

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF WOMEN'S COMMEMORATION IN BENIN COURT ARTS AND MONUMENTS, 1504 – 1897**

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### **Abstract**

*This study discusses the significance of women's commemoration in Benin court arts and monuments. Benin Kingdom exemplified a sophisticated socio-political economy. Undoubtedly, women's roles in the evolution of the Benin political culture are remarkable. Non royal women in Benin were not memorialized in court arts. The commemoration of women in court arts was only peculiar to royal women. The purpose of this study therefore, is to identify prerogatives for such distinction in Benin arts. The study also aims to examine cultural markers that distinguished royal prerogatives elevating the queen mother to appearances, commemoration and even immortalization in Benin court arts. The study is qualitative, and it employed the use of primary sources which comprised of oral information from individual interviews. Secondary sources used include books and journal articles. The study is both descriptive and analytic in its approach. The study identified that, the subtly muted and quite often mistaken representation of the queen mother for a male in Benin court arts, exemplified and amplified her royal personage and hierarchy, rather than her personage of womanhood. The study also showed that the portrayal of women in Benin court arts and monuments is a reflection of women's importance and contributions to Benin art, which in itself is an embodiment of Benin cultural heritage and history.*

**Keywords:** Benin, Women, Court Arts, Commemoration, Monuments

### **Introduction**

Benin art is unique in African Art. Primarily made of cast brass and ivory, it provides an unbroken record of the artistic heritage of one of West Africa's greatest kingdoms. Benin art is a royal art, made to extol the divine King or Oba and to glorify the great kings of the past. In addition to the powers and prerogative of kingship, the art of Benin expresses the roles and ranks of the myriad chiefs, titleholders, priests, court officials and attendants who constitute the kingdom's complex administrative and ritual hierarchy. It portrays past people and alludes to past events that have contributed to the kingdom's wealth, power and conceptual or spiritual greatness. The themes of history, politics and most importantly divine kingship are inextricably woven into the fabric of Benin art.<sup>i</sup> Ben-Amos puts it that the nature and purpose of royal art are conceived as primarily commemorative. For the people of Benin. Royal art is a means of enshrining the past in the metaphorical and literal senses of the term. The Benin people are profoundly concerned with their history, especially with the aspect that focuses on their dynasties. Therefore, "oral tradition about Benin rulers record their artistic innovations as well as their political maneuvering and war exploits...the view of royal art have a long standing in Benin culture".<sup>ii</sup>

Hall asserts that Benin art was more politically motivated and more secular in intent than most African arts and was meant to symbolize and to extol or affirm the power, mystique, grandeur, continuity and endurance of the ruling dynasty and its governing institutions.<sup>iii</sup> Both

the purpose and criteria of royal art are entirely different from those devoted to the attention of the spirit world. Tradition dates the appearances of Benin art to as early as the Ogiso periods about 900AD. The main form of Benin art which are its bronzes is dated to Oba Oguola in the late thirteenth century. Traditionally, Obas of Benin were usually patrons of the arts and were themselves highly skilled artists. They maintained a group of bronze sculptors, brass casters, and wood and ivory carvers within the palace. The British invasion completely destroyed the exclusivity of the Oba over the production of art works and his control over the guild system.

At the restoration of the monarchy in 1914 when Oba Eweka II was installed by the British Colonial government, the guilds were allowed to produce art objects not only for the king, but also for sale to colonial officials, art dealers and tourists. For the purpose of this study, court arts are in reference to royal art under the patronage of the Oba before the British invasion in 1897. This is particular to the period of Oba Esigie, beginning about 1504, as it was he who institutionalized the commemoration of women in court arts beginning with his mother Queen Idia. Benin art sponsored by the court of the king was designed to support imperial heritage. The Oba was both a political and spiritual leader and thought to be both human and divine. Only the Oba could commission works of ivory, bronze or copper as these pieces of art were made to honour the Oba and commiserate him in life and death.<sup>iv</sup> One of the first ritual duties undertaken by a new Oba was to commission brass casters and ivory carvers to create objects to decorate an altar commemorating his late father. The altar had a dual purpose, as a tribute to the achievement of the deceased father and to provide a point of contact with the spirit. The royal ancestral altars served as support for ivory tusks and completed the image of the Oba's crowned head. Additionally, ivory vessels made for the royalty of the court were included in altars. These carvings commemorated the kings, queens, warriors, priests and high officials. The tusks symbolized attributes thought to be present in elephants-physical power, leadership, longevity and wisdom.<sup>v</sup> Ivory was also selected because of its hardness and durability. The royal altars contained rattle staffs<sup>vi</sup> and brass bells<sup>vii</sup> which were shaken to invoke the spirits. Altars were also dedicated to past Iyobas (Queen mothers). These altars were decorated with commemorative heads of the Iyobas. The altars contained a large variety of items signifying their ability to bring supernatural powers to aid their sons.

Another important aspect of the Benin art is their exclusivity. Ownership was reserved for certain social classes, reflecting the strict hierarchical structure of Benin kingdom. In general, only the Oba could own brass and ivory objects. However, he could give permission to high-ranking chiefs to use pendant masks or arm cuffs of brass and ivory. Coral was also a royal material and neck rings of this material were a symbol of nobility and awarded to specific chiefs by the Oba.<sup>viii</sup> The right to wear a beaded crown was limited to the Oba, the Iyoba and the Ezomo (the Oba's principal war chief), thus showing the importance of the Queen Mother in Benin political hierarchy.<sup>ix</sup> Other than representations of the Queen mother in court arts, other remembrances of women in historic monuments, include the statue of Emotan at the Emotan shrine, Queen Iden's sacred tomb, Queen Ikuoyemwen's monument (an embodiment of Queen Idia), and several other tombs of Queen mothers which have been immortalized as powerful shrine centers at Uselu, in Benin City. The study is divided into sections. Following the introduction, is the review of literature. The next section discusses the memorialization of women in Benin court arts and monuments. This section is followed by discussion on the political and religio-cultural significance of women's commemoration in Benin court arts and

monuments. After this section is the conclusion. The study concludes that the portrayal of women in Benin court arts is a reflection of women's importance and contributions to the Benin kingdom.

### **Review of Literature**

There are a number of works that discuss the roles of women in Benin kingdom. Pertaining to women's commemoration in Benin court arts and monuments, they include but are not limited to the following, Nkiru Nzegwu, *Iyoba Idia, The Hidden Oba of Benin*; Flora Kaplan, *Images of the Queen Mother in Benin Court Art*; *Women in Benin Society and Art*; Kathy Curnow, *Benin Ivory Pendant Pair, Honouring an Ambitious Mother*; Irene I. Salami-Agunloye, *Idia: The Warrior Queen of Benin*, among others.<sup>x</sup> These works are unanimous in stating the assertive roles of the queen mother and her royal prerogative in Benin court art. These works support the position of this study that women's memorialization in Benin court arts and monuments is a marked contribution showing women's importance in Benin cultural heritage and history.

### **Memorialization of Women in Benin Court Arts and Monuments**

In Benin like in other parts of Nigeria, women were not known to carve in wood or work in metals and particularly in court arts. There were taboos that surrounded the practice of metal casting. The expression "*Okhuo ise eromwon*" in Benin meaning "a woman does not cast bronze" is a referral to women's exclusivity from metal casting. It is a common saying and it could not be conceived that a woman could even have the courage to handle the melting pot, let alone transgress the taboo which was believed to spell doom for the woman. Pertaining to women's history in Benin, there is no record of women's engagement in bronze casting until the reign of Oba Akenzua II beginning in 1933. It was at his instance he relaxed the rule for his daughter, Princess Elizabeth Olowo by allowing her to learn and practice the art of bronze casting. All other engagements of women especially in the court arts were majorly representations or commemoration in art forms. Dating back to the period of Ogiso Ere, the son of the acclaimed first Ogiso, Igodo, he was reputed with founding many villages including Ego and Erua, and craft groups which included: *Owina* (traditional carpenters) and *Igbesanwan* (carvers in ivory and wood). He also introduced *Ekpoki, Erhe* (traditional wooden throne), and the decoration of male (paternal) and female (maternal) ancestral altars called the *Aro-Erinmwini Nohuaren* (for male ancestral shrine) and *Aro-Erinmwini n' Owa* (for female ancestral shrine).<sup>xi</sup> Commemorative ancestral heads of wood and terracotta are attributed to the Ogiso era. Casting technology was not in this period and brass work was limited to smithed and chiseled bracelets.

Non royal or freeborn women could be transmuted by deeds and remembered in oral tradition, local cults and masquerades. Despite the fact that their representations were often not gender determined, they could be identified by those who shared the culture and secrets of initiated groups. Women, translated into spirits and heroin-deities were epitomized in such natural features as a river (*Ovia* or *Ikpoba*), a tree (*ikhimwini*) and certain leaves (*ewere* leaves). They reinforced rituals or found expression in village masquerades and local cults. Some modern elaborate clay shrines for *Olokun* include sculptures of his wives. They were portrayed at the height of their fertility, nursing or holding babies. Oracles and diviners may use pairs of small, semi-nude figures of adult males and females modeled in clay and chalk as augury and offerings. Clay pots for *Olokun* similarly were adorned with male and female figures. In this case, these figures were depicted in well-defined gender roles, males play musical instruments such as drums and side-blown horns and females are shown either pregnant or nursing babies. Women forms were also found in less well known vernacular art

traditions including wooden masks, clay sculptures and shrines; modeled chinks and red parrot, and other feathers that may be incorporated into masquerade headdresses. In court art generally, sexually mature women are portrayed in an exiguous manner, females are interpreted as either postmenopausal or preadolescent.<sup>xiii</sup> Both vernacular and court art are often deliberately subtle in depicting sex and gender roles. The public muting of overt sexuality in court art was enhanced by the omnipresent vows of secrecy among the initiated. Court art in particular emphasizes power and roles defined socially by gender rather than biologically by sex. Non-royal women are not memorialized in court art, however, the *ilois* (wives) and *Iyobas* (mothers) of the Obas fulfilled important nurturing and religious roles. They ensured the continuity of the family and the kingdom, and the memories of generations of queen mothers have been preserved in the ritual furnishings of the kingdom's ancestral altars, shrines, chiefly ornaments, masquerades and cults.<sup>xiii</sup>

Court art associated with royal women asserts the presence of the *Iyoba*. The *Iyoba*, the Oba's mother is the only woman among the highest office holders in Benin. Her elevated status is documented in bronze altar pieces and altars of the hand, where she is portrayed as a high ranking royal personage, with full coral beaded regalia. Brass heads of the queen mother are among the best known works of Benin art, as after the death of a queen mother, the ruling Oba commissions one or more commemorative heads for an altar dedicated to her. Court art associated with the *Iyoba* dates from the sixteenth century during the reign of Oba Esigie when the title *Iyoba* was first created. It includes some remarkable works, some of which were kept at her ancestral altar in the *erie* of the Oba's palace and at particular shrines such as the one at Uselu. Heads and altarpiece tableaux in which the queen mother appears were cast in bronze, along with aegis plaques and other sculptures. Court artists also carved ivory pendants, belt plaques, sculptures and tusks. The tusks however date differently from the late eighteenth to early twentieth centuries.<sup>xiv</sup> Since the beginning of the sixteenth century when Oba Esigie created the title of *Iyoba*, virtually all court art associated with royal women has referred to the queen mother, her attendants and retinue, and associated shrine furnishings. Since the sixteenth century, Obas could invest their mothers with the title of queen mother and install them to their own palace in Uselu. The Oba's mother is held in high esteem and has a splendid court beautifully and magnificently built. She is consulted in state affairs, but by the dint of a special law, the Oba and his mother are not allowed to see each other as long as they live.<sup>xv</sup> Women were not known to engage in the creation of court arts, (bronzes and ivory) until Oba Akenzua II's reign when the first woman was privileged to the rights of bronze casting in Benin. It should be noted, that the reign of Oba Esigie marked an important period in women's history in Benin, with the institutionalization of the *Iyoba* title given to his mother, queen Idia. The title earned her a palace built in Uselu for queen mothers and housed ancestral shrines that had commemorative bronze heads for queen mothers.

Chief Omoemu alludes that court arts were not just seen as mere ornaments "they portend some spirituality. Women were not allowed in the production of court arts. It was believed they would contaminate the process because of their menstruation. Female menstruation among other taboos was believed to affect the potency of the spiritual investment of the artworks, which were regarded as power centers. In being commemorated fully in court arts, royal women came into prominence during the reign of Oba Esigie.<sup>xvi</sup> The very famous Idia ivory mask is also dated to the sixteenth century in Oba Esigie's reign and Idia is credited with the introduction of the *Okpe okho*, the parrot beak headgear. All of the royal women in the *erie*, or women quarters of the palace wear variations of the hairstyle known as "chicken's

beak, however, Idia is depicted wearing a beaded head dress that is higher and more pointed than that of other royal women. Ben-Amos asserts that Oba Ewuare's grandson, Esigie is remembered for his encouragement of the art of casting in brass and iron, and particularly for the introduction of brass commemorative heads to be placed on the ancestral altars of queen mothers.<sup>xvii</sup>

As it is often the case in many societies, women's visibility and independence were very much controlled and limited. Their remembrance in oral tradition is therefore embodied in association with nature and landscape. Only women who birthed the kings were exempted from anonymity. Flora Kaplan avers that women are the least known and represented crop in the royal court art of Benin. Their appearance is barely popular in the echelon of arts in bronze; ivory, wood or iron. Such that when they do appear, their presence is subtly conveyed or reserved. In like manner, "they do not take the form of powerful creatures associated with the rain forests, creeks and rivers... they neither assumed the shapes of creatures that linger on branches or hover on trees beneath leafy canopies high above the forest floor. It was only common to the iconography of Obas, native doctors and diviners in art, to be depicted as leopards and pythons, elephants and crocodiles, frogs, birds, lizards, seeds and medicinal leaves".<sup>xviii</sup> The most famous and subtle works of a woman in Benin court art are the carved ivory face masks worn as hip pendants and sometimes referred to as plaques. A cache of four masks were found in a box in the Oba's bed chamber when the British invaded Benin in 1897. Oba Esigie commissioned several pairs of ivory pendants in the form of a dignified self-composed face. He wore these at the waist for the annual court ceremony *Emobo* meant to mark the defeat of his brother Aruanran. They commemorate his mother, a woman instrumental to his success.<sup>xix</sup> The most widely published of the masks is the British Museum's plaque, whose model was used to carve a new one from photographs for 'FESTAC 77'.<sup>xx</sup> All the Benin ivory face plaques are said to be alike in form and function. This is also seen in the composition of iron and copper metal inlay in their use. They are depicted with reference to the sea and wealth that followed the first Portuguese contacts with Benin in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Oral tradition that inform the works all suggest and lead to their identity as the portrait of Idia, the first queen mother of Benin.<sup>xxi</sup> Apart from queen mother heads in brass, carved wooden heads for chiefs and terracotta heads for bronze casters, no other class of persons are permitted to have memorial heads on their family shrines.

Among the privileges enjoyed by the queen mother was the right to have a bronze memorial head cast in her honour upon her passing and the casting was made at the request of her son the reigning Oba. There were many other works of art cast or carved in beautifying the Iyoba's altar in the palace. They included cast brass rectangular altar pieces, round altars of the hand, standing sculptures, brass bells and cockrels. There were also wooden rattle staffs, each one representing a past queen mother, along with carved ivory tusks and sculptures of young girls who waited on the queen mother in her palace. In addition to the royal ancestral altars, other types of altars also feature. Worship of the hand is concerned with the individual's ability to achieve success through his own actions, skills and enterprise. It is credited with the acquisition of great wealth or status and with the success of hunters, warriors, craftsmen and others who depend upon manual skills and physical strength for their achievement. Altars dedicated to the hand called *ikegobo* are cylindrical wood sculptures carved in relief around their sides. Throughout the altar are reiterated the themes of wealth (cowries, chests), success (the feathers, coral bead, and sword of chieftaincy), prowess (weapons and smithing tools), the sacrifices necessary for success (mudfish, crocodiles, kola nuts), and the very source of success and power – the hand itself.<sup>xxii</sup> Wooden altars to the hand are owned by Benin chiefs, but the queen mother had the privilege to own cast brass.

Examples like the Oba's. Queen mother heads were distinguished by a special type of coral-bead crown with a high, forward-pointing peak, an elongated version of an elaborate coiffure known as the "chicken beak". The projection on the queen mother's crown is called *ede Iyoba*, likening it to the spiritually potent *ede* protection on top of the Oba's crown.<sup>xxiii</sup> In their life time each queen mother also kept altars of her own in worship of the deities she served. The royal brass commemorative heads of past rulers, the Oba's regalia, insignia and paraphernalia that mark the sanctity of the position is of note. As a prerequisite of royal succession, every newly crowned Oba installs an altar in honour of his predecessor. The altar is furnished with a matched set of crowned memorial heads cast in brass. The memorial head of the Oba is especially sacred, as the survival, security and prosperity of the kingdom depends upon its wisdom. The *Iyoba*, the Oba's mother, is the only woman among the highest office holders in Benin. Her elevated status is documented in bronze altarpieces and altars of the hand, where she is portrayed as a high-ranking royal personage, with full coral beaded regalia. Brass heads of the queen mother are among the best known works of art in Benin.

Following the demise of a queen mother, it was in her honour that the ruling Oba commissioned one or more commemorative heads for an altar.<sup>xxiv</sup> The female ivory pendant face plaques or belt masks are some of the most famous of Benin art. These ivories are replete with symbols of water and wealth, fish, birds, decorative motifs and Europeans which symbolize Benin's first contact with the Portuguese in the late fifteenth century, linking the contact to the reign of Oba Esigie. Other ivories that portray women's representation in court art are the carved altar tusks, many of which are centered around a queen mother. Works in bronze were cast to decorate the *Iyoba*'s shrines and altars. Only the *Iyoba* and *Ezomo* were permitted to use bronze, which like ivory is a prestigious material associated with royalty. Chiefs had *Ikegobos* (altar of the hand) carved in wood. Deceased *Iyobas* were venerated by means of memorial bronze heads. The cast bronze memorial head (*Uhunmwun elao*) for a queen mother is a measure of her importance.

Among the senior chiefs, only the war chief *Ezomo* was allowed to wear a beaded headgear in the shape of a cap, and only the leader of the town chiefs *Iyase*, wore a tall, conical cap made of leopard skin and red flannel cloth *Ododo*. The Oba wore the most elaborate beaded headgear which is his crown. The *Iyoba*'s distinctive headdress with its coral work invented by *Idia*, denoted her high rank and unique status.<sup>xxv</sup> Queen mother heads were distinguished by a special type of coral-bead crown with a high, forward-pointing peak, an elongated version of an elaborate coiffure known as the "chicken beak".<sup>xxvi</sup> Visual depictions of the *Iyoba* portray her wearing a coral shirt and other insignia of high ranking male chiefs. In hindsight, only the *Ezomo*, the main war chief was known to enjoy a privilege and status that is close to the Oba's. Despite her public portrayal as a male, the *Iyoba* could be identified as a woman by her distinctive body tattoos, her conical curving hairstyle which according to oral tradition was invented by *Iyoba Idia*, *Ukpe-okhue* (resembling the parrot's beak). According to royal traditions, Benin, then ruled by warrior kings, enjoyed prosperity between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Obas most associated with developing the arts are *Oba Ewuare* and *Oba Esigie*. *Esigie* is remembered for the introduction of brass commemorative heads to be placed on the ancestral altars of queen mothers. The majesty of the monarch and splendor of the courts were important fifteenth and sixteenth century artistic themes.

The practice of honouring queen mothers with highly idealized representations in brass and ivory is dated around this time. The ivory pendant mask of Queen *Idia* is dated to Oba

Esigie's reign. There was a hiatus in the production of queen mother heads in the seventeenth century. Overall, the attribution is rather small. Given the political instability of the time, the lack of dynastic continuity and the very political nature of art, a reduction in artistic production particularly for the decoration of royal ancestral altars would not be surprising.<sup>xxvii</sup> In the eighteenth century, there was continuity in the production of commemorative heads for queen mothers although their status changed significantly. Idia the mother of Esigie is the stimulus for much eighteenth century art. Not only does the image of a queen mother appear widely on ivory tusks, brass altar pieces, brass D-shaped plaques and other types of sculpture, but new forms were created especially in honour of Iyobas, Brass rectangular ancestral altar pieces similar in concept to those made for the Oba. Idia is remembered in history and ritual as a great warrior and herbalist. References to her are part of the revival of the imagery related to Oba Esigie. Not every Oba after Esigie was able to install his mother as Iyoba. The queen mother was considered one of the senior chiefs of the order of Town Chiefs. Her placement was strategic and her successful installation was a sign that the reigning Oba had sufficient political clout to accomplish this feat

### **Political and Religio-Cultural Significance of Women's Commemoration in Benin Court Arts and Monuments**

Like Idia every queen mother after her lived outside the palace at the domain set aside for them at Uselu. Each of these queen mothers' never again saw her son once on the throne. As a senior chief the Iyoba held a unique position as a fictive man. Queen mothers presided over their domain, kept their own court, heard and adjudicated disputes. She had her own male chiefs to assist her at court and she supported her son, the Oba as being his eyes and ears in the community.<sup>xxviii</sup> The Iyoba was permitted to wear chiefly regalia and to display male symbols of power and prestige, such as the ceremonial sword of office, the *eben*; and some were given the sword of highest power, the *ada*. When the Iyoba donned her full regalia, she was assisted by men from the Iwebo Palace society (male attendants from the Oba's palace sent to dress her). In attaining her royal chiefly male status, the Iyoba's sexuality as a woman was effectively muted.<sup>xxix</sup>

The FESTAC Mask is also widely and wrongly assumed by most people to represent a man, an Oba or a king, because her sexuality is muted and rendered ambiguous. Her image and identity have long been obscured, and her diminished sexuality was understood in its original location in Benin and at the royal court where Idia and other Iyobas who followed her, are regarded as senior chiefs in a male gender role. Nkiru Nzegwu explains that the perception that these ivory masks depict Obas also stem from two misguided assumptions: one is the European artistic convention of how females and female bodies should be rendered in arts, and the second is the view of ancient Benin as a society suffused with strong male ethos in which women did not command any power.<sup>xxx</sup> In sculptures of cast bronze and ivory, the Iyoba is represented as a senior chief, a position held by men. Her image is usually attended by figures of pre-pubescent females, two adult females and sometimes males, all of whom refer to her status and leadership based on male gender roles. The Iyoba embodies the possibility for women to acquire wealth, prestige, influence and even immortality.

In Benin hierarchical and patrilineal society where women's roles have little viable permanence in court art, the representation of the Iyoba is unique.<sup>xxxi</sup> The iconography of the court art and works identified with Idia frequently invokes early contacts with the Portuguese near the end of the fifteenth century. Idia's distinctive features on the ivory face masks include two long incisions, usually insert with strips of iron between her eyes, in the middle of her forehead. The incisions mark a place from which power evoked. Idia's image is well

known and popularly identified as the FESTAC Mask in Nigeria and in the diaspora. The FESTAC symbol quickly gained acceptance worldwide since 1977. The ivory face plaque has been reproduced in media ranging from ivory, metal, and wood to textiles, hangings, paintings and prints. At times, it has served as corporate insignia on walls and airplanes. Court art created and displayed privately for the Iyoba in the wives' quarters of the palace, and publicly at the shrines at Uselu after her death, acknowledges the power of women in ensuring the continuity of the family and in the Iyoba's case, the continuity of the state. In fulfilling her roles as wife and mother, the queen mother attains visibility and a kind of immortality. As mother of the Oba, she is portrayed (her memory and deeds preserved) in the ritual furnishings of ancestral altars and shrines, in chiefly ornaments, in palace and local masquerades and cults and in oral tradition. The queen mother illuminates both the complementarity and the ambiguity of sex and gender roles in Benin. As a wife, the queen mother was seldom seen. As a widow, she was in the guise of a chief of the highest rank. She emerged from the *erie* to claim special privileges, regalia and a distinctive lifestyle. She achieves recognition, expresses her individuality and attains immortality in art.<sup>xxxii</sup> A testimony of the enduring political power of Idia's political influence is that a replica of the ivory mask continues to be worn by a reigning Oba during the main annual ceremonies. The fact that the spirit of Idia expressed through the ivory pendant still looms large over contemporary royal rites shows her significance.

Nkiru Nzegwu asserted in her work, *Iyoba Idia: Mother of the Nation and the Hidden Oba of Benin* that "an uncritical subscription to a state view of history propels scholars to miss the possibility that some of the initiatives, events and acts that have been associated to an Oba in old Benin may in fact have been conceptualized, initiated and implemented by an Iyoba...an assumption most pioneering works on Benin history tend to falsify".<sup>xxxiii</sup> Nkiru argues that Iyoba Idia can be credited with major accomplishments that have been attributed to Oba Esigie, "the victory over Idah in the Benin-Idah war not only eliminated Idah as a potential threat, but it also enabled Benin to gain and consolidate its imperial advantage..."<sup>xxxiv</sup> While one may have considered that the office of the Iyoba may have been awarded to the mother of the first Oba, Eweka I, Queen Erinmwinde, the first holding and bequeathing of the title to Idia, speaks volumes of her influence. On ascension to office, an Iyoba metamorphoses into a boundless fluid state in which she assumes, embodies and becomes the collective history of past occupants of the office as well as of the spiritual mother of all Edo people. Therefore, creating the title Iyoba may have been Idia's and Esigie's way of constitutionally enshrining and centering Erinmwinde or the Edo component in the making of the second dynasty.<sup>xxxv</sup> In preserving his mother from the culture of killing the Queen mother, Oba Esigie hid his mother behind the moat in a place he named *Oro*-meaning secret and when Idia escaped the brutal killing, Esigie named where he hid his mother *Oyesunu*- "it still happened that my mother wasn't killed", ending the culture of the killing of Queen mothers in Benin. *Oyesunu* later became corrupted to Uselu, the land that became the seat of two historical palaces – Eguae Iyoba (lower Uselu that housed the Queen mother palace and a place of her primary jurisdiction) and Eguae Edaiken (upper Uselu, a place of residence for the crown prince of Benin while observing his ascension rites). Hon. Benjamin Omuemu comments that. "Uselu, is divided into the upper and lower Uselu. The lower Uselu is where the palace of the queen mother Idia is located, the upper Uselu is for the Edaiken, the crown prince".<sup>xxxvi</sup> From Five Junction to Uselu shell in Benin, there are different shrines in honour of the queen mothers.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Chief Etinosa Omoemu, explains that after Idia, every other queen mother became immortalized as their grave became powerful shrine centers. All the shrine houses in



*Eguae Oba* are places where queen mothers were buried. They became deified. At their death, they are all buried within Uselu. There is an Odionwere who is the custodian of the shrine. During ascension rites, the Oba of Benin makes a visit to the first Iyoba's shrine. If the queen mother is alive upon her son's ascension to the throne, they are brought to the Iyoba's palace at Uselu, otherwise, they are buried posthumously, that is why Oba Ewuare II immortalized his mother at the Five Junction in Benin.

The commemoration of Queen Ikuoyemwen (mother of Oba Ewuare II) at the five junctions in Benin also depicts the suzerainty of women over *Eguae Oba*. It symbolizes all past Iyobas beginning with Queen Idia whose ivory mask signage is conspicuously imprinted on the marble walls of the thirty feet monument. Previously, a statue of Queen Esther was erected at the spot where the mother of the present Oba is currently immortalized in bronze, but Oba Ewuare II changed it, because Queen Esther was not a queen mother. Only queen mothers are investitured or memorialized in Uselu. Traditionally, the culture is very deep and that is why Oba Ewuare II was appraised for that gesture.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Idia was prominent in Benin and because Esigie became the first Oba to be Christianized, the ivory mask of Idia had depictions of bishops on them showing the religious affiliation of her son Esigie, with the Portuguese. That period also witnessed a spate of religious syncretism, a blend of two religions. In the depiction of women Iye Esigie is the most prominent women in the depiction of court art in Benin. She became the symbol of FESTAC 77. The artwork is super realism, that even foreigners couldn't comprehend how so called 'primitive men' could create such realistic work in ivory. It was a masterpiece because of its master realism. The queen mother became more powerful even after death.<sup>xxxix</sup> By relevance, It serves as a strong medium of honour to the entire Benin race when their artifacts are seen anywhere in the world. This impression gave the UNESCO the impetus to choose the bronze head of Queen Idia N'Iyesigie's plaque that was used as a symbol of unity in the 1977 Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) which took place in Lagos, Nigeria. The relevance of Queen Idia's bronze head in history of the Edo people is essentially to encourage women of today that bravery is not limited to men.<sup>xl</sup> There are two schools in Benin named after her, Idia College and Iyoba College. Idia's decision to go to war was out of nature's necessity as a mother to fight for the survival of her son, so whether tradition permitted women to go to war or not. Her resolve to go shows she was ready to brace the consequences from the fallout of her expedition, either in success or defeat. Her decision to go to that battle elevated her, otherwise; she would have been rated as just any other woman.<sup>xli</sup>

## Conclusion

There is a powerful force in the femininity of royal women. The concept of Benin art (bronzes) not only establishes the significance of royalty in womanhood, but it is significant in showing the power that the gender represents, and this helps us to deconstruct an important aspect of the gender theory. The gender dimension is very important. The bronzes are not only representative of royalty but are symbolic in that the composition of bronze tells of its strength. The richness of its beauty is very inviting, the grandiose, colour along with the glowing presence of brass are very remarkable and to see that women were commemorated in such material component shows that women were strong in Benin. It doesn't give only a pictorial description of women in court arts but it is also symbolic in material content.

Women's commemoration in Benin court art is not only culturally symbolic, but it is also significant in the global acceptance and popularity of Benin art and history, a positive contribution of women to Benin culture and heritage. The concept of women representation has taken a new form of cultural activism. Therefore, there is advocacy for the inclusion of non-royal women into the conventional rhythm and art of bronze casting. This will create a

balance and visibility of the achievements and contributions of the ordinary Benin woman whose narratives are short of documentation in the royal art corpus.

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- <sup>ii</sup>Paula Ben-Amos, *Art, Innovation, and Politics in Eighteenth Century Benin*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999), 4-5
- <sup>iii</sup>R. W. Hall, *Benin Arts as Power* in F. Kaplan ed. "The Images of Power, Arts of the Royal Court of Benin", (New York: New York University Press, 1981).
- <sup>iv</sup>Carol Finley, *The Art of African Masks, Exploring Cultural Traditions*, (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 1999), 38
- <sup>v</sup>Fima Lifshitz, *An African Journey through its Art* (Indiana: Author House, 2009), 86.
- <sup>vi</sup>Mosunmola Omibiyi-Obidike, *Musical Instruments as Art Objects*, "The Nigerian Field", 51, 101-114., Ukhure are placed on ancestors shrines for individual ancestors and on the shrines of the collective ancestors of a group. The Ukhure are used in prayer and in cursing and are banged on the ground for emphasis. The Ukhure is of two types; one ending with a human head, placed on the shrines of ordinary people; and the other (sometimes of brass, but usually of ivory) ending with a hand, placed on the altars of past Obas. In each case, the remaining part is designed in the form of bamboo, the top joint of which is further decorated with geometric patterns and contains the rattling object. There are also wooden rattles shaped like an hour-glass and decorated variously with pyrographed patterns of carved anthropomorphic figures in relief
- <sup>vii</sup>Mosunmola Omibiyi-Obidike, *Musical Instruments as Art Objects*, Benin was well known for the variety of bronze bells decorated with representational motifs as well as symbolic zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figures, among the wide variety of bells, the brass or bronze eroro are of Special significance. They form an important accoutrement of the altars of past obas in Benin. Pyramidal in shape, they are rung to communicate with the ancestors, or may be worn as part of the outfits of dignitaries. Eroro are variously ornamented with punched circles, parallel lines, coils, spirals, loops or guilloche patterns, and may include anthropomorphic motifs of human heads. and degenerate forms of the human face and head.
- <sup>viii</sup>Barbara Plankensteiner, *Benin: Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*, "African Arts", 40(4), 2007, 74-87
- <sup>ix</sup>Fima Lifshitz, *An African Journey through its Art*.
- <sup>x</sup>Nkiru Nzegwu, *Iyoba Idia: Mother of the Nation and the Hidden Oba of Benin* in M'Bow, Babacar and Ebohon, Osemwengie eds. *Benin, "A Kingdom in Bronze: The Royal Court Art"*, (Florida: African-American Research library and Cultural Centre, 2005).
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- <sup>xiii</sup>Bonnie G. Smith, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940), 340
- <sup>xiv</sup>Flora Kaplan, *Images of the Queen Mother in Benin Court Art*
- <sup>xv</sup>Henry Ling Roth, *Great Benin, Its Customs, Arts and Horrors*, (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1968), 119
- <sup>xvi</sup>Chief Etinosa Omoemu, Palace Chief, c60. Interviewed at Uselu Town Hall, Benin, 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 2024
- <sup>xvii</sup>Paula Ben-Amos, *Art, Innovation, and Politics in Eighteenth Century Benin*, (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999), 54.
- <sup>xviii</sup>Flora Kaplan, *Women in Benin Society and Art*.
- <sup>xix</sup>Kathy Curnow, *Benin Ivory Pendant Pair*, 282
- <sup>xx</sup>Flora Kaplan, *Women in Benin Society and Art*.
- <sup>xxi</sup>Flora Kaplan, *Women in Benin Society and Art*
- <sup>xxii</sup>Kate Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin: The Pearls Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 107-108
- <sup>xxiii</sup>Kate Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin*, 41
- <sup>xxiv</sup>Barbara Plankensteiner, *Benin: Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria*, "African Arts", 40(4), 2007, 74-87
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- <sup>xxvii</sup>Paula Ben-Amos, *Art, Innovation, and Politics in Eighteenth Century Benin*, 60-61
- <sup>xxviii</sup>Flora Kaplan, *Women in Benin Society and Art*
- <sup>xxix</sup>Flora Kaplan, *Women in Benin Society and Art*
- <sup>xxx</sup>Nkiru Nzegwu, *Iyoba Idia*: 37.
- <sup>xxxi</sup>Flora Kaplan, *Images of the Queen Mother in Benin Court Art*
- <sup>xxxii</sup>Flora Kaplan, *Images of the Queen Mother in Benin Court Art*
- <sup>xxxiii</sup>Nkiru Nzegwu, *Iyoba Idia*, 36
- <sup>xxxiv</sup>R. A. Sargent, *From a Redistribution to an Imperial Royal Formation: Benin 1293-1538*, "Canadian African Studies", 20(3), 1986, 402-427 in Nkiru Nzegwu, *Iyoba Idia*, 40
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- <sup>xxxvi</sup>Hon. Benjamin Omuemu, c55, Palace Librarian, Interviewed at the Palace of the Oba of Benin on 14<sup>th</sup> December, 2023
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- <sup>xxxviii</sup>Chief Etinosa Omoemu, c60, Palace Chief, Interviewed at Uselu Town Hall on 23<sup>rd</sup> July, 2024
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- <sup>xl</sup>Mr Benjamin Naziegbe, 66, Edo Language Tutor, Interviewed at Catholic Intercessory Academy, Benin on 15<sup>th</sup> November, 2023
- <sup>xli</sup>Mr Mark Olaitan, 57, Curator, Interviewed at the National Museum, Benin on 28<sup>th</sup> November, 2023