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Urban Transformation
BRIAN LARKIN

The Plaza cinema squats on the edge of the Old City of Kano, Nigeria. Outside women sell bean cakes, men hawk cassettes, cigarettes, and oranges. Buses stop and taxis unload, disgorging passengers who hurry on to catch other buses, different taxis. 'Drop me at the Plaza.' 'Meet me at the El Dorado.' These quotidian directions are uttered by urbanites who have little interest in going to the cinema but who have internalized the fact that cinema theatres, along with mosques, the post office, banks, and other institutions of the post-colony, architecturally punctuate the city. Their built forms create an abstract skeletal structure around which the city's nervous system circulates.

Cinema is one of the quintessential technologies of modernity. In the case of Kano, it is a colonial modernity, often perceived as an un-Islamic (*kafirai*) threat to local constructions of ethnicity and religion. Kano is the largest city in northern Nigeria and while its inhabitants are mainly Hausa Muslims, it contains considerable ethnic and religious diversity. To go to the cinema in Kano is to step outside of Africa, to move beyond the moral relations of an Islamic society and into the Indian, American, and Chinese realities projected on the screen. Cinema is seen as distinctively modern because of this ability to destabilize and make people, ideas and commodities mobile. Yet at the same time cinema theatres are parochial, an intimate part of urban topography that draw around them congeries of social practices that make cinema-going an event.

In 1937, the Rex opened in Kano. Before that, films had been screened in dance halls but had no purpose-built space of their own. This opening could be seen as unremarkable, the coming to prominence of an entertainment form well established elsewhere in the world. But this ignores how moments like these were foundational in the incremental enveloping of Hausa social space by a transformative colonial one. Cinema theatres were introduced to Kano as part of a much wider transformation of the colonial public sphere. Like the beer parlours, theatres, public gardens, libraries and commercial streets that preceded them, cinema theatres created

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new modes of public association that challenged existing relations of space, gender and social hierarchy. The cinema theatre thus created new modes of sociability that had to be regulated – officially by the colonial administration and unofficially within local Hausa norms.¹

The Hausa distrust of cinema was cemented when the construction of cinema-halls was mapped on to the moral geography of Kano City. After the arrival of the British in 1903, the mud-walled city of Muslim Kano was segregated from the European township and Sabon Gari, the area where the young male migrants from the Christian south were arriving in numbers. Sabon Gari was and is an area of ill repute in Hausa eyes and stands as the moral antithesis to the *birni*, the Old City, where female seclusion is maintained, prostitution and the sale of alcohol are forbidden and the values of conservative Islam upheld. The first cinema shows took place in the Sabon Gari in dance halls where men went to meet women and alcohol was sold. This is where the Rex was built and its original application included a request for an open-air bar that would promote social recreation beyond the cinematic event. Cinema in Kano quickly established a reputation as an illicit, immoral arena which respectable people should avoid. Cinema-going was regarded as *iskanci* (dissoluteness) and was (and is) associated by many Hausa with the immoral cultural complex known as *bariki*: which includes beer parlours, dance halls, certain hotels, and male and female prostitution. The mixed-sex nature of cinema theatres meant that they were also socially unacceptable for most Hausa women. Those who did attend were seen as *karuwai* (prostitutes), and their presence

meant that pleasure and desire were to be found both on and off the screen, the erotic pleasures of one context feeding off the other.

Despite its popularity with certain sections of Hausa society then, the space of cinema was quickly saturated with an un-Islamic moral aura. There were questions about whether the apparatus itself contravened the Islamic prohibition on the creation of images. The early Hausa names for cinema, *majigi* (from magic) and *dodon bango* (evil spirits on the wall) carried the traces of this initial religious distrust, just as the official royal names of the theatres – Rex, Palace, and later Queens – indexed the conflation of technology with empire.

Cinema theatres took hold in the Hausa imagination as a social space and practice that enacted the moral qualities of the areas in which they were located. They mimicked, in profane form, symbolic and material qualities traditionally associated with mosques and markets. Just as the mosque traditionally marked out the physical boundaries of moral society and the creation of a public arena for ritual and economic activity, the cinema theatre came to take on this role in inverted fashion. Like the mosque, it created an arena for public association, for ritualistic attendance; it drew around it satellite enterprises selling food or books and magazines; and it constituted a landmark of the urban topography.

In Kano, mosques, cinema theatres and markets were (and are) threshold spaces that mediated the boundaries between northern Nigeria and the wider world. Through ritual practice, film and commodities, these institutions connected participants to spiritual and material realities across national boundaries. Yet while transnationally oriented, they were at the same time local. Kano cinema theatres were situated next to major markets, and these institutions shared the task of marking out the spatial borders between the different ethnicities, religions and races that were brought together (and then kept separate) in the segregated colonial city. The Rex for instance, was located on the border between the European township, Muslim Fagge and Christian Sabon Gari. Later, the Plaza was constructed just outside the mud walls of the Old City, separating Hausa from their non-Hausa fellow Muslims in Fagge; the El Duniya marked off Fagge from the European township; Queens separated Sabon Gari from Bompai, a commercial area, and so on.

The carefully fashioned balance between space and religion in Kano was threatened in 1953 when the construction of the Palace cinema next to Kurmi market in the Old City disrupted the boundaries on which the moral division of Hausa urban space was built. Before the Palace, there had never been any controversy over the siting of cinema houses. The Rex and the El Duniya were both located in non-Hausa areas and hundreds of Hausa youth left the Old City nightly to attend performances at these cinemas. In the Old City, the news that a cinema was to be opened there sparked outrage and a massive effort to prevent its construction. A fatwa was issued forbidding the showing of films because of the religious injunction on the creation of images, but was overruled when it came before

the Emirate Council. Petitions were signed to entreat and pressure the Emir into halting construction. The opening of the Palace was marked by violence and the Emir had to call in the police to arrest the ringleaders. Months after the opening, the police were still arresting youths who were stoning patrons of the open-air cinema.

In 1951, while the controversy over the Palace was raging, matters worsened when the El Duniya burned down, killing 331 people out of an audience of 600. The tragedy was popularly seen as divine punishment for participation in this immoral arena and the rumour quickly spread that the film being screened contained the image of the Prophet Mohammed. The tragedy spawned many other rumours which grew so strong that the colonial Government was forced to take official notice and counter them over the radio. Twice daily for two days in four different languages, the Radio Diffusion Service announced there was no truth to stories that the people handling the bodies of El Duniya victims died, or that Native Authority warders who helped in the tragedy had all gone mad, or that prisoners from Kano prison (who helped in handling the corpses) could not eat for days afterwards.

Cinema theatres seem to have an ontological security based on the solidity of an auditorium which places audiences in familiar rows underneath the spectacle of light and dark unfolding on the screen. But in reality physical spaces have to enter and take hold in the imagination before they take on social significance. They must be made to have meaning. The conflict over the siting of the Palace cinema reveals the ways in which the public sphere of colonial modernity was contested and how control of the moral dimension of urban space was often embedded in the surface of institutions of everyday mass culture. The construction of cinemas, where they were located, the stories about cinema, the act of naming them, all contain residues of the history of colonialism and the urban experience. The physical coherence of the cinema theatre, its seeming reproducibility cross-culturally, masks the dynamic process whereby this global edifice becomes localized, its bricks and mortar invested with social meaning as it is carefully placed and integrated into the colonial and postcolonial urban topography. ♦

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Notes

1. Elizabeth Thompson (*Colonial Citizens; Republican Rights; Paternal Privilege and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon*. New York: Columbia University Press. Forthcoming) and Stephen Hughes ('Policing Silent Cinema in Colonial South India.' In, *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. Ravi Vasudevan ed. 1999, Oxford University Press) provide illuminating accounts of the spatial and social significance of cinema theatres in French mandate Syria and colonial India respectively.

MISCELLANEOUS



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