

Evictions - Projections

Watching Dharmendra in Suburban Lagos

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Listen to friends telling stories about Agege. Professionals, in their mid and late thirties, who have spent childhood years in this area and have seen it grow and change. Stories of how politics shifts people from their homes, how suburbs are born, stories about the particular nature of their own suburb. With some of these stories as my main research, some other small conversations, and my own conjectures, I try to sketch a picture of the area that is home.

In the 1970s, the government shifted a huge working class population of Oluwole area, Central Lagos to the far, far outskirts of the city, in Ogba. Oluwole was too close to a prospering business area and a semi-slum, however vast, however old, could not be allowed to stay there, reasoned the powers that be. After all, the area was ripe with business possibilities; there were many other, more profitable eyes on it. Very soon, real estate prices would sky rocket in the 'cleared out' land that was now 'developed' as the business navel of central Lagos.

The people who lost their homes struggled to adjust to a place that was closer to the rural hinterland than their city. Gradually, they brought back some of their lost citylife into the suburb. Their shops and institutions, their businesses and entertainments, and their urban outlook began to give a new character to Ogba.

The civil war got over. The government planned again, and 'gave place' to the many soldiers, shattered physically and mentally by the war, and their families, in far off Agege, just beyond Ogba, away from the city. Way out from the centre of Lagos, Agege was already a large trading junction for the Egba man coming in from Abeokuta and for the Hausa trader disembarking at its once famous railway station to go to Lagos.

My friends came from other families, families of middle class people from Lagos, who decided to relocate to the outskirts of the city, where land was cheap, where it was still possible to build a decent house. People who hoped, (as all middle class people all over the world, making this shift, hope of their cities) that Lagos, expanding on and on, would eventually embrace their suburb as its own, and share out its amenities and its opportunities. For the children leaving Mushin, or some place else in Lagos, to go live in Ogba or Agege was like going to live in the bush! They eventually found fellow complainers in the neighbourhood, with whom they tried to make this new place their own. One afternoon a child saw someone being knifed in Abule Egba. It gave him a precocious insight into a dangerous

adult world. Responding perhaps to a sense of danger, or to the sparsely peopled, empty landscape of Agege, he played destructive games with his friends, throwing stones at passing car windows. Stories of violence became the stuff of children's mythology and the source of new games. They made their own map of danger of the unfamiliar suburb - certain street corners, among certain 'kinds' of people, in darkensses, like the darkness of cinema theatres which 'hoodlums' frequented. Danjuma, Pen Cinema... were places of entertainment for 'strange people'.

Coincidentally those were the days when the big screen was becoming popular in Lagos, and in much of Nigeria. People began to flock, singly, in families, and groups, to darkened auditoriums mapping the city, to watch stories told by well-known actors unfold on the screen. Metro, Jebako, Rainbow... cinema houses in the main city had begun catering to middle class and even elite audiences. One of the theatres would have snacks served, mid-screening, with minerals, to its patrons.

Soon Dharmendra, Hema Malini, Wang Yu, Jugnu, Charas, Sholay... were names on diverse tongues in Lagos. And everywhere a new lot of cinema lovers entered the theatres, young, often not yet ten year old boys, stealing into shows well after the family outing was over, to be overwhelmed by the giants striding across the white screen.

By now missions had opened schools in the city's new suburbia. And roads to Agege from Lagos became busier. Simultaneously, from outside the city, traders added to the noise on the streets. Perhaps reassured by the increased new crowds, slowly more middle-class people started frequenting the cinema halls. And the two cinema houses of the area achieved some respectability in 'family' eyes. Danjuma ('International') Cinema was considered safer than Pen Cinema. It was larger, with a huge seating capacity, air-conditioned, relatively expensive balcony seats that separated the people who could afford them from the poorer 'masses', and 35 mm projection, mostly of Indian films. The children started flocking to the cinemas - boys with small stolen change, trying to get in on half tickets after the interval, sitting with unknown crowds of people, with 'people not quite like their families', in the crowd, in the stalls, watching the screen. Mesmerised by the secrets of large liquid eyes in a giant sized woman's face, or echoing the movements of a Kung Fu dance as they watched Bruce Lee in the dark.

Then, the cinema boys of the 70s grew up. Film watching became less of an addiction, more a pleasant occasional outing: A late night film with friends, or with a date maybe. By the late 1980s, public areas across Lagos started becoming unsafe. The nights especially had new dangers - armed robbers, increasing in number as the sliding economy created more poverty and unemployment; a military government that was suspicious of everyone; and its arm of law, the policeman: the man in the crowd given a uniform and a gun, power and a bad salary, a training and a license in violence and a need to show 'results'.

One late night in the 1980s, a group of friends, all children of the 70s, were returning from a late night show at Danjuma. Some trouble had broken out nearby. The police stopped the young men. The usual: kneeling on the roadside, humiliation. It seemed like simple extortion would not serve the policemen. The young men were told to get into the police van. The future lawyer among them refused, and managed to get a word with the senior officer. Managed to tell him they were coming from the cinema. "Show your ticket

then”, the officer barked. Wale put his hand in his shirt pocket, and that night, the slip of paper that let him into Danjuma became ‘proof’ and let off Wale, and the friends with him. The ticket became a talisman to protect the faithful patrons.

Late eighties, and with the still increased state brutalities, and the bad economy, cinemas became more deserted. The middle class was the first to clear out of the theatres. For many of them the house became the sanctuary instead. For those who could afford it, security gates, higher walls, grills, broken glass shreds, barbed wires guarded the house where entertainment, communion, leisure, everything was to be strictly contained. People lived as though in voluntary house arrest. Meanwhile, well heeled televangelists from American shores knocked on the television screens in these living rooms, encouraging people to join in a larger, more purposeful congregation, a different kind of sharing and participating.

Public gatherings did not die out completely; they found a new venue in religious assemblies. Almost every street of Agege soon had a church. What must these assemblies have offered that the cinema could not any more? More local context, perhaps, than the 35mm exports from far off countries. Who had the time anymore to pleasantly argue the nuances of romantic love dances, the peculiar absence of hot blooded passion; who had the time to deduce from these stories some truths about foreigners? Hope was what was desperately needed. A place of communion where you seemed to be much more directly addressed. Who had the spare money to spend on some exotic cinema, which might now have seemed like an indulgence of an easier time? What if you were attacked by armed robbers, stopped by the police?

And still, even those difficult years did not manage to shut down many cinema houses, they still had their takers. Some old faithfuls, some new initiates, and some seekers for whom the organized communion of religious places was not quite it. Who were these people who put together their meagre resources to still afford this leisure. Maybe those for whom life, with or without the military government, was a constant struggle anyway. Some sought the oblivion of the dark, some made the theatre their own carnival of discontent, unwinding with noise and disorder.

By the time some sense of order returned to the polity, the local film on video had become very popular with the middle-class especially. The children of the 70s did not return to these old haunts, or to their childhood films, except in nostalgic conversation. The combination of a locally made film, and a place like FSP, set in an estate, more ‘orderly’ and professional, started drawing in some middle-class families.

One Sunday in late November, instead of going on from my familiar landmark – a clumsy plaster statue of some Oba of Agege, standing amid the traffic – I crossed the road and wandered into Pen Cinema: the large, silent building for which this square is named. There was a man sitting astride a bench, in the narrow gallery alongside the theatre. The walls of the gallery were covered with posters of different Indian films. He beckoned me into the bulb-lit corridor. I hesitated: a lone woman, *oyinbon*, wary with accounts of hoodlums at such places. I finally walked in and stared at faces on the posters, recognizing some, imagining stories, till I felt easy about venturing a little further, and stepped to where a door led into the theatre. I could see only a few heads in the large darkness. People had paid to get away from the bright afternoon outside, to sit in the dark and gaze at a flickering

screen, a bad print, a foreign film – to dream, or seek an answer or a corroboration in someone else's story, or just to unwind. I stood at the door few minutes, my eyes widened by the brightness of the grainy print with undulating oversized human beings. Then I fled.

To return on Monday afternoon, determined to be bolder. To watch a whole film. I found Pen Cinema gone.

The gallery I remembered was a mess of unplastered walls and masonry. The posters were gone, their wooden boards, stacked up outside, waiting to be carted away. The board on top was chalked in with the old admonition... "Smoking of Indian Hemp and Igbo is strictly forbidden inside the premises".

The cinema hall, I was told, had been leased out to a church. One of the cinema employees, who is mute, gesticulated vividly with his hands: "All of it is gone, pulled down, over". Inside, the doors had been flung open, lights lit up the dark interior that I remembered. The screen had been replaced by a pulpit. A blue cloth hung there, with a rosette on it. Some four wooden steps covered in cloth separated it from the congregation: so far, rows of empty chairs, standing still, waiting for their new occupants.

Among those who will miss their cinema are the small traders of the area. Ronke, a young girl, who would go in occasionally for a film, or catch a few minutes with the screen when she went in on errands. Lasisi, in his mid-thirties who sells perfumes outside the theatre. He has lived in this area since he was a boy and he remembers Pen Cinema from then. Crowds, big crowds. Even now, he claims, people were still coming in, from as far as Mushin. He remembers the time when they tried to show a Yoruba film, but the crowds were so big and uncontrollable, they had to call the police! And so they returned the Indian film to the screen. The films shown were often reruns. Lasisi remembers how someone would stop by a poster, look at the faces, and narrate the story of the film to people gathered around. "And when we went in to see it, we saw all that again, all that he had said".

Pen Cinema used to have two theatres. Now both house separate churches.

I follow the current 'operator', (projectionist) who has been here 11 years, upstairs, overlooking the newly designated church hall, to the small dark space that is the old projection room. By candlelight I see two old large projectors, their noses pointed at small openings in the wall. "Victoria 8", he tells me their make, with visible pride. These are the magic making 35 mm machines he has wielded. So, will they fall into disuse now? He tells me they are waiting to be shifted, in two weeks or so. He was a patron of this cinema house too, a cinema boy, before he got the job here. He likes the place. It is not like other cinema houses, he says, it is... not rowdy. I hear the opinion repeated by others who frequent this place. This is a cinema hall they are intimate with, they are relaxed in here, they think it is better than many other such places. The 'rowdy' cinema house is a description of some other place; their own is not like that. I think of all my and my friends' misgivings. 'Rowdy', 'lumpen', are probably epithets used by one class to give a blanket description of people of another class. To describe a crowd that is not our own? Within that crowd, of course, people perceive themselves and each other differently.

A young boy outside worries about his mother's small trade, a roadside spread of women's footwear... She supports a family of four with it. Will the church chase them all away, just remove the small stalls that they spread out at the theatre entrance? Would I

speak to the management? I am thrown back, and tell him surely they will not heed me.

He tells me he would often go in to take a break from helping his mother, or when someone came to meet her. The people inside knew them, they would let them stroll in for a break... His worry returns, swiftly and suddenly, "But now - what will happen to the shop?"

An old ticket collector, Ahmeduilahi, sits astride a bench at a much-weathered looking Danjuma. He has been here 22 years, almost as long as the cinema. It is Sallah day, the end of Ramadan, but there is hardly anyone in the balcony watching the video projection of a new Indian film. (I am told it is new, therefore there are no subtitles.) Curtains are hanging loose, many blinds have been broken, and daylight flows in. A young couple sits stiffly, staring at the screen. Two young men share a resigned look and try and laugh at a comedian on screen. The catatonic violence unfolding on the screen precludes the need for subtitles. Overlit enlarged male muscles, alternate with sadistic bloodletting and frail lifeless women. And then small moments of comedy. The landscape the film 'expresses' scatters further out of reach.

A few washes of glitzy blood later, I walk out, up the stairs, and visit the projection room instead.

A large easy airy room. The silent ledges facing the film projectors are covered over with small objects of daily use. A video projector casts its image onto the hall outside. A comfortable cot stretches across one corner of the room. And the projectionist speaks to his woman friend as they both watch a local programme on television. A fairytale projection room, with so many more 'pictures' than those small dark spaces I have seen squeezing in the projectionist in other theatres everywhere. I peer out of the balcony. Neat shadows edge the sunlit street below.

I walk out and look back at the large spacious generously built building, by far the largest in the immediate landscape. In the distance I see the tall minarets of the Morcas Arabic and Islamic School. Around the theatre the road is neatly lined with single shops, there are hardly any buildings with even a first floor. A large cinema in a working class area.

I think of the contrast with the enclosed, strictly middle, upper-middle class housing estates spread over this area, where my friends live. Friends weighed in still by the wasted years of misrule, struggling at relatively late ages to consolidate hard-earned positions, or to provide well for newly started families. Friends, who as young boys had clamoured to this theatre, as young men had frequented roadside beer parlours, had been part of the 'common life'.

Agege has grown. Travellers, visitors, people of different nationalities are seen here today. Many kinds of shops and markets, catering to different classes of people with as many kinds of homes. On the streets, crowds, and vans of different organizations. Different churches for different classes of congregation, and now Muslim assemblies catering to the middle-class. For people at large, the beer parlours continue to be gathering places, lively with politics, personal relationships, religion, the electricity problem of Agege, lively chatter that sets into relief the silence of a lonely beer drinker.

In the market behind my house at Oko Oba is another world of Agege: a poorer world, lively, vibrant, where small traders make a very small daily living. These people of this small market have lived on, through times of violence and disruption, struggling to keep their

place at the margins of this suburb. It is here, on a routine Saturday morning shopping, that I meet a faithful member of the thin crowds at the Agege theatres. I hear a scratchy rendition of a Hindi song, on an old transistor. I ask the owner of the box, a soft-spoken middle-aged trader, maybe a little older than my friends, if he likes Indian songs. He does, he likes Indian films too. He still goes to Danjuma, Pen or another small cinema (I later get to know it is the Daily Mirror – a small busy cinema house tucked away in a small lane close to Danjuma) on weekends. One film on the weekend. It is a leisure he really tries to make time and money for, an outing he tries to treat himself to. Pen Cinema is out of his reach now, far off in Alagbado. But Danjuma and Daily Mirror still play for their faithful patrons from Agege.

Sunday afternoon, and someone else is minding his pepper-onion-tomato shop. I presume he has gone to diligently keep his tryst with his leisure, the screen at the theatre.

