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ARTICLE

Global Cinema and Transnational Constructions of Race: "Princess Kouka" in *Jericho* (1937)

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Abstract

In December 1936, producer Walter Futter announced that he had discovered a Sudanese princess named Kouka to play the romantic lead opposite Paul Robeson in *Jericho* (Thorton Freedland, 1937). "Princess Kouka" was not Sudanese, nor was she royalty, nor was she unknown. Kouka (née Nagiya Ibrahim Bilal; 1917–79) was an Egyptian actor who had been cast in supporting roles in Egyptian films. This article examines what media coverage of Kouka's brief moment in the international limelight (1936–38) reveals about differing constructions of race across three race-conscious societies: the United Kingdom, where the film is made; the Jim Crow United States that Paul Robeson left behind; and colonial Egypt.

Keywords: Nagiya Ibrahim Bilal; British cinema; Egyptian cinema; Kouka; race; Paul Robeson

The movie *Widad* (Fritz Kramp, 1936), a costume musical starring the Egyptian diva Umm Kulthum, premiered in Cairo on February 10, 1936 to great public excitement and media fanfare. The first feature film produced by Studio Misr, *Widad* represented Egypt at the Venice film festival in August and went on to screen elsewhere in Europe.[1] Umm Kulthum attended the London premier on September 25, 1936.[2] The film ran there for three weeks at the newly upgraded, art deco cinema, Studio One at Oxford Circus, double billed with another international feature, *Maria Baskhirtseff* (Hermann Kosterlitz, 1935).[3]

Following the success of their first film, Studio Misr received a visit from two Hollywood figures: producer Walter Futter and screenwriter Frances Marion.[4] Futter, who had recently relocated from Hollywood to London, was engaged in advance work for a new picture, *Jericho*

[1] "Filim Widad," *al-Ithnayn*, 27 July 1936, 48; Henriette Bornkamm, *Orientalische Bilder und Klänge: eine transnationale Geschichte des frühen ägyptischen Tonfilms*, Zürcher Filmstudien (Marburg: Schüren, 2021).

[2] 'Abd al-Mun'im al-Bay, "Kayfa 'Arad Filim Widad fi London?" *al-Sabah*, 9 October 1936, 57.

[3] The film, also known as *The Affairs of Maupassant*, was shot in both German and Italian, with Hans Jaray starring in both versions. The director, Hermann Kosterlitz, later moved to Hollywood and changed his name to Henry Koster.

[4] Frances Marion, whose reasons for visiting Egypt with Futter are not clear, was a longtime scriptwriter for Mary Pickford. Under her contract with MGM she wrote the screenplays for, among other projects, two Greta Garbo vehicles, *Anna Christie* (Clarence Brown, 1930), famously Garbo's first talkie, and *Camille* (George Cukor, 1936), which premiered in New York the month following Marion's visit to Egypt.

(Thorton Freedland, 1937), starring African American actor and singer Paul Robeson.[5] Robeson had moved to England in 1931 to escape the pervasive racism in America and had already starred in several British films. During Futter's visit to Egypt in November 1936, he and Ahmad Salim, the head of Studio Misr, agreed to collaborate on location shooting for desert scenes for *Jericho.* Indoor scenes would be shot at Pinewood Studios in London. The Misr Company for Acting and Cinema agreed to provide local support and infrastructure for a London-based crew to shoot on location in Egypt.[6] The lucrative contract promised to bring in 30,000 Egyptian pounds for an estimated six-week shoot.[7]

On November 12, 1936, the daily newspaper *al-Ahram* broke the story to the Egyptian public under the headline, "A Large English Company Will Produce a Film in Our Country."[8] On the day that the news about the contract between Studio Misr and Capitol Pictures appeared in *al-Ahram*, the paper also devoted extensive front-page coverage to the Egyptian parliamentary debate about ratifying the Anglo–Egyptian treaty, which stood to grant Egypt limited independence.[9]

In the 1930s, many cinema producers in Egypt saw themselves engaged in a patriotic, anticolonial endeavor. The establishment of Studio Misr and the release of its star-driven first feature, *Widad*, was "hailed as a nationalist project."[10] As Ifdal Elsaket has argued, Umm Kulthum, already a star performer and recording artist, "fuse[d] two nationalist symbols prevalent at the time: economic nationalism . . . and 'cultural authenticity.'"[11] Producers sought to make movies in Egypt that could compete with foreign imports. The Egyptian press also focused on the importance of film as an export industry; as Elsaket writes, Studio Misr and *Widad* "were seen as tools that could help raise Egypt's international prestige, a central tenet in Egyptian anti-colonial rhetoric."[12] This prevailing nationalist rhetoric celebrated film production in Egypt as a national industry with the potential for transnational, even global, impact. The media coverage of the 1936 contract between Capitol Pictures and Studio Misr reflected this perspective. The article announcing the collaboration to produce *Jericho* proclaimed, "The film will play an important role in publicity for our country."[13]

In the contract, Studio Misr also agreed to loan Capitol Pictures a young actor known by the screen name Kouka. Kouka had appeared in *Widad* as Umm Kulthum's sidekick. The film, set in Egypt during an indistinct period between the development of firearms and the advent of mechanized transportation, features Umm Kulthum playing an enslaved singer whose movement as chattel between households drives the plot of the film. The enslaved Widad is attended to by a servant, Shahd (Kouka). Producer Walter Futter had seen Kouka's

[5] In preproduction, the working title for the film was "Salt" or "The Salt Merchant." It was released in the UK under the title *Jericho.* In the US the film was released as *Dark Sands.*

[6] Capitol Film Corporation, Ltd., was associated with Trafalgar Film Productions and Buckingham Film Productions, owned by Max Schach. Although the press coverage about *Jericho*'s production referred to the studio as Capitol Pictures, the credits identify the film as a Buckingham production. "New Power in British Films," *Kinematograph Weekly*, 14 January 1937, 91.

[7] Zakariya al-Shirbini, "Sharika Injliziyya Kabira Tahraj Riwaya laha fi Baladna," *al-Ahram*, 12 November 1936, 3.

[8] Ibid.

[9] "Mashru' al-Mu'ahada amam al-Barlaman," *al-Ahram*, 12 November 1936, 1–3, 11.

[10] Ifdal Elsaket, "The Star of the East: Umm Kulthum and Egyptian Cinema," in *Stars in World Cinema: Screen Icons and Star Systems across Cultures*, ed. Andrea Bandhauer and Michelle Royer (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 43.

[11] Ibid., 39; For more on Umm Kulthum's early career, see Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and Raphael Cormack, *Midnight in Cairo: The Divas of Egypt's Roaring '20s* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2022), 199–220.

[12] Elsaket, "Star of the East," 43.

[13] Al-Shirbini, "Sharika Injliziya Kabira."

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Figure 1. "Princess Kouka" in London. *La Dépêche Algérienne*, 26 December 1936.

performance in *Widad* when it played in London a few weeks earlier.[14] While Futter was in Egypt, Salim persuaded him to cast Kouka as the love interest of Paul Robeson's character, Corporal Jericho Jackson. Under her contract with Studio Misr, Kouka was paid fifteen pounds a month. Futter is rumored to have paid Studio Misr an eye-popping 800 Egyptians pounds per month for Kouka to appear in *Jericho.* It is unclear from reports how much—if any—of this windfall Kouka herself received.[15]

Kouka set sail for London from Alexandria on December 3, 1936, her contract with Capitol Pictures in hand. She left Egypt as a character actor with three film credits to her name. When the ship docked in Europe, she emerged in the costume department's best Orientalist finery, reborn (rebranded) as "Princess Kouka" from al-Fashir, Sudan (Fig. 1). It was the role of a lifetime.

In what follows, I illuminate what Kouka's brief moment in the international limelight reveals about constructions of race across national borders in the 1930s. I evaluate coverage of Princess Kouka and the film *Jericho*, in which she appears with Paul Robeson, to analyze how the media reflected constructions of race and nation in the United Kingdom, where the

[14] Ibid.; Zakariya al-Shirbini, "Sharika Injliziyya Tista'ir Mumathila min Studiyu Misr," *al-Ahram*, 2 December 1936, 3.

[15] "800 Jinay Murattab Shahri li-Wasifat Umm Kulthum," *Akhir Sa'a*, 24 January 1937, 43; "al-Amira Kuka!," *Akhir Sa'a*, 24 January 1937, 51–52.

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film was made, in the Jim Crow United States that Robeson left behind seeking greater freedom and artistic liberty, and in colonial Egypt.

I refer to *Jericho* as an example of global cinema—a film shot in the UK and Egypt, featuring American, British, and Egyptian actors and distributed worldwide.[16] Although contemporary readers are likely to associate the term "global" with the late capitalist phenomenon of globalization, as Robert Stam and Ella Habiba Shohat remind us, cinema was "'globalized' since its very inception."[17] The term "global cinema" does not apply exclusively to Western cinemas. Looking beyond the influence of Hollywood and European cinematic idioms to film industries worldwide, we can see other, more reciprocal ways early Egyptian cinema, for example, also could be considered global. In the 1930s, Egyptian cinema certainly aspired to global reach. Egyptian films were widely disseminated in the Arabic-speaking world. Some Studio Misr films like *Widad* competed in international film festivals and were screened in Europe soon after their Egyptian premiere, and a few Egyptian titles eventually reached screens in the United States. Further, the Egyptian film industry in the 1930s was made up of a diverse range of professionals, including Egyptians and noncitizen residents of Egypt, many of whom trained in Europe, and foreigners like Vedat Örfi (Turkey) and Fritz Kramp (Germany).

Although I treat cinema production and circulation as global, I also recognize that notions of race—particularly, notions of Blackness and expressions of anti-Blackness—take different forms that are contingent on political and legal structures implemented at the state level. To elucidate those distinctions, I consider the reception of the transnational Princess Kouka phenomenon through national frames.

I also argue that it is important to consider the Princess Kouka phenomenon in the context of colonial relations between Britain, Egypt, and Sudan and the political shifts underway at the time of *Jericho*'s production and release. Postcolonial theory, Stam and Shohat argue, "deals very effectively with the cultural contradictions and syncretisms generated by the global circulation of peoples and cultural goods in a mass-mediated and interconnected world."[18] In other words, it provides an excellent frame for understanding the mobility of images and discourses surrounding the creation of an international film phenomenon.

Kouka's journey from Cairo to London and from Egyptian actor to Sudanese princess in late December 1936 unfolds at a transitional moment in Anglo–Egyptian–Sudanese relations. The Anglo–Egyptian treaty was signed in August 1936. In the Egyptian parliamentary debate taking place as Futter and Francis visited Studio Misr in November 1936, a broad consensus emerged to ratify the treaty, despite its shortcomings, and was "hailed by most parties as a successful outcome to an impasse."[19] Although British politicians and media along with Egyptian Prime Minister Mustafa Nahhas heralded the 1936 Anglo–Egyptian Treaty for granting Egypt independence, in actuality the treaty delayed negotiation over four key issues that perpetuated British political and military control over Egypt: maintenance of British troops in Egypt; British control of the Suez Canal; British protection of foreign and minority rights granted by the capitulations; and the continuation of joint British and Egyptian rule over Sudan. The Anglo–Egyptian treaty went into effect on December 24, 1936.

[16] The Francophone press, for example, advertised screenings in Indochina.

[17] Ella Habiba Shohat and Robert Stam, "Film Theory and Spectatorship in the Age of the 'Posts,'" in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold Press, 2000), 385.

[18] Ibid., 392.

[19] Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, *A History of Egypt: From the Arab Conquest to the Present* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 115. See also Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid-Marsot, *Egypt's Liberal Experiment, 1922–1936* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977), 181; and Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930–1945* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Princess Kouka was introduced to the press in London on December 22, 1936, and stories about her began to appear the following day, coinciding with the last day of direct British rule over Egypt. In the December 23 issue of the Sheffield *Daily Independent*, for example, a front-page notice titled "Sudan Princess to Play with Robeson in New Film" appeared alongside articles celebrating the "Cairo Change-Over," marking Egypt's independence from the "50-year occupation of Egypt by British Forces."[20] In what follows, I examine how this transitional moment in British–Egyptian–Sudanese relations is reflected in the evolving notions of race and national identity in media representations of the Princess Kouka story.

My readings of transnational media responses to a woman's mobility also are informed by star studies scholarship about public perception of and labor by women in cinema.[21] Star studies scholars approach their object of study, in Christine Gerarty's words, as "an unstable and contradictory figure, constructed both intertextually (across different films) and extra-textually (across different types of material)."[22] In my analysis of both *Jericho* and the extratextual transnational media coverage of the film, I extract and analyze contextual meanings made of Kouka's star turn as Princess Kouka in the British, American, and Egyptian press.

The arc of Kouka's career in British and American cinema—a single appearance followed by obscurity—tracks closely with what Philana Payton calls the "supernova" phenomenon of Black female Hollywood actors. Payton argues that Black actors were not afforded the same treatment as their white counterparts in Hollywood, and that star studies scholarship must account for these racialized differences. Although Black women actors were cast in leading roles in all-Black films, their images and careers were not curated by the Hollywood studios, and they were often discarded by the studios after a single star turn.[23]

In what follows, I track the media coverage of the Princess Kouka story. I begin by establishing the actor's professional profile, while distinguishing, where possible, the voice of the actor from her public persona. I then examine the politics of race that emerge from media coverage in the three cinema markets. In my discussion of media in the UK, I analyze the alignment between the plot of *Jericho* as an empire film and the media coverage of both the film's production and the casting of its female lead. Coverage of *Jericho* and star Paul Robeson in the African American press, I argue, situates Egypt—historically, culturally, and politically—in Africa, an unpopular view in Egypt. Coverage by the Egyptian press reveals the class underpinnings of Egyptian anti-Blackness.

Inventing an African Princess: "Garbo of the Desert"

Needless to say, Kouka was not a princess. She was born on March 17, 1917 in Cairo and given the name Nagiya Ibrahim Bilal. Her mother hailed from the Sharqia Governorate in the Nile Delta. Ibrahim, her father, an Egyptian army officer, had roots in Sudan.

[20] "Sudan Princess to Play with Robeson in New Film," *Daily Independent* (Sheffield), 23 December 1937, 1; "Cairo Change-Over," *Daily Independent* (Sheffield), 23 December 1937, 1; "First British Minister in Egypt," *Daily Independent* (Sheffield), 23 December 1937, 1.

[21] Richard Dyer is often credited with launching the semiotic approach to star studies with *Stars* (London: BFI, 1979). Jeanine Basinger's *The Star Machine* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2007) maps how the studio system identified, developed, branded, and commodified their leading actors. For a summary of the state of the field of feminist theories and methodological approaches to star studies see Mary Desjardins, "Star Studies," *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 2 (2018): 185–90, https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2018.4.2.185.

[22] Christine Gerarty, "Re-Examining Stardom: Questions of Texts, Bodies and Performance," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold Press, 2000), 185.

[23] Philana Payton, "'She Was Just a Chorus Girl, Baby': Nina Mae McKinney and the Hollywood Supernova," *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 64, no. 1 (2024): 115–40, https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2024.a944428.

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In 1935, Kouka began her professional career in cinema as an assistant editor for Studio Misr, where she was quickly drafted into acting. She entered the public eye performing on stage.[24] Prior to her role in *Widad*, Kouka was cast in supporting roles in two films. Uncredited in *al-Difa'a* (The Defense, Yusuf Wahbi, 1935), Kouka appeared with 'Ali al-Kassar in *Bawab al-'Imara* (The Doorman, Alexander Farkas, 1935), in which she gave, according to the popular weekly *Akhir Sa'a*, an unmemorable performance in a forgettable film. But the geniality of her performance as a servant in *Widad* "enthralled audiences."[25]

Kouka circulated in Cairo's multilingual environment. A native speaker of Egyptian Arabic, she studied literary Arabic and French, and she also spoke Turkish.[26] Her English, however, was weak. To help prepare her for the role, Capitol Pictures sent Kouka a recording of her scenes, so she could rehearse her lines.[27] She also received a month of intensive English tutoring before shooting began.[28]

Although it is not clear who first dubbed Kouka the "Garbo of the Desert," the moniker was picked up by the press in three languages, English, French, and Arabic.[29] Nor is it entirely clear what about Kouka's affect resembled Garbo's mystique. But, the British press, proud of its burgeoning national film industry—riding the wave of a speculative bubble—saw the influx of international stars as a sign of its own rising fortunes: "From Sweden we have had Garbo, from Germany Dietrich, from Austria Tauber and Bergner, while from America we have had dozens.[30] Now from Africa we are to welcome another newcomer to the screen."[31]

Capitol Film's publicity department did a good job selling the splashy story of Kouka as a Sudanese princess-turned-movie-star.[32] On December 22, 1936, producer Walter Futter staged a press conference in Claridge's, a posh London Hotel, where Princess Kouka addressed the press in French.[33] Dozens of newspapers in English-speaking countries reported on the story, from Linlithgowshire, Scotland, to Adelaide, Australia.[34] In England, the story was picked up by widely circulating London-based tabloids including the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror*, as well as in regional outlets across the country from Sheffield to Gloucestershire. Princess Kouka—and the new Paul Robeson film in which she was to appear—were of particular interest to the African American press, including the *New York*

[24] There are conflicting accounts of her first appearance on stage. According to Vladimir, the director of Nagib al-Rihani's stage troupe, Kouka launched her stage career there; Vladimir, "al-Ahadith al-Sakhifa: bi-Ism Kuka fi Sahaf Lundun," *al-Sabah*, 5 February 1937, 73. The official state narrative credits Niyazi Mustafa with casting her in a play, The Box of the World (*Sunduq al-Dunya*), named after a moving-image precursor to cinema, the zoetrope; "'Ash Huna: Kuka," https://web.archive.org/web/20250114172305/ (accessed 9 January 2025). It is not clear from the sources if the play had any connection to Ibrahim al-Mazini's 1929 collection of the same title.

[25] "Al-Amira Kuka!"

[26] Ibid.

[27] Al-Shirbini, "Sharika Injliziyya Tista'ir Mumathila."

[28] "Al-Amira Kuka!"

[29] Gaston Thierry, "Celle Du Désert," *Paris Soir*, 5 February 1937; "Kuka Ta'awad al-Yawm ila Injlitara," *al-Ahram*, 27 March 1937, 5.

[30] Greta Garbo (1905–90); Marlene Dietrich (1901–92); Richard Tauber (1891–1948); Elisabeth Bergner (1897–1986).

[31] Wardour, "Straight from the Desert," *Gloucestershire Echo*, 28 December 1936, 2.

[32] The false narrative of Kouka's origins continues to circulate: Paul Robeson Jr., *The Undiscovered Paul Robeson: An Artist's Journey, 1898–1939* (Wiley, 2001), 282; Rose Staveley-Wadham, "Celebrating Princess Kouka and Her Forgotten Film Legacy," *The British Newspaper Archive Blog*, 25 October 2023, https://blog.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/2023/10/25/celebrating-princess-kouka.

[33] "Dusky Princess from Sudan Becomes Film Star," *Peterborough Times and Northern Advertiser*, 22 January 1937, 4.

[34] "Filmland Features: Princess Kouka," *Linlithgowshire Gazette*, 8 January 1937, 2; "Dusky Princess in London," *Adelaide News*, 4 February 1937, 12.

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Amsterdam News, *Chicago Defender*, and *Indianapolis Recorder*. The story also was covered by French newspapers, as well as in the Francophone North African press.[35]

The international press corps fell under the spell of the Orientalist fantasy that Kouka spun out for them. According to the narrative, Futter "discovered" Princess Kouka as he passed through al-Fashir, Sudan, scouting locations. Princess Kouka had only been to the cinema once, on a visit to Cairo, but she was enamored by Futter's invitation to appear in a film. The princess's father, Sheik Ibrahim Mahdi, objected to his daughter leaving home and acting in a movie. Kouka cried and refused to eat until her father relented. Reporters personalized their stories with juicy details, including her taste for camel meat; her amusement at "ridiculous" and "scanty" Western fashions; her dismay at her looks following beauty treatments in Paris while en route to London; her distaste for the cold weather; and her lack of knowledge about international film stars.[36] A feature published in the Baltimore *Afro-American*, under the title "Princess Found Camels Tasty," lavishly describes Kouka's appearance:

> She was dressed in a pleated skirt of scarlet silk that swept from a high waist to the curved-up toes of her Eastern shoes.
> A sash of crimson slashed with white was round her hips. Between the red of her dress and the bright silver-striped blue of her bolero jacket flowed the thick white satin of her petticoat.
> Bound about her black, centre-parted hair was a veil of gold lace threaded with blue silk cord, which she called her turban. Her neck was circled with a collar of red and yellow gold. From her ears swung flat gold hoops three inches in diameter.[37]

The large, gold hoop earrings Kouka wore for her publicity shoot were a source of particular fascination. The writer for the *Afro-American* estimated the hoops to be three inches in diameter—over time, the tale grew taller: six months later, when reports of Kouka's earrings reached the pages of the Charleston *Gazette*, they had grown to six inches.[38]

Although the press corps was caught up in the earrings' exotic touch, no one, it seems, paid attention to the detail stamped into the earrings; the crescent and star distinctly visible in a photograph published by *The Tatler* were a symbol of Egypt's national aspirations (Fig. 2). Nor, it seems, did anyone notice that a strikingly similar actor had previously been seen wearing those same baubles in the Egyptian film *Widad* (Fig. 3).[39]

Kouka wanted to be a star, but the sources do not reveal how enthusiastically she accepted the princess persona. Kouka embraced her new role and participated in constructing the Princess Kouka persona by embellishing and tweaking her biography. In the narrative, her father Ibrahim is a tribal shaykh in al-Fashir, Sudan. In reality, her father, Ibrahim, an officer in the Egyptian military, was a resident of Cairo whose family came from Sudan. In the press conference, Princess Kouka describes going to extreme measures to convince "Shaykh" Ibrahim to permit her to travel to Europe and become an actor. It is quite

[35] My analysis focuses on reception in Britain, the US, and Egypt. Analysis of responses in North Africa and Sudan are beyond the scope of this paper. For examples of North African coverage, see "Une Princesse Soudanaise Tourne Un Film à Londres," *La Dépêche Algérienne*, 26 December 1936, 1; "Une Princesse Tourne Dans Un Film," *Maroc-Matin*, 31 December 1936, 3; and Thierry, "Celle Du Désert," 8.

[36] "Princess Cried and Cried," *Daily Mirror*, 23 December 1936, 3; "Princess Found Camels Tasty," Baltimore *Afro American* Newspaper Archives, 9 January 1937, 14.

[37] "Princess Found Camels Tasty."

[38] "Dark Princess Stars," *Charleston Gazette*, 26 July 1937, 3.

[39] The earrings make an appearance in *Jericho* as well.

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Figure 2. Princess Kouka publicity photograph. *The Tatler*, 20 January 1937, 115.

Figure 3. Kouka as Shahd in *Widad* (Fritz Kramp, 1936). Screenshot.

likely that Kouka's family—like other middle-class Egyptian families at the time—had, at least initially, objected to her decision to pursue a career in acting.

To be sure, the mystique of Hollywood is constructed on rebirth narratives. On some level, Nagiya Ibrahim's adoption of the screen name Kouka and her rebranding as "Princess Kouka" are not so different from the stories of her near contemporaries, Margarita Cansino who became Rita Hayworth, and Frances Gumm who became Judy Garland. Or one might prefer to compare Kouka's story to those of immigrant actors, such as Vienna-born Hedwig Kiesler, better known as Hedy Lamarr, who, like Kouka, arrived in London in 1937, and was

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subsequently cast in an exotic film shot on location in North Africa—*Algiers* (John Cromwell, 1937).

Kouka's rebranding differs from those of Rita, Judy, and Hedy in one key feature—racial stamping. The media circus presenting Kouka as Sudanese establishes her racial identity as unequivocally Black, according to the prevailing racist and colorist discourse in the British and American film industries. Under the terms of the Motion Picture Production Code in force in Hollywood at this time, a film could not depict a mixed-race relationship.[40] For the film to be distributed in the US, the actor cast as Paul Robeson's love interest had to be read as Black, had to *be* Black. Kouka from Egypt might not have passed as Black; Princess Kouka from Sudan did. These racialized terms, however, meant nothing to Kouka, nor to most of the Egyptian press.

Race in Britain: Cinema As a Tool of European Discovery

British cinema, like Egyptian cinema and, indeed, cinema around the world, developed under the shadow of Hollywood. The history of the British cinema industry, according to Andrew Higson, "has been one of consistent undercapitalization, virtually permanent crisis, and the fragmentation and dispersal of potential."[41] One of the ways British filmmakers competed with Hollywood films, carving out a domestic market and, in cases like *Jericho*, aiming to penetrate the US market, was through what Higson calls "product differentiation." The introduction of new, exotic stars was one way to distinguish a film or a studio from its competitors. In 1935 Sabu Dastagir, a British colonial subject, was "discovered" by director Robert Flaherty and whisked to the imperial capital, becoming subject and star of Orientalist fantasies, beginning with *Elephant Boy* (Robert Flaherty and Zoltan Korda, 1937). Following on Flaherty's successful promotion of Sabu, Walter Futter "discovered" his own exotic star, Princess Kouka. In what follows, I unpack how the narrative about Futter's discovery of Princess Kouka echoes the plot of *Jericho* and hews closely to plot conventions of "empire films"—a genre of adventure films that celebrate the British Empire.[42]

Complementing the extradiegetic news coverage of *Jericho*'s production, news media are central to visual language of the movie and play a significant role in the plot. *Jericho* opens with a shot of flipping newspaper headlines reporting on the outbreak of World War I—a kinetic sequence that repeats between static credit cards.

In the opening scenes, an American naval vessel with a largely African American crew is struck in combat. Corporal Jericho Jackson (Paul Robeson) rushes to save men trapped in the hold, defying orders to evacuate immediately. A white officer challenges the corporal, and in the scuffle, Jericho pushes him aside, accidentally killing him. In the aftermath, Jericho is charged with murder and imprisoned at a base of the American Expeditionary Force in Bordeaux, France.

Captain John Mack (Henry Wilcoxson), who believes Jericho is innocent, seeks permission for him to be released from his cell to join the troops for the Christmas celebration. Jericho escapes, and John is court-martialed. After serving his sentence, John resolves to find Jericho and turn him in to clear his own name.

Upon his escape, Jericho commandeers a sailboat from the harbor, only to discover a drunken stowaway onboard, Mike Clancy (Wallace Ford). The men become friends and

[40] According to the Motion Picture Production Code, under "Particular Applications," part 2, "Sex," section 6: "*Miscegenation* (sex relationship between the white and black races) is forbidden"; Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 233–40, 351–63.

[41] Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1995), 23.

[42] It is worth noting that both the British film industry and Hollywood produced empire films in the 1930s.

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Figure 4. Gara (Kouka) and Jericho (Robeson) meet in the desert. Screenshot, *Jericho* (1937).

traveling partners. As they land on the shores of North Africa, the film evolves from a war film into an adventure narrative. Borrowing already well-worn Orientalist cinema tropes that mine the casbah for comedy—like Eddie Cantor in *Kid Millions* (Roy Del Ruth, 1934)—Jericho and Mike try their luck as traveling performers, and, predictably, make a narrow escape from the police.

Setting off into the desert, Jericho and Mike encounter a lone shepherdess, Gara (Kouka) with her flock of goats (Fig. 4). Gara's brother, Hassan (John Laurie, in a performance of what Julie Codell calls "empire blackface"), arrives on horseback with news of a medical emergency back in town.[43] Fortunately, Jericho had completed his medical training before enlisting in the Navy. The men find refuge in the village, where Jericho becomes the trusted village doctor and marries Gara. Having taken a lead in uniting warring factions, Jericho is appointed leader of the annual salt caravan. A team of British explorers (Henry Aubin, George Barraud, and Frederick Cooper) join the caravan, shooting footage to be sent back to cinemas in the metropole as newsreel.

Another shot of flipping newspaper headlines—echoing the credit sequence—returns the viewer from the diurnal and seasonal portrayal of time in the African village to the linear march of Western historical time. Interspersing historical headlines with fictional news items, the audience learns that the war has ended, the armistice has been signed, and ex-Captain John Mack has completed his sentence and been released from Leavenworth prison. In a cinema, John sees the salt caravan footage and manages to locate Jericho, setting up a climactic encounter between the antagonists. The conflict resolves peacefully—John returns home, and Jericho remains in Africa.

The depiction of the salt caravan through the gaze of the explorers' camera overtly reproduces tropes of empire films. Indeed, the plot of *Jericho*—hinging as it does on footage shot by British explorers—both diegetically and extradiegetically represents the conditions of its own production. In September 1936, Futter dispatched a team to Niger—including

[43] Julie Codell, "Blackface, Faciality, and Colony Nostalgia in 1930s Empire Films," in *Postcolonial Cinema Studies* (Abingdon, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2011), 32–46.

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director Thorton Freedland, D. P. John Boyle, and the "well-known African explorer" T. A. Glover—to capture footage of a camel caravan traveling through the Sahara from Agadez to Bilma.[44] The team's effort to shoot authentic footage created a certain drama of its own, when the party failed to return home in time for Christmas, as planned.[45] The missing film crew eventually resurfaced, and the footage they captured, woven into the film and attributed diegetically to the British explorers, was widely praised in the otherwise mixed reviews of *Jericho.* The presence of these "explorers" also mirrors the press narrative about Futter's discovery of Princess Kouka, purportedly during his own exploratory travels in Sudan (actually Egypt) to scout locations.

In the course of production, after completing seven weeks of shooting on location in Egypt, director Thorton Freedland realized he needed to shoot additional desert scenes in the studio. The production team rounded up camels from a circus in Southend.[46] Freedland also required bedouin tribesman to ride horseback for the scene. As E. G. Cousins quips in *Picturegoer*, "Instead of 'blacking-up' a mob of extras, as a lesser man might do (and too frequently has done), 'T' Freedland sent an emissary to the Docks, who brought back as many Arabs as he wanted." Cousins enjoys reporting on the production of *Jericho*: "It's a journalist's dream, having more things happening in connection with it than usually happens to any three British films." He gleefully reports on the "fun and games" when the Arab dock-workers, "descendants, doubtless, of a thousand dauntless sheiks of the desert," were asked to ride the horses. In this piece, Cousins—with his admittedly tongue-in-cheek affect—praises the director for achieving a form of racial authenticity by employing Arabic-speaking imperial subjects working in the metropole. His attempt at humor, however, demeans, stereotypes, and ridicules the laborers cast as extras.[47]

Producer Walter Futter, it should be noted, had a history of film shoots in exotic locales, having produced two documentaries, *Africa Speaks!* (1930) and *India Speaks* (1933). *Africa Speaks!* received mixed responses, praised by some for its documentary footage and decried by others for its demeaning portrayal of Africans.[48] Futter repurposes the European explorer narrative both in the plot of *Jericho* and in the equally fictional story about the discovery of an exotic Sudanese princess.

The Princess Kouka discovery narrative also bears a suspicious resemblance to the plot of a French film starring Josephine Baker, *Princesse Tam Tam* (Princess Tam Tam, Edmond Greville, 1935). Like Robeson, Baker left the US in the 1920s to escape America's stifling racism and found success in Europe.[49] *Princesse Tam Tam* is a Pygmalion story of a Tunisian shepherdess "educated" by a European novelist and introduced to Parisian society as a princess. In addition to the obvious parallels between the plot of *Princesse Tam Tam* and the press coverage of Kouka's discovery, some have even noted similarities between the two actors.[50]

Futter's checkered past representing Africa and Africans raises the question of why Robeson agreed to the project. Having established himself as a leading man with a big box-office draw in the UK, by the time he signed on to *Jericho* Robeson exerted a certain amount of autonomy in choosing which projects to accept and a "decisive measure" of creative control

[44] "Capitol's Desert Expedition," *Era*, 23 September 1936, 8.

[45] "Fears for Film Party," *Daily Mirror*, 29 December 1936, 2; "Adventure in the Sahara: A Film Unit Stranded in the Desert," *Sphere*, 9 January 1937, 10.

[46] "Film and Theatre Gossip: The Sahara Comes to Film Studio—Via Southend," *Kensington News and West London Times*, 21 May 1937, 3.

[47] E. G. Cousins, "Street 'Arabs' for the Desert," *Picturegoer*, 5 June 1937, 10–11.

[48] Charles Musser, "Paul Robeson and the Cinema of Empire," in *Empire and Film*, ed. Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (London: BFI, 2011), 274.

[49] I am focusing here on anti-Blackness, but racism takes many forms, and other performers, like Anna May Wong, for example, sought to escape stereotypical roles on offer in Hollywood by seeking opportunities in Europe.

[50] Musser, "Paul Robeson," 275.

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over his roles.[51] While living in London, Robeson appeared in eight films, six of which were British productions. Robeson was particularly active in cinema during the 1936–37 season.[52] At the end of 1937, *Motion Picture Herald* listed the American Robeson in its list of the top ten most popular stars in British cinema.[53]

Robeson chose to play African characters in several of his films. *Jericho*, for which he accepted the role of leader of the tribe, was Robeson's fourth—and final—portrayal of an "African king" in the feature films he made in the UK. These included Bosambo in *Sanders of the River* (Alexander Korda, 1935); John Zinga in *Song of Freedom* (J. Elder Wills, 1936); Umbopa in *King Solomon's Mines* (Robert Stevenson, 1937); and Jericho Jackson in *Jericho.* Robeson was committed to films that brought Africa and narratives about Africans to Anglo–American audiences. In playing these African roles, Robeson was able to avoid the degrading racial stereotypes characterizing most African American roles. However, Charles Musser contends that Robeson's status as an African American star, rather than an African colonial subject (as in some of the characters he played), gave license to European audiences to "finesse their politics of race and empire."[54]

In *Jericho*, Robeson's character, an American naval officer, settles in Africa and proves himself worthy of serving as a tribal head. Despite Futter's questionable credentials, aspects of Jericho's character and the film's plot may have appealed to Robeson despite the deeply embedded plot of European discovery of Africa; in *Jericho*, "Western knowledge"—Jericho's medical training—"is used to benefit rather than conquer and exploit African people."[55]

Race in the United States: Egypt in Africa

Writing for the *Chicago Defender* in 1938 following the US release of *Jericho*, Eugene Gordon summarizes positive attributes of the script—features that might have drawn Robeson to the project: Robeson's character is "a peace-loving graduate of a medical school. . . . He is an upstanding, keenly intelligent and natural leader, whether those who follow be black or white." According to Gordon, despite the stereotypical depiction of Jericho's charges in the Navy, the narrative arc of *Jericho* sets "a distinctly progressive tone."[56] Indeed, over the course of the film, Jericho Jackson achieves wealth, power, and security among a local African community whose members value his medical training and his leadership skills. The African American corporal makes a home in Africa. He also survives the final confrontation with his white antagonist.

Like the rest of the Anglophone media, the African American press corps fell for Kouka's "discovered-Sudanese-princess" story. However, some reporters for these publications insightfully situated the Princess Kouka narrative within the context of British imperial relations with Africa and Africans. Writing for the *Indianapolis Recorder*, Frank Marshall Davis discusses the Sudanese Princess Kouka in his "The World in Review" column devoted to analyzing the political impact of current events. After criticizing King George VI for refusing to invite any African kings to his coronation, Davis discusses the potential salutatory effect of Princess Kouka's arrival in London. Davis argues that the media circus about the beautiful

[51] Robeson Jr., *Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 282.

[52] In addition to *Jericho*, in 1936–37 Robeson appeared in *Showboat* (James Whale, 1936); *Song of Freedom* (J. Elder Willis, 1936); *My Song Goes Forth* (documentary, Joseph Best, 1937); *King Solomon's Mines* (Robert Stevenson, 1937); and *Big Fella* (J. Elder Willis, 1937).

[53] "The Top Money Makers in British Productions," *Motion Picture Herald*, 18 December 1937, 19–20.

[54] Musser, "Paul Robeson," 267.

[55] Ibid., 275.

[56] Eugene Gordon, "'Deep Desert' Is Song Hit of New Movie: Paul Easily Dominates Production Which Uses Real Africans," *Chicago Defender*, 3 September 1938, 18.

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and elegant Princess Kouka might help to upend Western stereotypes of African women, noting that, "Her appearance may do much to counteract the impressions of scoffing whites whose conception of all African women is based purely on the plate-lipped females of the Ubangi tribe."[57]

Shooting for *Jericho* presented Robeson with his first opportunity to visit Africa. At the end of January 1937, the cast and crew of *Jericho* embarked from London to Cairo to begin location shooting.[58] From Cairo, Robeson sat for a lengthy interview with R. W. Merguson of the *Pittsburgh Courier.* In the interview, Robeson expresses his views on Egypt's place in African history, and Africans' roles in Egyptian history.[59] Robeson sums up his perspective on the mutual influences of Egypt and other parts of Africa on one another: "Having a knowledge of the African's history for a background, I cannot help but see that his contribution to Egyptian culture is very marked. As he has influenced, he has been influenced in turn. All through North and East Africa Arabic invasions have made their imprint on him."[60]

Robeson identifies with the Egyptian people and speaks of them as "Colored." In the Merguson interview, Robeson alludes to Egypt's ongoing struggle for true independence from Britain in terms that evoke his transnational antiracist commitments: "It appears to me that the Colored people of Egypt hold their destiny in their hands."[61] In another interview with Fay Jackson of *New York Amsterdam News*, Robeson acknowledges that his racialization of Egyptians runs counter to their own self-perceptions: "Egyptians are 'just another bunch of Colored folk. They consider themselves Mediterranean people—but they're just like us.'"[62] Robeson's political commitment to global racial justice and his desire to represent Africans to Western cinema viewers runs up against distinctly different prevailing attitudes in Egypt about race and Egypt's relations with other nations on the African continent.

Race in Egypt: Princess, Actor, or Maid?

For the British and American cinema industries and in the Western press coverage, the actress Kouka was inextricably linked to her Black, Sudanese princess persona. Although her skin tone was described variously with terms such as "dusky" and "brown," her racial Blackness was taken for granted.[63]

The Egyptian press offers a variegated set of terms to describe Robeson and Kouka, each bearing differently coded racialized distinctions. The Egyptian press consistently uses the Arabic words *aswad* (Black) and *zinjī* (Negro) to describe Robeson. For example, in the *al-Ahram* article that breaks the news about the collaboration between Capitol Pictures and the Misr Company for Acting and Cinema, Paul Robeson is described as the "Black (*aswad*) actor and singer who delighted audiences as Bozambo."[64] The same article also identifies Robeson's character, Jericho Jackson, as an American Negro (*min zunūj Amrīkā*). The term *zinjī*, as used in Egypt to describe Africans and African Americans, bears derogatory connotations.

[57] Frank Marshall Davis, "The World in Review," *Indianapolis Recorder*, 22 May 1937, 10.

[58] "Off for 'Jericho,'" *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 29 January 1937.

[59] Merguson's interview of Robeson was conducted in March 1937 and published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* over two weeks in May 1937.

[60] R. W. Merguson, "History of Black Man Is Written in Arabic, Paul Robeson Discovers," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 8 May 1937, 7.

[61] Ibid.

[62] Fay Jackson, "Robeson, Planning Return Here, Wants to Outstrip 'Stevedore,'" *New York Amsterdam News*, 5 June 1937, 20.

[63] "Dusky Princess from Sudan," 4; "Colour Difficulties," *Belfast Telegraph*, 26 April 1937.

[64] Al-Shirbini, "Sharika Injliziyya Kabira."

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Kouka is most frequently described as *samra'* (dark-skinned). The same *al-Ahram* article that identifies Robeson as "Black" and his character as "Negro" describes Kouka as "a dark-skin (*samra'*) Egyptian girl."[65] Although Kouka is never described as *zingīyya* or Negro in the Egyptian press, the coverage is, nevertheless, race conscious, and frequently reflects prevailing anti-Black attitudes in Egypt that intersect with class prejudice.

The first article about Princess Kouka to appear in the weekly magazine *al-Sabah*, for example, provides insight into common Egyptian assumptions about the interconnection of race and class. Kouka is described as "the charming Black (*al-sawdā'*) actor who played the role of a maid in *Widad*, Miss. Umm Kulthum's film."[66] Migrants from all over Egypt, including Nubia and Upper Egypt, relocated to urban centers, particularly Cairo, seeking economic opportunities. Nubians and upper Egyptians were often relegated to domestic labor, with women working as maids and men as doormen. Following tropes established on stage, in early Egyptian cinema, darker-skin actors were typecast for domestic labor roles—projecting modern racialized socioeconomic hierarchies onto historical costume dramas like *Widad.* Taking a closer look at the *al-Sabah* article, we see that the star, Umm Kulthum, is respectfully granted an honorific; Kouka is not. Kouka is further put in her place as a mere supporting player in the Umm Kulthum vehicle. The article goes on to announce that "Now Kouka will play the lead role opposite the great actor Paul Robeson."[67] Although Kouka's portrayal of Shahd in *Widad* is described as "charming," the article expresses surprise that an actor who previously played a maid was elevated to a leading role. Reflecting prevailing attitudes in 1930s Egypt about race and class, the article neglects to mention that in the short history of Egyptian cinema production preceding Kouka's 1936 casting in *Jericho*, no dark-skin actors of any gender had appeared in leading roles in domestically produced films.

When the news first broke of Kouka's casting in *Jericho*, the Egyptian media responded enthusiastically. As the first Egyptian actor cast in a featured role in a major European film, her personal success story aligned neatly with the patriotism surrounding the rapidly growing local film industry. On the eve of her departure for London, the Egyptian press wished her well. The weekly *al-Ithnayn* sent her off with an expression of collective good will: "We believe that Kouka will live up to expectations and will perform her role to perfection. This is what we all desire."[68]

The send-off article in the daily *al-Ahram*, by contrast, focused on the political and public relations significance of the collaboration between Capitol Pictures and the Misr Company for Acting and Cinema, downplaying Kouka's personal achievement. In the article, journalist Zakariya al-Shirbini shows disdain for the star-driven coverage in the weeklies. Instead of congratulating Kouka on her recognition, he congratulates Studio Misr on cultivating Kouka's talent. Al-Shirbini then issues a patronizing warning to the young actor: "We hope that Miss. Kouka will be a good representative to the West of girls from the East, and particularly the daughters of the Nile."[69]

As the news reached Egypt of Kouka's "transformation" into a "princess," the local media uniformly aimed to correct the record. "In fairness to the truth and to history," writes *Akhir Sa'a*, "we remind the reader that the so-called 'Amira Kouka' is not a princess, or any such thing. She is the sympathetic actor who triumphed in her role in the movie *Widad* produced by the Egyptian Company for Acting and Cinema."[70] *Al-Sabah* appeals to the actor to use her voice to set the record straight: "We thought that the artist Kouka was rational and could not

[65] Ibid.
[66] "Al-Brinsis Kuka wa-Bul Rubsun: Kuka fi Tariq al-Majid," *al-Sabah*, 29 January 1937, sec. 540, 43.
[67] Ibid.
[68] "Kuka fi Lundun," *al-Ithnayn*, 7 December 1936, 29.
[69] Al-Shirbini, "Sharika Injliziyya Tista'ir Mumathila."
[70] "Al-Amira Kuka!"

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possibly have expressed disapproval of some of the customs of Egypt and Egyptians, nor disdain for Egypt and Sudan." The article appeals to Kouka to disavow the lies and threatens a reckoning if she does not: "If she does not deny it, she has truly defamed her people."[71] Princess Kouka, however, does not break character to reveal her thoughts on being exoticized. Because the press has vested Kouka's good fortune with collective import, the characterization of her public persona carries additional significance.

With his focus on the corporate narrative, intertwined, as it was, with national interest, *al-Ahram*'s al-Shirbini downplayed the significance of Kouka's transformation. After reporting on what the British press wrote about Kouka, he shifts his reader's attention to his previous coverage about the agreement between the Misr Company for Acting and Cinema and Capitol Pictures. He credits the general manager, Ahmad Salim, for agreeing to loan Kouka to Capitol Pictures, "grant[ing] this Egyptian actor the opportunity to appear on the silver screen in a movie that will be shown around the world." He continues:

> We are pleased that foreign companies find our actors and actresses suitable for their films. We are also pleased that these companies rely on the largest studio on the country, Studio Misr, which has proven itself equal to the largest studios in Europe and America in terms of equipment, the efficiency of its staff, and the technical ability of its artists.
>
> We also will not overlook on this occasion, rather we recall that this studio is only one of the great works of a great Egyptian Pasha, Muhammad Tal'at Harb, who is the greatest and foremost supporter of film production in our country.[72]

For al-Shirbini, the transformation of a contract player from Egyptian upstart to Sudanese princess is a trivial matter, with limited bearing on the promise of future, lucrative, and high-profile collaborations between the British and Egyptian film industries. In other words, al-Shirbini does not consider the publicity stunt to be an affront to Egyptian honor. To the contrary, he takes the opportunity to pay homage to the "great" industrialist and banker Tal'at Harb, whose Misr Group financed the "great" Studio Misr, and who wrapped his many "great" projects in the cloak of nationalism.[73]

Egyptian journalists who took offense at the foreign press portrayal of Princess Kouka framed their objections in terms of collective injury. One journalist writing for *al-Ithnayn* objects to the sensational coverage of the backward practices of Kouka's family and Sudanese society: "We had thought that the art of the media frenzy was limited to Hollywood, but we now see that it has quickly infected England, as well. But, at the expense of an innocent people—the Sudanese people."[74]

One opinion column ridicules the gullibility of the foreign press corps, and the ease with which journalists accepted the Orientalist fantasy: "Isn't it amazing that in the 20th century there are people who do not know what Egypt is, and still believe that its houses are made of mud? It does not inspire confidence."[75] The author, Vladimir, the director of Nagib al-Rihani's theatrical troupe—with whom Kouka had previously performed—is both offended at the representation of life in Egypt and Sudan as backward and outraged at what he sees as a journalistic failure. One comment is particularly telling. In his column titled "Silly Talk" (al-Ahadith al-Sakhifa), Vladimir translates the story of Princess Kouka

[71] "Al-Brinsis Kuka wa-Bul Rubsun."

[72] Zakariya al-Shirbini, "'Kouka' bayn al-Qahira wa-Lundun," *al-Ahram*, 15 January 1937, 3.

[73] Robert Vitalis, *When Capitalists Collide: Business Conflict and the End of Empire in Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995).

[74] "Al-Amira Kuka," *al-Ithnayn*, 28 December 1936, 49.

[75] Vladimir, "al-Ahadith al-Sakhifa."

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published in an unnamed British newspaper. He relays that Princess Kouka reported having once left her village in Sudan to visit Cairo with her father. After relating the detail that Princess Kouka had not seen a white person before meeting Walter Futter, Vladimir quips in a parenthetical aside, "The editor must have thought that Egyptians are Black Africans."[76] As a resident of Cairo, well aware of its spectrum of human variation, Vladimir catches the inconsistency in Kouka's story. The British press did not. He is offended that, by accepting this narrative at face value—as it were—the British press corps must assume that all Egyptians are Black.[77]

Both of these articles reveal prevailing anti-Black attitudes in Egypt, as well as the country's complicated relationship to Sudan. An unsigned article in *Akhir Sa'a*, "Eight Hundred Pounds Monthly Salary for Umm Kulthum's Maid," clearly reflects these biases. The article drips with sarcasm:

> The man [Futter] arrived in Egypt a few weeks ago and came to an agreement with "Studio Bank Misr" [sic] that they would "loan" Nagiya to his company to work on the English film in exchange for the amount—hold your heart—in exchange for the amount of 800 Egyptian pounds as a monthly salary for the ebony-colored actor.
> So, the wages being paid to Umm Kulthum's maid—former maid, if you prefer—are the sum of 800 pounds per month.
> Whoever is next to the happy person is happy.[78]

This response reflects the author's multilayered chauvinism: anti-Blackness, misogyny, and class prejudice. He expresses surprise that a character actor in a relatively small supporting role would get the nod to star in a foreign production, and that Kouka, and not Umm Kulthum, was "discovered" by a British producer. He objects that the first Egyptian actor to break into international cinema has dark, "ebony-colored" skin. The author's anti-Blackness and misogyny run deep, and are reflected in the accompanying offensive caricature that reproduces racist tropes about Africans (Fig. 5).[79]

In the accompanying image, Princess Kouka sits on a throne in the middle of the frame, staring out directly at the viewer. Her face, portrayed with careful detail, is lighter than her body. The other six characters in the frame face her: two partially naked maids fan her; two sword-wielding guards look on from the margins, and two female supplicants kneel before her, eyes cast down. Several figures in the frame, including the princess, are depicted wearing large hoop earrings (and one with a large hoop nose ring). In the idiom of racist caricature—mimicked in the performance of blackface in Hollywood films that were screened in Egypt (again, see Eddie Cantor in *Kid Millions*)—several of the characters are portrayed with enlarged, white lips.

On one level, the caricature is intended to satirize the stupidity of the British press corps whose racist and Orientalist assumptions led them to report unquestioningly about the "newly discovered" talent from Sudan. The author refers to Kouka's fictional father as "one of the great rulers of Sudan, one of the Kings from the other side of the equator."[80] But, the

[76] Ibid.

[77] The suggestion that Egyptians from any period are or might have been Black continues to gall some of the arbiters of Egyptian culture. See, for example, the flap about race over casting in the 2023 Netflix production, *Queen Cleopatra*; Vivian Yee, "Whose Queen? Netflix and Egypt Spar over an African Cleopatra," *New York Times*, 10 May 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/10/world/middleeast/cleopatra-netflix-race-egypt.html.

[78] "800 Jinay Murattab Shahri," 43.

[79] Neither the article nor the caricature bear attribution.

[80] "800 Jinay Murattab Shahri."

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Figure 5. Caricature accompanying the article "Eight Hundred Pounds Monthly Salary for Umm Kulthum's Maid." *Akhir Sa'a*, 24 January 1937, 43.

image unquestionably also reflects the deep-seated anti-Black attitudes widespread in Egypt.

Ifdal Elsaket argues that anti-Blackness was a central feature of early Egyptian cinema: "The emergence of the cinema was intimately linked to the twin processes of nation building and racialization, under which lay a current of anti-Blackness that played a central role in image making." Further, according to Elsaket,

> [The] triumphant anticolonial nationalist narrative of Egypt in the 1940s never radically disavowed empire and its racial hierarchies. Rather, Egyptian tutelage over Sudan, and complex processes of racialization in which Egyptians positioned themselves as superior, were central to the narrative of nationalist liberation.[81]

In other words, as Eve Troutt Powell demonstrates, Egypt's political designs on Sudan and its sense of cultural and racial superiority were central to its national identity and its own struggle for independence. Describing this phenomenon, Powell identifies Egypt as a "colonized colonizer," referencing its relations with Great Britain and Sudan, respectively.[82] Egyptian nationalists rejected the charge of colonialism, arguing that Egyptians and Sudanese were one people; but, as Joel Gordon shows, the absence of Sudanese characters and performers in Egyptian popular culture tells a different story than "the official national narrative of the 'Unity of the Nile Valley.'"[83] The 1899 Anglo–Egyptian Condominium established joint rule over Sudan, although the partnership was never equal. Dominant strains of Egyptian nationalism linked its struggle for independence from Great Britain with resuming its status as a regional power. Of course, Egyptian desire to rule its southern neighbor ran counter to the Sudanese independence movement simultaneously emerging in the first half of the 20th century.[84]

[81] Ifdal Elsaket, "Jungle Films in Egypt: Race, Anti-Blackness, and Empire," *Arab Studies Journal* 25, no. 2 (2017): 10.

[82] Eve Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

[83] Joel Gordon, "River Blindness: Black and White Identity in Early Nasserist Cinema," in *Narrating the Nile: Politics, Cultures, Identities*, ed. Israel Gershoni and Meir Hatina (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2008), 137–56.

[84] Rami Ginat, "Egypt's Efforts to Unite the Nile Valley: Diplomacy and Propaganda, 1945–47," *Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 2 (2007): 193–222.

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The columnist and illustrator in *Akhir Sa'a* reflect this tension—the author's objection to Kouka's transformation from Egyptian actor to Sudanese princess manifests the widespread Egyptian belief in its cultural and racial superiority over Sudan—sentiments closely intertwined with the Egyptian desire to rule Sudan, one of the sensitive political issues deferred by the 1936 Anglo–Egyptian Treaty. Author and illustrator express their objections to what they perceive as the Western press's demeaning depiction of Kouka by deploying transnationally recognizable anti-Black stereotypes—stereotypes that Paul Robeson devoted his career to dismantling.

"A Put-Up Job"

Jericho premiered in London on August 23, 1937. Watching the film, as the credits roll, the viewer sees no mention of Egypt—no reference to the production assistance of Studio Misr, nor identification of Egypt as the site of location shooting. Needless to say, the dozens of Egyptian extras who took part in a battle scene merit nary a mention. Crews had shot on location in Saqqara, about a fifteen-minute drive from Studio Misr on Pyramids Road in Giza, where daily rushes were developed.[85] Although *Kinematograph Weekly*, a British cinema industry publication, expressed surprise at Egypt's "modern facility for picture and sound negative processing," at least they reported accurately on the country where the crew was shooting.[86] By contrast, the popular British press consistently reported, inaccurately, that the production team was shooting in Sudan. An article published by the *Daily Mirror* under the title "This was a Put-Up Job" identifies the location as Sudan; the accompanying photograph shows local laborers planting palm trees to construct a set (Fig. 6).[87]

In this context, the Capitol Pictures publicity department's erasure of Kouka's identity—Egyptian actor, not Sudanese princess—can be seen as part of what appears to be a larger, systematic effort to obscure Egyptian contributions to *Jericho* throughout production and promotion.[88] For Egyptians like *al-Ahram* journalist Zakariya al-Shirbini, who held out hope that the film would usher in a period of international cinema collaborations, in the words of the *Daily Mirror*, the contract between Capitol Pictures and Misr Company for Acting and Cinema was, indeed, "a put-up job."

There were other oversights, as well. With the exception of the actors who played Private Face (Laurence Brown), Sergeant Gamey (Rufus Fennel), and Tag (Ike Hatch), other Black actors playing the roles of enlisted men on Corporal Jackson's ship were not credited in the film. Thankfully, a few diligent journalists reported on the participation of several African Americans whose names do not appear in the credits: Chris Gill, Jack London, Orlando Martin, Johnnie Nit, Mounsey, Papafio, and Quashie.[89]

Although initially Robeson proclaimed Jericho Jackson to be his "best part yet," he eventually disavowed the film, and his cinematic efforts in general.[90] After production wrapped on *Jericho*, Robeson announced that "he was through with motion pictures," because they "tended to degrade the black man."[91] In an interview from 1938, Robeson expressed his disappointment in his recent films:

> I grew more and more dissatisfied with the stories I played in. Certain elements in a story would attract me and I would agree to play in it. But by the time producers and

[85] "Fi Studiyu Misr," *al-Ithnayn*, 5 February 1937, 21.

[86] "'Jericho' at Pinewood: Egyptian Exteriors Completed," *Kinematograph Weekly*, 8 April 1937, 33.

[87] "This Was a Put-Up Job!" *Daily Mirror*, 22 March 1937, 21.

[88] Unlike the British industry press, coverage of the shooting schedule by African American newspapers accurately reported on Robeson's travels to Egypt.

[89] Jackson, "Robeson, Planning Return Here"; "Coloured Talent For 'Jericho,'" *Era*, 15 April 1937, 14.

[90] "Paul Robeson's Best Part Yet," *Daily News* (London), 12 April 1937, 9.

[91] Gordon, "'Deep Desert' Is Song Hit."

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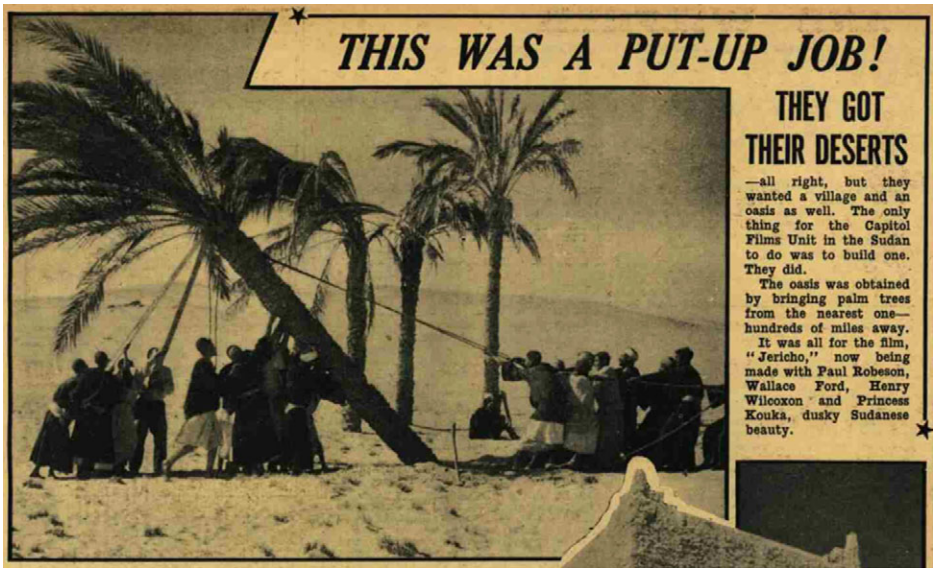

Figure 6. An article about building sets for *Jericho* identifies the location as Sudan. *Daily Mirror*, 22 March 1937, 21.

> distributors had got through with it, the story was usually very different, and so were my feelings about it.

Raining particular scorn on the bait-and-switch tactics employed in producing *Sanders of the River*, Robeson offered a sweeping dismissal of his other recent films as "the same story—an idea that attracted me, a result in which I wasn't interested."[92] After appearing in six feature films in two years, Robeson took a three-year hiatus from cinema.[93] Robeson devoted himself in those years to political engagement on a global scale. In July 1937 he stated:

> Events in Abyssinia, Spain and China have led me beyond the racial problem to the world problem of which it is a part—the problem of defending democracy against the onslaught of Fascism. Democracy should be widening, but instead a drive is being made to subjugate not only my group but all oppressed groups throughout the world.[94]

Shortly after the British premiere of *Jericho*, reports started circulating in the Egyptian press that Kouka had returned to Cairo to recuperate from a spinal fracture sustained in London.[95] When *Jericho* premiered in Cairo nearly eight months later, on March 7, 1938, in place of

[92] Sidney Cole, "Paul Robeson Tells Us Why," in Paul Robeson Speaks, ed. *Philip Foner* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1978), 121.

[93] Per Musser, Robeson's comments and criticisms of his films can be seen as "a means to negotiate an array of expectations from often conflicting constituencies: British and American, white and black, as well as industry personnel, radical commentators and diverse audiences"; Musser, "Paul Robeson," 262.

[94] Robeson Jr., *Undiscovered Paul Robeson*, 286.

[95] "Kuka—'Amirat al-Fashir," *al-Ahram*, 28 August 1937.

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Figure 7. Advertisement for *Jericho* (The Salt Merchant) playing at Cinema Royal in Cairo. *Akhir Sa'a*, 6 March 1938, 51.

splashy photos of Kouka on the red carpet in front of Cinema Royal attending the premiere of her new film, *Akhir Sa'a* published a bedside interview with the convalescing star (Fig. 7).[96]

In the interview, Kouka reports that in London she had met Alexander Korda, who invited her to appear in a film with Sabu, but she was forced to turn down the role due to her injury. Kouka also expressed that after having performed with Paul Robeson, her greatest wish was to act alongside Clark Gable.[97] It is clear from this interview that Kouka did not perceive her racialization as "Princess Kouka"—she did not understand that having been cast as a Black actor, she was identified as Black by the British and American cinema industries, their press,

[96] "Kuka Turid 'an Tammathal ma'a Klark Jaybil," *Akhir Sa'a*, 20 Mar 1938, 52.

[97] Here I cannot help but point out the parallel between Kouka's wish and the scene of a fifteen-year-old Judy Garland dreamily singing "Dear Mr. Gable" to a picture of the dashing thirty-six-year-old star in the film *Broadway Melody of 1938*, released in the US three days after *Jericho* debuted in London.

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and their viewing publics. According to the racist structures of the British and American production codes, as a Black actor, she could not, at that time, have realized her dream of starring opposite Gable. Instead, one could imagine the counterfactual scenario in which she might have appeared with Gable in *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939)—not, alas, in the place of Vivian Leigh, but rather alongside Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen, as an enslaved person serving white plantation owners.

Kouka's hopes for a career in the British film industry or in Hollywood were dashed. Her injury prevented her from capitalizing on her public visibility in the West. As far as the British and American film industries were concerned, Princess Kouka had flamed out. Like other Black actors whose featured appearances turned out to be short-lived, Princess Kouka was, in Payton's terms, a supernova rather than a star.[98]

Following the production of *Jericho*, Robeson voiced his disappointment with the outcome of his cinematic efforts and Kouka expressed regrets about the opportunities lost to her lengthy recuperation. The Anglo–Egyptian accord implemented on the heels of the arrival of Princess Kouka in London, too, led to great disappointment in Egypt and Sudan. Historians generally view the 1936 Anglo–Egyptian treaty as a ploy in Britain's ever-shifting efforts to maintain control over Egypt. Indeed, British troops did not remain confined to the Suez Canal zone as stipulated by the accord; British tanks surrounded the palace in 1942, forcing King Farouk (r. 1936–52) to dissolve Parliament and appoint a pro-British government. Egyptians do not consider 1936 to mark the beginning of their independence from the British. Instead, they celebrate the 1952 Free Officers revolt for launching the liberation process that concluded with the withdrawal of British troops from the canal zone following the 1956 Suez War.

After the rise of the Free Officers, Egypt publicly supported Sudanese independence, while, for a time, continuing to maneuver toward maintaining some form of political unity between the countries.[99] In 1953, the parties signed the Anglo–Egyptian agreement that ended the Anglo–Egyptian Condominium and established Sudanese self-government. In 1956 Sudan gained its independence from both Britain and Egypt.

Conclusion: Manufacturing an Egyptian Star

Kouka may have been a supernova in the eyes of the Anglo–American press and film industries, but her appearance in a British film featuring a star-studded cast and helmed by a Hollywood director helped make her a local star in Egypt. Following a four-year break from acting, Kouka shed her "Sudanese princess" persona and went on to build a long and successful career in Egyptian cinema. Unlike American actors Josephine Baker and Anna May Wong, who achieved success for their exoticized performances in Europe but whose careers faltered in the United States under the weight of racism and the strictures of the Hollywood production code, Kouka returned home and succeeded to break racialized taboos in the Egyptian film industry.

During the filming of *Widad*, Kouka found herself on the set with the newly appointed head of the editing department, Niyazi Mustafa, who had recently returned from a Studio Misr–sponsored scholarship to study cinematography in Germany. Mustafa was born in Assiyut in upper Egypt; his mother was Turkish and his father was Sudanese, like Kouka's father. A widely publicized romance developed between Mustafa and Kouka, and they wed. Mustafa's star rose through the 1930s, as he launched his directing career with *Salama fi Khayr* (Salama is Fine, 1937) and *al-Duktur* (*The Doctor*, 1939). Kouka and Mustafa collaborated

[98] Payton, "'She Was Just a Chorus Girl, Baby.'"
[99] Ginat, "Egypt's Efforts," 216.

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on numerous films over the span of a quarter century—films that challenged the prevailing racial politics of the Egyptian screen.

Following her recovery from her spinal injury, Kouka commanded star billing when she returned to the Egyptian screen as Samira in the modern comedy *Masnaʿ al-Zawajat* (*The Wife Factory*, 1941). The Egyptian media coverage of this film does not mention race. The program for *Masnaʿ al-Zawajat* produced by Studio Misr and the Egyptian press coverage of the film make no mention of Kouka's skin color, her prior appearance in *Jericho*, or her Princess Kouka persona.

Masnaʿ al-Zawajat explores the evolving role of "modern" women in supporting "modern" men, the *effendiyya*, like some other Egyptian movies also released in 1941, such as *Layla Bint al-Rif* (Layla the Country Girl, 1941, dir. Togo Mizrahi) and *Layla Bint Madaris* (Layla the Schoolgirl, 1941, dir. Togo Mizrahi).[100] In *Masnaʿ al-Zawajat*, three unemployed college graduates, Fadil (Mahmud Dhu al-Faqar), ʿAziz (Muhammad Tawfiq), and Hamdi (Anwar Wagdi), whose professional ambitions are at odds with their financial circumstances, have developed what they think of as "modern" ideas about domestic roles. The young cads are interested in marrying women who can support their own modern middle-class ambitions by providing housekeeping services and emotional support, while being able to circulate in fashionable society. After visiting his aunt (Dawlat Abyad) who runs an "old-fashioned" girls' finishing school, Fadil hatches an idea to launch a school that provides girls with a "modern" education—not like the boys' university education, mind you, but a wife factory "that graduates graceful, gentle wives who can boast about attracting men to their homes . . . emptying cafes of their patrons, clubs of corruption, and cabarets of their lovers."[101]

In one scene, Fadil looks on as a large group of young women wearing white ruffled aprons and maids' caps iron clothes while singing happily about their efforts (Fig. 8). The image of Egyptian middle-class women dressed as maids and engaged in domestic labor—retrograde as it appears to the contemporary viewer—at its time offered a radical departure from the racial and class stereotypes of domestic labor perpetuated by Egyptian cinema. The production of "modern" middle class wives in the film, then, visually displaces and economically replaces the Black maid. In her first star turn, Kouka—whose prior appearance in Egyptian cinema was as the maid to Umm Kulthum's character in *Widad*—appears in a role that upends the social hierarchy of domestic labor.

Throughout her career, many of Kouka's films continued to engage with questions of race. In *Rabha* (1943), her second collaboration with Mustafa, Kouka returned to playing a bedouin character, picking up on the successful formula of *Jericho*—a decision that set the course for much of her career. But, unlike Gara in *Jericho*, Kouka's bedouin characters in Egyptian cinema are distinctly marked as not-Black. Race and the marking of racial difference particularly characterized Kouka's most well-known role in Egyptian cinema, the bedouin princess ʿAbla in a series of five films based on the epic, *Sirat ʿAntar*, beginning with *ʿAntar wa-ʿAbla* (Antar and Abla, Niyazi Mustafa, 1945). For these films set in pre-Islamic Arabia, ʿAbla is dressed in what the costume department must have viewed as timeless bedouin garb—costumes not unlike those that Kouka wore as the early modern servant Shahd in *Widad* and the contemporary Taureg Gara in *Jericho*—or for that matter, as the Sudanese Princess Kouka at the 1937 press conference at Claridge's Hotel.

The source text, *Sirat ʿAntar*, features a romance set in pre-Islamic Arabia between ʿAntar, a Black warrior of mixed Arab African parentage, and his cousin, ʿAbla. ʿAntar's Blackness is central to his character—the son of an enslaved Ethiopian woman, he earns his freedom and proves his merit by performing acts of bravery. According to the literary tradition, ʿAbla is

[100] Lucie Ryzova, *The Age of the Efendiyya: Passages to Modernity in National-Colonial Egypt* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[101] "Masnaʿ al-Zawjat ʿala Sitar Sinima Studiyu Misr," *al-Ahram*, 11 October 1941, 2.

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Figure 8. Kouka (center) as Samira in *Masna' al-Zawajat* (The Wife Factory 1941). Screenshot from film trailer.

distinctly Arab; in other words, 'Abla is marked as not-Black in contrast to her beloved 'Antar.

In the 'Antar and 'Abla films, the male lead is played by an actor in blackface—Sirag Munir in Antar and Abla (1945) and *Mughamarat 'Antar wa-'Abla* (The Adventures of Antar and Abla, 1948); and Farid Shawqi in *Antar Yaghazu al-Sahra'* (*'Antar Invades the Desert, 1960*), *'Antar bin Shaddad* (1961), and *Bint 'Antar* (Antar's Daughter, 1964). Ifdal Elsaket notes that the use of blackface did not "provoke controversy" in Egypt because it reflected a marker of difference found in the source text.[102] But the decision to put a lighter-skin leading man in blackface nevertheless reflects persistent anti-Blackness in the Egyptian film industry. Dark-skin male actors were cast as servants, but not in leading roles. By 1941 Kouka was already cast in starring roles, but it would take more than a generation before a dark-skinned Egyptian actor, Ahmad Zaki, commanded leading man status in Egyptian cinema.

When Kouka reemerges on the Egyptian screen in 1941 as a leading lady, the local media falls silent on questions about the actor's skin color—a marked departure from Egyptian media coverage of her role in *Jericho.* Meanwhile, 'Antar's blackface in Antar and Abla also highlighted 'Abla's lighter skin tone, effectively displacing any lingering memory in the minds of Egyptian cinema audiences of Kouka's own "blacking-up" as Princess Kouka to play the role of Gara in *Jericho.* The contemporaneous Egyptian press helped to whitewash Kouka's public persona.

A similar process occurs abroad. In the eyes of the Hollywood motion picture production code, Princess Kouka was considered a Black actor. Censors in New York State tasked with upholding the code did not seem to notice that the actor identified as Kouka starring in not-Black roles in Egyptian films sent to them in the 1940s for review was the same the actor who had played the Black character Gara in *Jericho.* A few of Kouka's Egyptian bedouin films—including *Antar wa-'Abla*, with its complicated racial politics—passed censorship review and were screened in the United States.[103] With the disappearance of Princess Kouka from the international limelight, then, the actor known as Kouka experienced a transnational erasure of her identity as a Black actor. Only in retrospect has Kouka belatedly been celebrated as the first dark-skinned (*samra'*) star of the Egyptian screen.[104]

[102] Elsaket, "Jungle Films in Egypt," 19.

[103] A license for screening Antar and Abla was granted by the State of New York Education Department, Motion Picture Division, on 25 March 1949; New York State Archives, Motion Picture Scripts Collection, file 52801, box 1433.

[104] Mahar Hasan, "Zayy al-Naharda . . . Wafat al-Fanana Kuka," *al-Masry al-Yawm*, 29 January 1979, https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/882906.

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