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The Moving Location of Empire: Indirect Rule, International Law, and the Bantu Experiment (1935-1937)

Between 1935 and 1937, the International Missionary Council conducted the *Bantu Education Kinema Experiment* (the Bantu Experiment), with the financial support of the Carnegie Corporation and the Colonial Development Fund, and in coordination with the British Colonial Office and the colonial governments of the British protectorates and mandates in Tanganyika, Kenya, Uganda, Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland. The objective of the Bantu Experiment was the production of educational films to be screened by mobile cinemas. The films used local actors, and their tone was overtly pedagogical. Plots were intentionally formulaic, striving to capture 'the native point of view' by resorting to an ethnographic sensitivity in regards to local cultures. The content and style adopted in the films aimed to familiarize colonial subjects with modern techniques of agricultural production and public administration, public health issues, the nuances of modern emotions, and the glory of the British Empire through what were considered to be familiar faces and settings, and according to the correct cognitive capacity of natives. Thirty-five films were produced in total during the two years of the project. Today, only three of these films survive.

Although it failed to raise new funds for its continuation and was criticized because it didn't use local (human and financial) resources to their fullest potential, the Bantu Experiment was extremely successful in many other respects. Apart from mobilizing key actors, levels of government, and funding sources dispersed across the globe for the production of its films, it screened these films before thousands of local viewers who were themselves spread out over thousands of kilometers. The Bantu Experiment also left a detailed archival legacy of the practices and techniques employed during the project, and a trail of positive evaluations showing how its films had been perceived by 'different classes of natives – the educated, the semi-detribalized and the raw villagers'. As a result, the Bantu Experiment triggered an intense interest on the part of colonial authorities in the 'enormous possibilities for education and healthy entertainment' of cinema, with many publically-made films soon being deployed as a means of counteracting the 'often distorted presentation of the life of the white races' amongst Africans by Anglo-American and European commercial films. The Bantu Experiment inaugurated, in this way, the official use of cinematography in late colonial administration – an effort famously expanded by the British Colonial Film Unit from 1939 to 1955.

For (international) legal scholars interested in the geographies of law, the Bantu Experiment is a telling site to explore the dynamism of late imperial locations and their influence on modern forms of international administration. In particular, the Bantu Experiment offers a key visual and jus-political archive through which to examine three interrelated features of the international order that emerged during the first half of the twentieth century. Firstly, it reveals the multiple jurisdictions and levels of government assembled for the operationalization of modern international administration. Secondly, it exposes the techniques and tensions involved in the construction of colonial (and soon postcolonial) territories and peoples as potentially self-determined subjects. And thirdly, the Bantu Experiment illustrates the dynamism of imperial locations – a dynamism that was exacerbated by the production and circulation of films and the reversed ethnographic function of colonial cinematography: an exercise that ended up revealing less about the colonial subjects which were its object than it did about the metropolis behind the camera and its vision of law and the international.