



Cinema and Wage Labour in Colonial Kenya

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Abstract

In the early 1920s, the first generation of African nationalists in colonial Kenya rejected capitalism and called for its abolition. The ‘agitators’ demanded that women and girls be exempted from compulsory labour and taxation. ‘Riots’ against the two most essential pillars of capitalism – labour and taxes – erupted in Nairobi, and the agitators paid for the agitation dearly, some with their lives. Responding swiftly and violently against an unorganised assembly consisting of low-wage workers, the British government in Kenya made a bloodbath out of the encounter by firing at men and women who, according to its own admission, were armed with sticks. The fallout was swift and immediate. First, it compelled the colonial administration in Nairobi to respond to a concerned international community that questioned its excessive use of force. Secondly, it influenced policy makers to replace force with a ‘soft approach’. This article is a labour history that employs instructional films produced in London for colonial subjects in the colonies, including Kenya, to shine a spotlight on the intersection of wage labour and cultural programmes for Africans.

Résumé

Au début des années 1920, la première génération de nationalistes africains du Kenya colonial rejette le capitalisme et appelle à son abolition. Les « agitateurs », demandent « que les femmes et les filles soient exemptées du travail obligatoire et de la fiscalité ». Des « émeutes » contre les deux piliers du capitalisme (le travail et les impôts) éclatent à Nairobi, et les agitateurs paient cher l’agitation, certains de leur vie. Réagissant rapidement et violemment contre une assemblée non organisée de petits salariés, le gouvernement britannique au Kenya transforme la rencontre en bain de sang en tirant sur des hommes et des femmes qui, de son propre aveu, étaient armés de bâtons. Les conséquences sont rapides et immédiates. Premièrement,

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elles contraignent l'administration coloniale de Nairobi à répondre à une communauté internationale inquiète et qui questionne l'usage excessif de la force. Deuxièmement, elles incitent les décideurs politiques à remplacer la force par une « approche douce ». Cet article retrace une histoire du travail utilisant des films pédagogiques produits à Londres pour les colonies, y compris le Kenya, pour mettre en lumière le croisement du travail salarié et des programmes culturels pour les Africains.

Historical Background

In the 1920s, British colonial officials throughout the world recognised cinema's utility as a propaganda instrument of modernisation between and within each colony and nation (Druick 2012; Parsons 2004; Smyth 2011). Historian James Burns (2002) sees modernisation theory in the context of social and cultural hegemony and crude capitalism. Frank Ukadike (1994) made the same essential point more precisely when he emphasised that modernisation encompassed Western economy that intended to inculcate Africans with a sense of capitalism. These observations are not unique, as Walter Rodney (1982), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1982), E. D. Morel (1969), and Franz Fanon (1963) had previously argued that Europe's civilising mission in Africa – which included Western capitalism – underdeveloped the continent and stagnated its growth.

Eager to convert propaganda messages into picture stories for African audiences, British colonial officials embarked on a coordinated effort to utilise cinema as a tool through which to propagate imperial ideas of healthcare management, agriculture, and capitalism through taxation and wage labour (this article is concerned with the latter). In Kenya, they produced local instructional films but also imported other films from London, with the goal to persuade African viewers to consider the 'good' work taking place in the colony. Indeed, they encountered few problems in persuading Africans to practise healthcare management, farming and food production. However, convincing them to embrace wage labour messages proved problematic, as the strain over this central pillar of capitalism had vexed Africans since they first encountered colonialism proper in 1895 (wage labour, as we know it, was uncommon in Kenya before colonialism).

The strain over wage labour deepened over the years. By 1914, it had increased exponentially, with Africans, including women – such as Mikatilili Wa Menza – openly defying the colonial authority and, in Menza's case, she slapped Arthur Champion, the British regional administrator who, in retirement, made instructional films for the government and endeared himself to his African admirers as *bwana wa picha* (Mister picture) or *bwana*

cinema (Mister cinema).¹ In less than a decade, the strain had taken on a more insistent tone, this time in 1922, when it reached a crescendo after Africans openly questioned the policy informing taxes and free labour.

Harry Thuku (1970: 32), the doyen of Kenyan nationalism and founder of the first political party in that country, raised the issue of taxation and involuntary labour with the colonial administration and demanded that the government explain why ‘young girls and women’ worked with no pay under the supervision of tribal policemen when Winston Churchill had outlawed such practices. Thuku’s insistence irritated government officials, who, in their haste to perform power, responded by arresting him on 14 March 1922. Moving swiftly to contain his criticism, the government detained the ‘agitator’ on the charge of sedition. Word of his arrest spread to what Thuku characterised as his ‘seven or eight thousand’ sympathisers, who camped outside the main police station holding him to press for his release. In its assessment, however, the government reduced the number to ‘slightly over 1,000 natives’. Framing Thuku’s supporters as hostile and aggressive, officials maintained that they came ‘armed with large sticks, assembled outside the police station... and demanded Thuku’s release’.² This framing was intended to calm the clamour of a mortified international community that woke up to the news of a bloodbath in Nairobi, which the *New York Times* editors thought had caused ‘grave disquiet’³ in London.

What took place on that fateful day is open to interpretation. Both sides interpreted the event differently, and they narrated the story from their own points of view. Thuku claimed that the gathering was ‘peaceful’, but the government countered by stating that the crowd ‘became so menacing that the riot act was read and the demonstrators were called upon to disperse quietly’.⁴ Here is a condensed version from both sides:

THUKU (1970: 33): I heard later that the city sweepers, many of them men from *Embu*, had refused to work. Other workers also went on strike [my italics].

GOVERNMENT: Early today a strike of all *Kikuyu* house boys and other workers was declared [my italics].⁵

The Embu and Kikuyu ethnic communities live in disparate geographical spaces, with the former occupying what was previously known as Eastern Province and the latter Central Province. They speak competing dialects, and one cannot possibly be confused for the other. Nonetheless, by insisting that Africans had refused to work, Thuku attempted to frame the strike as a national rebuke of capitalism, but the government defined it as a tribal menace carried out by a few ‘boys’ of Kikuyu stock.

THUKU (1970: 33): *People* were pressing nearer and nearer to the police lines [my italics].

GOVERNMENT: It is now stated that the *mob* advanced toward the police palisade waving flags and snouting (sic). The men pushed their women folk in front of them, expecting this would prevent the *police firing* [my italics].⁶

THUKU (*ibid.*): One woman, Mary Nyanjiru, began to shout that they should get their leader free. The police opened fire from the front.

According to Thuku, the protesters were ordinary folks expressing frustration with the status quo, but government officials describe them as an unruly horde. By characterising the protesters as a crowd of disorderly people bent on causing violence, the government hoped that the international community would buy the argument supporting the use of force as a means to preserve peace. Although both sides acknowledged women's participation, they once again disagreed on the role they played. Thuku credited them for inspiring men to action, but the government argued that the men used them as pawns in a lost cause.

Once the dust and the gun smoke had settled, the confusion surrounding the casualty number took centre stage. Thuku's (*ibid.*) side informed the world that '*many* Africans were killed or wounded' [my italics]. Not to be outdone, the government maintained that 'twenty natives [were] killed and upwards of thirty injured', and it justified the use of 'fire . . . with ball cartridges', arguing that the protesters 'had been previously warned of what the consequences would be'.⁷ Government officials likely issued a warning, but the warning probably got lost in the loud chants of 'free Thuku' from the charged crowd pressing much closer to the police line. Mary Nyanjiru, a woman who spearheaded the effort to release Thuku, was among those pressing forward and those stopped in their tracks by police bullets. Nyanjiru's heroic effort endeared her to Kenyans as a symbol of resistance to British colonial rule and occupation in Kenya.

What began as a protest against labour and high taxes created a deep cleavage between African workers and an alien economic system. The clash severed the tenuous trust between the two sides, and it undermined hopes of a dialogue that would have opened the space for an honest conversation about labour in particular and capitalism in general. I do not insinuate that this specific encounter instigated the government's refusal to engage in dialogue. Far from it, and throughout the colonial period (1895–1963), government officials hardly welcomed criticism, and they tended to discourage dialogue between the institutions they oversaw and the African people they governed. Convinced, as they were, that constructive dialogue with government

representatives was unattainable, Africans increasingly turned to protest as a means through which to compel the authorities to address their grievances. Perhaps Paulo Freire (1968: 76–7) made the point best when he pointed out that ‘those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression’. Other salient issues – such as the 1919 Labor Circular and the protest it generated and the Indian Question – bothered the government and these merit scholarly attention. However, addressing them here would extend the present examination beyond its scope. Thuku’s uprising provides a vista through which to comprehend the rupture between the two sides and the shift in policy and approach.

Labour Messages in Films

Britain made instructional films in London and exported them to its colonies overseas, including Kenya, for African spectators. Example includes *Mr. English at Home* (1940), *A Journey by a London Bus* (1950), and *The British Policeman* (1959). Collectively, these films focused on wage labour, portraying British men working to support their families and the nation during the Second World War (*Mr. English at Home*) and in the post-war reconstruction era (*A Journey by a London Bus* and *The British Policeman*). Projecting a calm and confident nation undertaking its domestic chores that included wage labour, local transportation and internal security, the films encouraged Africans not only to emulate the calmness but also to go about their daily routines, which included labour activities, without murmuring. It is clear, at least from the pictorial point of view, that the messages targeted African men who, according to the propaganda informing wage labour, were supposed to secure for their families a sense of financial stability, peace of mind and cohesion. In the minds of the film directors, labour and family proceeded in tandem. This section examines the embedded labour messages in the three films. The examination allows for a comprehensive understanding of labour’s central role in sustaining colonialism, and it reveals the coloniser’s fascination with cinema as a tool of imperial conquest and civilisation (Diawara 1987).

***Mr. English at Home*⁸**

Intended for distribution in Africa, *Mr. English at Home* begins with a long shot of a policeman walking down a suburban street. The scene reveals the material wealth in the form of genteel homes belonging to middle-class Britons shortly before the Second World War. It then cuts to a medium shot of the exterior of a house before revealing the glamorous interior, where a

woman is waking up her son, who goes to the bathroom to wash. Because this is a silent film, viewers can only make sense of it by understanding its pictorial elements. The boy wakes up his sister then returns to his room to dress for school. He goes downstairs to the kitchen to sit with his father, who is having breakfast. Having finished his breakfast, the father takes his newspaper and briefcase, kisses his wife, and makes for the door. The camera follows him outside, where he boards a double-decker bus heading to Welling, presumably his final destination and work site. As soon as he steps off the bus and reports to work, viewers learn of his profession as a carpenter.

Back at home, his wife and three children sit at the breakfast table. The two older children pick up their school bags and leave for school. Viewers are then treated to shots of children playing at school. Meanwhile, the woman shops for groceries with her youngest child before returning home to prepare lunch for the two school children. As the children eat their midday meal, the woman cleans and dusts the home. The film then cuts to the two children coming back home from school later that evening. They pick up their younger sibling and leave for the park. In the meantime, the man leaves work and boards a bus heading to Lewisham. He arrives at home, and they all sit down to eat dinner and drink tea. Always busy throughout the film, the mother clears away the table and gives the youngest child a quick bath. With his father's help, the older son completes his homework while his younger sister is busy knitting. The mother puts the younger son into his cot and joins the rest of the family downstairs. The final scenes show the mother knitting with her daughter, the father reading his newspaper and smoking a pipe, the mother helping the sleepy daughter to bed, and father and son working together on a model aeroplane. The film ends with the mother drawing the curtains and turning off the light.

The film's director described it as a portrait of a day in the life of an English family (Sellers 1941). It tells the story of an English carpenter, his wife, and their three children. More than family, however, it draws our collective attention to wage labour. Through the man, the film articulates well this element of capitalism that drew a sharp wedge between Africans and the colonial administration. By depicting a man working an eight-hour shift of physical labour, the film intended to encourage African male labourers to embrace the wage labour economy. Men, the film suggested, are supposed to respond to the challenges of wage labour to secure economic benefits for their families. Eight years after the film debuted, Colin Beale (1948: 18), a colonial official, observed that *Mr. English at Home* 'shows a way of life in which the people are genuinely interested'. By people, Beale probably meant African viewers. Although Beale hardly provided the data to support the assertion, the notion that Africans, especially men, were 'genuinely

interested' in emulating European labour practices is debatable. What is palpable is that the film illustrates well the ordinary life of hard-working Englishmen. Its director, William Sellers (1941: 107), arranged the scenes 'in such a way that Africans are able to appreciate and recognize through their own family lives the various aspects of English family life included in the film'. Sellers hoped that African audiences, including children, watching the film would embrace and practise its central theme of wage labour.

*A Journey by a London Bus*⁹

This film opens on a long shot that reveals the 'splendid road service of passenger buses' and a cluster of retail shops in central London. It invites viewers into the economic space that serves to impress upon them the elegant material culture arising from a capitalist economy. The scene then cuts to a medium shot that displays London's grandeur. Using the most basic editing technique – the cut – the scene cuts to another long shot of a London bus on an isolated country road. In the succeeding scene, the film introduces the audience to two African students 'enjoying a walk in the fields' away from London. In the real sense, the 'fields' are bushes and a hill in the background. The underlying message here is obvious and hard to miss. By linking the two Africans with the uncivilised background – field or bush – from which they emerge, the film portrays them as less civilised individuals who would rather spend time in the 'fields' than in London's astir streets.

The two African students starring in the film perform simple acts like paying their bus fares, chatting, displaying their 'great love' for little children, and witnessing the 'friendly co-operation between passengers and conductor and driver that makes bus traveling comfortable'. They also see other passengers 'enter the bus in an orderly manner, no crowding or pushing out of turn', once again bearing witness to the British people's civility. Significantly, they witness the bus conductor collect fares, an exercise that, unlike in Africa, occurs in an orderly manner. The conductor even uses 'a friendly manner' to deal with the 'thoughtless' passengers who are not ready with their fare. After about four miles, the African students arrive 'back home', in London, presumably their final destination. Broadly, they represent 'visitors from overseas [who are] always impressed by the efficiency and comfort of the London Transport Bus Service'.

Naïve but somewhat inspirational, the film illustrates one of the truest British institutions – the London double-decker buses – that transformed London into the 'largest city' in the world. The buses symbolise a prosperous post-Second World War Britain. Imposing their towering heights along the

busy London streets, they gave meaning to the war-weary British population that had witnessed the collapse of their country's economy. By 1950, 5,000 double-decker buses carried 'seven million passengers' daily. As the film notes, 'this excellent service enables thousands of workers to live in healthy and pleasant districts far away from London's crowded streets'.

A Journey by a London Bus underscores the significance of wage labour that Britain exported in its overseas colonial territories. Exemplifying this element through the bus conductor, driver and 'thousands of workers' the film reminds viewers, especially African spectators, that wage labour is universal, no job is too small, and progress and prosperity stem from a working society. In any case, the success of public transportation depends on the tax the public pays, and the film employs fare payment to illustrate this point. All passengers, including the two African students whose countrymen often resisted taxation, pay their fares without coercion. Besides extolling the virtues of wage labour and taxation, the film underscores the significance of cooperation, which was essential in moving the colonies forward.

***The British Policeman*¹⁰**

The British Policeman opens on a medium shot of Police Constable (PC) Jack Edwards performing his beat assignment. Edwards walks directly into the shot, stops, looks over his left shoulder, turns and looks to the right, just in time for a transitional cut to the next scene that reveals an African man stepping off the bus. The impression is that the African is unaware of his immediate surroundings. In the subsequent scene, the audience sees him handing a piece of paper to Edwards. The constable looks at it and points to his left, perhaps in the direction of the African's destination. Although many themes emerge from the first three scenes, the most obvious ones are the Crown's authority and power, law and order, beleaguered Africans who clamour for self-determination yet seek out Britain for guidance and direction, the friendliness of the British police, and, of course, wage labour. Released in 1959, this film upholds some of the Central Office of Information's (COI) founding principles and the reason for its commitment to producing Public Information Films.¹¹

The next nine scenes show Edwards having his midday meal at home with his wife and two children – Susan, aged five, and Robert, aged three – before his 'typical' duties over an eight-hour shift. Edwards completes his meal and dons his police uniform, a symbol of institutional authority and power. His wife helps him as he grabs his helmet from her before heading for the door. In sum, these scenes highlight the concept of an ideal Western family, the institution of (monogamous) marriage, and wage labour. Produced with an

African audience in mind, the film brought to their collective attention the value of work and small families that put less pressure on family resources and social welfare funds.

The remaining scenes focus on Edwards at work. During his shift, which runs from 2 pm to 10 pm, Edwards patrols on foot and has to cover 'as much ground as he can easily from one end to other in 30 minutes'. By 1959, Britain had 'an average of 1 policeman to every 650 persons', which explains why the film shows Edwards covering large and congested areas of the railway station, one side of the market place, a street of locked-up shops and warehouses, a school, part of a city park, and a row of houses. In addition, 'at fixed times', Edwards 'has to report to his headquarters by telephone from one of several police pillars'. The film ends at 10 pm, at the end of Edwards's shift. He hands over the beat to one of his colleagues and updates him on all that has happened in the area. Eager to lessen, if not close, the existing gap in trust between the public and the police force, a gap that was increasingly widening in Africa following the clamour for independence that sparked wars of land and freedom – such as the Mau Mau war in Kenya and the Algerian civil war – the narrator quickly reminds viewers that 'the policeman is a friend of the people and he knows that they will always turn to him, without fear or restraint, in their time of need'. Clearly, the narrator failed to point out that, unlike their armed and trigger-happy counterparts in the colonies, the 'friendly and helpful' police officers in Britain were unarmed.

Commissioned by the Colonial Office to promote Britain's Police Service in the colonies and Commonwealth states,¹² *The British Police* goes beyond this singular objective. Far from focusing solely on the British police officers' friendliness, the film promotes the virtues of an orderly society, law and order, and wage labour. By introducing Edwards' family and his stay-at-home wife, the film encourages African men to embrace wage labour that would see them respond to their families' financial needs. It hoped to inspire confidence in African men to take up wage labour, even in the blue-collar industry that had considerably opened up in post-Second World War Africa. The film emphasises the significance of an eight-hour shift, a subtle excoriation of Africans, whom the colonialists tended to characterise as malingerers and loafers.

Disregarding Reality

It turned out that colonial officials in the metropole and in the colony, who anchored their hopes in instructional cinema as a vehicle through which to persuade African viewers to think broadly about the benefits of wage

labour, ignored multiple facets constituting labour and African workers during the period under review. From the outset, they completely ignored that unfair compensation dissuaded Africans from fully embracing wage labour. Colonial film producers assumed that underpaid African workers would, without hesitation, fully embrace an alien economic system that underpaid and undervalued their labour contribution. Paying insignificant attention to the question of fair wages that would bring Africans closer to the standards of social lifestyles displayed on cinema screens, officials insisted that Africans would, at least, give wage labour a chance to thrive in an environment that hardly practised it before colonialism. The ignorance continued even in the face of Africans' agitation for 'equal pay for work of equal value'.¹³ Constituting the bulk of the labour force in the country, African workers in public and private spheres were routinely underpaid. Revealingly, they 'were never paid the same wages as Indians for the same work',¹⁴ yet, through instructional cinema, colonial officials hoped they would overlook the disparity and moderate their views on wage labour. This thinking bordered on a romanticised notion that Africans, often described by their tormentors as lacking cinema vocabulary, were impressionable and susceptible to colonial cultural programmes that promoted the British way of life. Scholars are increasingly challenging the colonial characterisation of Africans as incredulous (Burns 2000). In particular, Larkin (2008: 9) reminds us that it was cinema's technology that 'generate[d] anxiety' among African spectators more than the films that officials used to make general observations about vocabulary.

Secondly, it seemed lost on colonial officials making instructional films that Africans were clamouring for labour unions that would champion just labour laws at their behest. During the period the three films were produced and exhibited in Kenya disenchanted African workers were increasingly forming unions or joining existing ones. In 1949, Wilson Maina Macharia, a trade unionist and Mau Mau veteran, and Bildad Kaggia, a fiery nationalist and one of the Kapenguria Six,¹⁵ established the Clerks and Commercial Workers Union (today the Kenya Union of Food and Commercial Workers) to demand fairness at work and access to social spaces. Macharia complained that underpaid African workers paid taxes that served to move Nairobi forward, yet the 'color bar, racial discrimination, and segregation' forbade them from accessing 'cinema houses, hotels and toilets' that were classified as 'Whites only, Africans and dogs not allowed'.¹⁶ The following year, Macharia joined the Transport and Allied Workers Union and 'took part in [the] Nairobi general strike',¹⁷ testifying to the growth of labour unions that negotiated for safe work spaces and were willing to shut down operations to compel the colonial government to respond to workers' concerns.

Looking for ways to represent African workers beyond Nairobi, the Transport and Allied Workers Union opened branches in other towns, including Mombasa, where it appointed Macharia to its committee as a member. Macharia wasted little time in identifying unjust labour laws against African workers. He found one in Major C. E. V. Buxton, a European farmer who 'kidnapped' fourteen juveniles from Limuru and took them to Vipingo Estates in Kilifi District (about 346 miles away).¹⁸ Macharia insisted that Buxton forced the boys to perform unpaid 'child labor without a letter from the Commissioner of Labor',¹⁹ and added that this White settler treated the juveniles 'as slaves'. The union accused Buxton of compelling the children to work 'from 6:00 AM until 6:00 PM without giving them food for [the] whole day'.²⁰ Macharia's union sued Buxton, and the court fined the settler Ksh. 600 for violating labour laws forbidding employers from employing minors without the Commissioner's authorisation. Crediting himself for 'rescuing' and bringing the fourteen boys back to Nairobi, Macharia sent them to their respective homes in Kiambu, Muranga, Machakos and Kitui Districts.

Thirdly, and perhaps the most obvious factor, was the 'wind of change' that British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan acknowledged had swept Africa following the Second World War. The change was hard to ignore, especially in Kenya, where it sparked a wave of labour strikes. For example, in May 1960, coffee and sisal plantation workers went on strike that stemmed from what the local government believed to be 'unsettling excitement in [the] present political atmosphere'.²¹ In four months (January to April), thirty-seven labour strikes were recorded in Thika alone. National strikes worried government officials, who lamented that 'if they continue [it] will undoubtedly threaten the agriculture industry and have serious repercussions on the economy'.²²

The wind of change also led to a gory encounter between the government and *Mau Mau* fighters agitating for freedom and the return of their 'stolen' land that Britain had expropriated and given to European settlers as an incentive to induce them to settle and farm in Kenya. The *Mau Mau* war has received extensive scholarly attention and will not be rehashed here (Githuku 2015; Koster 2016; Elkins 2005; Branch 2009). In passing, however, I should point out that the war occupied the minds of British officials in the colony and in London, including European settlers who feared for their lives and safety and asked the government to spare no resources in dealing with 'these thugs'. The government listened and agreed before going after the 'thugs', exposing itself, as it did during the Thuku riots, as unhinged and unresponsive to African concerns. Fearful of an extended crackdown, wearily Africans moved on, but they looked forward to an African-led administration that would, so they thought, improve their labour conditions.

Eight years of the *Mau Mau* war (1952–60) left behind a foul taste that undermined the tenuous trust between African workers and the labour industry, coloniser and colonised, and peasants and petite-bourgeoisies appearing in Gavin Kitching's *Class and Economic Change in Kenya: The Making of an African Petite-Bourgeoisie, 1905–1970* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child*. Still, the offensive taste appeared mild to the COI, which produced *The British Policeman*. Ignoring the British Labour Party's assessment in 1945–51 that nationalism in Africa was poised to expedite decolonisation, the COI went ahead and produced the film anyway, exemplifying its inability to read the political temperature correctly and adjust accordingly. By producing an instructional film that was supposed to 'teach' Africans about the virtues of labour and civility on the eve of the country's independence in 1963, COI officials ignored reality and a nationalist wave that conceived three conferences on Kenya's constitution in London (Maxon 2011).

Least Persuaded

The above examples suggest that Africans were concerned with salient issues that promised to reshape the contours informing their lives. As they looked forward to independence, they steadily decreased their commitment to colonial programmes that they strongly believed stagnated their upward mobility and jaded their sensibilities. 'What was the point of practising colonial messages when independence loomed large on the horizon?', Mũtua, an informant, asked during our oral interview before adding that 'people abandoned instructional cinema messages soon after independence. We called them *mambo ya wakoloni* (colonialists' things)'.²³ Africans understood, as much as their tormentors did, that independence would bring about changes that would outlaw dehumanising labour practices, such as the corporal punishment they endured at the hands of men like Sir Michael Brundal (farmer and politician), who flogged them to compel them to embrace wage labour.

Approaching instructional cinema through a heuristic lens, African viewers soon realised that 'these films had nothing important to tell'.²⁴ Although they found them fascinating, they derided the messages for 'not promoting anything African'.²⁵ In their minds, instructional films appeared unresponsive to their labour concerns. Muthigi, an informant, encapsulated this anxiety well when he pointed out that the films 'educated people about what Britain already had (e.g. factories, railways)'.²⁶ Convinced, as they were, that instructional films on labour glamorised work in the metropole but failed to relate to the 'sweating' associated with labour in the colony,²⁷ disillusioned African

spectators considered the disjuncture a real impediment that dissuaded them from practising the labour messages displayed on cinema screens. In other words, Africans rejected imposed ideologies expressed through instructional films, a rejection that Med Hondo (1996) employed to encourage them to interrogate cinema's real meaning to them. In contrast to their counterparts in the colony, the smiling British workers portrayed in these films enjoyed a robust infrastructure and affable labour laws that harnessed their work and increased productivity. Throughout the continent, Africans worked in what anti-imperialists and anti-neocolonialists have characterised as bad conditions (Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii 1982), yet officials expected them to readily embrace wage labour and engage in '*kazi leo, kazi kesho*' (work today, work tomorrow).²⁸

More than displaying the disjuncture, infrequent cinema shows deepened the gap between African workers and labour messages. Mobile cinema vans, which transported equipment, staff, shows and propaganda pamphlets for Africans, were few and, therefore, hardly rolled into the same venue twice in one year. The infrequency was not lost on Africans, who observed, rather disappointedly, that '*sasa kama mtaonyeshwa kitu mara moja kwa mwaka, faida yake nini?*' (What is the benefit of something shown to you once a year?).²⁹ Rosaleen Smyth (1983: 141) informs us that 'even in the most fortunate areas, villagers could not expect a visit from a cinema van more than two or three times a year'. Understandably, and, as Charles Ambler (2011: 199) has established, the government had 'a small number of official cinema vans'³⁰ that could not reach many viewers. In addition, bad weather, bad road conditions and mechanical breakdowns forced changes in itineraries, delays and cancellations.

Agriculture officials and their counterparts in the health sector mitigated the infrequency by visiting Africans and offering practical ideas in farming and healthcare management. This was not so for labour officials who believed, rather erroneously, that wages would naturally attract Africans to the labour industry. 'We consider', stated a colonial official, 'that taxation is the only possible method of compelling the native to leave his reserve for the purpose of seeking work' (Ochieng' and Ogot 1995: 7). As they always did, they compelled Africans to remit taxes from their wages, and those who defaulted were detained.³¹ Labour officials believed that punishment, as a form of deterrent, would hold down Africans at the centre of a capital labour market, and they pinned their hopes on this singular requirement, which eliminated the need for practical lessons that would have probably inspired Africans to begin the painful process of embracing an economic system that had, in Rodney's view, underdeveloped their country and

continent. It is little wonder that at independence in 1963 and thereafter Kenyans clamoured for what they fondly romanticised as African socialism (Mboya 1967).

Conclusion

From the onset, it seemed counterproductive to engage Africans in cultural programmes that glorified the very ideology they worked so hard to jettison. Although 'cinema shows were part of a larger and highly uneven effort to use film to advance the objectives of British imperial rule during this period' (Ambler 2011: 199), it was premature for colonial filmmakers to make films that they thought would persuade Africans to reconsider their approach to wage labour when the determination for fairness and equality was gaining traction against an industry that undermined their labour contribution. Making films that glamorised wage labour in Britain while overlooking institutional structures that subverted the upward mobility of African labourers in the colonies reveals just how much instructional filmmakers in London were detached from the reality on the ground. It seems that officials in Kenya, together with their supervisors in London, read the labour temperature in Kenya from two competing scripts. Whereas the 'men on the spot' read from a practical script that recognised the formation and expansion of unions and a surge in labour strikes, their counterparts in Britain studied a theoretical script devoid of reality, a colossal mistake that undermined their cinematic objectives for Africans. Consequently, the goal to teach 'an intelligent understanding of Britain's economy and economic programme' failed to yield much, but it succeeded in teaching Africans 'English ways and values'³² in farming and healthcare management.

Broadly, 'technological paternalism', to use Manthia Diawara's (1987: 61–5) timely phrase, failed to persuade Africans to embrace labour messages displayed on cinema screens. Several factors contributed to this failure. Firstly, the labour industry routinely underpaid Africans in exchange for their labour, so much so that Africans detached themselves from the genteel lifestyle and the material wealth of the British workers portrayed in instructional films. Secondly, mobile cinema circuits were few and far between, making the goal to recall cinematic messages, let alone to practise them, an arduous task. Finally, the fervour for self-determination and looming independence distanced Africans from colonial programmes and the commitment to sustain a colonial economy through 'hard work'.

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Notes

1. C. F. Parry, District Officer, to Chief J. Owino and others (20 August 1941), Law and Order Stage and Cinematography, DC/KSM/19/155, KNA, NRB; *The East African Standard*, 10 April 1944.
2. *The New York Times*, 'Rioters in Nairobi Killed by British: Troops Fire on Mob of Natives Attacking Kenya Police for Arresting an Agitator' ('Agitator' to use a worn-out colonial grammar referring to any category of Africans opposed to the undergirding tenets informing colonialism and capitalism). Cause Alarm in London Colony Formerly Known as British East Africa Has 4,000,000 Blacks and 6,000 Whites. Natives Refuse to Disperse. Land of Great Possibilities', (18 March 1922), p. 4..
3. *ibid.*
4. *The New York Times*, 'Rioters in Nairobi Killed by British'.
5. *ibid.*
6. *ibid.*
7. *ibid.*
8. Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire, <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/1808>.
9. Colonial Film Unit (1950), The National Archives, Kew, http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/films/1945to1951/filmpage_jbalb.htm. Unless stated otherwise, all quotes for *A Journey by a London Bus* are from the film and its script.
10. Central Office of Information for Colonial Office (1959), The National Archives, Kew, http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/films/1951to1964/filmpage_bpolic.htm.
11. *ibid.*
12. *ibid.*
13. Kenya Information Office, Summary of Opinions on African Affairs Expressed in the Kenya Press, 14 August 1946. Propaganda of Wireless Sets, DC/KSM/1/28/53, KNA, NRB.
14. *ibid.*
15. The Kapenguria Six (Jomo Kenyatta, Bildad Kaggia, Paul Ngei, Anchieng' Oneko, Kung'u Karumba and Fred Kubai) were six Kenyan nationalists whom the government arrested in 1952, tried at Kapenguria in 1952–53, and imprisoned thereafter in Northern Kenya.

16. Wilson Maina Macharia, 'To Whom It May Concern'. Macharia gave me copies of his private papers during our interview in Nairobi in June 2016.
17. *ibid.*
18. Letter from Kikuyu General Union (Mombasa Branch) to Hon. F. Brockway, November 4, 1952 (Lord Leslie Hale Papers) Reel LLH/1/81 KNA, NRB.
19. Macharia, 'To Whom It May Concern'.
20. The Kikuyu General Union, Mombasa Branch, to Attorney General, 'Complaint Against Major C.E.V. Buxton For Kidnapping', July 18, 1952 (Lord Leslie Hale Papers) Reel LLH/1/81 KNA, NRB.
21. Governor, to the Secretary of State of the Colonies, 'Parliamentary Questions', 16 May 1960. Labour Unrest/Boycotts and strikes FCO/41/6249. TNA, Kew.
22. Governor, 'Ruiru Coffee and Sisal Strikes', 3 May 1960. FCO/41/6249. TNA, Kew.
23. Interview with Mũtua, Nairobi, 2016.
24. Interview with Muthigi, Nairobi, 2017.
25. *ibid.*
26. *ibid.*
27. Interview with Ngare, Nairobi, June 2016.
28. 'Report on Cinema Shows at Garissa by Mobile Cinema Officer' (3rd April 1950), Information Propaganda for Africans, HAKI/13/229, KNA, NRB.
29. Interview with Opolu, Bunyore, 2017.
30. See also P.I.O. 'A Suggested Scheme for Extending and Stabilizing Cinema Services in Kenya' (5 May 1960), Ministry of Information: Organization and Films, AHC/6/7 KNA, NRB.
31. C. H. Heaton, 'Clothing of Detainees' (1944, May 31). PC/NZA/2/6/32 Detention Camps, KNA, NRB.
32. Director General, to John Grierson, 'Proposals for the Film Program 1951-52', 26 August 1950. Production Program, 1951-52, INF12/295, TNA, Kew.

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- Ngare, 2016, interview, Nairobi.
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