

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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City Hotel  
Box 24  
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Jackpots and Movies

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
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Dear Peter,

One of the most disturbing aspects of Freetown is the addiction of its citizens to slot machines. In a city where beggars line the sidewalks and almost every child I pass asks for money, the sight of men and women emptying their pockets to feed these one-armed bandits is infuriating.

Almost every bar has some gambling machines. Grimy little dives have two or three old ones standing in a dark corner, night clubs and discos have a whole wall, perhaps a roomful, of shiny new machines with bright lights and confusing diagrams of winning combinations. From the time the bars open early in the morning to closing, sometimes twenty hours later, the jingling of coins dropping into the machines and the ding of the bell announcing another spin of the dials are almost never absent.

All types of people play the machines, which are generically known by one of the brand names—jackpot. Men and women, old and young, the well-dressed and the ragged stand shoulder to shoulder in front of the machines, their eyes intent upon the whirling pictures of fruit, bells and geometric patterns, as mesmerized as the most vacuous of television viewers. In one way, jackpot is Freetown's most democratic institution. A spirit of camaraderie encircles the machines. Players keep track of each other's fortunes, commiserate over near misses, celebrate wins. They swap spots, searching for the right combination of man and machine, and often pull the lever for each other to break a spell of bad luck.

After watching these players for a while, I get the impression they have come not to win money but to lose it. Few stop after hitting a winning combination, many halt only when they have run out of money. For most the jackpot is entertainment and not an illusory source of income, but for a tragic few it is an illness.

One night, seated at a bar, I watched as a young man began to play. From his outfit of cotton shirt and shorts and plastic sandals, I could tell he did not have a lot of money, but his clothes were neat and he had a happy, intelligent air about him. The only jarring note to the wholesome impression he gave was a brown leather hat, made for northern winters, which he wore with the ear flaps down. Eccentricity in clothing styles,

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however, and in headgear in particular, is a sign of conformity in Africa.

Still, I had a feeling of foreboding as I watched him play the machines ever more anxiously and search his pockets ever more desperately for coins as his losses mounted. After fifteen minutes it seemed his money, like his luck, had run out; but no, a last frantic scouring of his clothing produced a final coin. In it went, all his hopes with it, down came the handle, around spun the pictures and when they stopped a few coins clattered into the tray below.

The look of relief in the young man's face was so gratifying that, though he had lost most of his money, it was as if he had gained a victory. Now at least he has taxi fare home, I thought. Silly me. His eyes brightened, the hands continued to feed the machine and soon once again the last coin had disappeared, this time for good. A look of such disbelief and betrayal crossed the young man's face it was as if he had heard the voice of God that evening telling him he would not lose at jackpot. Forlornly he watched as others continued to play. He wandered around the room, looking in cracks and corners for stray coins, and stopped in front of my stool at the bar.

"Master, I don't have any money."

"I know," I replied, "I watched you put it all in the machine."

He smiled and waited. "Will you give me some?" he asked.

"No, I won't give you any. You'll just lose it in the machine," I answered, almost in a shout.

He didn't deny it, but stood for a minute longer to see if I meant what I said. Convinced, he went back to the machines. He shook and hit them, trying to knock loose a few coins, stuck his hand up the chute, crawled underneath and behind looking for long lost silver, until ordered out of the bar.

Fode Kande, editor of the weekly Progress newspaper, says that such addiction to the game has led to the breakup of families, loss of jobs and crime. He has begun a series of articles on the evils of jackpot. He relates one story of a man given 500 leones by his company to deposit in a bank. On his way the courier stopped in a bar to play jackpot and in an eight-hour binge lost all the money. He was so disturbed by his loss that after borrowing fifty cents for a taxi he hailed each passing cab with the word "jackpot" until informed of his error by laughing bystanders. He subsequently lost his job, and his wife of six months left him.

Kande says the gambling machines appeared in Freetown fifteen or twenty years ago, but in the last five to ten years they have proliferated to become a national mania. Most large towns have some, though nowhere else have they attained the ubiquity that they have in Freetown. Despite his articles, Kande has little hope of getting the government to ban or control the jackpots. He says the person who owns most of the machines, reputedly the richest man in the country, is President Siaka Stevens' best friend and is well-connected in other ways as well. "All the (government) ministers have their hands in his mouth," he told me.

The most he hopes for is that his articles will dissuade some people from playing jackpot, and perhaps that is all that should be done. The slot machines are not rapacious. They are

adjusted to give a seventy-five percent payback, and some badly set machines return as much as 85 percent of what they take in. With no skill involved, it is unlikely that a regular player can keep from losing money, but with such a high return it is easy to make oneself believe one is breaking even. As entertainment I find it boring, but it is cheap. One could play all night with ten leones and, if the payback percentage held true, lose only Le2.50.

The people who make money at jackpot are those who don't play. A bar owner told me he gets thirty percent of the profits from his five machines, which comes to about 180 leones a week. Taking the action on his machines as an average, if the man who runs the operation allows himself the same percentage of the profits and owns five hundred jackpots, he would be making 18,000 leones a week. (A leone is almost equivalent to a US dollar.) Such profits indicate the popularity of jackpot. If 180 leones is 30 percent of the quarter of the money played that is not returned by the machine, the five machines are taking in about 2,400 leones a week, all in ten- and twenty-cent pieces.

The machines are only harmful to those who feel compelled to play when they have no money they can afford to lose. They are some of the casualties of Freetown's infatuation with Western society. I alternately feel pity and contempt for them. The jackpot manufacturers feel only the latter emotion, apparently. The mockery is lost on almost everyone here, but one of the companies uses the head of Mad Magazine's Alfred E. Neuman as a logo. His grinning, idiotic face appears on the machines over the words Try U Luck. What Me Worry? would be as fitting.

The most popular movies here are Indian and Chinese, though their attraction is beyond the grasp of most Western viewers. Plots for the Chinese kung-fu movies are invariable, borrowed from tired Westerns. A handsome stranger comes into town, awes the citizenry with his prowess in the martial arts, confronts the local baddies—usually corrupt government officials—revealing himself to be the son of a famous warrior whom they had treacherously killed and obtaining his revenge in suitably violent fashion. Most of the movies are more tedious than even this simple plot would indicate, since the story is told in brief conversations between repetitions of stylized and fantastic hand-to-hand fighting.

Indian films are more complicated, and I find them even more boring. Indian filmmakers seem to believe their productions will be flops if they omit a single cliché churned out by Hollywood in the last fifty years. Consequently all the films are bland curries of music, dance, comedy, romance, intrigue, suspense and violence. Fitting it all in takes more than three hours. What there is of a plot usually involves an ill-fated love affair.

Of the six movie theaters in Freetown, three show Chinese and Indian films exclusively and two others use them as at least half of the standard double feature. The sixth and most expensive theater, the Strand, shows American films, except Thursdays when it has an Indian film. The Strand's manager says police movies are the most popular. Films like Magnum Force and Dirty Harry run for twenty to twenty-five days. Day of the Jackal broke records by lasting more than a month. Music shows are

well liked but draw nowhere near as many people. Films like Saturday Night Fever and Grease stay only about a week. Horror films—The Exorcist, Beyond the Grave, The Omen—also are crowd pleasers. Surprisingly, although audiences are attracted by violence, they don't like war movies. A Bridge Too Far and Battle of Midway lost money, and the manager has asked his distributor not to send him any more of the genre. Nor do people like cowboy movies here.

On the average a film at the Strand has to draw a full house for three or four nights to break even, although costlier films take longer. The latest James Bond movie to arrive cost \$11,000 and will have to draw seven full houses to pay for itself. The Strand seats about 820 people and draws about 5,000 viewers a week. Balcony seats cost Le3.30 and orchestra seats are Le1.50. Business is good; the theater makes about 2,000 leones a night. Ten years ago it was only making about 400 leones nightly. The manager attributes the increase to better awareness of what the people want to see.

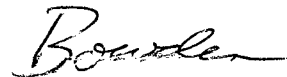
A government censorship board reviews every movie and can have them edited or banned, but deletions are few and scenes of explicit sex and violence make the screen. The Strand manager said The Comedians was banned because the authorities "don't want revolution films". Crazy Joe, a picture about the Mafia, was also forbidden because it might give some people ideas, he said.

Movies, especially the Chinese kung-fu films, have a visible effect on the public. Little children at play wave their arms in imitation of the pseudo-karate combat. Several times I have seen solitary madmen standing in the streets acting out a fight, to the amusement of everyone around. Yet after years of viewing Western-, and now Eastern-, imported mayhem, violence is still rare in Freetown. Robbery is rampant, but it is mostly the snatch-and-run variety.

Sexual attitudes are probably also influenced by the movies. The sight of a young man and woman holding hands is still uncommon, but it happens often enough to show that Western ideas about love and romance are taking hold. In this respect the movies may have the beneficial effect of enhancing young women's ideas about their roles in society and in marriage.

For most African viewers, the movies are a window into a different world that is remote but real. I saw Superman with an African friend who, literate and a trained mechanic, is more educated than the average. Walking home, he asked me if I knew the magician who could fly. Ironically, such credulity makes one harmful effect of Western movies rebound upon the country that has made most of them. More than once I have been unable to make friends believe that I don't own a gun, and I have met other Americans who have had the same experience. Such is the image of America that Africans have gotten from our films.

Regards,



Bowden Quinn