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'Are you proud to be British?': Mobile film shows, local voices and the demise of the British Empire in Africa

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Abstract:

The Colonial Film Unit (1939-1955) produced over 200 films, which were exhibited non-theatrically to African audiences through its fleet of mobile cinema vans. While the CFU closely monitored, and theorised on, its film texts, the particular ways in which these films were exhibited and received was afforded far less attention and remains critically overlooked by scholars.

In this article, I examine the development of the mobile film show across a range of colonial territories. The London-based CFU sought to standardise film exhibition across the empire, imagining these film shows as political events, as a means of monitoring, addressing and homogenising disparate groups of colonial subjects. The regulation of film space can be understood within this context as part of the broader effort to regulate colonial space. Integral to this process was the local commentator, an often-overlooked figure within African cinema. The local commentator would organise the film show, provide additional talks, answer questions, counter unrest and re-contextualise the films for local audiences, often without any direct European supervision. In examining government reports, personal interviews and, in particular, a series of audience surveys, the article repositions the commentator as a pivotal presence in the latter years of empire; a rising voice within African cultural and political life.

Keywords:

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'Are you proud to be British?': Mobile film shows, local voices and the demise of the British Empire in Africa

In 1941 William Sellers, the head of the recently formed Colonial Film Unit, published a paper on African audiences, entitled 'Films for Primitive Peoples,' in which he outlined a standardised model for mobile film exhibition in Africa. In order to get the attention of the audience, Sellers explained, an 'interpreter' will 'ask a question to which the obvious answer is yes; such a question might be "are you proud to be British?"' The question is repeated three times, finally with the microphone at full volume. 'This time,' Sellers wrote, 'almost every member of the audience will reply and their answer comes back in a roar. This is followed by complete silence everywhere' and the film can begin. By 1951, when Sellers revisited this model in the pages of *Colonial Cinema*, the suggested question had intriguingly changed from 'Are you proud to be British?' to 'are you all well?'¹

So why begin with this example? Firstly, it provides a neat illustration of the shifting political situation within Africa in the last decade of colonial rule; a realisation on the part of this government unit that the original question no longer appeared rhetorical within an increasingly volatile political environment. It also though indicates the ways in which the Colonial Film Unit, established under Sellers' leadership in October 1939 shortly after the outbreak of War, imagined its role not only as a production company but

also as a central authority, circulating films, ideas, peoples and technologies across a vast, rapidly changing, empire. Finally, and of particular relevance for this article, the initial question ('Are you proud to be British?') hints at the ways in which Sellers and the Colonial Film Unit imagined these film shows as political events, as a means of monitoring, addressing and homogenising disparate groups of colonial subjects. Integral to this process, I will argue, was the local film commentator, whose agency and importance within these government film shows was often critically overlooked as Sellers' constant use of the term 'interpreter' attests.

William Sellers remains a largely forgotten figure in histories of British (and global) cinema, not even a footnote in the celebrated British documentary moment and figuring within a strand of non-fiction cinema – instructional, educational – that remains massively under-represented in film scholarship. What scholarship there has been on Sellers has tended to fixate on the doctrine published in 'Films for Primitive Peoples,' in which he argued that films for African audiences required a specialised technique, which precluded the use of close-ups, cross-cutting, short scenes and excessive movement within the frame.² This ideology of film form, founded on regressive assumptions about the cognitive capabilities of the African spectator, would influence a final generation of colonial filmmakers, who set up, worked with, and trained members of emerging local units. It has also, somewhat inevitably, dominated and concealed the more progressive or

innovative aspects of the CFU's work, and obfuscated – both then and now – the very specific ways in which these films were presented and experienced within colonial Africa.

In this article I will illustrate the need to look beyond the film texts, first examining the ways in which the British government sought to standardise the mobile exhibition of film across its colonies. In analysing audience surveys conducted by the CFU over a decade – from the midst of war to the cusp of political independence – I will highlight the challenges and limitations evident within the government's use of film. The CFU holds a critical role in the emergence of local cinema cultures – establishing film and exhibition practices across the globe – and the moves towards independence are played out, in a small though significant way, through its experiences within the colonies. While the London-based CFU often fixated on the film text, by looking more closely at film shows as political events, we can see one of the ways in which the colonised began to manoeuvre authority from the coloniser. As a local catalyst for the reclamation of power, the travelling commentator represents the rise of a new, largely overlooked, voice within African cultural and political life.

Film Exhibition across the Empire

In June 1940, barely six months after the establishment of the CFU, William Sellers arrived in Lagos, Nigeria, to oversee the arrival of a new fleet of mobile cinema vans that would be used across West Africa. While highlighting Sellers' desire to standardise the technology used, controlling and administering the *use* of this technology was considerably more problematic.³ Sellers had intended to use his initial visit to 'hold [a] course of instruction in Lagos' for the newly selected mobile cinema staff from Nigeria, the Gold Coast and Sierra Leone. In a letter first proposing the trip in January 1940, Sellers had outlined the need to train local cinema staff. 'Another point on which I do not feel too happy,' he began, 'concerns the African staff who will be responsible for operating the cinema vans and other equipment. I know from experience that training Africans for this particular work is not easy.'⁴

While Sellers acknowledged the importance of training and monitoring the newly appointed staff, he was unable to bring all the West African staff together in Lagos. Indeed, despite these early initiatives, the CFU would not establish further training courses over the next decade, a fact noted in a 1949 UNESCO report on the use of mobile cinema vans. 'One of the main difficulties,' it wrote, 'appears to be the absence of any fixed standards for projectionists, the absence of a set course of training and the fact that the composition of the crews of the mobile cinema units is extremely varied.' The report highlighted the apparent failings of the CFU in monitoring the non-

mechanical, human elements of mobile cinema exhibition. 'The quality of training and the courses available to members of projection units in British colonial territories,' the report continued, 'depend more upon facilities and plans arranged locally than upon any system of instruction determined from London.'⁵

Throughout this period, the work of the CFU reflected a broader tension between local administration and central colonial policy. The Sellers' filmmaking technique is indicative of the CFU's attempts to organise, formalise and centralise film production, and the unit also exercised a physical control over the films, all of which passed through London for processing. When the CFU ceded some authority to local units at the end of the 1940s as part of the political moves towards decolonisation, it set up extensive training schools for the local filmmakers, run by CFU figures and with a prescribed curriculum. In contrast, its training of mobile crews was largely reliant on local preferences. This centralised administration of film exhibition was, it seems, both harder to achieve and less clearly prioritised.⁶

A close examination of the CFU's quarterly, *Colonial Cinema* (1943-1954) shows local film workers developing exhibition practices, often on an *ad hoc* basis. A 1948 article on the use of commentators in Nigeria, concluded that 'If others engaged in the use of film would care to share their experiences in this matter we in Nigeria would be grateful.' In developing his own methods as a British filmmaker with the CFU, the writer acknowledged the possible

failings in these local practices. 'We think we are right,' he observed, 'but there is the unhappy possibility that we may be wrong.'⁷ By 1950, the CFU distributed 1200 copies of *Colonial Cinema* every quarter to 'men in the field' in 35 colonial territories, and also now used the publication to outline and transmit model exhibition practices.⁸ The earlier quotation from Sellers in 1951 came from an article, entitled 'Mobile Cinema Shows in Africa,' which Sellers explained was intended to assist those who 'may be called upon to supervise or operate equipment in Mobile Cinema Vans and Travelling Projection Units.' While a decade earlier, Sellers had sought to administer training and to inspect the cinema operations in person, now such training and instruction was provided through the CFU's London-based magazine. What we see within *Colonial Cinema* (Figure 1) is the circulation of ideas and practices, but without a specified means of enforcing, checking or regulating their adoption.⁹

While the CFU may have struggled to monitor the human involvement within these film shows, Sellers' initial writings do reveal early attempts to standardise their organisation and structure.¹⁰ What is especially significant here is that these shows were imagined, as both Charles Ambler and Brian Larkin convincingly argue, as political events, and as ways of organising and addressing colonial subjects, regardless of the films shown.¹¹ In its audience surveys, the CFU focuses almost exclusively on the films shown, which were intended to project the modern colonial state, to instruct and define citizens

and to legitimise the work of the colonial government. However, Sellers' articles intriguingly recognise the specific ways in which the live event itself could more directly achieve these goals.

Sellers' writing places particular emphasis on the technology used within these shows, positively celebrating the machinery, often at the expense of those operating it. This celebration of the equipment was connected to, what Charles Ambler refers to as, 'the modernising agenda of the cinema spectacle.'¹² The maintenance and correct display of the technology was essential because this technology (regardless of the film shown) projected the modern colonial state, highlighting British modernity and technological primacy. Sellers recommended giving local elders and chiefs a tour of the equipment before the show, suggesting again that, in representing an image of the modern colonial state, the film was often less important than the ability to show film.

Sellers' invitation to the elders and chiefs was part of a more concerted effort to use film exhibition to incorporate local authorities within the colonial state. During the 1930s, Sellers had presented film shows at the emir's palace in Kano, bringing together the 'indigenous traditional elite' and using the presence of respected local figures to legitimise the work of the British administration.¹³ Writing later in 1951, Sellers again noted the importance of addressing 'all local influential people' before screenings both to 'pass on' the unit's message after its departure and to enact public support for the visiting

colonial authorities.¹⁴ These dignitaries would then be displayed at the show, sitting in a few specially assigned chairs 30 yards from the screen. The seating plans were especially important here in reaffirming traditional colonial hierarchies. They also helped in maintaining order through the visible presence of these local figures within the crowd.

The regulation of film space was imagined here as part of a broader effort to regulate colonial space, and this is perhaps most neatly revealed in a 1943 report on film shows in the Gold Coast. The report explained that a lamp had been fitted to the screen 'to reduce any slight tendency to friction in audiences. Isolated trouble makers,' the reports notes, 'are thus exposed to the general gaze and come under the censure, unmistakably expressed, of the main body of the audience.'¹⁵ What we see here is both a reliance on self-regulation within this colonial space and a literal attempt to use the cinema screen to light up audience behavior and political dissidence; in effect, the film is watching the audience.

The prescribed organisation of the exhibition site served as a way of maintaining order, reaffirming support for the colonial state, and administering colonial authority. Film was imagined here as a way of attracting an audience, of 'contacting directly and at one time,' as a report from Sukumaland noted, 'several classes' that were usually 'untouched by normal methods.' As the report acknowledged, 'the cinema, may if desired, be used as an attraction.'¹⁶ However, the film was not simply imagined here

as a way to attract or even organise a crowd, but rather served as one integral part of the colonial administration. William Sellers' own background was as a government administrator, rather than a filmmaker, using instructional films in the 1930s to support his work as a health official in Lagos. When he travelled back out to Nigeria in 1936, his occupation on the immigration records was listed as 'sanitation inspector.' Even in 1940 when working for the CFU, he was listed as a 'Civil Servant'. While Sellers would spend a lifetime working with film and was clearly immersed in all aspects of film production and exhibition, his background as a health official provides a significant counterpoint to the more celebrated filmmakers and producers of the British documentary movement. The CFU's first audience survey in 1943 asked colonial administrators – rather than film personnel – for their feedback. Furthermore, one of Sellers' initial innovations, the Raw Stock Scheme, was specifically intended to allow 'experts,' whether on hygiene or agriculture, to make films that 'adhere to the instructions given from time to time in *Colonial Cinema*.' Sellers was not seeking filmmakers but rather encouraging colonial administrators to make films. He was not a filmmaker seeking social change through film, like his near contemporary John Grierson, but rather an 'expert' using film and the film show as part of government administration.¹⁷

The CFU produced its films and outlined, through *Colonial Cinema*, how the film show should be organised, but it was less clear in recognising

and regulating the human involvement within this process. These mobile units would often travel with only a couple of crewmembers and thus a huge amount of responsibility was placed in a few hands (Figure 2). The local commentator served as a performer, attraction and administrator, often turning up a day before to organise and coordinate this political event. The model film programme suggested by Sellers (Figure 3), which opened with music and concluded with the national anthem, includes four separate talks intersecting with four shorts films.¹⁸ Even before considering the local commentary presented during the film, it is apparent that the spoken word is as prominent as the visual presentation. The point here is that, while clearly integral to the imagined performance, the agency of this local commentator has been largely overlooked, not only within contemporary histories of African cinema, but also by the CFU authorities that sought to regulate and administer film throughout the empire.

A number of recent local studies, focusing on the latter days of empire but stretching across colonial territories, have illustrated the failings of local shows to relay their intended message to colonial audiences. In Malaya at the height of 'the Emergency' – what was in effect a decade-long war between colonial authorities and so-called 'Communist Terrorists' – the government cancelled screenings of *1955: The Year in Malaya*. While intended as a piece of anti-communist propaganda, the colonial government balked when newspapers reported cinemagoers applauding the on-screen appearance of

communist leader Chin Peng.¹⁹ The film was often read in unimagined ways, but the shows themselves could also become sites of contestation as film historian James Burns shows. Burns notes local figures literally obstructing this government apparatus in Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia, blocking the mobile vans from reaching their destination and standing in front of the projector. Burns concluded that by 1963, 'the criterion for a successful film show in Nyasaland had become one unmarred by violence.'²⁰ John Izod recalls delaying the start of his mobile film shows in the Central African Federation in 1963 until audience members had finished listening to the radio broadcasts from Tanzania. These radio broadcasts effectively offered guerilla propaganda from a recently independent state and this delay, while effectively receiving oppositional media messages, provides a significant counterpoint, if not a direct challenge, to the work of the film show.²¹ Charles Ambler, in his valuable work on mobile film shows in East Africa, reveals the exhibition site more directly reimagined within a changing political environment. 'As Kenya moved toward violent rebellion,' Ambler writes, 'the idea of thousands of people assembled after dark for outdoor cinema shows suggested not the pageantry of the local state but a potentially dangerous assemblage of rebels and malcontents.' Significantly Ambler shows how the film equipment was now used for other purposes, most notably as nationalist leader Paul Ngei took the microphone at a film show in 1947 to advertise a forthcoming political meeting.²²

It is significant that Ngei should take the microphone here, as it reveals the film, or at least the film event, re-contextualised through a live performance at the exhibition site. It also highlights the presence of a local voice within colonial cinema. My own interviews with Sir Sydney Samuelson and Sean Graham, filmmakers in Nigeria and the Gold Coast respectively, reveal the prominent, and often unsupervised role of the local commentator, interpreting and translating the film.²³ Both noted the divergence between the government text and the words spoken by the commentator, and highlighted the problems of regulating colonial film at the point of production.

The point of control is then not at production, but at exhibition, with the pivotal role in colonial cinema often not the film director, as was so frequently the case in Western cinema, but rather the commentator, who would set up screenings, provide an introductory lecture, answer questions, counter unrest, and of course translate and talk over the film. While the CFU did set out some guidelines for these commentators, the experience of watching film was far less closely monitored than the film text itself.

Locating the commentator in colonial film

‘In Nigeria, where the language barrier is a real obstacle to the communication of ideas, we look upon the commentator as the most vital link between the film and the audience. It is upon the

commentator's shoulders that there falls the duty of explaining obscure points, clearing up misunderstandings, and generally being responsible for the proper impact of the film; and all this without direct European supervision. In Nigeria, with its vast distances, once a mobile van has left headquarters they are "on their own" in the strict meaning of that phrase.'²⁴

The comments of filmmaker Norman Spurr, published in *Colonial Cinema* in 1948, were seemingly not reflected in CFU policy during this period. While Spurr argued that 'it is evident that the commentator has to be something of a superman,' the CFU appeared to see this figure more as Clark Kent, administering and carrying out instructions. Furthermore, while Spurr repeatedly emphasised the 'unsupervised' nature of this role, CFU policy suggested that such supervision could take place at the point of production, seeking to monitor the films and scripts sent out, and to control the organisation of the show from afar.

Reports in *Colonial Cinema* continued to stress the need for 'close liaison' between a 'highly intelligent commentator' and the European officer, but evidently such close supervision was difficult to administer, both because of language divisions and a paucity of European personnel working with the vans. One report explained that the European would need to 'understand enough of the language to pick up ideas ... and check the commentator,'

while an account from Kenya highlighted that ‘the overall supervision of all cinema vans is the responsibility of one European officer.’²⁵

So, given the lack of direct European supervision, how did the CFU attempt to monitor the work of the local commentators? For the most part, the CFU sought to watch not the commentator, but the commentary. Norman Spurr writes at length about the commentator’s part in translating the ‘suggested commentaries’ (as the CFU initially labeled them) into local languages. ‘The original commentary of approximately 870 words was reduced to 539,’ he explained, ‘and this when translated came down to 467 words.’²⁶ Such close attention to the script more closely supports William Sellers’ notion of an ‘interpreter,’ charged with ‘translating’ government scripts. Sellers urged the ‘interpreter’ to ‘memorize his translations’, but also complained that ‘Experience has shown the need for checking all translations before they are used in public.’²⁷ While highlighting the necessity, and previous failure, to regulate the words spoken by the commentator, his writings also reveal the inherent problems in such an approach. ‘The success of film demonstrations depends on showmanship and stage-management. *This cannot be too strongly emphasized,*’ he argued, ‘The officer in charge should combine the best qualities of the teacher, the orator and the showman.’ The reference points are useful here, as Sellers presented his ‘interpreter’ as a showman, a figure drawn from the traditions of early western cinema and local oral literature; a figure that should engage, respond to, and inspire an

audience. Yet, his proposed moderation of a script appeared to eschew the interactive role of this showman.²⁸

Local training programmes also revealed a preoccupation with the commentary script. The report from the Gold Coast in 1943 outlined that trainee commentators would write 'interpretations of English film-commentaries which, on being re-translated into English, are compared with the originals.' This relationship between the film and the script was 'examined exhaustively.'²⁹ Yet the report also warned against a 'literal translation,' urging the interpreter, 'who is in charge of the Unit [and] is the key member of the staff,' to convey 'the real inner meaning of the material' using local idioms.³⁰ Further reports highlighted the challenges of regulation at the point of production. Arthur Champion, writing in 1947 about his experiences as a government film worker in Kenya, stated that the commentator often had little time 'to become word perfect in the commentaries' as he would have so much else to do. 'Naturally there was a tendency in such circumstances to employ the imagination where knowledge or memory failed.'³¹ Even if there was no deliberate, political motivation for their deviation, the nature and magnitude of the showman's role suggests that such close analysis of the script was misdirected. The Gold Coast report indirectly acknowledged these problems when concluding that the interpreter 'must be absolutely trustworthy and imbued with something of the missionary zeal.'³²

In outlining its model practices, the CFU sought to diminish the agency of the commentator, yet in presenting the film space as a political space, it simultaneously magnified the role. The Gold Coast report included a sample programme, which included an opening and closing talk. The opening talk would discuss 'the reason for the van's presence, the care of Britain for Colonial peoples,' and various aspects of the British and African war effort. These themes of imperial solidarity were again prioritised at the end of the show; 'Remember what you have seen – The Empire is strong, all are members and are safe and free within it.'³³ The commentator would be expected to talk on a myriad of subjects, relaying government propaganda to the assembled audience.

A more specific example is offered in a 1947 issue of *Colonial Cinema*, outlining a talk offered by 'an African commentator before a film show' in which he spoke about the development of cinema 'and what it means to you.' The talk largely followed established colonial rhetoric – 'it is little wonder you called it [the cinema] *magic*' – celebrating again the British mastery of modern technology.³⁴ There is nothing to suggest that this ascribed 'cinema' talk would have been either widely used or closely followed, but this example does highlight two further points. First, it reveals the prominent role of the commentator in addressing the assembled audience before and after screenings. Secondly, it suggests an eagerness to use African voices to speak on behalf of the British authorities. Arthur Champion believed that African

audiences 'believe much more readily what is told them by other Africans,' adding that 'their jokes went down better than ours.'³⁵ Champion's comments suggest that the CFU sought to use the local voices to generate support for the colonial administration. The political moves towards self-government, which promoted local agency and purportedly empowered local figures, may actually have offered a further means of control, a window-dressing for the colonial administration. When it was suggested to William Sellers as early as 1942 that 'one or two' Africans might be employed by the CFU, Sellers resisted the idea on the basis that a suitably qualified African would be 'too out of touch with conditions among the more illiterate sections of the community for whom the films were principally designed.'³⁶ In this example, a compromise was proposed – a single figure, part-time and in an advisory role – although the CFU was certainly quick to publicise the appointment of the chosen figure, Fela Sowande, at any opportunity.

The role of this local commentator was perhaps even more significant with other related forms of visual media. Anthropologist Liam M. Buckley noted a government backlash against the local commentators presenting filmstrips in the Gambia in the 1950s. The Colonial Secretary of the Gambia proposed culling the position of 'interpreter/announcer' in 1956, complaining that the local figures were invariably barely trained and unaccounted for during their travels.³⁷ By the early 1950s as emerging local units sought inexpensive, locally produced visual media, the CFU increasingly promoted

the merits of the filmstrip. Ostensibly the filmstrip would appear the ultimate manifestation of the Sellers' doctrine – a complete reduction of editing and movement within the frame, which seemingly minimised duplicitous audience readings – yet its success in delivering government doctrine was increasingly dependent on its operator and commentator. Writing in 1952, CFU Director in Chief (and celebrated early British filmmaker) George Pearson argued that 'the quality of the commentary determines the quality of the strip,' adding that 'in film strips the all-important factor is the spoken word.'³⁸

The local commentator offered a direct conduit between the government and the colonial subjects, delivering messages but also, on occasion, receiving and relaying audience responses. The Gold Coast Report explained that commentators would 'make a point of questioning individual members of the audience on the morning following a performance,' while Sellers urged that 'wherever possible' observers (and this often fell on the commentator) should be present to 'listen for any interesting remarks.'³⁹ Charles Ambler has recently argued that in Kenya, the staff used the tours for 'intelligence gathering and surveillance,' so that the tours were 'as much about gauging political sentiments in this rural area as they were about documenting the efficacy of the films shown.'⁴⁰ Yet, there is little evidence of the CFU initiating or collating these political responses. Its surveillance addressed neither the politics of the audience nor the reactions to the live

event, but rather remained focused on the film text, watching and commentating on the types of films shown. In short, the CFU wasn't watching audiences, it was watching audiences watching films.

Watching audiences watching films

I will next examine the ways in which the CFU watched its audiences, focusing on two audience surveys conducted in 1943 and 1952. Examining the administration of these schemes provides a snapshot of the broader challenges and difficulties facing centralised government agencies across a disintegrating empire. More specifically to film, the audience surveys reveal both this misdirection in the CFU's surveillance – the fixation on the film text – while also providing a glimpse into how these films shows actually worked. Here once more, we see the emergence of a local voice.

For its first audience survey in 1943, The CFU sent a questionnaire to officials working throughout the colonies, from Ceylon to Zanzibar. The 23 questions almost exclusively addressed film production and technique, overlooking the very specific ways in which these films were experienced and understood as part of a live social and political event. As an example, question 6 asks 'Which of the following camera technical devices do you think could be used with advantage now: panning, dissolve, wipe, fade, reverse angles, unfamiliar camera angles, dolly shot?'⁴¹ The surveys were largely

motivated by a desire to moderate and determine the *types* of films – and the formal characteristics of films – that would be shown to audiences in the colonies.

A later question did appear to ask about the commentary – ‘Aside from specialised films, what percentage of the running time do you consider should be taken up with commentary?’ – but it elicited a collection of confused responses. The Nigerian respondent explained that the ‘Audience hears nothing of a sound track. [The] Commentator at [the] microphone is understood,’ while the Ugandan official was one of a number to note the use of a running spoken commentary. The Gold Coast representative revealed the authority evinced by the live performer, claiming that the audience falls quiet once it hears the ‘interpreter’ speaking. Rather than addressing these responses, the CFU largely dismissed the question. ‘It seems that the purport of this question is not clearly appreciated,’ it wrote, ‘There is confusion with sound tracks and spoken commentaries by local interpreters.’⁴² The CFU again appeared interested in the specifics of the film text. It was not asking about the commentator, but about the commentary. It was not asking how the commentary was used, but rather the time assigned for this.⁴³

There is a clear disparity within these surveys between what the London-based CFU was watching and what the local officials within the colonies were seeing (and hearing). While the questions examined the film text (the commentary rather than the commentator), a large number of the

responses emphasised the local involvement within the film show. In answer to the first question on preferred films, the officer from Nyasaland outlined the use of, and need for, a local commentary 'in the vernacular of the Natives who make up the audiences.'⁴⁴ The respondent from Northern Rhodesia explained that 'the English commentary is cut off and the film is explained in the vernacular,' while the reply from Kenya confirmed that '[t]hese films of course require very carefully prepared commentaries.' When asked what audiences do if a film does not interest them, the Gold Coast representative explained that they respond 'by shouting questions at the interpreter.' The respondents therefore positioned the commentator within the film text, and the live event, in a way that the questions had not.⁴⁵

The 1943 survey indicates both the CFU's early interest in watching its audiences but also the broader failings of this surveillance, which would become ever more apparent over the next decade. A report in *Colonial Cinema* a few years later in 1947 noted the challenges of collating the varied, geographically diverse responses, and now called for more 'systematic research,' which would be conducted by 'someone in social sciences or anthropology.'⁴⁶ However, the subsequent discussions between the CFU and the Colonial Office over how this scheme would be run, funded and monitored, suggests that the changing political situation made any 'systematic' audience research increasingly difficult to administer.

In its initial discussions with the Colonial Office, the CFU outlined its determination to exercise complete control over all aspects of this study, running and financing the operation from London. The Colonial Office disagreed and called for local colonial governments to fund the scheme. To provide a bit of context here, the CFU was, by 1950, operating under the auspices of the Colonial Office and was expected to support the political moves to decentralise colonial administration. 'Although a division of responsibility placing technical direction in the hands of a Colonial Government may create certain difficulties,' the Colonial Office acknowledged, 'local financial control is really essential. Such difficulties are inherent in many research schemes directed from the United Kingdom but administered locally. Nevertheless the arrangement is workable, given close co-operation by both parties.'⁴⁷ This was the problem now facing the CFU. In trying to promote and administer a central policy, the CFU was working against the political tide. By 1950 the CFU ceased production and instead offered technical and advisory services for the newly established local units. This loss of authority would undermine the CFU's ability to administer uniform audience research as well as to survey and standardise production and exhibition practices.

The CFU opposed these changes, arguing that 'policy and administrative and financial control cannot efficiently be separated' and, on this occasion, the Colonial Office relented.⁴⁸ The CFU, for its part, now

recognised the need to acknowledge the changing political situation, even if it was evidently unconvinced on the value of these changes. 'It might even be worthwhile,' wrote one CFU official, 'as a matter of tactics, to add a paragraph to the draft scheme about the importance of local assistance and collaboration.'⁴⁹

While the CFU had seemingly secured control of the research scheme, there was a significant caveat; the scheme would be administered from London 'with the exception of the running costs of the vehicles and employment of local staff.'⁵⁰ Once again the CFU was able to control many of the practices and operations, but not the crucial human involvement within the colonies.

Despite this, the CFU did discuss the requirements for local staff and even selected a preferred candidate (Mr Maliki) for the 'important' role of 'interpreter-commentator.' H. Davidson, a member of the Colonial Office, argued that this individual should work with the Unit throughout the whole period. 'If the Unit are continually changing their commentator,' Davidson wrote, 'it will mean that there will be no continuity between them and their audience.'⁵¹ However, others noted the problems with this policy, suggesting that it would be 'necessary' to change staff as the team moves districts, as 'those reporting must be fully conversant with local language and custom.'⁵² Davidson did acknowledge that on occasion a further commentator might be needed – 'Obviously no one man can possibly speak all the languages and

dialects used in Nigeria' – but suggested that in such situations Mr Maliki could provide 'the permanent link.'⁵³ Davidson's comments acknowledge the importance of the commentator, the need for close co-operation between the commentator and the government and the merits of introducing a regulatory system with a local figure overseeing a team of itinerant workers. Yet, for Davidson, these stipulations were motivated by a desire to validate the scientific results rather than a broader attempt to moderate exhibition practices. Furthermore, while Davidson outlined the need for this single, trusted figure, the CFU were not able to secure his release from the Provincial Administration in Egbado Division, where he worked as a clerk. Such a secondment 'would cause serious dislocation in the work of the Divisional Office' and once again there was this tension between centre and periphery, between a policy administered from London and the specific requirements within the colonies.⁵⁴ As if to emphasise this division, the Public Relations Officer in Nigeria used this correspondence to state pointedly that 'his Cinema Section already carries out audience research to a larger degree than is generally realised.' The Officer explained that 'Members of the staff travelling with the mobile cinema vans regularly send back reports on audience reaction.'⁵⁵ Again any monitoring here was occurring locally and was not centrally administered or acknowledged by the CFU.

Writing on these proposals in 1950, K.W. Blackburne, Director of Information Services, listed three points that revealed, as he saw it, some of

the failings of the CFU's surveillance over the previous decade. Firstly, Blackburne stated that 'It is wrong to base an estimate of the success or otherwise of film work on attendance records.' CFU and *Colonial Cinema* reports had regularly cited audience figures, but Blackburne now stressed that 'It is not the size of the audience which matters but what the film does to that audience.' Secondly and connected to this, 'Educational film should not be given in vacuo [sic].' Blackburne proposed working more closely with government departments, something that the emerging local units, most notably in the Gold Coast and Jamaica, would do. Thirdly, Blackburne questioned the value of seeking the opinions of Europeans and 'educated Africans' in determining 'whether films are or are not suitable for educational work in the Colonies.' While still defining and dividing the audiences in familiar terms (European, educated Africans, illiterate Africans), Blackburne now sought the opinions of the local viewers on the ground 'who are not accustomed to films and whose reactions are all important if the film is to serve a useful purpose.'⁵⁶

This failure to question, and indeed credit the responses of, local African viewers was symptomatic of the dominant racial prejudices that had discredited the agency of the African commentator. When asked in 1943 how audiences responded if they were not interested in a film, the expert from Tanganyika concluded that 'Audiences here [are] not sufficiently sophisticated to be bored.'⁵⁷ A piece on audiences in Nigeria in 1945,

dismissed the value of seeking local responses to the film shows, claiming that 'The majority of the audiences under review are not sufficiently qualified to represent an accepted standard of opinion.'⁵⁸ In contrast, when Peter Morton-Williams, a social anthropologist from University College London, arrived in Lagos to begin the latest audience survey in November 1951, he sought to listen in on audiences, and monitor local responses. He relayed comments heard, used local translators and analysed essays written by schoolchildren after the shows. While now attempting to engage with the local audiences directly, the European presence overseeing the show and collating the responses on the ground, ensured that this was still far from representative of the majority of colonial film shows.

Peter Morton-Williams' six month tour of Nigeria, which began in January 1952, may initially appear to highlight the CFU's changing approach to its surveillance. It presents a scientific study that, in using a social anthropologist, now defined the audiences by their social and tribal groups (rather than as African). Yet, while appearing progressive in its treatment of the audiences, Morton-Williams' study still examined individual films shown in isolation, focused on the film text rather than the performance, and examined cultural variables (the collective background of the audience) rather than any variable exhibition contexts.⁵⁹

The presentation of these films 'in vacuo' appears particularly incongruous, even though Morton-Williams claimed that this was 'fairly

representative of the use which had been made of film as an isolated form of communication.’ Many of the films shown, for example the Gold Coast Film Unit production *Amenu’s Child* (1950), were produced specifically as part of government campaigns and were intended to play with government representatives on hand (in this case midwifery teams) to follow up the lessons presented on screen (Figure 4).⁶⁰ When *Amenu’s Child* was shown for Morton-Williams’ audience research, it was not as part of a broader campaign, with further displays or talks, but was rather shown in isolation.

In initially advocating this research study, Norman Spurr had emphasised film’s value as a form of enticement for other forms of government propaganda. He quoted a District Officer, who on attending one of his screenings, was ‘particularly pleased with the way the film put an audience in a receptive frame of mind, or, to borrow a phrase from the advertising world, “it broke down sales resistance”.’⁶¹ Spurr’s example reiterates that these films were rarely shown ‘in vacuo’ but were imagined as part of live, political events (Figure 5). A report from 1945 on a ‘typical’ mobile cinema visit in a Fanti village described a cinema van arriving in the village alongside a Post Office Savings Bank van, which was accompanied by a policeman. The presence of both the savings van and policeman bestowed legitimacy on the film show, while the film show organised crowds for the accompanying government presentation. The report explained that after the show the Chief would summon a general meeting near the savings bank, at

which he would open a new account before 'one by one' they all followed. This model structure, especially promoted in West Africa, again positions local authority figures within the film show and is heavily reliant on the expertise of the local commentator. 'When the music stops, a speech is made by the interpreter on the urgent need for the people to practise saving,' the report notes, further adding that later 'the interpreter of the cinema van speaks on behalf of the two units.'⁶² This figure is not only running the show, but also acting as the link between the people and the government.

These local roles remain largely obscured within Morton-Williams' official report, yet they are certainly visible within the individual screening reports, which were affixed as an appendix. The disparity between the CFU's official conclusions and the individual screening reports highlights again the broader disparity between what the central CFU was looking for and what was evidently occurring at the local screenings.

So, what do these reports reveal? Firstly, they highlight the technological failings, which ensured that the shows were cut short or presented in unimagined ways. These failings were often attributed to human error. Morton-Williams notes how a screening of *Development – Azgu* (1949) was projected at 16fps but had been shot at a faster rate. The film viewed by audiences was thus effectively in slow motion. This prompted two responses, both of which worked against its intended pedagogical function. Initially the audience laughed, but later complaints were made in a Group Council

Meeting in Awgu. 'As everyone was shown moving very slowly,' the report explained, 'it looked as if they were lazier than other people, and they felt they had been shamed and were angry.'⁶³ Such a response, while used to reaffirm Sellers' dominant ideologies on illiterate African audiences, again shows the film text reimagined on account of external factors.

The preeminence of the film text was also undermined at many screenings by a failure to organise the exhibition site. At a screening in Dashit, the film was stopped at times while the 'audience rearranged themselves' after clamoring too close to the screen. Other screening reports noted groups of men 'standing all together behind the projector' or 'crowded very close to the screen,' restricting their view and ensuring that they were 'unable to see adequately anything intricate.'⁶⁴ The Central African Film Unit insisted on using colour within its films, but the nature of outdoor mobile exhibition meant that the details within the film were often obscured. Morton-Williams appears to acknowledge this when later concluding that colour was of 'very little importance' within these films.⁶⁵ Indeed, given the exhibition context, the details and intricacies within the frame, so closely monitored by Sellers and colonial filmmakers, were often of far less importance than those producing or reviewing the films from London cared to believe.

The screening reports highlight the myriad of roles performed by the African commentator, yet the failure to address this directly within the main body of the report further highlights the critical lack of attention and

supervision afforded to this human role. For example, the reports reveal the CFU's continuing attempts to monitor the commentary at script level. When describing a screening in Egan of *Smallpox* (1950), Peter Morton-Williams noted that 'the film had been discussed thoroughly with the commentator two days before it was shown.' He outlines in detail the changes made, largely for cultural reasons, to the script. The failings of this approach are later revealed at a screening of *Mixed Farming* (1948). 'The typed commentary was not faithfully translated by the village schoolmaster who commented during the first screening,' the report notes, 'He described instead what he saw on screen.' At a screening of the Oscar-winning *Daybreak in Udi* (1948) 'The commentator had given up and made no attempt to reproduce the District Officer's speech, apparently feeling that all that mattered had finished.'⁶⁶ Morton-Williams often notes in brackets the minor omissions or mistakes of the commentator, while also noting their failings in delivery. At one screening he bemoans that the commentator, 'who tended to speak slowly,' was unable to keep pace. The commentator's failings here are connected to the control of the audience ('some of the children were becoming inattentive').⁶⁷ It is evident within the individual reports that, despite initial claims to the contrary, many different commentators were used and this further undermined the CFU's attempts to regulate this role.

The importance of the commentator in delivering the film's message was evident in a number of reports. 'If the commentary is inadequate,'

Morton-Williams notes when discussing *Amenu's Child*, 'the film tends to be only a tract against consulting fetish priests.' The failure of audiences to understand *The Two Farmers* (1948) was partly credited to the commentator's apparent confusion, while a screening of *Wives of Nendi* (1949) was undermined by the delivery of the commentator.⁶⁸ Significantly the reports also present the commentator as this direct conduit between the film and the audience. The end of *Smallpox* was met 'with a prayer from the commentator that they might never have smallpox in their village.' This provoked 'a general buzz of conversation and exclamation.' On another occasion, the commentator introduced the film with a prayer that all 'might be spared from smallpox.'⁶⁹ The reports show the commentator directly addressing his audiences ('many of you schoolboys don't wash your hands') and the audiences similarly engaging with the commentator ('One of two called out: "Thank You!" to the commentator when the film ended').⁷⁰ The commentator offers call and responses, asks questions of the audience, outlines the intended message of the film and directs where the audience looks on screen. He even manages to generate comedy when watching a film on venereal disease, evidence once more of his integral role in redefining the text for local audiences.⁷¹

Throughout the report, Peter Morton-Williams outlines the problems and failings of 'universal' narratives, arguing that CFU films should be specifically catered not for 'African audiences,' but for each of the socially and

geographically diverse audience groups. This view contradicts many other colonial units that sought to show principles not details. Morton-Williams believed that local audiences would only understand the behavior on screen if they could find 'analogues from their own culture' and acknowledges the CFU's seemingly impossible task of creating texts that are culturally specific to diverse audience groups.⁷² Yet, this was in effect what the commentators did. The role of the commentator was not simply to translate or describe the film, but to make it relevant and connect it to the local people. The commentators effectively do what the film text cannot, providing this specificity or, at least, removing the cultural specificity within the films (for example in not mentioning where a film was set). In doing this, they ensured that this film text was reimagined for the local audience.

The commentator's direct involvement as part of the film text is apparent when looking more closely at the 34 films shown during this scheme. Of these 34 films, 26 contained an English commentary or soundtrack and only 6 were silent. For these 26 films, the text was reworked in intriguing ways. The commentator would often appear as part of the film text, replacing the original commentary and played directly through the loud speakers. The local commentator thus became a part of the film text, in a way that the CFU, reviewing the films from London, failed to acknowledge.

On further occasions, the local commentator would speak alongside or over the original commentary. Peter Morton-Williams suggested that the

original commentary retained a value here as viewers 'enjoyed hearing people on the screen speak' even if they could not understand them. Speech, he argued, 'is so important a part of behaviour, and tones of voice are significant.'⁷³ The tones of voice here denoted a traditional form of colonial authority. When *Colonial Cinema* discussed the English soundtrack applied to these films, it noted that 'Mr. Lionel Marson of the British Broadcasting Corporation, who has spoken many of the commentaries, must now be quite familiar.'⁷⁴ This BBC voice represented a traditional authority from London, which alongside language and music (for example 'God Save the King' which concluded screenings) was integral to the ways in which these shows were imagined as part of the colonising process.

The CFU prioritised the original film, complete with English voiceover, and this is symptomatic of a failure to acknowledge the mutable nature of these films as they were presented to local African audiences. For all its emphasis on tailoring film production to African audiences, on training local filmmakers and monitoring individual films, the CFU was slower to recognise the importance of local figures in presenting, and redefining, the film text to colonial audiences. The local commentator now replaced, spoke over or competed with this authoritarian voice. This potentially provided a disjuncture between 'them' and 'us' on screen, and highlighted the rise of a new voice within African cinema, one that in its formal adoption, began a

process of reclaiming authority from the colonisers and set the grounds for both independence and post-colonial filmmaking.

Figure captions:

Figure 1: *Colonial Cinema*, June 1951.

Figure 2: Commentator and Cinema Operator in Western Nigeria, published in *Annual Report of the Western Region Government*, 1957, 25.

Figure 3: William Sellers' sample film programme, *Colonial Cinema*, December 1951, 81.

Figure 4: Discussion around a screening of *Amenu's Child* (1950). Photograph from Public Relations Office, Gold Coast.

Figure 5: A commentator with the mobile cinema van in Tsame in Trans-Volta Togoland explains the voting procedures for the forthcoming election, 1954.

Photograph from The National Archive, INF 10/129/37.

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¹ William Sellers, Films for Primitive Peoples, *Documentary News Letter*, 2:9; Cinema Shows in Africa, *Colonial Cinema* 9:4 (December 1951), 77-82.

² See for example, Rosaleen Smyth, The British Colonial Film Unit and sub-Saharan Africa, 1939-1945, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 8:3 (1988), 285—298; James Burns, *Flickering Shadows: Cinema and Identity in Colonial Zimbabwe* (Ohio: Ohio University Research in International Studies, 2002), 37-59.

³ Sellers explained in 1941 that 'all the cinema vans operating in the colonies are identical in design.' Sellers, *Films for Primitive Peoples*, 174.

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- ⁴ Films for Mobile Film Units in West Africa, 1940, Colonial Office 323/1744, Public Record Office, London (hereafter CO, PRO). Sellers did note when advertising for the initial crews in 1940 that the 'duties of the interpreter are of the highest importance.'
- ⁵ *The Use of Mobile Cinema and Radio Vans in Fundamental Education* (Paris: UNESCO, 1949), 86.
- ⁶ The UNESCO report (1949, 87) suggested that 'training appears to be more standardized' in other countries, most notably USSR and Papua New Guinea. Papua New Guinea operated a 9-12 month training course, which included subjects such as 'Commentary practice.'
- ⁷ Commentary and Commentators, *Colonial Cinema*, 6:1 (March 1948), 13-14.
- ⁸ Colonial Film Unit: Report for 1951, CO 875/52/3, PRO.
- ⁹ Sellers, Mobile Cinema Shows in Africa, 77-82.
- ¹⁰ Sellers, Films for Primitive Peoples, 174.
- ¹¹ Charles Ambler, Projecting the Modern Colonial State: Mobile Cinema in Kenya, in: Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (eds.), *Film and the End of Empire* (London: Palgrave, 2011), 199-224; Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
- ¹² Ambler, 208.
- ¹³ Larkin, 83.
- ¹⁴ Sellers, Mobile Cinema Shows in Africa, 79.
- ¹⁵ The Units at Work, *Colonial Cinema* 1:9 (November 1943), 2-3.
- ¹⁶ Report on the Use of the Cinema in Sukumaland, *Colonial Cinema* 12:1 (March 1954), 19-22.
- ¹⁷ Outward Passenger Lists for West Africa held at PRO and accessed through www.ancestry.co.uk (date of departure 19 February 1936 and 13 July 1940); Filming in Africa, *Colonial Cinema* 1:5 (July 1943), 1-2.
- ¹⁸ Sellers, Mobile Cinema Shows in Africa, 79.
- ¹⁹ Tom Rice, 1955: The Year in Malaya, *Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire*, 2010, <<http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/2545>> [accessed 30 May 2013].
- ²⁰ Burns, 133.
- ²¹ Personal correspondence with John Izod, March 2013.
- ²² Ambler, 210. Sellers (1951, 79) seemingly acknowledged the dangers of inviting local speakers, stressing that 'it is as well to ascertain the views of the person invited and give them guidance when necessary.'
- ²³ Emma Sandon, Tom Rice and Peter Bloom, Changing the World: Sean Graham, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 10: 3 (2013), 524-536; Interview with Sir Sydney Samuelson, conducted by Tom Rice and Emma Sandon, 15 June 2010.
- ²⁴ *Colonial Cinema* (March 1948), 13-15.

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- ²⁵ *Colonial Cinema* (March 1954), 19-22; The Information Service in Kenya, *Colonial Cinema* (March 1954), 14-15.
- ²⁶ Norman Spurr, A Report on the Use of Disney's Hookworm Film with an African Audience in the Western Province, Uganda, *Colonial Cinema* 9:2 (June 1951), 28-33.
- ²⁷ Sellers, Mobile Cinema Shows in Africa, 79.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.
- ²⁹ UNESCO, 1949, 114.
- ³⁰ Cinema Propaganda: Colonial Film Unit, CO875 10/9, PRO. See also 'Memorandum of the Cinema Branch of the Information Department Gold Coast and the Use of Mobile Cinema Units for Mass Information and Education.'
- ³¹ UNESCO, 1949, 90.
- ³² CO875 10/9, PRO.
- ³³ Programmes, *Colonial Cinema* 2:1 (January 1944), 3.
- ³⁴ The Cinema and You, *Colonial Cinema* 5:1 (March 1947), 20-21.
- ³⁵ Sellers, Mobile Cinema Shows in Africa, 79; UNESCO, 1949, 60.
- ³⁶ Reorganisation of the Colonial Film Unit, 1941-1945, INF 1/144, PRO.
- ³⁷ Liam M. Buckley, Cine-film, Film-strips and the Devolution of Colonial Photography in The Gambia, *History of Photography*, 34:2 (2010), 147-157.
- ³⁸ George Pearson, The Film Strip, *Colonial Cinema* 10:1 (January 1952), 10-15.
- ³⁹ Cinema Propaganda: Colonial Film Unit, CO875 10/9, PRO. See also *Colonial Cinema* 1:10 (December 1943), 2; Sellers, Mobile Cinema Shows in Africa, 80.
- ⁴⁰ Ambler, 206.
- ⁴¹ Colonial Film Unit: Replies to Questionnaire, CO875/10/11, PRO.
- ⁴² CO875/10/11, PRO.
- ⁴³ The CFU's focus on the recorded soundtrack rather than the live 'commentaries' was further evident in *Colonial Cinema* in a series of articles on 'good commentating' and commentary practices written by George Pearson.
- ⁴⁴ CO875/10/11, PRO.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ Audience Reaction to Films Necessity of Planned Research, *Colonial Cinema* 5:3 (September 1947), 59-62.
- ⁴⁷ Colonial Film Unit – Audience Research, CO 875/51/7, PRO. See 'Letter from Gibbs to Carstairs' dated 22 February 1951.
- ⁴⁸ CO 875/51/7, PRO. It quoted the example of the Jamaica training school, centrally administered by the CFU.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.* See note dated 15 March 1951.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.* See letter from Davidson in May 1951 and from Bryant dated 7 March 1951. The Colonial Office had earlier acknowledged that 'We really have no control over the employment of local staff.'

⁵¹ CO 875/51/7, PRO. See Davidson to Miss Loveless, dated 5 October 1951 and 18 October 1951.

⁵² Ibid. See letter from Governor's Deputy in Nigeria to Secretary of State in London, dated 8 May 1951.

⁵³ Ibid. See Davidson to Loveless, 18 October 1951.

⁵⁴ Ibid. See letter from Acting Government of Nigeria to Secretary of State for the Colonies on 11 October 1951

⁵⁵ ibid. See letter from Governor's Deputy, dated 8 May 1951

⁵⁶ CO 875/51/7, PRO. See K.W. Blackburne to Howson, dated 8 May 1950.

⁵⁷ CO875/10/11, PRO.

⁵⁸ Nigeria, 1944, *Colonial Cinema* 3:4 (December 1945), 89.

⁵⁹ P. Morton-Williams, *Cinema in Rural Nigeria: A Field Study of the Impact of Fundamental-Education Films on Rural Audiences in Nigeria* (Lagos: Federal Information Services, 1952), vi.-ix. The study still appeared motivated by a desire to develop film technique and production, as Morton-Williams (quoting from official CFU documents) stated that 'systematic investigation into audience reactions should enable reliable techniques (for making films) to be developed much more rapidly than under present conditions.'

⁶⁰ Tom Rice, Amenu's Child, *Colonial Film Moving Images of the British Empire*, 2010, <<http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/6730>>, [accessed 30 May 2013].

⁶¹ Norman Spurr, The Mobile Cinema Van is a New Weapon in Mass Education, *Colonial Cinema* 7:1 (March 1949), 9-16.

⁶² The Mobile Cinema Van in the Villages, *Colonial Cinema* 3:1 (March 1945), pp. 11-14.

⁶³ *Cinema in Rural Nigeria*, 130-133.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 73,46.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 48, 100, 125.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 70.

⁶⁸ ibid., 28, 32, 134.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 48.

⁷⁰ ibid.,.69, 50.

⁷¹ Ibid., 89.

⁷² Ibid., 4.

⁷³ Ibid., 45.

⁷⁴ Sound Track, *Colonial Cinema* 8:1 (March 1950), 18.

Biography:

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