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DOCUMENTING AFRICA ON FILM AND NKRUMAH'S LEGACY IN PAN- AFRICANIST AFRICA

Rebecca Ohene-Asah

Following Ghana's attainment of political independence, the new nation's leader, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, made efforts to lead Africa's decolonisation process. He used film as a medium of achieving this Pan-African agenda. Nkrumah restructured and renamed the Gold Coast Film Unit (GCFU), which the British colonial administration had established, as the Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC) and placed it at the forefront of documenting and propagating his version of the Pan-African narrative. From neighbouring Togo and Burkina-Faso, to distant Kenya and the Congo, GFIC cameras captured historical moments relevant to Nkrumah's ideas. Whereas Nkrumah's political legacy and diplomatic rhetoric are largely known, his use of cinema to execute his agenda remains unexplored. This article draws attention to the role documentary films of the GFIC played in the African decolonisation process. Drawing on information gathered about these films from interviews with key actors within the defunct GFIC, and from personal archives of these actors, it is argued that, although the functional use of documentary films in Nkrumah government appears similar to how film functioned in the colonial regime, GFIC films traversed national education and propaganda to become media of continental African integration and stimuli for post-colonial self-motivation and independence.

On 6th March 1957, Dr Kwame Nkrumah declared independence for the people of the Gold Coast from British colonial rule and Ghana, the new nation, became the first in sub-Saharan Africa to gain independence. In his inaugural speech,

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Nkrumah, the nation's first president, declared that, 'there would be no meaning to the national independence of Ghana unless it was linked with the total liberation of the African continent'.¹ This declaration suggested the country's leadership was poised to spearhead an advocacy under-laced with Pan-Africanist thoughts aimed at the decolonisation of other colonized people within the continent and the African diaspora. It also appears to have guided most of the social, economic and political actions that characterized his government's continental relationships throughout Nkrumah's years in office. The post-colonial government of Nkrumah transformed the Gold Coast Film Unit (GCFU), which had been inherited from the British colonial government into the Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC) and used its films to showcase and promote Ghana and Africa to advance Nkrumah's Pan-Africanist thoughts across Africa and beyond.² Nkrumah, for example, embarked on travels in 1958 to India, Canada and United States and in 1961 to Russia, China and Eastern Europe with a GFIC film crew that he tasked with the responsibility of documenting events that expressed solidarity with the nations he visited, while justifying the travels to Ghanaians back home.³ Common to colonised Africans nations at the time of Ghana's independence was the issue of media misrepresentation, particularly in film, which the Nkrumah regime sought to counter through the GFIC.⁴ The use of film to foster African liberation and unity was first formalized in 1958 at the premier conference of independent States in Africa, held in Ghana. A resolution was passed at this conference to implement an exchange of cultural ideas, audio-visuals and other journalistic materials.⁵ Specifically, 'to encourage and facilitate the exchange of exhibitions, educational, scientific and cultural material including books, periodicals, bulletins, audiovisual aids and other cultural materials' (Legum 1965:164).⁶

In spite of the availability of literature on Nkrumah's political life and legacies vis-a-vis his ideas about African unity, there is still a paucity of information with regards to his administration's utilisation of cinema as a tool in this pan-Africanist agenda.⁷ This article therefore sets out to fill this knowledge gap. It examines the role and contextual underpinnings of the continental documentary films produced by the GFIC and the role of these films in Kwame Nkrumah's national and continental activities. The rationale behind the use of documentary film genre as an integral part of Nkrumah's political agenda, the ways in which documentaries were used in Africa's decolonisation efforts, and the purpose of the films in relation to Ghanaians and other African's self-perception are discussed. Based on examination of documentary film titles and information gathered from some of the defunct GFIC film crew and their personal archives, this essay argues that although the use of documentary films in the Nkrumah government appears to be similar to that of films employed by the colonial regime, the GFIC films functioned beyond national education and propaganda to become a media for continental African integration and stimuli for post-colonial self-motivation and independence. A chronology of film usage in the Gold Coast and Ghana is first discussed to present the context within which the Nkrumah government eventually utilized film to connect with the rest of Africa. This is followed by an analysis of the titles and themes of the GFIC documentary films in relation to the Nkrumah's government's diplomatic relationships with other African nations with reference to Africa's decolonisation process.

Early filmmaking in Ghana

Ghana inherited from the British colonial government several social, cultural and political institutions, including the Gold Coast Film Unit (GCFU). The GCFU had since 1948 been operating in the Gold Coast as a mouthpiece of the colonial administration, producing mostly public educational films.⁸ Prior to its establishment, a 'West Africa Film School in Accra had begun training indigenous Africans from the Gold Coast and Nigeria in the techniques of film production.'⁹ The unit employed three of the six pioneer Gold Coast trainees – R. O. Fenuku, Sam Aryeetey and Bob Okanta – into its operations. The other three, R. F. Otigba, F. Fajemeson, and Alhaji Auna of Nigerian origin, were recruited into a similar film unit that the British had established in Nigeria.¹⁰ The GCFU's establishment was part of the British colonial government's effort to decentralize film production. This unit was touted as one of the most Africanized, as it produced films that incorporated indigenous cultural themes and idioms.¹¹ Prior to its establishment, films found in the Gold Coast in particular and across Africa in general were engineered by a London-based Colonial Film Unit, that was established in the years leading to the Second World War to make films that would propagate the war and elicit support from the colonies.¹²

The Colonial Film Unit produced three categories of films each of which focused on separate themes: pre-war films, war period films, post-war films centered around poverty and development.¹³ Following the war and led by William Sellers, the CFU produced several educational films that addressed issues of health and sanitation across the colonies. The style of these films was influenced by Sellers' belief that Africans could not comprehend film the same way as Westerners.¹⁴ Films produced by the CFU were thus viewed as overly didactic and as an alternative, John Grierson advocated for 'films for Africans, with Africans, by Africans' whereby Africans were to be trained and incorporated into the film-making process.¹⁵ This advocacy stimulated the film decentralization effort of the British colonial administration and led to the establishment of film production units in the Gold Coast, West Indies, and Jamaica.¹⁶

The ideology undergirding films of the units was similar to earlier colonial films as they fueled a central colonial agenda of systematically indoctrinating indigenous people to accept European ways of life. Regardless of some primary stylistic deviations such as the use of vernacular stories, films made by the GCFU, such as *The Boy Kumasenu* (1952), followed aspects of the post-World War II British documentary film tradition in form and genre.¹⁷ Particularly, the British post-war documentary form that stressed on the functional use of films for socio-cultural reconstruction of colonial communities within education, information and instruction was intrinsic to the GCFU films.¹⁸ Kwame Nkrumah and his Convention People Party (CPP) government after assuming the administration of the country renamed the GCFU to Ghana Films Industry Corporation (GFIC) to reflect the change and new identity of the country. Regardless, some members of the GCFU such as Sean Graham reportedly stayed on even after the official end of colonial rule. Graham claims he had managed to develop a good relationship with Nkrumah himself and as such, was offered Ghanaian nationality as well as a proposition to remain in a supervisory capacity for the new administrators of the film

unit.¹⁹ Another reason for Graham staying on may be the fact that whereas the unit could boast of a well experienced technical team such as cinematographers, editors, sound technicians and others, it could not account for a well-established script, directing and conceptualization unit amongst its indigenous members. Again, the local employees of the film industry were mainly junior staff who were minimally involved in the conceptualization, storytelling, narrative activities.²⁰ It was therefore imperative to aim for a gradual takeover by indigenous people from the Europeans.

Further, in line with Nkrumah's bid to demonstrate that '*after all, the black man is capable of managing his own affairs*', his government provided funding to support capacity building that could enable the Ghanaian staff to effectively take over the film industry from Europeans and spearhead production conceptualization processes of the GFIC.²¹ The effort to lead idea conception led to the appointment of Kofi Awoonor, a poet and writer who had demonstrated excellence in African stories and poetry as the first managing director of the GFIC in 1960. Other technical staff were sent to European institutions on scholarships to acquire new skills in cinematography, editing, script writing, and directing among other disciplines. In this regard, Chris Hesse was sent to Sorbonne France, for further training in cinematography. The government increased the equipment base of the film unit and restructured it into a sustainable production organisation.²² In a bid to nationalize and centralize the cinema industry, Nkrumah facilitated the purchase of a key exhibition company: West Africa Pictures Limited, which owned the Plaza, Rex, Regal, Royal and Roxy cinema houses and annexed them to the country's film exhibition and distribution industry. It is also believed to have made some investments into the fleet of cinema vans of the country's Information Services Department. Although there are no clear records to support this, Hesse suggests that cinema vans were repositioned to play an important role in nationwide film exhibition-particularly in communities without cinema halls.²³

The reorganisation of the GCFU into GFIC was meant to ensure the successful production, distribution and exhibition of films and to demonstrate the government's commitment to building a film production and exhibition network that communicated Ghana's independent and self-sustaining status to the rest of the world.²⁴ In this regard, Nkrumah requested the GFIC to document all news worthy activities in the country and he engaged the services of a personal cinematographer whose duties included filming all activities he undertook as leader of the country. His government encouraged all government ministries, departments and agencies to budget for documentary films that showcased their activities and progress. Additionally, the GFIC documented activities of the Osagyefo Players, a theatre group for which Nkrumah reportedly wrote story ideas and which gained prominence in performing at different OAU platforms. The GFIC packaged these performances into newsreels for the Ghanaian people.²⁵

The GFIC produced films for purposes of education, national integration, and development. Although the use of film in this case may not represent a clear deviation from colonial film usage, the films in this instant, were created from indigenous perspectives. Agencies of the government used these films to rally support for their mandate, emphasize national cohesion and minimize polarization which

varying political, ethnic and religious interest groups that agitated for Ghana's independence had caused and to propagate among Ghanaians the idea of African Unity. The films were exhibited in cinema houses, cinema vans, and later broadcast by Ghana Broadcasting Corporation's television unit after television technology emerged in Ghana. The broadcast and exhibition structure was used to evoke a sense of nationalism, decolonize minds and instill pride and self-worth in Ghanaians. According to Hesse, after a recorded version of Ghana's national anthem was played in the cinema hall, a newsreel or a documentary film encompassing these continental filming exploits were screened before the exhibition of the fictional film for the evening commenced.

The political value of documentary film genre in Ghana

Colonial exhibitions were organized as political events to which entire communities, including chiefs and community leaders participated to demonstrate support for the colonial government's agenda.²⁶ To a large extent, the production and exhibition of documentary films by the colonial administration contributed to the success of British cultural imperialism in the Gold Coast and elsewhere the British administered. For instance, the appropriation of English as *Lingua Franca* in British colonies is rooted in films such as *I will speak English* (1954).

By the 1960s however, the philosophical foundation for reversing this western cultural domination through film, appeared to have been laid. This was influenced, in part, by post-colonial ideologies that cautioned against neo-colonialist tendencies as propounded by Franz Fanon for example. Documentary films the GFIC produced immediately following Ghana's independence thus exhibited some rejection of colonial operational methods and styles. The management of the GFIC was convinced that changing existing dominant media narratives about Africa required a proactive coverage of continental happenings from the perspectives of an African film crew. As such, the films of the GFIC were rather quite different. They were structured as coverages that aimed to document and report important events and happenings within the post-colony to the people. It may seem, the Griersonian definition of the documentary film coined from Flaherty's 1924 creative which is epitomised by colonial power and gaze came to take a different form and meaning in the Ghana situation. Instead, themes of these post-independent films appear to be undergirded by the post-colonial thinking where Africans are encouraged to invent their own ways and foster a reversed colonial gaze, where post independent films were conceptualized and filmed from a reversed perspective, with an aim to dismantle the panoptic philosophies of colonial hegemony- where Africans could represent Africans on film.

The African continent through GFIC lenses

While there are significant stylistic and functional continuities between colonial films and post-colonial films, it is prudent to recognize that whereas the British use of film in the Gold Coast was from an etic perspective, the production and

use of the medium after colonial rule was largely from an emic point of view where the overarching thought on film conceptualization, production and exhibition is premised on the indigenous people's own perspectives. In essence, Nkrumah's administration sought to re-conscientize Ghanaians to be proud of their identities. The government viewed film and other media as effective modes of communicating to a largely illiterate population and hence used cinema continuously in its operations. The inheritance of this colonial asset placed it at an advantage over other African nations many of which could not boast of an active film production body. The GFIC thus provided filming services to other countries as a key diplomatic strengthening move and as a means by which Ghana, the premier nation to gain self-rule in sub-Saharan Africa solidarized with and encouraged other African nations to tell stories from an African perspective. As at the time the GFIC was divested in 1995 its archives had at least ten films produced by the corporation, focused on other African countries.²⁷

Among the films GFIC produced were *Freedom for Africa* (1958), *The Sahara Unites Us* (1958), *Ablode* (1960), *Operation Congo* (1960), *Report from Kassai* (1960), *Voice of Peace* (1960), *A Journey to Bamako* (1961), *Uhuru* (1963), *Africa Reborn* (1963), and *Towards a United Africa* (1964) which documented the alliance of nations that had different colonial allegiance yet converged ideologically and socially as groups with similar histories and destinies. Particularly, the Ghana, Guinea, Mali union led to the production of *Freedom for Africa* produced a year after Ghana's independence.²⁸ This film was significant for capturing the rudiments of the alliance that grew to engulf the entire African regions. The films, which were believed to be exhibited across Ghana, also represented an attempt to break through the linguistic barriers instituted by colonialism, and to showcase diplomatic relations the West African nations had established with their north African counterparts. For instance, *The Sahara Unites Us*, (1958) documents Nkrumah's visit to seven independent states as of 1958 namely, Ethiopia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Morocco, Tunisia and Liberia was meant to demonstrate unity beyond their linguistic and geographic similarities. The government of Ghana is believed to have been responsible for funding these continental productions. This is an assertion that is deduced from a similar commitment Nkrumah made to continental media development. A 1961 letter from Nkrumah to Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta details a benevolent action where the Ghanaian leader purchased and donated a printing press for use by Eastern and Southern African countries in their nationalistic and independence advocacy.²⁹

In addition, the GFIC documented independent day celebrations of other African nations such as Malawi, Kenya and Togo, as Nkrumah was convinced that these coverages by an African crew could be more objective than any other international media reportage. *Uhuru* (1963), a documentary film on the Kenyan independence celebration, for example, aimed to link Ghana's liberation struggles to those of East Africa, while *Ablode*, a film on the 1960 Togolese independent day celebrations was meant to demonstrate and cement socio-cultural relationships between Ghana and Togo as neighbours. *A Journey to Bamako* (1961) explores the neighbourly relationship between Ghana and Mali when leaders of the two nations met in Bamako. Another coverage of a meeting between Maurice Yameogo of

Burkina Fasso (then called Upper Volta) and Nkrumah, eventually led to a strengthened connection between the two countries. The most significant gain for the constituents of both countries was the relaxed movement of goods and people between the two countries.³⁰ The meeting at which their agreement was signed was captured in an untitled documentary news coverage. In another example, *Operation Congo*, focused on the 1960 Congo crisis and was particularly central in Nkrumah's proper discernment of the Congo conflict, helping him to determine Ghana's level of commitment to manage and bring peace to the conflicted region. Chris Hesse, Nkrumah's personal cinematographer, recounts how he disguised himself as a United Nations soldier to capture images of the Congolese people, and their decolonisation struggles.³¹ Similarly, the film *Report from Kassai* – a sequel to *Operation Congo* – also addressed updates on the Congo crisis and the involvement of Ghana's military in the country, a year on. Other films aimed at highlighting the post-colonial, Pan-Africanist thought are represented in; *Voice of Peace* (1960), *Africa Reborn* (1963) and *Towards a United Africa* (1964). These three films were comprised a series of meetings and events that begot the Organisation of African Union (OAU) that later re-branded into the African Union (AU). Currently, the AU, with headquarters in Ethiopia, is the mouthpiece and symbol of African unity. Overall, these meetings and events documented on film appear to have positioned Nkrumah at the realm of the Pan-Africanist movement as his actions demonstrated Ghana's assumed destiny to lead the entire pan-Africanist movement.³² Indeed, the effect of these actions begun to translate into Nkrumah's own internal and external political exploits.

GFIC documentary films and Pan-Africanism

The use of documentary film as a medium of decolonizing the African mind and correcting misrepresentations of Africans was important to the Nkrumah regime in Ghana. As such, GFIC's full-fledged professional film crew was dispatched to other African countries for filming assignments that were intended to motivate the African people. The crew's presence in these countries helped to demystify the camera as a preserve of Europeans, as the crew of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) which had hitherto dominated news making and reportage in the colonies were mainly people of European decent.

GFIC films heightened Nkrumah's personal image amongst his peers. The fact that Nkrumah had access to a complete local film organisation comparable to Western media set-up elevated his status amongst his peers and placed him above his competitors for leadership in the Pan African struggle. Films produced on Nkrumah's travels across Africa and beyond particularly reemphasized his desire to establish not just himself, but also Ghana as the focal point for the new Africa under proposal. Nationally, Nkrumah's foreign policies were implicitly expressed in the themes of every documentary films the GFIC produced with the objective of presenting Ghana as a unified society within Africa with one destiny. Although it has been suggested elsewhere, see Hess (2001) that most cultural productions under Nkrumah were aimed at feeding his personal cult, the themes of films produced by the GFIC point beyond Nkrumah's personal aggrandizement.³³ For

instance, the Malawian independent day celebration was filmed although Nkrumah did not attend the event.

Newspaper articles often featured information on films with highlights on the production achievements of the GFIC. Captions such as 'The Picture our Film Unit Made' 'Ghana Film Unit Makes Progress' speak to the positive and nationalistic perspective from which writers expected cinema goers to view the films from.³⁴ Hesse suggests that the films aided indigenes to place news they may have read in newspapers or listened to on radio in their proper perspectives and deepen their understanding of government policies vis-à-vis diplomatic ties with other countries. The GFIC's sovereign posture attracted independent filmmakers to the country under collaborative arrangements with the GFIC. The film *Tongo Hamile* (1964), for instance, was a co-production between the GFIC and Terry Bishop an independent British film director.

The impact of GFIC films beyond Ghana has not been studied and factored into this article, although Hesse claims it was a policy of the GFIC to make copies of its documentary films available through its foreign missions to any country that expressed interest for the purposes of deepening bilateral relations between Ghana and that country.

Conclusion

Since the end of colonial rule which peaked in the 1960s for most African countries, literature on African film developments appear to have been forwarded by researchers outside the continent. Such scholarship has also mainly focused on the fictional genre of African film practices. Even when the knowledge is championed by scholars from within the continent of Africa, the scholarship has mostly highlighted Francophone fictional film developments such as the acclaimed works of Osman Sembene which are significantly critical of the African bourgeois and neo-colonial influences in French speaking Africa and the entire continent, generally. Whereas this focus may be attributed to the scholars' personal origins and tie with Francophone Africa, other initiatives such as the 1970 establishment of the Pan African Federation of Filmmakers (FEPACI) has done little to promote films beyond fictional films of French African filmmakers. Again, a recent UNESCO partnered project titled Africa Film Heritage Project at the Cannes which was aimed at highlighting and preserving important cinema from the continent was heralded by the fictional works of French speaking African Filmmakers.³⁵

To a large extent, the discourse on African film developments has relegated the documentary film genre's contribution to African film practices to the background. Post-colonial scholars such as Manthia Diawara and Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike have suggested that the continuation of the Griersonian documentary style of filmmaking resulted in the supposed stalling of the Ghanaian film industry. This study has however through the examination of titles, themes and philosophies undergirding the conceptualization of documentary films produced by the GFIC, argued that the GFIC's focus on documentary film was crucial to the pan-Africanist media dissemination agenda. The article has demonstrated that contrary to the documentary film genre's propaganda tendencies as reflected in how

colonial governments utilized the genre, the GFIC films in this case, functioned to strengthen diplomatic ties between Ghana and other African nations while promoting the concept of unity amongst Nations. Ghana, in its position as the first nation south of the Sahara to gain independence, appears to have assumed a self-imposed responsibility to chaperone and support other colonized nations into a decolonized era with film as a key determinant. The GFIC productions embodied aspects of Kwame Nkrumah's ideas of self-reliance and total independence for Africa and may have enhanced his national and continental popularity in a bid to lead a proposed continental government Africa agenda. Documentary films of the GFIC were, without doubt, a major factor in the attempt by Nkrumah and his compatriots at unifying the African continent and giving it clout globally.

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