

The noted definitions aptly apply to the “bronze”/brass commemorative portraits or *Uhunmwun elao* /ancestral heads of Obas and Queen Idia, also called Iyoba Esigie or the mother of the sixteenth monarch Oba Esigie. Since *1897.com* displays terracotta “copies” of bronze ancestral heads of Obas and Iyobas, those terracottas constitute monuments in their honorific imitation. Conventionally, commemorative heads are made upon the death of the Oba or Iyoba, and placed on altars in their honor. As Layiwola observes, they offer praises (*awaren*) to deceased royalty in their very presence (Layiwola 2007: 84). Like praise poems and other such commemorative rituals, sculptural forms of precious “bronze”/brass metal enact prestige, honor, and permanency.<sup>55</sup> As Paula Ben-Amos Girshick reminds us, “(r)oyal brass portraits of deceased Obas were placed on altars for public viewing, communicating information about “personhood, social achievement, and the essence of the life well-led.”<sup>56</sup> Moreover, they were a “locus for constructing memory,” fashioning memory, and affirming social identity, as they signified that the “deceased had successfully fulfilled his social destiny or *akhonmioto* (Girshick 2007: 152). Layiwola observes that ancestral heads make “mnemonic” references to ancestors and their achievements,<sup>57</sup> she translates that knowledge into her conception and making of mimetic forms and processes in *Benin1897.com*.

Yet as the historical altar heads, plaques, panels and symbolic calabashes in *Benin1897.com* recall Benin histories for the sake of recording civilization and memorializing, they also recall trauma, pain and loss, as they refer to the devastation of the Benin Massacre/British Punitive Expedition. As mimetic portraits they memorialize Obas and Queen Mothers *ad infinitum*, while simultaneously representing lost memorials. Layiwola's act of commemoration and recuperation of royal and ritual objects, through mimesis and multifold repetition, responds to the trauma Benin history. This process is an index of agreement with Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Olin's claim that the “effective way to destroy a community is to destroy a monument that symbolically represents it.”<sup>58</sup> It is as if Layiwola vehemently counters that verity with superfluous repetition of select forms to ensure their visibility and recognition of the ancestors and visual forms they represent. For example, she incorporates “1000 Benin heads and pieces as a reference to the British punitive expedition.”<sup>59</sup> The hundred-fold mimetic ancestral portraits, plaques, and related ritual forms shout out the rejection of an irrevocable loss of the thousands of royal portraits and other forms that were plundered during the Expedition. Her resistant response is all the more emphatic of the honor she offers in portraying countenance, elegance, status and royal accoutrements that delineate identity and a sense of commemorative permanence. It is with that magnitude and detail of Obas and Iyobas that she reiteratively calls for restitution, commemorating primogenitary rulers and queen mothers and through them Benin histories. In that process, *Benin1897.com* memorializes lost forms, royal dynasties, and histories that its mimetic and symbolic objects metonymically represent. This visuality holds true for its copper panels, plaques, calabashes and other objects in the installation. Collectively, the various assemblages show themselves as a monument, and refer to other monuments and the histories to which they refer. Yet a closer inspection of the cultural import of ancestral heads is in order.

The Benin *Uhunmwun elao* -ancestral heads of Obas in *1897.com* vary in form, size, coloration, and textures, producing aesthetic effect of variety and resemblance. The same is true of the portraits of Iyoba Esigie/Queen Idia. Though both male and female ancestral forms stand for dynastic lines of primogeniture rulers and queen mothers, historical specificity is evident in the particular reference to Iyoba Esigie or Queen Idia. The images of Queen Idia are not simply representations of gendered prestige in Benin history. Alternatively, iconologically, they refer to Iyoba Esigie's power and authority, through her relationship to her son and husband; that is, as the first wife of her husband Oba Ozolua (c. 1481) to give birth to a son. She was the first Queen Mother in Benin history, a title bestowed upon her by her son in the 16th century, complete with political stature, a palace in Uselu, attendants, and accoutrements; and moreover, she exhibited transgressive authority in her actual engagement in war to help sustain the power of her son.<sup>60</sup>