

## From Lagos to Douala: the Video Film and its Spaces of Seeing<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

If only for its ethnic diversity and vast population of 140 million<sup>2</sup>, Nigeria is a country with vast social and economic possibilities. In terms of cultural products, this substantial population writes into the pattern and extent of artistic production and consumption. Thus in both rural hinterlands and urban centres, one confronts several visual artistic products of both roadside producers and academically-trained artists. While posters, banners and quick portraits scream from the frontage of roadside art workshops, the art produced by *academic* artists is more hidden as are their studios. But it is definitely the works of the street-side visual artists that have the popular base since their works are consumed by a broader range of social categories. For instance, they paint signposts and other displays for all kinds of petty and small-scale trading concerns like saloons, eateries, retails shops, video shops, and video parlours. In particular, the video shops/parlours began to appear across Nigeria beginning in the 90s when the video film (dramas on video) captured Nigeria's popular imagination. Because of the nation's strategic population, Nigeria's video films have the potential of spilling their logic over ethnic and national boundaries in West Africa, where Nigerian video films are consumed from neighbouring Cameroon to far away Gambia. But the breaking of social and cultural boundaries is not a distinguishing feature of the video film. Much earlier such ethnic and national boundaries had been broken by the Ghanaian Concert Party (Barber, Collins and Ricard), the Yoruba travelling theatre (Jeyifo; Kerr ) and the Onitsha market pamphlet (Obiechina; Dodson; Nwoga). The popular video film, that debuted in Nigeria in the late 1980s, has been able to break even farther than its predecessors by going/playing to audiences in spaces as diverse as roadsides, homes, offices, hairdressing saloons and even long-distant travel buses. Produced around Lagos, the films are shot and distributed in video format via networks of music and video shops across the country (Okome 1999). Lagos is the nexus not because the films are necessarily made there—more probably most of the videos are made

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is the result of fieldwork done in Nigerian and Cameroonian cities between January and April 2005. The fieldwork was part of my Doctoral research, *Citizenship and Contested Identity in Contemporary Nigerian Video Film*, at the University of Basel, Switzerland, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> The 2006 national Census, organised by the National Population Commission, gave this figure. See the Official Gazette <[http://www.population.gov.ng/pop\\_figure.pdf](http://www.population.gov.ng/pop_figure.pdf)>.

outside the city. Lagos is central because it is Nigeria's so-called economic capital, and even videos made as far away as Calabar brandish Lagos addresses on their sleeves—just as the most prominent actors/actresses are popularly called “Lagos people” even when they do not live in Lagos. With its popularisation, the contemporary video film has become a truly African medium. It finds audiences in Ghana, Cameroon and other African cities including Africa's diasporic communities in Europe and America. The popularisation of the popular video film has brought the film-seeing experience closer to the social, economic and spatial neighbourhoods of millions of people who may not have had (or be able to afford) access to a paid cinema per se. This popularisation has factored in the evolution of spaces within which videos are consumed by several categories of audiences. Using observations from fieldwork, this paper attempts to put into fairly stable typology the categories of spaces for seeing video films, from Lagos to Douala (fig. 1).



**Fig 1:** Map showing the route, from Lagos, through Nigeria's coastal cities to Douala, where fieldwork for this research paper was done.

## The Video Film

Nigeria's oil-boom of the 1970s had, by the close of the decade, translated into economic doom for many businesses. The petrodollar decline had far-reaching effects upon entrepreneurs and popular artistic production and consumption in Nigeria, including filmmaking. As in other African nations, film came to Nigeria in the colonial context (Okome “Colonial”; Adesanya). If, as Okome suggests, film became “one of the most significant institutions of dominance” (“Colonial” 27), it will mean that the images and identities that dominated the celluloid films were also aimed at domination. In other words, the colonial films were ostensibly foreign in identity, right from the beginning. Even when the first indigenous feature, *Kongi's Harvest*

(1970) was made, active indigenous minds were unconvinced of the Ossy Davies-directed film because its identity was considered more western than Nigerian (or African). Several other more “African” celluloid features were made, notably by the Yoruba travelling theatre troupes who simply put their previous itinerary performances on celluloid for more or less the same audiences. Such films include Ola Balogun’s *Ajani Ogun* (1976) and *Ija Ominira* (1977), Hubert Ogunde’s *Jaiyesimi* (1980), and Moses Olaiya’s *Orun Mooru* (1982). These films used the local worldviews and cosmologies in dealing with pressing issues of the postcolony, such as economic anxieties, corruption, bad leadership, and general social evils. At the time, these films generated a loose indigenous film culture built around adapting to a changing economy through the mediation of *local* identities with *local* imaginaries. This is where the indigenous films surpassed the colonial. For, while colonial films depended on foreign identities, the indigenous films deployed local content and contexts. Although the local films may have been crude in delivery, their localized filmic identities endeared them to popular audiences in Nigeria. This was to be expected since the masses now had the opportunity of seeing themselves, their everyday conditions, beliefs, fears and hopes in moving pictures. However, celluloid as a medium of popular production and consumption was not to last in Nigeria because of economic decline. When the collapse of the nation’s economy made it impossible to continue with celluloid production, Nigerian filmmakers appropriated the video technology as a direct alternative (see Haynes). Thus, by definition, video films are dramas about local social life shot and distributed to audiences directly on videotapes/VCDs. Okome notes that they are distributed to “the various publics through several music and video shops dotting the country” (“Preliminary” 52).

### Popular Spaces of Seeing: from Lagos to Douala

When the popular video film debuted in Nigeria in 1988, some filmmakers, visual artists and critics perceived it as a fad that would soon extinguish. The cinematic culture, bequeathed by British colonialism, was thought to have generated a discerning film audience that would shun the so-called cheap video medium. This was not to be. Video audiences have continued to be ever-increasing and insatiable. The video film has grown from a few productions in the late 80s to more than 1000 features per year. With the investment of more capital by electronic dealers in Lagos, Onitsha and Aba, the budget for the popular video film has also grown from a few thousands of Naira to a couple of million, depending on the cast and location.<sup>3</sup> What is more fascinating than the expansion of the video production budgets is the manner in which the video film has been popularised, bringing with it the emergence of several categories of spaces within which audiences can and do see the films. Although the video film is usually sold in

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<sup>3</sup> Videos shot only in Nigeria or with relatively unknown cast tend to be cheaper. But those with known cast or those shot outside Nigeria or in Europe like Kingsley Ogoro’s *Osuofia in London* tend to be more expensive, that is, if the figures given by producers is anything to go by.

shops, kiosks and other street outlets in Nigeria and Cameroon, there are specific and contextual spaces that have emerged, which provide opportunities for everyday people to see and engage in the video dialogue—on their own terms. What follows is a fairly stable categorisation of these spaces as they have been observed in the field, from Lagos to Douala. The spaces are broadly categorised as *private spaces*, *dedicated spaces*, *tie-in spaces* and *found spaces*.

### Private Spaces

*Private spaces* include homes and offices where TV/VCR/VCD sets are installed. A good number of private offices in Nigeria are furnished with video equipment so that staff can, at break or other intervals, watch TV or see videos. These types of electronic equipment are also standard in highbrow residential quarters. But in popular neighbourhoods it is usual to find just a few homes so equipped. The majority are too poor to afford video viewing equipment. In that case the few equipped homes become sites for the rest of the community to see and discuss the video film. People will crowd such homes in the evenings or at holidays to see video features. In such slum neighbourhoods, ownership of a rickety (but still functioning) TV and VCR/VCD set may quickly become a status symbol. Owners of such homes are only too honoured to have the visual attention of their local communities. So it is in popular neighbourhoods in Lagos and Douala<sup>4</sup>. As the film progresses people discuss both the video dramas and the social events that the films reference. Sometimes the talks and arguments can become heated. At such moments the film will be paused to enable the gathering to thrash-out knotty issues. All satisfied, the video sequence will be continued amidst fresh perspectives about the new video sequences.

### Dedicated Spaces

I use the phrase “dedicated spaces” to refer to those spaces originally designated for seeing video films. This space includes video parlours and video clubs/rentals. Video clubs are shops where people go to rent videotapes and video CDs. In many neighbourhoods one can rent a video film for about ₦50 in Nigeria and about CFA200 in Cameroon. Video films retail for ₦400 in Lagos and other Nigerian cities and between CFA1500 and CFA2000 in Douala and its adjoining towns. Therefore, it is cheaper for locals to rent than to buy videos. But, it is by far more affordable for people to *see* the films in a video parlour than to buy or rent them because it costs about CFA75 and ₦30, in Cameroon and Nigeria respectively. Thus, with less than 10% of the cost of the video’s outright purchase, millions of Africans too poor to afford viewing equipment can actually see a feature at a video parlour.

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<sup>4</sup> At a friend’s apartment where I stayed in April 2005 in Bonendale, Douala, there was a TV and VCR. Although there was no VCD player, there was a desktop computer, which could also play video CDs. The parlour was usually crowded when a video film was played. The crowd was mainly of young people who sometimes do not even speak or understand English. But they still found joy in seeing the Nigerian video films by seeming to interpret the images.

This is the logic of the video parlour, simple rooms meagrely furnished with TV, VCD/VCR and benches for people to sit and watch video films. For its ability to make audiovisual experience affordable at the social fringe, the video parlour is the motion picture-salvation of masses in popular neighbourhoods from Lagos to Douala. The benches are arranged facing the viewing area while curtains block-out light and, unfortunately, air from the outside. The rooms are usually damp and stuffy because there seems never to be enough oxygen, since the rooms were made for much smaller crowds of people. In my observations from Lagos, along Nigeria's coastal cities, to Douala, I find that the nature of the video parlour or video club corresponds very much to the quality or degeneracy of the general neighbourhood. Some video clubs at city centres can be quite plush, with more durable structures, glass doors/windows and air-conditioners (plate 1). But the more desperate slums have very modest or sometimes deplorable spaces for seeing video and discussing the dramatised social agenda (plate 2). In Lagos, every video club or parlour is furnished with an electricity generator. Even the slum video parlours do this—not because they can afford it, but, more specifically, because they cannot afford to do without it. Nigeria's national electricity supply is more than erratic and may be gone for several days, weeks or even months. Thus, without the electricity generator, the video business is doomed. In Douala the electricity generator is not a very important feature because electricity supply is much more dependable in Cameroon than it is in Nigeria.



**Plate 1:** Helen Ukpabios Video shop at Ndidem Usang Iso Road, Calabar. The structure, which boasts of glass door and windows, is built with durable materials. The electric generator, seen at bottom right, is a non-negotiable feature of video spaces in Nigeria.

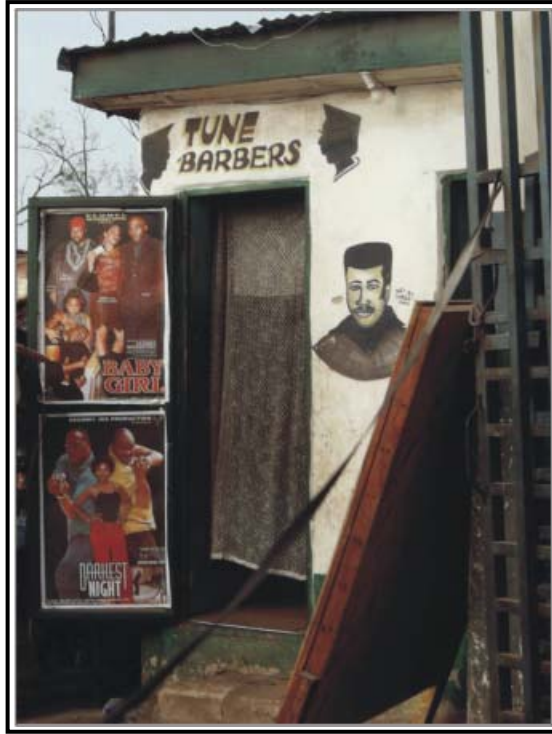


**Plate 2:** A video shop at Ndobo, a popular neighbourhood in the outskirts of Douala, showing the makeshift nature of the structure. The structures in both pictures are similar in material to the buildings in their respective neighbourhoods.

### Tie-in spaces

I use this phrase to describe spaces that are originally designed for other purposes but where proprietors have provided TV and VCD/VCR to show video films as incentive and or entertainment for a broad range of clientele. Such spaces include hairdressing salons, eateries, beer parlours and long-distance travel buses. Although eateries and hairdressing salons have been major features of many neighbourhoods, what used to be the incentive for clients was loud music blared from speakers adorning the entrance. But with the popularization of the video film, a new vista opened for attracting customers into over-competitive businesses. Proprietors began to furnish their salons with equipment for video film viewing. With time, TV and video facilities have become regular furnishing for salons in popular suburbs. And people—who otherwise could wait a few more days to have a hair cut—would walk into a salon to dress their hair and see a free video (plates 3 & 4). The gimmick does not only attract men. Many women invariably spend more time at hairdressing salons, seeing and discussing videos outside of hectic domestic schedules. Beer parlours and eatery owners are not left-out of the video race. They furnish their shops with video facilities for customers to enjoy over food or drink (plate 5). Another popular tie-in space in Nigeria is the long-distance commercial bus. With airplane fares raised above the economic capacity of popular masses, travel via big buses has gained currency. While domestic airfares for long-distances are between ₦12000 and ₦18000, these buses—furnished with TV and video players – cost about ₦3500. Over the journeys video films are played to the keen and participatory passengers (plate 6).





**Plate 3:** A video poster displayed at the entrance to a hairdressing salon indicates that the prospective customer can see a video film at no extra cost.



**Plate 4:** A TV and video CD player mounted in a hair salon.

## Found Spaces

“Found spaces” refers to free spaces in the street, in front of video shops where popular people chance-in on video showings. Although many video shops in Douala do not have the facilities, as a rule video vendors and electronic dealers in Nigeria have TV/video players inside the shop. In Lagos and other southern Nigerian cities, the TV monitors are placed in such a way as to face the entrance doorway and enable the screen to be seen from the street, outside the shop. It is this TV screen—on which a video is playing—that is “found” and utilised by street people, who do not have the financial means to enter the shop and buy a film. One of the TV’s main aims is to enable buyers to sample/preview the videos (from within the shop) before making purchases. This point-of-purchase sampling is not at all unique to the video film: it is the usual practice at the open market where people buy processed food like *gari* (grated and roasted manioc). In West Africa, individuals do not buy *gari* until they have taken a few pinches in the mouth to ‘taste’ and verify its suitability. This is the sense in which the TV in the video shop functions. And, it brings out the crucial differences between found space audiences and video buyers: while found space audiences are economically and spatially excluded from the shop, video clients have money to enter the shop, sample and buy videos. The video shop is established as a place to *buy* rather than *see* videos. Thus, those who stand on the street in front of the video shop and chance-in on a video are clearly using the space for its undesignated purpose. It is in this context that the video shop is a found space. The found space may even be an open door or window in a residential building, where a video is playing to the residents. Neighbours and street people would just cluster around such windows or doorways to see the film. Found spaces then provide free video viewing to people who would not normally afford to rent or buy videos and video equipment. Other video vendors confirm what Christopher Umoren, who has his shop along Egerton Road, Calabar, tells me: “People stop by the shop to see films because many cannot afford VCRs and DVD players. So they watch the videos free by my shop.” Umoren’s use of the term “by my shop” indicates the spatial and economic dynamics between found space audiences (plate 7) and the video shop’s clients who will be ‘in the shop’ sampling and buying. Thus found space audiences are more of a nuisance than video clients. But their nuisance is not completely disadvantageous to video sellers because crowded frontages also help to call attention to the shops.





**Plate 5:** An eatery furnished with video facilities for customers.



**Plate 6:** Buses are furnished with TV and video players. Over the journeys video films are played to the keen and participatory passengers

### Spaces of Seeing as References of Popular Social Life

We have, in the preceding pages, examined and categorised specific spaces within which popular audiences—from Lagos to Douala—see the video film. What is evident is that there are similarities and divergences in the spaces' organisation and the manner Nigerian and Cameroonian audiences attend to them. For instance, while electricity generators, TVs, found-space audiences and tie-in video spaces are normal in Nigeria, they are conspicuously absent in Douala and its adjoining towns. A few factors may account for these differences. Firstly, the video film evolved in Nigeria and then diffused into Cameroon. This evolution would naturally account for faster developments in video production and consumption culture in Nigeria than in Cameroon. Secondly, Nigeria is strictly Anglophone while Cameroon is partly so. In economic terms, this provides a much denser popular base for videos in Nigeria than in Cameroon because the films are made in the English language. Thirdly, Nigeria's larger population leads to many more audiences, more outlets and healthy competition for video clients. This sort of competition makes room for creative video *seeing* developments that benefit popular masses. This is, in fact, how several spaces for popular video viewing may have evolved in

Nigeria: as new businesses evolve and competition gets stiffer, proprietors tied-in video and video shop owners do not drive crowds away from their frontages because of the subtle advertising that the crowd brings.

Fourthly, one other reason that may be responsible, particularly for the heavy found space audiences in Lagos etc is that, while cinema culture has been dead for more than two decades in Nigeria, Cameroon still retains some measure of it. As in other Francophone countries, “film” is still *celluloid* in Cameroon. Unlike Nigeria’s long-dead cinemas,<sup>5</sup> there are two functional cinemas, *Le Wouri* (formerly Douala’s luxury cinema) and *L’Eden*, in Douala. From about the mid-1960s, film has been thoroughly regulated in Cameroon by legislation. Films are not scheduled without the outright approval of the National Commission of Film Control (popularly referred to as Censorship Commission). The Commission comprises representatives of the ministries of Communications, Youth and Sports, Women’s Affairs, Education, Health, Security and Armed Forces, including those of Catholic, Protestant and Islamic religions (Mailli). Motion-picture



**Plate 7:** A crowd gathers in front of an electronic shop on a street in Lagos. At nights the crowds are even larger, sometimes effectively blocking the doorway. Found spaces are not gender-specific. The fourth and ninth figures (from left) are women. Crowds like these are not present in Douala, most probably because the video vendors do not mount TVs at their shops.

viewing has therefore been very much restricted to “authentic” cinema houses. Thus, unlike Nigerians, Cameroonians may unconsciously construe the “film” experience as a strictly celluloid, indoor and institutional event. Even the video parlours in Douala are more specialised—fashioned after cinema houses—attesting to the

<sup>5</sup> Recently Silverbird Cinema (Victoria Island, Lagos) and Numetro Cinema (Onikan, Lagos) have attempted to reinvent popular cinema culture. But there is a difference because the new audience consists of middle-class and upwardly mobile people who can afford to pay about ₦ 2000 to see a film. These films cost close to a third of the nation’s minimum wage and Nigeria’s popular or common people can definitely not afford to see them.

difference between the cinematic consciousness of Nigerian and Cameroonian popular audiences.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in Nigeria, one can just walk into a video parlour and sit—before attendants will come for fees. In Douala, the entrance seem always curtailed and viewers have to pay before entering the venue. Although *private* and *dedicated* spaces are fast developing, the *tie-in* and *found* video spaces do not yet exist in Douala. In Cameroon, people go to the video parlour to sit in an enclosed, cinematic environment for the video experience. The Nigerian popular audience, unlike the Cameroonian, is uncritical and will stand or sit nearly anywhere and anyhow to see the video film.

One other critical difference is the electricity generator and the TV screen—conspicuously absent in the Cameroonian and ubiquitous in the Nigerian video shops. The rhythm of social life in both countries may factor in this development. For one thing, electricity supply is much more erratic and undependable in Nigeria than it is in Cameroon. While the Cameroonian video sellers can manage without private power supplies, the Nigerian dealers definitely cannot. The small shops in Nigeria have small electricity generators while the bigger shops own bigger sets. One clear inference is that electricity as a social service is more functional in Cameroon than in Nigeria.

The presence and/or absence of the TV screen may also point to the nature of social trust in both Cameroon and Nigeria. In Nigeria video buyers always insist on previewing the CD or videotape before buying it. People simply want to be sure that the tape or CD is functional and that *what* the video contains is *what* is displayed on the colourful sleeve.<sup>7</sup> In Cameroon one finds that buyers just enter the shops and make purchases without sampling or demanding a preview. In a very simple way, this attitudinal difference between the Cameroonian and Nigerian popular audiences may be a litmus test of the corrosion of trust in society. Whereas citizen distrust of the state may be similar in both countries—insofar as the basic failures of un-democracy, poverty and stifled social development are fairly common—interpersonal trust in both societies seems to vary. For, whereas the Nigerian video buyers will evidently not trust the sellers, Cameroonian consumers seem to demonstrate a level of trust. This trust is lacking in the Nigerian video space, alluding to the possibility that, in social practice(s), interpersonal trust is much less corroded in Cameroon than in Nigeria. These are some of the rhythms of social life that diffuse into the popular spaces of video seeing.

Importantly, the differences in the seeing modes of Nigerian and Cameroonian popular audiences of video films do not necessarily

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<sup>6</sup> Although the Nigerian video parlours are simply open rooms with benches or chairs, those in Douala are much more specialised. The seats are specially constructed and arranged in steps of different heights, and black clothes hang at the doors and windows to regulate light, much like a cinema hall. I found these features in all the video parlours I visited in Douala like Temple de la Culture and Levelodrome in New Bell.

<sup>7</sup> In 2004 I had to buy more than a hundred videos for the Institute for Social Anthropology, University of Basel. Since I was unable to preview all the CDs I bought before buying them, a number of them were either cracked and un-viewable or did not contain the videos displayed on the sleeves. Some were blank altogether!

dislocate the commonness of intrinsic social experiences. If anything, there tends to be a commonality in the social and economic condition(s) that the films privilege, which may be the fundamental attraction for audiences in Nigeria and Cameroon. As popular visual art forms, the Nigerian video films take-on themes from popular social life—politics, mythologies, events, fears, anxieties, rumours etc—and other experiences that masses share across the postcolonies. Films such as *Glamour Girls 1 & 2* (1992 & 1994) talk about prostitution; the four-part video *Issakaba* (2001) talks about the link between armed robbery, the occult, ritual murder and corrupt rich men; *Osuofia in London 1 & 2* (2003 & 2004) dwell on the attractions that local Africans have for Europe and America; Helen Ukpabio's *End of the Wicked* (1999) and Mike Bamiloye's *The Gods Are Dead* (2000) use local Christian ideologies to dramatise problems of the contemporary world; while *Saworoide* (1999) and *Agogo Èèwò* (2002) privilege popular representations of governance and corruption in Nigeria. The examples are endless. What may be clear from these videos is that the themes they engage and the social conditions that they mediate are not necessarily "Nigerian". These themes and popular conditions are parts of the social raw materials that may be found anywhere on the African postcolony, south of the Sahara. Likewise, the economic decline that catalysed the fragmentation from celluloid to video technology, from cinema houses to popular video seeing spaces, can also not be akin to Nigeria. If audiences in Nigeria, Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa find the films attractive, spell-binding and socially-engaging, then it can be inferred that the videos link to some of the people's common experiences while mediating popular realities in cheap and untidy social dramas. Karin Barber refers to this producer/consumer currency of the popular as the "confraternity in suffering" ("Views" 5). However, this untidiness makes both the video film and its popular spaces of seeing "sensitive barometers of cultural change which manifest . . . heterogeneity and contradictoriness" (Fairclough 60). Unlike the Film and Video Censorship Board, which loosely regulates the content of videos produced in Nigeria, as yet, there are no government agencies that regulate the video seeing spaces. These spaces—particularly the found spaces, tie-in spaces and the video parlours—have neither the control of the state nor of presiding elders, parents and the like who may moderate goings-on. As Barber's and others' works show, it is this ability to enact and circulate—outside of strict institutional control—that makes for fruitful study of decolonization (Barber "Views" and "Popular Reactions"; Coplan; Haynes; Dodson). In the final analysis, popular spaces for seeing videos lie at the social fringe, outside of strict state control while mediating and referencing the rhythms of social life—from Lagos to Douala. These spaces and their modes of organisation and usage are then among the most viable for studying social change among the consumers of the popular video film.

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