

Queen Idia's Air: Saturation, Conditioning and Power

This paper embraces what reading for air can bring to a narrative of how a 16th century portrait of Beninese Queen Idia came to be a Lagos icon. I explore how more airy understandings of artworks can expand existing art historical texts in order to enter the contemporary African city. Likenesses of the royal matriarch, who lived in the early 1500s, have been fashioned in Benin tradition since her time. Queen Idia is depicted as a powerful deity who commands both natural elements and European traders, symbolically rendered in the crown of ocean symbols she customarily wears. I contrast how her ivory portraits are held in major museums in New York and London against her appearance in 1977 Lagos as an Afrofuturist icon. In a city already teeming with more-than-human beings, the giddy atmosphere of FESTAC '77 (an iconic African cultural festival) encourages the possibilities of engaging with the politics of air. From the hermeneutic sealing of artworks in air-conditioned museums, which cuts off their breath, to the weathering of those buildings Lagos allows to remain standing, Queen Idia's portrait opens up the potential of how humans perceive their shared environment. I draw on the atmospheres of fiction centred in Lagos (Nnedi Okorafor, Wole Soyinka and Teju Cole) to consider the ways a portrait of a warrior queen can illuminate apparent and invisible ecological contamination.

THE AIR AND THE ARTWORK

This paper takes a 16th century portrait of the Beninese Queen Idia as a figurehead to explore the ecological and lyrical power of the surrounding atmosphere. The material iterations of a centuries-old depiction of a warrior queen infuses Lagosian culture and can serve as a route into the politics of air in Africa's lagoon city. My approach here is deliberately airy in the sense that I touch on different sculptural portraits of the queen with an aim towards shaping a larger project of investigating swampy atmospheres in Lagos. This loose discussion inflates and expands existing art historical work on the genre of Benin art from Queen Idia's time to broach discussing urban space in one of the fastest growing cities on the continent. *Portrait of Queen Idia (Iyoba)*¹ is a depiction of power stemming from elemental forces and, as such, is an entry point into environmental aspects of an "amphibious city" where healthy air and potable water are not accessible to all (Soyinka, 2021). I use different urban situations that hold Queen Idia's portrait as markers that lead to greater atmospheric patterns and imaginings, some of which stem from fictional writing about Lagos.²

Considering *Iyoba*'s air speaks to the sensory terms under which humans encounter art objects. The taste, smell, temperature, and sound of the shared atmosphere of those around the artwork effects how we understand its meaning. With the most famous examples of *Iyoba* residing in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the British Museum (respectively), questions arise regarding the assumed correctness of what an artwork's atmosphere should be. These are part of a near identical set of five ivory sculptures now encased in temperature-controlled environments across the UK and the US (Pendant Mask, n.d.). I put them in conversation with their counterparts in Lagos, where Queen Idia's watery portrait has become a symbol of the city. *Iyoba* and her crown of aquatic acolytes was reclaimed as an independence era icon, most notably for FESTAC '77, a legendary celebration of African culture. This paper keeps

¹ Henceforth referred to as *Iyoba*, meaning "Queen Mother."

² Most prominently, Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014), Teju Cole's *Tremor* (2023), and Wole Soyinka's *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth* (2021).

fleeting glimpses of Lagosian versions of *Iyoba* in mind (primarily a bronze relief on the National Theatre of 1973) to contrast with her sanitised museal iteration.

The portraits I discuss depict Queen Idia (who lived from approximately 1501 to 1550), the mother of Oba Esigie who was a prosperous Benin ruler known for his victories in battle. Oba Esigie consulted his mother throughout his life and honoured her in the shrines and rituals of the royal court (LaGamma, 2011, 26).³ The rare phenomenon of immortalising a female face in the Benin pantheon also provides an ecological angle. While different versions of *Iyoba* were made, carved in wood and ivory as well as cast in bronze, the one I home in on has a significant frame (Fig 1). A symmetrical crowning pattern of whorling sea spirits, alternatively animal and human always accompanies the queen's tranquil face in the versions I discuss. In some iterations, the human faces in her border are understood to be Portuguese traders whose beards intertwine with the tendrils of the mythical mudfish, who had the power to live on land and sea (Ezra, 33). In 16th century Benin, Portuguese traders were powerful international oceanic merchants with whom the kingdom had exclusive trading rights (Plaque, n.d.). The seabound traders entwine with the sacred mudfish, a symbol of prosperity whose amphibious qualities allow them to act as interlocutors between the physical realm and the spirit world of Olokun, the Orisha god of the sea (LaGamma 2011, 26). Idia's iconic countenance is fused with the powers of land, sea and air that buffer her material and spiritual stature.

Iyoba is sufficiently naturalistic to present a recognisable likeness to the distinctive features of a specific woman's face, memorialised for centuries. The queen's visage is portrayed with simplified features that face forward, balanced by both her enlarged eyes and semi-circular framing designs. The harmonious lines and decorative beads on the edges of the celestial royal face merge with her watery crown to suggest that the Portuguese traders and sea creatures revolve around her. In some versions (in the British Museum and FESTAC '77 insignia), her crown of bearded traders is offset by an intricate abstract pattern of braided lines. There is much to be gained from a purely visual analysis of the iconography in terms of

³ This was a common practice in Benin, adapted from Ife traditions.

its ecological import and how Benin society understood the human in relation to nature. I argue that reading the artwork for air demands a reckoning with its greater environmental conditions and, with this, the full objecthood of the artwork.

Outside of the museum encasement and in more quotidian roles, *Iyoba* visibly reacts to oxygenation, humidity, dust and pollution that speak to greater atmospheric dis-ease. A bronze curve serenely staring through the sonic onslaught of generator motors, draws attention to the skies in ways that encourage looking up (from muddy terrestrial challenges) and down (from digital and geographic heights). *Iyoba* leads to aerial views on how Lagos holds deep environmental trauma sunk in ecological racism.

STORIED HUMANS

Queen Idia was first commemorated in the 1500s in various ivory and wood carvings displayed at the shrines of the Edo royal court (Ezra 1992 14; LaGamma 2011, 26). The sculptures were revered and preserved within Benin city as relics of the royal line until the advent of European colonialism in the 19th century. The *Iyoba* ivory pendants were intended as a hip mask, to adorn the Oba during important ceremonies (Pendant Mask, n.d.). In the early years of the 20th century, German ethnologist Leo Frobenius encountered the royal art of Benin. He was so astounded by its stylistic naturalism (compared to the abstracted forms of the other Sub-Saharan African peoples known to him) that he suggested the artworks were artefacts from the lost city of Atlantis, rather than the productions of Black people (Kalous 1970, 27-8). Benin sculptures such as *Iyoba* questioned racist colonial conceptions of Black Africans as primitive and unable to achieve the cultural heights of caucasian antiquity.

Sylvia Wynter (2003, 259-263) describes the colonial invention of post-Darwinian man as separated into the supposedly naturally selected European and inferior others. *Iyoba*'s portrait subverts racial and gendered European hierarchies through style as much as iconography. Her licked ivory surfaces and delicate line-work not only speaks to the sophistication of her maker's craftsmanship, in a language even Frobenius could understand, but presents matriarchal possibilities for interspecies relationships. It is the queen mother (rather than a male figure) who is fluidly bonded with local deities and alien, seabound allies, who blend

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with each other. *Iyoba*'s balanced composition visually draws power from the ordered roiling of her crown and collar. The patterned forms of her crown are also an extension of her head. Queen Idia's physiognomy is merged with celestial bodies and earthly environments. She presents a mode of mythological storytelling that reinvents ways of being human "outside of the confines of European humanism" (Gandy, 2017, 354).

Wynter (in conversation with Katherine McKittrick) proposes that rethinking classifications of the human can help us to consider different futures for humanness outside of the violently narrow, racialised colonial episteme. A Darwinian macro-origin theory of evolution claims a space for the human species as purely biological (McKittrick, 2015, 10-11). With this comes a capitalist logic of acquisition that now threatens the very existence of the human species (ibid). *Iyoba*'s portrait counteracts Darwinian mythos with the "possibility of a different narrative" (McKittrick, 2015, 9). The sculpture's iconography does not present a romantic pre-colonial African past to be returned to so much that it centres alternative origin myths from a time when European visitors to Africa could be assimilated into local mythologies and belief systems.⁴ This is made evident through fluid craftsmanship as much as symbolism, and the serene facial expression of the woman herself.

Iyoba has been muse to numerous Afrofuturist imaginings and its predecessors in negritude and WEB Du Bois. In contemporary times, the warrior queen's self-possessed sense of power is not dissimilar to the fantastical extraterrestrial character Ayodele in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014). In this Afrofuturistic story, Ayodele comes to Lagos via the ocean and can reshape all carbon matter. She is first encountered by the book's main protagonist, a scientist and mother named Adaora:

Her mannerisms were too calm, fluid and . . . alien. . . . To [Adaora's christian husband], this woman would be a "marine witch". Her husband believed there were white witches, physical witches, and marine witches. All were evil, but the marine witch was the most powerful because she could harness water, the very substance that

⁴ In direct contrast to the dominant Mediaeval Christianity whose hierarchical order of knowledge dominated European society "spiritually and epistemologically" (McKittrick, 2015, 15).

made up 70 per cent of an adult's body and 75 percent of a child's. Water is life, she thought, yet again (Okorafor 2014).

Okorafor's shape-shifting extra-terrestrial beings have an otherworldly understanding of matter and, with this, hope to dissuade the speciesist humans away from their path of planetary destruction. They especially bond with the ocean life in the waters near Lagos shores, who act as their multispecies army in later parts of the novel. The evident othering of a powerful being who chooses to take on the appearance of a Black woman introduces the idea that some patriarchal belief systems dismiss unfamiliar spirit worlds as pagan. Lagos itself is teeming with more-than-human beings through a common practice of religious pluralism. Most families follow either the Muslim or Christian faith at the same time as adhering to Yoruba rites (African traditional religions). It is perhaps this proliferation of spiritual practices that are not mutually exclusive that prompt the extraterrestrials to engage with humankind via Lagos above other cities. The visitation also inspires Yoruba deities to manifest, having a profound effect on those humans who encounter them.

Okorafor's aliens require buy-in, or belief, from Lagosian citizens in order to bring about more balanced human-nature relations. Critically for this study, the otherworldly visitors, who also need oxygen to breathe, travel by merging themselves with the earth's atmosphere. Ayodele and her kind access more generous aspects of the human spirit via elemental powers in a manner reminiscent of the deified Queen Idia. Both *Iyoba* and Ayodele unlock the imaginative political power of water through the altered air. The mutative power of water to enfold and accommodate visitors from other worlds (extraterrestrial or 16th century Europe) is seen to be in sync with more enlightened humans who can imagine immense possibilities.

Thulile Gamedze (2021, 58) explains this quality of wateriness as “an embeddedness in organic earthly happenings”, whereby “water stores both ancient memory and the possibility of its own mutation in infinite futures.” Gamedze points to the transformative possibilities of Black ecologies of water because of its liquid, “undisciplined” nature that has the potential to counteract “the crude capitalistic forces of taxonomy and commodification” reproduced through colonial mechanisms (Gamedze, 2024, 58). Taking this idea forward with *Iyoba* as a

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conduit, her fluid metamorphic powers have served as direct inspiration for post-independence Afrofuturism. It is at the pivotal point of FESTAC 77, when Queen Idia's image becomes bonded with the city of Lagos and Black cultural power, that her physical situation becomes critical. In claiming *Iyoba* as the post-independence festival icon, the anti-colonial festival organisers critique the artworks presence in the western museum. It is not only the issue of monetary value and an ethical reckoning colonialism that is at stake. How *Iyoba* is displayed emphasises the extent to which she is cut off from the circulations for which she was intended, straining her biomutative storytelling power.

CONDITION REPORTS

The British Museum notes that five ivory versions of *Iyoba* were taken from the Benin royal court after the official British occupation of the area now known as Nigeria. Queen Idia's portraits, alongside other artworks, were rendered as hunting trophies from the now-infamous 1897 British punitive raid on Benin City (Pendant Mask, n.d.). *Iyoba* ivory hip masks were found stored in the intimate bedchamber of the Benin City Oba during the looting and sacking of the palace (ibid). In the transition from treasured ceremonial gear to the spoils of war, the ivory carvings moved into Euro-American museums as exemplary examples of African art. The statues were distributed across British and American ethnographic museums to be kept in ordered, controlled environments that deny the violence of "the smell of burning ivory, the sound of blunderbuss." (Adesokan, 2020) As desensitised museum exhibits, *Iyoba*'s spiritual life came to an end. In an act of colonial synecdoche, museum display made the appropriated object stand in for the entirety of its originating culture (Clifford 1988, 190-3). *Iyoba*'s encompassing origin mythos in the museum is culturally dislocated and flattened into "anthropological time" (Fabian, 2014). Not only is her storytelling potential diluted into a standardised museum label, amongst those of many others, but the object of the pendant masks were inundated with toxic chemicals.

Each individual *Iyoba* ivory carving, like all museum acquisitions made of natural materials, has been subject to the chemical processes of conservation. Starting in the late 19th century, Euro-American museums used substances such as mercury, arsenic and DDT, as a "pest control" on items in their collections (Arndt, 2022, 283). With pesticides applied to them,

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sacred objects became contaminated to the extent that they are a danger to the museum workers who handle them (ibid). In killing all of the *Iyoba* objects' organic life, and placing them in temperature-controlled conditions, they have not been frozen in time but fundamentally poisoned. While the illusion of the object's integrity is visually upheld in the sealed museum vitrine, those who enter its immediate micro-climate are in physical danger. The sanitised norms of museum display, whereby objects may not be touched by those without protective gear, are not only places of ideological appropriation but also a physical death.

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Iyoba* is currently displayed on a single plinth, approximately a metre high, in a securitised and temperature-controlled plexiglass box. This form of display allows her to be seen from behind, where the sculpture is hollowed out.⁵ The display emphasises the plastic qualities of the sculpture as a whole, with no reference to the shrines in which she might have co-inhabited with her deified relations or the rituals she may have been worn in. In this total objectification, she is dislocated from the potential "motion" and circulations of her origins, aspects of which are continued in Benin City today (Farris Thompson, 1979). Benin developed the practice of portraiture (assimilating the traditions of nearby Ife) to honour the dead and their ancestral lineage over generations. The deceased were kept alive through the ritual motions and constant attention that came with enshrinement and life in the royal court. On being forced to enter the museum, the organs of a greater spiritual body were dismembered, analysed in condition reports, classified, and poisoned. How Queen Idia is housed makes this apparent materially.

French filmmaker Chris Marker (in collaboration with Alain Resnais) portrays this death-by-museum in *Les Statues Meurent Aussi [Statues Also Die]* (1953). This early experimental film attempts to capture the zeitgeist of the negritude movement with footage of iconic African objects from what is now the Quai Branly Museum African art collection in Paris. The expressive camera approaches an Oba's bronze sculptural portrait from the side and below, rendering the face monumental. The statue is spotlit against a black background,

⁵ *Iyoba*'s patterned collar is missing a section, drawing attention to stilled processes of mutability over time.

highlighting sculptural geometries with deep shadows. Sombre orchestral music, heavy with percussion and harp, accompanies a full-bodied voiceover that laments how statues that were “the roots of the living” in their original roles have now become corpses on display (Marker and Resnais, Paris, 1953). Marker describes a colonial “botany of death” in the museum, where artworks are not only cut off from the living worlds of societal use but also ecological ones (ibid). The camera cuts to found documentary footage of damaged African forests from whose woods (presumably) some of the sculptures were made.⁶ Following Marker’s poetic logic, the ivory portraits of Queen Idia in the museum point to the environmental violence that came with the looting of Benin. The poisoned air tanks of Queen Idia’s museum vitrines are linked to broken ecological chains in the colonies.

The circulation between ethnographic museum, devastation of the natural world, and objectification of the colonised Black body was recognized in the negritude movement long before knowledge of the imminent man-made apocalypse was common. In *Discourse on Colonialism* (first published in 1950), Aimé Césaire questions the claims of colonial civilisation that “thingifies” the earth for the amassing of wealth at the same time as dehumanising the colonised into a labour force. Césaire bitterly rebukes the colonial gaze that objectifies African culture — “[What] About the bronzes of Benin?”— without recognising the integrity of the African environment and the humanity of its people (2000, 52). He affirms the value of the blending of different worlds saying, “exchange is oxygen”, but is scathing of the way colonialism “established contact” (Césaire 2000, 33). The kind of cultural blending and world-building evident in the rippling beards of *Iyoba*’s Portuguese traders presents an alternative worldview. It therefore makes sense that it is the iteration of *Iyoba* which assimilates Europeans as part of her headgear that came to be claimed as Lagos’s independence era icon.

DAZZLED SPIRITS

Nigeria’s legendary FESTAC ‘77, the Second World Black Festival of Arts and Culture, took place for 29 heady days in early 1977, with *Iyoba* at the helm. Aimed at unifying and

⁶ To push the idea of dismemberment, the film includes footage of a disembowelled ape.

amplifying Black sounds and styles, the non-stop festival program incorporated numerous large-scale concerts (with a line-up including Miriam Makheba, Stevie Wonder and Sun Ra) with dance performances, art exhibitions, film screenings, plays and poetry readings. The city celebrated in a flood of events including canoe regattas from river communities on the lagoon. Buoyed by the spirit of the African independence era, the festival went ahead in the wake of two Nigerian military coups and was the largest gathering of Black people from across the globe to ever have taken place (Monroe, 2015, 34).⁷ FESTAC '77 also widened Queen Idia's profile, with her portrait emblazoned across festival banners, posters and carved into new sculptures. Her celebrity status generated a wealth of commemorative textiles, wax cloths, crockery, jewellery, clothing, and other forms of merchandise.⁸ *Iyoba* merchandise is still present in the city today at various curio stalls, most prominently at the tourist market and galleries of the nouveau riche Lekki peninsula, to the south of the city.

This extravagant re-imagining of *Iyoba* brought her image into the open air of Lagos humidity. Beninese master craftsman Alufa Igbinovia from the contemporary Edo Ivory Carvers Guild was commissioned to carve a replica of the original ivory object in the traditional manner (Nwakunor, 2019). This was done as a deliberate challenge to the British Museum to return the original ivory portrait discussed above. When looking back to FESTAC '77, Wole Soyinka retells its story angled towards *Iyoba*. In his opinion:

[T]he most significant event of the festival never took place. This was the repatriation of the original of the symbol... [the] famous ivory mask from Benin, exquisitely carved and detailed, remained safely ensconced in the vast labyrinths of the British Museum in London. The mask was stolen property, and the aggrieved had a right to reclaim their property by any means. (Soyinka, 2007, 190)

Soyinka, with his tongue only partially in his cheek, suggests hiring mercenaries to simply steal the ivory portrait back and return her to Nigeria. The exact location of where the British

⁷ These occurred in 1966 (with the first coup in January and a countercoup in July) and again in 1975 when Olusegun Obasanjo's military regime took power to quell an attempted coup in 1976.

⁸ T-shirts *Iyoba*'s image are still in vogue. Amazon sells them online, labelled as "African Mask Queen of Benin".

Museum's *Iyoba* would go (to Benin City or a Lagos) remains blurry, but the angry underlying principle remains.⁹ In the unlikely event of the British Museum undertaking such a return, the option of reinserting the original ivory portraits in rituals of touch may well be hazardous to the health of devotees, given what we now know of conservation processes. Nevertheless, the empowering atmosphere generated around *Iyoba* as a Pan-Africanist icon led to an expectation of real actions. FESTAC '77 relinked Queen Idia to cosmopolitan African circulations in a live event supported with tremendous international star power. However, dizzying cultural heights and intense activity have inevitable consequences in city space, Lagos under a military regime notwithstanding. The festival will always be mired in controversy regarding how government spending played out in the city. Olusegun Obasanjo's regime sunk funds into luxury hotels and housing (FESTAC Town), alongside new highways to contend with the traffic congestion (Bradley, 2020).¹⁰

On the occasion of the international mega-event, the military regime invested in developing those areas of Lagos that best accommodated important guests and the cultural elite. The National Festival Theatre (1976) in Iganmu, Surulere, was planned years before the festival but used for the first time at that point. It bears an *Iyoba* portrait and also represents an entry point into reconsidering environmental urban stories (Fig 2). An aerial map of the city shows the National Theatre encircled by its roadways forming an urban independence era badge on the mainland, nestling on the lagoon's edge. The theatre was designed by the Bulgarian company Techno Exportstroy, who constructed a larger version of the Varna Palace of Culture and Sports in Bulgaria but failed to contend with the site's marshland foundations and the West African climate (Opara, 2017, 8-9). The seven-storey theatre has a silhouette resembling a military beret, with an elaborate bronze band of relief sculptures that includes *Iyoba*.

⁹ Such debates are rife in Nigeria at present with certain Benin bronzes being returned but not others. In 2022, the Berlin Ethnographic Museum agreed to return 512 Benin objects looted in the 1897 Punitive Raid. Plans for a new museum in Benin City to house them are underway.

¹⁰ Fela Kuti, who already had an international following, staged nightly protests from his club, The Shrine. He took issue with a military leader commandeering the cultural event as much as how state funds were spent.

Queen Idia's portrait adorns the main VIP entrance to the building, forming a centrepiece of the bronze frieze that encloses the structure (the Nigerian coat of arms is positioned above *Iyoba*). This was the work of local artist Erhabor Emokpae, who also made freestanding replicas of the hip mask. With her crown of mudfish-like Portuguese faces intact, *Iyoba*'s presence is now part of a mythology of new nationalism that claims Benin traditions as part of its pantheon. Emokpae emphasises her planetary role by including rays emanating from her visage and a map of the globe on either side (with the left depicting the Americas and the right Africa and Europe). *Iyoba*'s naturalism jars with the cartographic aesthetic, emphasising how the frieze moves abruptly across different stylistic modes to also represent a Ghanaian Akuaba doll and the sacking of Benin. Queen Idia's portrait still links to earth, sea, and sky, but the frieze, as a whole, produces a collaged effect. In an echo of *Iyoba*'s stylistic dissonance, the building she adorns is at odds with its environment.

The National Theatre building was not sufficiently maintained over the years. By 1991, the roof had cracked from extreme heat, leading to leaks, and the interior was unbearably hot from lack of sufficient insulation (Asaju et al, 2022, 122). The situation draws attention to one of the overriding features of Lagos air: interior conditioning. With unstable central electricity, air conditioners of different quality operate throughout the city. In more affluent areas, the hum of generators is a constant accompaniment. Hierarchies of air may be sensed in a city where “the rich are right next to the poor” (Cole, 2023, 140). Wealthier Lagosians “live in walled compounds and they have quieter generators, and their homes are built on solid ground” (ibid). The foundations of the National Theatre are set in the mud of the shoreline and the building is rumoured to be sinking. Reports on the site's condition also suggest a problem with water sanitation. The building's grounds contain a waste management facility (designed to manage the waste of up to 5,000 theatregoers), whose presence is felt across the area. Once sewage has been processed, the treated remains released into the lagoon are perceptible in the air and visible from the shore (Opara, 2017, 11). As one of the few remaining icons of FESTAC '77, which still bears *Iyoba*'s portrait, gives a taste of the kind of conditions that lower income demographics live with in Lagos. Famously, the fishing communities of the informal settlement Makoko, on the northeast shore of the mainland, live on the lagoon waterways in makeshift accommodation. Residents conduct everyday chores

and business in dugout canoes on water overloaded with both plastic waste and raw sewage, while potable water is scarce.

Following *Iyoba*'s image into Lagos can bring into focus the city of apocalyptic visions of infrastructural collapse (Kaplan 1994; Subirós, 2001). This “wild zone of urban imagination” (Gandy 2005) presents an environment where residents have to constantly negotiate ways of living. But *Iyoba* reminds us that different storytelling once took place and acts as a reminder not to lose post-independence spirit. Her home at the National Theatre is not likely to remain in an “indefinite state of swamp stagnation” (Opara, 2017, 13). Research into the site, and the hazards of design solutions from afar, has been underway since the 2000s and renovations commenced in 2015. While it is unclear when the updating and acclimatisation processes will be completed, the attention given to its degradation affords a rare act of heritage conservation in a city where older buildings are routinely torn down to be replaced by newer developments. The most positive potential outcomes of the renovations would be if the more environmentally gentle solutions of utilising solar energy were implemented.¹¹

Environmental reports on the National Festival building do not take us too far away from *Iyoba*'s transformative storytelling power and post-independence thinking. Even when the building was in its prime, Soyinka considered it an inferior “doll's house” that was more concerned with an outward aesthetic than a location where the pure human expression of theatre could fully expand (Jeyifo, 2003, 122). Olusegun Obasanjo's regime outsourced the design of the theatre when local architect and post-independence cultural giant, Demas Nwokko, had proposed a building based on local architectures (Oni, 2022, 9). Nwokko had built his own home and studio in clay and laterite and had proposed a feasible way to incorporate principles of what he saw as Nigerian architecture into the showcase theatre (ibid). If *Iyoba* demonstrates connectivity in form as much as iconography, Nwokko's understanding of building materials in relation to nationalism expresses an alternative to imposing architectures on lagoon-soaked soils and soiled atmospheres.

¹¹ See: Opara (2017) and Asaju et al (2021).

Air pollution is constantly present in Sub-Saharan Africa's biggest city. A constantly growing population pushing northwards and onto its waters generates toxic levels of pollution, with the main offenders being traffic, poor waste management, fuel burning (especially diesel generators), bush burning and smelting companies (Abulude et al, 2021). A sensory approach to the segment of the city allotted to the National Theatre draws attention to overburdened environments. While a spirit of post-independence empowerment elevated *Iyoba* onto iconic walls, she now gazes out on the turgid shoreline and is exposed to the rising smut of generators and traffic from nearby Eko Bridge. But if we take the message of Queen Idia's portrait as a way of thinking with the elements, the air also bears sounds of varied human stories. The air bears the weight of polluted particles and odours, but also signs of empathetic human life. Teju Cole decries the tragedy of daytime Lagos, where the city is mute regarding unspeakable violations and deaths. But at night, a sonic city emerges that carries an affecting and wholly human chorus:

From over there is a sound of argument, from over there a clamour of complaint, from over there a gospel choir, from over there the muezzin's call, from over there three or four spattering generators, from over there the squall of the bus stop and taxi stand, from over there revellers and water sellers, from over there the neighbours relentless television blaring out soap operas, from over there disconsolate wailing, from over there passionate lovemaking, from over there disputation and rancour, a vast sonic mix of an ocean that beats its incessant waves the whole night through until sunrise arrives and the pale light of morning settles a dazzled silence once again over the city. (Cole, 2023, 179)

INCESSANT WAVES

The secular FESTAC '77 flared briefly in Lagos without due consideration of Negritude's philosophy of world-making. But the replica *Iyoba* portraits that pepper the city hold far larger lesson than simply enacting the irony of an artistic platitude set against corrupted and corrupting human horrorscapes. The less rarified sculptures reveal the affective storytelling potential of the African city itself. From the cosmologies of 16th century Benin, held within desensitised museum displays, to Lagos grit, *Iyoba*'s narrative illuminates how no

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atmosphere is untarnished. While the terms of her museal containment highlight invisible toxicity (under the guise of conservation), post-independence Lagos set unattainable heights. Yet a central story of the human, and the possibility of empathetic change may be located.

Taking time with the enclosed atmospheres of museums and the too-muchness of Lagos suggests that embarking on detailed material investigations can bring new knowledge to how we understand larger political situations. By providing further felt, smelt and seen evidence of mounting ecological loss, urban iterations of *Iyoba* highlight the need for ecological tracings to come. Queen Idia's air—the microenvironment of this artwork— encourages a dissection of the dust particles, sticky condensations and mouldy indents that speak to greater atmospheric dysfunctions. Although far from a redemptive narrative, *Iyoba* encourages the accumulation of stories, philosophies that allow for ways of inhabiting pockets of ruination, bearing witness to what comes next.

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ADDENDUM: FIGURES



Figure 1: *Queen Mother Pendant Mask: Iyoba*, Edo artist, 16th century



Figure 2: Archival photograph of the Lagos National Theatre, 1977

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