

BOOK REVIEW

Odile Goerg. *Tropical Dream Palaces: Cinema in Colonial West Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. v + 201 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$60.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978019008907-8.

In *Tropical Dream Palaces: Cinema in Colonial West Africa*, Odile Goerg offers more than an account of cinematography in colonial West Africa; the book is an intriguing story of the origins, productions, and various development levels of the motion picture industry in the region. Studies on African cinema are not in short supply. From Amadou Bâ's 1967 UNESCO study on African film to Nollywood's rise in the 1990s, there has been an exponential increase in African motion picture research. In some respects similar to Glenn Reynolds's study (*Colonial Cinema in Africa* [McFarland and Company, 2015]), Goerg's book adopts a unique approach in its use of various sources and hermeneutic cues to deliver an engaging history of the connections between cinematics, leisure, and the West African imperial landscape.

Chapter One, covering the interwar period, focuses on cinema's journey from European metropolises to the West African colonial townships. However, the author reminds us that motion pictures had infiltrated North Africa from the Arab world as early as 1900. The West African cinematic experience that began with technical hitches and rickety equipment entranced the urban residents in a similar manner to the way magicians hypnotize reptiles. Chapter Two is an education on how the colonial authorities took control of what the private business of cinema should show, ever mindful of public security and order. The intent was to curb the proliferation of "more detrimental and vulgar" contents. Modes of censorship reproduced the mechanisms that existed in the metropolis (58).

Scholars interested in the dialectics between rural and township communities under the colonial order will savor Chapter Three. Here, we learn how mobile cinema entrepreneurs used snippets of motion pictures to indoctrinate the village dwellers into European habits and culture. Next, Chapter Four demonstrates that cinema, like the colonial schools, churches,

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and townships, was a useful tool for transmitting European tropes of culture into the countryside. As the author emphasizes, the silver screen's glaring beams offered the rural inhabitants a window onto the world of cultural representation. The substance of the life-long night school curriculum transmitted by mobile cinemas was often an idealized version of the white man's world, dominated by gangsters, magicians, illicit sexuality, and other sundry delinquencies.

The focus of Chapter Five is the postwar period, when the motion picture industry proliferated across the continent. Audiences in this time period were able to access more diverse cinematic experiences. The postwar-era developments coincided with the rise of aggressive anticolonial agitations and censorship aimed at controlling the nationalist movements. Nonetheless, the theaters provided a space of liberty for "exuberance, joy, and critique" (141). In this context, cinema houses unintentionally became a latent social disruptor and a vehicle for rebellious ideas. The crux of analysis in Chapter Six is the function of cinema as a facilitator of intergroup relations, broadly conceived to include actors in local and international spaces.

Historians of social change will appreciate Goerg's consistent attention to developments contextualized in specific spaces and timelines, as the African colonial world underwent constant flux. Her economy of words, precise use of parsing, and use of exact titles of films underscores the impact of cinema on popular culture and lifestyles. Equally effective is the narrative trail that the author traces from Central Africa's Cobberbelt to the living quarters of the South African mines. Goerg's ability to navigate the different Francophone and Anglophone colonial terrains and map out their similarities and differences in cinema is admirable.

Tropical Dream Palaces is a pleasurable and educational read. Its powerful and vivid impression of the urban and rural settings make it a must-read for all those interested in media history, African studies, comparative cultural studies, urban studies, and literary studies.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Barlet, Olivier. 2018. "The Huge Contribution to Cinema of Idrissa Ouedraogo." *African Studies Review* 61 (3): 181–90. doi:10.1017/asr.2018.68.
- Dima, Vlad. 2019. "Waiting for (African) Cinema: Jean-Pierre Bekolo's Quest." *African Studies Review* 62 (1): 49–66. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.153.
- Higgins, MaryEllen. 2015. "The Winds of African Cinema." *African Studies Review* 58 (3): 77–92. doi:10.1017/asr.2015.76.