



Matamata and Pilipili. First Run/Icarus Films,

Reviewed by Sheila Petty

Published on H-AfrLitCine (November, 1999)

Matamata and Pilipili by Belgian documentary filmmaker, Tristan Bourlard, is based on twelve short fiction films discovered in a film archive in Louvain, Belgium. Directed by Belgian missionary, Albert van Haelst in the 1950s, these short comedies set in Democratic Republic of Congo (former Belgian Congo), feature the comic misadventures of Matamata and Pilipili. Bourlard places the restored films within the social and political complexities of colonial images and post-colonial realities by exploring issues of production and reception in a narrative structure that combines footage from the restored works with interviews and archival footage. Although the documentary suffers somewhat from a lack of identification of the interview subjects and credits that are difficult to read, Bourlard both recovers lost cinema history and exposes contemporary postcolonial tensions. At the outset, Bourlard raises several questions: first, he signals that the documentary will be an inquiry into the identities of Matamata and Pilipili and then he queries what these twelve short films have to say to a contemporary audience. However, the film really focuses on Van Haelst and the production context within which the films evolved, which, in itself, raises a number of controversial issues by inference. In particular, the documentary is very successful in exposing the gulf that existed between the Belgian Scheut missionaries and the Africans they came to convert. For example, the first moving images of Van Haelst himself document his arrival at a vil-

lage on a missionary call. He is riding a bicycle and is depicted in the center of the frame, surrounded by smiling African porters who are all on foot. The technological separation between Van Haelst and the Africans reinforces the unspoken control Van Haelst demonstrates both as a colonial church authority figure and as a filmmaker. It also raises questions of manipulation and the power of images as propagandistic tools. The colonial attitudes expressed in some of the interviews demonstrate the lingering effects of colonialism. An elderly member of the Van Haelst family comments that Van Haelst held the opinion that Africans were born actors, adept at palavers, but not at constructive action. Such an opinion reflects the stereotypical view of Africans as feckless and lazy. In other interviews with the Scheut fathers, the reactions of Africans seeing the films for the first time are described as comic. In particular, one of the interview subjects relates how the appearance of a train on the screen causes immense consternation in the African audience. Such emphasis seems to promote the racist notion of Africans as simple primitive people incapable of comprehending western technology. Rather than purely negative in effect, these interviews make Bourlard's film especially useful in classroom settings where such opinions can be the catalyst for debate among students on the subtle and systemic nature of racism. One interesting aspect of the documentary lies in its success in laying bare the tension between exploitation and the

need of Africans to see images of themselves even if mediated by a colonial hand. In an environment where cinema was composed primarily of American and European imports, Van Haelst's films, which featured primarily black casts and scenarios ostensibly taken from African daily life, were extremely successful with African audiences. This is reflected in interviews with Africans in both Brussels and Kinshasa where audience members recall the series with fond nostalgia. Although it is clear that the series helped fill the need for locally relevant content, Bourlard does not analyze the films themselves in depth in terms of the colonial ideology that they promoted. For example, in *Matamata the Schoolboy*, Matamata is first shown on the fringes of a group of African men who are able to read French newspapers. By depicting Matamata as separated by his illiteracy, Van Haelst is promoting assimilation as necessary in order to gain entrance to "progressive" society. This message was not lost on his audience: in one of the interviews, an African woman relates that the name "Matamata" was given to adult students in school and that the film sent the message to Africans that their children must be enrolled at the right age or be ridiculed for their lack of learning. Thus, the propaganda aspects of Van Haelst's films are largely glossed over or ignored as Bourlard does not address the effects of such propaganda and the role it played in the devaluation of indigenous culture and knowledge. In addition, Bourlard does not directly address the political and cultural implications of a Belgian depicting African life. Although Van Haelst is quoted as remarking that the creation of these films was a response to the lack of local situational material and pace in the imported films he routinely showed, the cinematic grammar and structure of the *Matamata and Pilipili* series are profoundly western in their reliance on master scene cinematography and continuity editing technique. In addition, African society is portrayed as the missionaries might wish it to be: the men wear European dress, poverty is absent and

the Africans are unfailingly cheerful. It was these types of strategies that were rejected by Africans themselves when they began making their own films and establishing their own conventions of cinematic grammar. Thus, although the twelve films might be described as "the candy" that accompanied Van Haelst's moral messages, the effects of such colonial depictions of African society should not be underestimated. It is, in fact, somewhat unclear as to whether or not Bourlard's ultimate project is to recoup Van Haelst's films or to place them within a critical context. Although this is somewhat addressed through the discussion of African interviewees about the failure of Van Haelst to include Matamata and Pilipili's real names in the credits of the films, Bourlard devotes far more screen time to the production context of the films than he does in addressing their shortcomings. This being said, the audience ultimately knows considerably more about Van Haelst than they do about the Africans who played the roles of Matamata and Pilipili. In the case of Pilipili, this may be defensible as it appears that not even his real name has been passed down in history, which is in itself an irony of colonialism. This omission is less understandable in the case of Matamata, played by Kasongo-Biembe, who sues Van Haelst for breach of contract after Van Haelst returns to Belgium. Bourlard makes the decision to focus on Van Haelst's side of the lawsuit through an interview with one of the Scheut fathers who suggests that Kasongo-Biembe was duped by an opportunistic lawyer. Although the lawsuit is eventually resolved in the actor's favor, Bourlard chooses not to reveal the full circumstances that supported his claim. The lasting impression is that the lawsuit was frivolous and Kasongo-Biembe's charge of exploitation groundless. Even with these shortcomings, *Matamata and Pilipili* is still a significant documentary with an important contribution to make to the history of cinema as evidenced by the honors it has garnered, including awards taken at the 1997 Margaret Mead Film Festival (New

York) and the 1997 Bilan du Film Ethnographique (Paris). In some ways, the tone of the film provides a platform for discussion of the implications of colonial power structures and the role of cinema in reinforcing them. With this in mind, the documentary would be appropriate for postcolonial, cultural, ethnological, African and cinema studies courses or venues, among others. In particular, it would nicely complement other cinematic works such as Ferid Boughedir's <cite>Camera d'Afrique</cite> (Tunisia, 1983) and <cite>Camera Arabe</cite> (Tunisia, 1987) and Mohammed Soudani's <cite>Les Diseurs d'Histoires</cite> (Algeria/Switzerland, 1998) which deal with issues of power and the image from African points of view.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-afrlittcine>

Citation: Sheila Petty. Review of *Matamata and Pilipili*. H-AfrLitCine, H-Net Reviews. November, 1999.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14945>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.