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Graphic Fictions: Reader Research and the Making of a Comic Strip in 1950s “British West Africa”

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ABSTRACT

In 1954 the United Africa Company (UAC), one of West Africa’s largest British trading companies, with a decades-long presence in the region, commissioned market researchers to find out about reader preferences among hundreds of its employees. UAC managers wished to harness the medium of print to the genre best suited to the communication of a number of public relations messages promoting its pro-African ethos and practices in the face of what it termed “smear” campaigns by West African nationalists. The report on the preferences of approximately 600 readers in Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and the Gambia forms the core of this article, which examines the historicity of West African readerships, the transnational popular literary genres they consumed, and the UAC-sponsored comic strip *Joseph: The Thrilling Adventures of a Young African*, published in local newspapers from 1956 to 1958.

In 1954, senior managers at Lever House, the London headquarters of the United Africa Company (UAC), dispatched market researchers to oversee focus group discussions with hundreds of African employees at all levels of the company in Nigeria, the Gold Coast (Ghana), Sierra Leone, and the Gambia. The company’s aim in commissioning the research was to gauge which graphic form was the most attractive to its staff in order to graft public relations messages about its pro-African business practices and employment policies onto the typical storylines supported by that genre. Company managers wished to find an art form in which their intended messages would coincide with the interpretations of the largest number of target readers from myriad social, cultural, and economic groups, not as employees of the UAC, but as “good judges of the reaction of the African public”

(UAC 1/11/18/2/18b n.pag.). As this article will suggest, the research exercise combined colonial-era assumptions about Africans as mass-media consumers who were open to the persuasive powers of British propaganda with a new, postwar market research orientation where audiences were consulted, opinions fathomed, Africans regarded as discerning readers, and advertisements crafted to suit local tastes. With attention to these focus group discussions as well as to the ways that British interpreters of the data reaffirmed a number of entrenched colonial stereotypes about African media audiences, this article will examine how the UAC's ambitious market research exercise translated into a comic strip inscribed with the aspirations of a European company with decades of involvement in West African trade.

COMMERCIAL COMIC STRIPS IN WEST AFRICAN NEWSPAPERS

In the editorials and columns of African-owned newspapers such as the *West African Pilot* in Nigeria and the *Accra Evening News* in colonial Ghana, support for economic nationalization was unwavering in the face of tenacious trade monopolies by European companies such as the UAC, which had thousands of African employees in its shops and offices throughout the region and a long history of assimilating independent firms in mergers that kept African produce prices low.¹ As a subsidiary of the Anglo-Dutch manufacturer and trading giant Unilever (est. 1930), previously Lever Brothers (est. 1885), the UAC exemplified the tensions between indigenous and international economic interests in the era of decolonization: these tensions came to a head in the “Women’s War” of 1929 in Nigeria and again in the 1948 riots in colonial Ghana, when protesters targeted the UAC and other foreign trading companies perceived to be holding back African economic advancement (see Matera et al.; Decker). By the mid-1950s, in the wake of transformations to the company to increase training and promotion opportunities for African employees, British managers in London realized that they also urgently needed to reshape West African public opinion in their favor if the company was to retain its share of postcolonial markets.

Nearly 600 employees of the company were recruited to fifty committees to share their preferences with local facilitators about the content and form of five different types of graphic text ranging from allegorical pictures to comic strips, all “specially prepared” by UAC managers in close consultation with market research experts at Export Advertising Service Ltd, the London-based company overseeing the interviews. Focus group discussions were convened, and responses noted and counted, by local personnel of the UAC’s marketing wing, West African Publicity Ltd, which had over a hundred employees spread across three branches in Nigeria and branches in Ghana, Sierra Leone, and the Gambia (United States Department of Commerce 57–58). The archives arising from this ambitious research exercise provide a rare, if partial, glimpse into mid-century “British West African” opinions about reading, English literacy, graphic art, and the efforts of a preeminent foreign company to influence public opinion through the exploitation of popular narrative forms.

Many of the readers with whom the facilitators worked would have been familiar with newspaper advertisements targeting them as consumers of foreign commodities.² From the inception of English-language newspapers in the

June 17, 1954 DAILY GRAPHIC Page 11

ACHIEVEMENT

BUILDING bicycles and building houses has one thing in common. Before construction commences, a vast amount of study, designing, planning and experimenting has to be undertaken. Hercules engineers have been doing this for many years. That is why each part of every Hercules machine is completely reliable and why Hercules bicycles have a world-wide reputation for easy running and long-lasting quality.

SOLD BY ALL LEADING MERCHANTS

Hercules

THE FINEST BICYCLE BUILT TO-DAY

Figure 1: Advertisement for Hercules bicycles (*Daily Graphic*, 17 June 1954, p. 11)

mid-nineteenth century, trading companies in Manchester, Liverpool, and London placed regular adverts for British-made goods in the African press. Until the 1920s, these featured line-drawn European men and occasional women, who were offered as models for local emulation (Decker). By the 1940s, the majority of adverts featured African characters in generic “African” settings. Created by foreign artists and published across the wide political spectrum of newspapers,

from British-controlled papers and the conservative African press to the locally owned nationalist press, these adverts tried, with varying degrees of success, to avoid the racist caricatures popular in European cartoons about Africa in favor of mimetic, single-frame drawings. The advert for Hercules bicycles typifies the graphic style preferred by commercial artists at this time: Africans are placed in tropical settings, with palm trees and colonial buildings in the background to demonstrate an unequivocal congruence between the imported product, the local consumer, and colonial modernity (Fig. 1).³

In this way, the advertisers worked to transform local perceptions of imported commodities from luxuries to essentials (see Burke; McClintock). Their success is marked by the fact that, as Bianca Murillo finds for colonial Ghana, “by the 1940s, foreign companies accounted for more than two-thirds of Gold Coast imports, and many imported goods had driven out locally produced products,” not least because nationalist leaders like Kwame Nkrumah often endorsed the consumption of foreign merchandise as an outward sign of African progress (“The Devil We Know” 323).

Alongside single-frame adverts, in the postwar period a number of British companies started to print multi-frame comic strips featuring African protagonists in scenarios advertising the health-giving—and life-enhancing—benefits of their products. Most notable among these were the regular strips published by Marmite, Horlicks, Blue Band Margarine, and Dunlopillo, all narrating African success stories arising from the use of their products. In the regular Horlicks storyline, a young man’s lethargy prevents him from getting a promotion at work until he starts to drink Horlicks regularly and is transformed into an efficient employee (Fig. 2); in one of the many Marmite adverts, an enervated young man’s marriage proposal is rejected by his beloved until Marmite gives him virility and prospects (Fig. 3); another man’s perpetual lateness for work is solved by a BSA bicycle (Fig. 4). This theme spreads across brands: one man’s pain, exhaustion, and underperformance at work from years of sleeping on a traditional bedroll are cured after a night’s good sleep on a Dunlopillo mattress; another is able to push a heavy truck out of a muddy rut because of the strength delivered by Blue Band Margarine.

From the outset of these commercial strips, African men in white-collar jobs were at the center of advertisers’ attention: with few exceptions, the protagonists are male drivers, junior clerks, haulers, garage attendants, and mechanics. Featuring bright young men eager for economic self-advancement, and young women eager for marriage to these eligible men, the strips illustrate the stark way in which companies offered gendered forms of “modern” agency to male wage laborers by sieving individual aspirations through capitalist consumption and conjugal ideology, redefining men through the “breadwinner image,” and de-politicizing their own colonial hierarchies in the process (see Lindsay 242). The cumulative message conveyed by the Western-dressed, English-speaking men featured in these adverts was simple: to achieve the physical constitution necessary for marital success at home and recognition from the boss at work, one must relinquish locally manufactured products and consume the products depicted in the strips.⁴

If taken literally, these images can be seen to carry a number of practical assumptions about the intended consumer’s income, shopping habits, domestic arrangements, and tastes. As many commentators have observed of African



Figure 2: Advertisement for Horlicks (*Daily Graphic*, 2 Oct. 1956, p. 13)



Figure 3: Advertisement for Marmite (*Daily Times*, 26 Sept. 1956, p. 11)



Figure 4: Advertisement for BSA bicycles (*Daily Graphic*, 25 Mar. 1955, p. 15)

newspaper advertising in the 1950s, however, the consumption habits and lifestyles promoted in these adverts were aspirational rather than actual, communicating messages designed to shape readers' values and desires about what constituted "modern" urban life rather than reflecting readers' actual circumstances, preferences, or gender relations on the ground (see Driver; Decker; Weinbaum et al.; Lindsay).

Interpreted ideologically rather than literally, the message of these strips was coherent across the different brands: failure to progress in the colonial workplace was a consequence of erroneous consumption on the part of individuals rather than an outcome of political, economic, or structural inequalities. The foreign companies ignored the blatant colonial paradoxes in their adverts, for, as shown in the above illustrations, their claims to be beneficent removers of the barriers to African self-advancement were undermined by the

presence of the ubiquitous white boss as the arbiter of protagonists' futures. Taken together, and in contrast to other local graphic forms, these commercial strips reinforced colonialist ideology by repeatedly framing the narrative of African self-advancement within a colonial discourse of white superiority. In strip after strip, the economic reality of colonial power was illustrated by the presence of white bosses expressing disappointment with lethargic drivers, passing over apathetic clerks for promotion, and reprimanding employees for their late arrival at work.

In addition to these newspaper advertisements from foreign companies, urban West African readers in the mid-1950s would have been familiar with many other types of graphic images, including hand-painted shop signboards, adverts, and slogans on the side of trucks and buses; imported comic strips such as "Bruin, Pingo and Percy" in the foreign-owned daily press; colorful billboards for imported entertainment movies at the many commercial cinemas that proliferated in urban areas from the late 1920s; and comic strips in West African editions of *Drum* magazine (1954–58) featuring African boxers, hard-boiled detectives, gangsters, and romantic couples alongside adverts aimed at men and women. Meanwhile, in the nationalist press, readers would have been entertained (or scandalized) by "Roddy's" satirical cartoons in Kwame Nkrumah's *Evening News* (est. 1948), where caricatures of the editor's political rivals were published alongside hagiographic representations of Nkrumah, demonstrating the shrewd use of artwork to increase Nkrumah's popularity (Fig. 5; see Jallow).⁵ Front pages pressed home Nkrumah's popularity through large photographs of him meeting distinguished foreign leaders, or addressing the masses, while the satirical cartoons continuously belittled his rivals.⁶

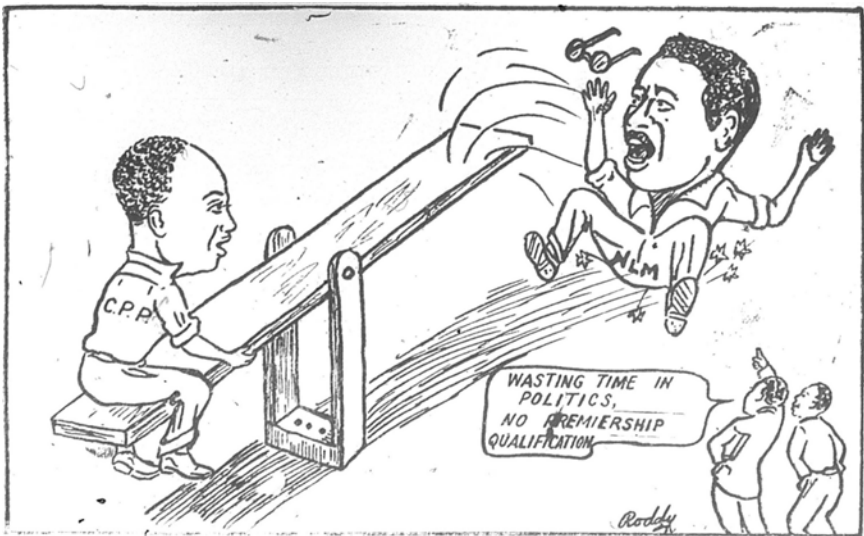


Figure 5: CPP versus NLM (*Evening News*, 7 Aug. 1956, p. 2)

LOCAL READINGS AND “MISREADINGS” OF THE UAC’S PUBLIC RELATIONS MATERIALS

With all these graphic forms circulating in the public sphere, UAC managers were zealous in their choice of genres for focus group discussions. In a media climate of heated political debate about decolonization and neocolonialism, they chose the safest types of art in an effort to avoid ambiguity of interpretation, on the one hand, and political controversy, on the other. First, the researchers showed an allegorical picture of a pawpaw tree in full fruit, with healthy foliage above ground and strong roots beneath. The tree was labeled “United Africa Company”: a set of labels attached to the healthy upper part proclaimed “more industries,” “transport,” “finer clothing,” “richer harvests,” “new buildings,” “better food,” “imported goods.” Underground, each root had a label signifying depth and breadth of investment: “years of hard work,” “technical skill,” “capital investment,” “faith in Africa,” and “constant research” (UAC 1/11/18/2/18a n.pag.). The second image was also an allegory: a vigorous climbing plant wound skywards with the caption, “Africa is growing up helped by the United Africa Company.” Each leaf carried a positive slogan, from “brighter future” and “better living” to “increased prosperity,” “skill,” and “knowledge” (Ibid.). The next image featured two storylines about an African boy in conversation with a lion whose rump is stamped “UAC.” Didactic and paternalistic, these parables about “Kofi and the Lion” showed how the UAC lion was wiser in all respects than the African child. The final two graphics were comic strips: first, a three-frame strip was tabled, featuring an African youth called Joseph as an urban crime-busting superhero designed to appear daily in serialized installments; second, a complete strip was presented, entitled “‘Ploughing Back’ the Profits—Now Henry Knows What It Means,” which mixed the action of a robbery, a bicycle chase, and a fist-fight with dense prose about the UAC’s investments “to make Africa a happier and richer country [sic]” (Ibid.).

Facilitators’ questions were scripted to “assess the degree of understanding shown by Committee members” and to determine, more broadly, “whether, in their opinion, the ordinary African newspaper reader will be likely to understand them quickly or at all. This is the major object of the enquiry” (Ibid.). The tone of these scripted questions assumed a lack of African critical faculties for interpreting advertisements, if not among focus group participants themselves then certainly among their friends and family, whose powers of comprehension they were invited to ventriloquize. “Now consider the words,” participants were asked of the parables about Kofi and the lion: “Would Africans be able to understand their message?” (Ibid.). “Does the picture of the animal and small boy help to make the message any clearer?” they were asked, to which only 205 said yes, while 322 said no. Of the pawpaw tree, they were asked, “[w]ould your African friends recognise this as a picture of anything?” to which 343 answered yes, but a striking 230 said no (Ibid.).

The preconception that Africans were not capable of analyzing their own critical insights into media content is reiterated many times over in the final report. The results were interpreted, and the final report produced, by Export Advertising Service in London. The irony of asking British market researchers to interpret more than 19,000 responses generated by African media consumers and collected by

African personnel did not appear to strike UAC managers as counterproductive.⁷ But the tone of the final report betrays a colonialist bias and erodes the progressive orientation of a research exercise aimed at fathoming hundreds of African readers' interpretations. "It seems unlikely that the average African is able to focus his thoughts into a stream of well-directed criticism," the final report stated (UAC 1/11/18/2/18b 5). While the adverts will "attract the attention of the West African ... [w]e must now ask whether he will understand what it is all about, and the answers indicate that he won't" (Ibid. 2). "Simplicity [is] essential," the report reiterated: "[a]lthough to the English mind the advertisements under review appear simple, in fact the evidence shows that, in varying degrees, they are too abstract and complicated for the African and do not succeed in making their point clearly" (Ibid.). "[I]t seems from the replies that the average African mind is no more able to follow a verbal argument than to bridge a mental gap," the report concluded: "Innuendo, abstractions and oblique approaches are either wasted or, what is far worse, completely misinterpreted" (Ibid.).

While recognizing the capacity of local audiences to pick and choose which media they preferred, the combination of racist paternalism and lack of local knowledge in Export Advertising Agency's report leads to numerous confused and erroneous statements about "the average African" and "African thought" (UAC 1/11/18/2/18b 1, 5). Here we have another stark moment in the history of the failure of European "experts" to understand the aesthetic and political values of locally situated consumers of global mass media. The report duplicates the failures of many previous audience research exercises commissioned by the Colonial Office in London into the success or failure of "educational" films in British African colonies in the 1940s and early 1950s when opportunities were repeatedly lost for understanding local audiences' responses to transnational media (see Newell, "Screening Dirt").⁸ The UAC's market research took place in an intellectual environment marked by the rise of relativism in sociology and ethnography and in a political environment characterized by an emphasis on accelerated decolonization and economic nationalism. But when it came to interpreting the results of the survey, British analysts in London failed to appreciate that they could not be separated from their own cultural biases, nor that their own interpretations of the data would be influenced by historical preconceptions about Africans as readers and consumers. If one focuses on the areas of "complete misinterpretation" lamented in the report, however, an alternative—and far more productive—archive of local reader responses can be gleaned from the research. What was interpreted in the UK as the inability of "the African mind" to comprehend the simple message of undemanding symbols can in fact be seen as evidence of recalcitrant, politically critical, and aesthetically rooted readings of the advertising material.

Unleashed in West Africa, the UAC lion generated too many powerfully localized interpretations within and across groups to communicate its intended message about the benevolence of the company. While 426 respondents out of 549 said they clearly understood what the lion represented, these interpretations did not coincide with the intended message of the parable. Local facilitators reported that the UAC lion "provoked the most animated discussion" and was interpreted by many participants as "ludicrous, condescending and insulting" (UAC 1/11/18/2/18b 3). Murillo points out that not only was the representation of Africa as a child patronizing in this image, but the body-language of the child, directly

confronting the lion, would have been regarded as a sign of insolence among adult readers from cultures where respect for seniority was a cardinal rule ("The Devil We Know" 337). For other readers, the lion was interpreted politically as "U.A.C. taking the lion's share again," "U.A.C. feeding on Africa," and "U.A.C. taking all the credit for Africa's progress" (UAC 1/11/18/2/18b 3). For many readers, the ferocity of lions in general, and the attachment of the UAC logo to this particular lion, supplanted any attributes of courage and nobility associated with lions in the British heraldic and national traditions. Instead, West African readers appropriated the lion as a piece of satirical political commentary and produced their own network of anthropomorphic associations drawn from long-standing critiques of the UAC (see Murillo, "The Devil We Know" 344).

The use of oral art forms to articulate dissent in printed media has a long history in Anglophone West Africa. In Ghanaian newspapers, folktales about Ananse have been used since the early twentieth century to send veiled warnings to editors' political opponents (Newell, *The Power to Name* 84–99). As many scholars of West African oral traditions observe, folk figures may be familiar to audiences, but they rarely yield singular meanings: they are flexible, possess a complex historicity, and contain seeds of past commentary that, with each new iteration, provide potentially new applications and interpretations (Yankah; Barber). Anthropomorphic figures such as the UAC lion were thus the least—rather than the most—"simple" insofar as they depended for their meaning on readers' capacity to complete the work of the representation by applying it to a specific situation and drawing out its lessons for themselves.

The brilliant (mis)readings that occurred in focus group discussions about the allegory of the pawpaw tree also merit close examination for the clues they provide about local readers' aesthetic values and political sensibilities. In spite of the labels that described the underground system of roots as representing the essential, but publicly unrecognized, support system provided by the UAC for the visible activities of the company in West Africa, demonstrating its investment in people and infrastructure, many readers interpreted the roots as an illustration—if not a confession—of company duplicity: "[t]he U.A.C. feeds on Africa," people commented on seeing the image, and "[the] U.A.C. is a monopoly" (UAC 1/11/18/2/18b 3). The intended message of the allegory was completely inverted in this reading, and the large number of participants who saw in the roots a story of how the UAC was hiding the truth about its exploitation of Africans caused the authors of the final report in London to issue a stern warning: "the pictorial allegorical approach should be avoided [because of ...] the very great danger that, if it is not understood, it could be construed to make the very criticism the company is endeavouring to answer" (Ibid.).

In her detailed cultural history of the UAC in Ghana, Murillo offers compelling insights into how Ghanaian readers' responses to these market research materials were filtered through local beliefs about money and trade, shaped by culturally specific and politically charged perceptions of wealth, expenditure, investment, and consumption. In particular, she suggests that popular stories about the company's non-redistributive extraction of profits for repatriation to Europe were interpreted by many people as an indication of the potentially diabolical sources of its wealth ("The Devil We Know" 345–46). Lacking visible evidence of social investments by the UAC in local communities, people on the ground made the

unavoidable connection between its hoarded wealth and the operation of witchcraft and *juju* (Ibid.; Murillo, *Market Encounters*). The image of the tree, with its unseen and underground root system, thus confirmed the very perception it was deployed to correct: underground mischief that readers had long suspected was brought into view by the picture.

In tabling the allegories and parables, the UAC perhaps assumed an African preference for “traditional” material. Echoing the errors of the European editors of *Drum* magazine in South Africa, where sales soared only when the “tribal homeland” stories in early issues were replaced by graphic strips featuring urban African heroes and antiheroes, UAC managers perhaps hoped that West African readers would recognize and enjoy the plants and animal symbolism through the framework of their own oral traditions (Gready). If established aesthetic frameworks were deployed by participants, however, their combinations of literal meanings with metaphorical and political ones demonstrated how local traditions of interpretation worked through rich layers of association whereby, in spite of the UAC’s heavy-handed textual explanations, the lion, the pawpaw tree, and the climbing plant became freely available for political reinterpretation and reuse.

JOSEPH: THE ADVENTURES OF A UAC SUPERHERO

The two comic strips—“Joseph’s Holiday Adventure” and “Ploughing Back”—were reported by the facilitators to be the most popular of the graphic forms throughout West Africa, although 50 percent of participants “did not understand the explanation of ploughing back profits” in the latter strip (UAC 1/11/18/2/18b 4). The lead characters, Joseph and Henry, would have been recognizable to readers familiar with foreign advertisers’ graphics. Likewise, the crime-busting plots reflected popular literary consumption and the circulation of mass media in West Africa in the postwar era. By the mid-1950s, local authors such as Gilbert A. Sam, in Accra, had established their own presses for the production of popular detective stories and romances featuring Ghanaian protagonists, while American gangster-fiction by the English popular author James Hadley Chase had a large fan-base in Ghana and Nigeria from the 1940s onward (Newell, *Literary Culture*).

Participants in the 1954 research exercise were UAC employees ranging from mechanics, drivers, and shop assistants to administrators and managers, brought together in the shared space of focus group discussions. Unfortunately, UAC records do not indicate the gender breakdown of participants, but given that waged labor was dominated by men until the 1950s, and that local women “faced difficulties breaking through racial, gender, and generational barriers when they began working for Kingsway” in the 1930s and 1940s, it is likely that the majority of interviewees were men, and this would have affected the results (Murillo, *Market Encounters* 134).⁹ As the local researchers well knew, people’s different positions in social and company hierarchies would not simply have melted away for a short-term research exercise aimed at isolating their aesthetic preferences. No matter how carefully ironed-out and quantified at the end of the project, participants’ preferences in group discussions would have been affected by the operation of power dynamics affecting their expressions of taste and judgment. The conversations of groups would have been shaped by dominant members, by social hierarchies within the group, by individual participants’ competency in the

language chosen for discussions, by the space in which discussions were held, and by the personalities and perceived social status of the facilitators themselves. Nevertheless, the authors of the final report felt that the results were sufficiently clear to indicate directions for a successful UAC public relations campaign in West African newspapers.

Joseph: The Thrilling Adventures of a Young African was published in daily installments and ran from January 1956 through to May 1958 in the *Daily Times* (Nigeria, est. 1926) and the *Daily Graphic* (Ghana, est. 1950), both owned by the British Mirror Group.¹⁰ When the strip came to press, the recommendation of the Export Advertising Agency for the main character to be “taken on a series of tours of all the U.A.C. enterprises throughout West Africa” in plainly plotted, educative strips with titles such as “Joseph at the Sawmills: U.A.C. tells you the Story of Timber” was ignored by company managers in London (UAC 1/11/18/2/18b 6). Instead, they approved a story featuring an African hero who continuously risks his life to capture dangerous criminals like “Scarface,” “Mr ‘Brainy’ Brag,” and other violent gangsters around town, delivering them to well-staffed police stations and courts after many adventures. *Joseph* is packed with fast-moving, violent plots in which the hero survives kidnappings, car chases, and fist fights, restores stolen jewels to their rightful owners, and exposes malpractices in business and sports. Additionally, where *Joseph* was presented as “a typical U.A.C. employee” in the research exercise, in the published strip he is as an urban youth with no obvious employment (Ibid.).

The published strip was described by the UAC as “goodwill advertising” for African newspaper readers, who were regarded as the company’s primary interlocutors with the capacity to influence public opinion (UAC 1/11/18/2/18a n.pag).¹¹ A broad appeal was essential. *Joseph*’s low social status as an unmarried youth who does not travel to work each day is probably designed to capture the empathetic attention of as wide an array of newspaper readers as possible. The protagonist closely resembles the satisfied African consumers featured in 1950s advertisements, but he is stripped of workplace hierarchies, filled with future potential, and released into urban West Africa to circulate outside of the colonial economy (Fig. 6).

In spite of his brilliant deductive powers and great physical strength, *Joseph* is soft-boiled by comparison with his peers in North American gangster films or in South Africa’s *Drum* magazine, where heroes often crossed over into criminal underworlds or were alienated outsiders from the conventional workplace (Gready). This urbane young African undergoes no physical transformations into a



Figure 6: *Joseph* strip (*Daily Times*, 2 Jan. 1956, p. 10)

Superman or a Batman to be a hero, nor does he possess any superhuman powers. Joseph radiates peaceful good citizenship, obedience, and acceptance of his place in society.¹² Through his honest, modest demeanor and respect for authority, he retains the humility of a person who, as the strip's second main character, Uncle Samson, enthusiastically declares, would excel in the opportunity structure of the UAC: "We want clever boys like you in the U.A.C.!" (UAC 1/11/18/2/15 frame 17).

The decision to locate Joseph outside the structures of the company enabled the UAC to introduce an arsenal of public relations messages that would have been difficult to present through the eyes of an employee. Now, with the naivety of a complete outsider, Joseph can comment, "U.A.C.? My friend says they don't give good jobs to Africans!" and "My friend says the U.A.C. monopolise all the trade" (Ibid. frame 26). These opinions are corrected each time by Samson, who is twenty-five years older than the hero and has been recently promoted to the position of UAC manager (Ibid. frame 65).¹³

Uncle Samson incarnates the company's plans to use the published strip to eliminate "ideas implanted by 'smear' campaigns," to "answer criticisms, to correct wrong ideas [and] ... to clear away any misunderstandings," especially about the degree to which it "ploughed back" profits into West Africa (UAC 1/11/18/2/18a n.pag; UAC 1/11/18/2b 1–2, 5). He tackles public (mis)perceptions head-on and promotes the UAC as a major social investor in West Africa as well as a conscientious employer: "[t]hat's not true! I've got a good job. I'll soon be manager!" he tells Joseph (UAC 1/11/18/2/15 frame 19). "You and your friend don't keep your eyes open!" he insists: "Nobody has got a monopoly of trade" (Ibid. frame 27).

In focus group discussions, the facilitators had been instructed to warn participants, "[w]e must remember that strip cartoons will be of no benefit to the Company if people just read the adventure parts and take no notice of the parts that answer the criticisms [of the UAC]" (UAC 1/11/18/2/18b n.pag.). Uncle Samson's presence is designed to solve this problem, allowing Joseph to operate as an unencumbered hero in exhilarating adventures where his punch knocks out hardened mobsters and his powers of deduction solve the most complex of mysteries. With every appearance of Uncle Samson, the action is suspended and readers are educated about the roots of the UAC tree. Thus, while a truck packed with hitmen bears down on the heroes, Uncle Samson pauses to point out "our new U.A.C. building ... fine buildings like this enrich our country!" (Ibid. frame 70). Moments before their abduction, Uncle Samson says, "Look, here's the new building I was telling you about. The U.A.C. 'plough back' a lot of money like this." "A fine building, Uncle," Joseph comments, asking, "What d'you mean by 'plough back?'" (Ibid. frames 73–74). Uncle Samson then delivers a lengthy lecture on the topic, including statistics: "I mean that the U.A.C. are spending their profits and making the country richer.... New roads, workshops, warehouses, factories, machines and offices. Why! The U.A.C. have 'ploughed back' £10,000,000 like this in the last five years!" (Ibid. frame 75). Samson carries these, and many more, UAC messages about opportunities, recognition, and rewards for talented Africans. In a later scene, having nearly been murdered by "Scarface" and his gang, he comments of his brush with death, "Ha, ha, my boy—then I shouldn't get my pension from the U.A.C.!" (Ibid. frame 154). "Do you get a pension from the U.A.C. Uncle?" Joseph inevitably asks: "Yes, when I retire, Joseph! Yes, my boy. I shall get a pension. I pay towards it now and the U.A.C. are paying just as much!" (Ibid. frames 155–56).



Figure 7: *Joseph* strip (*Daily Times*, 24 Oct. 1956, p. 12)

These dialogues about the UAC's investments and initiatives, and the continuous interruption of Joseph's heroics by Samson's public relations messages, show how the graphic narrative is *framed*—manipulated as well as enclosed—by the UAC's efforts to “correct wrong ideas.”

In spite of the strip's attempts to reshape public opinion, however, each time the UAC enters the storyline, old colonial racial hierarchies become visible and indelible in the same manner as in the commercial strip cartoons discussed above. Uncle Samson exemplifies the gradualist business model of the UAC in the heat of nationalist debates about postcolonial trade and investment. He describes how he has moved up steadily through the ranks of the company from a job in the motor division, where his hard work was rewarded with promotion. But when he travels to London to learn about UAC policy, he becomes a junior figure again, listening as the white bosses teach him about the outward flows of investment and resources from Britain to West Africa, absorbing information about how West African consumer interests are at the heart of company interests, and learning how African raw materials are made into products for export to the rest of the world (Fig. 7).

Scenes like these perform the UAC's corporate distaste for a comprehensive Africanization of postcolonial trade (see Decker). Uncle Samson's career trajectory is determined by white men in London, whose appearance in the strip resituates the African manager in white-controlled hierarchies. His British bosses determine the trajectory of his working life. Moreover, present circumstances are shown to be no different from the past: where Uncle Samson started out as a driver twenty years earlier, one of Joseph's peers is shown following in his tracks with “a very good job at U.A.C. They're training me to be a mechanic” (UAC 1/11/18/2/16 n.pag.).

CONCLUSION

Joseph did not appear in the African-owned press, nor is there any mention of it in their columns. One might assume that the nationalist newspapers—if approached by the UAC—would have rejected the strip for its anachronistic colonial ideology and pro-British business messages. But the anticolonial press was not averse to materials highlighting African success stories under the umbrella of the UAC. At the same time as *Joseph* appeared in Mirror Group newspapers, Nkrumah's *Evening News* carried multiple public relations advertisements from the UAC featuring half-page profiles of successful African traders, highlighting positive messages about the company's non-monopolistic practices and pro-African orientation (Fig. 8). Whether or not these were real people, their diverse biographical

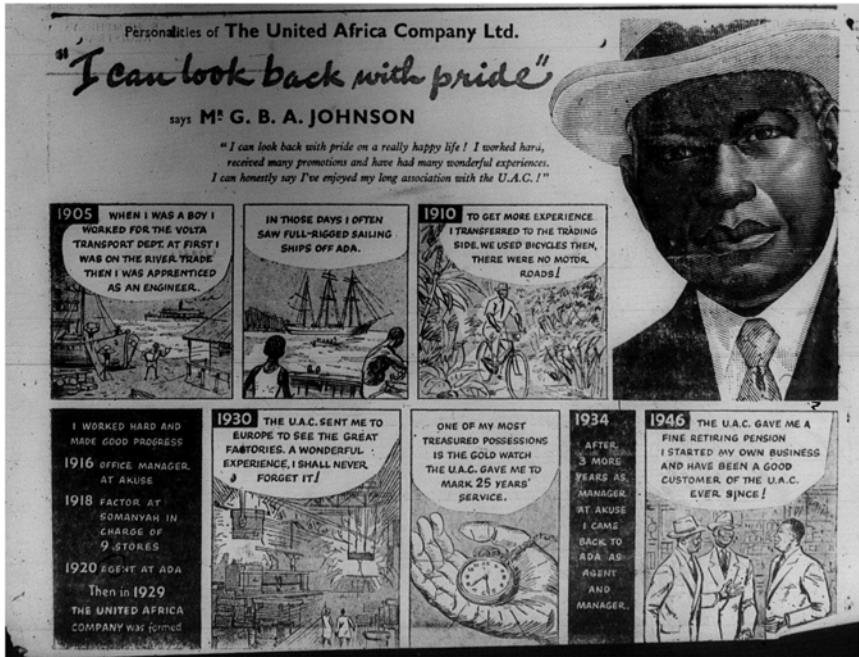


Figure 8: *Ghana Evening News*, 20 Mar. 1956, p. 3

portraits furnished readers with positive role models and examples of African self-empowerment in an era of optimism about postcolonial prosperity.

While the longevity of the *Joseph* strip suggests UAC confidence in its positive impact, the company archives contain no studies of its uptake among newspaper readers, and no editorials or correspondence about the strip were published in the West African press for the duration of the serial. All that remains to indicate the presence of readers are the outcomes of several “Joseph competitions” published in the *Daily Times* and the *Daily Graphic*, as well as the repeated injunction to “start reading today, and save these pictures for the competition to be announced later” (see Figs. 6 and 7). To compete for Raleigh bicycles, gold wristwatches, and Parker pens, entrants were required to answer questions such as “What did Uncle Samson say about careers with U.A.C.?” and “What proof did Uncle Samson give to his questioner that the U.A.C. does not monopolise trade?” (*Daily Times*, 19 Dec. 1956, p. 10). The long lists of winners—with 105 names published in one announcement in the *Daily Times*—indicate a popular take-up of the strip, as well as readers’ successful extraction of the public relations content, at least for the purposes of the competitions (18 Apr. 1956, p. 3).¹⁴

The study of readers in diverse global contexts is vital to our appreciation of how literary texts are interpreted locally, but scholars with an interest in historicizing postcolonial reading practices often face archives whose silences and prejudices provide stark lessons on the ethical and methodological difficulties of attempting to retrieve media consumers. There can be no simple access to local

literary values in any time period, but an attempt to understand readerships is all the more constrained in colonial contexts where people with little or no understanding of local aesthetic practices, languages, or political values interpreted local data from afar. As a consequence, a number of questions remain unanswered about *Joseph*: did some newspaper readers accept and reiterate Uncle Samson's UAC messages, and did others debate the strip in the same way they debated provocative editorials according to the long tradition of disputation and discussion encouraged by West African newspapers (Newell, *The Power to Name*)? Did readers regard the strip as yet another foreign advertisement in a graphic genre? Did *Joseph* engender similarly politicized interpretations to those provoked by the allegories and parables in the focus group discussions of 1954?

Scholars interested in the historical reception of supposedly transnational genres face the challenge of how to compile, let alone interpret, a record of past audiences' responses from colonial-era archives. While the final report for the UAC offers valuable localized information about reading and literary interpretation in West Africa in the era of decolonization, the examples given in this article demonstrate how such "information" is inseparable from the Eurocentric racial prejudices that underwrote colonial-era audience research exercises at all stages of their implementation. Readerships matter: regardless of how stark the intended message of a text—graphic, commercial, literary, or otherwise—its reception in local contexts cannot be determined by its contents or genre alone. Reading is always more complicated than assumed by the model of "goodwill advertising" adopted by the UAC because ordinary readers are critical, tactical users of official discourses, with the capacity to appropriate and subvert institutional practices and representations.

The fact that so much labor and commentary were involved in identifying the preferences of Anglophone West African newspaper-readers in the UAC survey demonstrates the weakness of thinking in universal terms, either about "the reader" or about the genres they consumed. While the UAC's research exercise provides no unmediated access to African readers, it does furnish vital clues about the reading preferences of several hundred West African men in tension with decades-old colonialist presuppositions. The processes by which *Joseph* came into print illustrate the necessity for literary scholars and cultural historians to ask questions about local consumption and the historicity of literary reception. The partial archive on which this article depends demonstrates the ongoing necessity for researchers with an interest in supposedly "transnational" textual genres—whether the comic strip or the novel—to study readers in separate spaces from producers in order to appreciate the cultural specificity and interpretive autonomy of local publics.

NOTES

1. In her study of the UAC in Ghana, Bianca Murillo states that in Ghana alone the company employed over 3,000 African staff by 1953 ("The Devil We Know" 334). For histories of Lever Brothers and the UAC, see Pedler; Fieldhouse.

2. The UAC's involvement in West Africa included products, outlets, and services ranging from washing powders and drinks, to timber plantations, agricultural equipment, hides and skins, motor sales and services, technical services, and wholesale

and department stores, most of which were advertised in the pages of the local press (Pedler; Fieldhouse).

3. In other ways, the Hercules advert was highly unusual, not least for featuring an African manager in a suit and tie issuing instructions to his junior, rather than the white boss, discussed below.

4. Single-frame adverts for beauty creams and different types of soap almost always featured women, but only two strips—an Optrex advert showing how Mary wins a beauty contest and a Horlicks advert about a market woman's eventual success—could be located featuring female protagonists in West African newspapers from the 1940s and 1950s (*Sierra Leone Daily Mail*, 3 Dec. 1956, p. 3; *Daily Graphic*, 24 July 1956, p. 9). This absence of women from the frames of most adverts at this time raises important questions about the gendering of “modernity” in the era of decolonization. See Driver; Burke, “The Modern Girl.”

5. In his examination of the use of photographic plates in Nigerian and Ghanaian newspapers between 1937 and 1966, Rouven Kunstmann argues that newspapers were so partisan that independence celebrations and other events of “national” significance (such as the opening of museums) were immediately party-politicized through editors’ manipulation of photographs, often disingenuously. In this period, Kunstmann argues, political elites refined strategies for using the newspapers as tools for self-aggrandizement in the competition for political power, and photographs were a vital tool in this process.

6. These satirical cartoons used caricature and symbolism in a style that flourished in Ghana in later decades (see Oduro-Frimpong; Destrée). For a discussion of the shift in cartoons depicting Nkrumah and his allies in the *Evening News* from hagiographic in the pre-coup period to satirical and censorious after the coup, see Jallow; for a study of Nigerian anticolonial and satirical cartooning between the 1940s and 1960s, see Olaniyan.

7. No biographical information is available about D. S. McKinnell, Manager of Export Advertising Service Ltd, who wrote the final report and liaised with managers of the UAC at Lever House in London. In all likelihood, McKinnell had a career in colonial service or trade, from which he developed the company as an agency for a number of market research companies in the colonies.

8. Rare examples of progressive research include the audience survey conducted by Peter Morton-Williams, whose inclusive approach toward Nigerian rural film spectators in the early 1950s led to the publication of a unique report containing detailed summaries and translations of people’s responses across diverse language groups. Morton-Williams’s rural audiences recognized and commented on filmic technique and genre, and they critiqued the structure of films. Spectators showed cultural self-confidence in their consumption of the new global medium, absorbing films into their own discursive frameworks. In so doing they comprehensively overturned many of the myths about Africans’ inability to differentiate between on- and off-screen realities propagated by colonial filmmakers in preceding years (Newell, “Screening Dirt”).

9. The absence of data on gender from the UAC survey is a significant omission. If one extrapolates from Bianca Murillo’s extensive discussion of gender stereotypes and women’s struggles for equitable white-collar employment in Ghanaian branches of the UAC, it is tempting to regard the survey results as largely conveying men’s, rather than women’s, reading preferences (Murillo, *Market Encounters* 103–06, 134–35).

10. The *Daily Times* was taken over by the London Mirror group in 1947 (see Adebawwi). *Joseph* was not published in the Mirror-owned *Daily Mail* in Sierra Leone between 1956 and 1958, however, in spite of being top choice among readers in Freetown (UAC 1/11/18/2/18b n.pag.). For a history of the Mirror Group’s involvement in West Africa, see Barton; Derrick.

11. UAC managers would have been aware that “newspaper readers” in West Africa were not only Western-educated or literate in English, but included non-literate people with access to newspapers, who read and discussed pictorial material, and to whom columns were read aloud or summarized by others.

12. Joseph is the opposite of a juvenile delinquent, a new sociological category used for African urban youth after the 1930s (see Fourchard).

13. Joseph’s birth date is given in one strip as “fifteen months before the war,” that is, April 1938, making him seventeen and eighteen when the strip went to press (UAC 1/11/18/2/15 frame 19).

14. Lever Brothers had long used competitions to galvanize customer loyalty and generate creative engagements with their products and ethos: for instance, the “*Sunlight*” *Year-Book* of 1898 contains a list of twenty-three separate topics for literary and art competitions with entries invited on questions such as “What Is the Greatest Problem in the Life of a Married Woman and What Is Your View of It?,” “Profitable Rearing of Poultry,” and “Best Subject for Competition in the 1899 ‘Sunlight’ Yearbook” (468–89).

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