

Mouse Act" passed in 1913 to allow the temporary release of hunger-striking prisoners and therefore avoid creating martyrs for the cause. Capturing them often proved to be an ordeal for the authorities, the cats.

Meryl Streep makes a fleeting appearance as Mrs Pankhurst, the stately mouse; before she is whisked off by her bodyguard, she advises a mesmerized Maud to continue the fight. And the campaign did continue outside the parameters of the film, with Sisters Uncut throwing smoke bombs in suffragette colours at the London premiere. *Suffragette* is a sensitively cast, rousing and necessary film whose cultural contribution is all the more important in the light of Amanda Foreman's recent BBC series, *The Ascent of Woman*, which uses interviews and film footage to demonstrate the ways in which women are still fighting against being politically silenced.

At times raucously funny, *Make More Noise! Suffragettes in Silent Film* is a collection of twenty-one short movies – comedies and documentaries – from the BFI's National Archive, shown together to coincide with the release of *Suffragette*. As the co-programmer Bryony Dixon says, many of these films "were a test bed for all possible outcomes of female emancipation – they visualized the inconceivable". They also charted attitudinal changes. The first film, shot in 1899, is an anti-feminist comedy entitled "Women's Rights", depicting suffragists (played by men) so absorbed in discussing female emancipation that they do not notice the workmen who are nailing their dresses to a wooden fence. In contrast, the Tilly Girls, Alma Taylor and Chrissie White, play young women who flout the rules of feminine decorum by escaping from home, flirting with men and turning the hose on pursuing firemen, while the popular comic character Did'ums, dressed as a little girl, outwits Policeman Plod. A disgruntled hen-pecked husband's friend in "Wife the Weaker Vessel"



The Tilly Girls

of 1915 smugly announces that he will only marry an uncomplaining "gentle woman". Along comes a seemingly demure and weak lady who tricks the charmed rich man into marrying her. She is in fact the energetic "Physical Culture Phyllis", played by Chrissie White. These films are wittily and sensitively complemented by a score by Lillian Henley, whose well-timed use of the pedal in the middle of a light-hearted piano theme evokes a sense of interrupted gaiety as Emily Wilding Davison is stopped in her tracks at the Derby. In "Milling the Militants" (1913), a suffragette's husband dreams of passing laws to suppress and punish the militants – making them wear trousers and ducking them in water. His wife wakes him up, giving him and his reveries a good old rinse-out with a bucket of water – washing indeed.

West Africa header

NOO SARO-WIWA

WEST AFRICA
Word, symbol, song
British Library, until February 16, 2016

When the British unearthed the ancient terracotta Nok sculptures in a tin mining area of central Nigeria in the 1920s, they concluded that a non-African civilization must have been responsible for this elegant craftsmanship – such was the perceived backwardness and vacuity of African civilization. They couldn't have been more wrong, for the region has been home to fascinating and dynamic empires, including the Amazons of Dahomey in modern-day Benin, the Asante of Ghana and the Benin empire of Nigeria, producers of the world-famous bronze sculptures.

West Africa has exerted an immense cultural influence across the globe through the spirituality, songs, dances and rhythms diffused by its diaspora. The literary aspect of its culture, however, is often understated; the British Library is now highlighting that heritage in a new exhibition. *West Africa: Word, symbol, song* explores how West Africans have used words and art over a thousand years of this history, from Middle Age symbolic scripts, manuscripts and artworks, to the writing of Wole Soyinka and the music of the Afrobeat legend Fela Kuti, together with sound and ethnographic film recordings.

With seventeen countries and a thousand years to cover, the thematic options are endless, but the exhibition has a chronological progression, subdivided into religion, music and literature. Among this fascinating collection are a musical instrument from Gambia called the *akonting*, thought to be a likely predecessor of the banjo, and small, intricate brass weights carved in the form of crocodiles and other animals, used for weighing gold dust in Ghana. Other Ghanaian exhibits include a handsome brass decorative box covered with relief carvings that convey messages and proverbs.

One of the exhibition highlights is a beautiful leather saddlebag that encased a copy of a Qur'an which contained loose-leaf pages that could be lent and disseminated by horsemen on the move. Quirker items include a book by Sir John Laithwaite, a British politician who jotted down the religious signs and proverbs emblazoned on buses in Ghana in 1958.

One artefact points to an unknown and possibly complex civilization in Nigeria: a wooden ibis head is carved with *Nsibidi* – graphic symbols discovered in the south-eastern region. They have yet to be deciphered but seem likely to contain instructions or communications of some kind. These, along with objects such as the textiles with Guinea worm health advice printed on them, demonstrate the way in which African art fuses functionality, communication and aesthetics. Visitors can also listen to an audio recording from 1921 of "talking drums", which conveyed the poetry of the Asante people in Ghana, or watch ethnographic videos showing masquerades and the coronation of an Asante king.

In the music section, you can listen to Benin's Angélique Kidjo, explore the tonality and inflections of West African languages or hear songs from Syliphone, a state-run record label launched by Sékou Touré, Guinea's first post-colonial president, who sought to develop a national identity through a cultural policy known as "authenticité".

No exhibition of West African culture would

be complete without the inclusion of Fela Kuti, and a separate booth is devoted to the Nigerian musician, whose album covers line the outer windows. Inside, a screen broadcasts a documentary about his fight against Nigeria's military dictatorship. Pasted on the wall is the typically outspoken letter Fela wrote to Nigeria's then military ruler.

Nigeria, in fact, dominates the final section of the exhibition, which explores postcolonial culture. Along one wall is a large set of aluminium bas-relief panels by the artist Asiru Olatunde – in a nod to the famous Benin versions (contained in the British Museum), the panels depict a Yoruba folk tale.

Some of the British Library's huge African book collections are on show here for the first time: the first-edition hardback of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is on display, alongside a playful letter he wrote in Pidgin English to the Caribbean writer Andrew



A two-headed crocodile weight, used for weighing gold dust, from Ghana, c18th-20th century

Salkey; also here is a first edition of George Bernard Shaw's *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God*, which was later parodied by the Ghanaian journalist Mabel Dove Danquah in *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for Mr Shaw*.

Such challenges to colonial cultural hegemony in the twentieth century were also expressed in the development of indigenous handwriting systems: for example, the king of the Njoya kingdom in Cameroon invented a new script and language called Shu-Mom. Liberians, meanwhile, formulated the "Vai" script. More informal is a copy of a "photoplay" magazine from the 1960s, in which popular Yoruba-language "Atoka" plays are captured through an amusing sequence of posed photographs and dialogue bubbles.

Even those familiar with West Africa will learn something about this constantly evolving region; one could spend several hours marinating in this wonderful audio-visual stew.