




SIGNAL AND **NOISE**


MEDIA, INFRASTRUCTURE, AND URBAN CULTURE IN NIGERIA

BRIAN LARKIN

An abstract graphic in the top right corner of the page. It features a light gray, textured oval shape that resembles a brain or a cluster of cells. From this central shape, numerous thin, dark gray lines radiate outwards, resembling neural connections or a network of fibers. The overall effect is a subtle, artistic representation of the brain's complexity.

Signal and Noise

A JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN CENTER BOOK



SIGNAL AND **NOISE**

Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria

BRIAN LARKIN

Duke University Press Durham and London 2008

© 2008 Duke University Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ☺

Designed by C. H. Westmoreland

Typeset by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data appear
on the last printed page of this book.

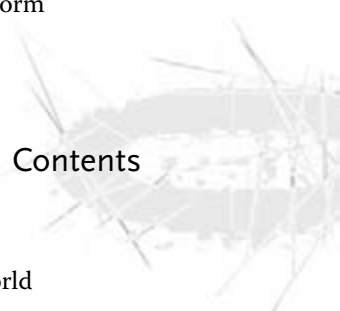
*This book is dedicated
to my mother, Joan Larkin, and
to the memory of my father,
Jim Larkin*

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

- 1 Infrastructure, the Colonial Sublime, and Indirect Rule 16
 - 2 Unstable Objects: The Making of Radio in Nigeria 48
 - 3 *Majigi*, Colonial Film, State Publicity, and the Political Form
of Cinema 73
 - 4 Colonialism and the Built Space of Cinema 123
 - 5 Immaterial Urbanism and the Cinematic Event 146
 - 6 Extravagant Aesthetics: Instability and the Excessive World
of Nigerian Film 168
 - 7 Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the
Infrastructure of Piracy 217
- Conclusion 242
- Notes 257
- Bibliography 277
- Index 301

Contents





Acknowledgments

RESEARCH FOR THIS BOOK was funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, a Dean's Research Grant from New York University, and the Pionier Program in Mass Media and the Imagination of Religious Communities at the University of Amsterdam.

While in Nigeria I was affiliated with the Kano State History and Culture Bureau and Arewa House Centre for Historical Documentation in Kaduna. I am very grateful for their help and commitment to facilitating research on all aspects of northern Nigerian history and culture. Abdullahi Mahadi and Hamid Bobboyi, former directors of Arewa House, Abdullahi Maradun, archivist at Arewa House, and Auwalu Hamza, director of research at the Kano State History and Culture Bureau, were especially generous with their time and effort. My gratitude for their logistical and intellectual help runs deep.

The book could not have been written without the help and support of many of the young, creative talents of the Hausa literary and video world. The novelists and filmmakers Dan Azumi Baba, Adamu Mohammed, and Yusufu Lawan were all generous with their time. I especially thank Ado Ahmad, chairman of Gidan Dabino Publishers, and Yusufu Adamu, novelist and university professor, without whom this research would not have

Acknowledgments

been possible. Ado Ahmad, along with the late directors Aminu Hassan Yakasai and Tijani Ibraheem, the author and actor Adamu Mohammed, and the camera operator Bashir Mufi, introduced me to the world of Hausa film. I extend special thanks to the publisher, editor, and novelist Ibrahim Sheme and to Abdalla Uba Adamu, whose work on Hausa cinema has overlapped with and informed my own. Alhaji Aminu 'Dan Bappa; the *'yan toxics*, Nura, Usman, Abdulhamid, Kabiru, Abdulkadir, and Kabiru; Philip Shea and Yusufu Adamu of Bayero University Kano; and Abdulkarim 'Dan Asabe and Fatimah Palmer of the Federal College of Education, Kano, were largely responsible for making my stay in Nigeria so memorable, for which I thank them all.

I was preceded in Kano by a burst of young Western researchers—Alaine Hutson, Jonathan Reynolds, Conerly Casey, Katja Werthmann, Rudi Gaudio, Peter A. Rogers, and Mathias Krings—and followed by Shobana Shankar, Sean Stilwell, Moses Ochon, Steven Peirce, and Susan O'Brien. We rarely were in Kano at the same time, but I have learned much from them. Since my first predissertation trip, Jonathan Haynes has shared my sense of the importance of Nigerian video film.

During my research a number of people helped me with interviews (and gaining access to interviews). They include Abdullahi Maradun, archivist at Arewa House, Dalha Waziri of Bayero University, Abdulkarim 'Dan Asabe of the Federal College of Education, and especially Usman Aliyu Abdulmalik. Their efforts and ideas improved the quality of my research and prevented me from making social blunders. Moses Ochon helped me with archival research, and Usman Aliyu Abdulmalik helped me with translation and interviews.

At Barnard College and Columbia University I have had the support and help of many great colleagues, including Nadia Abu El-Haj, Marco Jacquemet, Paul Kockelman, Mahmood Mamdani, Gregory Mann, Brinkley Messick, Rosalind Morris, Beth Povinelli, Nan Rothschild, Lesley Sharp, Sandhya Shukla, Paul Silverstein, Maxine Weisgrau, and Paige West. Many of the ideas in this book were aired in courses I taught on urban African culture, media, and technology and on spaces of globalization taught with Reinhold Martin. I would like to thank all the students from these classes for their insights and their willingness to experiment and Reinhold for his stimulating ideas.

Over many years, I have had the enormous good fortune to learn from Birgit Meyer of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, both in her written work and in person. I was particularly lucky to spend a year in Amsterdam as a fellow of the Pionier Project in Mass Media and the Imagination of

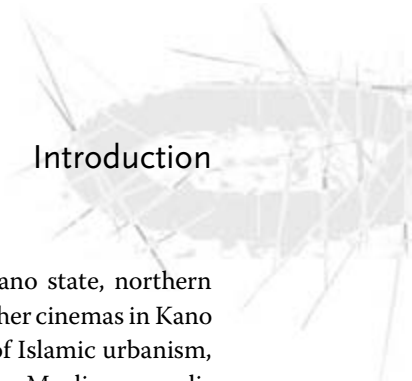
Religious Communities under Birgit's directorship. Ze D'Abreu, Sudeep Das Gupta, Marleen De Witte, Francio Guadalupe, Lotte Hoek, Martijn Oosterbaan, Peter Pels, Rafael Sanchez, Patricia Spyer, Matthias van de Port, and Jojada Verrips all made that stay one of the most stimulating and enjoyable of my life. I have worked so closely with Birgit Meyer and learned so much from her that many of her ideas are woven into this text.

Despite all this learning, the foundations and architecture for this project were laid during my graduate years at New York University. I was lucky to arrive at NYU at a time when people were trying to develop new ideas and ways of thinking about media and society, about the traffic in culture and material objects. This text is very different from the dissertation I submitted there, but the excitement and desire to learn, and the ideas that run through it, all bear the mark of that formation. I would like to thank my advisors, Lila Abu-Lughod, T. O. Beidelman, Fred Myers, Bambi Schieffelin, and especially Faye Ginsburg, for all their help and advice and for making this project what it is. While at NYU I benefited from the support and insight of a great graduate cohort: Alison Griffiths, Maureen Mahon, Tony Rossi, Lotti Silber, Sarah Teitler, and Erica Wortham. Teja Ganti, on whose generosity and capacious knowledge of Indian film I have continually depended, deserves special thanks. I would also like to thank Kate Baldwin, Jennifer Cole, Brian Edwards, and William Mazzarella for friendship and support over the years.

Chapters 4 and 7 originated as the articles "Theaters of the Profane: Cinema and Colonial Urbanization," *Visual Anthropology Review* 14.2 (1998–99): 46–62; and "Degraded Images, Distorted Sounds: Nigerian Video and the Infrastructure of Piracy," *Public Culture* 16.4 (2004): 289–314. Stefan Andriopoulos, Toby Dodge, Andy Podell, and Meg McLagan read portions—or in the case of Andy, all—of the book at different times. I am very grateful for their critical insights and for putting their own work aside when I asked them. I would also like to thank Caroline McLoughlin and Sumaiya Itahalique for helping me with copyedits and Lorene Bouboushian for tracking down image rights. I appreciate the careful work of my editors and copyeditors at Duke University Press.

Throughout this project Meg McLagan has provided me with emotional and intellectual support, encouraging me to develop my ideas and providing me with criticism and love so this could happen. Sinéad and Annie Larkin have lived with every iteration of both the book and me. Together with Meg they have made the life in and around the book worth living.

Finally, I want to thank my parents, to whom I dedicate this book in recognition of everything they have given me.



Introduction

AFTER THE INTRODUCTION OF ISLAMIC LAW in Kano state, northern Nigeria, Wapa Cinema was shut down along with all other cinemas in Kano city. As part of their attempt to institute a new form of Islamic urbanism, authorities separated Christian areas more firmly from Muslim ones, divided buses and taxis by gender, and closed down un-Islamic institutions from brothels to beer parlors to movie theaters. Cinemas were problematic urban places because of what they did, creating a space for mixed-sex activities, and for what they bred, prostitution and other un-Islamic activities that fed on the crowds drawn by the theater.

What was it about cinema that occasioned such disquiet among politicians in charge of defining a new religious order? It was not an issue of form—of conservative Islamic iconophobia rejecting the images of cinema. Representational images continued to be freely available through magazines, stickers, calendars, videocassettes, and a wide variety of other media. Nor was the issue one of content, as the Indian and American films shown at the cinema could easily be seen on television or bought on video. Rather, what made authorities anxious were the sorts of practices that had grown up around the social space of cinema among Hausa people in northern Nigeria. Cinema draws people because of the narratives and spectacles

of the films it shows, but the *experience* of going there is greater than the films themselves. It is this excess, the immaterial experience of cinema emerging from the assemblage of built space, film, and social practice, that became the target of regulation. One cannot understand this decree without realizing that what Hausa authorities saw as un-Islamic was not the cinema theater itself but the aura that hung over it, not the just built space or the bright images shown there but the assemblage of these into a social event which generated an electrical charge of excitement.

A few months later, theaters in Kano were reopened after a series of procinema campaigns. Exhibitors promised to ban women, removing the clearest legal obstacle. They complained about the negative effect on their livelihoods, arguing they were being punished economically with no clear religious reason. Next, together with Hausa filmmakers, they challenged authorities to provide the legal reasoning behind the ban, given that cinema is legal in most Islamic societies. The state closure of cinema was a populist response of Hausa politicians, who felt that theaters were an easy and highly visible target that would highlight the moral nature of the new legal regime. But precisely because legal regimes are legal, the closure had to be justified in the logic of Islamic law, and this proved hard to do. Cinema is a marginal but accepted part of Hausa society. The controversy over the cinema's place under shari'a law was the latest in a series of such controversies that had taken place since the medium's emergence in Nigeria in the 1930s. After shari'a, cinema emerged reorganized for a new era, ready to be the arena for new sets of experiences, the continuing site of cultural debate, and a fecund place for arguments over the shape and limits of Hausa religious and cultural norms.

This book analyzes the cultural work of media technologies and their role in producing what we call urban Africa—specifically the Muslim Hausa city of Kano, northern Nigeria. Media technologies are more than transmitters of content, they represent cultural ambitions, political machineries, modes of leisure, relations between technology and the body, and, in certain ways, the economy and spirit of an age. Yet at the same time, media such as television, cassettes, and cinema provide the infrastructure to facilitate and direct transnational flows of cultural goods and the modes of affect, desire, fantasy, and devotion these goods provoke. They create technical and institutional arrangements, each directing what sort of media (Islamic preaching, sporting events, Indian films, Hollywood) will travel and what the arrangements of their exhibition and reception will be. In this way, media create unique aural and perceptual

environments, everyday urban arenas through which people move, work, and become bored, violent, amorous, or contemplative. This book unpacks the cultural logics of media technologies in Nigeria and their unintended consequences, which create the particular experience of urban life in colonial and postcolonial Nigeria.

Technologies are unstable things. We think we know what a radio is, or what a cinema is used for, but these phenomena, which we take for granted, have often surprising histories. What media are needs to be interrogated and not presumed. The meanings attached to technologies, their technical functions, and the social uses to which they are put are not an inevitable consequence but something worked out over time in the context of considerable cultural debate. And even then, these meanings and uses are often unstable, vulnerable to changing political orders and subject to the contingencies of objects' physical life. The recent shari'a ban on cinema and its rescission is a clear example of this. Debates about what media are, and what they might do, are particularly intense at moments when these technologies are introduced and when the semiotic economies that accompany them are not stable but in the process of being established (Gitelman and Pingree 2003). I focus on these moments when technologies were first introduced in order to foreground the material and epistemic instability of media.

It did not have to be that in Kano cinema theaters were closed down for being immoral, just as it was not inevitable that cinemas in Europe and the United States became socially acceptable after initial periods of intense moral concern. Technologies' affect on social life is the outcome of a series of processes. Of great importance are the intentions and ideologies that go into conceiving and funding any specific technology. Media systems are sponsored and built to effect social action, to create specific sorts of social subjects. When British colonialists built radio networks or mobile cinemas, for instance, they did so with the intention of educating and developing Nigerians into "modern" colonial citizens. One aim of this book is to examine the systemic efforts of governments to stabilize the symbolic logic of infrastructure and thereby examine the relation between infrastructural technologies and modes of rule. Yet the material qualities of these technologies, while working to implement those designs, also create possibilities outside the imagination of their designers. As these media get taken up and used in everyday life, they spin off in wholly unexpected directions, generating intended and unintended outcomes. If to understand how it is technologies come to have meaning we first need to understand

Introduction

the ideologies governing their sponsorship, we next must keep a keen analytic awareness of the technologies' autonomous power, which create technical and social potentials outside their sponsors' control. Which aspects of technologies' technical and social potential are brought into being depends on the intentions going into their construction, their technical capacity, and the social and religious contexts they inhabit. Each of these conditions helps determine how technology exists and makes meaning. None can finally control what is at stake.

The narrative movement of the book starts with the creation of a radio network and the use of mobile cinema units during the colonial period. It focuses on the tight link between the introduction of media and the modernizing ambitions of the colonial state (see also Abu-Lughod 2004; Mankekar 1999; and Rajagopal 2001). The middle chapters examine how media technologies, specifically cinema, are shaped and transformed by the social and religious practices of Hausa society. At the end, I examine the contemporary period, which has seen the rise of piracy and the striking success of Nigerian video films. The first chapters analyze the colonial state's ambitions to produce modern Hausa subjects by disembedding them from their rooted cultural world and "exposing" them (through the mediation of technology) to the circulation of ideas from around the world. The middle shows the disordering of these ambitions and a reordering of technology in Hausa social life. The end examines the emergence of a new era of Nigerian media outside of state control, representing new sets of relations between neoliberalism, the informal economy, and Nigerian politics and society. In the narrative movement from state control of media to its general absence from many of today's key media forms lies one of the key features I wish to examine of media systems and media technologies: their dynamic and processual nature over time.

Examining how technologies work is a powerful way of finding out what it is to live as an African urban subject. Technologies have material, sensual qualities: the wooden radio cabinet, a satellite dish perched monumentally on a roof, a small plastic transistor, the clean modern lines of a cinema theater, the tangle of cables stealing electricity from neighborhood pylons. These qualities are key to the significance of how media operate. Cassettes playing in buses or taxis, loudspeakers relaying religious recitations over the rooftops and through the streets, televisions playing continuously in cafes and restaurants create new ambient sounds and spectacles that make up the city's mediated environment (Hirschkind 2006; Spitulnik 2002). Media are key ingredients in popular life, in the everyday pleasures and af-

fective engagements that make up the urban experience everywhere. They are also important in stimulating new aesthetic forms that borrow from older ones, adapting and reworking them, creating new forms from old. In facilitating the emergence of new leisure habits and helping to innovate cultural practices, communication technologies share, with all urban infrastructures, the role of providing physical networks through which the goods, ideas, religions, and people that make up urban life are trafficked. To understand how this occurs it is fruitful to examine how media operate as part of a wider networked infrastructure that facilitates and mediates the goods that travel along its paths.

MEDIA, INFRASTRUCTURE, AND URBANISM

Kano, Northern Nigeria, is a sprawling city on the edge of the Sahel desert. In this dominant economic, political, and religious center, Sufi orders, Lebanese businessmen, Ibo traders, and Hausa politicians interact but are embedded in discrete networks that extend in different directions over the world. The city itself takes shape as a node of these different circuits. It becomes the site of many differing forms of exchange, some in mutual competition, all moving at different rates, so that an intensification in Islamic practice is coextensive with the rise in materialism and a perceived drop in spirituality; Islamic law is introduced at the same time as forms of popular culture in which Hausa actors mimic Hindi cinema.

Infrastructures are the material forms that allow for exchange over space, creating the channels that connect urban places in wider regional, national, and transnational networks (Graham and Marvin 2001). Systems of economic exchange need means of transport, whether camels, trucks, railroads, or planes, and these in turn need the roads and rail lines, the warehouses and shops, the personnel speaking Arabic or English, that allow this exchange to occur. These grids dictate the sets of cultural, religious, and economic networks with which the city is involved, and indeed the physical shape of the city emerges from the layering of these infrastructures over time (Graham and Marvin 1996, 2001; Harvey 2000; Lefebvre 1991). At the most basic level, infrastructures are technical systems of transport, telecommunications, urban planning, energy, and water that create the skeleton of urban life. Analyzing media as technical infrastructures gives greater analytic purchase on how these technologies operate as technical systems. Infrastructures are the institutionalized networks that facilitate the flow of goods in a wider cultural as well as physical sense. Ab-

Introduction

douMaliq Simone (2004) has written about this in regards to the knowledge circulating in African networks of ethnic migrants that connects these migrants to each other and to a homeland. Infrastructures can also be “soft,” such as the knowledge of Arabic, or a particular sort of religious learning, the performance of a cultural style that allows one to participate in a “diaspora aesthetic” (Diawara 2002). *Infrastructure*, in my usage, refers to this totality of both technical and cultural systems that create institutionalized structures whereby goods of all sorts circulate, connecting and binding people into collectivities.

Much of what we experience as urban reality is mediated by how infrastructural networks connect urban areas into wider cultural, religious, and economic networks. The historical development of cities is structured by successive technological revolutions: transport by camels, then ships, railways, telegraphs, roads, and fiber optic cables. Even “virtual cities,” the instantaneous real-time linkage of diverse urban centers into electronic networks, only exist due to the laying of cables across oceans, the digging up of cities to feed in pipes, or the construction of relay stations and the launching of satellites. These infrastructures have mediating capacities. Newly developed networks do not eradicate earlier ones but are superimposed on top of them, creating a historical layering over time (Lefebvre 1991). This is why Henri Lefebvre argues that when we look at the city we are confronted not by one social space but by many, all clashing and feeding off of each other at the same time. Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin (1996) term this mediation “enhancement,” referring to how new technologies do not simply destroy older forms of communication but call into being new mobilities and sometimes intensify older ones. At any one point urban space is made up of the historical layering of networks connected by infrastructures. These are the conduits that dictate which flows of religious and cultural ideas move and therefore which social relations get mobilized in their wake. Their historical layering helps explain why dormant cultural, religious, and economic forms can suddenly gain purchase again, be reawakened and reenergized in a new situation. When we think of the urban experience, partly what we are referring to is the particular assemblage of networks that forms the unique configuration of a city and the preconditions that allow for the emergence of cultural and religious ideas. Infrastructures are not simply neutral conduits, then; they mediate and shape the nature of economic and cultural flows and the fabric of urban life. One powerful articulation of this mediation is the monumental presence of the infrastructures themselves.

TECHNOLOGY

In the David Lean film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, Alec Guinness plays Colonel Nicholson, the officer in charge of British prisoners of war forced to build a railway bridge to aid a Japanese war offensive. At first, British prisoners passively try to sabotage construction by working slowly and inefficiently, but over time this attitude is transformed by the colonel into a fevered commitment to building the bridge in as fast and technically excellent a way as possible. He ceases to conceive of the bridge in narrowly technical terms—as transporting Japanese troops and supplies from one side of a river to the other—and begins to see it as deeply symbolic. Here, infrastructure is used as representation to “prove” to local natives and to the Japanese a fundamental racial superiority expressed through British technical expertise. For Nicholson, the bridge embodies qualities of organization and order that characterize military life and British civilization. In a tender scene, he wanders over the newly completed bridge at sunset, admiring it, stroking its hard supports, patting its railing. The Japanese commander joins him, thinking Nicholson is taking an evening stroll. Gazing at the sunset he turns to Nicholson and observes, “Beautiful, isn’t it?” “Yes,” replies Nicholson as he looks not at the sun but at the bridge itself, “It really is a first-rate job.”

This film powerfully captures the representational logic of infrastructure embodied in the colonial arena, with its roots in the civilizing mission of colonial development and its potential for modernizing colonial subjects. It reveals the workings of what I term in chapter 1 the “colonial sublime,” the use of technology to represent an overwhelming sense of grandeur and awe in the service of colonial power. Technology represented a world order in which the immaterial workings of God and his spirits were subordinated to the power of science to rationally order and control the natural world. British mastery of it was part of the conceptual promise of colonialism and its self-justification—the freeing of natives from superstitious belief by offering them the universalizing world of science. The construction of complex technological projects is seen in this light as part of the spectacle of colonial rule. In Lean’s film, Nicholson’s desire to use the bridge as representation becomes excessive, so much so it overwhelms his sense of its technical function—the transportation of Japanese troops to facilitate a war effort. This is carried so far that the British organize a commando team to destroy the bridge and at the climax of the film Nicholson, horrified that his work is to be destroyed, fights against the commandos, reacting to their

attack as if it were an assault on all the ideologies of British workmanship, technical expertise, and civilizational superiority congealed in the material form of the bridge. Made in the 1950s, Lean aims the film at the fault line where the British commitment to science is revealed to be a fetish, a hysterical icon of colonial rationality and technology run amuck. Nicholson dies ambiguously, falling on the dynamite plunger, making him responsible for the bridge's destruction but leaving open the question of whether he ever realized that his commitment to the bridge led him astray.¹

The ideological development of contemporary infrastructures has its roots in the Enlightenment project of rationally engineering the world, ordering it according to the free circulation of goods and ideas (Mattelart 1996, 2000). This is one of two ways infrastructure came to function in the colonial arena. Infrastructure created the connecting tissue linking disparate territories into a state and facilitating the rise of a centralized political administration. But as David Lean's film dramatizes, infrastructure was just as important as a representation, evidence of the civilizing promise of colonial technical superiority (Adas 1989; Mitchell 2002; Mrázek 2002; Prakash 1999). In the early years of radio and cinema in Northern Nigeria this was explicit in that media both depicted infrastructures (in films and in radio talks about engineering projects) and *were* infrastructures that conjoined scientific rationality with spectacle.

The tie between the representational logic of infrastructure and the state was not loosened with the end of colonialism but intensified, only now infrastructure came to represent the promise of independent rule rather than colonial supremacy. Government after government in sub-Saharan Africa came to independence with the ambition of building a modern African nation. As Okwui Enwezor (2001) has shown, during this period new public buildings in Nigeria followed the international style, as nationalist leaders were less interested in emphasizing Africa's cultural difference than in asserting its presence in a common cosmopolitan internationalism. In this context radio stations and television networks, like road networks and steel plants, were infrastructural evidence of the political success of independence, the icons of new postcolonial nations. The nationalist leaders' assertion that Africa too was modern was both a direct response to the colonial sublime, the use of technology to represent an ideology of superiority, and also an internalization of its logic.

Anthropological and African studies analyses of technology, or, more precisely, analyses of stories of African reactions to technology, have tended to stress how Africans understand and "indigenize" foreign technologies in

their own conceptual schema. This classic anthropological move is a powerful corrective to stereotypes of African “first contact” with technology—the circulation of stories about the inability of natives to understand modern technologies whether they be photographic images, printed texts, clothing, or domestic items like soap.² Timothy Burke (1996) argues that Ndebele and Shona people in Southern Rhodesia in the 1950s who smeared stork margarine over their bodies instead of eating it were simply incorporating new commodities into existing regimes of cleanliness (protecting the skin through the use of oils and fats). Rumors that African medics were using their ambulance and medical technologies to steal blood and sell it represented not a misunderstanding of what those technologies were used for but a way of marking cultural difference (L. White 2000). This move at unmasking the simplicity of European reports of African encounters with technology is important, but it often downplays the autonomy of objects and the very real uncertainties and epistemic instabilities of objects themselves. I was struck in my research how often people referred to their previous “ignorance” about objects. When I asked many older people about ideas that the cinema projected images of spirits, or that radio broadcasts were magic—people were sanguine and often amused by these responses. “We were ignorant then,” the prominent Sufi cleric Shaikh Nasiru Kabara said simply when I asked why many opposed listening to the radio and watching cinematic images.³ I heard the same explanation of religious resistance to many technologies, from riding bikes to watching television. For Kabara, the idea that previous clerics were mistaken is not something that makes him defensive or that he needs to justify. This was only for a momentary period (“We were ignorant *then*”) and can be spoken about from a contemporary position of knowledge, where the anxiety-provoking capacities of new technologies have been domesticated. For Kabara this position of knowledge and familiarity with technology is not just the result of Hausa people’s becoming more Westernized and more familiar with Western technology but also, significantly, because of their better education *Islamically*. The ignorance he was referring to was not about how to use technology but how to understand the legal status of technology in Islamic law. Objects generate anxiety. Their technical capacity offers possibilities that are unknown and potentially threatening. One major theme in Cary’s (1939) novel *Mr. Johnson* is the tension between the desired benefits and feared results of building a road connecting a small town to the great urban centers of Northern Nigeria. For the colonial officer, Rudbeck, “to build a road, any road, anywhere is the noblest work a man can do” (Cary

1939: 46). His senior, Blore, by contrast, considers “motor roads to be the ruin of Africa, bringing swindlers, thieves and whores, disease, vice and corruption, and the vulgarities of trade, among the decent unspoilt tribesmen” (46). Cary represents local authorities, the emir, and the *waziri* as fearing that the road will bring “thieves and swindlers” and transformations that will undermine their authority. The central tension in the book is one of potential, open-endedness, and inability to know exactly what the future will bring. It is about the contingencies technologies bring about and the attempt to stabilize them. When colonial administrators try to fix the symbolic logic of radio in an Enlightenment tradition of exposure to the free flow of ideas, when Nasiru Kabara mobilizes an Islamic legal system to explain technology, what is at stake are the competing traditions mobilized to institutionalize and control this instability. This is not to argue that Africans did not domesticate and indigenize technologies—as in many cases they did—but it is worth hesitating before looking at this process. By paying attention to the incomprehension that greeted many innovations, and by examining the social efforts that went into regulating and producing technologies as objects that have meaning, we gain a greater sense of these moments of instability and avoid an invocation of social agency without a sense of the limits on that agency. To read through African incomprehension too quickly is to fail to realize the autonomy of the objects themselves, the fact that attempts to domesticate them take time and social effort, and while they do their potential looms large and unpredictable.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book’s title, *Signal and Noise*, operates on several levels. At its base it focuses attention on the capacity of media technologies to carry messages (signals) and on the technical interference and breakdown that clouds and even prevents that signal’s transmission (noise). I also use *noise* to refer to the interference produced by religious and cultural values, the historic configurations in which technologies and cultural forms are made manifest. Finally, on a more metaphoric level, the title refers to the connection between media and modes of rule (signals) while keeping in mind the unstable consequences media bring about (noise). In chapter 1, I examine the effects of the colonial sublime, the way that technology was made to be an explicit part of colonial political spectacle. I focus on the building of grand infrastructure projects as a way of understanding how the British invested

in making technology sublime, overwhelming peoples' senses with the spectacular achievements of science. The erection of immense factories, the construction of bridges, roads, and rail, indeed the terrifying ability to remake landscapes and the natural world, were the ways in which the sublime was produced as a necessary spectacle of colonial rule. The consequence of this for many Hausa is that these infrastructures not only began to redefine the fabric of urban life, but they did so as machines invested with their owners' identity. Because of this, many Hausa reacted ambivalently to these technologies, arguing that they were specifically Christian and therefore un-Islamic. When media technologies such as radio or cinema were introduced, they entered into a highly contested social field in which electronic technologies were associated explicitly with Christianity and with colonial rule.

In the next two chapters I examine the consequence of this origin by tracing the building of the radio network in Nigeria (chapter 2) and the introduction of mobile cinema units traveling to urban and rural areas showing documentaries on agriculture, health, and colonial citizenship (chapter 3). These chapters continue to examine the relation between technology and colonial rule, but at the same time they tease out how these media began to generate new forms of leisure in urban Nigeria, creating cultural possibilities that threatened and sometimes overwhelmed this logic. I do this by tracing the concrete material features of these technologies and how they were used in the urban North. Radio, for instance, was part of the technologizing of public urban space. In its early years it was not a domestic technology but a public one, with receiving sets nailed to the walls of prominent places blaring out signals over urban streets. It was part of a new era of technologized urban form when local spaces were increasingly opened up to the forms of leisure and information coming from elsewhere. Chapter 2 traces this material history of radio by looking at the place of the object in Hausa society and its changes over time.

Like radio, mobile cinema was explicitly political, and indeed enormous effort went into separating mobile film from its commercial cousin, entertainment cinema. I examine the political address of mobile cinema to explore in detail the links between cinema and a form of political rule—colonialism. For most Nigerians, their first experiences of cinema came through the traveling film units of the Nigerian government. I explore how these screenings operated in practice, what their aesthetic forms were, and how this film form continued into the postcolonial era. In many ways, my work engages with some of the key thematic elements of what has come

to be called early cinema (Elsaesser and Barker 1990; Gunning 1986, 1994; M. Hansen 1991): the “first contact” of audiences with cinematic technology, foregrounding the spectacle of the technology over the content of films and highlighting the linkage between cinema and wider transformations of modernity. I draw on this work to question a bedrock assumption of mainstream cinema history: that the emergence of cinema should be examined in relation to that ur-form of industrial modernity, the commodity. In this chapter I use the context of colonial rule in Nigeria to provide a different genealogy for the emergence of cinema, one that examines the mode of cinematic exchange as governed not by commodity but by political relations. The political use of cinema, moreover, did not simply disappear with the end of colonialism; it was fully adopted by postcolonial Nigerian leaders, who realized its usefulness in propagating a very modern form of political power—mediated publicity (McLagan 2003).

Chapters 4 and 5 shift away from how media technologies were introduced with the aim of serving colonial rule to how these technologies began to be shaped and reimagined by Nigerians—and the limits in that process. Chapter 4 argues that Hausa in the 1940s and 1950s saw the introduction of cinema theaters in urban Kano as an imposition of colonial urbanization on Muslim space. Cinema halls, like beer parlors, theaters, and public gardens introduced new modes of modern mixed-sex association into Hausa life. In a strict Muslim area this upset existing spatial hierarchies, creating new modes of stronger sociability that had to be regulated. Chapter 4 examines this regulation. It explores the built form of cinema theaters—how they were constructed, in which parts of the urban area they were located—as a means of analyzing the nature of colonial urbanization. Looking at conflicts over where cinemas were placed, who could attend, and rumors about the spiritual and physical consequences of cinema-going, I argue that conflicts over the opening of cinemas became a key way for urban Hausa to contest the transformation in urban order imposed under colonial rule.

Chapter 5 looks at the consequences of this for contemporary experiences of cinema-going. It moves from examining urban space as built form to a greater attention to the immaterial forms of urbanization that also make up city life. These are the affective dimensions crucial to city space—the pleasures and fears, the states of arousal and boredom that congeal around certain areas and certain institutions. I argue that cinema is one such institution. If chapter 4 looks at how cinema came to be, chapter 5 analyzes what it means for contemporary urban Nigerians by looking at

cinema-going as an affective practice in Kano. There, cinema-going is perceived as an immoral activity charged with illicitness, eroticism, danger, and excitement. I tack between the material specificity of cinema—the relations of lighting, vision, and movement inside and around it—and the modes of sociability and leisure it promotes. My interest is in how material structures produce immaterial forms of urbanism—the senses of excitement, danger, or stimulation that suffuse different spaces in the city and create the experience of what urbanism is.

Chapter 6 examines the rise of perhaps the most dynamic visual media form in postcolonial Africa: the Nigerian video film. Focusing on English-language Southern films and Hausa-language Northern ones, I argue that these cultural forms, across a variety of genres, draw on ideas of emotional, financial, and spiritual corruption that index the vulnerability and insecurity of contemporary Nigerian life. Southern films, I argue, rely on an aesthetics of outrage, a mode of cinematic address that rests on the outrageous abrogation of deep cultural norms to generate shock and anger in the viewer. Resting on norms of melodrama, these films provide fantastic narratives about Nigerian life in order not just to reflect that life but, by evoking bodily reactions, to constitute a living experience of this as well. Narratives about businessmen who belong to cults in order to become successful, about fraudsters who mask themselves to betray unsuspecting victims, about grandmothers who ensorcell their children and grandchildren, all represent a world in which people who appear one way turn out to be something else. In this world the visible grounds of daily experience cannot be taken at face value and vertiginous success and disaster are all too common.

In northern Nigeria, Hausa films have dealt with these issues of instability and vulnerability through the very different idiom of Indian film. Perhaps one of the most striking and unexpected results of the introduction of commercial cinema into northern Nigeria has been the massive success of Hindu Indian films with a Muslim African audience. Hausa filmmakers have pioneered a film genre wholly different from its Southern cousins, and they have done so famously, and controversially, by borrowing heavily from the narratives, songs, and style of Indian films. Their success has, in turn, spawned a fierce backlash among intellectuals angered at the infiltration of Indian film into Hausa culture. The very fact that the rise of this film form emerged at the same time as a movement toward Islamic revitalization leading to the imposition of Islamic law itself indicates the complexity and diverse cultural assemblages that make up urban Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigerian video films are a national media form that emerged free from the control of the state. Chapter 7 examines the roots of the video film phenomenon in the rise of piracy in Nigeria. I see piracy not simply in legal terms but as a mode of infrastructure that facilitates the movement of cultural goods. In the case of Nigeria, I argue that piracy has generative as well as destructive qualities, and that the infrastructure created by piracy brought about the emergence of a video film industry in the North. I also explore a wider issue, arguing that piracy is not simply a neutral conduit but imposes particular conditions on the recording, transmission, and retrieval of data. Constant copying erodes data storage, degrading image and sound, overwhelming the signal of media content with the noise produced by the means of reproduction. Pirate videos are marked by blurred images and distorted sound, creating a material screen that filters audiences' engagement with media technologies and the senses of time, speed, and space that result. In this way piracy creates an aesthetic, a set of formal qualities that generate a particular sensorial experience of media marked by poor transmission, interference, and noise.

If the beginning of this book examines the rise of media technologies as part of the infrastructural project of the Nigerian colonial state, the end looks at what happens when media get dislodged from those state projects. The rise of Hausa video films is one part of the efflorescence of media that make up contemporary urban experience in Nigeria. When taxi drivers play cassettes of Islamic preachers, or youths get together to visit video parlors, these are the ephemeral ways that urban space becomes mediated, and not just because of the sounds played or images shown.

In *Signal and Noise* I develop an anthropological approach toward media and a broad analysis of how technologies come to mean in society. To do this I have had to combine theoretical and methodological approaches from a number of different disciplines. This is because I am not just interested in texts but in the conditions of possibility that allow texts to have meaning. To trace this, I have gone back to tease out what was at stake when technologies like radio and cinema were first introduced to colonial Nigeria. What was at stake in that encounter between new infrastructural technologies and Hausa colonial subjects? How did this develop and mutate over time? To answer such questions I have had to combine archival analysis with ethnography. I have tried to maintain a proper concern for the analysis of cultural texts but also for the materiality of the technologies which transmit those texts and a sense of the wider social configuration that gives those texts purchase and social force. Throughout I have been

guided by a desire to start from the ground up in examining how media exist in the particular context of northern Nigeria. I seek not to take for granted histories of media that privilege their origins in Europe and the United States but critically to engage with them. I hope to discover where their insights have force and where their analytical assumptions turn out to be socially specific rather than universal to a technology. Nigeria is a vibrant, diverse, and provocative nation, continually experimenting and producing new forms of urban life, new sounds, sights, and experiences that constitute the physical ambient for its citizens. *Signal and Noise* traces out the role media and the social practices surrounding them have played in shaping that life.



1

Infrastructure, the Colonial Sublime, and Indirect Rule

IN 1932 KANO CITY unveiled its new Water and Electric Light Works. Based in Pan Shekara, an area just outside the city, it not only was intended to bring the infrastructural benefits of colonialism to Nigeria but was the first project of its size and ambition financed entirely by the Native Administration,¹ at a cost of more than a third of a million pounds (Crocker 1937). Befitting such an important moment, European dignitaries traveled from Britain and from around Nigeria; the emir of Kano, chief of the Native Authority, presided over a number of Hausa-Fulani notables and the senior British officer of the North, the lieutenant governor, headed a distinguished European contingent. The opening was a spectacular event. As Mallam Dauda described it in a newspaper account, “The Southern gate of the Emir’s house was magnificently decorated. Date palms had been put there and look as if they had grown there on the spot; brightly

colored cloths were hung up, red, white, green, blue, and yellow and different places were railed off for people to stand in. Electric lights were put all the way around from the office of the Galadima to the Tax Office, the whole place was a mass of lights and coloured cloths of all sorts" (*Northern Provinces News* [NPN], 14 November 1931, 6). Along with this, stands were built for European and Hausa-Fulani dignitaries; a fountain was erected in front of where the ceremony was to take place, and near where the emir of Kano was sitting a large metal frame had been built with lights on it forming Arabic letters.

In his report, Mallam Dauda stressed the scale of the event and the size of the crowd: "There were so many that some were unable to see anything. . . . The dust rose up so that one could scarcely breathe and the number of people could not be counted" (ibid). The British were more precise, fixing attendance at over fifty-three thousand (NPN, 1 December 1935, 14), though Dauda's imprecision gives a more tactile sense of the overwhelming nature of the spectacle. This was a simply enormous number of people congregated to watch the event of a work of colonial infrastructure being opened. C. W. Alexander, the lieutenant governor of Northern Nigeria, made a speech to the assembly, pointing out that many had said that this project was a waste of time,² but that now everyone could see for themselves just what had been accomplished. With that, the emir of Kano threw the switch and thousands of colored lights hung over the wall and along the streets exploded into florescence. Fireworks erupted from the rooftops, "and the whole place was a blaze of light and very beautiful to see" (ibid.). There was a gasp from the crowd and shouts of "*Lantiriki, ya kama*—the lamps are alight." Water came gushing out of the fountain, and at the center of it all a frame of tiny lights spelled out, in Arabic script, *Sarki ya gai-sheku* (The king [emir] greets you all).

For Muslim Hausa, Hausa written in Arabic script (*ajami*)—the standard mode of literacy until the British introduced Hausa written in roman script (*boko*)—was, and is, a domain of religion and tradition, a reserve from which the modern advances of colonialism were kept well away.³ The sign, "The king greets you all," thus represents the coming together of two discrete realms. On the one side, Arabic Hausa represents an intimate domain of tradition. The statement itself references the emir's power and the continuing legitimacy of precolonial modes of government. But the material the letters are made from, electric lights, represents the spectacular heart of modernity. When the emir addresses his subjects in this fashion he is melding his traditional legitimacy with a new form of government

Chapter One

emanating from colonial rule. Engineered into these thousands of colored lights, into the streetlamps and fountains, was a new sort of authority located in technology as the visible evidence of progress. For the British, the Water and Electric Light Works was evidence of their success in promoting modernizing improvements which they were increasingly using to legitimize their suzerainty. The Works was also a public display to the people that the emir of Kano and his administration recognized the importance of progressive infrastructural projects such as this.⁴ In the latter stages of colonial rule, when colonization had to be justified to its mounting critics in the colonies and the homeland, British colonial government legitimated itself by an argument of exchange: the giving of “voluntary” political subjection in return for technological progress. What every street-light and tap in Kano now made clear is that this form of exchange had been reproduced in Hausa society itself. The lights and fountains were not just effects of colonial rule; they were a mode of it. Mallam Dauda’s account of the opening of the Water and Electric Light Works sums up the success of the initiative: “Now the waterworks and electric light have done much good to Kano. Everywhere there are stand-pipes and washing places have been built, some for men, some for women and some for children. If anyone wants these things in his house they are brought there for him and he pays for them every month. If you were to see Kano now at night you would say that it is like the stars on a summer night” (*ibid.*).

What must it have been like to live in Kano at that time and see the coming of electric light? To grow up with the busyness of daytime curtailed by the oncoming of night, and then one day know that night would never be the same again? What would the feeling be to know that such things as electric light existed, but until that time they always existed elsewhere in a world where Europeans lived? The coming of electricity effected a split in Nigeria between electrified and modern towns and those that remained without electric power. Those conurbations now became cities yet to be electrified, pregnant with the future, yet remaining in the past. A year after the Kano opening, one Halilu Bida wrote a short piece for the newspaper depicting the town of Ilorin. In it, he described the town’s great size and admired the broadness of its new roads. “But,” he enthused, “the most marvelous and splendid feature of Ilorin is its electric light. . . . There are more than a hundred lamps on standards set up in the market which is held at night. The light from these lamps is very powerful and one can see everything in all directions, while people moving about in the glare of the electric light look quite unreal, and their white garments shine brilliantly”

(*NPN*, 9 April 1932, 17). Frozen in aspic inside this short description is the sense of the experience of electricity, the excitement of seeing something for the first time. Electrification can only carry this excitement for a short time before the sense of wonder becomes exhausted and, like a bulb, goes dark. As electricity becomes familiar, possessing it will no longer make Ilorin exceptional. The adjective *electric* before the noun *light* will become unnecessary and cumbersome—stating the obvious—rather than an exciting piece of description. Yet at this point, for Halilu Bida, technology and the life it creates are charged with force. Electricity has the power to recast a mundane world and present it again to one of its inhabitants in a new way so that real people look “unreal” and everyday garments seem to shine “brilliantly” and one can see “everything in all directions” even though it is night. That moment must have been an exciting one indeed.

Grand openings of infrastructural projects like the Kano Water and Electric Light Works are both a visual spectacle and a political ritual. They possess their own codified genres: the parade of military bands, processions by British troops and by the traditional emirate cavalry, speeches by eminent dignitaries, firework displays, and the spectacular presentation of modern technologies such as the wireless and the cinematograph. Rituals like these are moments where the public display of colonial authority is made manifest (A. Apter 2002, 2005; Cohn 1983; Ranger 1983). But openings were also about the spectacle of technology itself. They celebrated the completion of long, complex projects and focused attention on the existence of the object at hand—a power plant, a bridge, or a railroad. In colonial Nigeria, an object such as a bridge was intended to operate on several levels simultaneously: it had a technical function of facilitating transport from one side of a river to another; it trained a class of workers versed in the technical skills necessary to complete the job; it embodied successful bureaucratic organization; it confirmed that Northern aristocrats understood the benefits of modern infrastructures; and it displayed British scientific superiority and, by contrast, the gulf in education and civilization separating ruler from ruled, implicitly legitimizing the rule itself. Just as the ritual surrounding the opening of the Kano Water and Electric Light Works was designed to represent the plant as a technical object, so that plant was itself involved in a representational project intended to signify the future and promise of an electric Nigeria, bright and modern.

Understanding the provision of infrastructures as a work of state representation as well as a technical process pushes us to examine the conceptual mechanism that lay behind infrastructures and translated these objects

into cultural forms. In this, the erection of bridges and the building of railways in colonies such as Nigeria had much in common with infrastructures back home in Britain. What was different in Nigeria was the context of colonial rule and the way these technologies were tied to that rule. It is this link to rule that gave rise to the planning, funding, and completion of infrastructural projects and created an aura surrounding them, guiding how Nigerians and British related to them. Yet because technologies have their own material shape and design, they can never fully be reduced to the intentions with which they were constructed. They do not simply enact relations of ideology. Because they give rise to what the historian Rudolf Mrázek describes as the “sensing of colonial modernity,” the phenomenal, lived experience of a world undergoing colonial modernization, the material qualities of these technologies are excessive, creating possibilities and setting in motion forces that cannot quite be contained. Mrázek (2002) gives an example of this in his account of road building in the Netherlands East Indies. Hard, dark, and smooth, these well-built highways embodied the speed and rationality of colonial rule, and stood in contrast to the mud and dust of the chaotic Indonesian world they replaced. “The newness, the hardness and cleanness” are the material qualities that embodied the roads’ modernity, Mrázek argues. “Cleanness of the roads, in this logic, was the purity of the times, democracy even” (8). Mrázek’s aim here is to tie the sensate experience of the objects to the larger logic of rule they express. But once in place, that logic has to jostle with competing modes of reasoning. Just as the railroad was introduced for the elite but taken up far more quickly by the poorer classes, roads were introduced in Indonesia to facilitate a fast, modern world but quickly gave rise to *vrachtautos*—native trucks. Traveling too fast to be safe, overladen with goods and people, in poor repair with frequent breakdowns, these trucks disrupted the streamlined, modern world of which they were meant to be part. Europeans saw these buses and trucks as “wild,” renegades from the proper behavior that road traffic was intended to inculcate. The existence of the road, intended as a model of ordering, thus gave rise to new machineries that seemed, to European eyes, bowdlerized copies of the vehicles they should have been. Yet sleek Dutch trucks and decrepit Indonesian ones were both products brought about by the road and both equally modern. This dynamic, whereby the agency of the object (Latour 1993) has an independence from the intentions governing its introduction, opens up the sensate, material world of the technology itself.

For a book on media and urban life, dwelling in detail on the adminis-