

10. Groundnut Film

In this piece, PhD researcher Atenchong Talleh Nkobou of the School of Agriculture, Policy, and Development at the University of Reading shares insight into his current research interests and how these connect to the history of the Groundnut Scheme. He reflects on the significance of historical representation in contemporary development research and practice, linking this discourse to Black Lives Matter and to decolonising approaches to farm and rural heritage.

Colour film, The Groundnut Scheme at Kongwa, Tanganyika, 1948



Still from *The Groundnut Scheme at Kongwa, Tanganyika* showing local workers ploughing virgin ground as part of the attempts to cultivate new tracts of land (MERL TR 17RAN PH6/49).

Historical Contextualism: The Role of The MERL in the Twenty-first Century

The objective of this piece is to provide a brief reflection on the politics of historical representation as part of the '51 Voices' project on The MERL's seventieth anniversary. It engages with the representation history, art, and monuments using three contemporary and historical vignettes as a window into the assault of African land, diets, and bodies. The idea of imperial and colonial history being inscribed in the bodies of 'invisible' Black subjects.

The year 2020 witnessed a revival of an old, yet pertinent conflict between contemporary criticism and historical representation. The death of George Floyd, an African American who died of asphyxia while being detained by a white police officer in Minneapolis, triggered a flurry of protests, debates,

and activities advocating for inclusive policies and spaces related to Black liberation. For this reason, on 7 June 2020, the BBC reported that the statue of Edward Colston had been torn down by protesters of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in Bristol. The Prime Minister described it as a protest ‘subverted by thuggery’, and a statement from Avon and Somerset Police called it an ‘act of criminal damage’. At the same time, remarks from historian Professor David Olusoga suggested that the public display of Edward Colston’s statue had political undertones, which justify the BLM protest. Olusoga argued that statues are about saying, ‘this was a great man who did great things. However, [Colston] was a slave trader and a murderer.’



After the statue of Edward Colston was removed it continued to serve as a focus for BLM protests and discourse (Photograph by Caitlin Hobbs: <https://twitter.com/Chobbs7/status/1269682491465576448?s=20>)

In an analytical sense, Olusoga’s statement carries a dual representation of history. The first part is a venerated version of history which increases the chances of not acknowledging the lives of 84,000 enslaved Africans, 19,000 of whom died as a consequence of Colston’s slave trading. To Amos Wilson, this version of history is the ‘falsification and concealment of history by omission and commission’. The second part of Olusoga’s statement raises the standards of judging history and minimises the concealment of historical facts. In the context of the BLM movement, the high standards which protesters placed on eliminating this ‘concealment of history’ triggered a reaction of discontent and dissent. To manipulate history is to manipulate consciousness; to manipulate consciousness is to manipulate power. To this end, the statement from the Mayor of Bristol, Marvin Rees, introduced a more precise representation of the conflict between contemporary criticism and historical representation. To the Mayor of Bristol, he knew the unsanctioned removal of the statue

would divide opinion, but it was important to listen to those who found the statue to represent an affront to humanity.

Historical representations and contextualism can be (or are) politicised to represent a version of history which maintains power hierarchies in today's globalised world—a device to install and reaffirm hegemonic hierarchies. Historical contextualism can be questionable in its political affiliations. Meaning, it is superficial in an analytical sense and suspect for 'selective history' or employed to ignore history that does not satiate nationalist or hegemonic desires. To Sande Cohen, historical contextualism is nothing less than a 'tortured symbol promising an iconic and indexical satisfaction', but which is not realisable other than by the repression of meanings—'the use and abuse of history'.

This critique of historical contextualism extends to the short film presented here—*The Groundnut Scheme at Kongwa, Tanganyika*. On the 31 January 2021, while watching *The Big Questions* on BBC, a panellist lauded Clement Attlee's policies for positively 'changing the direction of the U.K.' after the Second World War (1939-1945). His version of Attlee's 'remarkable' efforts in redressing Britain's worst economic crisis since the 1929 Great Depression did not acknowledge the impact of colonial policies on the peoples in Tanganyika (now Tanzania). By the end of the Second World War, there was an acute shortage of vegetable fats and oil and a pending food crisis in Britain. The Attlee government conceived of the Groundnut Scheme to address the shortage of vegetable fat and oils through large-scale agricultural operations on colonial African soil.

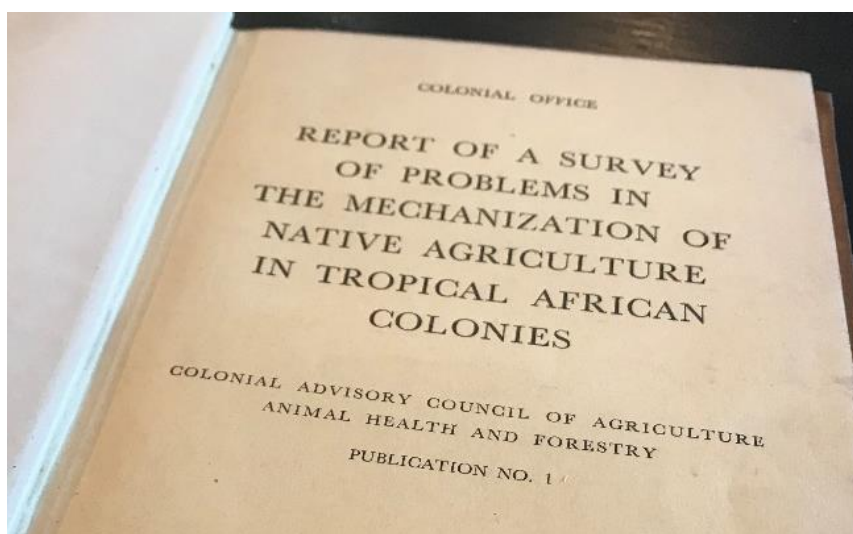


Still from *The Groundnut Scheme* film showing officials in colonial-style clothes (MERL TR 17RAN PH6/49).

As this film held by The MERL helps to reveal, the Scheme envisaged the mechanisation of the entire process of groundnut production. That is, from the clearance of bush, the preparation of soil, to the planting and harvesting of the groundnuts. It was primarily supported and promoted by big business corporations, who saw it as a speculative opportunity to increase their market influence. Private

enterprises, including the United African Company (UAC), represented by Frank Samuel, managing director of the UAC (a subsidiary of Unilever), participated in a nine-week expedition to 'survey' land in East Africa. By 1946, over three million acres of land had been approved for groundnut production by the British government.

'Historical context' is about reading and thinking historically, and 'coming to terms with the past'. There is no question that English rural life shaped and was shaped by the British Empire. In this sense, 'rural' is cosmopolitan, robbing it of its localised meaning and extending its significance to global geographies and influence. John Higgs, the first Keeper of The MERL, himself an authoritative voice on colonial agricultural extension and farm development work overseas, undertook a field visit in 1948 on behalf of the colonial office to explore the potential for upscaling the production of cash crops and the mechanisation of farming in rural Africa. Higgs' visit to Tanganyika during the Groundnut Scheme reveals the material connection between English rural life and rural life in Tanzania. Like many other colonial policies, the Groundnut Scheme helped *cosmopolitanise* English rural life. Therefore, increasing the standards of judging Britain's history. Fundamentally, the Groundnut Scheme is an example of the contributions of colonised people to English rural life and the consequences of colonial policy on other geographies. The Groundnut Scheme was halted in 1951 and has been cited by scholar such as Coulson (1977) and Rizzo (2006) as one of the biggest failures of the ambitions of British late-colonial developmentalism.

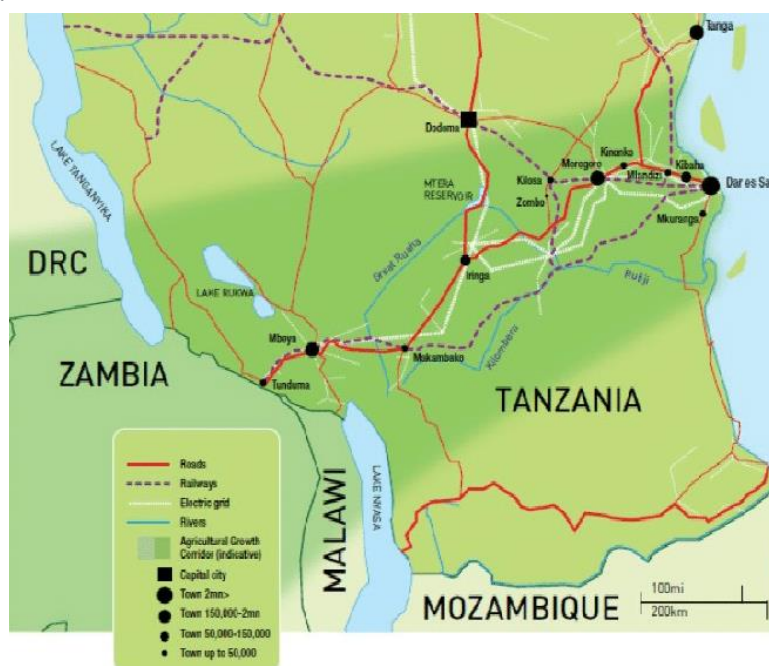


1950 report on mechanisation of African farming systems, as co-authored by agricultural technology expert John Higgs. Higgs later served as the first Keeper of The MERL (MERL 2280 COL).

As The MERL matures into its seventieth year, it must continue in its progressive effort to become a melting pot of ideas, histories, and geographies, which it amalgamates into an accurate representation of the scope and influence of English rural life. So too, The MERL must continue to provide spaces for contemporary criticism and a version of history which strives to get the facts straight. A more nuanced and complex understanding of the world is often undermined by a

perverted version of 'contextualism'. In seeking an answer to *What Was left of the Groundnut Scheme?* Matteo Rizzo highlights the Groundnut Scheme as a 'theme that has largely escaped the attention of historians [and development practitioners]'. At the peak of the Groundnut Scheme, local economies in Tanganyika experienced a rise in the number of people in wage employment, improvement of roads and educational facilities. However, the Scheme also impacted local food production systems leading to what Rizzo describes as 'the appearance of underweight babies'.

What is more critical is colonial and modernisation rhetoric which continues to appear in economic development discourse to this day. The treatment of African farmers as marginally competent and the expropriation of land from rural communities with a purported aim to develop 'vacant' and 'underutilised' land in rural Africa. Through the Groundnut Scheme, the British Colonial Government resonated a faith in mechanised agriculture and a regard of African farmers in deficit terms. Mistrust in the potential of African farmers, and an ideological representation of the African farmer 'as backward' and in need of modernist and Eurocentric approaches to agriculture, still linger in much of today's mainstream development discourse. In fact, we are interacting in the context of history right at this very moment.



Map showing coverage of Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania (Source: SAGCOT, 2011).

Following the 2007/2008 financial crisis, there was a replay of history and a recounting of the purported abundance and underutilisation of land in African countries. The alarmist nature of media reports which characterised the 'global land rush' for resource and food supply to the Western world, in the wake of the 2007/2008 crisis, is in Alden-Wily's words '*nothing new under the sun in the political economy of African Dispossession*'. In fact, launched in May 2010 by then-president of Tanzania Jakaya Kikwete, the Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania (SAGCOT) was introduced to facilitate the development of modernist, growth-focussed agricultural investments. Like *déjà vu*, the

corridor covers one-third of the mainland Tanzania and extends from Dar es Salaam, Morogoro, Iringa, Mbeya, Ruvuma, Njombe, Rukwa and Katavi to the northern areas of Zambia and Malawi.

Driven mainly by multi-national investors like Yara, Monsanto, Bayer Crop Science, Syngenta, Unilever (a partner, recall, in the Groundnut Scheme), and financiers such as the World Bank, the SAGCOT promises to produce 680,000 tonnes of field crops (maize, tea, soya, and wheat), 630,000 tonnes of rice, 4.4 million tonnes of sugar case, 3,500 tonnes of red meat and 32,000 tonnes of high-value fruit. But SAGCOT researcher Emmanuel Sulle has described the SAGCOT as an example of 'externally-driven land grabbing'. The expected benefits from the SAGCOT have to date not been realised, resulting in an increase in land conflicts, food security concerns, and deprivation of local communities' human rights. These neoclassical approaches to economic development obscure the potential vitality and agency of African farmers to this day.

Summarily, the study of history cannot be a mere celebration of our past but an appreciation and transformation of history into the planning and development of an inclusive world for humanity. The historical representation, presented through the three vignettes in this reflection piece, illustrates how a Eurocentric representation of history ignores or downplays Black agency and resistance—i.e., Black people and their concerns about oxygen, food, land, and freedom are in danger of remaining invisible. We must consciously study history and understand history as a non-linear narrative. Our consciousness of the politics of 'historical representation and contextualism' will challenge inequalities and actions that are an affront to humanity. The '51 Voices' theme and its '51 objects' offer an opportunity for reflection and discourse around the influences of English rural life and call for a more critical review of historical representation.

About the author

Atenchong Talleh Nkobou has submitted his PhD and is exploring post-doctoral opportunities. He is originally from Cameroon, is based at the University of Reading, and carried out fieldwork for his doctoral research in Tanzania. He has written powerfully on challenges that he faced as a researcher exploring land rights and agricultural practice in rural Tanzania. This piece [is available here](#). You can [follow him on Twitter](#).

Further Information (online):

For more information about the Groundnut Film – [MERL TR 17RAN PH6/49](#); watch the film on the [Virtual Reading Room](#)

For information about The MERL and its early links to colonial agriculture –

<https://research.reading.ac.uk/global-development/colonialism-and-development-in-the-mid-century-museum-of-english-rural-life/>

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