'Lady no be so': the Image of Women in Contemporary Church Posters in Nigeria

Babson Ajibade Department of Visual Arts & Technology, Cross River University of Technology, Calabar, Nigeria.

Believing that history was propelled by materialist considerations, Karl Marx had an unflattering view about religion. He called religious faith "the opium of the masses". In the sense in which Marx uses the term, religious faith produces some sort of insensibility to critical social stimuli by depressing the individual or collective consciousness. In other words, as masses bury themselves in religious practices, they become less critical and more susceptible to domination – according to how fervently they are involved in those innuendos of religion. Whereas Max wrote in a milieu far remote from Africa, postcolonial Christian practices in Nigeria seem to validate him. Prior to the nation's independence in 1960, most churches were either Catholic or Protestant varieties – besides African churches like *Aladura* Church and Celestial Church of Christ, both of which africanized Christianity by blending it with so-called traditional religious practices. From the basic Catholic, Protestant and Africanist church varieties of the pre-1960s, the late 60s ushered-in a flood of breakaway clergy men, who began to establish their own churches in which they were 'founders' and 'general overseers'. The late Benson Idahosa established Church of God Mission in 1968 and William Kumuyi started Deeper Life Bible Church in 1973. However, being the helmsman over a fast-growing church meant that the founding pastor was also in control over both the spiritual and material accumulations of the church. This last part, where pastors have control over material accumulations of the church, may have played a big role in the prolific way in which churches have multiplied in Nigeria. Today, there are no official figures for the thousands of churches registered in Nigeria.

Some churches like David Oyedepo's Living Faith Church have branches all over Nigeria with a headquarters auditorium that can seat 50,000 members. Most churches have just one branch, which may even be in a small room, someone's sitting room or a garage in a residential building – in fact any available space where people can put benches, place banners and put a loud speaker. On some street corners, it is possible to find competing signboards of up to six churches. For any regular attendee or keen observer at any of these churches, the most fervent sermons and prayers are built around 'prosperity', 'money' and a host of economic subjects. Membership in these churches is massive and popular, transcending generational, economic and other social stratifications. From Sunday to Saturday churches schedule activities in which pastors expect more or less all members to attend. Midweek and Sunday services are the most attended, with crowds of old and young, poor and rich, sick and handicapped flooding to their preferred churches for diverse social and economic agendas. By the form, context and manner in which social actors participate in them, contemporary Nigerian churches satisfy in a way what Haag calls "all (or at least many) individual tastes" (512). While church-going has become a popular culture, the vast collection of practices built around the Nigerian church world tends to highlight the opiate in religion. Mostly male, pastors are sacrosanct and unaccountable, members transfer ownerships of properties to pastors, pastors' living standards far outweigh the average, church funds are unaudited and members keep flooding-in. From all indications the church world is a dominated social space not just in terms of materiality but also in terms of how male pastors see, use and represent women. If, as this paper suggests, church-going is a popular culture in Nigeria, is this 'culture', like all popular cultures (Hall 1981, Barber 1997, Dolby 2006), an arena for consent, resistance and negotiation of identities? Can the analyses of any of the fundamental practices of the contemporary church reveal the sense of domination that pervades that sector of the Nigerian society? Using the analysis of printed posters made and distributed by churches in the city of Calabar, this paper seeks to show how male-domination is reproduced in printed posters made and distributed by churches in Nigeria. In this paper, 'poster' is a broad printed category that refers to handbills, posters, banners, and

billboards because the Nigerian churches do not make distinctions in the categories and, thus, print the same visual design on all the media.

Table 1: Female Pastor-owned Churches in Calabar		
S/n	**Name of Church**	**Name of Pastor-owner**
1	Liberty Gospel Church	Lady Apostle Helen Ukpabio
2	The Cloud of Glory Ministry International	Evangelist Louisa Ekara
3	Beauty for Ashes International	Pastor Emilia Ekam
4	Blessed Zion Church	Pastor Effiowan Ekanem
5	Melodious Songs Assembly	Prophet Melody Egemba
6	Touch of Love Ministries	Reverend Margaret Ikpat
7	Rapha Mission Assembly	Reverend Veronica Bassey-Duke
8	Cheering News Ministries	Reverend Rachael Nkum
9	Power of Faith Church	Reverend (Prof.) Grace Umoren
10	Radiant Christian Church	Evangelist Chibuzor Duru
11	Word Family Centre	Reverend Charity Anayo Winner
12	Green Pastures Christian Centre	Pastor Grace Udoakan
13	Praise Evangelical Mission	Pastor Glory Anam
14	Cheering News Ministries	Reverend Rachael Ukim

The Production of Church Posters

With a population of about 1.2 million people, Calabar is the capital city of Cross River State, southeast Nigeria. As with other cities southern Nigeria, church is a booming business. Reverend Bassey Daniel, a male pastor and Secretary of Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN), tells me that more than 1000 churches have registered with him (*Personal Interview*). Also Reverend Veronica Bassey-Duke assures me that there are close to 2000 churches in Calabar (*Personal Interview*). In terms of gender distribution of pastor-owners of churches in Calabar, men are in the clear majority. Of the nearly 2000 churches in Calabar I found only 14 owned and run by women Pastors (see Table 1), indicating the clear gender disparity in church ownership in Calabar.

Besides this disparity, the proliferation of churches in Nigeria has meant that they are all competing for much the same mass of audiences. This competition for audiences and patronage among pastors has also meant that churches no longer depend solely on bible sermons to attract masses. To gain audiences and patronage, churches rely heavily on visual media like printed posters, handbills, billboards and videos. These visual media usually have screaming titles, claims of miracle and prosperity. Though billboards and videos are effective visual media, they are expensive to produce. Billboards need to be printed on large format and then erected on site with wood or metal frameworks. Additionally, rent needs be paid to local authorities for erected billboards, which adds up to the final costs. Video production is also expensive in that equipment need be bought or rented, as well as manpower for production, editing and distribution. In fact, the average budget for videos made by commercial producers in the Nigerian video film market is more than US$10,000. This is far above what most Nigerian churches can afford on publicity. But by far the cheapest visual media employed by churches in Nigeria are printed posters and handbills. From Table 2 below, posters cost about ₦18.50 (about US$0.1) while handbills are about ₦2.40 (about US$0.02) to produce. Thus, for minimal budgets, thousands of these prints can be produced and circulated to mass audiences to announce and publicise

churches' and pastors' activities. No wonder then, that these prints flood the streets of Calabar, adorning walls, door posts and church members' vehicles.

Table 2: Cost of printing Posters and Handbills			
Cost of Producing 1000 Posters		**Cost of Producing 8000 Handbills**	
Average size: 42 x 59.4cm		Average size: 14.8 x 21cm	
1 packet of Art paper	₦7500	1 packet of Art paper	₦7500
Computer design	₦1000	Computer design	₦1000
Digital colour separation	₦3500	Digital colour separation	₦3500
4 lithographic plates	₦2000	4 lithographic plates	₦2000
4 lithographic impressions	₦4000	4 lithographic impressions	₦4000
Trimming on guillotine	₦ 500	Trimming on guillotine	₦1000
TOTAL	₦18500 (US$122)	TOTAL	₦19000 (US$125)
Cost per poster	₦18.50	Cost per handbill	₦2.40

The Use of Church Posters and Handbills

Whereas the visual designs on both media are the same, churches in Calabar often use posters differently from handbills. Posters are generally pasted on visible parts of walls, fences and other environmental structures, where passers-by can have the best views. Posters are sometimes pasted on cars of members, particularly during carnivalesque publicity floats. These floats can involve upwards of 100 poster-ridden cars filled with church members. Hundreds of other unruly church members on foot – mostly young women – intersperse the convoy screaming and tossing handbills into the hands of unwilling pedestrians and passing cars. At the head of these floats is usually a decorated truck from where loud music is blared continuously. Church handbills are also placed at the counters of fast food restaurants, where customers can take them along. But the sheer volume of handbills disseminated during publicity floats far outweighs those that are disseminated at eateries.

That women form the majority in these carnivalesque church floats is very fascinating. It is fascinating because church spaces are male-dominated spaces where women are expected to be silent and men take leads. But it is not only in the publicity floats that women are majority. Women are also majority in church auditoriums during services. Women do most of the cleanups and other duties like choir and ushering. Expectedly, women provide a large chunk of the offerings and other monies collected by pastors. Paradoxically, this ubiquity of women in the church space does not actually translate into power in any meaningful way. In the church spaces women are apprehended as the so-called 'weaker vessels' whose voices, wishes and rights are secondary to men. In the older churches such as Christ Apostolic Church and Deeper Life Bible Church women do not just seat separately but must cover their heads with scarves in submission to God and men. In this sense, newer churches like Chris Oyakhilome's Christ Embassy and David Oyedepo's Living Faith Church differ because they employ women pastors and neither forbid women from wearing trousers nor do they compel women to cover their heads with scarves. While the criteria for selecting and employing a few women as pastors are unclear, what is very clear is that, as yet, women are a much dominated category in the church world. Yet, while relegating women to the background in the church world, male-domination as a social construction operates shrewdly in putting women forward and using them to distribute posters and handbills during publicity floats.

The Representation of Women in Church Posters

The typical manner in which women are represented in Nigerian popular practice can be evidenced in the text of Fela Anikulapo Kuti's song *Lady no be so* (1983), a Pidgin English song that was very popular among Nigerians of all ages:

> *African woman go dance, she go dance fire dance*
> *...she know him man na master,*
> *She go cook for am,*
> *She go do anything he say,*
> *But lady no be so,*
> *...lady na master,*
> *...she go want sit down for table before anybody,*
> *...call am for dance, she go dance lady dance...*
>
> When African woman dances, she will dance fire dance
> ...she knows her man is master,
> She cooks for him,
> She does anything he says,
> But a lady is not like that,
> ... a lady is master,
> ...she likes to be first to sit at a table,
> ... call her to dance, she dances lady dance...

In this context the Pidgin English term, *lady no be so* simply means 'this is not the way of a lady'. The text of Fela's song is very revealing of how women are represented in Nigerian popular practices. In the domestic space, a woman is supposed to know the man as 'master', cook for him and do anything he says. At social times the so-called African woman is also expected to dance 'fire dance', that is, dance with all her body and soul in order to please the man. In contrast to this traditional but popular archetype of womanhood, Fela says that a 'lady' is not like that. A 'lady' in this sense, is a woman that is self-aware, conscious of her rights and knows that she is her man's equal and partner. And, at party times, a 'lady' will dance a self-aware dance to please herself rather than a self-repudiation dance to please the man. This '*lady no be so'* dynamics is a keen representation of the ideology of male domination in Nigerian social practices. And, it forms "the social context in which girls and women are culturally subordinated" (Brown 13). Thus, in a clear way, it is this narrow traditional archetype of womanhood that is reconstructed in Nigerian church posters.

Church posters in Nigeria correspond to the category that Bergström (2008) classifies as 'directive images', which are specifically designed to make the sender and message more visible and "influence people in a certain direction" (124). As such Nigerian church posters are designed to make the pastor and the prosperity message most visible to audiences. Pastor-owners of churches (as well as guest preachers considered 'equal' to the pastor) are placed at the vantage position far right or left flanks of the posters, where they are framed by other motifs in the layout (see figure 1). The church's name and slogan/by-line occupy the top and bottom flanks respectively. Guest pastors are lined at the subordinated bottom between the pastor-owner's position and the by-line, while the central portion of the layout is earmarked for church/programme details. The visual structure of church posters analysed in figure 1 below is not necessarily rigid because some motifs may shift a bit and the pastor-owner's image may be larger. More than this, the visual design, placement of motifs and structure of church posters tend to relate directly to the general proxemic patterns of male-domination in the Nigerian

social practice and church space itself. Firstly, since the vast majority of pastors are men, there are also more men represented in the design of church posters generally. Secondly, on men pastors' posters guest women pastors are never placed at the vantage positions. Whereas guest men pastors are always granted that visual equality (Plates 1 and 2), women guest pastors are always placed at the subordinated bottom of the poster (plate 3).

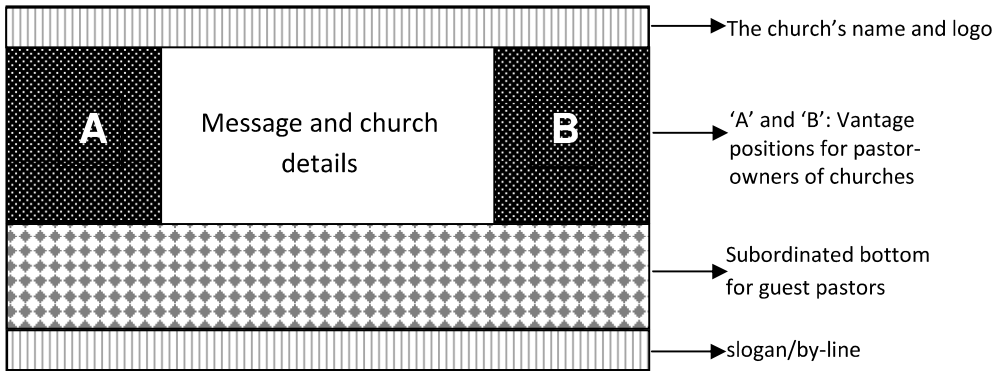


Figure 1: The visual structure of contemporary Nigerian church posters

s

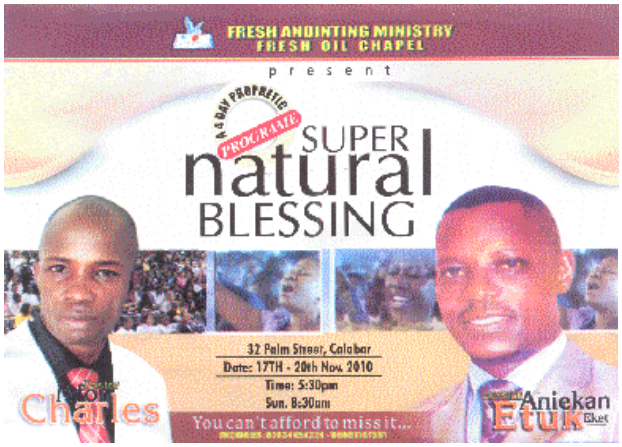


Plate 1: A church poster showing how male guest pastors are placed at the vantage position of equality, opposite the pastor-owner.

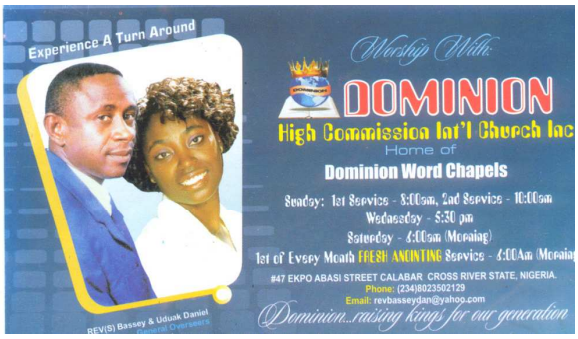
Plate 2: Another church poster in which a male guest pastor is visually equalised with the pastor-owner.

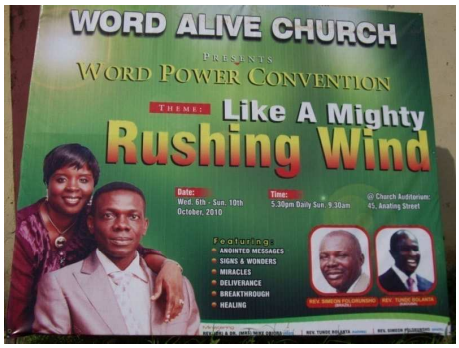
Plate 3: The placement of women guest speakers at the subordinated bottom as one among many.

Thirdly, women appear at the vantage positions of the church posters only as wives of the pastor-owners. Male pastors are able to draft their wives into the church work generally and the posters in particular. For them, it is important to showcase their wives on their posters. When I interviewed Reverend Bassey Daniel, he was very clear about this:

> It helps to tell the public that you are married and responsible...I put my wife on my church posters because she is a beautiful woman. Every man likes a beautiful woman. For me, it helps. People will feel better coming to discuss their marital problems with you when they know you are married. (*Personal Communication*)

Reverend Daniel holds the general point of view of male pastors. For them, putting their wives on their posters is not about showing the publics their wives' partnership in the church. It is rather about using their wives as charming objects of femininity to convince people to come to them and entrust their resources to the church. It is then clear that the woman's picture on the church poster functions differently from that of her pastor husband. Drafted into the poster, her image is a visual device, based on sex appeal and her domestic role, to pull audiences to the pastor. Thus, in the church posters, the proxemic pattern between the pastor's image and the woman's very much underscore her position as being just a 'wife' – in the archetypal sense of the term. There is also differentiation in the costuming of the characters. The pastor is usually more formally clad in suit while the woman beside him appears in less formal attire, which helps to place visual emphasis on the man. In these condescending pictures the women stand smilingly by their often more serious-looking husbands. A hand across the pastor's shoulder (or vice versa) merely serves to domesticate and reinforce her role as a 'wife' rather than a 'partner' in the church space (plates 4-7).





Plates 4-7: The 'wifesisation' of women in church posters of male pastor-owners.

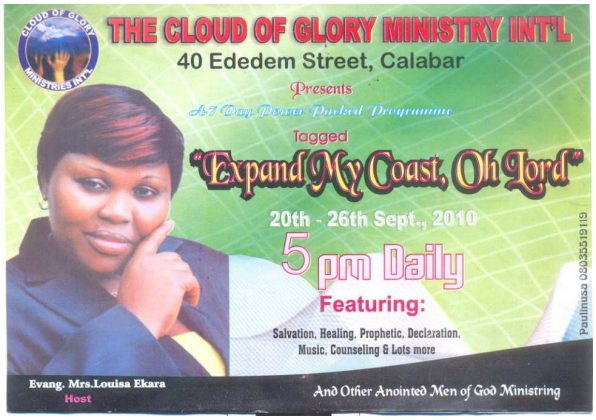
Interestingly, while male pastors are able to draft their wives, women pastors are unable to put their husbands into their church posters. My interview with reverend Veronica Bassey-Duke was very revealing:

> The husbands shy away from the ministry and posters. But if the man is put on the posters, it can bestow a kind of credibility. I have never asked to put my husband's picture on the poster because I already know his position.
>
> It is a lot easier for men pastors to drag their wives into the posters because the man is the head. No matter how much the woman dislikes it, the husband pastor will always compel her to comply. It is interesting because Jesus gave women prominence in Christianity – away from patriarchal Jewish religion. But patriarchalism is still there in Christianity. Women pastors work twice as hard to get where men pastors get to in the Christian world. (*Personal Communication*)

The resonance between what is said above and actual social practices in Nigeria cannot be missed. From what she says, it is clear that, while women are unable to drag their husbands into the posters because they "know" their husbands will decline, men pastors employ the inequality in power relations to compel their wives into their church posters. Concurring with this, Reverend Bassey Daniel goes further:

> Men don't appear in their wives' posters because they understand that it is their wives that are called not them. But the woman needs to appear in her husband's

posters because she was made as a helper to him. Joyce Meyer is perhaps the best example. She is the one that appears on the posters. Her husband never does. He is the business manager that operates in the background. (*Personal Communication*)



Plates 8-10: The absence of husbands on their wives' church posters.

Reverend Daniel's position above indicates two separate but negative ways in which men pastors see women generally. Firstly, while men can 'understand' that it is their wives that are 'called' (and therefore exempt themselves from women-pastors posters), women by their 'natural' composition are unable to understand that it is their husbands that are called. This fundamental point-of-view vitalises the entire Nigerian church world in a very negative way because it reflects how women are seen as having less functional initiatives and inferior reasoning faculties. But this view is not entirely new. It is one that functions by degrading the *other* as a basis for elevating self. Emil Ludwig (in Booth 1977) was convinced that Africans did not have the cranial ability to conceive God; David Hume (in Gould 1981) believed that Negroes are naturally inferior to whites; and, more recently Frank Ellis was suspended from his Faculty when he declared to his students that "black people have a genetically lower IQ" (*Racism* 2006). Calling upon race, gender or other forms of differentiation in relational discourse is often a distracting device that subordinates the *other*. And, in so doing, individuals like Nigerian pastors fortify themselves by measuring "against a group they define as largely worthless and ineffectual" (Roediger 118). In the final analysis, the visuality of the Nigerian church posters represent what Comaroff and

Comaroff term "puzzling new patterns of exclusion...that reflect older lines of gender, sexuality, race, and class in ways both strange and familiar" (292).

Secondly, Reverend Daniel's text reveals the mythological sense of seeing women in the Nigerian church space. This myth is appropriated from the Bible's creation narrative in which women were 'made' only as God's afterthought. In that sense, the woman was made long after God had made man and, only to discover that he needed an inferior feminine *other* to help in some basic manly needs. Therefore, women were made only to serve and help men, and never the other way round. But seeing women as less intelligent and subhuman is a patriarchal device by which men construct and sustain a narrative of the inferiority of woman nature in the Nigerian church world. By apprehending women in this narrative of inferiority, men are able to elevate and enthrone themselves over silenced women. As Larson finds in African literature, Nigerian church posters are "concerned for the most part with a masculine world" (78). Furthermore, men-pastors in Nigeria draw validation for this mode of seeing women from local and global sources. They refer to African traditional roles of women defined in Fela Kuti's song above while, at the same time, making selective references to isolated global cases like Joyce Meyer's, the successful American Christian speaker, to validate their narrow but strategic way of seeing women. By this, women are doubly inferiorised (Oyewumi 2006) in the church space itself and in the printed poster, its mediated form. And, this pervasive mode of seeing women is visually represented using proxemic positions of women printed in church posters.

Plates 11 and 12: Appearing in 2010, these church posters of women pastor owners show only men as invited guest pastors. But they also indicate that women are beginning to subordinate male images in the patriarchal social space of the church.

In the end, the modes of positioning the woman in posters replicate both the power relations in the Nigerian social practice and in the churches themselves. While power relations in the society may be open to debates and forces of social change, the church space is very patriarchal, using constricting and unquestionable religious regulations to dominate women. The diffusion of gender politics of the Nigerian church to the printed poster can be read as a process of womanising females and delegitimizing them as leaders in a masculinised predatory world. The unquestionable social geographies of the church space merely fortify men pastors and enable them to subordinate women. Therefore, using the general ambience of religious opiate, male pastors conceptualise women as a lesser social category not only in the church space itself but also in the visuality of their church posters. As Pieterse (2005) notes in the

relational politics of urban South Africa, in Nigeria, what may be regarded as a gender crises in the church world has found its way into the public domain via the media of printed posters. And, in the final analysis, semiotic elements of the Nigerian church posters' visual design are a system of signs and codes that reflect inherent patriarchal colourations in a contextual process of women's disempowerment.

At the moment, this mode of seeing women in the Nigerian church space is habituated. And, as churches proliferate, this subordinated mode of seeing multiplies. If a reading of the visuals is anything to go by, then there are no indications that the subordination of women in church posters will abate or be upturned very quickly. Even the posters of the women who own churches in Calabar attest to this. In their churches, their husbands excuse themselves from both overt church politics and the printed posters altogether. That their husbands never appear on their church posters may indicate that the reversal of women subordination in the church world may be long in coming. For, as Plates 11 and 12 indicate, even the guest preachers women pastors invite to their churches are mainly men. This is hardly surprising since most pastors in Nigeria are men. What is however curious in women pastors' church posters is that they do not seem to be interested in inviting and highlighting women – as a counter-text to male pastors' posters. However, from these same posters emanates the potential for what De Boeck and Honwana (2005) term 'a counter-hegemonic force' in that, on a few of the prints we find male guest preachers placed not at the vantage positions but at the subordinated bottom (plates 11 and 12). Although such posters are rare, the fact that some women pastors are beginning to see men through visual categorising standards made by men is positive in itself. It is positive in that it provides us the visual data critical for verifying the agency of women in resisting, liberating themselves and reversing their subordination in the Nigerian church space. The kind of liberty signified by the Nigerian church posters is what Foucault (2004) terms a 'practice', in the sense that it is not bestowed automatically but needs be exercised by the oppressed social category. This is what Appadurai (2005) means when he says that imagination and agency are vital to group mobilisation. Taken as a practice, therefore, women pastors' ability to subordinately image male pastors on their posters is liberty because it indicates both the interesting gender interconnection among pastors and a direction in social change in the Nigerian churches. Thus, the agency of women represented in an obscure visual media like church posters represents a crack in the frontiers of exclusion and inclusion in the contemporary urban African church space. What remains to be seen is whether this crack in a colonised public space will extend until the hegemony is upturned, or whether women as a category can defy the opiate frontiers of urban African religion and re-invent a new idea of *self* that is contrary to that allocated by men.

Works Cited

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Barber, Karin. Ed. *Readings in African Popular Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997.

Bassey-Duke, Veronica. *Personal Interview*. Calabar: 30th October 2010.

Bergström, Bo. *Essentials of Visual Communication*. London: Lawrence King Publishing, 2008.

Booth, Newell. "God and Gods in West Africa". *African Religions*. Ed. Newell Booth. New York: Nok, 1977. 159-181.

Brown, May Ellen. "Introduction: Feminist Cultural Television Criticism – Culture, Theory and Practice". *Television and Women's Culture*. London: Sage Publications, 1990: 11-22.

Comaroff, Jean and John Comaroff. "Millenial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming". *Public Culture* 12(2), 2000: 291-243.

Daniel, Bassey Bassey. *Personal Interview*. Calabar: 30th October 2010.

De Boeck, Filip and Alcinda Honwana. "Agency, Identity and Place". *Makers and Breakers: Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*. Eds. Alcinda Honwana and Filip De Boeck. Oxford: James Currey, 2005: 1-18.

Dolby, N. "Popular Culture and Public Space in Africa: The Possibilities of Cultural Citizenship". *African Studies Review* 49(3), 2006: 31–47.

Duru, Emmanuel. *Personal Interview*. Calabar: 30th October 2010.

Foucault, Michael. "Space, Power and Knowledge". *The Cultural Studies Reader*. Ed. Simon During. London: Routledge, 2004: 134-141.

Gould, Stephen Jay. *The Mismeasure of Man*. New York: Norton, 1981.

Haag, Ernest van den. "Of Happiness and Despair we have no Measure." *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*. Eds. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1957: 522-34.

Hall, Stuart. "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular". *People's History and Socialist Theory*. Ed. R. Samuel. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981: 227–240.

Kuti, Fela. "Lady". *The Best of the Black President*. Vinil. 1983. Original sound recording by EMI Records.

Larson, Charles. "Heroic Ethnocentricism: the Idea of Universality in Literature". *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. 2nd Ed. London: Routledge, 2006: 77-79.

Oyewumi, Oyeronke. "Colonizing Bodies and Minds". *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. 2nd Ed. London: Routledge, 2006: 256-259.

Pieterse, Edgar. "At the Limits of Possibility: Working Notes on a Relational Model of Urban Politics". *Urban Africa: Changing Contours of Survival in the City*. Eds. AbduMaliq Simone and Abdelghani Abouhani. London: Zed, 2005: 138-173.

"Racism Row Lecturer is Suspended". BBC News. Online.. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/education/4838498.stm>. Accessed: 26 March 2006

Roediger, David. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso, 1991.