# The Cinema, a Place of Tension in Colonial Africa: Film Censorship in French West Africa

## Odile Goerg*

## Abstract

Although cinema quickly became an important leisure activity in colonial Africa, its development and impact have not been studied in regard to French colonies. After analysing the context in which movies were watched, mainly in the most important cities, this paper moves on to study the government's attitude towards this new and potentially subversive activity. Censorship regulations were passed from the mid-1930s on, and censorship boards were organised, responsible for allowing or forbidding the screening of movies.

The study considers the motives for censorship and its actual implementation, the reactions of the audience and official responses (including closures), sometimes decided on the spot. Foreign movies, be they Egyptian, Hindu or American, sometimes allowed movies-goers to express not only their enthusiasm, but also their feelings towards colonial authorities. Movies theaters became then a site of tension, especially in late colonialism.

Although this paper focusses primarily on French colonies, its comparative dimension makes it an important contribution to the study of cinema-going in Africa.

## Résumé

Durant la période coloniale, le cinéma était rapidement devenu une importante activité de détente en Afrique. Cependant, l'étude de son développement et de son impact dans les colonies françaises existe à peine. En plus d'une analyse du contexte dans lequel l'activité d'aller au cinéma s'est développée, surtout dans les grandes villes, ce document analyse l'attitude des gouvernants envers cette nouvelle activité qui pourrait aussi avoir des allures subversives. Des mesures de censure ont été adoptées dés le milieu des années 1930 et des organes de censure établis pour autoriser ou interdire certains films.

* History Professor, Laboratoire sociétés en développement dans l'espace et dans le temps (SEDET), Unité mixte de recherche CNRS 7135, Université Paris VII-Denis Diderot – Email: o.goerg@free.fr

Cette étude prends en compte les motives de la censure et la manière dont elles ont été appliquées, les réactions des auditoires et la réponse quelques fois brusques des autorités (y compris la fermeture de salles de cinéma). Les films étrangers, fussent-ils égyptiens, hindous ou américains, permettaient aux adeptes du cinéma d'exprimer non seulement leur enthousiasme, mais aussi leur sentiment vis-à-vis les autorités coloniales. Les salles de cinéma deviennent donc un site de tension, particulièrement vers la fin de la période coloniale.

Même si cette étude se focalise surtout sur les colonies françaises, elle constitue une importance contribution à l'étude du cinéma en Afrique grâce à sa dimension comparative.

Going to the cinema became a major leisure activity during the inter-war period in Africa, mainly for urban male audiences. This is especially true for Southern Africa since the growth of cinema theatres took place later in Western Africa, after the Second World War. At that time, cinemas became a major site of tension between the colonial authorities, who aimed at controlling the screens, and the audience, who demanded the right to see a large array of films, including Arab or Hindu films.

When viewing foreign films, mainly American westerns or detectives, spectators could express their feelings and criticism, but this could lead to censorship. Censorship was indeed often the result of the audience's reactions to a movie and not a preventive measure as the authorities lacked the means to ensure the control they wanted to impose. One can, nevertheless, analyse the statements that served to justify colonial censorship and try to enumerate the various reasons for cutting parts of or forbidding the circulation of films in colonial Africa. This essay deals with these issues based specifically on French West Africa, whose policies resemble however those applied elsewhere.

The relation between cinema and censorship is a complex issue, which can be introduced in various ways. When completing the archival material in Dakar, the author happened to witness an interesting discussion reflecting what the author was actually reading in the archives. People around the table, especially women, were complaining about the fact that there was no censorship board anymore, that youth could see anything they wanted and that this had the effect of dramatically increasing urban criminality. This anecdote, and the familiar discourse that underlines it, show two things: that the request for government action is widespread and exists even today, and that the connection between violence on the screen and crime is a general and longstanding paradigm.

From the author's perspective, this discussion raises the question of the specific link between colonial context and censorship: what was particular to censorship in the colonial context is certainly one of the main questions we can ask as historians. What distinguishes censorship in the 'The Colonial Era', as Balandier framed it in 1951 (Balandier 1951:44-79), from censorship applied in other historical situations?

Another way to introduce the subject is to quote this statement by Coulibaly, dating from the late 1950s:

> Although some westerns only consist of fighting or humorous scenes, the majority of them celebrate gangsters and robbers, and feature rape, murder and immorality. This is what is shown to an audience who still believe what they see. What is the purpose of such movies in a country as ours … other than to intoxicate the minds, and pervert morality?[1]

By putting the stress on the negative influence of films (the majority of them celebrate gangsters and robbers, and feature rape, murder and immorality), this author expresses an opinion prevalent in the colonies in the 1950s. Furthermore, he depicts cinemagoers as 'a naive audience who still believe what they see'. However, this statement does not come from some colonial officer preoccupied with public order, but from an African representative, Ouezzin Coulibaly from Upper Volta, concerned with youth attitudes and the future development of his soon-to-be-independent country. Like most of his contemporaries, he was convinced of the power of images, especially on youth or uneducated audiences, considered to lack critical judgment and to be quick at reproducing socially unacceptable behaviour. He wanted the colonial powers to exert a tighter control on the films shown to urban audiences.

In addition to the question of the relationship between violent and immoral images and increased crime rate, this statement raises the issue of the groups involved in the public debate on films. While at the time of the first cinema shows, only the administration seemed to be concerned but, with the expansion of this medium, new actors became involved: various religious authorities (Muslim or Christian), parents or educators in general, political or cultural elites, the cinemagoers themselves…It also raises the question of the preconceived image of African cinemagoers as immature.

Censorship is indeed based on mutually understood codes, defining not only the meaning of images but also their interpretation. Colonial authorities, like any dominant power, projected their own cultural codes and usually did not even question different ways of interpreting images and their changing cultural impact. This leads us to the question of the aims and reception of censorship: censorship implies both intention by the legislator and reception

by the audience. What were the goals of censorship? How best could they be achieved? What were the tools of censorship? From the point of view of the audience, how did cinemagoers react to specific films? How did specific African audiences view and understand specific images? How did they interpret the cuts in films? How did they decipher the government's intention, as censorship is based on codes that are far from being universal?

For a movie control to be efficient, it needs to take into account, the viewer's culture. More generally, censorship entails a precarious balance between control and a measure of freedom. Obviously, too tight a control would be counterproductive and would chase the audience away from cinemas (boycotting dull films) or, worse, would provoke uproar. Thus the question is that of the colonized agency when confronted with obvious examples of censorship. This question is far from being one of colonial omnipotence versus colonized passivity. It allows for local strategies depending on various factors.

The question becomes then: how to interpret government's policy in this respect. How can one evaluate its impact? How can one interpret African cinemagoers' reactions? Another quotation gives us a further insight into how this policy can be viewed. At a conference on the role of cinema in African (January 1954) in Rufisque, Kane Abdoul Aziz, a member of the Senegal Censorship Board, mentioned the fact that a high percentage of films shown in Africa had a potentially dangerous influence: ... ''in order to lead Africans into perversion; in this way, he is maintained at the same level, deprived of any evolutionary advance which would lead him to a higher class of human society, and he is even corrupted''.

According to this view, France purposely chose films that would not educate the African masses but would instead pervert them. Furthermore in Kane's view, France was the only colonial power 'to ban from the screens in Africa any movie which could facilitate Black people's evolution'.[2]

This excerpt is part of a confidential report, from the colonial Intelligence Service, showing how at this time colonial authorities felt very much concerned with everything relating to films. This fits into a more general idea; the power attributed to images**,** object of a general consensus in the colonies as elsewhere. Images are rarely seen as being 'neutral': they are either seen as evil, sources of immorality and perversity, or, on the contrary, as educational.

In a recent article, Ibrahima Thioub (2005:75-97) analysed how the circulation of foreign knowledge was controlled and restrained in the French Empire and how the actual content or implementation of this policy depended on the political context (e.g. fear of Muslim propaganda before the First World War; obsession with Communist influence later on). Attempts to

control what colonial subjects had access to were not specific to films but the power attributed to images made them all the more important. Ibrahima Thioub stresses this point when he mentions the destruction of hundreds of Islamic religious images from the Ottoman Empire in the 1910s, which could have an impact on the 'unrefined minds of the natives', according to Governor General William Ponty. The Coran and other prayer books were not affected by this iconoclastic spirit in the same way as films; their banning would have alienated loyal Muslims altogether.

More than the written word, images are indeed thought to have a fascinating impact on the viewers. As this paper argues, moving images are even more powerful. They are intrusive ways of exposing people to or imposing new cultural models; moving images are profoundly disruptive of social and cultural habits. They are invested with expectations by the audience as well as by various moral or political authorities.

Thus, the basic question is: when does the fear of images become so important that the government take steps to control them? And, how was censorship actually turned into law and then implemented, though often with some delay?

## The Authorities, Movies and the Law

### *The General Context*

In order to address these questions and define the subject (of censorship), some information about the history of film shows in colonial Africa is needed: the time frame, the characteristics of the audiences, the programs… Without going into detail, one cannot discuss the question of film censorship without being aware of the general context of the introduction and the development of this new leisure activity.

Censorship can operate in different ways, from complete banning to small cuts, or at various stages, from the production of films to circulation. Except for Southern Africa and, partly, the Belgian Congo, no policy to produce films intended specifically for an African audience was implemented. This might have been the most efficient way – though in itself complex – of controlling the images, but the size of potential film audiences made it too expensive and unrealistic[4]. Furthermore, this policy would have implied a sophisticated discourse on the African people as film spectators. This was the case for Southern Africa, as James Burns has brilliantly demonstrated in *Flickering Shadows* concerning Southern Rhodesia (Burns 2002). But psychological analyses remained quite simple in West Africa, based on the classic representation of Africans as 'big children', naive onlookers. These stereotypes were rarely developed further in the specific context of films. As

a result, the government exercised censorship mainly on the circulation of films and not on the production or, even, on the commercial distribution networks, which were controlled by private entrepreneurs.

In most West African cities, cinema developed as a major leisure activity from the 1940s onwards only. Until the end of that decade, going to the cinema was a limited phenomenon, both sociologically and spatially. So the situation differs from the one described for South Africa or the Belgian Congo and Rhodesian mining compounds where it was a major leisure activity. The chronology explains that censorship was not a priority in most West African colonies before the Second World War. The situation changes drastically in the 1950s; a limited span of years before Independence.

These crucial years coincide both with the rapid increase of cinemas and cinemagoers and with the rise of political movements, which gave the colonized certain powers: representatives both in the metropolis and in the colonies, local elected assemblies and, from 1956, semi-autonomous governments. At the beginning of the decade, cinema censorship was still not a priority for most administrators,[4] who were busy with new economic schemes or broader political surveillance, but by the mid-1950s there was an obvious need for stricter film control and also for taking into account local interests. The paradox is then the attempt to impose a coherent and tight control on films, while at the same time bargaining on a political level.

Control also became prominent because of larger urban audiences, mainly young men enjoying mostly American films, although the growing importance of Arab or Egyptian films attracted more and more women.

## *Censorship Regulations*

One easy, but in fact somewhat abstract, way to approach the question of censorship itself is to analyze the government's regulations in this respect. Colonial authorities were indeed concerned with the control of films in the Empire and issued a number of laws to deal with it. One can draw a list of the laws related specifically to some kind of censorship, be it direct or indirect, e.g. on production or circulation of films. The first laws referring to cinemas were in fact concerned with cinemas as troublesome and dangerous places. They dealt with security (fire hazards), and public order (noise or fighting). In this respect, the federal law regulating 'dangerous public spaces' in 1927 (28 April 1927) did not include cinemas but made it possible for colonies to issue specific laws, which Guinea did, for example, in 1931.[5] The concern for security remained during the whole colonial period, as was the case in the Metropolis, and served in some cases as a cover for forbidding the construction of a new cinema.[6] Here are the main laws:

# Laws on Censorship

### 3rd Republic

8 March 1934 (Administrative Decree) '*portant organisation du contrôle des films cinématographiques et des disques phonographiques'* made it compulsory for the governors to give a permit (*visa d'exploitation*) with the assistance of a local censorship board while also regulating the production of movies in the colonies; this permit complemented the one given previously in France by the Information Ministry instituted *Local Censorship Boards.*

### Vichy Regime

20  February 1941 (Federal law) extending to French West Africa the 26 October 1940 Decree on Cinema Industry.

31  July 1941 (Federal law) created a *federal censorship board* (according to the 1934 law); modified in 1942.[7]

### 'France Libre'

Federal Laws of August 1945 and October 1946: hesitation about the legal procedure but decision made to apply no specific censorship in the colonies.

### 4th Republic

15 December 1948 (Federal Law): instituted a double permit for West Africa

The *Federal Censorship Board* in Dakar controlled the existence of the French permit and gave a specific permit valid for the whole Federation but the local Governors maintained the right to forbid or change a specific movie in their capacity as head of the police force.

20  June 49 (Federal Law)

Modifies *supra:* each colony had to institute its own *Local Censorship Board* (e.g. in Guinea: Local Law of 25 July 1950).

21  July 54 (Federal Law)

Revived the *Federal Censorship Board* (but the Local Governors retained the right to forbid or change a specific movie).

5  October 1954 (Federal Law promulgating the 31 December 1953 French Decree)

Protected French Cinema Industry in general and in the colonies "makes it possible to limit locally in a good measure the showing of foreign movies, particularly Egyptian movies'.[8]

Modified in spring 1956: made it less rigorous in the colonies.

Following the 1956 Loi-Cadre (instituting semi-autonomous governments), censorship was applied at the colonial level.

**Source**: *Local censorship boards.*

At first glance, one can see that the first law dealing with film censorship was only passed in the mid-1930s.[9] It did not have much impact in fact, mainly because of the slow development of cinemas. One can also note the frequent change of laws in the 1940s and 1950s: its tells us a lot about the empirical attitude and the hesitation, especially between federal and local censorship (i.e. Dakar versus each colony) in a highly tense political context, while at the same time reflecting the very practical problems in the implementation of censorship (quick rotation of films shown, limited viewing facilities, existing competing commercial distribution networks). The following questions are indeed the most important: How were the laws applied? What were the actual means devoted to censorship? And finally, what was the actual impact of censorship and its criteria? This will be the main point of this article.

## How to Assess Censorship? Sources and Methodology

When the Vichy Information Ministry demanded that any references to the 'Marseillaise' and to the 'Republic' be cut from films,[10] one can easily interpret this as direct, and certainly quite naive, political censorship but censorship is usually a much more subtle and complex business. In this case, censorship is so straightforward that it does not require any further comment.

Censorship is generally based on shared moral codes and image interpretation skills but it is quite rare to find in the archives an overall statement explaining the specific reasons for censorship: most of the time the reasoning is implicit, as if obvious and universal. Sometimes however, general statements provide some justification: they always boil down to the same vague ideas.

The 1934 decree, for example, states that censorship should '… take into account all the national and local interests at stake, particularly the advisability of preserving national and local customs and traditions'. This formula reproduces exactly the one used in the 18 February 1928 French law, just adding the term 'local'.[11] Twenty years later, the same vague statement is retained in the 1954 law. 'Not to offend local customs and traditions' is certainly what comes most frequently as an official reason for censoring films, along with general ideas of 'public order, morality, self-respect, local traditions'.[12]

Some officials with a special interest in censorship suggested stricter guidelines. This was the case of the military, which frequently took offence at films. In 1949, the General in charge of the land forces in French West Africa suggested the following categories:

> '1. dangerous movies: which celebrate resistance to occupying forces and explain in detail methods of clandestine struggle;

2. tendentious movies: which have a colonialist or racist component, especially the ones showing scenes where coloured people confront white people or those with scenes that shock indigenous traditions;

3. amoral movies: which show debauchery of white women'.[13]

This categorization was never implemented as such but it tells us something about general, as well as more specific, reasons for censorship. Criticism of the military was indeed a sensitive issue, but the colonial authorities never went as far as to ban all films that made fun of the army or the police. That censorship should not lead to the complete loss of humour was the general opinion. For example, in 1950, the police force asked for the banning of a film starring the famous French comic actor Bourvil on the grounds that 'it ridicules the police force' and that 'Africans could not understand humour or make the difference between jokes and criticism'.[14] The hand-written comment on this request was: 'grotesque'. However, when one finds this kind of interesting remark written in pencil on censorship reports it is difficult to judge their more general meaning or impact. Is the opinion expressed a general one or just a personal point of view? The same methodological question is raised by isolated documents asking for extreme actions against films.

Another example shows how difficult it can be to draw general conclusions. On a report stating that 'indeed one sees too often on the screens movies about the underworld and gangsters, or westerns or frankly pornographic movies which exert a subversive influence on youth…', somebody has written: 'what is wrong with Westerns' and for the pornographic films 'which ones?'.[15] Obviously all administrators did not agree and one thing is certain: there was no unanimous attitude toward censorship but a multitude of opinions, which one must gather indirectly from the sources.

Most of the time, only lists of censored films can be found, without any explanation as to the reasons for censorship. Some titles are meaningful enough for us to understand the reasoning, basically films dealing with some kind of rebellion: titles like *Révolte des Cipayes* (1957), *Révolte au Mexique, La révolte de la cellule 11; Les insurgés; Du Rififi chez les Hommes* (1956) are obvious enough.

Sometimes, the local or federal censorship boards gave explicit reasons to justify the cuts or bans. In 1956, one Egyptian film (*El Hag i.e.* The Holy Man) was censored. The authorities asked to 'Cut the sub-titles that indicate that the Egyptians distribute food to the poor at the Mecca'.[16] Too-positive an image of Muslims and Arab regimes was seen as dangerous at a time when Nasser was a very famous leader.

## Specific Criteria for Censorship

It is not surprising to find the same general statements all over colonial Africa as studies on British Africa or the Belgian Congo show (Burns 2002; Ramirez and Rolot 1985) but beyond generally vague statements, one can distinguish specific criteria for censorship in a colonial context. Some of them would also be relevant for Europe (public order, morality) but some are specific to the colonial situation.

### *Prestige of White People*

The representation of white people was certainly the main concern for colonial authorities as films, particularly the numerous Westerns or gangster films, did not convey positive images but more often images which contradicted the so-called civilizing values. Therefore, the very basis of colonization was threatened by images of European individuals acting in an unlawful or immoral way. One can find many examples of films being cut or forbidden on these grounds. One example is the famous *Tarzan* films, which often presented Europeans in a negative light in their interaction with local people (acts of violence, whipping, total disrespect for lives). The Governor General asked for some caution, based on the local situation, even though it rarely led to the complete banning of these films.[17]

Scenes depicting white men acting violently towards white women could further undermine the prestige of colonizers. In 1951, the censorship board from Guinea asked for a scene to be cut in the film '*Méfiez vous des blonde*s' (directed by André Hunebelle, 1950) after people reacted to it, which confirms the frequently empirical attitude of the administration. The scene showed a gangster about to hit a blonde woman with his belt.[18]

Harmonious gender relations indeed symbolized the colonial relationship and were seen as the core of civilizing values. This concern for gender extended more generally to issues of morality, mainly perceived in relation to sexuality or drinking. In *Le cinéma et ses merveilles,* Rolland Villiers mentions:

> The parts which are generally cut in France are the love scenes which tend toward licentiousness, drinking or fighting scenes, and those scenes which display a human vice such as drug addiction…[19] (Villiers 1930).

What the French considered grounds for moral censorship in the metropole (pornography, drinking and drugs, fights) were also relevant for their colonies. These are very broad and quite "universal" reasons for censorship; for France, one could quote Villiers 1930; Léglise 1969 and Trelis 2001.  However, the colonial situation obviously added another dimension, because there the authorities had to deal with other moral codes and, for example, another conception of eroticism as one of the informants pointed out. It was only

years after seeing *La Dolce vita* (Fellini 1960) with the famous scene where Anita Ekberg takes a midnight bath in the Trevi fountain in Rome, that he realized that, for Europeans, this was highly erotic. In cultures where women used to walk around bare-breasted and where couples have minimal, if any, physical contact in public, ideas of eroticism were obviously quite different. The way in which African audiences viewed specific images depended on their own culture, knowledge or experience. Couples kissing in public (which was the extent to how explicit the films were then) usually provoked laughs in the African audience.

In this perspective, as in the metropolis, a rating of films, with a sub-category depending on age, was established after the War but its implementation was an obvious problem since, as many cinema owners stressed, there was no identification in the colonies. The issue of controlling young audiences was complicated, of course, by commercial concerns to fill the cinemas.

Morality, in a broader sense, was also used as a common reason to censor films. Local cultures and traditions were used as an excuse by the authorities that had, according to colonial ideology, to protect their subjects. This reasoning is based on the general representation of Africans as 'big children' and the stereotyped view of African peoples as in need of being guided. The discourse regarding respect for cultures is of course the main pretext for domination.

### Public Order

As mentioned in the introduction, one frequent and widespread assumption is that films would influence spectators to reproduce what they had seen on the screen and act in an unlawful way. This discourse was not specific to Africa, but was enhanced by the supposed naive and immature nature of Africans: in the minds of the censors, seeing robbers could entice African people to try and copy their ways. The relation between gangster films and what was perceived as growing criminality seemed obvious everywhere. For example, in the Congo, films were seen as creating delinquent attitudes after some youth tried to derail a train as they had seen done in a Western (Ramirez and Rolot 1985:273). This was also the opinion of a District Officer in Guinea, who stressed the bad influence of Westerns or gangster films on urban youth:

> The dissemination of certain movies (especially those featuring the exploits of thieves or bandits) is, in my opinion, sufficiently harmful in the town of Mamou, and there is no need to extend this influence to the 'brousse'.[20]

Some films were censored specifically on these grounds. For example, the American film, *20 000 years at Sing Sing* (directed by Samuel Bischoff, 1932):

> This movie is highly critical of the system of justice and describes the Prison Administration in a very negative light whereas convicts on death row are presented as heroic figures.[21]

From the authorities' perspective, it was a short step from this kind of rebellion to contesting colonization.

### Contesting Colonization

The period when films started to draw large audiences coincided with the end of the Second World War and the celebration of French resistance to German occupation. In this context, *La Bataille du rail*, a famous film directed by René Clément, and recipient of the first 'Prix international du Jury' at Cannes, was proudly shown in Dakar when it was released in 1946. But it was later censored after one political RDA leader in Niger declared: 'We should imitate the French in Paris and not fear to give our blood for our country and our freedom'.[22]

One military officer commented in a secret report that this was said 'before a local audience who did not understand correctly or understood, on the contrary, too well'; this statement contrasts with the usual image of Africans as naive people.

With good reason, colonial authorities feared all films that praised or encouraged any kind of rebellion. The examples are numerous: military forces, stationed in Ivory Coast after the Bouaké riots, reacted strongly to *The Tiger of Malaysia*, a film which they described as mediocre and naive but dangerous, featuring a white oppressive sultan overthrown by his peasant subjects led by a religious leader.[23]

The same year, in 1950, a letter was sent to all governors to warn them against possible troubles caused by the Soviet film *Tête brûlée*, following incidents in Niger, despite two cuts. More generally, all Soviet films were seen with suspicion as tools for communist propaganda. Obviously, many films, such as *The freedom-fighters* (*Les partisans*), illustrating the resistance of Russia against the Nazis, rang a bell for African audiences.[24] On a more general basis, any film 'showing some kind of political activity'[25] was censored in the 1950s. The focus depended on the political context. For example, during the Suez crisis, Egyptian or Arab films were particularly under surveillance as was all information dealing with French Indochina or Algeria. Newsreels about these countries were also strictly censored after a scene

showing the entry of the Vietminh troops in Hanoi in 1954 provoked strong reactions among the audience in St Louis (Senegal).[26]

Authorities also feared disorder around the cinemas, because at that time they became venues for political meetings. The fear increased with the growing struggle for independence in the late 1950s but also depended on the local level of conflict between the opposition parties, mainly the RDA, and the administration.

These examples from a variety of sources[27] confirm the fact that censorship applied in the colonies was not an abstract affair but that most of the time decisions were taken in response to audience reactions. As the experience of spectatorship developed over the years, in connection with broader political activity, colonial audiences became far less passive when confronted with aggressive images. The cinema became a new place where opinions could be expressed openly and harsh criticism of the colonial situation formulated. This pushed the authorities to change completely their evaluation of old films: spectators no longer accepted some films, which previously had provoked no uproar. According to the Governor General: "These movies, fit to be shown without problem a few years ago, are no longer appropriate because of changes in the local as well as international context".[28]
The audience no longer remained silent when hearing the racist comments that abounded in French films, as sources from the French Soudan show. Administrative reports give us some examples: *Auberge rouge*, where actors openly express opinions on 'savage people', and *Rumeur publique* in which, to defend a defendant, one character says: 'At least it was not a Negro who raped one of your daughters'.[29]

Not being aware of the impact of such racist statements and underplaying their importance, the administrator described them as 'unfortunate phrases' ('*réflexions malheureuses*' or '*réflexions malencontreuses*') and only asked to cut the sound in these scenes, arguing that the films in themselves were innocuous.[30]

The cinemas became then places for indirect dialogues between colonized and colonizers, the analysis of which must be made on a local basis, taking into account the diverse actors and the state of the political situation.

## Conclusion

On reading the various sources, paradoxical or contradictory views about censorship in a colonial context are possible. At one extreme, one can argue that a tight control on films prevented African audiences from having access to a wide range of films and made it difficult for them to be aware of outside influences (ideas of modernity, new images).

At the other extreme, cinema is presented as the 'opium of the masses' (*opium du peuple*), the very tool used by colonial authorities to lead youth astray into perversion, to deter them from political activity, to restrict their critical capacity and manipulate them instead of educating them. In this perspective, often adopted by political leaders or members of the educated elite, amoral films were shown on purpose by private entrepreneurs, with the support of the administration.[31] Thus, cinema could be seen as either an ally in the 'civilizing' process or, on the contrary, the ferment for rebellion and the loss of moral values.

The hypothesis of a tight control would imply that there was a coherent policy for film censorship or even for the choice of films circulating in the colonies to start with. This was obviously not the case, even if censorship was applied according to various criteria, be they general or specific to the colonial situation. Censored films were far from being the majority: in about a year, the French West Africa censorship board, forbade twenty-two films out of 545 (less than 5 per cent) and asked for cuts in a few others.[32]

As already stressed, censorship was often the result of pragmatic attitudes of the administration; it was carried out on the spur of the moment, in response to audience reactions in some colonies. This obviously made censorship visible and could be followed by even greater reactions. Furthermore, there is an obvious limit to the general censorship policy: if one can restrict the choice of films, one cannot force people to attend specific performances if this does not correspond to what people want to see. As Charles Ambler puts it, referring to Northern Rhodesia: "African cinemagoers had little patience for films on postal savings banks… For them, films meant the bioscope – the high-action products of Hollywood dream factories (Ambler 2001)".

As a result, African audiences were exposed to all kinds of films, mostly unrelated to their everyday life, experiences or cultures, which was in itself very disruptive. The issue is then, regarding the impact of films on audiences, that of the reception of films, which is more difficult to assess methodologically. Going to the films became a widely shared experience and an important component in defining the urban population over a few decades, starting in the 1950s. The cinema and its environment constituted a place where new collective identities could be shaped, on various levels and for various groups. For example, the 'cowboy' figure became prominent in a young male and urban culture all over Africa, visible through surnames, attitudes or clothing. Interaction in and around cinemas also reflected changes in generational and gender relations.

Therefore any detailed study of censorship in a colonial context must also take into account all the various aspects of cinema, as a new leisure activity that disrupts previous cultural codes and social relations.

## Notes

1. ANS 21 G 193 (174), O. Coulibaly (Vice-president of the Upper Volta Government Council) to the President of the Federal Censorship Board, 9, May 1958.

   'Autant quelques [westerns] sont des scènes de pugilat et de fou-rire, autant par contre et c'est la majorité sont des victoires du gangstérisme, du brigandage, des leçons de viol, d'assassinat et d'immoralité. Voilà ce qu'on montre à un public qui croit encore ce qu'il voit. Quel est le but d'un tel film dans un pays comme le nôtre ?… sinon d'intoxiquer les consciences, de perturber la moralité'.

2. ANS, 21 G 193 (174), Conference by Kane Abodoul Aziz at the 'Cercle d'études culturelles' on 'The Role of Cinema in Africa', 17, January 1954.

3. This was done in some measure for French North African colonies (Lacolley 1945-46).

4. Some general surveys were organized to assess the importance of movies but without much success; the most significant ones were a 1948 Unesco survey, followed by a general inquiry in FWA in 1951 but many District Commissioners did not answer the questions.

5. The 1948 Report shows that many colonies lacked a specific regulation for movie theatres. The Federal Law of 31-7-1950 adds the movie theatres to the list of 'Danger Zones' (*JOAOF* 1950, p. 1253).

6. See the Federal Laws of 1949 and 1955, following a fire in the annex of a movie theatre in Dakar in 1950 and the 1951 disaster in Kano-Northern Nigeria, and also the passing of a new law in 1954 in France on the 'Protection contre les risques d'incendie et de panique'. On the Kano fire, see James Burns (2006:65-80).

7. ANS 21 G 109, 28 file on Vichy Censorship.

8. '... permettre sur le plan local, de limiter sensiblement les projections de films étrangers et particulièrement de films égyptiens'.

9. The permit was established in France itself in 1919.

10. ANS, 21 G 109 (28) Vichy, 1940-1942, from a popular movie, *La belle équipe:* "Cut the Marseillaise (French national anthem) at the end of the first reel and 'I drink a Toast to the Republic and to Freedom' (Fall 1941). Apart from these political references, Vichy was sensitive to any satire of the clergy.

11. Article 6, French Law of 1928 : 'La commission prend en considération l'ensemble des intérêts nationaux en jeu, et spécialement l'intérêt de la conservation des mœurs et traditions nationales'.

12. See for ex. ANG, 2G 17, letter dated from the 26th of sept. 1951, president of the censorship board of Guinea to the Kankan District Officer '...signaler au gouverneur télégraphiquement les films ou les passages de films qui vous sembleraient porter atteinte à l'ordre public, au moral, à l'amour propre, aux convictions des diverses populations des centres de Guinée'.

13. ANS 21 G 193 (174), General Borgnis Desbordes to the Governor General (29 November 1949).

14. ANS 21 G 193 (174), Chef d'escadron Dailly to the General Commander of Land Forces (9 May 1950), supported by Col. Pages, Dakar, 10 May 1950 and by General Borgnis Desbordes (1 June 1950).

15.  21 G 193 Governor of French Soudan to the Governor General (6-1-1951) : "On voit, en effet, trop fréquemment sur les écrans des films sur la vie de la pègre, sur le monde des gangsters, des 'western' (manuscrit : 'Qu'y-a-t-il de mal dans les western ?') ou des films franchement pornographiques (manuscrit : 'Qu'on les cite') qui exercent sur l'esprit de la jeunesse une influence subversive".

16.  ANG, 2G 14, file on banned movies 1956-57.

17.  ANS 2G 12, Governor General to local Governors, 1-3-1955 : "Le film 'Tarzan défenseur de la Jungle' a été autorisé par décision n° 126/AP du 18 février 1955. Cependant, j'appelle votre attention sur le fait que ce film, au demeurant aussi naïf et invraisemblable que ceux de sa série, met en scène, en pays africain et au contact d'une population primitive, des Européens présentés sous un jour défavorable. Je soumets donc à votre jugement l'opportunité de la projection de ces films compte tenu de l'état et de l'orientation de l'évolution propre au public de chaque territoire".

18.   ANG, 2G 17 : 'J'ai demandé à M. Dupuy de couper un tout petit passage (au début : lorsque le gangster enlève sa ceinture pour frapper la femme blonde) qui a soulevé quelques murmures dans la salle'. (1 March 1951, Robin, President of the censorship board).

19.  Roland Villiers (1930:77) : 'Les scènes que l'on coupe le plus volontiers, en France, sont les scènes d'amour qui penchent vers la licence, les scènes d'ivrognerie ou de rixe, celles qui montrent un vice humain tel que la passion des stupéfiants …'.

20.  ANG, 2G 16 letter from the District Officer in Mamou, in the 1950s (illegible date). 'La diffusion de certains spectacles de cinéma (exploits de voleurs ou de bandits notamment) est à mon avis assez néfaste dans la ville de *Mamou sans qu'il soit besoin d'étendre ses effets en brousse*'.

21.  '*Le spectacle incriminé contient une charge contre la justice et dépeint l'Administration pénitentiaire sous un jour très défavorable alors que des condamnés à mort de droit commun y sont présentés comme des sortes de héros*' (censorship board, 21 août 1950).

22.  'Nous devons imiter les français de Paris et ne pas craindre de verser notre sang pour notre pays et pour nos libertés'. In fact the movie does not take place in Paris but in the French provinces.

     The RDA (Rassemblement démocratique africain) was the first federal party founded in 1946 in Bamako.

23.   ANS 21 G 193 (174) secret report, Bouaké, mars 1950.

24.  Ibid., 12 août 1950 General Borgnis Desbordes to Governor General.

25.  ANG, 2G 14 Governor General to all Governors (January 1950).

26.  ANG 2G 13, Governor General to the Governor of French Guinea (telegram, 15-12-54: everything related to Indochina and Algeria must be censured): see also ANS, 21 G 190 (174) telegram (26-5-1955) banning a newsreel on the evacuation of Haiphong by French troops.

27.  Mostly colonial in fact, as oral sources rarely mention censorship.

28.  ANS 21G 193, letter to the Governor of Niger, after troubles in a movie theatre in Niamey (31 January 1950): 'Ces films jugés bons à projeter il y a quelques années, ne le sont plus depuis l'évolution de la politique, aussi bien intérieure qu'internationale'.

29.  'Ce n'est tout de même pas un nègre qui vient de violer une de vos filles'.

30. ANS 21G 193 Acting Governor of French Sudan to the Governor General, Bamako, 31-1-1957.

31. See the conference quoted above in Note 2 (Rufisque, Kane Abdoul Aziz).

32. ANS, 21 G 193 (174). Governor General to the French Resident in Togo (June 1956).

    One should also take into account the complex interplay between the administration and the private cinema entrepreneurs who had other interests, basically financial, but could not oppose the administration too openly. As a result, they applied a sort of pre-censorship when importing movies to the colonies.

## References

Ambler, Charles, 'Popular Films and Colonial Audiences: The Movies in Northern Rhodesia', *American Historical Review,* pp. 81-105, vol. 106, no.1, 2001:85.

Balandier, Georges, 'La situation coloniale. Approche théorique', *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie,* Vol. 11, 1951:44-79.

Burns, James, 2002, *Flickering Shadows. Cinema and Identity in Colonial Zimbabwe.* Athens: Ohio University Press.

Burns, James, 2006, 'The African Bioscope—Movie-House Culture in British Colonial Africa' pp 65-80, *Afrique & Histoire*, no.5.

Léglise Paul, 1969, *Histoire de la politique du cinéma français*, tome 1, La troisième république, Paris, Pierre Lherminier Editeur.

Lacolley, Albert, 1945-46, *Le cinéma dans les territoires d'Outre Mer*, ENFOM dissertation.

Ramirez Francis and Christian Rolot, 1985, *Histoire du cinéma au Zaïre, au Rwanda et au Burundi*, Royal Museum of Central Africa, Tervuren.

Thioub, Ibrahima, 2005, 'Savoirs interdits en contexte colonial : la politique culturelle de la France en Afrique de l'Ouest', pp 75-97 in C. Chanson-Jabeur et Odile Goerg (eds) *"Mama Africa". Hommage à Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch*, L'Harmattan.

Trelis, Lionel, 2001, *La censure cinématographique en France*, maîtrise, IEP, Lyon.

Villiers, Roland, 1930, *Le cinéma et ses merveilles*, Librairie Bernardin-Bechet, Paris.