. This allowed the curious to sneak in to the rear of the theatre unannounced, though owners did not discourage this for it served as a useful means to spread word-of-mouth publicity for coming attractions.

On occasion, the disregard shown to the censorship boards had a comic aspect, with crowds of children waiting outside and screaming or even pelting the theatre roof with stones to hurry the officials up, which is noteworthy too for the implication that there were crowds of somewhat unruly children outside the cinema even after dark, who

\(^{66}\) PRAAD RG3/5/303 Minutes of a meeting of the Cinematograph Exhibitions Board of Control, December 1945, addressed from the Acting Director/Education to the Colonial Secretary, 12 May 1946.
were reluctant to respond to the attempts of cinema staff to enforce discipline. Security staff were even known to wield sticks on occasion when children got out of hand while waiting in line.\footnote{PRAAD ADM/11/1/1525, Letter from District Commissioner, Eastern Province, to President, Cinematograph Exhibition Board of Control, January 14, 1930. Following one particular incident, the Inspector General of Police assigned police constables to patrol outside the cinemas when a censorship review was taking place.} The problem of darkness hamstrung official efforts to expose children to the commercial cinema in carefully regulated conditions: administrators thought it would be undesirable, if unavoidable, to do this once night fell.\footnote{PRAAD RG3/5/1998 Cinematograph – Proposal to Introduce Use of in Schools. Memorandum from Director of Education to Colonial Secretary, January 20, 1931.}

The owners could not avoid the demands of the censorship board but the method used for the censorship review prevented them from experimenting with additional weekday screenings in the theatres used by the censors. The situation was no more ideal for the censors so in 1946 they began using a new enclosed theatre, part of the administration’s information arm, for censorship screenings during the day. Even then, there was an occasional need to revert to the old system because of the sheer volume of films to be reviewed. These logistical pressures on the censors were linked to the ways in which Gold Coast theatre operators offered films to the public. While in urban parts of the US, and most of Europe, the standard model in the 1940s and 1950s was to have the same film occupy a theatre for a full week, or even many weeks, in the Gold Coast the offerings changed almost every evening. This was common across the western and equatorial parts of Africa, in both British and French colonies. A Hollywood executive suggested that the practice required the importation of “between 400 and 500 films
This was a longstanding practice in the Gold Coast: as early as 1933, the Governor reported back to London that the six cinema houses then operating in the colony cycled through an average of one film a day per venue. It was uncommon for the same theatre in the Gold Coast to show a film more than two nights running but a film might come back weeks or months later for an encore performance. To accommodate this practice, particularly if an operator had multiple theatres that were spread out over a wide area, the owner needed to have a large stock of films on hand, each of which required the censor’s approval. This led to the situation where West African Pictures had over 200 films in stock, with another thirty awaiting censorship review, for a network of about a dozen cinemas, in the late 1950s. The group represented only 20% of the venues at the time, and at least one other cinema operator had a similar number of films at his disposal at any given moment.

Audiences sought out novelty and while people enjoyed seeing old favorites again, sometimes many times, they preferred not to do so on consecutive nights. Instead, they chose to see the picture again and again over the course of a year or more. There is no evidence that any operator experimented with a model more like the American system in the immediate post-war period, but they were convinced that such a system could not

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70 PRAAD CSO/15/8/1 Letter from Governor to Colonial Secretary, March 29, 1933.
71 Small-town American practice was somewhere between these two extremes, with owners mixing first and second-run material together and rotating titles rather than holding them over. See “What’s Playing at the Grove?,” reprinted from Fortune 38 (August 1948) in Waller, Moviegoing in America: 203-210. The Grove was a theatre in Galesburg, Illinois, a town of 30,000. The theatre was independently owned and had 390 seats, and it might play a picture for two or three days in a row, with Sunday-Monday-Tuesday much better than Wednesday-Thursday. See also Gary D. Rhodes, The Perils of Moviegoing in America, 1896-1950 (New York: Continuum, 2012).
work, and that by the third or fourth evening the projector would be running to an empty theatre.\textsuperscript{73} Even the American system was not monolithic since the most inflexible version of the rental system applied to first-run films. Beyond that, local theatre owners had more scope to cater to the interests of their audiences, holding over particular films for extra nights or return engagements, or programming different films depending on the night of the week. The owner of the Alhambra theatre in Campbellsville, Kentucky tried to ensure that he programmed westerns in the Friday and Saturday night slots, “when town was crowded with rural folk,” as often as possible.\textsuperscript{74} Still, there was nothing like the same degree of rotation of films that prevailed in the Gold Coast – another Kentucky theatre went through 150 titles in 1935, whereas a Gold Coast venue at a comparable point in cinema popularity could go through 250 or more titles in a year. This necessitated a constant stream of incoming product, one reason for the local exhibitors’ highly developed contacts with the American industry in the 1940s.

The pattern of constant change was driven by the local nature of most cinema audiences. In the 1940s and 1950s transport options were limited and once darkness fell most people remained close to their homes. This created a situation where each population center could sustain a theatre, going some way toward explaining why Accra and Kumasi theatres are often close together despite rotating many of the same films. The local population might be able to scrape together the sixpence admission fee, but could not also afford bus fare if the theatre was not within walking distance. This gave most

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\textsuperscript{73} Interview, Munir Captan, 23 October 2012.
\textsuperscript{74} Waller, “Hillbilly Music and Will Rogers,” 179.
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theatres a “neighborhood” flavor in the words of one observer, who also commented that this meant certain theatres welcomed viewers of one ethnic affiliation or another, though apart from one or two theatres that catered primarily to Muslim audiences because of the composition of the local population there is no archival trace of ethnically distinct theatres.  

Only the high-end theatres, which were located in the heart of Accra’s upmarket nightlife, attracted a more mobile audience at a considerably later date. The Captans’ flagship Orion theatre, adjacent to what became Kwame Nkrumah Circle in 1958, was a crucial first stop for a night on the town, and the picture might be followed by a meal at a nearby restaurant with the evening ending in the wee hours at a nightclub. In some ways, that harked back to the elite leisure practices of the 1920s and 1930s at Ocansey’s venues or the Sea View hotel, with the key difference that three separate venues now catered to the trio of stops on a big night out. Cinema owners advertised across to this well-off public across Accra, aware that at least some people would make their way across the city if the venue was attractive enough.

While the neighborhood audience remained the primary revenue source, there were important non-local components, such as the traders who moved around the city and its suburbs on their weekly market circuit. Many of the small-scale sellers would go to the movies after the market was over and then they would sleep with their goods before

76 Interview, Munir Captan, 23 October 2012.
moving on to the next location in the early hours. The markets also attracted large crowds into the central areas of town, and people would go out afterwards to the pictures, as seen in American market towns too. At least one cinema circuit, owned by the Captan family, planned their screenings with this market schedule in mind, moving the potential box office hits around the city based partly on where the markets were held after the weekend premiere at the chain’s flagship theatre. Thus the takings could be very large even during the week since the chain made a point of appealing to people for whom weekend nightlife was not necessarily of great consequence.\textsuperscript{78}

Operators with enclosed theatres also focused on the younger audience of schoolchildren by adding weekday screenings at 12:15, timed with the long school lunch-break in mind. Children would then return to school after the film, which was more often than not a short B-movie that lasted an hour or less – a cheap western, or even a few episodes of a serial, with maximum action in the short time available. Officials were not overly perturbed by the practice of midday screenings: they were far more exercised by what they saw as the temptation to commit “petty crimes to obtain admission.” One official admitted that the link between watching movies and subsequent criminal behavior was not clear – in other words, he could not stand behind the bald assertion that seeing criminal activity onscreen made it likely that audience members would copy what they saw – but made his own connection by claiming “it was undoubtedly true that the proceeds of many of the crimes were spent on visits to the cinema.”\textsuperscript{79} As explored in

\textsuperscript{78} Interview, Munir Captan, 23 October 2012.
\textsuperscript{79} PRAAD RG3/5/303 Notes on a Meeting to Discuss Film Censorship Held on 30th January, 1953, In the New Conference Room.
greater detail in Chapter Five, while officials tarred many youngsters with the brush of criminality, there was a kernel of truth to their observations: the cinema exerted an enormous attraction for some young people and could tempt them to play truant or commit petty theft if they could not otherwise feed their habit.

The main methods of advertising to this varied clientele were posters outside the theatres and the projection of trailers for coming attractions. Until the 1970s, American and British film distribution companies supplied posters and other advertising materials at the same time as the reels of film, while locally hand-painted canvas posters, similar to the vivid panels used to publicize concert party performance, were also used at times. Posters were not just about promoting novelty. They often reminded customers about the return of a favorite item, for as much as the customer base demanded change in the short term, it was clearly loyal to certain cherished titles over the longer term, as one journalist noted when commenting that “Some of these films have already been shown here but have not in the least lost the charm that compels fans to see them as often as possible.” Popular films could be imported several times on sequential five-year rental contracts, by one or another exhibitor.

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81 The Daily Graphic, June 16, 1956.
In December 1950, West African Pictures imported the American film *Cobra Woman*, a 1944 Technicolor picture featuring Maria Montez, Sabu, and some extraordinary studio-exotic settings. The company screened the film in Kumasi in January 1951, among many other occasions, but it also had been shown as early as July 1946 in Accra’s Rex cinema with the language of a handbill on that occasion suggesting that this was not the first screening: “Your Favourite Show is Here Again.” The film was a B picture now remembered for its camp value, though in addition to its breathless plotting and eye-catching color local audiences may well have responded to the parallels between the titular character, who embodied the spirit of the cobra, and the figure of Mami Wata, a mythical creature often associated with the snake. Similarly, Errol Flynn swashbucklers from the 1930s might still be advertised in the 1950s, having been imported three, four, or five times over the decades. Newspapers drew on audience knowledge of his most popular role, Robin Hood, referring to Flynn by this name rather than his own.

One former owner indicated that because of the large stock of films they had on hand and the generally low cost of most rentals until the late 1950s if a film wasn’t paying the chain simply didn’t continue to show it. This suggests that newspaper listings also provide a fairly good indication of the popularity of a given film, at least when examined over a period of several months or years: titles which did not pay would

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83 Errol Flynn’s star remained high overseas long after he had drifted down the pecking order in Hollywood. In the early 1950s, his films were also popular behind the Iron Curtain. Valentine Davies, *Movietime USA*, undated article, in MHL, AMPTP Records 3.f-29 American films abroad 1952-1953. See also *Ashanti Pioneer*, January 16, 1951.
84 Munir Captan Interview, October 23, 2012.
disappear from the listings within a week or two and others might continue to appear for months or even years. This does not always account for the theatres at the bottom of the economic spectrum or outside the largest population centers, however. Bart’s theatre appears and disappears from time to time in the columns of 1930s newspapers, and judging by the titles that were advertised it was not at the forefront of local cinematic innovation at the time. Research on those British theatres that exhibited the low budget British-made pictures known as “quota quickies” in the 1930s suggests that such venues, which were often outside the major, first-run exhibition chains in Britain, did not make regular use of newspaper advertising which means an important segment of exhibition remains hidden from the historian.85

The absence of newspaper advertising should not be taken as evidence that a venue closed, either temporarily or permanently. Censorship screenings and import records suggest that at least some of these locations continued to hold shows, which were promoted on a more local basis with posters and other advertising, as well as word of mouth, though the content may often have mattered less than the experience of going out. Theatre groups also made consistent use of printed handbills with the details of their weekly offerings during the 1940s and 1950s.86 The censor reviewed these handbills as well as the official posters for each film. Handbills highlighted the thrills and spills on offer rather than the details of the plot and served as a precursor to the hand-painted

85 Steve Chibnall, Quota Quickies: The Birth of the British “B” Film (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 1.
86 Interview, Munir Captan, October 23, 2012. American exhibitors also distributed handbills, as Gregory Waller has explored. See Waller, “Hillbilly Music and Will Rogers,” 176-7.
movie posters of the 1970s and 1980’s, which owed at least as much to the imagination of the artist as to the actual content of the film.  

Still, none of these advertising methods was as eye-catching, or perhaps as effective, as those employed by concert party performers in the 1930s and 1940s. For their shows, “The most popular method of publicity was by a bell ringer. Costumed in tail-coat and mask and made to look comic with a big belly, the bell ringer carried a billboard round the town. Children loved his antics and trailed after him on his rounds and relayed the news to other people.” The bell ringer was usually a child from the neighborhood where the performance would take place, and the job was sought after by youngsters for in addition to the visibility it provided, the lucky individual got into the performance for free. The character was known as “Charlie Mask Man,” and apart from the rotund appearance was modeled on Chaplin’s tramp character – the movie character thus being used as a method of attracting attention to a different entertainment form, albeit one that made extensive use of cinematic reference points from the 1920s onward.

**A New Player on the Cinema Scene – the Government, 1950s**

By the 1950s, the cinemas were the major leisure attraction in Accra, whose population continued to explode. By the middle of the decade, Accra’s cinemas alone were selling 42,000 tickets a week, an annualized figure of over two million tickets in a

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88 Sutherland, *The Original Bob*, 16.
city with a population of around 400,000 people. That attendance rate is the same as that which prevailed in France in the late 1950s and early 1960s, at a time when French cinema attendance remained robust in comparison to that in the US and most European countries.\textsuperscript{90} Combining ticket sales with details of the total number of cinema seats, Accra’s cinemas were 70% full every week, making the cinema business an attractive proposition, quite different to the fragile business environment of the 1920s and 1930s.\textsuperscript{91} Within months of the compilation of those statistics, two more cinemas had opened in Accra: cinema owners were as aware as statisticians that they were enjoying a boom in attendance and revenue.

Prosperity did not come without challenges, however. Cinema owners had to contend with challenges to the business environment that extended well beyond accusations about the social impact of their products. From the beginning of the 1950s, workers across a wide variety of sectors began to organize themselves to demand improved pay and conditions, particularly in the wake of the 1951/1952 Lidbury-Gbedemah recommendations on pay for civil servants.\textsuperscript{92} These recommendations formed part of a broader set of discussions of policies of Africanization of the civil service in the wake of the 1951 elections, the first to the country’s Legislative Assembly.


\textsuperscript{91} Acquah, \textit{Accra Survey}, 153. The figures for cinema tickets date from 1955.

Cinema employees were no exception to the larger movement, and newspapers of the time are filled with discussions of the appropriate salaries and working conditions for employees across a wide variety of sectors. In July 1952, the Gold Coast Cinematograph Employees’ Union met to discuss pay and conditions. The employees, ranging from theatre managers to gate-keepers, sought wage increases of 45%. However, the government recommendations applied only to the public sector and carried no weight for private business, and there is no evidence that the union was successful in implementing its demands for increased wages. Later debates in the Legislative Council continued to accuse non-African owners of sharp practice and of amassing substantial personal profits at the expense of both their employees and of ordinary moviegoers. The pattern of union activity in the entertainment sector continued for several years: in 1956, several dance bands also proposed to form a union as a breakaway from their existing trade association.

Even against this backdrop, however, the cinema sector was thriving, to the extent that the sector attracted the direct attention of the state in the mid-1950s at a point when it was eager to identity targets for investment. The Industrial Development Corporation (IDC), the agency that managed state-owned enterprises, first explored an investment in the cinema sector in December 1955, and acquired a network of cinemas less than six months later, though the circumstances suggest either that the earning potential of the

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93 Daily Graphic, Accra, July 16 and 17, 1952.
95 The Daily Graphic, August 21, 1956.
network was heavily overstated or that the purchase was intended to be of much greater personal or party benefit than as a major contributor to the national economy.96

The head of the IDC at the time of the acquisition was the businessman Emmanuel Ayeh Kumi, a trusted Nkrumah adviser who was forced to step down from the government and subsequently purged from the CPP in 1961 on the grounds that he “had abused [his] position by amassing too great a fortune even by party standards.”97 His transgression was more about the visibility of his acquired wealth than a fundamental question of propriety and as such he was only temporarily sidelined: by 1962 was Nkrumah’s personal financial adviser.98 Ayeh Kumi acquired a substantial property portfolio, among other resources, following his entry to government.99 At a later date, he also faced accusations of accepting substantial bribes from expatriate businessmen on behalf of the President.100 These accusations were leveled immediately after Nkrumah was deposed in 1966 amid extensive score-settling within the political class and at a period when numerous accusations of corruption were made against Nkrumah and his circle. In the process many state-run entities were exposed as openly clientelist operations, although there are no sustained accusations of this kind in relation to West

96 Ghana was not the only post-independence African country to invest in the cinema exhibition sector: the Tanzanian state took a 30% stake in a drive-in project opened in 1966 in Dar es Salaam. See Fair, “Drive-In Socialism,” 1077-1104.
97 Austin, Politics in Ghana, 405-6. Ayeh Kumi was one of half a dozen members of the government who President Nkrumah asked to resign; the group included the Minister of Finance, K.A. Gbedemah. The forced resignations were part of the follow-up to Nkrumah’s Dawn Broadcast of April 8, 1961, in which, among other subjects, the President forbade members of parliament from also owning businesses or from amassing wealth. Statement by the President Concerning Properties and Business Connections of Ministers and Ministerial Secretaries, Accra, 1961.
African Pictures after 1957. Indeed the company’s story is frequently one of being excluded from the state’s most advantageous financial arrangements, which extended instead to well-connected private cinema owners.

The state’s intended involvement in the cinema trade was a minor point of discussion during the 1956 election campaign, ironic in that cinema managers cited elections as a reason for depressed cinema attendance at certain times.\textsuperscript{101} Politics was hardly all-dominating as a distraction: while some cinema-goers dedicated a good deal of their time to matters political in election years, “less than half of the registered voters in this country voted” in 1956.\textsuperscript{102} The low levels of voter participation reinforce the sense that the new political structure, like the colonial power apparatus that preceded it, had shallow roots in Gold Coast life: as Fred Cooper argues, Ghana provided an especially poignant example of the “gatekeeper state,” with weak political control in the post-independence phase leading swiftly to undemocratic decision-making and counterproductive relationships with the country’s primary wealth creators of the 1950s, the cocoa farmers.\textsuperscript{103}

The criticism of state involvement with the cinemas came from the opposition National Liberation Movement (NLM), absorbed into the United Party after 1957 when Nkrumah passed legislation that banned any party that had an ethnic, regional, racial or religious affiliation. The NLM focused on the Ashanti region which was formed in 1954 by rebel members of Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party. The party drew its support

\textsuperscript{103} Cooper, \textit{Africa since 1940}, 161-2.
from an unusual alliance of the Asante Youth Association, cocoa farmers angered by CPP policy on cocoa prices, and traditional chiefs.104 The NLM’s electoral platform was presented by K.A. Busia, a former District Commissioner under colonial rule who spent virtually his entire political career in opposition to Nkrumah.105 The platform castigated the CPP for “bribery and corruption on an unprecedented scale,” but also for spending money on allegedly wasteful luxury projects like hotels and “the Accra cinemas” as well as “funds to titivate Accra for independence.”106 The phrasing is significant, for the NLM’s Ashanti focus meant that the party was particularly concerned to ensure a share of developmental largesse for its region and sought a federalist structure for any post-independence government. Although the CPP won the 1956 election, the state agency that controlled the cinemas investigated several possible cinema expansion projects in Ashanti shortly afterwards as part of a series of initiatives designed to draw the region closer to the new government.

During the elections, the CPP attempted to rebut the charge that it had supported wasteful projects, with K.A. Gbedemah, the Finance Minister, suggesting that the various construction projects and “the many other signs visible to those who have eyes” were ample proof of the CPP’s successful administration.107 The party presented itself as the modernizing alternative, specifically suggesting that a vote for any other party would be a

104 Austin, Politics in Ghana, 253-281.
105 Busia held a traditional Ashanti title and was educated at mission schools and at Oxford. Outside of politics he had an academic career. He served as a district commissioner from 1942-1949, and spent almost a decade in exile, returning after the coup that toppled Nkrumah.
106 Austin, Politics in Ghana, 324-5; the quotations are taken from the detailed NLM announcement on pages 6-7 of the Daily Graphic of July 6, 1956.
107 Austin, Politics in Ghana, 326-7; the quotations are from an article by Gbedemah in the Evening News of July 11, 1956.
vote for the “days of imperialism, colonialism and tribal feudalism,” and from its perspective investment in cinemas and similar projects was a visible representation of this policy, even if the actual reasons may have been financially motivated with the symbolism merely a useful corollary.\textsuperscript{108}

While the election rhetoric of 1956 suggested that the CPP-led government was constructing its own cinemas, the pre-independence administration did not build a new network of theatres. Instead, it acquired one of the two largest existing networks, West African Pictures Company Ltd, which was then run by the Lebanese Barakat family. The company was not nationalized in the sense that the state replaced the prior ownership with new government managers, or even with new African-born managers. Instead, the state, through the mechanism of the Industrial Development Corporation, bought out the previous owners at a cost of £275,000, and left the existing management structure in place.\textsuperscript{109} In that respect at least, the NLM’s electoral materials were at least partly accurate, for the price seemed by any measure to be inflated given the likely future returns to the state.

The Barakat brothers became Gold Coast employees and received very substantial, indeed controversial, annual salaries for the privilege of continuing to run the business they had just sold, though this arrangement changed within two years in large part due to negative publicity the arrangement received. In 1958, the Barakats were


\textsuperscript{109} PRAAD RG7/1/1656 IDC Minutes, May 17, 1956. The state purchased the share capital of the Gold Coast subsidiary of the London-based Baraland company, a holding company for several interlocked family-owned businesses in the cinema sector, to make the acquisition.
forced out and returned to Lebanon, with their transport costs paid by the Ghanaian state. The administration’s official justification for the original purchase was that it would allow the state to “acquire and show educational films to children, in addition to providing the usual commercial films,” tapping into a long history of attempts to use the cinema for socially improving purposes, or at least laying claim to such goals since the true purpose was almost certainly to divert a substantial sum of money into party or personal coffers.\textsuperscript{110} There is no evidence of any particular emphasis on educational fare in the years immediately following the acquisition of the network, although the state was saddled with hundreds of existing film rental contracts that would have limited its scope for quick maneuver.

The news about the state acquisition was not immediately released to the public. The largest local daily newspaper, \textit{The Daily Graphic} – still privately-held in 1956 – did not report on the change until more than a month after the cinemas had been acquired. An editorial demanded to know why the news had not been made public, particularly since public money was involved.\textsuperscript{111} The newspaper dedicated one of its regular debate columns, a formal exchange of views between the writers Henry Ofori and Moses Danquah, to the matter. The exchanges were often rather artificial in tone, with one writer cast as devil’s advocate, but there was nonetheless sharp criticism of the state’s involvement, particularly at such high cost to the taxpayer: Danquah, who later edited a pamphlet about Ghana’s first post-independence year that was notably light on Nkrumah-

\textsuperscript{110} PRAAD RG7/1/1656 IDC Minutes, December 22, 1955.
\textsuperscript{111} \textit{The Daily Graphic}, June 20, 1956. The newspaper was eventually acquired by the Ghanaian state in 1962, although it became increasingly deferential in the lead-up to that change of ownership.
centric content, called the West African Pictures transaction “a piece of irresponsible gambling,” and suggested that the deal had an unsavory aspect due to the secrecy in which it was shrouded.\(^{112}\)

It is difficult, even with the benefit of archival documents, to determine what motivated the purchase. The limited evidence suggests that the Barakats, for reasons of their own, approached government officials about a sale: the IDC, hitherto focused on small industrial projects like a biscuit factory and a match manufacturer, had made no effort to expand into the leisure sector on its own. Even after the acquisition, the cinema project was an unusual aspect of the IDC portfolio, one that IDC officials were ill-equipped to deal with from a managerial perspective for they lacked any knowledge of the cinema exhibition sector or of the process of negotiating film rental contracts with outside agents.

The IDC was an important source of CPP patronage in the early phase of its operations, with all of the organization’s key roles filled by CPP loyalists, while the agency also operated a small loan scheme that proved to be a complete fiasco due to the collapse of most businesses opened with the loans. The IDC head in the early 1950s, William Halm, later the head of Ghana’s Central Bank, whittled down the loan scheme as much as possible to re-focus the agency’s efforts on its own wholly-owned businesses.\(^{113}\) The IDC was dwarfed by the Cocoa Marketing Board both in terms of revenues and in terms of the diversion of funds that took place, but both institutions shared the problem of


short-sighted political masters interested in ensuring their own wealth rather than in laying the groundwork for long-term success, though Halm did his best to mitigate this in the first half of the 1950s.

Once West African Pictures became part of the IDC in the middle of 1956, it had to submit monthly statements about its business. These reports provide a detailed picture of the nature of the Gold Coast/Ghana cinema business at the moment of independence. Nonetheless, the accounts have to be treated with a certain degree of caution, for members of the Legislative Assembly suggested that the Barakat family were not always running the business to the standards of propriety required of a state-owned company. They may have under-reported the number of tickets sold each month and pocketed the difference, so that the state did not benefited from the entirety of the available revenue; under-reporting the success of specific films could also be a useful way to bargain for lower rental prices in dealing with the American industry.\(^{114}\)

The company’s annual accounts suggest the presence of opaque financial dealings including large, unexplained adjustments to the accounts that might mask transfers to the governing regime or individual beneficiaries. In parliament, members alleged that the administration had unrevealed ties to the Barakats, an accusation that they backed up by citing the large sum of money that the state paid for the cinema chain. Such allegations were common in Ghanaian political life of the time: by the late 1950s, a number of government commissions had examined accusations of self-enrichment or kickbacks of this nature and while expatriate businessmen were named on several occasions during the

\(^{114}\) Ghana Legislative Assembly Debates, 1957, columns 1904-1907.
proceedings of the commissions none of those inquiries focused directly or indirectly on the Barakats or other cinema owners.\textsuperscript{115}

\textit{No Smooth Sailing for West African Pictures, 1950s-1960s}

In the first year after the state acquired West African Pictures, the company began an aggressive expansion program across Ghana. This did not have the unqualified blessing of all the civil servants working for the IDC, an early signal that the company’s state-run status would not grant it special favor. By March 1957, IDC officials represented the interests of the post-independence government rather than those of the colonial administration, although given the complexities of Ghana’s transition process the personnel were the same in the immediate aftermath of the transition, with some British civil servants remaining in place to assist.

Late in 1957 Nadim Barakat made a plea to Emmanuel Ayeh Kumi, head of the IDC, for his intervention in dealing with small-scale Indian entrepreneurs who were working to establish cinemas in Asamankese, about 30 miles north of Accra, among other locations. According to Barakat, this would be detrimental to the interests of West African Pictures and its own favored client, a Mr. Baah Attah. Barakat’s plea sought to make use of the debate on Africanization of the leadership of both government and local industry that occurred throughout the 1950s in the Gold Coast, drawing on the earlier, very divisive, process of Africanization of the civil service from the 1920s to the

\textsuperscript{115} In other cases, including before full independence, officials questioned the nature of substantial, and vaguely labeled, expenditures in the accounts of companies that were perennially loss-making – “household expenses,” “security,” and so forth. PRAAD RG7/1/1814 IDC Annual Reports and Accounts, internal correspondence dated December 17, 1956.
1940s.\textsuperscript{116} In this, as in many processes that contributed to independence, Ghana was in the continental vanguard: where other countries engaged in a rapid post-independence process of Africanization of the civil service, Ghana already had a substantial African presence at even the higher levels of the administration by 1957, including staff who had risen through the civil service ranks over lengthy careers.\textsuperscript{117}

Nonetheless, Africanization remained a controversial issue in Ghana throughout the following decade, often to the detriment of Lebanese business owners: many small expatriate entrepreneurs were expelled from the country in the late 1960s as Nkrumah’s successors sought to steer a new economic course, using anti-foreigner rhetoric for popular appeal. In the late 1950s, Barakat suggested that the Indian business owners with whom he was in competition were “trying to outstep African Exhibitors,” an ironic charge indeed given parliamentary accusations earlier in the same year that the Barakats themselves were far less qualified than potential African managers of West African Pictures. Members of Ghana’s Legislative Assembly, including from the CPP, suggested that the government was making a mockery of its own policies of Africanization by continuing to employ expatriate men who the members of parliament accused of being illiterate.\textsuperscript{118} Parliamentarians thought such businessmen were poor representatives of a


\textsuperscript{117} On post-independence Africanization, or indigenization, of civil services across the continent, see Ali Al’Amin Mazrui and Christophe Vondji (eds.), \textit{Africa Since 1935, Volume 8} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 405-7.

\textsuperscript{118} The manager of the Ambassador Hotel, another IDC-owned business, complained at one point at the attempt to impose “illiterate [CPP] party hacks” on him. Erica Powell, \textit{Private Secretary (Female)/Gold Coast} (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1984), 51. President Nkrumah apparently intervened to end the problem.
new state concerned to present itself as being modern and Afro-centric, although no one suggested that the Barakats were not successful entrepreneurs.  

One of the officials who reviewed the correspondence wrote in the margins of Barakat’s letter that “the public must be allowed to choose what it wants to see -- Not West African Pictures.” In any case, the “Africanization” argument cut so little ice with government officials that while the Barakats were pushed out shortly thereafter on the pretext that they was responsible for the company’s murky financial dealings, their replacement was a Dutch man. He in turn had an English assistant and there was also at least one Indian member of the management staff. Africans occupied only very low places in the management hierarchy at West African Pictures.

The financial affairs of the company had attracted press attention since the previous summer, with newspaper reports of a committee being set up to investigate what was occurring in West African Pictures. However, government records indicate that there was no formal committee but rather an internal review that consisted of a series of meetings between West African Pictures management and ministry officials. The matter was the subject of an extended parliamentary debate in July 1957. The core accusation – made by a government back-bencher – was that the state had overpaid for the chain, In addition, critics believed that that the management was benefitting from special treatment resembling that accorded to European expatriate officials, including home leaves and

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119 Gold Coast Legislative Assembly Debates, Session 1957. July 10, 1957, column 1903. The accusations of illiteracy were leveled by F.E. Tachie-Menson, a CPP member of the assembly for Denkyira; Tachie-Menson was president of the Gold Coast/Ghana Trades Union Congress.
120 PRAAD RG7/1/1656 Letter from N. Barakat to the General Manager, Ghana IDC, 9 December 1957.
121 PRAAD RG7/1/1656 IDC Minutes, August 8, 1957.
housing allowances, even though they had been resident in Ghana for many years. The assembly member who raised the issue suggested that “If the Lebanese are removed [as managers] the I.D.C. will achieve something. (…) It is our duty to protect the interests of Ghanaians in a free Ghana.”

When offered the opportunity by the CPP parliamentarian, the opposition NLM were quick to note their objections to the original acquisition of West African Pictures during the 1956 electoral campaign. J.E. Appiah (once a close confidant of Nkrumah’s who had spent time with him in England) suggested that the episode was part of a “catalogue of inefficiency, corruption and nepotism” within the IDC. Appiah noted the timing of the acquisition of the chain just before the 1956 general election, and suggested unambiguously that the £275,000 paid for West African Pictures was simply a method of injecting £100,000 into the CPP’s coffers to cover campaign expenses. Another member of the assembly indicated that the value of the cinemas was actually somewhere between £50,000 and £90,000, although it is not clear what these alternative estimates are based on. This method of increasing the purchase price of businesses was later documented by a 1967 government commission: “the price paid by the government for properties from a Greek businessman (A.G. Leventis) was deliberately inflated so that £1 million could be turned back to Nkrumah for his own use.”

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122 Gold Coast Legislative Assembly Debates, Session 1957, July 9, 1957, column 1868.
123 Gold Coast Legislative Assembly Debates, Session 1957, July 10, 1957, column 1906.
125 LeVine, *Political Corruption*, 29. LeVine notes that the many Ghanaian government commissions of the 1960s and 1970s provide a rich and unusual source of data about political and bureaucratic malfeasance, and he takes the view that the commissions “on the whole did their work honestly and judiciously” (xii) notwithstanding the political motivations at play. At least one commission report was suppressed at the political level because the information contained therein would have caused embarrassment. Accusations of
Leventis case was paid to Emmanuel Ayeh Kumi, who had headed the IDC during the period when it acquired West African Pictures.

The assembly discussions suggest both the liveliness of parliamentary politics in Ghana and the deep cynicism of many members of the assembly about the government’s propriety in financial matters from the first moment of independence. It also tends to underline the sense that the IDC’s due diligence with regard to the acquisition of West African Pictures was cursory at best, lending further weight to the possibility that this was a deal designed to favor a government client – or the party itself – rather than one that was in the best interests of the people.

In 1958, in the wake of parliamentary debates and press attention, the financial affairs of West African Pictures were raised in a cabinet meeting following the appointment of auditors to the IDC. The auditors were to examine the affairs of the Ambassador Hotel and the cinema business, as it appeared that both operations had “accounting systems [that] permitted of many irregular practices which had led to considerable financial losses.” Investigations into these allegations suggest that the state-owned hotel had serious problems with both theft of supplies and the siphoning of funds by members of staff, whereas the cinemas were run on a basis where the initial senior management -- that is, the Barakat brothers -- appeared to be careless, at best, in what they extracted from the company in terms of "Management Charges," depleting the company's working capital in the process.

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a similar nature regarding the inflation of prices paid for Nkrumah’s personal holiday home in Aburi appeared in the wake of his ouster. “Matchet’s Diary,” West Africa, April 9, 1966.

126 PRAAD ADM/13/1/27, Cabinet Minutes, June 24, 1958.
Thus within two years of the acquisition of West African Pictures, the state's own auditor general was warning that "unless a marked and early improvement is achieved both in the standard of films shown and in the accommodation provided, the whole venture will prove increasingly unprofitable." In this context, the auditor meant not the educational or improving pictures so frequently cited by colonial officials and Ghanaian politicians, but rather high-quality imported pictures to replace the many outdated, low-earning pictures in the network’s storeroom, a roster that made it less than competitive at the more lucrative upper end of the market.

The reaction to the auditor’s assessment was less than immediate, for as late as 1961 the company’s general manager commented on the terrible state of the cinema spaces, the parlous quality of financial management prior to 1957, and the “bad selection” of films, which in turn were poorly managed in terms of maximizing returns. The manager took the view that it was not until the company completed a total reorganization that it could even begin to think in terms of real profitability, yet by the time he was making such comments the state had already allowed five years to go by without real progress in reorganizing the business it had acquired at such expense – the state was letting a fairly profitable chain fall into disrepair because ongoing financial success was of far less interest than the initial, lucrative acquisition.

Against this backdrop of financial struggle, the management of the company deemed expansion of the cinema audience a particular imperative from the moment of

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acquisition in 1956 until well into the 1960s. State officials wanted to be able to show that the network was improving its profitability since it represented the IDC’s largest single investment, at a total cost by 1958 of over £300,000. Expansion alone was clearly not a cure for the company’s ills, and it was increasingly obvious that the government would be hard-pressed to claim that the investment in the company was of great benefit to the populace.

By the standards of IDC companies, the company’s annual performance was not terrible: unlike most of the other IDC entities, West African Pictures at least turned a modest profit. The problem lay more with the fact that at such rates of return it would take decades to recoup the initial investment, though at the very least the IDC could claim the network was not a major drain on state resources after the initial acquisition. Nonetheless, officials in the government’s auditing department questioned whether modest profits were adequate given the level of state involvement, part of a pattern of tense interactions between the management of the IDC and government departments. These tensions produced rhetoric that went in both directions: the initial draft of the IDC's annual report for 1955-1956 contained pointed comments on unrealistic financial expectations “in certain government quarters,” as well as the bureaucratic excesses involved in dealing with government departments.

The IDC was not entirely at fault for issues of cinema profitability, since it had been saddled with an investment in which it had not expressed interest. In addition, the

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IDC discovered that while individual entrepreneurs were often enthusiastic about cinema projects, they did not have a realistic grasp of the costs of establishing and operating a cinema: they submitted inappropriate plans and budgets for consideration, which meant that joint ventures or other forms of expansion were slow to get off the ground. Thus in 1961, five years after the original acquisition, the company’s General Manager, H.P.H. Juten, was still pleading the need for expansion of the cinema network. He noted that just that year, “Arrangements were reached to close down the last competition in Keta,” in the Volta region, so that West African Pictures finally had unimpeded access to the local market.\textsuperscript{131} The path to even modest success of this nature was not smooth, and the company felt that it did not benefit from its status as a state-owned business, and seemed to be at a severe disadvantage when compared with the other major network, owned by the Captan family. That issue had been discussed by the cabinet as early as 1958, when the Minister for Finance, K.A. Gbedemah, informing his colleagues that “rival picture companies had intensified their competition against the [IDC] cinema enterprise. The Minister for Finance therefore proposed that something should be done to protect the Industrial Development Corporation from such competition.”\textsuperscript{132}

Several years later, the chain’s management complained that they were still struggling to acquire the best films before the Captan network, primarily because they had insufficient capital to negotiate with overseas distributors. The general manager claimed that the Captan chain bid twice as much as West African Pictures in some cases.

\textsuperscript{132} PRAAD ADM/13/1/27, Note of an Informal Discussion by Cabinet Held Before the Cabinet Meeting of January 28, 1958.
a claim that appears to be borne out by the contracts the Captan signed with the Selznick picture company: throughout the 1950s, Captan paid prices that were far above the rates that West African Pictures tried to negotiate with the same firm. This was a means to undercut his rivals’ business by building up a huge library of films that he could then rent out to his competitors after he no longer needed them, extracting further revenue from each title and dominating local distribution during the decade.\textsuperscript{133}

West African Pictures’ efforts to expand its activities were also hampered by the fact that it invariably seemed to come off second-best when it came to licensing and locations. A member of the Captan family indicated, for instance, that his father was granted a plot in the new Tema harbor development directly by President Nkrumah, who felt that the presence of a cinema was key to attracting migrants to the new location. Captan referred to the location as Community One, Plot One, and said that the cinema was finished well before the harbor, as part of the accommodations for workers.\textsuperscript{134} By contrast, the site for West African Pictures was placed in Community Two, an early addition but much less central: Community One was the location of the main market.

While West African Pictures made use of the sub-par Tema site, their first cinema there was little more than an enclosed yard, which “may not be termed a cinema” but rather was a “very old-fashioned bush-cinema.” This left them literally in the dust when compared to the air-conditioned Captan premises, which was constructed as a showcase in the new town, though West African Pictures held out hope of eventually establishing

\textsuperscript{133} Selznick Papers, Box 1471, Folder 5.
\textsuperscript{134} Interview, Munir Captan, Accra, October 23, 2012.
its own more attractive venue. The general manager of West African Pictures suggested that Mr. Captan had “more direct ways to get to his target,” ways that superseded the advantages of having “public money available to spend in the interest of the people of Ghana and the Government.” The amount of public money was clearly limited given the low-grade nature of the state-owned venue, and the manager’s efforts to shame his superiors into a more competitive investment proved fruitless.

Captan had a close working relationship with some figures in the administration, and Nkrumah visited the site of one of his cinema developments, the Orion, in 1956 just before the venue opened – and just months after the state had purchased its own theatres. Around the same time, Captan was being praised in the Legislative Assembly for his willingness to sell back to the state lands that he had purchased from the former Ga manche (traditional ruler) for the Labadi area at some point in the 1940s. The state wished to use the lands for industrial purposes, and the traditional ruler was heavily criticized for having sold the land to “foreigners,” though in this case opprobrium was reserved for the African seller rather than the expatriate buyer. The lands, for which Captan was compensated at the standard market rate of the time, were known as the “Captan Acquisition,” and were located near the government-owned Regal Cinema in Labadi.

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137 The Daily Graphic, August 15, 1956. A number of other ministers, including K.A. Gbedemah, Minister of Finance, accompanied the Prime Minister.
138 Gold Coast Legislative Assembly Debates 1956-1957, First Series, Volume 1, July 30, 1956 to September 19, 1956, discussion on Accra Industrial Estate (Acquisition of Land) Bill, August 27, 1956, column 309.
Captan proved a canny operator, managing transactions of this kind to improve his standing with the government, and being rewarded with preferential treatment – the implication being that this was in return for his own financial largesse toward the CPP and its central figures. The state-run network was hobbled in this game: not only was it now dependent on handouts from other parts of government, but its challenging financial state greatly limited any ability to use monetary means to improve its station.

The Tema development was by no means the only occasion on which West African Pictures appeared to lose the race to market. In 1959, the company’s management complained to its governmental overseers about the Captans’ success in establishing a new cinema in Mamprobi, a western suburb of Accra, just as West African Pictures was attempting to set up its own venue in that location. That was the latest of a string of new Captan openings that included venues in Accra New Town (the Oxford cinema) and Kaneshie. The West African Pictures manager complained that Captan was “able to have a far better, modern Cinema situated next door one of West African Pictures (sic).” It is likely that the manager was referring to the close proximity of the Rialto and Oxford cinemas in Accra New Town. These tense relations between the two networks persisted well into the 1960s, for a few years later American industry office in Lagos noted the “tangled situation which appears to exist between Captan and West African Pictures.”

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139 PRAAD RG7/1/1656 Letter from General Manager, West African Pictures, to Board of Directors, September 11, 1959.
140 Most West African Pictures theatres began with the letter “R” while the Captan network generally used names beginning with “O”.
Financial Challenges: Import Licensing and the Dollar Allocation, 1940s-1960s

The systemic disadvantages that West African Pictures faced were compounded by the increasing strictness of the censor from around 1960. For nearly three years, the censor banned substantial numbers of films and employed other licensing restrictions that severely restricted the supply pipeline for West African Pictures. While the censorship apparatus, whose stricter policies in this period are explored in greater detail in the following chapter, was the most visible and intrusive source of control of the cinema business, the administration had other mechanisms to regulate the exhibition sector.

After the Second World War, the dollar allocation was an important method of limiting the overall quantity of film imports through restricting the availability of foreign currency with which to sign contracts for imported films. The import restrictions frequently resulted in exhibitors choosing contracts that maximized the number of films they could import, disregarding quality – so much so that when the major American studios began to focus to a greater degree on bigger, more expensive productions from the 1950s, Ghanaian importers inevitably sought product instead from “Poverty Row” studios as well as from Indian producers.142 The “Poverty Row” studios, such as Monogram and Republic pictures, were often well-entrenched companies with their own filming spaces, and they focused on the cheaper “B” films. These studios’ films were well-represented in the Gold Coast, particularly in the Western genre. Westerns in the

mid-1940s were almost always from the non-major studios: only 38 of the 572 Westerns released in the US during the Second World War in came from the five major studios, though this accelerated again after 1945 when war pictures were somewhat less popular.¹⁴³

When the major Hollywood studios made contracts with Gold Coast exhibitors, they always sought to combine an attractive title with less stellar material, often insisting that distributors take five or six (sometimes many more) B pictures films as part of a deal in order to gain access to a single high-profile film. That practice, known as block booking, was commonplace in the US domestic market until the 1940s, with advance sales of up to a year’s worth of a studio’s production not uncommon. In 1948, however, the US Supreme Court enacted restrictions that severely curtailed block booking (and the related practice of blind booking, or selling films sight unseen) and forced the studios to divest themselves of their theatre holdings, ending the full vertical integration of the traditional Hollywood studio system.¹⁴⁴

The Supreme Court decision impacted only the US market, meaning that the studios were free to continue with blind booking and block booking of large numbers of films in overseas markets.¹⁴⁵ Since Gold Coast distributors were such enthusiastic bulk purchasers of films the policy of block booking films, seen or unseen, would not have distressed them overly as long as the price was right. They could program virtually any

¹⁴⁵ For a discussion of the Supreme Court decision of 1948 and the history of antitrust charges against the American studios, see Schatz, *Boom and Bust.*
film once and quickly pull the title from circulation if it was not playing well, and then shift their attention to the more popular films in their substantial stock. The practice of showing a very diverse range of films also allowed them to identify unexpected hits that went outside normal market expectations.\textsuperscript{146}

Gold Coast exhibitors were willing to sign contracts for as many as 100 films in some circumstances. In other cases, though, they resisted the attempts of American producers to package films together, leading to protracted negotiations on particular titles; the issue here was not so much the fact that there were some less desirable titles in the package but that the overall price was too high.\textsuperscript{147} The practice of dumping large number of films that had covered their production costs years earlier was common in American industry dealings with overseas markets, though the motivation was not always simply to extract revenue from those titles: Hollywood studios dumped hundreds of films into the German market after 1950 in large measure to undermine any local attempts to establish a significant post-war industry.\textsuperscript{148}

The restrictions of the dollar allocation also meant that on occasion near the end of a fiscal year distributors had no more money to allocate to American imports. This problem curtailed negotiations between the Barakat family and the London office of the

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\textsuperscript{146} The drama \textit{Sentimental Journey} (1946, US, directed by Walter Lang) was an example; the American academic Elizabeth Drake studied audience reactions to the picture at some length, as detailed in Chapter Five. SCD, Box No: 80 [Mass Communications in Tropical Africa], Folder No: 3 Mass Communications in Tropical Africa, “Explorations of the Impact of Movies in Ghana,” by Elizabeth Drake (unpublished manuscript).

\textsuperscript{147} Selznick Papers, Box 1471, Folder 5 and Box 717, Folder 12 include extensive back and forth correspondence of this nature in the 1940s and 1950s, sometimes involving sums as small as US$30.

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Selznick company in 1949. There were a variety of methods to get around this problem. Exhibitors could import films from alternative locations, including France or even the USSR. They could also go through a middleman who was not subject to the dollar allocation irrespective of the national origin of the film, but this resulted in far higher prices for the titles. Finally, they could import films from other colonies which had purchased those films under their own dollar allocation. In 1950, the dollar allocation was US$30,000, but in that year the restriction does not seem to have been a major concern for in the first several months of the year only US$1,900 of the allocation had been used. In later years, however, the limited number of dollars created significant bottlenecks. In 1962, there were severe restrictions for a period of time with as little as the dollar equivalent of GH£2,000 available to companies for a six-month period just as the American industry was establishing its distribution operation in Nigeria. This was against the backdrop of the overall challenge of access to foreign currency with Ghana’s foreign currency reserves dwindling rapidly by the middle of the 1960s and the country unable to meet debt repayment schedules.

While these restrictions were onerous on occasion, most of the cinema entrepreneurs of the 1950s were familiar with doing business across currencies since almost all of them were expatriates. Although this may have equipped the owners with some useful trading skills, expatriate businessmen had a difficult status in Ghana, as Peter

149 Selznick Papers, Box 1471, Folder 5. In 1950, the Barakat family’s West African Pictures Company was allocated US$42,000 annually to import American films into Nigeria, with a further US$18,000 allocated to a smaller company. The Film Daily, December 13, 1950.

150 Gold Coast Legislative Assembly Debates, Session 1950, Issue No. 3, 25.

151 WBA, file Africa/AMPECA, Miscellaneous to 12/31/62, memorandum from G. Griffith Johnson to AMPECA board, March 8, 1962.
Garlick has recounted at length. Lebanese merchants in particular were an especially prominent presence in the commercial sector in Accra and Kumasi, and came in for regular criticism from African businessmen, who accused their Lebanese counterparts of favoring colleagues in wholesale trading. This gave Lebanese retail traders a substantial advantage; though Indian businessmen were also a significant presence they attracted less virulent criticism.\(^{152}\)

Expatriate businessmen came in for particular ire during the 1948 disturbances in Accra, when numerous expatriate businesses were targeted by angry crowds who felt that these businesses were taking advantage of ordinary consumers. However, while dozens of business owners made applications for compensation from the state in the wake of the disturbances, cinema owners do not appear to have needed any government assistance to get back on their feet, with none of them requesting financial assistance from the Loans (1948 Disturbances) Commission that the administration established in 1950.\(^{153}\) Even if cinema owners did suffer losses, they may also have had private insurance to cover the costs of any damage, which would have rendered them ineligible for government assistance and would also have meant that any damages were not reported to the commission (looters did break into the Bartholomew company, but this was no longer a cinema by that date).\(^{154}\) The cinema owners were also, in the main urban areas, substantial enough businessmen with interests in many sectors that their losses in one area may have been bearable.

\(^{153}\) PRAAD RG6/1/83 Loans to Victims of the 1948 Disturbances.
The Nankani family did request compensation for damage caused to their silk stores, but there is no evidence that there was any damage to their (then small) cinema business. They sought to have the remaining balance of an interest-free post-disturbances loan written off in 1956 during a period of financial difficulty, but the administration did not grant this concession on the basis that business owners were always subject to the vicissitudes of the market, even if the Nankanis suggested that their business was impacted by political upheaval in Ashanti at the time (this was unrelated to the original 1948 disturbances).^155

While such broader social and political tensions appear to have had only a limited impact on the business practices of the Lebanese cinema owners since their supply line was overseas rather than internal, the community as a whole was the subject of mistrust. In the late 1960s, numerous expatriate businesses were forced to transfer ownership of their companies or even to cease trading under the terms of a Ghanaian Enterprises Decree designed to promote indigenous business.^156 Although Omar Captan, the patriarch of the cinema-owning family, acquired Ghanaian citizenship in 1970 he was deported the same year, and died in Lebanon in 1971.

While deportations were widespread in 1969-1970 under the terms of the Aliens Compliance Order, Captan’s deportation was part of a settling of scores among the political class in the post-Nkrumah period: he was accused of supporting the former CPP

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^155 PRAAD RG6/1/82 Loans to Victims of the 1948 Disturbances, Correspondence from September to November 1956. The Nankani family was also represented on the “Committee of Looted Persons,” a body made up primarily of Indian and Lebanese-Syrian businesses, which petitioned the government for further relief in 1953.
^156 Ghanaian Enterprises Decree (No. 323, 31 December 1968); 202 businesses were named in the decree.
Finance Minister K.A. Gbedemah, who formed a new political party in 1969 but was banned from taking his parliamentary seat because of past accusations of financial crimes. Gbedemah had visited Captan’s Orion theatre as part of a publicity opportunity in 1956, in the company of then-Prime Minister Nkrumah, though the evidence for a more sustained connection was limited, but Captan’s undoubted associations with prominent members of the Nkrumah regime would not have helped his cause by 1970.\(^\text{157}\) However, the deportation did not affect the operations of Captan’s cinema business, which he had transferred to a limited company structure under the supervision of his wife and some of his sons (the operations were revealed when an illegitimate son, Samir Omar Captan, engaged in legal proceedings against his late father’s estate). By contrast, the broader pattern of deportations under the Busia government was a naked attempt to scapegoat foreigners that was entirely self-defeating: within a year, more than 200,000 people had left Ghana, and “a large proportion of this number turned out to be migrants from neighboring African countries who sustained Ghanaian agriculture – cocoa in particular – as farm labourers.”\(^\text{158}\)

Irrespective of the actual citizenship of the cinema owners, Ghana's newspapers implied that expatriates were engaged in nefarious practices, whether such accusations came from the pen of the journalists or letters that the editor chose to publish. One 1973

\(^{157}\) Obed Yaa Asamoah, *The Political History of Ghana (1950-2013)* (AuthorHouse, 2014), 196. Asamoah served as both Foreign Minister and Attorney General in the Rawlings governments in the 1980s and 1990s. See also Adjei Adjepong, “The Origins, Implementation and Effects of Ghana’s 1969 Aliens Compliance Order,” M.Phil. thesis, University of Cape Coast, 1969. Captan’s case ended up before the Supreme Court in Ghana on the grounds that the state could hardly deport its own citizen, but Captan had not yet received his naturalization certificate and the original decision stood.

letter suggests that those in the entertainment sector, which was still dominated by Lebanese businessmen despite the apparent restrictions on expatriate involvement in the business sector by the early 1970s, were engaged in tax evasion by selling tickets to discos and other venues many times over, and reporting only some of the tax to the government. Another writer did not hesitate to call out Lebanese owners by name, commenting that it was “about time somebody made it clear to certain foreigners that they cannot ‘CHOP’ (sic) Ghanaians all the time without giving a little back.” The writer’s main complaint was that the seats in the Globe cinema, which he incorrectly believed to be owned by the same people behind the luxury Orion venue, were “so old that one risks breaking his back if he sits without scrutinizing them,” while that and other venues attracted rats because the proprietors did not clean up leftover food.

At the heart of the letter was the idea that Ghanaians were being asked to tolerate standards that would not be permitted elsewhere – that Ghanaians were not being granted the same modern standards in their entertainment, in other words, and that in this specific case Lebanese owners were the impediment to progress. Foreigners of one stripe or another were seen as a constant source of threat to Ghana during the late 1960s and early 1970s. They were targeted rhetorically and through practical means such as deportation, even if on other occasions successive governments sought to harness the community’s entrepreneurial resources for their own development ends.

In many respects, the fortunes of particular expatriate-owned cinema enterprises relate to the success or failure of their owners in navigating changing political circumstances. The Captan family managed these transitions with relative success, sometimes nailing its colors to the new mast in fairly blunt fashion as with the 1966 advertisement that linked the company to both the National Liberation Council, which had just deposed President Nkrumah, and the “People of Ghana” on the ninth anniversary of independence. As with the 1948 disturbances, the political turmoil that followed Nkrumah’s overthrow was not accompanied by more general unrest: cinema screenings continued without interruption immediately after he was deposed. The editorial tone of the newspapers changed overnight, but the entertainment listings suggested continuity in other realms, and most shops remained open.

Nonetheless, it was not always smooth sailing for the Captans, even during the Nkrumah era. In 1964, for instance, Captan’s import license was arbitrarily reduced from £2.5M to £65,000, by the then Minister for Trade, Andrew Yaw Djin, a close associate of Nkrumah’s. This jeopardized major (non-cinema) contracts that Omar Captan had entered into during trips to Europe, Lebanon, and Japan. Even other close Nkrumah advisers who faced accusations of personal enrichment were alarmed by the mess that Djin created during his oversight of the import license scheme. Former IDC chairman

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163 *Evening News*, March 7, 1966. The newspaper was Nkrumah’s personal mouthpiece and a source of constant adulation. Some news sources suggested that there was “merrymaking” in Accra streets after Nkrumah was deposed: “The First Days,” *West Africa*, March 5, 1966, 275. See also “Job 6000,” *West Africa*, March 12, 1966, 293 and “Under Military Rule,” *West Africa*, February 27, 1966, 306. The latter article repeated a claim that many Accra restaurants and bars ran out of beer in the days after the coup.
Emmanuel Ayeh Kumi was among those who brought “the grave situation to the attention of the Government in an attempt to arrest the situation.” In 1967, following the overthrow of Nkrumah, the episode was the subject of a government commission, known as the Ollennu Commission. That commission followed on the heels of a similar 1964 commission (the Akainyah Commission) that investigated prior manipulations of the import license system. As one scholar notes, “Private enterprise – of a legitimate kind – and the state enterprises were equally hurt” by these persistent manipulations of the trade system, while Justice Ollennu commented that the malpractices were “prejudicial to the economic and financial interest of the country.”

At times, Nkrumah was more comfortable with the major expatriate entrepreneurs than with indigenous businesspeople. At one point, he even went so far as to characterize the massive United African Company as “the devil we know,” in the sense of being a familiar adversary whose business was given considerable latitude by his administration. After Nkrumah was deposed in 1966, he was accused of stifling African enterprise, perhaps because he had feared the creation of a rival African power base. Indeed, in 1964 one of his closest advisers became aware of active efforts to thwart the efforts of African businessmen, either by co-opting them into state enterprises

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165 Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Irregularities and Malpractices in the Grant of Import Licenses, 2.
166 Jones, Ghana’s First Republic, 216.
or by granting them restricted licenses that effectively made it impossible for them to do business.\textsuperscript{169} By contrast, Nkrumah was adept at managing relations with the expatriate class, who were only a limited political threat but a rich source of patronage.\textsuperscript{170}

While the Gold Coast/Ghana’s small group of cinema owners almost always had close working relationships with colonial officials and members of the pre-independence African elite as well as carefully cultivated contacts with the post-independence administration, this was a function of the restricted size of the administration and of the substantial financial resources of the key cinema players, most notably the Ocansey, Barakat, and Captan families at different times. The closeness of the relationships did not always translate into positive treatment, with the government concerned to remain in control of the size of the cinema sector but also to benefit financially from the growing success of entrepreneurs in attracting and maintaining an audience for their product.

Cinema owners had to juggle loyalties to the administrators who could, at least in theory, hurt or harm their interests through licensing changes or censorship policies with their external contacts with Hollywood and other distributors. The changes of political environment and of available product helped business owners who were flexible and responsive and, when it came to good relations with overseas business, financially reliable. These were qualities that the state-run cinemas rarely possessed, particularly

\textsuperscript{169} Jones, \textit{Ghana’s First Republic}, 162-3.
\textsuperscript{170} \textit{Evening News}, March 4, 1966; the front page article quotes Emmanuel Ayeh Kumi as saying that “Kwame Nkrumah informed him that if he permitted African business to grow it will rival his and the Party’s prestige and therefore he did everything to stop this growth which he succeeded in doing by applying tight sanctions on the operations.” While there may well be elements on truth here, material from this highly partisan newspaper source should nonetheless be treated with some caution: the newspaper’s tone shifted smoothly from obsequious praise of Nkrumah at the time of his departure for Hanoi to aggressive condemnation of the leader immediately after the military took over.
once they had to go through the onerous process of justifying even small investments through the government bureaucracy. A political power structure that granted favors to individual business owners was better equipped to deal with those outside the state structure than with state-run enterprises, which came off as the losers in any shift of power. This was seen in vivid relief with the increased local interest of the American industry and in the responses of the Ghanaian government, which used blunt censorship as one of the few tools at its disposal in dealing with massive overseas business interests that enjoyed the backing of the US political apparatus irrespective of the financial consequences for state-owned business.
Chapter Four – The American Film Industry in Ghana, 1945-1965

James Stewart pointed the way to the future, one in which Hollywood began to ship its top-flight product to Ghana’s screens – for reasons, naturally, of Tinseltown’s financial self-interest. Stewart’s name and face appeared in newspapers throughout what was still Gold Coast in March 1956 when his hit Western *The Man From Laramie* was the opening film for the country’s first CinemaScope-ready theatre in an Accra suburb. Stewart was at the peak of his fame, the biggest star in the US market at the time.¹ His film was just six months old, unusually recent by West African standards but representative of what the 1960s would bring, while the gala screening also foreshadowed a convergence of interests between the American industry and local theatre operators, who would collectively attempt to exploit a growing post-independence middle-class by showcasing the latest wares and visual gimmicks in the finest surroundings.

This chapter explores the ways in which the American film industry, the dominant player in the global film export industry by the end of the First World War, came to cultivate a small international market like Gold Coast/Ghana. Over a period of fifteen years, Ghana shifted from being a market of at most peripheral interest to the American studio system to a reliable smaller revenue stream worthy of close management and Hollywood paid close attention to the emerging African middle-class market. However,

¹ *The Man From Laramie* (1955, US, directed by Anthony Mann). Stewart was an innovator in another respect, too, as the first star to negotiate compensation in the form of a percentage of his films’ box office take. This was one of the fundamental business changes of the late 1940s and early 1950s that prompted Hollywood to increase its overseas focus on hitherto peripheral locations like Ghana. See Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 287.
this transition was not smooth: local distribution practices and audience preferences forced the American industry to adapt in ways that challenged its own preferred revenue maximization strategies. Government intervention in the mechanics of Hollywood’s negotiations with local entrepreneurs and the state-owned cinema network also meant that Ghana could be a difficult place to do business for American firms due to the tense relationship between Ghana and the superpower in the early 1960s. Not only did Ghanaian officials take a stern line with American businesses as a way to reinforce political points, but they were mistrustful of an industry that saw itself as a continued partner in American soft diplomacy. That role could be undermined by the industry’s attempts to develop a monopoly in the Ghanaian market, which was hardly the ideal promotion for notions of democracy and inclusiveness.

While African audiences had always been of at least some marginal interest to the American film industry, until the 1950s the American studios sold most films to African distributors through middlemen located in Britain, France or South Africa, rather than engaging directly with the continent. Hollywood treated South Africa as a substantial market in its own right, very different from most of the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, and several studios had representative offices in that country, even holding a controlling interest in certain theatre chains. Independent rental agencies in European capitals managed the distribution of films to what were, for the most part, European colonies, supplying local exhibitors from the available film stock that Hollywood released to them. Until the mid-1950s, this stock was by and large of the second rank, and even if the films were noteworthy on a commercial or artistic level, they were outdated. At the time,
African exhibitors generally rented American films on long-term, flat-rate contracts of up to five years (they purchased prints of Indian films). These were very different business models from those that then applied within the US domestic market, where short-term rentals of film prints were the norm, especially for the most lucrative first-run films from the major studios.

After the Second World War the American industry began to assert itself as a more active presence across much of the African continent, culminating in 1961 with the establishment of a studio-funded agency designed to exploit the English-speaking markets of West Africa. A similar agency began to develop markets in many of the countries of French-speaking West and Central Africa later in the decade. Rental agents based in the UK and South Africa remained important in servicing the English-speaking markets of eastern and southern Africa through the 1960s: these markets had far fewer cinemas per capita and were not worth Hollywood’s direct engagement, although they did generate some modest revenue.

*Early market research – 1910s to 1940s*

Although the American industry did not work directly with exhibitors in West Africa until the late 1940s, it catalogued commercial possibilities around the globe from as early as 1916. These efforts were conducted by industry organizations or government sources and, more rarely, by individual studios.² The earliest evidence of the interest of a particular American corporation in the Gold Coast dates from 1937, when Columbia

Pictures’ London representative requested information about the number of cinemas in Sekondi. At the time, there was just a single theatre in the town, the Zenith West End Palladium, a small venue with 180 seats. The studio’s representatives may have perceived improved commercial possibilities in the town following the completion of a deep-water seaport in Sekondi-Takoradi in the late 1920s, especially they could ship films directly to the location.³

British and American officialdom invested a remarkable amount of time and energy in assessing the exact contours of the market despite the small size of the potential Gold Coast cinema audience by global standards. On the British side, this was a function of the official belief in the educational or propagandizing power of the cinema and, to some extent, ongoing concern in British colonies about the role and impact of American films. Officials in Britain were also perturbed by strong audience identification with American films, with fashions and language from the movies making an appearance on British high streets, while Australian objections extended to the “filthy American twang” that accompanied the arrival of sound in the late 1920s.⁴

British government departments and American consular officials sought comprehensive tallies on the numbers of cinemas in the Gold Coast from the 1930s, as

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³ PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Letter from Columbia Pictures to the Colonial Secretary, Accra, undated, received August 3, 1937.
well as information on weekly attendances, ticket prices and technological information such as the rate of conversion to sound. Despite the accumulation of data, the Gold Coast did not feature in the annual reports that the Motion Picture Division of the US Commerce Department generated during that decade, notwithstanding evidence that the American Consul in Nigeria both sought and was supplied with extensive information about developments in the neighboring colony on an annual basis.⁵

The absence of information on the Gold Coast is surprising: the Division wrote elaborate accounts of far smaller colonial markets in the Caribbean as well as markets in other colonial African locations including Nigeria. Gold Coast theatres also converted to sound somewhat earlier than other African locations: this should in turn have made the colony more attractive as a target for the distribution of up-to-date feature films. The report for 1938 makes clear that Nigerian audiences were segregated by race and class and just three of the colonies nine theatres had sound systems. European audiences enjoyed sound films at prices as high as 3s 6d while “large native audiences” continued to watch silent films at a penny a time.⁶ In the same year, half of all theatres in the Gold Coast had been converted to sound, including all but one of the larger venues in Accra.⁷

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Departments of Commerce and State functioned as de facto export agents on behalf of the huge American film industry. Motion pictures were one of the United States’ most lucrative exports of that period, in part because it

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⁵ PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Correspondence from American Consul, Lagos, October 4, 1937 and 21 April 1938.
⁷ PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Cinematograph Theatres 1938 [no date].
was a rare industry that benefited, as the film historian Robert Sklar notes, from a
universal technical standard and, until the end of silent period, no language barrier.\(^8\)
Nonetheless, the industry, like many others, suffered in the middle years of the
Depression before bouncing back in impressive style both at home and overseas: the
sheer novelty of sound had given the industry something of a financial cushion in 1929-
1930 and had deferred the impact of the economic collapse.\(^9\) Motion pictures were so
economically significant at that time that the industry was included as a component of the
Census of Distribution, along with a whole range of manufactured goods.

As of 1929, the Census of Distribution, estimated that there were 57,743 theatres
around the world, of which 755, or just 1.3\%, were located on the continent of Africa;
approximately 22,000 of theatres were located in the US. A near-contemporaneous UK
Colonial Office report suggested that barely 40 of these venues were in British-controlled
areas, which reinforces the reality that the vast majority of cinemas on the continent at the
time were concentrated in South Africa, Algeria, and Egypt. This makes the official effort
to acquire data on each of the remaining peripheral locations all the more striking.\(^10\) In
tandem with the compilation of general statistical data for the Census of Distribution, the
US Department of Commerce published exhaustive narrative accounts of cinema markets
in some of the more obscure corners of the world in the late 1920s, including African
islands such as Cape Verde and Zanzibar. These publications provided a detailed picture
of every potential marketplace for both film projection equipment, short subjects, and

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\(^8\) Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 216.
feature films, describing everything from the frequency of screenings to the quality of the seating, while noting drily that there were limited conditions for cinematographic expansion in specific locations.\textsuperscript{11}

The Department of State oversaw the annual effort to gather updated information on the numbers of cinemas in each location along with details of the frequency of film screenings, censorship changes, popular genres, and ticket prices.\textsuperscript{12} On occasion, potential distributors and exhibitors in London sought the same information from Gold Coast authorities though by comparison with American officials these industry professionals were ill-informed about the fact that cinemas were already well implanted in the Gold Coast colony. Their overtures were based on the assumption that they would be providing a new service to consumers in the Gold Coast. A Mr. McNally, for instance, was ignorant about the state of exhibition in the colony despite his prior conversations with an official in the Colonial Office in London: he saw an opportunity to work as a traveling exhibitor in what he assumed to be a territory devoid of cinemas. He proposed to project films in a field to audiences seated on the ground and to charge sixpence for the privilege, at a time when the cheapest seats in Accra theatres were available for


\textsuperscript{12} The Department of State sometimes played a more active role on behalf of the American film industry, too, intervening in local censorship debates on occasion, for instance when the Irish censor wished to excise significant sections from \textit{Gone With the Wind} (1939, US, directed by Victor Fleming). Rockett, \textit{Irish Film Censorship}, 91.
threepence. The official response to the query was polite but suggested that his venture was unlikely to be a financial success.\footnote{PRAAD CSO/15/8/21 Letter from F. McNally, London, to Colonial Secretary, Accra, March 8, 1938. There were already at least traveling cinema circuits in operation in Gold Coast at the time, in addition to the fixed cinemas.}

Before the Second World War, there were even approaches to the Gold Coast administration from COMACICO, the company that later managed around half of the cinema theatres scattered across French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa. While on a visit to Accra in 1939, the manager of COMACICO contacted officials about the prospect of opening a pair of theatres in the city, “for Natives,” even though there was no official practice of segregation in Accra at that time. These plans petered out with the beginning of the Second World War weeks later, although the company had already identified a suitable site on Horse Road for one of two proposed open-air cinemas.\footnote{PRAAD CSO/15/8/7 Letter from Maurice Jaquin to Colonial Secretary, July 29, 1939.} That location was close to several well-known theatres in Jamestown, the center of pre-war nightlife.

\textit{Hollywood’s New Postwar Export Model}

After the Second World War, the American industry organized its overseas distribution along new lines, taking a much more active role in its own export activities with the establishment of the Motion Picture Export Association (MPEA) in 1945. The MPEA was the twin of the existing Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which had originally been established as the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) in 1922. After 1945, the MPAA focused on the domestic exhibition
industry.\textsuperscript{15} Eric Johnston, the MPAA’s new President, oversaw the re-organization. He discarded the more unwieldy MPPDA tag immediately following his appointment and led both the MPAA and the MPEA organizations in tandem until his death in 1963.\textsuperscript{16} Johnston was a successful businessman who served as President of the US Chamber of Commerce and although he was active in the Republican Party he also served as a wartime emissary for the Roosevelt administration. Later, while President of the MPAA/MPEA, he accepted special commissions from both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations.\textsuperscript{17}

While Johnston did not know it at the time, the US domestic exhibition sector would reach the zenith of its success a year after his appointment. The American cinema audience never again as large as it was in 1946, though it staged a brief, illusory comeback in 1953.\textsuperscript{18} The weekly audience dropped from 82 million patrons in that year to 30 million patrons by 1960. The reasons for the decline were complex, but just as population growth drove the success of Ghana’s cinemas in the 1950s, American demographic change undermined the movie business. Not only were many Americans moving out of the inner cities but expanding families led the parents of the baby boom generation to “curtail [their] moviegoing habit.”\textsuperscript{19} While there were new cinemas in the suburbs, including many new drive-in theatres, thousands of small-scale urban venues closed their doors in the late 1940s and 1950s as their patrons either moved out or were

\textsuperscript{15} Jarvie, \textit{Hollywood’s Overseas Campaign}, 227 and 324.  
\textsuperscript{16} The MPAA and MPEA later merged to form the Motion Picture Association (MPA).  
\textsuperscript{18} Sklar, \textit{Movie-Made America}, 285.  
\textsuperscript{19} Sklar, \textit{Movie-Made America}, 274.
priced out by rising ticket prices. Ticket costs increased in response to changes in the way that the industry produced its films, devoting an ever-greater share of its resources to expensive, large-scale pictures that were designed to take in a huge share of Hollywood’s annual revenue. These pictures were also expensive for theatres to acquire. The drive-ins were of no use to the faithful lower-income patrons who depended, like a great many Gold Coast consumers, on the close proximity of a neighborhood theatre: once they had to add transport costs into their budget, they could not sustain the movie habit.

The audience decline was further accelerated by both radio, by now a mature and hugely attractive leisure option to which listeners devoted many hours each day, and, from the tail end of the 1940s, by the threat of television. The new medium prompted numerous technical experiments from the film industry to distinguish its product from small-screen entertainment, from 3-D pictures to the many large-screen formats of the 1950s including CinemaScope and its imitators and successors. The studios were also involved with television as both suppliers of films and as producers of new television shows even if this seemed as though they were cannibalizing their own revenue streams by providing older product to the television stations that reduced the likelihood consumers would seek out newer films.

Amidst the financial turmoil of the late 1940s, the industry needed to increase its attention overseas in order to sustain its financial success. Individual producers, particularly David O. Selznick, were often at least as active as the MPEA in re-orienting

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their attention to the overseas market, with Selznick deploying his considerable
government contacts to establish a beachhead in post-war Germany, among other
locations, while his organization also signed contracts in small markets across the
globe.\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, Hollywood’s postwar efforts, whether collective or individual, recalled
the ways in which it sought to establish its initial global primacy during the First World
War, carefully positioning itself for success after the end of the conflict.\textsuperscript{22} The American
industry carved out a position of near-total dominance in Germany by the 1950s, with
even German producers needing to go through American companies to release their films
on any scale – the kind of dominance that foreshadowed the extreme difficulty that
African filmmakers had in distributing their films in their countries of origin.\textsuperscript{23}

Hollywood had not been oblivious to the lucrative foreign markets of the 1920s
and 1930s, although it was able to break even in its domestic market during that period.
The UK, in particular, was a major contributor to Hollywood profits in those decades and
the American industry so dominated Britain’s box office that legislators in Britain
developed the quota system to protect its own domestic production industry, a project
with mixed overall success.\textsuperscript{24} What changed for Hollywood in the late 1940s was the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Andrew J. Falk, \textit{Upstaging the Cold War: American Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy, 1940-1960}
  (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 187-188. Studio heads, including Jack Warner, toured
  Germany in 1945 to assess the postwar prospects, and even took a Rhine cruise on Hitler’s former yacht.
  avidly-aided-nazis.html. The MPEA was also aggressive in re-launching itself in Italy immediately after the
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Kristin Thompson, \textit{Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907-1934} (London: BFI, 1985), 61-99.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Elsaesser, \textit{New German} Cinema, 14-15. The American industry also lobbied to ensure that the pre-war
  German studio UFA was dismantled to ensure that it could not rival American power.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} See Chibnall, \textit{Quota Quickies}.
\end{itemize}
frank admission that the overseas market was now critical to the bottom line rather than a welcome source of additional and reliable profit on top of the domestic riches that Hollywood had enjoyed for several decades.

Even against this backdrop, it was rare for the American studios to cultivate African contacts until the mid-1950s. While West African Pictures signed contracts with Metro Goldwyn Mayer and United Artists to supply some 60 films for their theatres, and United Artists made a subsequent proposal for a contract covering a further 100 films, such initiatives were the exception: for the most part, the industry continued to work with the middlemen who were based in the metropolitan capitals. This was true even for the most lucrative African markets, such as Egypt. Egyptian theatres were supplied from Paris, as was also the case for the substantial Algerian cinema sector. Egyptian consumers were well-served by exhibitors, with all of Egypt’s theatres wired for sound long before this was true in many European locations.

It was not until the various colonies of sub-Saharan Africa began to receive their independence in the late 1950s that Hollywood as an industry truly began to take notice of local potential. This was not just a function of the new political dispensation across the continent. By 1960, the secondary markets that Hollywood had targeted when the US domestic market entered its postwar decline had, in turn, begun to display serious weaknesses of their own. Television was making significant inroads across continental Europe from the middle of the 1950s, compounding the continent’s own changing

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demography, with almost all countries experiencing a sustained baby boom and associated lifestyle changes. In addition, certain local cinema industries remained quite resilient, making Hollywood domination at the box office more difficult.26 That was particularly true of France, where local productions populated the upper reaches of the annual box office in the 1950s and 1960s, though Hollywood was by no means absent from French screens. The French population remained fervent cinema-goers much longer than their British peers, continuing to contribute an important stream of francs to Hollywood. Despite such relative successes, the overall trend was downward, and by 1960, it was clear that Hollywood needed to breach a new frontier – or a series thereof.

_Hollywood on “safari” – Assessing the Market, 1960-1962_

The first direct industry effort to assess prospects in African markets took place in the late summer of 1960, when Eric Johnston embarked on an extensive African “safari” through what the trade journal _Variety_ termed an “epidemic” of new countries, including Ghana.27 The MPEA came to the conclusion that there was significant growth potential in English-speaking West Africa, and proposed to establish its own local representative offices in Lagos and in Accra to cover the cinema markets in Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone. Johnston’s reports back from other locations, including French

Equatorial Africa, suggested that the English-speaking countries were by no means alone in their enthusiasm for the cinema, including American films, but there may have been other administrative issues, including the existence of a French monopoly on distribution in its former colonies, that prompted the initial focus on the English-speaking subset of the countries visited.  

Within months of his five-week African journey, Johnston began his efforts to sell West Africa as a market to his members, using the pages of the trade journal *Variety* to further his cause. In January 1961, he raved that Africa was “Exhibitor’s Paradise. The audience interest in films is intense. It was never more intense in our peak boxoffice (sic) days at home, in the immediate postwar years.” He suggested that the audience potential was such that “all an exhibitor has to do is thread the film on to his projector, open the boxoffice and then hop, step, jump and leap back from the crowds waiting to rush in and fill up his seats!” On another occasion, he claimed that audiences began lining up for screenings three hours in advance, though it is hard to imagine that this describes the most routine movie-going experience, particularly in urban locations with plenty of choice.  

Johnston hinted that the African market could be doubled or even tripled in size, the kind of return that must have seemed very tempting – as long as Africans had adequate screens on which to view Hollywood product. Johnston’s primary aim at the time was to “stimulate local capital to expand and improve the exhibition sector” with an

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infusion of high-end Hollywood product. There was certainly something to this plan, for Ghanaian theatre owners in the 1950s had already emphasized how theatrical improvements could lead to the rental of better films and thus to higher profits – with “better films” being understood to mean either improved commercial prospects or added social value depending on who was doing the talking. Ghanaian promoters tried to trade on the idea of a virtuous circle: high-quality theatres would lead to top-notch films (understood both in educational and commercial terms), driving profits and continued investment in the theatre spaces. The MPEA also saw the period of political change as an opportunity to cut out the middlemen located in the former colonial capitals. During the colonial period, the imperial powers had made every effort to preserve their preferential trade position, which meant that American pictures usually had to be distributed in Africa either through subsidiaries located in the colonial capitals or through private, non-American entities. The new political configuration offered the US industry the opportunity to compete on a more open, though not necessarily a level, playing field.

The MPEA leadership remarked on the popularity of Indian films in former British and French colonies even though the films were not in locally-spoken languages (subtitled versions were rare). He suggested that part of this success lay in the sheer length of Indian films, which often ran for three or even four hours, far longer than the average Hollywood release with the exception of rare super-productions like *Gone With the Wind* or *Ben Hur*. At the time, an American “B” film might be as short as an hour,

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with most “A” grade American films generally running between 90 minutes and two hours; the “A” pictures became longer from the early 1940s, with the major American studios devoting increasing resources to that part of their business. As the film historian Thomas Schatz notes, the “B” picture was defined as much as anything by what it lacked—length, major stars, significant production values. It was, though, ubiquitous: three-quarters of Hollywood films during the 1930s could be classified under the “B” heading.

African audiences were not the only ones who reputedly valued quantity higher than quality on occasion: Bolivian cinemagoers in working-class neighborhoods of the same period enjoyed double or even triple bills, and also tended to favor those venues that ran continuous programs since they allowed consumers to spend an extended period in the theatre. By contrast, David Bordwell suggests that triple bills were a rarity for American consumers, with some cinema-goers suspecting that such promotions were little more than a gimmick to serve as a dumping ground for multiple sub-standard “B” pictures.

In addition to his views on the African audience preference for longer films, Johnston also suggested that African audiences valued Indian films as “they can identify
with the hardships and hazards and hopes of Indian life as they see it in these films,” an insightful comment given later academic research that corroborates his thinking.\(^{38}\) Brian Larkin notes that this was especially true of Indian films of the 1950s and 1960s, which were less likely to be influenced by American film genres. Hindi-language films of that period took as a core theme “negotiating the tension of preserving traditional moral values in a time of profound change,” something that African audiences found very easy to relate to at the moment of political independence.\(^{39}\) One Ghanaian audience member from Akosombo commented on precisely this idea, suggesting that Indian films showed “a whole lot of what is going on in India,” and lamenting the disappearance of such “educative films” from Ghanaian screens by the 1980s.\(^{40}\)

**Establishing a Hollywood Outpost in West Africa**

In the wake of Johnston’s African tour and follow-up publicity, the MPEA began internal discussions on the launch of an office in West Africa. The member studios placed restrictions on signing individual contracts with the African countries that they

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\(^{38}\) Eric Johnston, “Africa In Not-So-Slow Motion. New Countries Incline to the West (Certainly in Film Fare) But Yen Greater Variety Than Westerns,” *Variety*, 4 January 1961.


intended to include in the arrangement. Local exhibitors in West Africa had concluded that the establishment of an American operation would lead to increased rental or purchase costs and so they were “feverishly buying up as many pictures as possible to build up a booking for future exhibition.” They were somewhat successful in this endeavor, at least until the studios suspended new sales in March 1961, which meant that the best-prepared Ghanaian cinema owners had quite a comfortable cushion of product for several years given that most films were rented on long-term contracts.41

Reactions to the proposal to establish a beachhead in West Africa made clear the differing financial interests of the American studios, who were convinced they could rapidly begin to extract more from African markets, and the local exhibitors, who tried to keep their costs as low as feasible even if this often meant serving their customers inferior films. However, some of the studios chafed at the slow pace of the new MPEA initiative: in August 1962, one Warner Bros. executive complained that his company’s business in West Africa was “at a standstill” while the operation ironed out early difficulties since Warners, like its major studio counterparts, had agreed to suspend the signing of individual contracts with West African exhibitors.42

Although it took them some time to set up their offices in West Africa, the MPEA’s representatives were well informed about the state of the local exhibition business, at least in the major towns, having assembled detailed lists of venues, prices,

41 WBA, File West Africa 1961 16615B, Letter from Mac Greenberg to Arthur Abeles, March 17, 1961. Abeles was the head of distribution for Warner Bros. in London from the late 1940s to the late 1960s, while Greenberg was the US-based executive responsible for international administration.
and distribution practices (records rarely make reference to the more ephemeral venues that were part of the traveling cinema circuits). Follow-up visits to Ghana by other officials from the MPEA took place in early 1961 to discuss matters of distribution in the country, and representatives from at least one of the major film studios accompanied the MPEA officials.43

While Johnson suggested that the MPEA would begin operations with two separate offices in Accra and Lagos they eventually decided to set up shop in Lagos as a first step, with Accra to follow. They tasked that office with managing relationships across all of the former British colonies in West Africa although the intention was always to focus on the more significant markets of Nigeria and Ghana.44 In the end they never opened an Accra operation, likely because of the substantial challenges to the business in that country in the 1960-1963 period detailed below. The Lagos office remained the only direct MPEA representation in English-speaking Africa: it formally opened its doors in January 1962 and remained in operation until the late 1970s. The establishment of the office was notable in that it came at a time of retrenchment by the MPEA: in 1962, the MPEA’s offices in other territories were asked to reduce their operating costs by 15% (excluding rent and salaries).45 The agency also closed its office in India in the same year.

43 The lead MPEA official on the visit, S. Frederick Gronich, spent his career overseas as a representative of the Hollywood industry. Gronich was born in Czechoslovakia and commissioned in the US army during the Second World War. In 1948, he served as a key adviser to David Ben-Gurion. The Los Angeles Times, July 7, 2003. He was based in the MPEA’s Paris office at the time of his 1961 visit to Ghana.
44 This was not the first time that the MPEA had established a local office to coordinate the activities of the studios: they had a joint office in Malta with the same revenue-maximizing aim. WBA, file Africa/AMPECA, Miscellaneous to 12/31/62, letter from Arthur Abeles to Wolfe Cohen, October 31, 1960.
45 WBA, file MPEA Foreign Office Budgets 61 16576B, letter from Ralph Hetzel to Foreign Office Budget Committee, June 19, 1962.
on cost grounds. The major studios clearly felt that the West African venture, despite high personnel costs, was more worthy of support than increased spending through other ventures controlled by the MPEA.

The West African agency was incorporated under the title American Motion Picture Export Company (Africa), or AMPECA, and it quickly moved to exert a new control over American distribution in Anglophone West Africa. AMPECA was complemented from 1970 in French-speaking territories by AFRAM (Afro-American Films, Inc.), whose main office was in Dakar. While AMPECA had every intention of devoting considerable resources to the Ghanaian market – they thought it could yield far more revenue per capita than the more populous Nigerian market with minimal effort – the first couple of years proved to be challenging.

A Bump in the Road: The Ghanaian Censorship Crackdown

The biggest early challenge to AMPECA’s operation in Ghana was the strict post-independence turn in local censorship, with the peak lasting from 1960 to 1963. This was


a serious disincentive and the American industry, which was now seeking to promote its premium films in Ghana, became wary about doing business when their product might at any time be banned. The censorship crackdown rendered exhibition difficult and slowed new commercial opportunities. The tone was set early on when MPEA president Johnston reported in a trade journal on his meeting with Ghana’s information minister, Kweki Boateng (sic), who told Johnston that “motion pictures should only be shown for a purpose. That purpose, as he puts it, is to advance the interests of the people and the state.”

Johnston’s report on his meeting with Boateng gives a useful insight into the ways in which the ministry defined its task and sought to control cinema images at a time for which the surviving archival records are sadly rather sparse. There is a conspicuous continuity between Boateng’s view of the cinema and that of numerous pre-independence administrations who tried to harness what they saw as the power of the cinema by showing educational and propaganda materials, with limited success given the often less-than-enthusiastic response of African audiences. Ghanaian parliamentarians expressed similar sentiments, calling the cinema a means of education. However, colonial officials had not, for the most part, fooled themselves about the likelihood that audiences would

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49 “Johnston on Ghana; Film Attendance Up, Govt. Censor-Minded,” *Variety*, September 7, 1960. The minister’s name was actually Kwaku Boateng, although variant spellings of his first name are common. Boateng held several ministerial posts, but had an up and down career in subsequent years. He took over the portfolio of Interior Minister in 1961 but in early 1964, a CPP newspaper called, on its front page, for his ouster in the immediate aftermath of an attempt on Nkrumah’s life. Nonetheless, later the same year he was appointed as Minister for Education. *The Ghanaian Times*, January 10, 1964.

50 Ghana National Assembly Parliamentary Debates Session 1965, June 10, 1965 to September 17, 1965. Motion on Ghanaian Press, September 10, 1965, column 694. The representatives may also have been echoing the thoughts of film directors such as Ousmane Sembène, who saw the cinema as a powerful educational tool: Sembène began his directing career in 1963.
embrace such materials, since the whole point of going to the cinema was for a good night out. One administrator noted that “there is no real entertainment value in such [educational] films,” and rejected the idea of imposing obligatory showings of educational material in the commercial cinemas. Nonetheless, the post-independence governments do not seem to have had the same hesitations, and commercial cinemas sometimes had to include government films on their programs.

This pattern of industry enthusiasm coupled with government and bureaucratic obstacles characterized the MPEA’s relationship with the Ghanaian authorities throughout much of the 1960s. Eric Johnston signaled the likely road ahead early on, noting that “While film attendance in Ghana is constantly increasing and the business outlook is healthy, situation (sic) is clouded by a censorship minded government.”

Ghana was one of three African countries that were of concern to the MPEA because of censorship practices, the others being Guinea and South Africa, with Variety, in its distinctive house style, commenting that the Ghanaian “censorship chief, for instance, wants only ‘constructive’ films which will help people in the task of building up the nation—rather than pix that provide diversion alone.”

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51 PRAAD RG3/5/303 Report on implementation of directions given by the Cabinet, from M.F. Kissane [Senior Assistant Secretary, Department of Education and Social Welfare] to the Senior Assistant Secretary, 13 January 1953.
52 Interview, Munir Captan, Accra, October 23 2012. Captan suggested that there was a positive side to this and that such films kept people informed about what was going on in their country, particularly in the pre-television era. In that, he felt that they served a function similar to that of imported newsreels.
It is also worth bearing in mind James Brennan’s analysis of censorship in pre- and post-independence Tanzania, where he notes that censorship was not simply an effort to ensure that every piece of cinematic material met a defined standard of moral acceptability but was also about determining who remained in control of access to certain images or ideas. That process of negotiation continued on both sides of the point of independence in Tanzania, Nigeria, and Ghana, among other British colonial locations, and the ongoing debate could reveal “significant continuities between colonial and postcolonial statecraft.” In some ways, the change in policy in Ghana around 1960 is a slightly delayed manifestation of this debate in the post-independence landscape, albeit against the very specific backdrop of Cold War geopolitics.

The increasing strictness of the censor restricted the supply pipeline for West African Pictures, the state-owned network of cinemas, at least as much as for private entrepreneurs. The company even claimed that it was being targeted with special strictness, and that the censor was less severe in its treatment of films submitted by the competing Captan firm. The West African Pictures management provided a statistical snapshot in support of this accusation which appeared to show that West African Pictures did indeed suffer a ban rate that was higher than that of its competition. West African Pictures even sought to have the IDC Chairman intervene to discuss the situation with his counterparts in the censor’s office given the business impact of the latter’s numerous

negative decisions. The Minister for Information eventually convened a series of meetings, though they do not appear to have had any immediate impact.\textsuperscript{58}

In two months in early 1961, the censors rejected 38 films, about the same number as they rejected in total between 1925 and 1940. Even against this backdrop the “expatriate venture” (Captan) was treated with relative leniency: it suffered a much lower ban rate despite having more films in circulation.\textsuperscript{59} This was almost certainly due to Captan’s links with key members of Nkrumah’s administration, through which he may have funneled payments to officials who then worked to ensure his business dealings remained trouble-free. The state-owned chain was less financially successful: Captan was so entrenched that it was hard for anyone else to compete with him in terms of access to the best product, which in turn allowed him to operate more cinemas at higher capacity (ticket prices were comparable in all venues, though some of the Captan cinemas were much more modern). In AMPECA’s internal reporting, it suggested that the Ghanaian administration was using all the tools at its disposal to advantage West African Pictures. This version of events diverges so far from the company’s internal reports that it suggests Captan and other private operators had an effective rhetorical impact on the AMPECA officials with whom they met, painting their own circumstances in the direst possible light despite the fact that their experiences were far less disruptive.\textsuperscript{60}

In 1961, in addition to the problem of the increasing number of bans, West African Pictures found that other films languished with the censor’s office for many months with no decision, even though the censor certified similar films for other companies. This kind of delay was unusual by historical standards, where cinema owners almost always knew the censorship board’s decision within a few weeks. These accusations persisted, and were raised in the National Assembly in 1965, when deputy Krobo Edusei went as far as to suggest that the censor “should see to it that good films are allocated” to the state chain. It is difficult to assess Edusei’s exact intent but the comments of other contributors to the debate suggest that his overall thrust was to use the censorship board, and its ministerial overseer the Minister for Information, as a mechanism to help allocate “first-class films” to West African Pictures rather than its competitors.\footnote{Ghana National Assembly Parliamentary Debates Session 1965, June 10, 1965 to September 17, 1965. Motion on Ghanaian Press, September 10, 1965, columns 694-5.} In the context of the debate, Edusei also suggested that Captan’s company was far more successful than its state counterpart, with the latter attracting desultory crowds at the time.

While owners never liked to hear that a film had been banned, the occasional prohibition during the colonial period did not cause great difficulty because the various companies kept enough stock on hand to cope with brief interruptions. In addition, the middleman distributors in London did not charge for films that were sent back unscreened due to censorship difficulties: they applied a credit to the account of the renting company though the exhibitor might still be out the costs of shipping. Once more
frequent bans began to occur, international distributors became wary of even signing contracts with Ghanaian exhibitors and sometimes threatened to honor only existing contracts but not renew them.

In the early 1960s, the Censorship Board also introduced a policy of re-censorship for all existing films, a process that was both time-consuming and as strict as the censorship of brand-new material. West African Pictures had to submit 339 films for re-censorship in August 1960. By December the censors had only reviewed twenty-nine of these titles, and had rejected fifteen. The circuit thus had fourteen re-censored films available in addition to another twenty-nine films that had been censored in the normal fashion, but that total of forty-three films in stock fell far short of the seventy to eighty titles the chain required every week to move between its various venues.\(^{62}\) This was far stricter than at any point under colonial rule. In some years in the 1930s, not a single film was banned, while even in the stricter years after censorship regulations were introduced in 1925, only three films were banned in one nine-month period during which the censors reviewed some eighty-six pictures, a representative total.\(^{63}\) The dozens of banned films also contrast with the handful of prohibited pictures each year in the early 1950s, even though that was a period of great upheaval in the political life of the Gold Coast as the colony navigated its first open elections and set a course toward independence. As seen in Chapter Two, while the Legislative Assembly introduced new cinema censorship

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\(^{62}\) PRAAD RG7/1/1656 Memorandum from A.A. Ankrah to IDC management, January 4, 1961.

\(^{63}\) PRAAD ADM/11/1/1519 Letter from Secretary for Native Affairs to the Colonial Secretary, Accra, 23 March 1928.
legislation in 1952 this did not create any fundamental change in the application of censorship policy in the early 1950s.

The re-censorship decisions could be damaging because the cinema owners had already paid for and screened many of the films in question, often on multi-year contracts. In these cases they did not receive any credit from the distributors since they had already shown the pictures at least once and made some money from the screenings. In 1960, the MGM film *Something of Value*, set during the Mau Mau period in Kenya and partially filmed in that colony, was re-censored and rejected in Ghana, resulting in a loss of some £500 to West African Pictures, one of many such instances.64 *Something of Value* had been projected without incident in Ghana until that point, although the colonial censor in Kenya in 1958 rejected the picture despite the authorities in Nairobi having approved a filming license for the American production company some years earlier. On the film’s initial run in Ghana, the American academic Elizabeth Drake spent some time questioning local viewers about their impressions of *Something of Value* before the re-censoring decision, as discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

The Kenyan censor justified the ban because of scenes that might cause “misunderstanding” or tension between the races, as well as other scenes of criminality. No records of the specific rationale for the Ghanaian censor’s decision survive, but on other occasions around the same time those in charge of censorship voiced negative opinions on the violence of the current cinema. The realistic and unpleasant portrayal of

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scenes of violence – inter- and intra-racial – in the film was quite different to the adrenaline-inducing fight sequences of most entertainment films. Many of Elizabeth Drake’s interviewees also expressed very uncomplimentary views on this aspect of the picture, even where they found it to be informative and even admirable on other levels.

While the Ghanaian censor had only a very limited history of citing interracial violence as a cause for concern, authorities in non-African locations worried about such material, too. Australian censors worked to reduce the impact of scenes of violence between African and European characters in Killers of Kilimanjaro among other films; the censor was even-handed enough, requesting cuts to any sequences where a person of any race was wounded in combat with someone of another race. In that instance, the censor did not insist on the complete removal of the scenes in question but rather requested excisions that made the violence less impactful – showing a weapon fired but not the result, for example, although this could be inferred by the characters’ subsequent behavior.65

The comprehensive change in Ghana’s censorship ground rules proved disruptive for the local cinema business, with cinemas forced to scramble to ensure that they had adequate product available. This was a more acute problem in the networks that moved films from one venue to another throughout the week, though as already noted the Captan network suffered less. In some cases, owners experimented with projecting the same film

65 Killers of Kilimanjaro (1959, UK, directed by Richard Thorpe). The “killers” in the film were man-eating lions, though the film depicted both African and Arab characters as obstacles to the ambitions of white men determined to build a railway in East Africa, and the film draws on imagery of white men hoodwinking African characters that dates back to West of Zanzibar in 1927, as discussed in Chapter Two. On Australian censorship of the film, see MHL, MPAA General Correspondence Files [Microfilm] Reel #21, Part 1, Censorship Report, August 31, 1960.
on multiple evenings in a row, and even tried showing Soviet entertainment films on occasion. The latter initiative met with limited success.66

The censorship bans in 1960-1963 affected films from many locations, including older British pictures such as The Thirty-Nine Steps and French films such as Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves (both banned in 1960). American films, so heavily represented in Ghana’s theatres, fell afoul of the censor in large numbers.67 Banned Hollywood productions included 1930s Tarzan adventures, teen pictures such as Gidget, and adult-oriented thriller material.68 The banned films also included pictures that depicted mixed-race interactions, such as The Defiant Ones, in which a black and a white prisoner are shackled together and have to cooperate to their mutual benefit; these had been certified for release in the 1950s.69

Because of the sheer scope of the change in policy it is difficult to assess whether each individual film’s content was examined in detail or whether the national origin of the picture trumped other considerations. The impression that the American industry was the particular target of the Ghanaian authorities is reinforced by the fact that the censors rejected no Indian titles in 1960-1961, the first year of more strict regulation. While many of the Indian films were unobjectionable in content, the same might have been argued of many American films at least with respect to the previous standard of local censorship.

66 Interview, Munir Captan, Accra, October 23, 2012.
67 The 39 Steps (1935, UK, directed by Alfred Hitchcock); Ali Baba et les quarante voleurs (1954, France, directed by Jacques Becker). The 39 Steps had been available to Ghanaian viewers since 1937, when it was shown at the Sea View theatre.
68 Gidget (1959, US, directed by Paul Wendkos).
69 The Defiant Ones (1958, US, directed by Stanley Kramer).
While the censors were careful never to make the connection explicit, the stricter turn in Ghanaian censorship came during a period of tense relations between Ghana and the United States; the smattering of banned films from other countries may have been a strategy to mask the overall intent. The anti-American rhetoric of the early 1960s was a distinct swing away from the policies of the late Eisenhower years, when Nkrumah and most of his government had taken a strongly pro-Western line. The Ghanaian attitude was pragmatic during the early phase of negotiations on the huge Volta River project, the centerpiece of which was a hydroelectric dam designed to provide power for the aluminum industry as well as for the needs of Ghanaian households. By 1958, though, Nkrumah had begun to steer a more independent course even if his relationship with the US remained outwardly cordial; he visited Washington in that year at President Eisenhower’s invitation.

From early 1960, the relationship between the two countries had begun to sour and by the end of that year US officials were suggesting that Nkrumah was leaning toward the Soviet bloc, particularly after Ghana accepted a Soviet aid package. The primary precipitating event for the change of tone was the crisis that erupted in the Congo in July 1960. While the US was involved at various levels in the events that led to the overthrow of Patrice Lumumba, Ghana had pledged its support to Lumumba’s government in mid-July 1960, before any other nation. Nkrumah felt a personal

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connection to Lumumba and the Ghanaian leader attempted to steer his own distinct policy in the Congo, independent from both the US and Soviet lines: he even discouraged Lumumba from seeking Soviet assistance at one point.\textsuperscript{72} Ghana was also aggrieved by US policy on Algeria, another situation of colonial transition where the US and Ghana found themselves on opposite sides. The request to re-censor all films already in Ghana came at almost the same moment as the outbreak of the Congo crisis, in July/August 1960, although the cinema managers who dealt with the consequences of the change in policy did not draw a connection between the two events.

The official relationship with the US became even more difficult after the death of Lumumba in January 1961 just at the moment of the transition from President Eisenhower to President Kennedy. Some Ghanaian officials “instituted a policy of shunning contacts with American representatives in Ghana” at the time.\textsuperscript{73} This was combined with President Nkrumah’s efforts to develop a more personal relationship with President Kennedy to present his views, and the Ghanaian leader visited the White House in March 1961. In subsequent months, he wrote directly to his American counterpart, something that irritated American diplomats who felt that other channels were more appropriate.\textsuperscript{74} Among other things, they felt that Nkrumah overstated his importance by choosing to communicate through such mechanisms. For their part, senior members of the Ghanaian administration may well have been distressed to discover that in the wave

\textsuperscript{72} Nwaubani, “Eisenhower, Nkrumah and the Congo Crisis,” 614.
of newly-independent African nations after 1960 they no longer occupied the special position that had been theirs since 1957.

The reason for this dual-track Ghanaian policy of recalcitrance and friendship was again rooted in a pragmatic recognition that whatever their differences on other issues, the US was Ghana’s only realistic partner in the Volta River project, which had enormous personal and political significance for Nkrumah. Before and after construction, imagery of the project featured in government propaganda materials, with newsreels, posters, and newspaper articles drawing a close personalized link between Nkrumah and the success of the project. Successor regimes also made use of the project to present an internal and external image of Ghanaian modernity on stamps, currency and other visible symbols of the state – the 1972/3 currency issue included a picture of the Akosombo Dam on the 10 cedi note even though the National Redemption Council regime otherwise rejected Nkrumah’s legacy.

The Volta River issue was the source of much irritation at the beginning of the Kennedy presidency, with US officials differing on whether they should work with Nkrumah given the overall challenge of the relationship with Ghana at that period. There were regular protests outside the US embassy in Accra and highly critical commentary in local newspapers in early 1961, all carefully managed by the Ghanaian government.

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76 While Ghana’s National Museum in Accra is severely underfunded, it does have useful displays of Ghanaian currencies through the years.
77 JFK, Ghana: Security, January 1961. MA. Telegram from Russell (Accra) to Secretary of State, January 31, 1961. One protest involved as many as 300 people, with US officials easily able to identify many of the
The American film industry representative in Lagos suggested that the US government’s hesitation over finalizing its participation in the Volta River project due to uncertainties about working with Nkrumah could explain the stricter censorship of the period. The American wavering affected the Ghanaian attitude “not only toward us [Americans] but towards all foreigners doing business in the country.” Indeed, the period was so sensitive that the representative felt that it would not be worthwhile for him to meet with Ghanaian officials until there was greater clarity about US involvement in the Volta River project.78

The US hesitated to commit to the project as they were unsure whether they could rely on Nkrumah’s geopolitical orientation – not so much because of his use of socialist vocabulary but because of the pragmatism that led him to shift course when necessary. The US ambassador in Accra was also aware of the substantial accusations of personal and party corruption circulating in a press that still enjoyed considerable freedom in 1960. Nkrumah’s own knowledge of the public discussion of financial propriety led to his April 1961 Dawn Broadcast, which proclaimed new limits on material gains for the political class and which resulted in temporary political exile for some members of his circle. By 1963, Nkrumah’s strategy had changed to one of limiting any criticism of him and his party through a much more repressive set of controls on the press: newspapers now needed to get a license to operate, while the government took over the Daily Graphic in 1962.79 Even in 1961, Nkrumah’s government was tightening its control on

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the press and the US authorities tried to use this in their favor, lobbying Nkrumah directly on the repeated and very public negative press commentary about American policies. At one point in January 1961 Nkrumah “said casually ‘I have spoken to the press,’” in response to entreaties from the US ambassador.\textsuperscript{80}

The one more positive note in US-Ghanaian relations during this period of tension was the arrival of the first group of 51 American Peace Corps volunteers in the late summer of 1961. The volunteers received pre-departure training from a number of American academics, including St. Clair Drake, professor at Roosevelt University in Chicago and, at the time, Chair of the Department of Sociology at the University of Ghana.\textsuperscript{81} Drake and his wife Elizabeth spent much of the 1950s conducting research in Ghana, including projects on mass communications in Africa, and Elizabeth Drake focused on the impact of the movies in Ghana. Their work is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five.

\textit{AMPECA and Ghanaian Officialdom}

Throughout the early period of AMPECA operations, Eric Johnston continued to communicate with the Ghanaian officials he had encountered during his initial trip to Accra. In 1961, for instance, he wrote to the director of the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC), Emmanuel Ayeh Kumi in follow-up to a prior meeting. The IDC oversaw the state-owned West African Pictures Company and Johnston, who was a

\textsuperscript{80} JFK, Ghana: Security, January 1961, Telegram from Russell (Accra) to Secretary of State, January 31, 1961.

\textsuperscript{81} JFK, Peace Corps: General: Profiles-Descriptions of First Nine Projects, November 1, 1961.
polished diplomat, offered his assistance with Ayeh Kumi’s journey to New York in the context of the Conference on African Resources that year. His letter made no attempt to conceal his overall purpose, to “improve the distribution of American films in Ghana.”

While AMPECA had cordial relations with the major private film importing/exhibiting companies in Ghana, government officials did not roll out the red carpet despite such efforts to curry favor. Ministers and other senior officials made a habit of avoiding any proposed meetings with AMPECA representatives in the early 1960s, just as many of them shunned representatives of the American government. The AMPECA agent in Lagos displayed increasing signs of exasperation in his reports back to New York (where the agency was headquartered), and his views filtered into the pages of industry journals like *Variety*. This reinforced the sense that Ghana could be a difficult place to do business in the early 1960s due to the Nkrumah government’s lack of consistent support for American exporters.

*Variety* published a report from the US Department of Commerce that outlined some of these challenges across newly-independent African nations. The report set American business aims and “African nationalism” in opposition to one another and also suggested that the expressed interest of some newly-independent African countries to establish their own film industries could hamper US attempts to increase its market share. These general concerns were more acute in the case of Ghana given the country’s import controls, capricious changes in censorship policy, and limitations on the

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82 PRAAD RG7/1/127, Letter from Eric Johnston to Emmanuel Ayeh Kumi, February 2, 1961. Johnston was Chair of the conference, which was a joint project by New York University and an organization called African Fair, Inc.

availability of foreign currency. That the American industry did not retrench was a sign of its own pragmatism: AMPECA believed the market prospects in Ghana were stronger than anywhere else in West Africa because of the deep implantation of the cinema in the local leisure landscape.

There is no indication that Ayeh Kumi took up the offer extended by Eric Johnston, consistent with the official frostiness toward American industry outreach during the early 1960s. A subsequent letter from Jack Labow, AMPECA’s Lagos manager, to Ayeh Kumi noted that the writer had been seeking an audience with the Ghanaian official for several years at that point. Ayeh Kumi was an important political player who spent a good deal of his time trying to generate revenue for the CPP so that the party could channel largesse across the country to reinforce its political support. As such, he had a great many demands on his time. However, the MPEA/AMPECA also underestimated the potential for Ghanaian officials to be aggrieved at the decision not to establish an office in their country given their particular pride in the idea that Ghana should be in the vanguard of new developments on the African continent. In an early analysis, an MPEA official warned of this possibility, and stressed that the MPEA could not “arbitrarily lump the countries into one operation,” for both Nigeria and Ghana were

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85 Selwyn Ryan, “The Theory and Practice of African One Partyism: The CPP Re-Examined,” Canadian Journal of African Studies, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1970), 152. As Ryan notes, much of Nkrumah’s concern in the aftermath of his “Dawn Broadcast” was that revenue destined for the party “was being shortcircuited into the pockets of party functionaries at the national and local level,” and not about corruption per se.

86 Garlick, African Traders, 126. It should be noted that some of Ayeh Kumi’s negative comments about Nkrumah came in the context of a post-coup investigation in 1966, when Ayeh Kumi no doubt felt the need to conform to the new political dispensation.
sensitive “with respect to their neighbors.” That Ghana was not the final selection would have been a bitter pill to swallow for officials accustomed to being a high priority for Western business interests in previous years.

While AMPECA’s manager was unable to meet with Ayeh Kumi he did receive an audience with the Minister for Information, who had assumed oversight of West African Pictures during one of many recalibrations of administrative authority in the immediate post-independence years. When Labow met with the minister in early 1962 the latter was in control of censorship and of the state’s commercial cinema operations. The fact that one official controlled two key aspects of the administrative apparatus still did not assist West African Pictures with gaining new commercial traction, for the private-sector competition was better connected to the central power structure.

The long-gestating meeting with AMPECA was not cordial. The Minister “made it quite clear that they resented our coming into Ghana. He felt that distribution of our pictures should be “vested in other hands,” specifically those of his own ministry, which would then have been able to sign its own contracts with other Ghanaian cinema operators such as the Captans or the Nankanis. On that point, however, AMPECA would not budge, insisting on its right to enter into commercial contracts directly with both West African Pictures and its competitors. A few months later, a second meeting

87 WBA, file Africa/AMPECA, Miscellaneous to 12/31/62 16579A, memorandum no. 217, West Africa, March 29, 1961. AMPECA also ran into constant problems with Nigerian customs, which delayed the release of films returned from Ghana, adding to the length of time each print was in circulation. The Nigerian authorities tried to charge customs duty when films were returned, too, even before AMPECA could verify that films were actually returned intact. WBA, file Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous 1/1/63 to 12/31/64 16579A, George C. Vietheer to AMPECA board, June 12, 1963.
produced a similar stalemate. At the same time, West African Pictures tried to renew contacts with individual American companies rather than dealing with them through AMPECA. This was a quixotic endeavor that put the company at a disadvantage with other operators: the Captans had free rein to purchase whatever they wanted while West African Pictures explored the doomed alternative. West African Pictures persisted in its efforts for some time, with AMPECA member studios warned again a year later about the Ghanaian government’s attempts to control distribution of their films.

The divergent experiences of the state and private cinema networks suggest intense competition between different political interests about which model of control to follow when it came to allowing the American industry to sell its product in Ghana. The lack of success for the state-owned chain reinforced the sense of behind-the-scenes negotiations over control of the film pipeline, in the manner that Fred Cooper suggests characterizes interest group competition within the post-colonial gatekeeper state. Governments desired to maintain control of the interface with the outside world as it provided them with multiple opportunities to levy taxes, regulate currency, and issue licenses, among other methods of control. All of these are present in the Ghanaian government’s interactions with the American film industry, with the existence of a state-owned cinema chain adding yet another layer that created competition between different components of the state apparatus. Thus while a ministry might be responsible for

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90 WBA, file Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous to 12/31/62 16579A, Memorandum from George C. Vietheer to AMPECA board, April 20, 1962.
91 WBA, file Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous 1/1/63 to 12/31/64 16579A, George C. Vietheer, report to AMPECA board, October 3, 1963.
promoting the state-owned cinemas, the Minister in charge might also be extracting payment from a private chain for his own or his party’s benefit.

**AMPECA’s Early Operations: Forecasts Meet Reality, 1962-1964**

To its members, AMPECA broadcast a desire to establish new markets in Africa and forecast that it could double its earnings within a year of beginning operations, to a total of US$300,000 in 1963 and as much as US$500,000 in 1964. Even accounting for the substantial expense of maintaining an office and an expatriate and local staff in Nigeria, this would have made the venture very profitable within one year of arrival.\(^{92}\) The figure was predicated on the misplaced assumption that AMPECA would quickly succeed in transforming existing commercial practices across West Africa, resulting in earnings far beyond the previous average revenue of around US$1,500 per picture.

While introducing new practices into the local markets remained an AMPECA concern, the bigger target was not the African audience as a whole but rather the newly-emerging middle class, as well as the remaining European expatriate population. To that end, AMPECA was involved not just in the film distribution trade in Nigeria but also in the construction of new cinemas, with a particular focus on high-end, air-conditioned venues aiming at a higher ticket price market. In Nigeria, their focus was on a market segment that consisted of as few as 50,000 people in the early 1960s – 20,000 Europeans and 30,000 middle-class Nigerians from a population of around 40 million. The MPEA

\(^{92}\) WBA, file Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous 1/1/63 to 12/31/64 16579A, Memorandum on Earnings Forecast, George C. Vietheer to AMPECA board, May 15, 1963.
had every expectation that this more lucrative audience would increase in size as the
decade advanced. An industry journalist suggested that the middle-class and European
audiences “eschewed going to the openair, hardbench” theatres previously available.93
The MPEA phrased the problem slightly differently, suggesting that there was no
opportunity for the industry to engage with “politically important segments of the
population,” who “simply never go to the movies because they neither want to see the
pictures shown nor to sit in the kind of theatres available.” By this, the MPEA meant
Nigeria’s small middle class, country’s the political and economic decision-makers who
could be disproportionately profitable if they could be persuaded to take up the cinema-
going habit in high-end, high-priced theatres.94

AMPECA did not become involved with theatre management or construction in
Ghana: the agency believed that local success could only come from keeping the
distribution and exhibition sectors entirely separate to avoid tempting the Ghanaian state
to add distribution control to its existing network of cinemas. They feared the Ghanaian
administration would act as a drain on Hollywood’s prospects of financial success in the
local market if it controlled distribution. Against the Cold War backdrop of competing
models of state control in the early 1960s, the American industry was wary of any hint of
nationalized industry.

Its initial experiences in dealing with Ghana’s state-run chain and its censorship
apparatus only confirmed their concerns that the state would prove less able than the

94 WBA. File Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous to December 31, 1962. MPEA Memorandum No. 217
private sector to deliver business success, and the Americans were well aware of suggestions that government control had not benefited the cocoa production sector.\textsuperscript{95} Ghana’s political class gave further fuel to this idea themselves by undermining the state network’s efforts to establish itself: they often favored the competing Captan network since it was a source of patronage for figures in the government. Nonetheless, the MPEA continued to believe that Ghana would be the more lucrative market per capita if only political and censorship conditions were more favorable. The Lagos office estimated that it could earn a minimum US$2,000 per picture in each of Ghana and Nigeria if the former “opens up,” with smaller figures for each of Liberia and Sierra Leone.\textsuperscript{96} The MPEA ascribed the larger possible per capita returns from the Ghanaian market to the greater degree of competition in the market, with three substantial networks and several smaller-scale operators who owned two or three theatres.

The MPEA’s understanding of the Ghanaian market was deeply flawed, however. The organization was convinced that many of its problems in Ghana could be explained by the attempts of the Lebanese- and Indian-owned firms to drive West African Pictures out of business. The MPEA’s assumption that this resulted in government retaliation, especially censorship, displayed a fundamental failure to grasp the complexities of the state’s interests at the time.\textsuperscript{97} The MPEA also took the view that at least some of their problems stemmed from the desire of the Ghanaian authorities to completely exclude

\textsuperscript{96} WBA File WBA, File Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous 1/1/63 to 12/31/64 16579A, AMPECA, August 20, 1964. Gambia was theoretically part of the AMPECA arrangement but is very rarely mentioned in AMPECA documents.
Lebanese traders from the business. Again, the evidence of the government’s own actions is altogether more ambiguous than the MPEA reading of the situation suggests. Nkrumah’s government actively cultivated Lebanese business owners when it suited its interests, often to the detriment of African entrepreneurs since Nkrumah was concerned that the latter might establish an alternative power base. Expatriates, by contrast, could more easily be regulated, including through deportation. The treatment of expatriate owners was a source of considerable concern to the American industry, and may have been a factor in the industry’s decision not to add an Accra office to its Lagos operation, another illustration of the broad American sense of the challenges to business in Ghana at the period.

Despite the manifold challenges, there were reasons for persistence, not least the fact that there were a great many more cinema screens per capita in Ghana than in Nigeria. However, until the American industry took a more active interest in the local market, Ghanaian consumers almost always purchased the cheapest possible tickets. Records of the takings for West African Pictures in the late 1950s show that more than half the tickets sold were for the cheapest price range, that which appealed most to lower-class viewers and/or the young. Fully 90% of the tickets sold from 1956-1959 were in the


99 In 1962, the MPEA listed 73 theatres in Ghana, with 80,000 seats, for a population of close to 7 million people (the population in the 1960 census was estimated at 6.7 million). Nigeria had the same number of theatres, for a population that may have been as high as 55 million in 1963, although the Nigerian censuses of 1962-1963 were highly controversial and likely overestimated the population at that time. The MPEA estimated the population at closer to 40 million. WBA. File Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous to December 31, 1962. West African Report, George C. Vietheer, December 3, 1962. Of Ghana’s 73 theatres, up to 15 were deemed operational on a “sometime” basis. WBA, file Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous 1/1/63 to 12/31/64 16579A, George C. Vietheer, report to AMPECA board, October 3, 1963.
two cheapest categories. In order to continue to stay in business at such prices, exhibitors prioritized rental of the cheapest pictures, and West African Pictures avoided the first-run films that would have been more expensive to acquire. This became a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy that excluded the middle-class market: low-rent films did not appeal to better-off customers and this in turn ensured that the network never had much money to invest in higher-profile films.

The various urban exhibitors in Ghana realized the flaw in their business strategy in the late 1950s and began looking at opportunities for greater investment to turn their venues into more attractive destinations that could attract a well-heeled audience. West African Pictures Company became vocal in requesting an infusion of funds from the central government to create a marquee location capable of screening top-drawer films. The company advocated for a kind of national theatre on a par with the finest international venues and attempted to appeal to notions of national pride. This was politically astute in the post-independence period as Ghana sought to position itself as a modern, innovative country though the appeals were of limited practical success and the national cinema venue never materialized.100

In seeking out the middle class consumers, the interests of the local exhibitors in Ghana and those of the Hollywood industry were beginning to converge even before the establishment of AMPECA. Theatre owners in Ghana started to build more enclosed, air-conditioned cinemas both in Accra and in new locations such as Tema well before 1961.

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100 PRAAD RG3/5/1433 Application to Charge Special Prices Rex Cinema. Ghana acquired a Chinese-built National Theatre for stage performances in 1992 but the Rex remained a small venue throughout its cinema life despite its ideal location in downtown Accra.
AMPECA’s key goal was to begin importing and projecting high-end Hollywood films, which depended for their success on this kind of premium venue. AMPECA recognized that the American industry had often fobbed African audiences off with inferior or older product, not a strategy that was likely to work with the more cosmopolitan audience is was increasingly focused on.

Of course, even before AMPECA began operations, older films did not always mean a poor quality product for Ghanaian audiences. David O. Selznick’s company specialized in prestige productions and signed contracts directly with Gold Coast exhibitors long before the MPEA began to explore the market for its members, in addition to distribution through intermediaries in England and South Africa. Business records make clear that Selznick’s company sought to supply high quality prints even for such marginal markets as the Gold Coast, assembling the best possible version of a film from the available reels in their warehouse. When Selznick supplied copies of the 1947 Hitchcock film *The Paradine Case* and the 1936 *Garden of Allah*, an exotic adventure featuring Marlene Dietrich, to the Captan company in 1953 there was extensive internal correspondence over the supply of a good quality trailer for the latter film, part of the company’s overall concern to maintain a certain level of prestige for its products.\(^{101}\)

In the early 1960s, AMPECA tried to impose a similar degree of quality control for films supplied by the major studios. AMPECA’s representative in Lagos was quick to highlight instances when individual studios did not appear to be holding up their end of

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101 Selznick Papers, Box 1471, Folder 5. The cost to Captan was US$748, or about US$6,500 in 2015 dollars.
the bargain. Warner Bros. acquired a particular reputation for sending lower-quality prints, which was problematic for AMPECA as it sought to project itself as a newly-installed guardian of quality and reliability for the American industry. It would also have been very difficult for AMPECA to increase the rents it charged if the product was inferior. In addition, the individual prints were now supposed to play on many more consecutive days, increasing wear and tear.\textsuperscript{102}

Warner Bros. did work to respond to the AMPECA concerns for they feared that the agency would prefer the films offered by other companies.\textsuperscript{103} The AMPECA manager rejected Warners’ argument that such prints had hitherto been acceptable, pointing out that AMPECA was attempting to cultivate an entirely new market niche which would not tolerate shoddy material. Warner Bros. executives conceded that the company’s customers might previously have been wary of complaining about issues like print quality as they felt that they were otherwise getting a good deal. The West African market was not, at the time of AMPECA’s establishment, the highest priority for Warners: internal documents indicate a pecking order, with “New Zealand, Pakistan, Formosa, Bermuda, Trinidad, Jamaica” and the cinemas controlled by Aramco, the American company which managed oil exploitation in Saudi Arabia, all figuring further up the list.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{103} WBA, File Africa/AMPECA – Materials to 12/31/63 16579A, Internal Memorandum from Mac Greenberg to Sol Zwicker, December 21, 1962. Whatever the print quality, however, the studio was supplying prints of its most high-profile films, including recent titles such as \textit{Splendor in the Grass} (1961, US, directed by Elia Kazan).
\textsuperscript{104} WBA, File Africa/AMPECA – Materials to 12/31/63 16579A, Internal Memorandum from Sol Zwicker to Mac Greenberg, January 8, 1963. In some senses, Aramco was not dissimilar to AMPECA: it represented the interests of multiple different American oil companies on the ground overseas.
In this very early phase, AMPECA struggled as much to impose a new way of thinking on its own members as on its West African customers, and its success in West Africa was by no means immediate. Six months after AMPECA opened the Lagos office, there were rumors in the trade newspapers of the troubles that the operation faced, with the hopes of US$2 million in rentals in the operation’s first year swiftly downgraded to US$400,000 across the five markets for which the office was responsible. This figure was essentially the same as the unremarkable market norm that prevailed before AMPECA’s arrival and in response AMPECA claimed that its initial goals had always been less ambitious. As *Variety* wrote in its house style, AMPECA had “assumed from the start that the operation would be slow in starting since it requires ‘re-educating’ native exhibs to modern American biz practices.”

Even if the early phase of operations was not as lucrative as hoped, the agency’s arrival shake up long moribund distribution networks. One of AMPECA’s early priorities was to track all of the films currently in distribution across the territories for which it was responsible, a particularly challenging undertaking given the sheer number of films in question as well as the multi-year licensing arrangements that were common in the pre-AMPECA years. The industry’s mere presence close by prompted exhibitors to dig out and return long-forgotten pictures so that they could begin to get access to the more up-to-date or attractive product supplied by AMPECA. In most cases, prints of these older films should have been burned at the expiration of contracts since they were too worn to

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be useful elsewhere in the exhibition network: in some cases local distributors retained the prints but sent a certificate attesting to the destruction. Some of these prints turned up as late as 1963 despite having been “destroyed” in 1955 or 1956.\textsuperscript{107} AMPECA tried to root out the deceptive practice by refusing to supply new films to anyone believed to be supplying false certification.\textsuperscript{108}

This was a clear indication of AMPECA’s desire to impose a new business model on its own terms, even if this did not always accord with local practice (legal or otherwise). Just as AMPECA intended to bring more up to date material to African audiences, they also intended to force through those business practices that were then standard in its mature markets. Ghanaian exhibitors were accustomed to renting films for a fixed fee for a defined period, often as long as five years, or to buying films outright when they came from India or, on occasion, Egypt. AMPECA much preferred a method whereby it was guaranteed in advance a certain percentage of the box office receipts. The guaranteed sum was substantial, and often had to be earned in a limited exploitation period (measured in weeks). In order to comply with these rental conditions cinema owners had to adopt a different exhibition model, projecting the same film for many days in a row in order to meet the studios’ ambitious financial targets. As indicated in previous chapters, most consumers in Ghana were accustomed to near-constant turnover in the screen offerings and exhibitors were concerned that any change in their exhibition

\textsuperscript{107} WBA, file Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous 1/1/63 to 12/31/64 16579A, George C. Vietheer to AMPECA board, June 12, 1963.

\textsuperscript{108} WBA, file MPEA (Notes of Meeting) 1963 16628A, Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Board of Directors of the MPEA, August 21, 1963. This was the preferred strategy, as opposed to legal action, which the MPEA thought would be expensive and without guaranteed results.
practices would disadvantage them compared to their competitors, or even drive them out of business altogether.

AMPECA’s insistence on this rental method, designed to channel more potential profit from each film directly back to the US, slowed down its success in the first years of operation as it attempted to persuade local owners of the potential benefits to them. In addition, there was also criticism of the “the ‘monopolistic’ nature of the subsid [sic] [i.e. AMPECA] – one critic suggesting that this is hardly the way to demonstrate ‘democracy at work.’”109 This kind of criticism provides a window into the way in which the Hollywood industry continued to be seen as a source of “soft” diplomatic power for US interests, which could go awry if the intended targets of such diplomatic outreach perceived the industry’s methods to be heavy-handed. The irony in the Ghanaian situation was the fact that the state sought its own position of monopoly power with respect to American films, repeatedly trying to govern distribution of Hollywood product. They had learnt Hollywood’s lesson of tight control of the supply line rather well.

AMPECA took a more active hand in the Nigerian market by funding a number of new cinema venues. This put it in a position to organize its first film screenings in Lagos in August 1962. Since it depended on local partners in Ghana, the agency did not sign its first major contract for that country until early 1963 when the Captan company agreed a deal for 52 pictures, with a minimum of one picture to be played each week.110 Unlike previous contracts, Captan agreed to a minimum return per picture as a percentage of the

overall revenue, and the pictures were to play on a restricted first run circuit over a short period of time (no more than eight weeks). While the deal was not especially lucrative, AMPECA was delighted because “it establishes a pricing policy which has been hard-fought against by Captan.” AMPECA anticipated that future deals would move in its favor because Captan’s backlog of available pictures would dwindle when older contracts ended.\(^\text{111}\)

Late the previous year, AMPECA had concluded a much smaller deal for five pictures with a Mr. Russek, who owned one theatre in Accra, the Globe, and another in Hohoe. The terms were similar to those subsequently agreed by Captan, and AMPECA’s view was that the success of the Globe contract had forced Captan to the negotiating table. The Globe was a direct rival for the disposable income of the cream of local society, who would otherwise patronize Captan’s Orion theatre. AMPECA reported that Captan experienced a significant downturn in business at the flagship Orion once the Globe started showing the latest attractions.\(^\text{112}\) Both theatres were competitors for the government-owned Rex, which suffered disproportionately during that period.

Captan was a desirable partner not just because of the size of his network but also because he could guarantee payment in either dollars or Nigerian pounds, unlike many smaller operators. By contrast, when AMPECA concluded a deal with West African Pictures, everything that could go wrong – from AMPECA’s perspective – did go wrong: payment was not remitted, box office returns were not supplied, and the prints themselves

\(^{111}\) WBA, file Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous 1/1/63 to 12/31/64 16579A, George C. Vietheer to AMPECA Board, March 25, 1963.

\(^{112}\) WBA, file Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous 1/1/63 to 12/31/64 16579A, George C. Vietheer, report to AMPECA board, October 3, 1963.
were retained for eight months rather than the agreed ten weeks. AMPECA had similar problems with both the Agyepong and Nankani circuits and responded by halting the supply of films until payment arrangements were resolved. While such challenges were not entirely absent from dealings with the Captan circuit, they were less problematic, and Captan resolved complaints promptly.

The dollar allocation was not the only financial challenge to exhibitors and to AMPECA in the early 1960s. In 1962, the Ghanaian government introduced an entertainment tax that had a significant impact on cinema owners, who had to pay a tax on every admission. Theatre operators purchased cinema entry tickets from the government printer, meaning that they had to pay the duty in advance of selling tickets, a significant imposition in a business sector where the margins were modest, particularly for operators smaller than the Captan and West African Pictures networks. While there were various ways of circumventing the regulations, such as by re-selling the same ticket a number of times and only paying the tax on a single entry, the 1962 legislation anticipated at least some of these strategies and included severe penalties for both owners and cinema-goers if they did not comply with the regulations. In order to enforce the regulations, inspectors could enter theatres and see whether everyone was in possession of a valid ticket: cinema-goers could be fined up to GH£10 or imprisoned for up to a month if they had been complicit in avoiding the tax.114

113 WBA, file Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous 1/1/63 to 12/31/64 16579A, George C. Vietheer, report to AMPECA board, October 3, 1963.
The tax on film tickets was at the high end of the scale laid down under the Act, at 33\(\frac{1}{3}\)% of the ticket price. Horse racing, boxing and nightclub entertainments were all taxed at the same rate, whereas dances and football were charged at 25%, and concert parties and theatrical performances were charged at the much lower rate of 10% though over time the rate for cinemas came down to 20%. The highest-taxed entertainment sectors were all dominated by expatriate owners, though not to the complete exclusion of African entrepreneurs; concert parties were considered a more indigenous form of entertainment.

AMPECA termed the new tax “punitive,” perhaps linking it to earlier American analyses suggesting that the government wished to drive non-Ghanaian owners out of the sector entirely in favor of the government-owned circuit. In reality those expatriate businessmen, with multiple different business interests, were probably best placed to survive such a tax since they could move money from one business sector to another to cover the tax costs. While Ghana was not the only country to introduce a tax of this nature in the early 1960s, the rate was very substantial. By contrast, Ireland instituted a tax of just 2\(\frac{1}{2}\)% of turnover on cinema owners in 1963, with exemptions for small theatres.

Ghana’s hefty tax on cinema tickets was part of an extractive mentality that pervaded the early independence state, and for which the term “punitive” seems apt in

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115 PRAAD RG1/2/137 Petition by the solicitors of Samir Omar Captan, income and expense statement for Apollo Cinema & Estates, 1970-1971.
certain cases. Cocoa farmers “had to shoulder an average tax burden of 23.0% during the 1960-65 period,” which led some of them to exit the sector entirely and others to circumvent the Cocoa Marketing Board by transporting their product into Côte d’Ivoire for sale there.\textsuperscript{118} Against the precarious backdrop of plummeting world prices and an extractive state, many migrant workers transferred their labor from Ghana to Côte d’Ivoire and never returned.\textsuperscript{119}

AMPECA also had tax obligations on its earnings. These amounted to 5% of gross billings in Nigeria, while the rate in Ghana was initially set at 10% of gross billings, a rate that AMPECA challenged in repeated meetings with revenue officials, but with little success. As was the case for entreaties on other business matters ministers simply ignored AMPECA requests for meetings and lower-level officials were unable to make any headway on the organization’s behalf.\textsuperscript{120} In this case, at least, silence was quite literally golden from the Ghanaian perspective.

AMPECA’s business was also affected by the upheaval in import licensing, discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three. In March 1964, the Ghanaian government cancelled all import and export licenses for films rented by AMPECA in Lagos. This brought a halt to the shipment of films from Nigeria to Ghana, but also created shortages of many more critical items, as AMPECA noted: potatoes, pepper, and all consumer goods were hard to obtain in Ghana in the immediate aftermath of the license

\textsuperscript{119} Gwendolyn Mikell, Cocoa and Chaos in Ghana (New York: Paragon, 1989), 187.
\textsuperscript{120} WBA file, Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous 1/1/63 to 12/31/64 16579A (second folder), Herbert J. Erlanger to AMPECA board, Re: Ghana – Taxes, December 11, 1963.
cancellations. Film import licenses were subsequently restored after a relatively brief interruption, although it is not clear whether any reallocation of license values from one Ghanaian exhibitor to another took place during the hiatus.\footnote{WBA File WBA, File Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous 1/1/63 to 12/31/64 16579A, Memorandum from George C. Vietheer to AMPECA Board, March 30, 1964.} The AMPECA representative travelled to Ghana to explore whether his agency could obtain any advantage from the confusion over licensing. He tried to negotiate a deal with the Minister of Trade that would allow AMPECA to remit its earnings out of Ghana outside the context of the import license system in order to reduce the impact of such incidents in the future. However, because finance matters were at the time under the direct control of President Nkrumah, the proposal did not advance very far.\footnote{WBA, file Africa/AMPECA miscellaneous 1/1/63 to 12/31/64, memorandum from George C. Vietheer to AMPECA board, April 20, 1964.}

**Hollywood Settles In, 1960s**

Notwithstanding such challenges in the early years, AMPECA became entrenched as the partner for the more ambitious local exhibitors. No matter the challenges, AMPECA had one major selling point: access to high-quality product from the United States. While the agency constantly expressed frustration in its dealings with the Ghanaian authorities, it became a successful business venture and, just as the MPEA originally envisaged, two different exhibition tiers developed, albeit in more haphazard fashion than anticipated. One tier, covering the majority of theatres, including the more ephemeral venues in smaller towns, carried on much as had always been the case, renting films for an extended period or purchasing Indian films outright and then sending them...
around the country on complicated circuits where exploitation of a particular title might last for several months if the film was a hit. The other tier focused on the biggest Hollywood films, designed to appeal to the more affluent audience in Ghana and Nigeria, and followed AMPECA’s preferred rental pattern. These films played at a small selection of high-end theatres.

On occasion, a film that had been a success in the latter format might be re-imported later, after the early fanfare had elapsed, on a kind of informal second-run circuit. By the early 1970s, late in the story of cinema-going in Ghana, the two tiers merged more clearly, with high-profile films staying in Accra for a more extended period before heading off to the provinces in the later phase of the central contract. The MPEA had a similar tiered system in French-speaking West and Equatorial Africa, with an average flat rental price of US$2,000 per picture for the COMACICO and SECMA chains applying to most pictures, and a percentage contract with a minimum guarantee for what the industry termed “roadshow pictures,” that is, their top products, which were exhibited at higher ticket prices and with reserved seating.

AMPECA’s relative success in implementing these policies suggests an important aspect of audience preferences in Ghana, at least in major urban areas. City audiences

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123 Newspaper listings for films as diverse as Bruce Lee’s *The Big Boss* (1971, Hong Kong, directed by Lo Wei) or the horror film *The Exorcist* (1973, US, directed by William Friedkin) suggest this pattern, with an extended engagement in Accra followed by a brief break to facilitate transportation to provincial locations, with especially big hits sometimes shuttling back to Accra for a day or two, breaking up the peripatetic journey.

124 WBA file, MPEA Memorandums May to Aug. 1963 16633B, Memorandum No. 354, French West Africa. The price per picture applied to a 14-country territory, comprising Senegal, Guinea, Benin, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, Niger, Gabon, Central African Republic, Mauritania, Togo, Burkina Faso and Republic of Congo. At that time, American films accounted for 60% of the playing time across those countries. At that time, those countries had a total of 169 theatres between them; Ghana alone had 73 at the time.
increasingly indicated their interest in seeing up-to-date films and in the 1960s they were willing to pay higher ticket prices to see the best American films, whereas for a relatively short period in the late 1950s Indian films had been more popular. From the exhibitors’ perspective, it might have seemed easier to buy prints of Indian films outright at relatively low cost or to continue importing low-grade American or British films at fixed rental costs, including films from the independent American producers that did not participate in AMPECA. However, this would have made little business sense, as at least some of these films would probably have played to empty houses: even in the late 1950s, West African Pictures noted that the extremely low cost for many routine Indian films did not mean that the pictures would be profitable while the company also had difficult relationships with some of its Indian suppliers that led it to cancel contracts outright.  

Indian films also varied in popularity on regional lines, proving consistently successful in Northern Ghana or in those urban locations with sizeable migrant Northern and/or Muslim populations, most notably Kumasi and Accra. The Captan family made a particular point of programming Indian films in heavily Muslim areas, including in the northern town if Tamale, where a family member established an outpost in the 1950s in an area that had been ill-served for decades. The Captans also had a partnership with a cinema operator in Nigeria, who had as many as 30 venues showing 16mm films, and Captan supplied this circuit almost exclusively with Indian pictures. Occasionally,

125 PRAAD RG7/2/146 Members Notes on the Agenda for the 23rd Meeting of the West African Pictures (Ghana) Ltd., 4 September 1959; also Minutes of the 23rd Board Meeting, 4 September 1959.
126 Zeitlin, To the Peace Corps, With Love, 131.
127 WBA, file Africa/AMPECA, Miscellaneous to 12/31/62, memorandum from G. Griffith Johnson to AMPECA board, February 5, 1962.
Indian films all but took over local screens: ten cinemas in Accra showed Indian films on a night in 1966, and the newspaper advertisement drew special attention to this promotion, which crossed company lines.\textsuperscript{128} Even when Indian films were at the height of their popularity in the late 1950s, though, they made up only about 13\% of overall revenues for West African Pictures, and less than 10\% of revenues for Accra cinemas.\textsuperscript{129}

The American industry’s research suggested that in the late 1950s, Indian films made up over 50\% of the films screened in Ghana, which includes the many venues scattered across small towns as well as itinerant circuits, and as much as 75\% of the Nigerian market, but this considered Indian films purely from the perspective of the numbers of titles screened rather than the revenue per film.\textsuperscript{130} In any event, the popularity of Indian films burned brightly for just a few years and fell very quickly in more upmarket theatres when consumers moved on to the latest sensation of American CinemaScope films.

In tandem with the new business practices of the 1960s, there were also important changes to the physical spaces available for cinema-going, particularly in the form of fully enclosed theatres. Enclosed, and sometimes air-conditioned, cinemas offered the possibility of film screenings throughout the day rather than exclusively after dark.\textsuperscript{131} Such theatres necessitated a substantial investment and in order to attract substantial paying audiences these venues had to have equipment capable of showing the latest hits,

\textsuperscript{128} The Evening News, January 26, 1966.
\textsuperscript{129} PRAAD RG7/1/1656 Gross Takings of Indian Films in November 1957, dated December 13, 1957.
\textsuperscript{130} WBA. File Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous to December 31, 1962. MPEA Memorandum No. 217 West Africa, March 29, 1961
which in the early 1960s were often widescreen spectacles – musicals, war films, Westerns filmed on a huge scale, including titles like *Lawrence of Arabia* or *The Sound of Music*. Equipment upgrades had been ongoing since the late 1950s, particularly after the introduction of CinemaScope and similar widescreen processes, which necessitated new projection equipment if theatres wished to offer the biggest hits of that decade. The first big CinemaScope-ready cinema in Gold Coast was the Plaza in Mamprobi, west of the center of Accra, which opened in March 1956 with a screening of James Stewart’s *The Man from Laramie*; the film was just six months old, very recent by local standards.¹³²

Contracts with American companies quickly began to display evidence of the desirability of CinemaScope films: within a year, the Captan chain was requesting some titles only in that format and others in both CinemaScope and non-CinemaScope formats.¹³³ Nigerian theatres were not capable of showing CinemaScope films until late 1961, with theatre owners apparently reluctant to invest in the process before the arrival of AMPECA as they could not previously be guaranteed a steady supply of product.¹³⁴ By then, at least 27 of Ghana’s 73 theatres had been converted, largely in southern locations.¹³⁵ While in the end CinemaScope itself proved to be a short-lived innovation,

¹³² *Daily Graphic*, May 23 and May 29, 1956. This was Accra’s tenth cinema and the opening was a formal gala – evening dress was suggested.
¹³³ WBA, File Capitan Ltd. (sic) Accra, Gold Coast 9/1/57 to 8/31/58 16646A, multiple entries outlining details of print shipments to Accra.
¹³⁵ WBA, file Africa/AMPECA Miscellaneous to 12/31/62, Memorandum No. 217, March 29, 1961. There is a consistent pattern of earlier improvements to Ghanaian cinemas: in 1962, Nigeria had only a single covered theatre, in Jos, though such venues were quite common in Ghana at that point.
other new processes kept the emphasis on spectacle and scale, and on marketing some cinemas as venues for a more upmarket consumer.

The American industry also tried to drum up local interest through visits from major Hollywood stars. Gene Kelly made a gala visit to Accra in January 1964, with advertisements highlighting the visit of Gene “Kwesi” Kelly. The government-run press gave his visit minimal coverage even though he had public appearances hosted by the School of Music and Drama and at both Radio Ghana and the Ghana Film Industry Corporation but even the tepid newspaper coverage admitted that his visit created great popular excitement. Tensions with the US at the political level continued to constrain official enthusiasm for any American visitors, with the notable exception of Louis Armstrong, who made a second triumphal visit to the country in 1962 after a successful 1956 trip. The Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova visited at almost the same time as Gene Kelly and there was far more extensive coverage of her visit in the press, including gossipy follow-up pieces speculating on whether she was pregnant. Whether the populace actually followed every detail of Tereshkova’s life is a different matter.

Ghana’s cinema business of the early 1960s provides an illuminating window through which to examine the realities of post-independence economic and political life, including with respect to Ghana’s external relations. Because almost all films in the early 1960s came from outside Ghana, they needed to pass through the gates of regulation in one or more respects – import licensing, censorship, and the availability of foreign

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136 *The Ghanaian Times*, January 21, 1964. It is not clear why he is referred to as “Kwesi,” as that is not the Akan day name associated with Kelly’s date of birth (by that logic, he should have been “Kofi”). Kelly also visited Cote d’Ivoire, Senegal, and Upper Volta on his trip. The following year, Charlton Heston made a similar trip to Nigeria.
currency all provided mechanisms for the state authorities to impose itself on both individual cinema owners and the exporting agency, the American film industry. The latter’s status as an American entity added a further layer of complication at a period during which the Ghanaian state had a challenging relationship with the United States on the political level even as it tried to cultivate American financial support for Ghana’s signature infrastructure project. The cinema business was used as a pawn to send signals of political displeasure with the US through the mechanism of stricter censorship in the period 1960-1963.

The differing experiences of the state-run and private cinema networks also provide insights into the ways in which members of the ruling regime sought and dispensed favors, with the state-run chain’s limited access to capital a double bind: not only did this limit its ability to access the best Hollywood product and improve its own venues, but it also made it difficult for the network to grease the wheels of the political apparatus in its favor. The long-term consequences of the rapid post-independence spend-down of the state-run network’s working capital became clear when West African Pictures was unable to cultivate political contacts after 1960. By contrast, private networks, first among them the large Captan cinema group, were far more successful in navigating control processes through their ability to contribute to the patronage networks that were a key component of the state’s effort to build loyalty at the local and district levels.

The Captan network could also invest in higher-quality films and begin to build a clientele among the post-independence middle class that had shown little interest in the
pictures over the previous two decades. Where the cinema in the 1940s and 1950s was associated with youth and even delinquency, in the 1960s one tier of viewers could attend the flagship theatre, surrounded by all of the accoutrements of cosmopolitan leisure – fine beverages and dining, expensive tickets, cars – and this functioned as a form of advertising for the lower tiers of the network, provoking interest among cinema-goers not able to afford to attend these venues but eager to participate by watching the same films once they filtered down to the lower tiers of the cinema network.
Chapter Five – Managing Audience Enthusiasm: Elite and Administrative Anxieties, 1930s-1980s

At the height of a big action film at the Opera cinema, young men, screaming with delight for their hero, ripped off their shirts and fling them into the air. Some of the garments caught on the ceiling fans since the Opera was a roofed venue, and the clothing spun around for the remainder of the film before the theatre staff retrieved the patrons’ possessions.¹ This joyous expression of engagement with the film, recounted amid fits of giggles by a former cinema employee, was suspect in the eyes of some observers. Gold Coast and Ghanaian elites castigated the enthusiastic behavior of lower-class audiences at the pictures. They even extrapolated from such incidents that simply to attend the pictures made one suspicious, possibly criminal. Government officials and elite writers leveled this accusation with particular frequency at younger audiences, who they often characterized as being near delinquents – with cinema attendance as the gateway drug to other misbehavior.²

The longstanding disapproval of government officials, members of parliament, and journalists had little deterrent effect on the status of the cinema, however. The pictures increased in popularity from the 1930s to the 1960s, tracking and even exceeding population growth in Ghana’s urban areas. By the end of this period, the cinema enjoyed particular favor in the hearts of the burgeoning population of youths who were only

¹ Interview, Wallace Blankson, Accra, October 23, 2012.
² By the late 1980s, the pattern was reversed, at least for the Ghanaian physician who promoted cinema attendance as part of the process of weaning young addicts off drugs. Joseph Bediako Asare, The Problem of Drug Abuse in Ghana: Guide to Parents and the Youth (Accra: self-published, 1989), 55. Bediako Asare blamed television and newspaper/magazine coverage of celebrity antics for the attractiveness of drugs; the cinema was a benign influence.
marginally employed, and they dedicated much of their limited resources to the cinema. Schoolchildren were also likely to succumb to the attractions of an afternoon at the pictures. Where the initial mechanisms of audience control in the 1920s and 1930s focused on censorship, by the 1950s officials expressed much of their concern about the cinema audience through the juvenile arm of the criminal justice system. At stake here was the attempt to define a particular standard of appropriate youth behavior in urban areas against the backdrop of new social structures and temptations. However, even the chance of a brush with the authorities did not prevent local audiences from developing their own vibrant cinema-going culture. Audiences remained passionate about cinema-going until the Rawlings government of 1981 shut down public night-time leisure through the blunt instrument of a multi-year curfew. This occurred at the same moment that home video players became ubiquitous, bringing the cinema business and its attendant audience culture to an end in Ghana.

This chapter examines official, journalistic, and academic accounts of the cinema audience in Gold Coast/Ghana to assess the ways in which the cinema audience alarmed those in power, and aims to provide a more nuanced picture of the audience’s behavior. The chapter looks in detail at surveys of the audience in the late 1950s and early 1960s from three different viewpoints: the Gold Coast’s Department of Social Welfare, with its focus on juvenile behavior in 1953-1954, the work of a pair of American academics from 1954-1960, and an extensive mass media survey by the United States Information Agency in 1960-1961. These surveys are complemented by an examination of journalistic sources from the 1930s to the 1970s, particularly the work of local columnists and letters
from readers whose concerns prompted them to write to newspaper editors. This newspaper correspondence reached a peak in the 1950s, a decade of constant discussion on what constituted appropriate conduct in a society on the verge of independence.

**The view from the cinema seats, 1950s**

As with any good film, some scene-setting is required. By the 1950s, most urban cinemas were very similar. The vast majority of southern Gold Coast cinemas were open-air, and they were beacons for local commerce. Before every evening screening, the cinemas were surrounded by vendors of one kind or another: children selling ice cream so they could earn the few pence needed for a ticket of their own, hawkers with food and novelties, people trying to sell or re-sell tickets. Patrons walked through the entrance to the box office, purchased a ticket and perhaps some popcorn, and made their way through a gate into the auditorium, with a variety of personnel assigned to ensure that everyone had a ticket. Inside, the seats were arranged in large blocks, rectangular or sometimes in a fan shape.

The physical spaces were not always pleasant. Letter writers in *The Daily Graphic*, a busy group indeed, regularly complained about overzealous security guards, unruly fellow patrons, and broken seating that created risks for the unwary cinemagoer. These comments echo reports by the general manager of West African Pictures, who suggested that when that chain came under state management in 1956 the physical quality of the cinemas left a great deal to be desired. In the subsequent years, the management invested in renovations for all of their Accra venues (five theatres), cleaning and
repainting the theatres and repairing or replacing broken seating, as well as adding public toilets.³ Their efforts only scratched the surface, for in 1961 the management presented a long list of further projects that needed attention – everything from new roofing over the premium seats to repairs to the floors in most venues, as well as the construction of lavatories in those venues that still lacked any such convenience.⁴ The company had difficulty getting quotes for such work and was reluctant to work with the state-owned construction company owing to its reputation for excessive costs.

The Dutch manager of West African Pictures, H.P.H. Juten, also noted that the theatres in the network had managed to bring the problem of fighting between audience members under much better control, by a combination of increased entry prices, stricter security measures, and even the occasional use of police assistance.⁵ While Juten does not expand on the reasons for the fighting, there was a certain amount of territorial jousting within youthful audiences. Many of the cinemas were in the James and Ussher Town areas, located next to one another, and residents of both locations had friendly and unfriendly rivalries on a number of levels, including competing football teams.⁶ Ethnically the two areas were Ga in character, with low numbers of migrant residents and very few non-Ghanaian Africans.⁷ Given the ethnic homogeneity of the areas, rivalries

⁴ The company had difficulty getting quotes for such work and was especially reluctant to work with the state-owned construction company owing to the latter’s reputation for excessively high costs.
⁵ Juten spent two years as manager of West African Pictures, a break in a career largely spent in film distribution in the Netherlands.
⁶ Darby, “‘Let us Rally Around the Flag,’” 221-246.
most often traced their origins to the *asafo*, or group-fighting, companies established in the nineteenth century and still vibrant markers of local identification into the 1950s, although fighting was often at least as common within each company as between the companies.⁸

Notwithstanding such potential negative aspects to the cinema-going experience, many people, especially the youngest fans, hung around the sides of the theatre to see if they could sneak past a security guard. If they weren’t quite that lucky they might perhaps pay a reduced fee to the same guard to turn a blind eye, and once inside they jostled each other in search of the best vantage point. The crowds were much larger on Friday and Saturday evenings, and once larger numbers of people could afford private vehicles from the mid-1950s the traffic could be chaotic outside the largest venues.

Each venue in the 1950s had just a single screen, twenty feet tall or more, which was at the opposite end of the large open space, away from the box office. Ticket prices determined where patrons sat: the sixpenny seats were up closest to the screen, with patrons sometimes forced to sit at odd angles to watch the action. The further back one sat the more expensive the seats became, and box office receipts suggest that the crowd was often very thin back near the entrance.⁹ Most cinemas had a bar or refreshment stand of some kind, in addition to young women selling sweets and other treats within the

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⁹ A member of the first Peace Corps group to travel to Ghana narrated an incident in which he attempted to buy a mid-price ticket at the government-owned Rex cinema, with the ticket seller insistent that he should instead purchase top-price ticket – at the steep sum of 4 shillings – in order not to “degrade” himself. Arnold Zeitlin, *To the Peace Corps, With Love* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 113.
auditorium. Patrons would get up during the movie, or during the interval or breaks between different parts of the program, to purchase something or even just to socialize.

Unlike other cultural forms, cinema-goers in Ghana had few opportunities to also be producers of content, a key distinction from other leisure options such as literature or the concert-party. With the exception of a privileged few with access to 8mm cameras and a handful of technicians who worked for the Gold Coast Film Unit, there were no African film-makers in the colonial period.\textsuperscript{10} Even after independence, Ghana did not develop a film industry along the lines of several francophone West African countries, and the country’s first major feature film dates from 1980.\textsuperscript{11} By contrast, in sport, dancing, or music African consumers could shift into roles as cultural producers, taking ideas from local or distant sources and then adapting them to local leisure practices. Peter Alegi has described the process by which South African soccer players adapted common playing styles from the English and Scottish leagues to the needs of African players and spectators, sometimes placing greater emphasis on individual displays of skill than was routinely the case in the more results-driven British league environment.\textsuperscript{12} The historian Nathan Plageman has explored similar phenomena in the Gold Coast music scene, which saw a constant process of adaptation and re-purposing influences from other bands, or from records made by both foreign and domestic performers.

\textsuperscript{10} 8 mm cameras were first available in the 1930s and were mass-produced from the 1950s in the United States.
\textsuperscript{12} Alegi, \textit{Laduma!}. 

267
It is in these other cultural forms that the influence of the cinema becomes clear: even if films could not be re-purposed back into other films by Gold Coast viewers, they could respond in other formats. Professional actors or musicians might find inspiration in a particular film sequence or a musical interlude, whether it was the blackface comedians of the 1920s, who remained popular in Ghana despite their reputation among North American consumers, or the rock and roll musicians of the 1950s, who first came to mass attention in Ghana through pictures like Rock Around the Clock. The comic Ishmael Johnson, better known as The Original Bob, mined Chaplin and Al Jolson films for inspiration: “I imitated Charlie Chaplin’s work, and turned that style of walking into dancing.”

Audience members would also take hairstyles or items of clothing and introduce them to the street, seeking inspiration from the movies and in the process creating a tentative fan culture for particular genres or performers. One arena where Ghanaians expressed their fandom was on trucks and buses, which they painted with vivid slogans of various kinds. Many drivers and owners daubed their vehicles with religious names, but others made explicit reference to movies with names like “Jack Pallance” (sic), “Samson” (in reference to the popular film Samson and Delilah), and “Summer Holidays” (a nod to a huge film hit of the 1960s) as well as more generic American references like “Chicago Boy.”

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14 Such phenomena were globally common – British cinemagoers of the 1930s noted how they mined films and the associated paraphernalia, particularly magazines, for fashion ideas or hairstyles. See Kuhn, *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger*.
founded in 1942 and still in operation across Ghana, makes its own obvious reference to a popular hero of the time.

*Back in time: early commentary on the Gold Coast cinema audience, 1920s-1930s*

Those who wrote about the cinema almost always occupied the places at the back of the theatres, which gave them a fine view over those who either chose to sit up front or who could not afford to sit anywhere else. The disapproving tone of elite observers evolved over time. In the 1920s and 1930s, when cinema-going was still somewhat novel in the Gold Coast, a substantial portion of the audience was made up of working men, clerks who worked for the colonial apparatus or for one of the various trading firms. On another evening, they might attend a literary club function or enjoy a night of ballroom dancing, all pursuits of the aspirant colonial middle class. At the period, middle-class women – most often wives and girlfriends – also attended the cinema, particularly if the venue also offered post-show dancing.

Although the cinemas in the first two decades of regular film exhibition were a leisure haven for many members of the popular classes they were nonetheless regarded as a reasonable place for an aspiring member of the elite to be seen. The pricing structure meant that venues could cater to more than one clientele, with the best-off patrons concentrated in one section such as a balcony or covered area at the rear of the open-air theatre. A small number of theatres also made a conscious appeal to a more exclusive audience, most notably the high-priced weekly cinema at the Sea View Hotel.
Over time, the audience became both larger and more segmented, although the vast majority of viewers continued to pay for the cheaper tickets. After the Second World War the audience skewed younger and many new of the new cinema patrons were poorly-paid migrants to the city. Venues established in the 1920s and 1930s looked decrepit compared to the new wave of cinemas that opened from the early postwar years, and in the mid-1950s venues such as the Orion and the Globe began to a more affluent audience with fancy décor, bars, and restaurants.

There were strong class preferences when it came to what to watch. More educated Gold Coast viewers enjoyed a wide range of films, including melodramas and musicals. Popular audiences disproportionately favored the cowboy film in the 1920s and 1930s. This was not a prestige item on the Hollywood production line during that decade: the vast majority of Westerns in the first decade after the introduction of sound in 1927 were formulaic films produced by the non-major studios, and Gold Coast audiences loved them. In the late 1920s, Ocansey Palladium, the best theatre in the colony, projected *Rip Roarin’ Roberts, Hard Hitting Hamilton and Double Action Daniels* numerous times, among many similar, titles. All were routine Westerns, now lost.16 Bartholomew's offerings included more drama pictures, but the films themselves remained of low quality. They were also far more dated: where the Ocansey Westerns were two or three years old, some of Bartholomew's offerings in the late 1920s dated from the early

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16 PRAAD ADM/11/1/1278 Board of Control Cinematograph Exhibition. *Rip Roarin’ Roberts* (1924, US, directed by Richard Thorpe); *Hard Hitting Hamilton* (1924, US, directed by Richard Thorpe); *Double Action Daniels* (1925, US, directed by Richard Thorpe). All three were Western films and ran roughly an hour in length.
The theatres appealed to different audiences on different days through their choice of programming, and tended to reserve films with a middle-class appeal for the weekends since many audience members employed in the colonial administration had limited weekday leisure.

There was very little journalistic writing about the cinema experience and the films on Gold Coast screens through the 1930s. A rare and notable exception came in the writings of Mabel Dove in the 1930s. Dove was a pioneer woman journalist who was married to the nationalist politician J.B. Danquah from 1933 to 1940. Dove was also closely associated with the Nigerian newspaper editor and activist Nnamdi Azikiwe, who was in turn an employee of Alfred Ocansey’s in the 1930s, and Mabel Dove’s father Frans represented Azikiwe when he appealed his 1936 conviction on charges of sedition. Dove wrote a weekly newspaper column in the *Times of West Africa* through most of the decade under the pseudonym Marjorie Mensah. Danquah founded the newspaper in 1931 under the slightly different title *West African Times*. Dove’s column focused on women’s affairs, relationships, family life, and morality. Dove commented at length on films she saw at Ocansey’s Palladium in the early 1930s. She recounted the plotlines in detail and suggested that audiences could

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17 It is not possible to identify all of the films censored during this period: some may be lost films or short subjects not covered by any database, while in other cases it would appear as though the local exhibitors used titles of their own invention, possibly because the original titles were not in English. In September 1928, for instance, Bartholomew’s sought censorship certificates for seven films from Germany. However, since neither the censors nor the exhibitor could understand German no-one could even put the reels in the correct order or determine whether there was inappropriate content, and the films were withdrawn and re-exported. PRAAD ADM/11/1/1278 Board of Control Cinematograph Exhibition, Request dated September 18, 1928.

18 Sources disagree on the exact length of the union: 1940 is the most common date.

learn a certain amount at the pictures about both the idea of “love” in general and about the societies that produced the films.\textsuperscript{20} Dove’s comments provide a striking early illustration of the idea that African audiences could engage deeply with the content of a film and use it both as a means of education and as a spur to reflection on matters of personal morality.

Dove took considerable delight in her cinema outings at and commented on the pictures’ artistic qualities, such as in her evaluation of “spectacular grandeur” of one unnamed picture. There may have been some portion of her writing intended to provide a degree of publicity for Ocansey’s theatre since he was an important player on the newspaper scene and closely involved in the same pro-independence circles as Dove. Nonetheless, her positive evaluation of many of the films she saw was sincere, and in the same spirit as her affirmative commentary on novels and locally-produced plays.

In subsequent decades there were strict limits to what Dove felt was appropriate for African audiences. Most notably, in 1955, by which time she was serving as the first female member of the Legislative Assembly, Dove introduced a motion “That this House requests the Government to ban the importation of demoralising films.” In the Assembly, she spoke of her concern that “The film industry in this country is in the hands of foreigners – Syrians, Lebanese and Indians,” recycling racially charged rhetoric heard frequently from the mouths of political figures in the 1950s, a far cry from her earlier support of African cinema owners.\textsuperscript{21} There was also a class dimension to her change of

heart: where she embraced the middle-class cinema experience of the 1930s, by the 1950s she believed that she had a duty of care to lower-class viewers.

Dove’s exhortation to pay close attention to the educational potential of Hollywood films suggests that as early as the 1930s audiences had the capacity to understand English-language films. In early 1933, she contrasted the emotional content of two American sound films, *Gold Diggers of Broadway* and *Sally*, pronouncing in favor of the latter film as a model for behavior. By contrast, *Gold Diggers* could only be recommended to those who held money as the highest ideal. To fully understand the content, though, audiences had to have a decent grasp of English or at least needed the services of a charitable fellow cinema patron who could explain the dialogue.

Colonial officials in many other locations were distressed by the effectiveness of the commercial cinema as an educational mechanism, lamenting the intrusion of American slang in locations otherwise supposed to benefit from the King’s English. The main impediment to the audience’s understanding was not a limited grasp of English but rather a technical problem: colonial administrators in the 1930s suggested that between the outdated equipment and the cinema acoustics dialogue was “completely unintelligible.”

While British officials paint a reasonably sophisticated picture of the early cinema audience, overseas journalists resorted to clichéd presentations and used their cinema

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visits to add a dash of local color to features on West Africa. Even though cinema shows were common in urban areas across the globe by the early 1920s, reporters characterized the African cinema-going experience in exoticized terms. A 1925 *New York Times* piece recounts a visit to Accra’s “Accra Picture Palace,” (Bart’s theatre), just months before that venue lost its monopoly on local cinema-goers. An expatriate in the piece referred to the theatre to it as the “only cinema house on the coast, the only movie (sic) within thousands of miles of country.” This was a wild geographic exaggeration since there were already theatres in Lagos, if not closer. A Chaplin film played at the theatre on the night the *Times* correspondent visited. He described the rapturous reception when the little tramp appeared onscreen, characterized the adult audience as “savages,” unsophisticated viewers less cosmopolitan than a small-town American five-year-old on the basis that they were laughing uproariously at an outdated film. The writer assumes that the poor quality of the print was due to repeated screenings on the Gold Coast, though in fact it is at least as likely that in those early years the prints arrived in Accra in poor state to start with. 24

Even journalists for the specialized trade magazines used this kind of exotic presentation. A 1936 report about cinema-going in Senegal in the trade journal *The Film Daily* is quite representative, and makes much sport of the fact that the African projectionist used a charm to prevent the film from breaking as it whirred through the projector. The apparent disconnect between the old-fashioned belief and the new-fangled machinery is the source of the comedy, although many an American or European

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operator started up his projectors with his own form of prayer given the constant risk of
fire during the fragile nitrate film era.\(^{25}\) The writer also noted that excitable “mobs”
showed up to see any and every cowboy film necessitating the provision of additional
security: the considerable enthusiasm for the Western was by no means restricted to
English-speaking colonies.\(^{26}\)

**Under the Microscope: the Gold Coast audience in the 1950s**

The occasional glimpses of the audiences of the pre-war era mushroomed into a
far more comprehensive examination by the 1950s. As Gold Coast politicians asserted
their desire for independence and contested open elections for the first time, the country
as a whole became a source of fascination for overseas observers.\(^{27}\) Newspapers,
magazines, writers and academics all turned to the Gold Coast to understand what made
this evolving society tick, although they were not always complimentary about what they
found. Cinema-goers found themselves the subject of careful examination too, in part
because of their sheer ubiquity in urban areas of the colony. While some observers
condemned what they saw as naïve identification with big-screen heroes, others gave

\(^{25}\) The Gold Coast escaped any major cinema fire tragedy although in 1956 a film storage facility in Accra
Also interview Wallace Blankson, October 23, 2012. Regulatory prudence did not prevent tragedy
everywhere. The management of the El Dunia theatre in Kano, Nigeria ignored detailed fire and theatre
safety regulations, contributing to a 1951 fire that killed 331 spectators. *Report of the Commissioner
appointed by His Excellency the Governor to enquire into the circumstances in which a fire caused loss of
life at, and destroyed, the El-Dunia Cinema, Kano, on the 13th day of May, 1951*, Commissioner Percy
Cyril Hubbard (Nigeria: Government Printer, 1951).

\(^{26}\) Phil M. Daly, “Along the Rialto,” *The Film Daily*, October 6, 1936.

\(^{27}\) Among many examples, see Oden Meeker & Olivia Meeker, “Letter from the Gold Coast,” *The New
voice to the audience’s concerns and understood that local cinema-goers had an intense
engagement with the material on the screen, using it as a source of reflection as well as a
means of entertainment.

Some of the numerous African-American visitors dedicated significant time to a
discussion of the cinema audience they encountered, going well beyond the surface
impressions of newspaper commentators. Richard Wright’s book Black Power chronicles
his six-week 1953 visit to the Gold Coast, and his view of the local population is
frequently acid in the extreme. 28 He was struck by the number of American movies
projected in Accra and the frequency with which he heard mention of themes from
popular films when chatting to locals. 29 Their awareness that Wright was American
almost certainly affected the tone and content of these conversations. This boom in the
exhibition business also created an environment in which the cinema was more likely to
be a regular topic of conversation for a foreign visitor.

Despite his status as an outsider in the late-colonial Gold Coast, Wright's
conclusions about the pervasive influence of Hollywood “in the mentality of the
Africans” are reminiscent of the attitudes of members of the British colonial
administration as well as of local African elites, who believed that African cinema-goers
took what they saw at face value. Wright was critical of the impact of American films
because he believed that Gold Coast audiences had “no idea of the distorted context of

28 Richard Wright, Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos (New York: Harper Perennial,
29 Wright visited just before the major influx of Indian films, with American dominance almost total during
his trip.
life in which Hollywood actions take place."30 His interlocutors could not convince him of the possibility that they were using film as a device for reflection on their own lives, or as a means to develop a set of professional or personal aspirations. As the anthropologist Brian Larkin and the historian Laura Fair, among others, have shown, African audiences of this time period could display great capacity for self-reflection based on what they saw onscreen, re-purposing commercial films for their own entertainment and educational goals. Wright appeared unable to hear these voices even as he described them, characterizing one man’s movie-inspired professional aspirations as absurd. Wright does not pick up on the possibility that the audiences he observed had their own quite sophisticated set of verbal and behavioral conventions for responding to films: he recorded the quality of detachment in local audience commentaries on the onscreen action, including their sustained and ironic observations on advertisements, without acknowledging their quick-witted analytic ability.31

Wright was associated with the American social scientist St Clair Drake, and he wrote the original introduction to Drake’s seminal 1945 work dealing with Chicago’s South Side, *Black Metropolis*.32 St. Clair Drake and his wife Elizabeth, who unlike many visiting American intellectuals of the period was white, subsequently spent two extended

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31 Wright, *Black Power*, 190. The fictional protagonist of Wright’s novel *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas, makes a trip to the movies that suggests he has a more complex relationship with the cinema than Wright would seem to allow his Gold Coast interlocutors (Bigger took in a double-bill at the Regal Theatre that included the colonial adventure *Trader Horn* (1931, US, directed by W.S. Van Dyke)). Bigger saw films as both a representation of his aspirations and a reflection of his social limitations. See Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 93-113.
32 St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (New York: Harper & Row, 1945). The setting for Drake’s work was the same as that of *Native Son* and Wright’s novel is accurate with respect to the geography and features of the South Side.
periods in the Gold Coast and Ghana. The Drakes conducted their own systematic research into the impact of the mass media, including the cinema. Although the Drakes would have encountered many of the same members of the Gold Coast elite as Wright during his own visit in the early 1950s, their view of the Gold Coast audience was a great deal more nuanced, and provides a useful counterpoint to the views of both cinema owners and local newspaper commentators.

Elizabeth Drake took a particular interest in Gold Coast cinema-goers. She commented with some humor that her interest was prompted by the “special circumstances” of “two American children (…) who were deprived of television” and who insisted on at least a weekly trip to the cinema. Drake’s unpublished work provides fascinating insights into local reactions to specific films and adds a good deal of complicating detail to the standard portrait of audience behavior in Gold Coast/Ghana. She challenges the idea that raucous audience reactions were the norm, and suggests that even where this was the case such behavior was grounded in a local tradition of response to musical and theatrical performance. The rowdiest behavior was confined to two or three of Accra’s theatres, and in those venues such reactions were “conventional and

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33 The Drakes first travelled to the Gold Coast in 1955, and spent the calendar year there. They returned for two years from 1958-1960, by which time Ghana was independent. St. Clair Drake spent the Fall semester of 1954 at Boston University, working at the newly-established African Studies Center.
34 SCD, Box No: 80 [Mass Communications in Tropical Africa], Folder No: 3 Mass Communications in Tropical Africa, “Explorations of the Impact of Movies in Ghana,” by Elizabeth Drake (unpublished manuscript). The prompt to Drake’s research is reminiscent of Hortense Powdermaker’s work as an anthropologist in both the American South and the African Copperbelt: a movie fan herself, it seemed natural to her to go to the pictures and observe the audience’s behavior. See Hortense Powdermaker, *Stranger and Friend: The Way of an Anthropologist* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1966), 209 & 264.
expected behavior” that was absent from other theatres, whether patronized by European or African audiences.

Elizabeth Drake posits that audience reactions to the movies were ritualized to a significant degree, suggesting a direct connection to audiences for cultural forms that pre-dated the cinema in the colony. Gold Coast audiences already had their own conventions for watching local theatrical performances, in particular the vaudeville-esque concert parties that developed in the early twentieth century. These conventions included the expectation and even the encouragement of audience response to the onstage action, and could be imported to viewings of a new cultural form.\(^{35}\) Drake describes the way that the audience chanted in unison every time someone was knocked down and suggests that for Ga audiences jeering was the standard response to any such situation, whether it involved friend or foe, onscreen or off. This aligns with other accounts suggesting that throughout fight scenes popular audiences would yell expletives in Ga and Twi, usually amounting to some version of “kick the crap out of him!” or less polite variations thereon.\(^{36}\) The downtown theatres in Jamestown and Usshertown were in Ga districts, meaning Ga viewers had a direct neighborhood connection to the movies from the earliest days of exhibition.

Daily interactions in other contexts could also have a ritual aspect: in addition to the codified aspect of greetings and other routine communications, more robust


\(^{36}\) Interview, Munir Captan, Accra, October 23, 2012. See also Zeitlin, *To the Peace Corps with Love*, 162; Zeitlin, an early Peace Corps volunteer, suggests that the most common exhortation during fight scenes was closer to “up your private parts.” Audiences on the Copperbelt were equally vocal, with different conventions: during Western fight scenes, the audience would often stand up and yell “Wa! Wa! Give blow!” Powdermaker, *Stranger and Friend*, 264.
exchanges could have a call and response aspect. The political scientist Maxwell Owusu recounts a vivid scene from the streets of Swedru, a town located between Accra and Cape Coast. After outlining the various stereotypes that different ethnic groups used to categorize one another, he commented that it was “not uncommon to see people on the street corners of Swedru to see people of different ethnic backgrounds (...) hurl abuses at one another for some time, or tease one another, and then quickly turn to other subjects of mutual interest—the cost of living, or how their football club is faring in the national league.”

The mention of a popular sport, with its own ritualized forms of supporter interaction, makes a link to another theatre of formalized expression familiar to many cinema-goers.

Nonetheless, in other venues even a packed holiday audience could remain silent, as was the case for a Christmastime showing of the film Hiawatha at the downtown Opera theatre owned by the Captans. The action-adventure film featured only Native American characters, although it made little pretense at historical accuracy; nonetheless, the depiction of Hiawatha’s pacifism led to accusations in the US that the film was Communist in intent. Silence was especially important at the Opera because of the venue’s poor acoustics, and audiences seem to have had, at least some of the time, a genuine interest in what was going on at the level of the dialogue. Drake commented on

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37 Maxwell Owusu, Uses and Abuses of Political Power: A Case Study of Continuity and Change in the Politics of Ghana (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970), 151. The stereotypes were many and varied: the Lebanese did not wash, and lured young local women into prostitution, the Hausa were unclean, the Ashanti proud and boastful, the Nigerians dirty, inland Fante rural and rustic, Indians clannish and liable to use magic. In this hierarchy, coastal Fante – the native population of the area and the generators of the hierarchy – emerged with the most credit.

38 Hiawatha (1952, US, directed by Kurt Neumann).
the whispers with which some viewers translated the dialogue in many films into local languages for the benefit of those who did not speak English, characterizing this behavior as being self-educational in nature: the audience wished to ensure its own full understanding of the picture on such occasions.

Drake contradicts the cinema owners who insisted that local audiences only wanted to see cowboy films despite the evidence by the 1950s of a more nuanced and diverse audience that the owners possessed in the form of their own box office records. In fact, as Drake estimated from her own painstaking research compiling newspaper records and advertisements, cowboy films comprised no more than 15-20% of film shows in the late 1950s in urban Ghana, with the city audience by then very broad in its interests. In addition to the Indian films that were popular during that period, she found that other Hollywood genres, long dismissed as useless in terms of attracting local audiences, were in fact a steady lure. She suggests a degree of audience fragmentation here, with the younger attendees continuing to embrace the Western and the low-rent action picture, while audience members in their twenties sought out dramas and more polished entertainments. Women attendees most often chose to attend dramatic fare if

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39 SCD, Box No: 66 [Ghana], Folder No: 1 Diary and Notes, 1954, “Interview with Mr. Barakat,” no date.
40 There is ample evidence that Westerns were a huge draw in Southern and Equatorial Africa at this time, particularly on the Copperbelt and other major mining/industrial locations. See Burns, Flickering Shadows and Ambler, “Popular Films and Colonial Audiences.” The cowboy film was greatly influential on local youth culture in many locations. See, for instance, De Boeck & Plissart, Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City, 36, for a vivid description of the impact of the Western on the development of the phenomenon of Billism: “In particular the image of the buffalo hunter and culture hero Buffalo Bill, alongside other cowboys such as Pecos Bill, left a deep impression. These cowboys provided ideal models for the young Kinois, who imitated the appearance (blue jeans, checkered shirt, neckerchief, lasso) and the tics of the Hollywood actors. After each movie, these young urban cowboys circulated on their ‘bicycle-horses’ to announce the message of the western (mofewana, Lingala deformation of Far West), crying loudly Bill oyee!, upon which the bystanders would reply with serumba!”
they were purchasing their own tickets (attending the cinema alone was not uncommon, for either men or women). The audience also included a dedicated subset of consumers who went to the pictures at least weekly and for whom self-identification as a cinema-goer was important.41

In an effort to understand the contradiction between box office evidence and owner opinions, Drake interviewed dozens of viewers after they attended performances of the American drama *Sentimental Journey*. The 1946 film deals with themes of grief and loss, and includes some mild supernatural elements. Drake took the film as an example of a genre that was the polar opposite of the cowboy action picture. *Sentimental Journey* was popular in the Gold Coast for over a decade, with exhibitors re-importing it regularly on multiyear contracts. Drake had no difficulty in coaxing detailed plot descriptions from her respondents, some of whom had seen the film more than once. As she noted, these accounts often differed from her own summary of the narrative, in part because the film depended a great deal more on dialogue than crisp action. Even an attentive audience proficient in English could be derailed by a bad print or poor acoustics.42

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42 The USIA surveys of the Accra cinema audience from the period suggest that the majority of attendees were literate and conversant in English.
Nonetheless, her respondents’ accounts of the storyline were internally coherent and many of them remarked on how much the film could teach them about life. Childlessness is a core plot element in the film, prompting the central couple’s decision to adopt an older daughter. Even where viewers misinterpreted some of the plot details, they saw the film as a potential guide for situations of childlessness in their own lives: this was often a problematic scenario in Ghanaian marriages. Viewers also found that a plot centered on the death of a spouse articulated a universal theme that was easy to identify with despite the apparent distance between the film’s upper-class American setting and their own circumstances.

Drake also made an extended study of audience reactions to the American film *Something of Value*, a film set against the backdrop of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya and filmed on location in that country. Despite the African connection, the audience reactions to the film are less illuminating, at least in terms of Drake’s interests in assessing the extent to which viewers understood events in Kenya through the cinematic prism. Some viewers found the film to be informative but on the whole they did not respond strongly except to the scenes of violence, which almost all viewers found to be distressing and excessive. Much of the violence onscreen is directed at white characters, and the film adopts a self-consciously realistic perspective on scenes of violence in comparison to most entertainment films of the period. Such negative reactions notwithstanding, the film was quite popular in Ghana for at least some months after its release.
The financial records of the state-owned West African Pictures bear out Elizabeth Drake’s conclusions about the wide-ranging audience interests of the local audience from the mid-1950s. In 1956, for instance, the chain’s hits ranged from Westerns and action pictures to romantic dramas and musicals in almost equal proportions. Management reports from the Accra cinemas in the chain suggest that the overwhelming preference of local audiences for action-packed films is not grounded in box office results. In July 1956, for example, the films which the West African Pictures chain rated as hits were a mixture of action (*Tarzan Escapes*), Westerns (*The Marauders*), romantic drama (*Flame and the Flesh*), and musicals (*The Glass Slipper, So This is Paris*).

The mixed preferences revealed by the financial results suggest the existence of several distinct paying publics as much as a desire for variety on the part of the average filmgoer. It is unlikely that the same audience showed up for a very outdated, juvenile adventure like *Tarzan Escapes* and a serious drama like *Flame and the Flesh*, which were almost identical in terms of their box office success in Accra. The former almost certainly attracted a much larger number of young attendees. It is difficult, however, to assess whether a film like *The Flame and the Flesh* appealed to a female audience, or indeed whether the female audience was very substantial, though it is clear that there is no straightforward relationship between gender and/or social standing and genre in Ghanaian cinemas. Elizabeth Drake’s interviews with audience members for *Sentimental Journey*.

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include numerous young men as well as some women. Cinema owner Munir Captan and his employee Wallace Blankson both reminisced about one of their more memorable screening experiences – a packed house in the Opera cinema, with plenty of street-hardened youths, singing along, word for word, to the saccharine English heartthrob Cliff Richard’s “Summer Holiday” in the 1963 movie of the same name. Captan and Blankson said they played the film “500 times” (a slight exaggeration, perhaps), until it was worn out. Blankson suggested that as a general rule, the audience was mixed in gender terms, though evidence from surveys of the juvenile population suggests that males were far more numerous than females among those under 16. Irrespective of the gender composition of the audience, romance films and major Hollywood musicals like *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* had no trouble in attracting an audience in Ghana.

This came as rather a surprise to the American industry once it established an outpost in Lagos. In preparing for the new operation it had absorbed the simplistic presentation of the cinema owners and as a consequence believed that “only action pictures could do well in West Africa.” While they knew that cinema owners rented other

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46 Male and female cinema-goers seem to have had distinctly different preferences in other locations – in the 1920s, for instance, boys like Westerns and then generic adventure films as well as comedies and mysteries, whereas school-age girls preferred first romance films and then comedies and Westerns, though younger, grade-school, girls liked Westerns first and foremost. Melvyn Stokes, “Female Audiences of the 1920s and 1930s,” in Stokes, M. and Richard Maltby (eds), *Identifying Hollywood’s Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 47. Cliff Richard’s films were popular enough in Ghana that *The Young Ones* (1961, UK, directed by Sidney J. Furie) was still playing in 1973, twelve years after its original release, at one of Accra’s highest-profile theatres, the Orion at Kwame Nkrumah Circle. *Daily Graphic*, August 18, 1973.

genres too until they attempted to impose their own business model from around 1962
they had no idea of the revenue per film and assumed that the owners were giving an
accurate account. They were thus mystified by the obvious audience enthusiasm for films
as diverse as *Some Like It Hot* (a rare comedy hit, though the film also has a strong
gangster element), *The Millionairess* (a British romantic comedy), and the religious
picture *The Nun’s Story*. The latter film filled theatres in the Muslim north of Nigeria
and the location shooting in Congo surely helped its success. As was clear in the case of
*Something of Value*, films with an African connection tended to do well even if audiences
were otherwise ambivalent about the content, and on occasion they could make a big hit
of a thoroughly old-fashioned film: the colonial film *Sanders of the River* starring Paul
Robeson was first released in 1936 but was again a big success in Accra in 1956.

**Newspaper debates on the cinema, 1950s-1960s**

The primary driver of a broader range of cinema interests was the massive growth
of the audience in the 1950s, creating the potential for a much greater degree of audience
segmentation as well as the financial stability that could encourage exhibitors to program
theatres with more than one audience segment in mind. Just as the number of cinemas
tracked the growing population, concern about the behavior of the audience increased in
the 1950s. A larger audience demanded a greater degree of concern on the part of both

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48 *Some Like It Hot* (1959, US, directed by Billy Wilder); *The Millionairess* (1960, UK, directed by
Anthony Asquith); *The Nun’s Story* (1959, US, directed by Fred Zinnemann).
49 WBA, file Africa/AMPECA – Miscellaneous to 12/31/62, West African Report, George C. Vietheer,
December 3, 1962.
50 PRAAD RG7/1/1656 West African Pictures Monthly Management Report, September 1956 (dated
October 13, 1956).
the administration and local members of the educated African elite – which was in the process of becoming the colony’s new political elite.

Elite commentators dominate the surviving narrative of audience behavior in large measure because they populate the official and newspaper archives in ways that less literate viewers could not unless their voices were sought out and recorded by academic or journalistic observers. As historian Fred Pratt has discussed in his analysis of the letters pages of Gold Coast/Ghanaian newspapers, conduct at the cinema was a real concern for members of the Gold Coast elite in the 1950s. Letter writers and columnists expressed consternation about issues such as their fellow patrons walking around during screenings among other infractions, though their commentary also suggests that whatever their concerns middle-class and even elite viewers continued to attend the cinema.\(^5\) As Pratt suggests, while these reports contain an element of elitism they also reveal that different members of the Ghanaian audience had distinct ways of viewing the cinema space.

Some viewers saw the cinema building as a place of socialization and active interaction with other attendees with the film itself of only incidental importance. This conditioned their behavior on cinema outings. While there was a class element to such behavior it was not simply a divide between a mobile popular class and a seated elite class. Those in the cheap seats near the front stood up and interacted vocally with the picture, and those in the most expensive seats at the back might step outside for a

\(^5\) Pratt, “‘Ghana Muntie!,’” 237-8. Pratt quotes extensively from regular letters sent to the pages of the *Daily Graphic* and *Ashanti Pioneer*, particularly during the period 1953-5, with the newspapers adding headings such as “Rowdyism in Cinemas” and “Let Us Have Peace at Movies.”
cigarette, a drink, or a chat with a girlfriend. The raucous commentary at the front did not always enhance the atmosphere for these elite leisure activities and elite writers did not always appreciate the fact that the cinema owners did not cater exclusively to their preferences.

The newspaper letters pages dramatize the tension between these competing ways of being in the physical space of the cinema, just as other letter writers debated the appropriate form of behavior in family relationships or working life in an evolving modern society. These debates almost always included the suggestion that those outside the educated class were failing to conform to the standard that the educated writers determined. Less-educated citizens, often newcomers to the city, were developing their own ways of being in a growing urban population and that these ways of being included voluble commentary and disrespect for authority only reinforced the sense that there was a link between cinema attendance and slipping standards of behavior in the society.

The newspaper columnist Henry Ofori wrote about his cinema outings with some regularity in the 1950s and penned a somewhat tongue-in-cheek paean to the virtues of the serial film that reveals a good deal about the social space of the cinema from the elite part of the house. As Ofori recounted, the short episodes were often stitched back together and shown back-to-back in Ghana for a multi-hour show. Ofori extolled the helpful refreshers at the beginning of each episode as they served to re-orient those who had stepped outside for a drink and a chat. While humorous in tone, Ofori’s column reinforces the idea that cinema-going was sometimes as focused on social interactions as

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52 Daily Graphic, August 27, 1957. See also Salm, “‘Bukom Boys,'” 144.
on the film itself – including for those affluent members of the audience who could afford to enjoy a drink at the cinema bar in addition to their more expensive tickets. This social aspect of the cinema was one reason that popular audiences did not object to repeat screenings of old fare, though Ghanaian columnists in the more self-consciously cosmopolitan corners of the press were less tolerant of this kind of exhibition practice.

While there is a great deal of negative attention to the cinema in official records and newspaper accounts, positive accounts of the cinema experience are more difficult to trace in written form in part because the written narrative was so dominated by those with a disapproving tone. There was little tradition of local commentary on the content of film, which might have helped to frame a counter-narrative by exploring the films that audiences valued. Even the entertainment-heavy magazines produced in the colony from the 1950s, such as the Gold Coast edition of *Drum* and *The Ghanaian*, are light on film-related materials. They contain few features on film stars and minimal commentary on individual films. By contrast, both journals carried numerous articles evaluating the merits of music, theatre and literature on the local arts scene.53

The lack of film coverage was linked to the publications’ guiding philosophy, which highlighted African or black cultural contributions, something that was more of a challenge when there were few black cinema icons (as opposed to the rich array of musical stars of African descent). As late as 1967, the mainstream American industry was essentially “discovering” the black audience in the domestic market, in the sense of

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53 The Ghanaian edition of *Drum* was established in 1954 as a spinoff from the South African original, which began publication in 1951. By contrast, the Senegalese magazine *Bingo* featured films and actors on its covers with some frequency in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly if they had a local connection of any kind.
developing stars to appeal to that market. Smaller operations had long catered to this audience, churning out hundreds of “race films,” the term used to describe films with an all-black cast directed at an all-black audience, until around the Second World War.\textsuperscript{54} There is no evidence that any of the “race films” of the pre-1950 period were exhibited in Gold Coast.

*The Ghanaian* made a point of calling for local writers to replace foreign literary imports in the collective consciousness, and from the late 1950s exhorted the Ghana Film Corporation, the agency that superseded the Gold Coast Film Unit, to film local plays and scripts.\textsuperscript{55} Given the modern outlook of these magazines, writers complained about the fact that Ghanaian audiences were often only able to see American films several years after their original release.\textsuperscript{56} Local exhibition practices would have put a monthly magazine in an unusual position to influence potential viewers given that pictures played for a brief period and then returned weeks later for repeat engagements due to the preference for regular turnover on Ghanaian screens but magazine editors did not seize this opportunity, perhaps because of the broader elite tendency to denigrate the cinema audience.

The only sustained exception to the lack of critical writing on film came when locally-made films appeared in the Gold Coast. This critical commentary began with a

\textsuperscript{55} *The Ghanaian*, April 1959 and April 1964.
\textsuperscript{56} *The Ghanaian*, October 1958. Ironically, one writer extended complaint about this phenomenon mentioned a series of films which were as little as a year removed from their UK or US releases.
focus on the offerings of the colonial Gold Coast Film Unit, including, most notably, the
hour-long docu-fiction *The Boy Kumasenu* in 1952, discussed in earlier chapters. On such
occasions, newspapers might devote space over multiple weeks to contrasting critiques of
a film, its local impact, its acting and behind-the-scenes talent, and even its success with
audiences. Whereas hundreds of Hollywood or Indian films unspooled without comment
in the 1950s and 1960s, Gold Coast and Ghanaian journalists had no hesitation in
criticizing any flaws they perceived in local productions even when they tried to
encourage better work in the future. Journalists set a very high standard for local
productions notwithstanding the difficulty of getting any feature-length film off the
ground in Gold Coast or early post-independence Ghana, though such strong newspaper
critiques do not appear to have dampened box office appeal in the least. They were
financially successful due to the sheer novelty of seeing local stories on the screen
irrespective of their cinematic merits.57

Critics’ concerns with local productions were also linked to how an external
audience might perceive local productions. A *Daily Graphic* writer in 1972 gave
qualified praise to the music-themed *Doing Their Thing*, for instance, which the writer
felt had most value for its export potential as a means to show “how the Ghanaian would
like to be seen.”58 Paradoxically, showing the film to outsiders was likely to emphasize
its weaknesses, including what the writer saw as the film’s weak plot and amateurish

57 On a personal note, growing up in Ireland in the 1980s films set in a recognizable present-day Ireland
were very rare, which likely explains the enormous local success of *The Commitments* (1991, Ireland/UK,
directed by Alan Parker) despite a certain degree of enhanced local color added by the film’s non-Irish
director.

acting. Twenty years earlier, overseas audiences did see *The Boy Kumasenu* at the Venice Film Festival and at the Edinburgh festival. It even ended up in the pages of *The New York Times*, whose correspondent wrote from Kano, Nigeria that no local distributor had even been interested in the film on the theory that “the African likes to see things far removed from his daily life.”\(^5^9\) Instead, the film was a huge local hit, playing in various theatres to paying customers for at least two years even though it had been intended primarily for the colonial film education/propaganda circuit.

While newspapers carried articles discussing each week’s cinematic attractions, these accounts were descriptive in tone. There was no criticism of films in terms of style or content, which had been routine in the American and European press for several decades by that point even if critical standards varied a good deal. Weekly features in Ghana commented on the latest releases with fulsome enthusiasm, reinforcing the sense that they were a publicity filler rather than actual criticism even if they were often signed under a byline such as “from our film critic.” Local theatrical promoters assisted in providing copy for the editors to stitch together into a single piece by supplying copies of the publicity materials that accompanied the canisters of film.\(^6^0\)

Indian films did not come with the same comprehensive publicity materials and so were absent from the weekly round-ups in the 1950s despite the fact that the films


\(^{60}\) American newspaper criticism existed in parallel to self-publicity written by cinema proprietors in a format other than the direct advertisement. An Alabama cinema proprietor, for instance, had a weekly column in the local *Florence Times* that functioned purely as a method of drumming up business for his venues. Rosenbaum, *Moving Places*, 22.
themselves were popular on urban screens from the middle of the decade. In a 1958 column, the writer Bediako notes that “for the first time in my movie career I have picked an Indian film (…) that has caught my fancy because of its quality and theme,” though there is little evidence from the article that he had in fact seen that picture, the 1957 version of the story *Yahudi Ki Ladki*, about the persecution of Jews by the Romans.61

Bediako, the only columnist identified by name, was the author of the few columns of near-criticism and sometimes included a very minor judgment on the film, noting when a picture was “easy to follow” or similar information.62 He used his weekly round-up to comment on other aspects of cinema-going, such as the piece in which he addressed the problem of cinema proprietors allowing children to see adult fare such as *A Kiss Before Dying*, even though such films were certified as being “For Adults Only,” in line with the censorship laws of 1952.63 In the same column, he excoriated those who rushed out of the cinema at the end of the picture rather than standing through the national anthem, adding that most such early departures were drivers or passengers trying to avoid traffic at the end of the screening.64 Not everyone got in trouble for their failure to pay appropriate respects to the anthem, though – after a screening of *Rebel Without a Cause*, one woman remained motionless in her seat, tears flowing down her cheeks while her teenage daughter rested against her, a scene that Bediako found deeply moving, for

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61 (1957, India, directed by S.D. Narang). Bediako was likely the prolific Ghanaian journalist and novelist Bediako Asare, here on one of his earliest newspaper assignments. Asare subsequently moved to Tanzania in the 1960s to launch a newspaper, and later self-published a short work entitled *The Downfall of Kwame Nkrumah* (Accra, 1966). The book sings the praises of the leaders of the 1966 coup in fulsome terms and Bediako notes that Lieutenant General Joseph Arthur Ankrah, the new Head of State, was a film fan.


the film was “one of those which actually does something to you,” in other words a picture that could be used for personal reflection and education.\textsuperscript{65}

Bediako’s columns and the many letter-writers of the 1950s tied in to a longstanding, and global, debate about the question of the correct way to behave in the cinema, stretching from the picnicking observed – and even celebrated – by some surrealist writers in 1920s France, to the ways in which young audiences of the 2010s might tolerate and even embrace mobile devices.\textsuperscript{66} For some audience members, interactions with friends and acquaintances, particularly those mediated by electronic methods, may well be at least as important as watching the film. In other words, the theatre always holds the potential for a much broader set of engagements than simply watching and absorbing the images that happen to be on the screen, even if those are of importance to many in the building.\textsuperscript{67}

\textit{Regulating Youth at the Cinema, 1950s}

From the elite perspective in Ghana, the cinema audience was problematic in multiple senses: it was often lower-class, less educated and, above all, young. In the 1950s the audience was made up largely of people who had limited familial or other

\textsuperscript{65} \textit{The Daily Graphic}, February 22, 1958.
\textsuperscript{67} Film historian Leslie Midkiff DeBauche notes that while many American female cinema-goers of the early twentieth century celebrated their outings in great detail, including the names of those they attended with, they did not always record the film title, suggesting a definite order of priority! Leslie Midkiff DeBauche, “Memory books, the movies, and aspiring vamps.” Published February 8, 2015, accessed February 15, 2015. http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2015/02/08/memory-books-the-movies-and-aspiring-vamps/.
responsibilities but just enough disposable income to afford such entertainments, either because they had intermittent sources of work or, in the case of children, because relatives or friends gave them sixpence or a shilling here and there to finance a trip to the movies. Those who had more extensive professional or familial responsibilities simply did have the time to indulge in such activities on a regular basis. When young people in Accra and other urban locations went to the pictures, they usually did so unaccompanied by adults. A family outing to the cinema was an unusual experience for most children, restricted to holiday occasions but it was common for younger siblings to be introduced to the cinema habit by an older brother or sister.68

Although elites may have frowned at young people’s attendance at the movies, youngsters, including those drawn from the educated classes, placed great value their outings. Many of those who used the pages of the newspapers to find pen-pals, a popular activity of the day, cite “films” among their interests, and the fact that they highlight this for potential correspondents overseas suggests the global reach of the phenomenon. Even young people who did not know one another might expect to have an interest in films in common.69 For the young, cinema-going was part of the process of developing a new and distinctive urban popular culture, not dissimilar from the new forms of culture highlighted by Emmanuel Akyeampong in his discussion of new urban migrants, whose “social needs (...) differed from those of the educated coastal Africans. The immigrant

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68 Interview, Joseph Eiwuley, March 27, 2012. In some more rural locations it may have been more common for families to attend the pictures together. Joint interview with Nene Doku Atteh, Rev. Dr. Mercy Wood and others, conducted by Stephan Miescher, Akosombo, February 15, 2008.
urban workers began to construct, not imitate, a unique urban popular culture that
meaningfully interpreted their urban social experience.”

As Akyeampong notes, the lifestyles of young urban men in particular were
threatening to the authority of local chiefs and elders, just as the enthusiastic youthful
audiences of the cinema threatened the ability of the educated urban elite to shape the
narrative on appropriate conduct and leisure behavior. This may well explain the strict
impulses of some African members of the censorship board in the 1950s, suggesting that
the core issue was not always the content of films but rather the threat that cinema-going,
with its boisterous, even disrespectful, local tradition of talking back to the screen in
some venues, might represent to existing authority. Such processes of unsolicited
feedback to activities and dialogue onscreen contrasted with traditional habits of
interaction between youth and older persons. If the authority of the screen image could be
punctured with ripe commentary, so too, might that of a real-life interlocutor.

This kind of youthful enthusiasm alarmed the colonial authorities in equal
measure. Social workers and magistrates were vigilant to what they perceived as the
threat of the cinema to social order among the young. Juvenile court records in Gold
Coast were accompanied by detailed personal histories of the juvenile offender complete
with abbreviated interviews with the youth in question and often mention that the young
person, sometimes just eight or nine years of age, was apprehended at the cinema, or that
he or she slept at the theatre. Social workers in the colony expressed a generalized

70 Akyeampong, Drink, Power, and Cultural Change, 102.
71 The report on Odarte Lomotey from September 23, 1954, for instance, mentions that he “sleeps at the
Opera Cinema House,” in the absence of a fixed address. PRAAD SCT/17/5/300 Accra District Court
Juvenile Records 1952-1954. Sleeping at the theatre was not restricted to the 1950s, or to children: as late
concern with the propriety of cinema-going, which they rated as one of the most
corrupting influences on urban youth. Based on records from the early 1950s, Accra and
Kumasi’s race-courses were the other major pole of juvenile transgression, although
children under 16 were not even supposed to be admitted to those venues. Sexual
morality was also at issue at the race-courses, with the authorities, in the form of both
colonial officials and Gold Coast elders, suggesting that young girls were befriending
jockeys in the hopes of obtaining inside information to help them place bets. The cinema
had the added danger that it was most often an after-dark activity, just like the bars and
nightclubs that attracted young people at a loose end, whereas the race-course was only
open during daylight hours.

The cinema crops up so often in juvenile court records that it suggests that social
services found the theatres to be an easy source of new clients whenever they needed to
be seen to maintain a certain strictness or numerical consistency. A quick raid at a
downtown Accra cinema house was a sure way to find a few runaways or troublesome
youths, and this further underlined the negative credentials of the cinema every time the
tactic proved to be successful. Parents of missing children sometimes reported that they
had searched unsuccessfully for their offspring at the cinemas before contacting the social
services; the failure to locate children at the pictures reinforces the sense that there were
other popular places for children to spend time far from adult supervision even if the
authorities placed the greatest degree of blame on the cinema.

as the 1990s, the Gaskiya theatre in the Sabon Zongo (Muslim) area, still showing videos from India and
Hong Kong, was near-home to a blind man, who sometimes went to sleep on one of the theatre benches.
Deborah Pellow, personal communication, May 1, 2013.
Even when children were to be found at the cinemas, not all of them were watching the movies. Since there were many other consumers there, the venues were attractive as locations for hawking activities and for less legitimate enterprises such as pickpocketing, though it is clear that many juveniles engaged in minor hawking immediately outside the cinemas primarily so that they could then finance their own tickets for the movies – the ice cream companies made frequent use of youngsters in this way.

The reports of the juvenile court understate the fact that the alleged crimes of many delinquents (or at least the many children so labeled) had nothing directly to do with the cinema, apart from the nebulous suggestion that the idea for their behavior came from something seen onscreen. Few of the children were in fact accused of theft or other crimes: most often, the issue was lack of attendance at school or familial strife of one kind of another, often prompted by challenges at home stemming from parental absences due to heavy work obligations. One report, featuring a repeat offender, does mention a youth who engaged in habitual thievery and gambling at the race-course, but then adds, with no preamble, the comment that “He admits being a cinema-goer.” However, there is no suggestion that the race course, or admission thereto, needed to be better regulated, nor do other officers suggest regulation of places like the Kokompe market – a second-hand market for car parts and a regular haunt for young truants – or casual football

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practice areas, another place that school-age children were to be found whiling away their time.

Despite the evidence that cinema was by no means the only attraction for youngsters, the link between cinema-going and juvenile delinquency was persistent. A probation officer’s report sets the tone when it comments that “It is unfortunate that Akueteh has taken to many evil habits including truanting, gambling, cinema-going and petty pilfering,” as if to suggest that attending the cinema is itself an illegal activity.\textsuperscript{74} Another report introduces a note of greater subtlety, suggesting not so much that the cinema is in itself illegal but rather that it functions as something of a gateway to “other anti-social habits.”\textsuperscript{75} Against that backdrop, in 1954 the Department of Social Welfare undertook a detailed study of cinema going among juveniles in both Accra and Kumasi, entitled \textit{Children and the Cinema}. The post-independence government deemed the study useful enough a decade later that it was published in a monthly journal with only minor updates, primarily related to the statistics on the venues then in operation.

The purpose of the study was to investigate the “criticism so often heard that the Cinema is the cause of Juvenile Delinquency.”\textsuperscript{76} The department sent representatives out to all of the cinemas in Accra and Kumasi to assess the numbers of youngsters who were attending shows, and gathered data on their reasons for attending, their methods of

\textsuperscript{74} Probation Officer’s Report of Investigation on Akwetei Ruthman Akuetah, January 8, 1953. PRAAD SCT/17/5/300 Accra District Court Juvenile Records 1952-1954.
\textsuperscript{75} Probation Officer’s Report of Investigation on Samuel Amoako Codjoe, October 2, 1952. PRAAD SCT/17/5/300 Accra District Court Juvenile Records 1952-1954.
\textsuperscript{76} M.L. Clarkson, “Children and the Cinema ” [Reprint of “A Report on an Enquiry into Cinema Going among Juveniles undertaken by the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development in Accra and Kumasi”], \textit{Advance}, July 1963. The report was one of a series authored by Clarkson on a variety of social phenomena, including underage drinking and begging.
paying for films, and their preferred movies. While the study acknowledged that “it is too easy an explanation to say that [the cinema] is the only cause of their delinquency,” not least because only about half the children interviewed went with any degree of regularity, the report nonetheless suggests that “there appears for instance to be a definite link between the truant Schoolchild, Cinema going and eventually the Juvenile Court, the first stage being truancy from school.”

The report lays as much of the blame for these negative consequences on the simple act of attending the cinema as on the content of the films: the writers assumed the need to play truant and to beg, borrow or steal to amass the necessary resources for a cinema ticket. In the report’s telling, the films were only a subsidiary attraction because, the writers indicated, many of the children could not understand the dialogue, a contrast to almost all other official accounts of issues of comprehension. A subset of the children treated the cinema as a place that was not home, a place to pass the time without even a specific interest in the movies, pointing to much more serious difficulties in their home lives.\(^{77}\) The report also points to the relative lack of alternative diversions available to Ghanaian youngsters at the time – even a middle-class viewer thought the cinema provided an agreeable counterpoint to the tedious routine of “birthday parties, naming of newly-born children and marriage ceremonies” that were the normal social outlets for children of that class.\(^{78}\)

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\(^{77}\) Kofi Busia, later to be Ghana’s Prime Minister, made an earlier social survey of Sekondi-Takoradi and noted that delinquent children not infrequently slept at the cinema, though he made no particular recommendations for control of cinemas or films. K. A. Busia, *Report on a Social Survey of Sekondi-Takoradi* (London: Crown Agents for the Colonies on behalf of the Govt. of the Gold Coast, 1950), 93.

\(^{78}\) Interview, Joseph Eiwuley, March 27, 2012
Children between 8 and 16 were present in large numbers at the noon-time screenings in Accra’s cinema, which were timed for the longer school lunch-break. Dozens of them attended evening screenings, too, and while boys formed a far larger portion of the audience there were always at least some girls there, too. The great majority of the juvenile court records also deal with young boys, but there is the occasional mention of a girl attending the movies, either in groups of friends or alone.79 Young consumers were also an important part of the audience for those post-lunchtime screenings when children might have been expected to be back in school.

Not all of the children had spare cash, and some used a variety of enterprising methods to gain entry – they might band together and use the same ticket more than once, conspiring to pass the ticket back outside to their comrades (in the open air evening theatres this was especially easy), while others would barter their way in, offering goods or services to the staff at the entrances to the theatres.80 Some officials suggested that the introduction of daytime screenings sometime in the late 1940s had worsened the problem of truancy, though most reports are much more concerned with late night roaming, both in terms of the disruptive impact on the children’s routines and the perceived likelihood that they would encounter disreputable characters. Some children were transported to school from areas with no cinemas, too, which meant the pictures were a much stronger daytime lure.

80 PRAAD SCT/17/5/300 Accra District Court Juvenile Records 1952-1954.
The report makes no mention of whether some of the films where children were present were restricted to audiences over 16 although it is likely that at least some of the titles bore such a restriction after this option was introduced with the 1952 revisions to censorship regulations. There are only very brief hints of the cinema-going preferences of the young audience conveyed by the efforts of those concerned with juvenile welfare. The occasional probation report notes that a youngster knew “almost all the crack cowboy stars,” but for the most part the officers are interested only in the location of the “delinquent” activity rather than the reasons for the attraction.  

The primary recommendations of the report were the full implementation of existing censorship policy and, as soon as time permitted, the introduction of even more restrictive censorship law. There is little evidence of major changes in censorship practice in the immediate wake of the report, but it is likely that the document was one of the factors that led to regular debates on issues related to cinema-going in the Gold Coast Legislative Council, where African members were as likely as their British counterparts to suggest that films were a problematic influence on young people in general. The historian Andrew Burton has traced similar attitudes among the Tanzanian elite, who tended to take a strict line regarding cinema-going by the younger generation. The Gold Coast courts dealing with youngsters may also have paid attention: from the mid-1950s the probation orders for juvenile offenders sometimes included a specific ban on

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attending the movies during the period of the probation, which could be as long as three years. There is no evidence of similar bans prior to 1954.

The following year, the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development issued a more general report, Problem Children of the Gold Coast, which drew on the Children and the Cinema report as well as other sources, including surveys of Kumasi, Sekondi-Takoradi and Cape Coast. The report opened with a description of “The Problem,” before devoting sections to the various temptations that faced youngsters. The cinema appeared first the report detailed its negative aspects at greater length than the other enticements of the race-course, drinking, dancing, and “roaming the streets.”

Official concern shifts, 1960-1970s

Alarm about regulation of juvenile viewing habits was not constant in Ghana. As with the moral panics that attended children’s experiences of cinema in the UK and US, there was a cyclical aspect to concerns that tended to parallel changes in either the broader political climate or in levels of attendance. The overall context of debate on appropriate behavior in the 1950s, as well as the gradual shifting of responsibility from colonial to African officials, was a natural backdrop for such expressions of concern. As the cinema historians Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby and Philippe Meers have written, many of the administrative interventions elsewhere around the globe also “responded to

anxieties occasioned by cinema’s modernity, deploying discourses preoccupied with the protection of children, values and norms, and with the restoration of tradition and community life.”  

In the mid-1960s, as Nkrumah’s rule became more restrictive, a new classification system was introduced that categorized films as being suitable for all audiences, children accompanied by a parent or guardian, and adults only, a system very similar to that used in the UK at the time. In the limited debate on the new measures, one member of the Legislative Assembly requested a ban on day-time cinema screenings, but the Deputy Minister of Information and Broadcasting rejected this, citing research from the 1954 social survey that there was no evidence of a direct link between such shows and the problem of juvenile delinquency.  

For most of the rest of that tumultuous decade, however, the cinema audience was a minor concern for governments who were engaged in control of dissent at a much broader level, whether the more repressive and restrictive measures of the late Nkrumah era or the desperate attempts of successive regimes to improve Ghana’s perilous economic situation. Censorship was used as blunt tool in the first few years of the decade, as discussed in detail in the previous chapter, but officials loosened the reins again by 1963 and for the remainder of the decade theatres operated with few restrictions of that nature.  

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87 Interview, Munir Captan, Accra, October 23, 2012.
It is not until the 1970s that there was another official examination of the youth audience, stemming from a somewhat humorous context. That did not preclude the occasional non-governmental initiative, such as the 1972 campaign by the Ghana Society for Child Welfare calling for increasingly strict censorship on films which “depict crime techniques and criminal behavior.” In November 1973, a *Daily Graphic* letter writer affiliated with the Accra Academy, one of Ghana’s most prestigious secondary schools, suggested that the introduction of Chinese films that same year had resulted in a major increase in cinema attendance by schoolchildren, wearing their school uniforms, and indeed that the movies were so attractive that “children run away from classes in the afternoon to the cinema houses (...) The best thing is either to abolish this afternoon cinema or stop these children from entering the cinema-halls (...) Another thing is to stop children under 16 or 17 years of age from entering the cinema-halls except when special or educative films are on the screen.”

The letter followed hard on the heels of another that suggested cinemas were particularly attractive, later in the day, to delinquent children: the writer of the first missive gave an account of young boys loitering late at night around the Orbit Cinema in Kaneshie, and suggested that the police should make surprise visits to such venues to deal with these “wayward boys,” suggesting a continuity with social worker practices dating back to the 1940s, where cinemas were a reliable source of “delinquents” who could be catalogued by colonial authorities.

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The authorities were not best pleased by the letter that suggested children were attending the cinema during school hours and they launched an investigation. It turned out that the letter-writer was himself a sixteen-year-old student, one Joseph Appiah Sackey, who was no doubt startled to be visited at school by government officials on more than one occasion. The authorities also visited the Opera Cinema, where the schoolchildren had been attending daytime screenings (since the Academy where the student letter-writer attended school was located a considerable distance from that particular cinema, it also begged the question as to how Mr. Sackey could observe such behavior).

The authorities were unconcerned by what they found. There were indeed school-age children at the Opera, but in most cases they were children who attended school during the morning session at the shift schools, which at that period in Ghana’s history had morning and afternoon sessions for different groups of students due to a lack of resources, as well as those children who continued to wear their school uniforms long after they had completed their schooling for the day, in some cases likely because they had few alternative garments.

As it happened, the authorities did find a few genuine truants among the group, but these students were smart enough not to wear their uniforms to the performances, and were mostly from more well-to-do families.91 One former cinema owner commented that his father was regularly contacted by well-connected men asking him (the cinema owner)

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to ensure that their children were not allowed into the cinema during the day and in some cases, the parents even gave permission for the security guards to dole out punishment with their sticks! While the officer charged with conducting an investigation into the letter in the Graphic suggested that her ministry should refute the allegations in the press, her superiors felt that the matter was not serious enough to warrant such a follow-up, and indeed also cautioned against any heavy-handed measures that might restrict legitimate cinema attendance. By contrast, the ministry did issue a reminder in early 1974 to headmasters to ensure that children were aware of the penalties for playing truant during school hours.

The original letter of complaint did not provoke a major public outcry, in part, no doubt, because the state-owned newspaper made sure not to publish anything more on the matter, and officials let the matter drop. On that occasion at least, the regime was less concerned about juvenile cinema attendance than about reports as to its own regulatory capacity. The notion that young citizens were running wild and ignoring the educational opportunities, however student, that the state provided would have been felt as a stinging rebuke to a regime determined to present a new vision of Ghanaian society. The population might well have experienced this as yet another such vision, following hard on the heels of previous unsuccessful attempts to shape the population and the economy.

“Gone are the Days” – The last boom and bust, 1970s-1980s

92 Munir Captan, Interview, October 23, 2012.
93 PRAAD RG3/5/270 Cinema Performances for School Children, Memorandum from A.K.A. Tinkorang, January 22, 1974
The afternoon cinema incident occurred during the early, more optimistic phase of rule by General Ignatius Kutu Acheampong’s National Redemption Council. Acheampong led a coup in January 1972 to overthrow Kofi Busia’s government. Busia served as Prime Minister from 1969-1972 and attempted to introduce more liberal economic policies, but his government hit new lows of unpopularity after the devaluation of Ghana’s currency in 1971. The devaluation only exacerbated problems such as the drop in incomes from a plummeting world cocoa price in 1970-1971 and increasing unemployment rates. Acheampong used this popular discontent as the pretext for the military takeover. The new government’s name suggests its desire to project a new vision for the country, and Acheampong introduced major campaigns designed to develop a new vision of Ghanaian self-reliance, represented most clearly by Operation Feed Yourself, intended to increase production of food crops. The military regime also led the switch to driving on the right-hand side of the road in 1974 and used pamphlets, articles, and eye-catching newspaper advertisements to project on the citizenry its view of what constituted good driving standards in the nation. The government attempted to enlist different forms of entertainment in support of the right-hand driving project, inviting members of the public to submit High Life songs, posters, advertising hoarding ideas, and even film scripts as part of the campaign; entrants could earn 100 cedis if their ideas were used.

95 The exchange rate fluctuated a great deal during the early 1970s, but GH¢100 was roughly equivalent to US$80 at the time. See competition notice in The Daily Graphic, July 12, 1973. The government’s preference was to receive High Life songs composed in English, with a translation into one Ghanaian language.
The optimistic opening salvos of the NRC period gradually gave way to more oppressive government in response to unrest rooted in the country’s underlying economic difficulties. The Acheampong government clamped down on opposition political discourse and issued a “Prohibition of Rumours Decree,” almost identical to a piece of legislation introduced by President Marcos in the Philippines in 1972. Ghana’s newspapers suggested that the problematic political rumors allegedly in circulation emanated from “foreigners,” a constant target in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The experience of non-Ghanaians in Ghana, including both African and non-African residents of the country, indicates that there was considerable continuity in Ghanaian political life despite the regular regime changes: Acheampong’s predecessor K.A. Busia presided over the introduction of legislation that deported more than half a million people, primarily from Nigeria.

Against this backdrop, cinema-goers seemed to be enjoying what amounted to a second Golden Age, a period like that of the mid-1950s when censorship was light and when viewers had access to a very wide range of pictures, from the US and other sources. This broad range of options remained available in Ghana until the late 1970s. The Acheampong regime made no effort to restrict the popularity of a cinematic 1970s hero such as Bruce Lee, despite the actor’s image as a little man (literally and figuratively) who attacked powerful entrenched interests and emerged victorious. This persona surely resonated with audiences who were themselves powerless in the face of the social and

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political transformations that kept Ghana in almost perpetual turmoil from the middle of the 1960s to the early 1980s. The light reins of censorship may have been a conscious response by a government that believed the cinema could channel audience emotions in a politically manageable fashion, diverting them from the streets.

The range of options available to Ghanaian cinema-goers was in fact a symptom of the broader economic malaise rather than a paradoxical business outcome. Currency devaluations and revaluations played havoc with import prices, and the country’s foreign exchange reserves ran almost dry. The regime made use of import controls and duties in desperate attempts to raise revenue and protect local agricultural production, as well as reorienting its economic policies toward agriculture. Not incidentally, such mechanisms created new opportunities for control of commodities and licenses, with the weaknesses of the gatekeeper state manifesting themselves once again: Ghanaians used the term \textit{kalabule} to refer to “an economy that was dominated by rent-seeking.” The re-orientation of policy toward agriculture and primary production removed much of the Nkrumah/Busia emphasis on small to mid-size business and impacted the revenues of entrepreneurs still involved in the cinema trade. Some businesses had also suffered from the deportation of family members in 1969-1970. Consumers were already hard-pressed

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98 Much as, in earlier decades, administrators in various countries saw the Western as an innocuous genre that espoused straightforward moral values, with the routine triumph of good over evil. The New Zealand censor celebrated the genre in 1951 for precisely these reasons. MHL, AMPTP Records. 26.f-261 Johnston, Eric – reports 1953-1964. See also Burns, \textit{Flickering Shadows}, 156-157.


by inflation affecting key foodstuffs and had greatly reduced disposable income for luxuries like cinema tickets.

In order to remain in business, film importers sought out cheaper alternatives to the American studio product. AMPECA continued to cultivate the Ghanaian market in the 1970s, and local cinema networks played high-profile American films like *Airport* or *The Exorcist* at their flagship theatres, with extensive newspaper advertising.\(^{101}\) Increasingly, however, these films were the exception rather the rule since the American rental costs were exorbitant in Ghana’s challenging economic circumstances. Independent American production houses like American International Pictures, which did not participate in the studio-controlled AMPECA import mechanism, appeared more frequently in the Ghanaian market. They sold their films to Ghanaian operators soon after the American release: the exploitation film *Blacula* was one of many examples.\(^{102}\) Films such as *Blacula* and *The Exorcist* underline the mild nature of censorship in the mid-1970s: a decade earlier the censor banned almost all horror films, never mind ones that contained dramatic scenes of bodies rising from the dead or adolescent girls possessed by evil spirits.\(^{103}\)

There is further evidence of both the diversity of films and the light hand of the censor in the release of the Italian film *The Battle of Algiers*, which played at the Captan-
owned Orion theatre in September 1972.\textsuperscript{104} The film, a docu-style dramatization of the French occupation of Algiers includes several scenes of brutal violence, not to mention extended depictions of guerrilla activity against a repressive state, the kind of content that troubled the Ghanaian censor in Kenya-set \textit{Something of Value} in 1960. At that very early point in the life of the NRC regime, releasing \textit{The Battle of Algiers} may have been a signal of self-confidence.

Around the same time, the NRC pledged to use Ghanaian television to promote the work of indigenous cultural producers such as musicians, part of a broader policy of self-sufficiency (this indigenization was reinforced by high import duties on musical instruments). The change of policy came in response to accusations the broadcast of foreign films on Ghanaian television was threatening local values, and the NRC government suggested it was part of an effort to “present the vision of a new destiny to the people.”\textsuperscript{105} While the NRC removed foreign films from television screens it did not prohibit them from Ghana’s cinemas, playing into the hands of cinema owners: those Ghanaians with a love for films would be less likely to stay at home for their fix if the state no longer broadcast such material.

The search for cheaper cinema imports created a situation where local audiences had access to a highly cosmopolitan mix of pictures. Neighborhood cinemas presented a variety of options well beyond that available to audiences in most large American cities at the time. In the mid-1970s, the residents of many towns could choose between Hong

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{The Battle of Algiers} (1966, Italy/Algeria, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo).
\textsuperscript{105} \textit{The Daily Graphic}, September 16, 1973.
Kong kung fu flicks, Indian drama or musical epics, major Hollywood releases (albeit in lesser numbers than before), and Italian genre films such as spaghetti Westerns and Roman-era sagas. Ghanaians embraced even more unusual fare such as Filipino popular films; these were often knockoffs of big-budget spy/action fare of the time period. One theatre owner recalled that audiences were so engaged by a Filipino action picture featuring the character Tony Falcon that they brought drums into the theatre to heighten the experience at key moments.\(^\text{106}\)

The cream of Indian film production also returned to Ghana’s screens in the 1970s, prompted by the far lower per-picture cost compared to Hollywood’s prices. *Amar Akbar Anthony*, the biggest hit of its release year in India, made a particular impression on cinema owners because of its local success.\(^\text{107}\) The film centers on a trio of boys who are separated in childhood and grow up in three different religions (Hindu, Muslim, Catholic), a plotline of great interest in a heterogeneous population like that of Accra, with immigrants from across the region. A substantial segment of the local cinema audience treasured Indian films. Comments on contemporary online social media reminisce about seeing such films at the “Kaneshie Orbit and Opera cinema. Gone are the days.” Other viewers fondly remember screenings in both cinemas and on home video in Nigeria and Sierra Leone.\(^\text{108}\)

\(^{106}\) Interview with Manu Nankani, October 31, 2012. The film was *Tony Falcon, Agent X-44: Sabotage* (1966, Philippines, directed by Eddie Garcia); the Tony Falcon series, a cheap and cheerful Filipino riff on the James Bond films, was consistently popular in Ghana in the 1970s.

\(^{107}\) Members of both the Captan and Nankani families recounted the plot in great detail, though none could remember the title. Their own enthusiasm for the film recalls their belief that their fathers and grandfathers had first gone into the cinema business as a sideline because they themselves were film fans. *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977, India, directed by Manmohan Desai).

This exuberant audience culture was at odds with the overall tone of Ghanaian life in the 1970s as the economy continued a steep decline, with serious unemployment, hyperinflation, food shortages, and profound political instability.\textsuperscript{109} The apparent contradiction recalls the massive popularity of the movies in the US and Britain in the 1930s despite the Depression. For many people, the cinema was a place of solace in a time of great upheaval and by seeking out cheap imports cinema owners could afford to keep ticket prices low enough to encourage the audience to keep coming back.

The paradoxical Golden Age came to an abrupt end with the advent of yet another new government in 1981, the second led by Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings. The Air Force officer first came to power in June 1979 following a coup that overthrew the government of General Fred Akuffo, who directly succeeded General I.K. Acheampong. Rawlings’ first government, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, turned over power to a civilian leader, Hilla Limann, in September 1979. However, Rawlings overthrew Limann on December 31, 1981 and returned to power himself, leading the country as a military leader until 1993 and subsequently as a civilian elected president from 1993 to 2001.

Rawlings’ second government held power under the auspices of the Provisional National Defence Council. The PNDC proclaimed itself revolutionary in nature, though as historian Paul Nugent comments Rawlings understood the concept of revolution in a Ghanaian sense, seeing the need for a form of direct people-led democracy rather than

\textsuperscript{109} Recently, historians have sought to complicate the standard narrative of Ghana’s 1970s, including a panel at the 2014 African Studies Association conference in Indianapolis which found that for at least some Ghanaians the 1970s were not a period of decline due to substantial infusions of foreign aid in rural areas.
linking his leadership to Cuban or Russian models.\textsuperscript{110} In the immediate aftermath of his coup, there was a pervasive atmosphere of distrust and Rawlings enacted a variety of measures to suppress dissent. In the first few days of 1982, the regime imposed a nighttime curfew that lasted for over two years. As Nathan Plageman has commented, the curfew “put an end to the country’s Saturday Nights [at the dance hall],” and forced a great deal of leisure – cinematic and musical – from public venues to private homes.\textsuperscript{111}

The privatization of cinema was made a great deal easier by the increasing availability of a new technology, the video cassette recorder, which became widely available from the late 1970s. The new system affected the cinema business in multiple ways. Wealthier consumers could afford to purchase their own VCR machines for home use. Small-scale entrepreneurs found that the inexpensive units were within their financial means and began to open tiny video clubs around the country, advertising the performances with vivid hand-painted posters. The barriers to entry were minimal since many of the films were pirated copies found in local markets for a dollar or two. The easy access to a wide range of material also meant that the video clubs operated along lines similar to the cinemas, changing their offerings every evening. Finally, some of the cinemas replaced their expensive film projectors with VCR projectors and also benefited from the easy availability of film product as a means to extend their livelihoods through daytime screenings.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{110} Nugent, “Nkrumah and Rawlings,” 52.
\textsuperscript{111} Plageman, \textit{Highlife Saturday Night}, 227.
\textsuperscript{112} Garritano, \textit{African Video Movies}, 65.
The curfew and technological change combined to destroy the cinema business as it had existed: cinema theatres, with their high overheads, simply could not survive without reliable evening screenings, unlike the video clubs that needed just a VCR and a television.\(^{113}\) By the time the curfew ended in 1984, when Rawlings had consolidated his power and had fewer concerns about popular unrest, the viewing population had moved on, transferring its affections to the cheaper video clubs. Theatre owners did not have the capital to get back into the cinema game, while high-end American product was no longer available: with West African markets collapsing, AMPECA closed its doors in Lagos at the tail end of the 1970s. Most of Ghana’s cinemas followed suit within a few years, and venues fell into disrepair, though Ghanaians’ relationship with the movies remained strong in small video clubs or private homes. By the middle of the 1980s, the first shoots of a local video film industry emerged, giving local audiences a new range of indigenous themes, stories, and stars to complement or supersede the Hollywood, Bollywood, and Hong Kong pictures that circulated illegally on videotape.

The Rawlings regime had little interest in controlling the entrepreneurs who started the video industry and who showed films in their small clubs. They represented little threat in terms of capital accumulation unlike the market women of the early 1980s, they were not used as easy and often erroneous scapegoats for rising prices.\(^{114}\) In that decade, elite and political concern moved in new directions focused on the parlous economic state of the country and the specter of mass unemployment. For a time at least,

\(^{113}\) The power cuts and power rationing of the early 1980s no doubt caused considerable frustration for owners and patrons, for small-scale operators could not afford back-up generators and fuel at the prices they charged for admission.

\(^{114}\) Robertson, “The Death of Makola,” 469-495.
after the curfew ended, the movie audience was left to its own devices, taking its pleasure where it could.\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{115} Archival records on the Rawlings regime are very limited, and much material has not yet been released under standard thirty-year holding policies.
Epilogue

Given the American industry’s desire to cultivate Ghana’s wealthiest cinema patrons AMPECA might have been happy to see how things turned out despite the collapse of the 1980s. Today, Ghana’s small cinema audience is split between two high-end venues owned by the Nigerian Silverbird company, plugged directly into the Hollywood distribution system. The first Silverbird outpost in Ghana opened at the Accra Mall in 2008, and the company added a second cinema at the West Hills Mall in Weija in 2014. The venues tout their technological innovations, emphasizing that they project films in “full digital clarity” and trumpeting the arrival of the 3-D movie experience at the Weija venue.

The Accra Mall is past Ghana’s main international airport, a dozen or so kilometers from the crowded downtown areas where multitudes enjoyed a night at the pictures in earlier decades, and the West Hills Mall is over thirty kilometers west of the capital in an affluent suburb of the capital. A ticket at either venue costs around US$10, more if the title is especially enticing, to which the viewer must add the costs of transport. Inevitably, the audience is made up almost exclusively of wealthy Accra-area residents and expatriates (Chinese, South Asian, Middle Eastern, European) as well as the occasional tourist or visiting researcher.

On most screens, the experience is hard to distinguish from that at any theatre in the US. In October 2012, I watched the James Bond film *Skyfall* during its first week at
the Silverbird, before it had even appeared on American screens.¹ The theatre was packed with couples, groups of adults, and a handful of teenagers. A month or so later, I watched the picture again with an audience just outside Boston. At the Silverbird (built in 2008) and the Somerville Theatre (built in 1914), the audiences reacted as one to the key scenes, testament to the agreeable machine-tooled qualities of a big film production. On both sides of the Atlantic, audiences purred with recognition as the film deployed the usual Bond thrills and spills and they delighted at the surprise appearance of a particular old friend, suggesting that both audiences were familiar with the many preceding films.

The upper end of Ghana’s film industry also shows its films at the Silverbird theatres, running them for an initial week or two before launching DVD copies for the mass audience.² The plots of these films focus on Ghana’s wealthiest class and often include overseas location shooting: they are filled with images of financial success such as fine homes, expensive cars, restaurants, and hotels, and international travel. Irrespective of the origin of the films, attendance at the cinema screenings is reserved for the small audience able to afford the substantial costs of a ticket. The collective experience of the cinema belongs to an increasingly distant past for most Ghanaians.

The fact that most Ghanaians watched films in small venues or in their own homes for more than twenty-five years meant that the formal censorship apparatus fell into disuse just like the venues it once regulated. The state showed no interest in

¹ *Skyfall* (2012, UK/US, directed by Sam Mendes). As with most of the James Bond series, the film was released in international markets before the US release.
² Films by high-profile directors such as Shirley Frimpong-Manso and Kobi Rana, shot on substantial budgets, premiere at the Silverbird amid great media attention. They are advertised on billboards along Accra’s Ring Road.
functioning as gatekeeper during the initial video boom in the 1980s and would have struggled to control the phenomenon of piracy during a period when copying videos was an easy task. However, with the return of the cinemas in 2008 and the development of slick Ghanaian video productions that channeled much of the polish of American cinema, there was the occasional flash of the moral panic of old. In 2010, after a Ghanaian video film provoked controversy due to allegations that it contained racy content, the authorities convened a censorship board for the first time in many years. Whereas in the past, critics of the cinema held expatriate owners responsible for the negative social influence of the cinema in contemporary Ghana directors are seen to be the problem, for giving themselves over to Hollywood style and content rather than locally appropriate filmmaking.

While censorship regulations were revised numerous times during the period when cinemas were common in Ghana, in 2010 the authorities still relied on legislation from 1961, drafted at one of the high-water marks in the history of Ghanaian censorship.\(^3\)

Not everyone in 2010 understood the regulations, not least because they had not been used for so many years. A newspaper reader commented online that a 25-person panel was further evidence of the regime’s desire to provide jobs for its “cronies,” whereas the reality was that a much smaller review board was chosen from the list of 25 people with the selected members receiving no compensation for their efforts.

The censorship board in 2010 quickly ran into more trouble when the director Shirley Frimpong-Manso accused the board of leaking her films after she submitted them for review!\textsuperscript{4} With the board itself then the subject of controversy, the government shelved plans for more thorough censorship. There was no evidence of any censorship certificate, or any attempt to enforce an age-based restriction, when I visited Accra in late 2012, but in early 2015 the two Silverbird venues began to advertise their films with age-based restrictions identical to those used at the Silverbird’s seven Nigerian cinemas.

The cinema experience today is enjoyed by a small fraction of the audience of old, and the entrepreneurs of that period have passed away, departed the country, or transferred their attention to new sectors such as the salt business, in the same way as their investment in the cinemas was a pragmatic decision driven by a sense that this was an area with growth potential. Like many audience members, they have a deep nostalgia for that period of their careers. The cinemas were a fun business both in front of the screen and behind the scenes and just as cinema-owners enjoy reminiscing about the period, cinema-goers of an earlier era cannot help but look back with a craving for the exuberant collective experience of the theatre age.\textsuperscript{5}

Today’s young urban populations find their own collective expressions of enjoyment, often defining themselves in relationship to new forms of identification


through attachment to particular soccer teams. The enthusiastic cinema audiences of the past have become the enthusiastic soccer watchers of the present, cheering and despairing to the rhythm of the on-field action. Like the cinemas in their heyday, the appeal of soccer lies partly in its low costs: venues expect seated patrons to purchase a beer or a soft drink but are content to allow others to stand at the sides for no charge. The audience also enjoys the sense of being part of something global and instantaneous, as plugged in and legitimate as fans in Madrid or Manchester. Hollywood is indeed a thing of the past.
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