



---

John Wayne on the Zambezi: Cinema, Empire, and the American Western in British Central Africa

Author(s): James Burns

Source: *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 1, Special

Issue: Leisure in African History (2002), pp. 103-117

Published by: Boston University African Studies Center

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3097368>

Accessed: 11-04-2018 01:19 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



*Boston University African Studies Center* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*

## **JOHN WAYNE ON THE ZAMBEZI: CINEMA, EMPIRE, AND THE AMERICAN WESTERN IN BRITISH CENTRAL AFRICA**

*By James Burns*

During the early years of the Second World War Oliver Bell, president of the British Film Institute, conducted a survey of the cinema habits of the British empire's African subjects. Working with colonial officials, Bell gathered information on the kinds of films Africans saw, and tried to determine what movies colonial officers believed Africans should see. He shared his conclusions in a 1942 letter sent to one of his chief advisors. Based on his consultations with the empires' men on the spot, Bell had determined that "the native must be treated as we treat a ten-year-old white child, i.e. ... he must be shown films of action of the Western type."<sup>1</sup>

In recounting this view Bell was articulating a conventional wisdom about Africans and the cinema that was already decades old in Britain's Central and Southern African colonies. Africans in colonial Zambia and Zimbabwe<sup>2</sup> had been watching movies since the First World War, when mine-owners organized screenings to lure workers to their compounds. By the end of the 1930s many Africans in the region were attending performances regularly. American Westerns (referred to locally as "cowboy" movies) became the most popular films and were so widely shown that, by the end of the Second World War, for many African moviegoers the "cowboy" and the cinema had become synonymous. Bell's condescending remark was thus based on his informants' observations, accurate in themselves, that Africans enjoyed Westerns.

Official acceptance of the cowboy film came into question after the Second World War, however, as white observers in the Rhodesias began worrying that these films posed a danger to public order. Surprisingly, many educated Africans echoed their fears, and began lobbying the government to ban the showing of Westerns. A vigorous debate ensued about the influence of cowboy movies on Africans, which played out in the colonial and African press, in public meetings, and in the Parliament of the Federation of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland. It culminated in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Zimbabwe National Archives (ZNA) S935/10, Gale to Bell, 3 August 1942.

<sup>2</sup> In 1953 the British government created the Central African Federation from the territories of Northern Rhodesia (modern Zambia), Southern Rhodesia (modern Zimbabwe), and Nyasaland (modern Malawi). The Federation was dissolved in 1963.

appointment of a federal committee in 1959 to investigate the influence of the cinema, and in particular, American Westerns, on African audiences.

Why did these groups develop this preoccupation with African film tastes? And why did American Westerns suddenly become the target of colonial critics? The answers to these questions shed light on the dramatic economic and social dislocation experienced in the Rhodesias during the 1940s and 1950s and the intense anxieties these trends inspired within colonial society. In the decades following the Second World War a booming economy and a massive influx of European immigrants fueled rapid urbanization in the Rhodesias. The expanding colonial economy drew thousands of unemployed and landless Africans into the cities. The crime and violence endemic to the crowded African townships left many settlers longing for the relative quiet and security of the sleepy prewar years. In retrospect, these problems were the inevitable consequence of the poverty and overcrowding of the new African shantytowns. However, many contemporary critics attributed them to the inability of Africans to cope with the sophisticated practices and technologies that were part and parcel of modern urban life. In this environment, the cinema came to be regarded as a confusing and potentially dangerous medium, capable of inspiring a variety of antisocial activities among its impressionable and credulous audiences. White critics singled out American westerns in particular as disseminating dangerous messages among the African populace.

Many educated Africans joined these white critics in calling for a ban on cowboy movies. Their activism was inspired in part by the belief that their own communities would be victimized by criminal acts perpetrated by impressionable moviegoers. They also viewed westerns as a contemptuous and “low-brow” form of entertainment, appropriate for children and the uneducated, but not for sophisticated audiences. Thus their advocacy of stricter censorship was in part motivated by a desire to establish equal access to the highbrow culture of the colonizers.

### **Postwar Censorship**

Concerns about the influence of cowboy movies in Southern Rhodesia first appeared in 1948 when missionaries began advocating for reform of the colony's censorship policy. This was remarkable, given that Southern Rhodesia already had some of the strictest film censorship laws in the British Empire. Responding to pressure from mission groups, in 1948 the Southern Rhodesian Legislative Assembly delegated responsibility for the censorship of “films intended for exhibition to natives” to a missionary-run board in Bulawayo.<sup>3</sup> The Federation of African Welfare Societies, an organization run by the Reverend Percy Ibbotson, chose the

---

<sup>3</sup> The board's guidelines can be found in ZNA F137 169/J, “Film Censorship N.R. Film Censorship Board,” 17 March 1959.

board members. Ibbotson's group presented its views on censorship in the February 1948 issue of their organ, the *African Welfare Bulletin*:

The Federation of African Welfare Societies has for some time been disturbed by the fact that many films shown to Africans in the Colony were unsuitable, and also there was some evidence that the influence was detrimental to African life.<sup>4</sup>

The board set about its task very aggressively, and within four years their newspaper could report that, due to its exertions, many Africans had been kept from seeing undesirable films.<sup>5</sup> The board was not satisfied with these results, however, and in 1952 announced their intentions to redouble their efforts.<sup>6</sup> As the Salisbury-based African newspaper the *African Weekly* reported, under the watchful eye of the new censorship board, Africans would be shielded from a variety of pernicious images, including

Scenes where masks are worn: Manhandling of women: Capture and tying up of members of one racial group by those of another race: Deliberate murder at close quarters, such as shooting in the back or strangling: Undue emphasis on violence.... All scenes of obvious crimes readily understood by Africans: All scenes where attacks are made or threats made with the aid of a knife.<sup>7</sup>

Though Westerns were not specifically mentioned, it seems clear from these guidelines that this was the particular genre the Reverend Ibbotson had in mind.

Colonial officials by and large shared the opinions of the board. Most settlers believed that Africans were impressionable and credulous cinema viewers. At best, this meant that American Westerns were basically incomprehensible to Africa audiences. Articles in this vein published in newspapers in Southern and Northern Rhodesia during the 1950s underscored the tendencies of Africans to be puzzled and confused by cowboy films. Thus a 1952 editorial in the *African Listener* warned Africans that

these films cause a great deal of misunderstanding among many Africans in Central Africa.... There is plenty of action in Cowboy films, and that is why so many people like them, but do remember when you see one of these films

<sup>4</sup> *African Welfare Bulletin*, February 1948.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1952.

<sup>6</sup> "What Africans Will Not See in Films," *African Weekly*, January 9, 1952.

<sup>7</sup> "Censorship of Films Shown to Africans," *African Weekly*, February 1952.

next at a cinema, that you are seeing a picture of the sort of life that some people led in the very remote parts of America 100 years ago.<sup>8</sup>

In a similar vein the *Bantu Mirror* reported an incident in which an on-screen cowboy had pointed a gun at an audience in Bulawayo, terrifying the patrons and inciting a stampede for the exit.<sup>9</sup>

Of greater concern to white critics was the fear that seeing acts of crime or violence on the screen would encourage Africans to put them into practice.<sup>10</sup> Thus most whites who ventured an opinion on the subject warned that showing American Westerns to Africans was likely to encourage crime, immorality, and violence. However many, including the secretary for internal affairs of Southern Rhodesia, whose department was responsible for censorship, did not believe that this was an adequate reason to proscribe the films. He recognized that theater-owners and mine managers were reliant on the popular cowboy films, and any efforts to ban them would likely inspire resistance from African audiences. While the secretary agreed that "cowboy films with scenes of violence and lawlessness may not be considered suitable," he acknowledged they would have to be permitted because "there is little else to choose from."<sup>11</sup>

### Why Do Africans Like Cowboy Films?

Colonial observers like the secretary had long recognized the popularity of Westerns. In the early days of cinema in Central and Southern Africa, American Westerns had become standard fare at urban and mine cinema shows. Westerns were popular with white entrepreneurs because they were relatively cheap to rent. By the late 1920s cinema shows in colonial Zambia invariably included "a cowboy film (old and grade B)."<sup>12</sup> Many of these films featured American actor Jack Holt, who starred in a series of cheap features and cowboy serials between the 1920s and

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Bottomore notes a similar phenomenon in Honduras in the early era of the cinema, when the popularity of American Westerns inspired audiences "to come to think that the entire population of the United States is made up chiefly of cowboy, Indians, and soldiers, who spend their time chasing each other." Quoted in Bottomore, "The Coming of the Cinema," *History Today* 46 (1996), 14.

<sup>9</sup> "Cowboy Frightens Vundu Audience," *Bantu Mirror*, January 29, 1955.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of settler views of African cinema audiences, see James Burns, "Flickering Shadows: Cinema and Society in Colonial Zimbabwe" (Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1998), Ch. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Report of the Secretary of Internal Affairs 1950 (Salisbury, 1951), "Censorship."

<sup>12</sup> Hortense Powdermaker, *Copper Town, Changing Africa: The Human Situation on the Rhodesian Copperbelt* (New York, 1962), 254.

1940s. By the end of the Second World War, Jack Holt had become an important icon of popular culture in Zambian and Zimbabwean urban locations.<sup>13</sup>

Why Africans were so devoted to the genre was a question that began to intrigue whites in the region in the late 1940s. Among the first to investigate the Western's appeal were the staff members of the Central African Film Unit (CAFU), an agency established in 1948 to make entertainment and educational films for Africans in Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland. The CAFU charged admission to its shows, and thus competed with Westerns for the pennies of film audiences. Thus before they began making films, CAFU staff members sought out opinions from throughout the region about the tastes of their target audiences.

One of the first "experts" to render an opinion on the topic was J.D. Reinhalt-Jones, an advisor on native affairs to the American Corporation of South Africa, Ltd., who had helped organize film shows for miners at his company's compound. In a 1948 memo to Alan Izod, the head of CAFU, Reinhalt-Jones confirmed the popularity of "Wild West films," while arguing that "The sharp increase in the use of firearms and knives in criminal assaults on the Reef suggests the possibility of the influence of the cinema." He made it clear that he did not advocate stricter censorship, however, explaining that "(1) the mine workers need the release which action films give and that secondary exposure of the kind provided by action films helps to satisfy the drives and needs."<sup>14</sup> He was echoing the views of a generation of mine managers who had shown Westerns to their workers. They assumed that it was the violence of the films that appealed to the audiences but believed that this had a salutary, cathartic effect on African men.

Izod received another interpretation of the Western's appeal from an official of the Southern Rhodesian Information Office.

For long periods the audience sits completely bemused by pictures without action but with continuous meaningless (to it) dialogue: then violent action occurs, and the audience is released from its embarrassment and its bemusement and reacts almost hysterically. The fact is that the people are so glad to have something they *can* understand that they make a lot of noise when it happens.<sup>15</sup>

Hiding in this nonsensical evaluation is a conclusion similar to Reinhart-Jones': violence provided these otherwise incomprehensible films with their appeal.

<sup>13</sup> Harry Franklin, "The Central African Screen," *Colonial Cinema* 4 (December 1950), 85–88.

<sup>14</sup> ZNA S926/F35, "Film Shows and Reports Thereof."

<sup>15</sup> Izod to Denys Brown, *Ibid.*, 2 May 1950.

These and many similar opinions received by CAFU supported the conventional wisdom about African audiences in the region. Africans were assumed to have limited abilities to comprehend commercial films. They were believed to have particular difficulty following plots, identifying characters, and in general making sense of any kind of "sophisticated" film technique. An editorial in the Southern Rhodesian *Herald* explained that:

a film designed for European consumption is not necessarily suitable for Africans. It is, indeed, often quite unsuitable. The action of a European film is too quick (with shots lasting from five to eight seconds); such devices to indicate the passage of time as fades, mixes, etc., are confusing; and the steady progression of fact upon fact is beyond the African's grasp.<sup>16</sup>

Relying on similar views from white advisors, CAFU produced films for Africans that utilized simple techniques, few characters, and very little action.<sup>17</sup> However not all of the European directors employed by CAFU were willing to wish away their audiences' enthusiasm for the genre. Film-maker Louis Nell, who had lived in Northern Rhodesia during the Second World War, and had first-hand experience of watching cowboy films in theaters on the Copperbelt, tried to imitate the action of these films in his work for CAFU.<sup>18</sup>

CAFU employed these simplified techniques for over a decade. Eventually, its employees came to accept that much of their target audience preferred Westerns to their films. Consequently the Southern Rhodesian Information Service quit charging Africans to see the films in the late 1950s. Writing a brief history of the film unit in 1960, Izod admitted that though C.A.F.U. films were popular with rural audiences, who were basically captive audiences, "more sophisticated town audiences used to a diet of 'cowboy' films, would have nothing to do with them."<sup>19</sup>

Izod and the members of his film production team were not the only white officials who hoped that Africans could be weaned away from American Westerns. The district commissioners responsible for maintaining order in the Rhodesias kept a vigilant watch on the cinema tastes of their charges, and many believed that Africans were waiting to be delivered from their steady diet of cowboy films. In 1953 a district commissioner in Southern Rhodesia suggested with cautious optimism that

<sup>16</sup> *Rhodesia Herald* February 12, 1948. For a history of colonial film theories see James Burns, "Watching Africans Watch Movies: Theories of Film Spectatorship in British Africa," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* (June, 2000).

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the CAFU approach to film-making, see Burns, "Flickering Shadows," Ch. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Louis Nell, Borrowdale, Zimbabwe, March 15, 1997. Nell also discusses his craft at length in his memoir *Visions of Yesteryear* (New York, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> ZNA Central African Film Unit File (uncatalogued material), "History of the C.A.F.U. July 1960."

CAFU might be making headway against the Westerns: “the Unit’s productions ... have proved immensely popular even with the Africans who are habituated to the cinema and might be expected to find them tame by comparison with the thrills of the Wild West.”<sup>20</sup> Other observers were less confident, however. An official in the mining district of Shabani reported in the same year that “where the Africans have seen the cowboy type of picture they are less inclined to walk a distance to see a bioscope than those who have never seen a show.”<sup>21</sup>

### Cowboys and Anthropologists

In the early 1950s American anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker began research on urban life in the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt. Powdermaker realized the significance of the cinema in the lives of African miners, and made it a focus of her study. She attended weekly film programs that invariably consisted of “a Cowboy film (old and grade B),” and made a systematic study of audience responses.<sup>22</sup> Powdermaker’s research confirmed that audiences preferred cowboy films to the other shorts and rare non-cowboy features screened at the theaters. This predilection varied little between men and women, though she also noted a slight (and somewhat surprising) preference for cowboy films among educated over uneducated audience members. Powdermaker developed her own theory to account for the popularity of the genre:

It was not difficult to understand why the Africans strongly identified with the cowboy hero.... the cowboy hero fits into the present power relationship between European and Africans. It was obvious that Africans resented their low political, economic, and social status in relationship to Europeans and that there was relatively little outlet for the consequent aggressive feelings. The hard-fighting cowboy, moving freely on his horse in wide-open spaces, surmounting all obstacles and always winning, is indeed an attractive hero for a people intensely fearful of losing some of their wide-open spaces to Europeans, who until recently held all the power. The cowboy is white, but not European. Through identification with him, the African can fantasy [sic] unconsciously or consciously, being as white as the dominant group and always winning over them.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> ZNA S2827/2/2/2, “Annual District Reports, 1952–53,” *Rhodesia South Department of Native Affairs Report 1952*,

<sup>21</sup> Article from *African Weekly* held in ZNA S926/F54 1949–1953, “Native Department Salisbury, Correspondence,” Mobile Cinema Officer’s Report—September 1952.

<sup>22</sup> Powdermaker, *Copper Town*, 254.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 261–62.

Contrary to other colonial observers, Powdermaker concluded that Africans closely followed and clearly “understood” the Westerns they watched. Indeed, it was their close identification with the cowboy that accounted for the genre’s appeal.

### Cowboys and Crime

Since most observers believed that it was the violence of the films that appealed to Africans, it is not surprising that the medium came to be seen as a root cause of theft and violence in African townships. This fear of cinema-inspired criminality originated in South Africa, where in 1949 a report prepared for the South African Parliament on disturbances on the Rand attributed a recent crime wave to the corrosive influence of the cinema. Highlights of the report were published in the *Bulawayo Chronicle* in 1950 as a cautionary example for the white community in Southern Rhodesia.

White settlers were not the only inhabitants of the colony apprehensive about cinema-inspired crime. In 1953 the Report of the Southern Rhodesian Department of Native Affairs noted that:

Complaints continue to be heard about the poor type of films available.... the majority of the complaints emanate from responsible Africans, who allege that a regular diet of “westerns” and “cowboy” films which usually form the main feature of programmes issued by commercial companies has a harmful effect on African youth.<sup>24</sup>

The “responsible Africans” mentioned in the report became increasingly active in the campaign against cowboy movies during the early 1950s. Colonial authorities in favor of strict censorship increasingly found support for their cause among middle-class Africans. For these self-styled “emerged” Africans the issue of censorship had several dimensions. One was the fear that constant exposure to the dregs of Hollywood would undermine the values of African youth. This view appeared frequently in the pages of African newspapers. For example, a lengthy editorial in the Salisbury-based *African Weekly* titled “Influence of the Cinema Criticised” declared that

Many young boys who see films of gangsters are inclined to put what they see on the screen into practice. A case happened at Gatooma some time ago when young boys who were using some of the methods they had seen used by cow boys on the screen were arrested after they had laid waste to many business premises.

The editorial concluded with a demand for more stringent censorship: “it would be to the interests of both the Africans and Europeans if Cow Boy films were banned

<sup>24</sup> *Southern Rhodesia Report of the Department of Native Affairs*, 1953.

from being screened to African audiences.”<sup>25</sup> This remained a popular theme in the editorial and letters pages of African newspapers throughout the decade. The influence of Westerns on Africans became a favorite topic of discussion among educated Africans in the cities and was taken up several times by African representatives in the Federal Parliament.<sup>26</sup>

Many educated Africans also took issue with a colonial policy that made no distinction between themselves and the mass of their countrymen when determining guidelines for censorship. Thus their criticisms of cowboy films were in part inspired by their desire to distinguish their tastes and status from those of their less-educated compatriots. Many African elites adopted the paradoxical position of demanding the same access to motion pictures enjoyed by whites in the colony, while supporting the censorship of American westerns for “unemerged” audiences.

### Showing Better Films

Some educated Africans tried to spare their community from the scourge of Westerns by improving the tastes of audiences. In this they received support from white social welfare officers, who were anxious to replace the cowboy films with more edifying programs. In the late 1950s elites in Bulawayo began organizing regular screenings of the rare non-cowboy films that had escaped the censors’ net. They established a new theater in McDonald Hall, which charged higher admission prices and featured a variety of comedies and dramas. It was an alternative to the other main theater in the city, Stanley Square, which continued to show cowboy films. A correspondent to the *Bantu Mirror* voiced the demand of educated theater-goers for the new venue:

the films that are shown at the Stanley Square ... have no moral at all, and above that they have little to thrill. It must be remembered that the days are now gone when Africans were interested in the Western type of film. The cowboy with all that goes with it has very little to attract the African of today. That type of film may interest young boys but not grown-ups.<sup>27</sup>

This argument appears to reflect the views of most educated Africans, who insisted that Africans were no longer enamored of Westerns and would therefore seize any opportunity to view films of higher quality.

<sup>25</sup> *African Weekly*, February 4, 1950.

<sup>26</sup> “Cinema Is Harmful,” *African Daily News*, 23 September 1956, and the minutes of the Federal Parliament of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland, particularly the debate of February 10, 1960, Volume 44, 1959–60, 2621–2624.

<sup>27</sup> “Our Reader’s Views,” “Wants Better Films, Westerns Condemned,” *Bantu Mirror*, April 4, 1959.

The experiment was not a success, however, as audiences proved resistant to "improvement." Few moviegoers turned out to see the more "sophisticated" programs, and many of those who did attend often came in the expectation of seeing a cowboy film. As one newspaper described a showing of the film "That Midnight Kiss,"

there was among them a section still clamouring for the blood racing, action and thrill packed "Westerns." This section defied all decorum and shouted without restraint, with some of its members taking the role of unauthorized commentators on a picture they hardly followed.<sup>28</sup>

Similar experiments failed in Northern Rhodesia as well. Testifying to a federal committee on film censorship in 1959, Mr. A.J. Harris, a government social welfare officer, explained that "the outspoken desire of many Africans for good-quality films was not borne out in practice.... The cinema was packed with Africans when a "Western" was showing but there was only a sparse African attendance for a better-type of film."<sup>29</sup>

Most African audiences continued to show their affection for the Western by voting with their feet. Others spoke out against these attempts to manipulate their tastes. As one correspondent wrote to the *African Weekly*:

I do not see any harm done by Western films shown to young boys and girls.... Cowboy films are the best on the screen because they teach people to be very careful if they go to big cities. Moreover, young boys and girls when they see cowboys being arrested and imprisoned, it teaches them that crime does not pay.

In the view of this correspondent, such films were preferable to films made by the CAFU because "Africans are not interested in seeing local films because they do not want to see their own people dressed in a primitive way."<sup>30</sup> Another writer was similarly critical of the new programs being presented at MacDonald Hall: "The cry is now fairly general from Africans who say that they are deliberately being robbed of their hard-earned money by being given pictures at MacDonald Hall which are very very poor."<sup>31</sup> And the editor at the *African Weekly* acknowledged that: "The J.M. MacDonald Guild has been featuring a number of films in the MacDonald Hall for the high class Africans and the response has not been good."<sup>32</sup> Many

<sup>28</sup> "That 'Midnight Kiss' Was a Hit," *African Daily News*, 9 February 1957.

<sup>29</sup> ZNA F121C5/4, Film Censorship Procedure and Working Party Report, 1960.

<sup>30</sup> "Western Films Preferred," *African Weekly* March 4, 1953 [clipped and held in CAFU files, S926/F43].

<sup>31</sup> *African Home News*, February 14, 1959.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

moviegoers wrote letters to the African press confirming this assessment. As one reader of the *African Weekly* commented about a similar show at another theater, “the films shown … with the exception of a few, were not appreciated by the African cinema going public” because they were “too ‘sophisticated’ or too dramatic.”<sup>33</sup> The plea from another correspondent summarized the frustrations of these cowboy fans: “What is your idea of giving us bad and useless pictures.... You must give the public what it wants and not what you think it wants.”<sup>34</sup>

These efforts to “improve” cinema programs often turned violent. In a letter to the editor, Wilson Sedambe observed that a recent showing had resulted in “a big row because of the poor film shown.”<sup>35</sup> Another letter-writer confirmed that a recent screening at the Hall had nearly ended in a riot.<sup>36</sup> This kind of violence was apparently not unusual at Harare cinema shows. A story in the *African Daily News* about a scheduled showing of “Abbot and Costello Meet Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” assured readers that “To maintain order in the hall, African constables from Harare will be in attendance.”<sup>37</sup>

### The Campaign to End Race-Based Censorship

Public concern about the cinema and its influence on Africans spurred the federal government to take action. In 1959 it appointed a committee to consider film censorship in the Federation. The committee heard testimony from government officials, social welfare officers, film distributors, and a variety of urban and rural Africans. The hearings focused on two related questions: Did cowboy films pose a threat to the community? And should censorship in the Federation be based on nonracial principles?

Several white officials warned the committee that Westerns had a pernicious influence on Africans. K.D. Leaver, chief information officer for the Southern Rhodesian Department of Native Affairs, testified that his Department was convinced that a link existed between crime and the cinema, and therefore “it was out of the question to exhibit films depicting violence (including ‘Westerns’) in the rural areas.”<sup>38</sup>

<sup>33</sup> *African Weekly* January 10, 1959.

<sup>34</sup> Wilson Sedambe, “Cinema at MacDonald Hall,” Letter to the Editor, *African Home News*, February 21, 1959.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> “Cinema Shows at Macdonald Hall,” Letter to the Editor, *African Home News*, February 28, 1959.

<sup>37</sup> *African Daily News*, March 5, 1957.

<sup>38</sup> ZNA F121C5/4, Film Censorship Procedure and Working Party Report 1960. The specter of Africans misunderstanding Westerns did not worry all white officials, however. Leaver’s boss in the Native Affairs Department, R. Howman, told the panel “that there was no yardstick whereby

Lt. Col. B.J. Price of the Southern Rhodesia C.I.D. voiced a similar opinion. He argued that films posed a danger to all members of the African community, and described the educated Africans clamoring for an end to racial-based censorship:

this type of African could be regarded as a leader amongst his people. To allow him to see all films passed for European exhibition could well be dangerous, especially if he were to discuss some of them with his uneducated "followers."

He insisted that these followers should likewise remain protected from the cinema because "The unsophisticated African undoubtedly thought that films were some sort of magic. Because of this he should only be shown films passed for general release."<sup>39</sup>

Several educated Africans also testified before the committee. Most emphasized the danger Westerns posed to African audiences. One prominent witness was Nathan Shamuyarira, a reporter for African Newspapers Limited, and a future cabinet minister in the Zimbabwean government. In his testimony Shamuyarira recognized the films' appeal to the "unsophisticated mass of the African population" but warned of their "very harmful effect" on this audience.<sup>40</sup> Mrs. E.V. Bwanausi, a colleague of Shamuyarira's at African Newspapers Ltd., made a strong case for censoring films to be shown to certain elements of African society. In her testimony (paraphrased in the official transcript) she explained that:

Violence had followed the showing of films depicting violence and some of the crime which took place in African townships undoubtedly resulted from the showing of these films. The mass of Africans considered that films depicted real life and there was no harm in emulating what they saw on the screen.

The managing director of the African Newspapers Ltd., C.A.G. Paver, argued that "cowboy type[s] of film did untold harm to African audiences. Some of the crime and hooliganism committed in such places as Harari [were] undoubtedly motivated by such films."<sup>41</sup>

While some witnesses disputed these opinions, most did not. At the end of the proceedings, the committee drafted a list of recommendations to guide future censorship policy. According to their report, they had been "particularly impressed

one could judge African reactions to films.... It could be said, however, that no violent incident concerning Africans had been traced as resulting directly from the showing of a film depicting violence."

<sup>39</sup> ZNA F121C5/4, Film Censorship Procedure and Working Party Report 1960.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Paver had close connections with several prominent officials in the Southern Rhodesian government.

by the unanimity of evidence from African witnesses rather than European regarding the need to protect the uneducated, unsophisticated Africans from the impact of films that for them were unsuitable and disturbing."<sup>42</sup> They concluded that the censorship policy should be guided by two apparently contradictory principles:

- (1) The Need for Censorship on a non-racial basis
- (2) The need to discover means by which without introducing a racial principle into censorship, something could be done to protect the rural or unsophisticated audience from the effects of unsuitable or harmful films.

Given these conclusions, it proved expedient to take no action, and to allow each of the three federated territories to continue to draft their own censorship legislation.

The transcripts of the censorship hearings shed a good deal of light on the anxieties of colonial elites in the late 1950s. But they offer little insight into the deep bond that had developed between American Westerns and their Africans fans. So why did Africans enjoy cowboy movies? Removed from the urgency and anxiety of 1950s Rhodesia, an analysis of the available evidence suggests several plausible explanations, none of which appears to have occurred to critics at the time. To begin with, any assessment of the outlook of colonial audiences must recognize the unique experience of these cinema shows. Charles Ambler has recently argued that the reactions of Central African miners to American Westerns must be understood within the context of the particular meanings these audiences brought to the films. In the mine cinemas of colonial Zambia, American Westerns were heavily edited and screened for audiences with limited proficiency in English. Much of the dialogue was drowned out by the comments and conversations of the audience. In this environment, whatever messages and symbolic meanings the film-makers may have intended were in all likelihood lost on audiences who imposed their own meanings on these spectacles. Thus any discussion of this question must recognize that "cowboy movies" meant something different to African fans than they did to European or American audiences.<sup>43</sup>

Why did audiences remain attached to films that were heavily edited and virtually bereft of dialogue? One part of the explanation is that, in their enthusiasm for Westerns, Africans were simply marching in lock step with the tastes of movie-goers worldwide. As early as 1914 the Western had been established as the world's most popular film genre. Until the 1960s Hollywood churned out more Westerns than any other kind of movie. Westerns undoubtedly appealed to non-Western audiences because they were driven by action rather than dialogue and adhered to a formula that was easily comprehended by non-English speakers. Presenting simple dichotomies of good and evil (often color-coded by costume) and following a well-

<sup>42</sup> ZNA F128/C5/4, First Draft of Report.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Ambler, "Popular Film and Colonial Audiences: the Movies in Northern Rhodesia" *American Historical Review* 106, 1 (2001), 81–105.

established narrative trajectory, the simple plot of a Western emerged despite the heavy editing and absence of dialogue.

Africans also liked cowboy movies because that was all they knew, having been fed a steady diet of Westerns since the earliest days of the cinema. The proliferation of cheap cowboy features and serials in the 1930s and 1940s, and the economics of cinema distribution in Southern Africa, guaranteed that cowboy films were virtually the only type of films available to African audiences. Thus for most movie goers in the Rhodesias Westerns *were* the cinema. Before critics began attempting to discourage fans from seeing Westerns in the 1950s they had few opportunities to watch anything else. Thus the introduction of new genres would have been a radical departure and would have required a period of adjustment for any audiences. African elites and colonial officials were unwilling to recognize this fact, however, and preferred to assume that audiences simply didn't like other film genres because they rarely had an opportunity to see them.

There are also other, more specific reasons why the conventions of the Westerns resonated with audiences in Southern Africa. Hortense Powdermaker's informants for example identified violence as the aspect of the films that they enjoyed the most. However it was not the violence that the censors sought to proscribe—use of weapons, tying people up, etc.—that her respondents reacted to, but rather the fist fights between heroes and villains. As Powdermaker described reactions to one cinema show in Zambia, "During this film men, women, and children rose to their feet in excitement, bending forward and flexing their muscles with each blow the cowboys gave. The shouting could be heard several miles away."<sup>44</sup> One of Powdermaker's informants attributed his enthusiasm for cowboy films to the fact that they "gave him an opportunity to learn the popular skill of boxing."<sup>45</sup> Boxing was a fast growing sport among urban Africans in Southern Rhodesia in the 1930s and 1940s,<sup>46</sup> and, as with cinema, there was a spirited public debate about the social consequences of its popularity. As with cinema, the boxing issue pitted middle-class Africans, who viewed boxing as a barbaric pastime that encouraged crime, against uneducated Africans, who constituted the majority of the fight fans.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>45</sup> Powdermaker, *Copper Town*, 261–62.

<sup>46</sup> During the Rhodesian Front era boxing films were a staple of the Rhodesian Information Service's regular program. See Burns, "Flickering Shadows," Ch. 6. See also Emmanuel Akyeampong's article on boxing in Ghana elsewhere in this issue.

<sup>47</sup> For the popularity of boxing in Southern Rhodesia during the 1930s see Terence Ranger, "Pugilism and Pathology: African Boxing and the Black Urban Experience in Southern Rhodesia," in William J. Baker and James A. Mangan, eds., *Sports in Africa: Essays in Social History* (New York, 1987), 196–213 For the role of Boxing in the formation of elite identity in Southern

But surely much of the stubborn refusal of audiences to abandon cowboy movies stemmed from their natural resistance to having elites dictate taste to them. It is worth repeating the plea of a cowboy fan that appeared in the pages of the *African Daily News*, “You must give the public what it wants and not what you think it wants.”<sup>48</sup> In the colonial cities of the Rhodesias leisure remained one of the few areas in which urbanites could exert any kind of self-expression. Voting for leisure activities with your wallet or your feet was one aspect of life for urban Africans that they retained control over. Thus, it is not surprising that the condescension of these elite critics appears to have stiffened the resolve of these audiences to retain control over this one significant leisure activity.

### **Conclusion**

The federal censorship hearings were the culmination of more than a decade of public discussion of African movie tastes. As this debate raged over their heads, African audiences continued to frequent cowboy pictures, resisting all efforts to manipulate their tastes. The Western remains popular in the region today. Urban entrepreneurs still make a living renting old cowboy films and showing them on 16 mm projectors in remote areas. Ultimately, neither colonial officials nor educated Africans were able to wean African audiences away from these films. The fact that they believed they could do so is remarkable, however. Their attempts to transform African cinema habits were rooted in the belief, held by African and settler elites alike, that the tastes of the cinema-going public could be guided from above. It shocked both educated Africans and colonial officials when this proved not to be the case.

Rhodesia, see Michael O. West's dissertation, "African Middle-class Formation in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1890-1965" (Harvard University, 1990), 216–21.

<sup>48</sup> Sedambe, "Cinema at MacDonald Hall," *Africa Home News*, February 21, 1959.