

**Odile Goerg, *Un cinéma ambulante en Afrique : Jean-Paul Sivadier, entrepreneur dans les années 1950*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2020, 163 p.**

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The scholarship on the history of the French colonial empire in West Africa is extensive and varied in terms of coverage and thematic approach. Consequently, there is a rich and deep understanding of the dynamics of imperialism, resistance, and the decolonization process. Moreover, in recent years researchers such as Jon Cowans (*Empire Films and the Crisis of Late Colonialism, 1946-1959*), James Currey, ed. (*Africa Writes Back*), Kenneth Harrow (*Postcolonial African Cinema*), and Paul Landau and Deborah Kaspin, eds. (*Images & Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*), among others, have explored the subtle and enduring cultural aspects of colonialism and the struggle to overcome its legacy. Specifically, scholars have analyzed the role of film and the cinema industry as integrated with and integral to those processes, some tracing the origins of African cinema to that period of decolonization and national liberation. However, it is rare when readers get a personal, grassroots, and daily window into that context and period. Odile Goerg provides just such a view in her new work, *Un cinéma ambulante en Afrique*. The narrative is engaging, humorous, and insightful in surprising ways as it follows the life and experiences of Jean-Paul Sivadier in his travels across French West Africa in the last years of colonial rule, 1956-1959, as the owner of an independent mobile cinema enterprise.

The book is effectively divided into three parts. Claude Forest writes a preface that gives an overview of the significance of the account about to be laid out while also offering some explanation of the importance of a person such as Sivadier in that time and place as well as the overall history of the cinema and colonialism. Following the Preface, Goerg produces a section of Sivadier's memoirs that specifically cover the period when he took ownership of a mobile cinema enterprise in West Africa after having worked for several years in the region performing odd jobs as an electrician or performing other mechanical labor. Finally, Goerg presents her



own analysis of Sivadier's account and draws out some of the most salient aspects of the journal-type account just put forth. Structurally the book is solid, and it takes the reader on a journey through time and place that creates a sensation of being there. It is important to have Sivadier's own words to follow as the audience is transported in his intrepid truck across savannah, rivers, desert, and forest. It is also significant to be able to read the entrepreneur's own representation of the universe in which he lives and works, from the perspective of a French citizen, an outsider, and a businessman in the late colonial context. Goerg allows Sivadier to speak for himself and then intervenes to situate that voice in the larger framework of what is transpiring in a manner that offers structure to his activities and perceptions. Consequently, the book flows effortlessly and makes a noteworthy contribution to the broader understanding of empire, imperial perceptions of the decolonization process, and specifically how the cinema industry worked and mattered in Francophone West Africa.

In the preface, Forest notes that Sivadier "is absolutely representative of his generation." (p. 7) As the head of the Circuit Cinéma Africain (CCA), Sivadier sat at the nexus of film distributors such as the giants COMACICO and SECMA that monopolized access to motion pictures and owned the vast majority of the theater system in West Africa, the colonial government that regulated distribution, viewing, and taxed box office receipts in the region, the African audiences who were the primary consumers of Sivadier's product, and local political actors who sometimes caused frustration for the entrepreneur while at others he sought to curry their favor. As a small businessman, the head of the CCA was continually in a state of negotiation for everything and with everyone around him. Traversing vast distances Sivadier relied extensively on his African employees to make his enterprise happen while also being subjected to the whims of his suppliers and government officials in terms of fees and even political approval for showing his wares and accessing certain locales. Forest explains that the kinds of films that Sivadier showed were very popular among African audiences and were generally not that different than what one would experience in France, suggesting a universal interest in certain types of motion pictures.

Goerg presents a brief introduction to the section of Sivadier's memoirs that are the centerpiece of the book. She reminds the reader that the mobile cinema was the primary and often only means whereby most Africans gained access to motion pictures. This prevalence marks a striking continuity with the introduction of film to the region as early as 1905. After a while, the colonial government became more interested in regulating the cinema enterprise as well as controlling the kinds of images presented to Africans. Consequently, by the time Sivadier entered the business there was already in place an extensive administrative architecture around the cinema industry as well as a deep tradition of cinematic engagement by the people in the region. In Goerg's introduction the reader learns a bit about Sivadier's background and how he wound up going to West Africa in 1949. After several odd jobs, chance encounters, and fortuitous developments Sivadier decided to purchase the CCA in 1956 from Marcel Rochefort who had been operating his mobile cinema business since 1948. With a background as an electrician and mechanic, but no previous experience in motion pictures Sivadier set off on his new adventure. The business consisted of a truck, projection equipment, and a contract with SECMA for distribution of films. He maintained the outfit for three years

until the approach of independence for the countries of West Africa combined with escalating costs convinced him to sell off the assets and head back to France.

The main body of the book is the excerpt from Sivadier's memoirs covering the period of his ownership of the CCA. The reader follows the mobile cinema through its banal adventures. There are too many blown tires and mechanical breakdowns to recount. But that is precisely the magic of the narrative. Those everyday obstacles confronted in the process of trying to bring motion pictures to remote and varied parts of West Africa are the stuff one rarely gets in scholarship. Sivadier offers his generally conservative opinions about the locals, regional politics (complaining many times about leftist and Communist agitators stirring up trouble), and his frustration in working with government officials to obtain appropriate permits and SECMA's rising fees for the product at the center of Sivadier's business. The section is generously interspersed with his photographs, which are rare gems allowing for a stark visual presentation of life in French West Africa in the waning years of colonial rule. Moreover, the reader can see what a mobile cinema looks like, the construction and preparation that went into each viewing, and the audiences drawn to Sivadier's wares. There are food vendors, an improvised box office with tiered pricing, and security to prevent creative individuals from gaining gratis access to the movies. Sivadier also provides the lists of films he showed, which were often the typical fare of Hollywood westerns, gangster films, sci-fi classics like "Godzilla" and "King Kong," some Arab films, and the occasional French colonial picture like "Paysans Noirs," strongly promoted by the French rulers as part of their own cinema politics. The journal reveals notable aspects of the cinema in West Africa that are often glossed over by researchers such as the attention paid to varied climates and the impact they had on the film stock and equipment, and the incidental costs of fuel, repairs, food, lodging, and contract workers to build the viewing space in each new location. In sum, the very mechanics of making the motion picture experience possible are revealed in detail through Sivadier's words.

In the book's final section Goerg steps back from Sivadier's exposition to offer a deeper analysis of what the memoirs reveal about the cinematic experience in Africa, late colonial rule, and the legacy of imperialism for France and the region. Most significantly Goerg poses the question of "what impact did the films projected have" on their audiences. She observes that certainly as an entrepreneur Sivadier had an overarching incentive to contract for those films that were most likely to offer a return on investment. Consequently, proven successes were important parts of the catalogue Sivadier escorted around the region. However, the head of the CCA also had to have a sensibility to the audience, some understanding of the unique cultural codes that provide the framework for reception and interpretation of the films. This Sivadier could only learn through experience and sustained contact with his potential audiences. At times, the businessman observed unexpected reactions to movies that indicated the analytic context in which the audiences interpreted the films suggested their cinematic language was not identical to French audiences and were influenced by local politics, experiences, and relations of power on the ground. Therefore, Goerg intimates that a reading of Sivadier's account exposes the European encounter with empire through the cinematic industry while also hinting at the fault lines that became the basis for the rupture that would imminently produce sovereign countries and the demise of colonial empire in the region. Ultimately, Goerg's book speaks to the profound importance of film in the history and life of

West Africa. Sivadier aside, the reader comes away from the study with an appreciation of how significant cinema was (and is) in the region as well as how important the role played by film was to the story of the colonial experience and the process of decolonization.

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