# Colonialism and the Built Space of Cinema in Nigeria[1]

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"Drop me at the Plaza." "Meet me at the El Dorado." These casual directions highlight the role of cinema theaters as built spaces in the urban geography of Kano, northern Nigeria. Large, hulking buildings punctuate Kano topography. There, buses stop, taxis load-up, motorbikes deliver people in a constant circulation from home to work to market and back again. Most of these travellers have little interest in films or the theater but have internalized the demarcation of public space marked out by cinema theaters, mosques, the post-office, the Emir's palace, and other landmarks of urban infrastructure. Outside the theaters merchants, prostitutes, idlers, mechanics, customers, and films fans depend on the particular social space created by cinema for their livelihood and leisure. Around the back and on the sides boys play football against the large dark walls. Men squat and piss against a wall painted with large letters "AN HANA FISARA A NAN" (Don't piss here).

This chapter is an examination of the materiality of cinema theaters. It is about the fantasy space of cinema but by this I do not mean the magical worlds that cinema transports viewers to. Rather, I view fantasy as the energy stored in the concreteness of objects, especially the commodified elements of everyday life (see (Benjamin, 1978)). These are not just the products people buy but constitute the total

sensory experience of urban living. I examine the architectonics of cinema theaters and the arena for social interaction they create as symbolic and physical emblems of the imposition of colonial urbanization and the experience of modernity for urban Hausa in northern Nigeria

In Kano, the introduction of cinema theaters inaugurated a series of controversies: whether the practice of showing films was a diabolical, un-Islamic technology; over where theaters could be located; and over the regulation of who was allowed to attend. As a result of these controversies cinema became a symbolically unruly place. It upset gendered and racial divisions of public space by creating new modes of sociability. It offered new, Western derived forms of leisure based on a technological apparatus that was religiously questionable. The controversies it produced can be seen as moments of struggle in the reterritorialization of urban space, the attempt to reassert and redefine Hausa moral space in the face of an encroaching colonial modernity. Cinema is a technology whose place in Hausa social life had to be defined. Its mass, stories and rumors about cinema, and the words used to refer to the technology itself all contain traces of the history of colonialism and urban experience. They tell us about the way that cinema as technology entered into Hausa space and took hold in the Hausa imagination.

In African postcolonies like Nigeria, a trip to the cinema has always been trans-local, a stepping outside of Africa to places elsewhere[2]. To step from the foyer into the dark night of the cinema hall was to be magically transported into a universe where American realities, Indian emotions, and Hong Kong choreography have long occupied Nigerian cinema screens. But cinema theaters are peculiar kind of social spaces marked by a duality of presence and absence, rootedness and transport, what Lynne Kirby (Kirby, 1997) refers to as the paradox of travel without movement. Cinema is distinctively modern because of this ability to destabilize and make mobile people, ideas, and commodities. This can be threatening by eroding "the cultural distinctiveness of place," (Watts, 1996:64) but it can also reaffirm and intensify forms of belonging by providing a cultural foil against which local identities may be hardened.

Elsewhere I have approached the social space of cinema in this way, analyzing the fantasy worlds cinema transports one to by examining the ways Hausa viewers engages with Indian films as a third space lying in between the reification of Hausa tradition and Western modernity (see (Larkin, 1997)). But while often seen as engines of mobility, cinema theaters are also deeply parochial, an intimate part of

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[2] In the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, Kano mainstream cinemas were dominated by British and American films. In the 1950s cinemas began screening the odd Egyptian and Indian film. By the mid-1960s Egyptian films had disappeared and Indian films had emerged as the most popular film genre (in northern Nigeria at least) though American and some English films were still highly popular. In the 1970s Hong Kong films began to gain in popularity. When I conducted my research in the 1990s Indian films were shown five nights a week at cinemas with one night for Hong Kong films and one night for American films (mostly cheap action films). African films have rarely been shown regularly on mainstream cinemas (the notable exception to this is in Nigeria is the case of Yoruba films - a small "imperfect" cinema which emerged from the Yoruba travelling theater tradition. For the most, part these films were not screened in mainstream theaters but in rented halls formerly used for theatrical performances.

urban topography that draw around them congeries of social practices that make cinema-going an event that always exceeds (and sometimes has little to do with) the films that are shown on the screen. My focus here is on the "materiality of specific domains" that direct attention to the "sensual and material qualities of the object", through which "we are able to unpick the more subtle connections with cultural lives and values" (Miller, 1997:9). Though Hollywood and Bollywood and other national cinemas have indeed devoted great energy into regularizing relations of textual address in the attempt to create a homogenous viewing audience, in practice the experience of cinema is still profoundly local. This is because cinema theaters, while commodified, do not offer material objects we can take home with us but an emotional experience based on a sensory environment regulated by specific relations of lighting, vision, movement, and sociality[3]. By analyzing the built space of cinema theaters and the struggle over where they were sited on the Kano landscape I wish to shift the study of cinema toward the social practices the theaters create. I examine how specific cinematic environments are produced and use this to explore the nature of colonial urbanism.

# Cinema, the phenomenology of the surface and colonial modernity

Objects that were once new and once symbolized modern life but whose historical moment has passed become inadvertent but dense signifiers of transformations in social structure. Walter Benjamin built a powerful hermeneutics around these sorts of objects, around the interrogation of obsolescence – objects swollen with the force of history, but whose significance had ebbed with transformations in social and economic structure. According to his friend Adorno, Benjamin created a "petrified...or obsolete inventory of cultural fragments" that provided concrete embodiments of historical process or "manifestations of culture" (cited in (Buck-Morss and Benjamin, 1989:58)). Benjamin shared this evocative theorizing of material culture with Siegfried Kracauer who also pioneered the historico-philosophical interrogation of the marginal, the momentary and the concrete. Like Benjamin, Kracauer was interested in surface phenomena and argued that their marginal, mass produced nature was revelatory of the social order. "The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined...from an analysis of its unconscious surface-level expressions," he wrote in his essay 'The Mass Ornament' arguing that these "expressions...by virtue of their unconscious nature, provide unmediated access to the fundamental substance of the state of things

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[3] The Russian film historian Yuri Tsivian (1994) provides an elegant account of cinemagoing as a sensory activity paying attention to the temperature of the auditorium, the placing of the projector, the quality of light and the nature of aural and visual interference.

(Kracauer and Levin, 1995:75).

For Kracauer and Benjamin, the quotidian landscapes of life--posters on the walls, shop signs, dancing girls, bestsellers, panoramas, the shape, style and circulation of city buses--are all surface representations of the fantasy energy by which the collective perceives the social order. This structure creates an interpenetrated analysis of urban culture in modernity, one in which strikingly different phenomena are structurally linked. The stained concrete of Nigerian cinema theaters, the open-air screens, their proximity to markets reveal knowledge of "the state of things" which in Kano refers to the imposition of a colonial, capitalist modernity. Cinema theaters were part of a much wider transformation of the restructuring of urban space and leisure practices under colonial urbanism (Martin, 1995; Mitchell, 1991; Thompson, 2000). Like beer parlors, theaters, railways and buses, public gardens, libraries and commercial streets that preceded them, cinema theaters created new modes of public association. In a strict Muslim area such as Kano, for instance, where female seclusion was, and is, a defining moral characteristic of Muslim Hausa space, the institution of mixed -sex and mixed-race public spaces profoundly challenged existing gender and social hierarchies. Cinema theaters thus created new modes of sociability that had to be regulated - officially by the colonial administration and unofficially within local Hausa norms.

As a new mode of public association in the colonial arena, cinema theaters were unruly and often contentious social spaces but this disruption was not something that was restricted to colonial arenas. Scholars of early cinema have made the convincing argument that the rise of cinema must be seen in relation to the wider transformation in urbanism, employment, consumption and leisure that occurred during the *fin de siècle* (see, for example, (Allen, 1983; Bowser, 1990; Chanan, 1996; Friedberg, 1993; Griffiths, 1996; Hansen, 1991; Kirby, 1997; Koszarski, 1990; Kuhn, 1998; Musser, 1990; Tsivian and Taylor, 1994). For interesting work on cinematic space outside of the West see (Armbrust, 1998; Himpele, 1996; Hughes, 1999; Thompson, 2000)). Miriam Hansen (Hansen, 1991) argues that in the United States the rise of cinema generated considerable anxiety about the increasing presence of women in public practices of work and leisure. Cinema played a role in "changing the boundaries and possibilities of public life" especially for women whose "relations to the public sphere were governed by specific patterns of exclusion."

The introduction of new technologies and new sets of social relations that accompany them is often a fraught and anxiety ridden process as societies come to terms with the new political and social possibilities that technologies bring. Reactions by local Arab, African or Asian populations against the introduction of cinema cannot be glossed as the anti-modern stance of traditional societies toward modernity but more properly should be interrogated as part of a common transnational anxiety toward modernity. What is necessary is to realize that the sort of social spaces cinemas become is the result of a process, an interaction between

particular rules of sociability and local relations of gender, religion and class.   And this is particularly true for the distinctive dynamics brought about by the racial and political context of colonial rule.

To give one clear example, the rise of cinema in the United States is famously rooted in the leisure practices of working class immigrants.   One of the classic themes in cinema historiography has examined the efforts by early entrepreneurs to transform cinema from a working class to a bourgeois form of entertainment.  This transformation was effected by a variety of means: from the construction of cinema "palaces" that resembled the grandeur of theaters; to the seeking of a female, rather than a male audience; to use of the bourgeois form of novels as a model for cinematic narrative (see, for example, (Hansen, 1991; Sklar, 1975)) In the colonial context, however, the trajectory was just the opposite: in most cases cinema was introduced as a specifically foreign, colonial form of entertainment intended for European and native elites.   Only after it became with this class were auditoriums constructed (or opened) for the masses.   Instead of being a marked lower class activity, then, it was often identified as an elite, racially coded, leisure practice. Despite this, in most places cinemagoing quickly became a local, indigenous activity (and in the case of India most notably, film-making itself become an indigenous phenomenon).

# The Built Space of Cinema

In its materiality, its reproducibility over space and time and its ubiquitous presence on metropolitan landscapes, the cinema theater appears reassuringly familiar, a self-effacing transnational technology that seemingly belongs to no particular country.   The ontological security of theaters comes from the formal solidity of an auditorium that places audiences in a familiar spatial configuration: arranged in rows sitting beneath the ethereal spectacle of light and dark unfolding on the screen.   In most parts of the world the theater has become second nature; we no longer query its existence or imagine a time when it could be queried, when its innovation brought with it a powerful transformative capacity.   But this second nature is illusory and masks the process by which physical, public space becomes social: the forgetting of history in the creation of myth (Barthes, 1972).   The taken-for-grantedness of cinema theaters masks the historical conditions of colonial rule that made the technology possible.

The erection of cinema theaters in colonial cities created new social spaces of sexual, ethnic, religious and racial intermixing making them ambivalent institutions that often threatened existing hierarchies and boundaries about the public use of space.   This ambivalence is seen very simply in the diverse ways colonies attempted to regulate the transformative capacity of these new institutions and reconstitute them within existing gender hierarchies.   In India, for instance, separate entrances were

built so that women could enter and exit without sharing the same social space as male cinema-goers (Arora, 1995). In Damascus, by contrast, the same concern over female mobility and the threat of sexual intermixing was limited by reserving afternoon performances for women only (Thompson, 2000). The same threat was contained in Lamu, Kenya, by making one night a week "ladies night" (Fuglesang, 1994), and in northern Nigeria the immoral connotations of sexual intermixing were so intense that cinema theaters never became socially acceptable for women. This variety of structural and social regulations points to the necessity of interrogating the social space of the cinema theater, neither taking it for granted nor seeing it simply as a colonizing technology. Rather, cinema theaters are produced, and in the struggle over that production tensions over colonial urbanization are foregrounded.

In October 1937, the British colonial administration received an application from a Lebanese businessman for the construction of the Rex cinema, what was to become the first purpose-built cinema in Kano. The Rex was built as an open air cinema, what was known as a "garden cinema," and consisted of two rooms as well as a bar which thebusinessman proposed "to build quite decently and with stones" [Nigerian National Archives, #171; The West Africa Picture Co., #172]. This exhibition format was modified two years later when J. Green Mbadiwe, a hotel owner in Kaduna, the capital of Northern Nigeria, applied for a license to build a more formal and elaborate hotel and cinema complex in Kano. It was to include "all the latest amenities usually associated with first-class Hotels and Cinemas in the Aristocratic Countries of the world" (Nigerian National Archives, ). His application was denied but his proposal gives witness to the conceptual construct of what constituted a cinema space in Nigeria at this time. In the proud insistence on the quality of construction material and the boast that Kano cinemas would be like "first-class" cinemas in the West, the applications signify the elite, European clientele that the owners intended to attract. The emphasis on first class quality found in "the Aristocratic nations of the world" promised reassuring familiarity for Europeans and created a spectacle of grandeur for local Hausa filmgoers. And the inclusion of a bar would have offered recreation other than the cinematic event itself intended for Europeans only who could "come out and enjoy the cool air and evening." (Fuglesang, 1994) The design and social function of these early theaters was intimately associated with another public space of colonial modernity: the hotel. Like the hotel the cinema is a public space of anonymity, a transient coming together of people unconnected by relations of kin, religion or ethnicity. Making the cinema like a hotel means that the experience was not organized solely around watching a film but was part of wider complex of leisure activities that emerged for expatriate recreation.

As a product of a colonial ideology of transformation, the architectonics of the cinema theater expressed the particular historical conditions of colonial rule. Cinema as a social space helped create a new public, "the imagining of human beings as, in principle, an indefinitely extensible horizon of anonymous and interchangeable

members" (Barber, 1997:348). Kracauer referred to this public as a "mass" arguing that the spatial organization of the audience in patterns of "tier upon ordered tier subordinated the individuality of the audience member to the totality of the mass" (Kracauer, 1998; Kracauer and Levin, 1995:79). The arrangement of seating in cinemas reflected the new bodily configurations of colonial rule, though of course could never be contained by them. The attempt at constructing an abstract and equivalent public was often frustrated by colonial and Hausa practices of hierarchy and distinction, for instance the creation of specific seating for whites only that were embedded in the conception of cinematic space.

In the highly stratified colonial world one immediate problem of common public space was the potential of racial mixing. What were the possible consequences of mixed race audiences? In response to people's fears the Lebanese owners of the Rex originally intended their cinema for European use and finally divided the exhibition schedule so that two nights a week were reserved for Europeans and Arabs and two for African audiences. This segregation was intentional but informal and was regulated mainly through the pricing of seats.[4] J. Green Madiwe went further proposing to divide his auditorium into two discrete compartments, one for Europeans and one for Africans, which would be approached through separate entrances. The only connection was a fire door but this, he assured the authorities, "will be always locked" (Kracauer, 1998; Kracauer and Levin, 1995:79). This attempt at encoding practices of racial segregation into the architectonics of the theater space reveals how the solid materiality of the cinema theater expresses local ideologies of (in this case) racial hierarchy. The Secretary of the Northern provinces who wrote to the Chief Secretary in Lagos with a response to fire safety regulations reveals stunningly how the physical space of cinema can be the outcome of a specifically colonial situation of racial prejudice.

> As regards seating:- In view of the natural tendency of some Africans when in a crowd to be seized by panic at the mere rumour of danger it is thought that in Cinema halls in Nigeria much wider spaces should be allowed between fixed seats, wider alleyways and more and wider means of exit than as obligatory in England (Nigerian National Archives and M.I.A., ; Secretary Northern Provinces, 1932).

In Kano, the British imperial presence was reflected in the naming of theaters themselves, as was the wider Islamic world (colonialism and Islam representing the two great world systems with which Hausa were intimately involved). The first cinema in Kano following the Rex was the Palace and later came the Queens

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[4] "It is probably true to say that if an African sought admission on one of these [European] nights and was prepared to pay 3/6d he would not be refused admission but the number of Africans who would wish to pay 3/6d admission when they can attend exactly the same performance on another night for 2/-, or 1/- or 6d is very small" (Nigerian National Archives and M.I.A., ). Informal segregation by pricing was a common practice in South India also (Stephen Hughes, personal communication). This raises the question of whether the practice was an Empire wide means of keeping races separate while avoiding the negative ideological connotations of hardline racial segregation.

Theater. These names encoded imperial splendor into the spectacle promised by the experience of cinema[5]. Other Kano cinemas were given Arabic names such as the El Duniya (the world) and, most recently, the Marhaba (Arabic for welcome which differs from the Hausa word: *maraba*), referencing the Arab ownership of cinema theaters and the cultural connections between Hausa and the Arab world. (long part of the imperialist imaginary as the lost city of fabulous wealth waiting to be 'discovered'), Plaza and Orion connote travel and movement and are titular embodiments of the promise of transportation, of removal from the local and the mundane which is the hallmark of cinematic escapism. Only one cinema in Kano has an identifiably local connection, Wapa (named after the area where the cinema is located).

# The Evolution of Urban Kano

The spatial arrangement of cinema theaters in urban Kano was mapped onto a terrain that was already the site of intense confrontation. This tension began in 1903 when, after conquest, the British began to construct a modern city outside the mud walls of Kano. The British divided Kano into what was administratively, and symbolically a dual city divided between the walled *birni* (Old City) and a modern Township. The Old City was dominated by the political rule of the Emir and the economic importance of the trading families based around the Kurmi market, one of the major pre-colonial nodes in the trans-Saharan trade. In the old city pre-British custom remained strong and, under the principles of indirect rule, was actively protected from the transformations of colonialism. Missionization and Western education were restricted; families still lived in domestic compounds which were largely passed down through inheritance rather than rented or sold[6]; female seclusion and strict sexual segregation was the norm to be aspired to; prostitution and the sale of alcohol were forbidden and the values of conservative Islam upheld.

Economically, ethnically and culturally the Township provided a strong contrast to this pattern. It was divided into several different areas: a commercial area, 'Asiatic' quarters for Syrians and Lebanese, the Sabon Gari for non-Hausa Nigerians, and a European residential area. As Kano grew under colonial rule it did so slowly in the Old City and exponentially in the Township. It was in this latter area that the new banks, companies and businesses were established that connected Northern Nigeria to the wider capitalist world economy and this area became the

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[5] It could be argued that these names could refer to the Hausa monarchical system both pre and post-Islamic. It is probably true that the names were chosen for the multiple references: to British imperial splendor and local Hausa authority, but tellingly the names are in English rather than the local equivalent: the Latin Rex (the term emphasizes the connection with the British royal family) instead of *Sarki*, Palace, instead of *Gidan Sarki*, and Queen, instead of *Sarauniya*.

[6] In 1946, the Kano District Officer, C.W. Rowling reported in his survey of Kano Land Tenure that the area to the East of the Emir's compound "still reveals a clear picture of pre-British custom: family compounds, long occupied and still in individual shares, no renting, little pledging and sale only to a local family member needing more house room...by one who is dying out" (Frishman, 1977:116-117).

motor of the Kano economy. It was here that alongside the factories and businesses, new modes of leisure were created for workers to enjoy. For the Europeans there were gentlemens's clubs, and restaurants; for the African workers, beer parlors and dancing clubs.

Erecting this new city entailed hardening a series of infrastructural, architectural and symbolic cleavages in Kano. The red and brown ochres of mud buildings in the Old City contrasted greatly with the lush greenery of the residential European sections of the G.R.A. (the European residential area) and the hastily constructed barracks of Sabon Gari. Where the Old City was full of narrow, winding mud alleys, the GRA was built on Ebeneezer Howard's garden city model with sweeping crescents, star shaped intersections and large, ventilated residences set back from the road by gardens (Frishman, 1977). Sabon Gari differed again, built on a grid system reflecting its utilitarian position in the colonial order and occupied by young, male migrants renting space in multi-occupant buildings. The openness of the European area was opposed to the congestion of the African areas and segregation was sealed by the construction of buffer zones of open land 440 yards wide[7] that separated European from African areas. Fear of the physical contagion meant that all Africans were prevented by law from residing in a European area overnight (except for domestic servants).

# An enclave of disrepute

In 1975, the Hausa scholar Ibrahim Tahir described his opinion of the status of Sabon Gari. It was, he wrote,

> the home of strangers, on their way to assimilation, Nigerian and foreign Christians, the European Christian, *Nasara* or Nazarene, the urban drifter, the wage worker, the prostitute and the pimp. It contains churches, beer houses and dance halls, hotels and brothels. There deviant conduct prevails and custom does not have a stronghold (Tahir, 1975:110).

His opinion did not much differ from the 1926 view of the British Resident of Kano who described Sabon Gari as "an enclave of disrepute," that was full of "dissolute characters."[8] For Kano Hausa, Sabon Gari has come to stand as the moral inversion proper social relations a colonially created spatial "other" against which Hausa Muslim tradition can take shape and be defined.

Sabon Gari was created in 1912 brought about by the political requirements of Lord Lugard's theory of indirect rule. In return for political allegiance, the British

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[7] T.S. Rice, Memorandum on Segregation and Town Planning, 1921. KNA Kanolocauth 5/2 142/1923 (Frishman, 1977).

[8] The Resident Alexander of Kano in a speech to the Conference of Residents in 1926 coined this phrase, which may well sum up the entire symbolic value of Sabon Gari in the eyes of Kano Hausa ((Resident Alexander of Kano, 1927) cited in (Allyn, 1976:138)).

promised to preserve Hausa political, religious and cultural structures and protect them from alien influences, especially Westernization (Lugard, 1922).[9] Southerners were seen as necessary because they "spoke, read, and wrote the language of the colonizer" (Ubah, 1982:54) but while this made them useful to colonialists, the British were as suspicious as the Hausa of the cultural influence of this modernizing population. Besides speaking English, southerners wore European clothes, placed a high premium on western education and were largely Christian. With no religious injunction against alcohol, and dominated (originally) by male migrants, Sabon Gari became the main area in the city to buy alcohol, and the enclave became known for its dance halls, beer parlors and prostitution.

Segregation *between Africans* was seen as the best way to preserve Hausa religious and cultural values by creating a separate social and ethnic arena from which Hausa were banned from living. As Allyn sees it: "Controlled in this way...the aliens would provide necessary services for the government and European firms but would have limited opportunity for contaminating the highly-regarded [by the British] culture of their Hausa-speaking neighbors"[10] (Allyn, 1976:87). Administratively Sabon Gari was placed under local British authority and legal jurisdiction and the area was kept culturally, religiously and politically apart from its Hausa neighbor with little chance of mixing. Hausa looked down on southerners as "black Europeans" alienated from their own culture, while southerners returned the condescension stereotyping Hausa society as backward and traditional. Their liminal position of southerners in the north is made palpable by the oxymorons of "native foreigner" and "alien native" by which Sabon Gari residents were officially categorized[11].

It was onto this highly politicized grid that cinema theaters were mapped. Cinema theaters were and are located primarily outside of the Old City and in the new Western-oriented areas. Interestingly, nearly all Kano cinemas are located on the borderlands of ethnic areas, alongside the markets that often act as a formal border separating one part of Kano from another. The Rex, the first cinema in Kano (now torn down) was built next to Sabon Gari market effectively straddling the border between three areas and peoples: the southern Nigerians of Sabon Gari; the Arabs and non-Hausa northern Nigerians living in Fagge and the Europeans living in

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[9] In keeping with this philosophy, European companies were not allowed to trade within the Old City, Christian missionaries were restricted in their activities in the North, and the Kano Emir retained political control over the Northern Muslim areas of Kano (the Old City and Fagge, a traditional trading area to the north of the city).

[10] British colonial officials operating in northern Nigeria were often contemptuous of southern Nigerians who they saw as rejecting their "African" heritage while not quite becoming "European". The hierarchical structure of Islamic northern Nigeria was much more amenable to British prejudices and consequently efforts were made to preserve it. "We want no violent changes," wrote one Governor-General of Northern Nigeria, "no transmogrification of the dignified and courteous Moslem into a trousered burlesque with a veneer of European civilization. We do not want to replace a patriarchal and venerable system of government by a discontented and irresponsible democracy of semi-educated politicians." ((Bell, 1910/1911) cited in (Allyn, 1976:51)).

[11] Sabon Gari is an exemplary illustration of Simmel's (1950) theory of the stranger. Simmel argues that the stranger, who is often a trader embodies the conflictual principles of nearness and remoteness, that while being outside, he or she is always "an element of the group itself" (Simmel, 1950:402).

Bompai, a European industrial area and commercial district. Similarly, the Orion and Plaza cinemas were built just outside the gates of the Old City, one near *Kofar Wambai* market, the other near *Kantin Kwari* market, on the boundary between the Old City and Fagge. The El Dorado, located on the edge of Sabon Gari, marked off that area from Bompai, as did the Queens a mile or so to the north. The El Duniya (now destroyed) was also located close to Sabon Gari market, separating it from Fagge, and Fagge from the Commercial District. Cinema theaters physically occupied liminal, transgressive spaces. They were close to Hausa areas, so that Muslim cinemagoers could have access to them, but they were kept separate and over time, the illicitness the cinemas themselves worked to harden and exemplify the religious, racial and cultural segregation of colonial (and postcolonial) Kano

## The Moral Aura of Cinematic Space

From their inception, cinema theaters in Kano were saturated with the moral ambience of the areas in which they were located, mainly Sabon Gari and Fagge. The first film screenings took place in Sabon Gari, in irregular venues such as dance halls, such as the Elsiepat, where they were sandwiched in as entertainment between dances and prize-giving [12]. By 1934, however, cinema had become popular among enough that the British Resident's of Kano could report that films were being shown "with considerable frequency" (Nigerian National Archives, 1934), and within three years the first purpose-built cinema, the Rex, was opened. The Rex, showed four films a week in an open-air theater adjacent to Sabon Gari market. Initially, performances were informally racially segregated with two nights reserved for non-Africans (Europeans and Syrians) and two for African audiences. A garden bar was established and during the early days, alcohol was served, but the British authorities were unsure how to restrict the sale of alcohol to Africans while permitting European consumption (Nigerian National Archives, 1934). Consequently a formal ban was placed on the sale of alcohol at cinemas which exists up until today.

The Rex cinema was situated on the edge of Sabon Gari, placing it in an area that for Hausa was culturally out of bounds. Despite this, or perhaps because of it cinema quickly became popular among poor Hausa youth and indeed by the mid-1940s cinemagoing was stereotyped as a cheap, poor man's entertainment, to be avoided by people in positions of respect. "The local outlook is as follows," wrote one colonial official in the early 1950's. "The intelligent and educated malams (Muslim religious teachers) simply do not go....They disapprove of the sort of low-type Hausa that revels in the cinema...." (Kano State History and Culture Bureau (HCB), ; 1954). The low class, mixed sex nature of the cinema theater meant that it

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[12] This mode of exhibition mimics the history of film in the United States and Britain where the first films were often shown as part of wider program of burlesque (see (Hansen, 1991)), or vaudeville (see (Chanan, 1996)), sandwiched between singers, comedians and dancers so that they were only one element of the evening's entertainment.

became socially unacceptable for most Hausa women. Those who did attend were seen as karuwai ('independent women/prostitutes'), and their presence added significantly to the illicit nature of the arena. Sexual availability and sexual activity within the cinema meant that pleasure and desire were to be found both on and off the screen, the erotic pleasures of one context feeding off of the other.

Cinemagoing became established as a social activity, an experience that was always much more than the viewing of the film itself. "Among a large youthful class of Kano City, Fagge and Sabon Gari," the Kano Resident Featherstone remarked in 1948, "it has become quite the thing to go to the Cinema quite regardless of whether they understand what they see or hear or not" (Kano State History and Culture Bureau (HCB), ; Resident of Kano E.K. Featherstone, 1948). Featherstone's paternalistic disapproval of Hausa audiences misses the importance of cinemagoing as a social, as well as a visual, event. One viewer told Featherstone that although he did not always understand the films being shown, "he went regularly to the cinema to be seen and to see his friends". This social activity was taking place in a particular social space that drew its moral aura from its social and moral place on an urban landscape in the process of transformation. One educated Hausa man who went regularly to the cinema in the late 1940s told me that cinemagoing involved leaving the safe confines of the old city and crossing from a moral to an immoral space (the Sabon Gari). For him this was an intentional act that involved a radical attitude toward Hausa authority and Islamic orthodoxy. Defined as undesirable by the values of orthodox Hausa Islam, the pleasure of going to the cinema was thus highly local, an intimate experience of illicitness that framed the spectacle of watching the film and which derived from the peculiar nature of Hausa colonial urbanization.

Religious questions about the ontology of the cinematic apparatus itself contributed to the wariness with which this colonial technology was greeted in mainstream Hausa society. Since the early days of British conquest, part of what Barkindo (1993) has termed the "passive resistance" of conservative Islamic teachers to colonial rule had taken the form of intense resistance to the new commodities introduced by colonialists. Hiskett (1984) relates that elderly Muslim moralists condemned to hell-fire Muslims who used hurricane lamps, battery flashlights, starch, or wore buttons on their shirts. Nasiru Kabara, a prominent Kano sheikh who served on the first colonial censorship board similarly told me that 'local malams' (by which he meant poorly educated, neighborhood Islamic teachers) condemned cinema because they were unsure whether the images on screen were true or false. According to their logic, if someone was killed in a film they thought he might actually be dead. If not, then film was magic and because Islam was against magic then film was haram (forbidden) (Sheikh Nasiru Kabara, 1995). Many also believed that cinematic representation contravened the Islamic prohibition on the creation of images and idols.[13]

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[13] Although the Qur'an itself does not explicitly forbid the making of representations, the hadiths (the sayings and deeds of the Prophets) are explicitly negative about the status of artists (see (Bravmann, 1974; Grabar, 1973)).

For Kabara this religious insistence on the blasphemous, magical nature of the rational technology of cinema was a mark of ignorance of both the world at large and Islam in particular. But the early Hausa names for cinema - *majigi*, derived from the word magic[14], and *dodon bango*, literally, 'evil spirits on the wall'[15] - reveal how popular the sense of the enchantment of cinema was. It reveals powerfully the symbolic layers that saturated cinema so that it could only be experienced through its associations with Christianity, paganism, and colonial rule.

In the segregated world of colonial Kano, cinemagoing was a transgressive activity for Hausa viewers. It was one of the few leisure activities shared by both Europeans and Africans, a fact that was greeted with ambivalence by Europeans (Larkin, n.d.) and Hausa alike   While actual performances were segregated as a matter of general colonial practice, the day following a European performance, African audiences filed in to watch the same film in the same venue. This allowed African participation in a form of leisure activity that was originally designed to be for Europeans only and was a marked contrast to the colonial clubs and sports events from which Africans were effectively excluded.   Cinema also became defined by Hausa as part of *bariki* culture, marked by *iskanci* or dissoluteness. *Bariki* derives from the English word barracks and refers to a moral complex of activities from pagan spirit possession (*bori*), to male and female prostitution, and dancing and alcohol consumption . These practices became associated with the new barracks that were constructed to house young migrant workers to the North resulting in a new transgressive cultural form.

The spatial and social context of the emergence of cinema theaters in Kano created an illicit aura, which dovetailed nicely with conservative Hausa distrust of European technologies.

# The *Palace, El Duniya*, and the Maintenance of Hausa Moral Space

The introduction of cinema theaters in Kano intervened in an ongoing conflict over the moral definition of urban space under colonialism.[16] How cinema theaters were to be built, what they were to show, and whether they could sell alcohol were all issues of formal regulation by which the transformative spatial and social

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[14] Later the name began to be applied mainly to the British Government mobile cinemas that travelled the cities and rural areas screening educational and propaganda films.

[15] Both terms were later replaced by the more neutral *sinima* or *silima*.

[16] In using "moral" I refer to two things. Cinema in Kano is defined as an immoral, sexualized space, one that (unlike in the United States) never achieved social legitimation.  On another, underlying level, 1 follow Beidelman's (1993) concept of morality as the set of images and practices through which people both comprehend their world and act within it in ways that conform and subvert their moral understanding. Space, for Beidelman, is a 'moral metaphor', a social product that encodes the imagined order of society and personhood and reveals basic ideas about, and conflicts between, the individual and society. Beidelman's assertion of the active presence of the imagination in moral space has the advantage of foregrounding the concept of space as formed by human action, as something *produced.*

ideologies of colonialism were embodied and enacted. Conflicts within the Hausa community over where theaters were to be located and who could attend them are best seen as attempts at the moral reterritorialization of an urban space that was rapidly expanding outside of Hausa control. Appadurai (Appadurai, 1996) has referred to this process as the "production of locality" which, he argues, involves the assertion of socially organized power over places that are potentially chaotic. The mediation of cinema as a moral space was an attempt to reassert the Muslim basis of Hausa life in opposition to the encroachment of non-Muslim (both European, and southern Nigerian) cultural and religious values. Cinema theaters became markers of neighborhoods, embodying the moral qualities that allowed those neighborhoods to exist. For urban Hausa the cinematic experience was (and is) embedded in the history of ongoing debate over the nature and regulation of urban public space.

In 1949, a Lebanese cinema distributor wrote the Resident, Kano Emirate, asking for permission to build a cinema, The Palace, within the old city, in Jakara quarters, next to Kurmi market. When the application for the Palace was received, cinemagoing was well established in Kano; many Hausa regularly left the old city to travel to one of two cinemas located outside in Waje. The uniqueness of this application was that the Palace was to be the first cinema theater constructed within the confines of the old city. I can date the application and the opening of the Palace from the colonial archives in Kaduna that contain copies of the application file. However the story of the Palace I engage with rests on rumors, and prejudice, stories and memories that do not provide an objective history of the Palace as much as they reveal the social place that it and other cinemas occupy in the social imagination. Rumors about cinemas, stories that have come down from parent to child, are a form of local hermeneutics. They are quasi-religious allegories by which people divine the 'real' motives underlying phenomenal events.

The Emir's decision to allow the construction of the Palace cinema provoked a strong backlash in different sections of the Hausa community. Kano *ulama* (religious leaders) were outraged by the penetration of this disruptive, sexual arena into the Islamic space of the old city. The more conservative among them issued a fatwa (religious teaching) forbidding the showing of films and citing the religious injunction on the creation of images as evidence that the technology itself was kafirai (pagan). According to a story I was told, this fatwa was overruled when it came before the Emirate council despite the fact that the Kano Emir at the time, Abdullahi, was widely known to be socially conservative. Abdullahi's decision then sparked its own set of rumors including one that Abdullahi was forced into the decision as a result of pressure from the British Resident (Adamu, 1996).

In 1951, while the controversy over the Palace was raging, but before the cinema was actually open, matters were brought to a symbolic head when the El Duniya cinema burned down killing 331 people[17] in an audience of 600. The

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[17] See, (Nigerian National Archives and Justice Percy E. Hubard, ). See also, (Nigerian National Archives, ).

government enquiry that followed established that the cause of the fire was flammable nitrate films that caught fire in the projection room and spread along the ceiling. Hausa complicity in the tragedy was reinforced by the fact that 82 percent of the cinema audience during the afternoon performance were Hausa, not Southern Nigerian or European. The youngest was only nine years old.

The rational, functional explanation of the colonial state for why the disaster occurred was accepted by Hausa as explaining how but not why the disaster occurred. In the context of the growing controversy over the Palace it was widely believed by many that the fire was direct divine retribution for Hausa participation in illicit and immoral activity. The tragedy became seen as a judgement about the growing Westernization of Hausa society and a series of rumors emerged to explain the tragedy. Most common, and still widely believed, was the accusation that the film being screened that night in the El Duniya contained the image of the Prophet Mohammed, the colonial technology of representation being harnessed for blasphemous ends. Others believed that during construction of the theater people passing every day cursed (*tsine*) the theater and the theater was engulfed not just by flames but by the combined magical force of these curses.[18]

In a religious society such as Kano, where God's divine intervention in the material world is an everyday occurrence, rumors and stories become part of a critical discourse in which everyday events are interrogated. Stories about the El Duniya represent conflict and ambivalence about the Western cultural arena that was infiltrating the Hausa moral world. They underscore the profane nature of cinematic representation, making it guilty of the heresy of representing Mohammed. These rumors 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 the 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 (Nigerian National Archives, ). Stories about the El Duniya became part of the informal moral economy that regulated the evolution of cinema in Kano.

On the July 2, 1952, a year after the El Duniya burned down, the Palace finally opened after months of controversy. When the opposition to the cinema turned violent, the Emir was forced to call in the police to arrest youths who were demonstrating against the opening (Adamu, 1996). Three months later, the British Superintendent of police reported that ever since the Palace opened, youths outside the open-air theater had been regularly stoning patrons inside. What was worse, he complained, was that the *alkali* (Muslim judge) to whom the cases were being

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[18] The power to curse (*tsine*) is a powerful magical attribute in Hausa society as elsewhere in Africa. Certain people are believed to be have the magical power to make their curses come true, though if they are not evil people, they may have this ability and not realize it. One person explained the rumor to me by saying that so many people were cursing the construction of the El Duniya that the combined weight of all these curses brought the theater down.

reported was letting the youths go free and that it was difficult for the police to ensure "good order" during cinema performances (Nigerian National Archives, ). Ironically, or perhaps inevitably, the Palace became the immoral social space that its opponents feared. It became a notorious place where, as one friend said to me, men would go to drink alcohol, take drugs and engage in sex with women and other men ("There! There! Right there in the seat next to you!"). In the early 1980's the governor of Kano State, Sabo Bakin Zuwo, who came from Kano's old city and who was a veteran of the anti-Palace campaign, closed down the cinema and, in a grand populist gesture, converted it into a hospital clinic. Since that time no cinema theater has been opened in the old city[19] and to this day hundreds of Hausa youths travel nightly through the mud gates marking the city's boundaries to cinemas that lie outside in Sabon Gari, Fagge and Nassarawa.

The attempt to resist the construction of the *Palace* cinema represents an effort by Hausa Muslims to re-establish the moral, spatial equilibrium of urban Kano society. The growth of a metropolis *outside* of what formerly constituted the city, the shift in economic and political balance from the Old City to the Township and Waje, and the rise of a substantial migrant population of "native foreigners" who owed little allegiance to existing political structures (some of whom openly mocked local religious and cultural practices), helped to create a situation where the assertion of Hausa control over a political and social world under threat became increasingly important. When the Palace as a foreign, immoral, and potentially irreligious institution was built within the Old City, it threatened to erode the carefully produced social, religious and political division between the Old City and Waje, collapsing two very different moral spaces and making protest almost inevitable.

After the controversy over the *Palace*, Lebanese entrepreneurs never attempted to situate a theater in the Old City again. As a compromise, two theaters were built *just* outside the city walls: the *Orion* in Kofar Wambai and the *Plaza* in Fagge This construction is a testimonial to the fact that since the 1950s until the present Hausa people have made up the dominant cinema-going population in Kano. Despite the fact that cinema theaters occupy an ambiguous moral position in Hausa society, certainly much more than they do in Yoruba or Ibo society, cinema-going has never waned in its popularity for Hausa youth. To go and see Indian films at the *Marhaba* or at *Plaza* is recognized by Ibos, Lebanese and even Indian expatriates, as a *Hausa* form of social activity.

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[19] In Sani Mainagge, the Kano State History and Culture Bureau (HCB) operates an open air theater which it uses for cultural performances such as plays and dances by the famous Koroso dance troupe. When it is not being used by the HCB, videos of Hausa dramas and Indian and Hong Kong films are screened there through a projection unit, making it something like a cinema but with the patina and authority of a government institution.

# Conclusion

Cinema theaters in Kano are not discrete buildings but integrated nodes in an urban environment from which they draw their significance and, indeed, which they help to define. As the site for screening fantastic texts of love and adventure, cinema theaters project Hausa audiences into the imagined realities of American, Indian and British culture (see (Larkin, 1997)). Here my focus has been on the place of theaters as part of a wider urban materiality produced by, and thus expressive of, transformations in colonial modernity. Their social significance cannot be divorced from the other technologies and public spaces produced under colonial rule. Cinema theaters in Kano came into being only twenty years after the construction of the Kano-Lagos railroad and were built in the areas created for the masses of male migrants brought into Kano; they were sited alongside the new colonially constructed markets marking out the borders and moral qualities of the new colonially constructed metropolis; and they formed part of the construction of new modes of sexual and ethnic interaction produced by the transformation in urban public space. Encoded in the physical space of the theater, in the dirty bricks and broken lights, and in the walls that divide the arena are traces of history of colonial rule and colonial urbanism. My aim has been to move away from the taken-for-granted quality that so often makes the cinema theater seem like second nature, an accepted and already understood site that disappears from analytic view as the lights are turned down and the films are projected. Instead, I analyze the materiality of the theater itself, theorizing its significance for an anthropology of the media which situates technologies within the wider social realms from which they take on meaning.