



## **Water Fights Back in Lagos: A Performance Reading of Aqua-Terrestrial Futures in Ojo Bakare’s “Ekun Omi”**

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### **Abstract**

The Nigerian tropics is home to diverse ecosystems and rich cultural traditions. Taking up water as a material and symbolic force in relation to urbanisation, ecological deterioration, and colonial history, this work analyses Ojo Bakare's play “Ekun Omi” [When Water Cries] in a performative reading of Lagos' aqua-terrestrial futures. Through metaphor, the African theatre production examines the complex interaction between the city's aquatic systems and its human residents in light of flooding, climate change, overpopulation, and the socio-political marginalisation of Indigenous knowledge. Drawing on ecocriticism and the blue humanities, this paper takes a multifaceted approach to understanding water as a victim and agent of ecological retribution. It highlights the transformative power of Bakare’s work in depicting the ecological crisis in Lagos, while engaging the audience in collective responsibility for the future. “Ekun Omi” provides a critical and speculative analysis of Lagos' trajectory, showcasing how any viable future for the city must acknowledge the intricate bond between humans and the natural world—especially watery domains.

**Keywords:** aqua-terrestrial futures, blue humanities, ecocriticism, “Ekun Omi”, African Theatre Performance, Lagos’ urbanisation, Nigerian tropics

## Introduction

The challenge of solid waste generation and management is a global phenomenon. However, the situation is more pressing in Nigeria due to the ever-growing population, high level of environmental indiscipline, poor waste management technologies (WMTs), low income, and inadequate environmental awareness, which directly influence waste generation and management in Nigeria. (Alao, et al., 2024)

This paper addresses the aquatic and terrestrial landscape and futures of the city of Lagos, the largest metropolis of Nigeria and African. Lagos' tropicity not only effects its climate and environment, but this paper argues that the old colonial notion of tropicity, has been used to characterise the landscape of the tropics from an imperialist-environmental perspective, frequently ignoring tropical places' entwined environmental, historical, and cultural aspects (Sutter, 2014). From the outset of colonialism, the "new world" tropical regions, having been deemed the wild and exotic "other" of the mild and temperate (Western) zones have had to endure—and continue to endure—invasions, intrusions, displacements, extinctions, and pillaging of their human inhabitants, their animal populations, and their terrestrial and aquatic environments. Humans and wildlife in the tropics have been conquered for profit from colonialism, through capitalism, and today via post-colonial neoliberalism—leaving long-term, and continuous effects on natural habitats (Lundberg, et al., 2022; Abakporo & Ohenhen, 2023).

The Nigerian tropics are characterised by a diverse range of ecosystems, with a typically hot and humid climate and distinct wet and dry seasons. While the northern regions are more arid, with savanna grasslands and areas of scrubland, in contrast, the southern regions, particularly around the Niger Delta, experience heavy rainfall and are comprised of wetlands rich in faunal and floral biodiversity, including many unique species. Nigeria's rich cultural heritage is also deeply intertwined with its natural landscapes, influencing Indigenous traditions, agriculture, livelihoods, and artistic productions – both ancient and contemporary.

Central to this ecological tapestry is water, an element that sustains not only flora and fauna but also the myriad communities that have evolved within and alongside waterways. The survival of the various habitats and living species that inhabit the region depends on these terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems (Ikhmetse et al., 2022). The interplay between terrestrial and aquatic bodies is dynamic, marked by seasonal cycles,

historical transformations, and contemporary challenges. Several waterbodies—rivers, lakes, swamps, mangroves, ponds, streams, lagoons, wetlands, and coastal waters—adorn the Nigerian tropics and contribute in no small measure to the sustenance of the ecosystem. As rainfall and the flow of rivers shapes the landscape, they also carry with them stories of resilience, conflict, and transformation.

As part of the environmental infrastructure, water in the Nigerian tropics, has been plundered socio-politically, economically and religiously since colonialism. And this plundering continues into the post-colonial neoliberal present. The current water-related issues in the country are at such an extreme tipping point, that it can be imagined that water has begun to fight back. This research analyses this situation as a feud emanating from the strained relationship between (human) terrestrial and aquatic life. In this scenario, humans, envisaging themselves as masters of the environment (Fitzgerald, 2015), “graduated from adapting to our environment to making it adapt to us...we regularly decelerate and accelerate natural processes, focus energy in extraordinary ways and alter, destroy or create ecosystems” (Syvistski, 2012, p. 12). This is evidently the case in tropical aquatic and terrestrial landscapes like Lagos.

The anthropogenic activities which are the result of industrialization, urbanization, and population increases in Lagos have not only fuelled environmental concerns in the area, but have also exposed a unique lens for looking at the environmental relationships in the region. While acknowledging that the the bulk of scholarly works concentrate on the notion of an ‘environmentally-used-up’ Lagos (Abakporo & Ohenhen, 2024), attention is also drawn to a seeming strained/altered relationship between the terrestrial and aquatic bodies orchestrated by humans. This paper focuses on how the sustained pillaging, extraction, and displacements of the aqua-spaces in Lagos have awoken the “angry beast” (Hamilton, 2014) of the waterbodies. In this scenario, terrestrial life seems to be the opponent in a battle between aquatic and terrestrial environments.

Attempts at tackling the massive aquatic environmental issues: including commissioning environmental projects such as waste collection points, drafting of funds for environmental projects, and media advocacy, are widely known in this area. These efforts, however, are largely flawed due to corruption and the exclusion of local residents. Likewise, transferring ecological concerns from the realm of knowledge, to that of feeling, has proven to be a challenge in Lagos (Tolstoy, 1997; Abakporo & Ohenhen, 2024). This research, thus puts forward the potential of theatre, given its potency to shape opinions, create images, and provoke critical consciousness (Boal 1979, 2002; Dillon, 2008). Specifically, the performance piece, “Ekun Omi” [When Water

Cries], is replete with metaphors that speak to the present environmental concerns, and possible futures of the strained aquatic and terrestrial (hereafter aqua-terrestrial) relationships pioneered by ‘human chauvinistic’ (Routley, 1979) ideals in the Nigerian tropics, and particularly the case of Lagos.

This paper is structured in four parts. Firstly, the environmental outlook of Lagos is introduced, specifically outlining its tropical aqua-terrestrial vulnerability. Secondly, the theories of ecocriticism and the blue humanities are presented. Thirdly, these theoretical ideas are discussed in reference to the Ojo Bakare’s theatrical work “Ekun Omi”. This is done by carrying out a dual reading of the fictional environment in the performance of “Ekun Omi”, and the material environments in Lagos. This reading enables us to link the imagined aquatic oppressive metaphors (aqua-oppressive) of the play to real aqua-oppressive practices and experiences in Lagos; showing factors that have culminated in the present obstruction of aqua-terrestrial relations in the region. This research also attempts to show how these aqua-oppressive practices have triggered the resistive agency of the waterbodies in the region and the potential of theatre to drive ecological concerns and advocacy. Fourthly, and finally, the paper extrapolates the present ‘aquatic invasion’ of terrestrial life in Lagos to possible environmental futures and offers strategies for restoring healthy aqua-terrestrial relations in the region with implications for policies and sustainable practices in line with the resolutions in “Ekun Omi”.

### **Historical and Aqua-Terrestrial Lagos**

The harmony in creation is disordered and the earth is worse for it.  
This is because man has not accepted the earth as a common home  
for all creatures (Obilor, 2021, p, 51)

The Lagos metropolitan region is surrounded by water, with a lagoon on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other. The city’s land area comprises numerous islands amid water bodies of rivers, creeks, swampy mangroves, and wetlands. The land is also prone to seasonal flooding (fsdafrica, 2021). There is a strong historical connection between the agricultural and fishing practices of the Yoruba communities who originally inhabited the area and the early settlement of Lagos, with many studies exploring these Indigenous human-environment connections. However, Lagos’ rapid development into a megacity follows a different trajectory, one common to other African cities, which can be traced to colonial European settlements and their concomitant establishment of administrative centres, markets, and trade. In the post-colonial period, these developments expanded Lagos into a hub for “social change, receptacles for talents

and manpower, and places of investments” (Emordi & Osiki, 2008, p. 96; Onwuanyi, 2019). In the mid-1900s the city experienced rapid growth and development, including wharves, a seaport, industrial estates, and business expansion, along with improvements in education and health facilities (Emordi & Osiki, 2008, p. 98).

In his analysis of Lagos population metrics, Onwuanyi (2019) explains that the population was under one million in 1960. However, it surged to four million by 1990, reached over fifteen million by 2015, and escalated to twenty-six million in 2023. Estimates suggest that (including the greater metropolitan areas) the population could exceed thirty million. The rapid growth also prompted further expansion of housing and infrastructure, as residents moved from Lagos Island—the original settlement—to the mainland. This exceptionally high population density was exacerbated by the urbanization that followed the oil boom in the 1970s, and continues today through push factors, such as low wages and limited job opportunities in rural areas driving migration into the city, while pull factors, include higher-paying jobs and the allure of urban living, continue to make Lagos a prime migrant destination.

This vibrant megacity is known for its bustling streets, diverse cultures, and its complex aquatic environments. And it faces unique challenges and opportunities related to these waterbodies. Lagos' growing population has outpaced the area's land supply, and today, the majority of residents not only reside close to the water, but also on top of it (Májà-Pearce, 2023). As the largest and most dynamic city in the largest economy on the African continent, this megacity is under risk due to environmental recklessness exacerbated by climate change, specifically the increased likelihood of flooding (fsdafrica, 2021).

The aquatic environmental outlook of Lagos is like a mirror reflecting the global problem in which millions of tonnes of trash, hazardous chemicals, medical waste, fertilisers, and crude oil are discarded into the water (Menamprmpil, 2012, p. 12). All these toxic wastes are prevalent in the waterways of Lagos and are shaped by factors such as urbanization, pollution, climate change, and failed efforts toward sustainability (see also, Karmakar & Chetty, 2023). As the city expands in population, natural water bodies have been encroached upon and altered for real estate gains. This has led to the degradation of vital ecosystems that play crucial roles in regulating water quality and providing habitats for diverse species. The loss of wetlands, mangroves, and other natural buffers has increased the city's vulnerability to flooding and erosion, further complicating urban management as well as risking liveability and viability in the near future.

## **Ecocriticism and the Blue Humanities**

One of the most important concerns of the twenty-first century continues to be the environment. Over the years, researchers looking at the causes, processes, and prospects of increasing environmental destruction have developed sophisticated ideas and terminologies to foreground their thinking about human-nature relationship. While Val and Richard Routley (1979) speak of "human chauvinism," and Donna Haraway (2008) uses the term "speciesism" to explain the privileging of human species over the non-human beings that share the ecosystem, Baird Callicott (2006) views it as a problem of "homocentrism or human supremacism". David Kidner (2014), puts forward that "industrocentrism," with its power to submit both humans and the environment to the capitalist economic system, is the foundation of the Anthropocene (over anthropocentrism). Human-centric values, whether they are referred to as speciesism, homocentrism, capitalocene (Moore, 2017), chthulucene (Haraway, 2016), or "technocene" (Lopez-Corona et al., 2020), essentialize people to the detriment of our beyond-human ecosystem partners. According to this limited view, non-human ecosystems are reduced to little more than things or "means to human ends" (Callicott, 2006, p. 119).

Some scholars like Dovie (2015) argue that Africa always had systems that governed the relationship between humans and their environment; systems that acknowledged the agency of our more-than-human collaborators, including: animals, plants, the elements, and spirits (Chao & Enari, 2021). However, these Indigenous epistemologies were subjugated to the rule of colonial knowledge systems, and later to the post-colonial reckonings of economics and neoliberalism. Environmental crises in the tropics occurred alongside the creation of colonised landscapes (Abakporo & Ohenhen, 2023), continued in the face of subsequent gullibility of colonized governments (Muñoz Martínez, 2022), and further with post-colonial government corruption. The environmental crisis in Africa today, however, spans beyond the moral depravity of the government and the bureaucratic inefficiency with which the business of government is conducted. The crisis is complex. We may consider here Rob Nixon's (2011) idea of 'slow violence', which encompasses all brands of chaos that occur steadily and out of sight. This kind of violence for Nixon is monumental but its consequences are strategically delayed, the kinds of violence that scholars like Okuyade (2013) see as "violence without blood" (p. x). Violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous but incremental and accretive (Nixon, 2011; Okuyade, 2013). And in the case of aquatic

ecosystems, may entail long lasting and severe effects, that nevertheless remain hidden in watery domains (Sarkar & Rangarajan, 2022).

As concerns for restoring the liveability and viability of the planet grow, ecological analyses have also assumed an interdisciplinary face. Within the humanities, ecocriticism has emerged as a way to explore the relationship between literature and the physical environment (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996). It aims to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness in response to environmental crises (Kerridge & Neil, 1998). More recently, the subfields of green and blue humanities have emerged. While the green humanities relate to terrestrial landscapes, blue humanities examine the various ways that people interact with water, introducing and reinforcing water-centric thought through literary, cultural, historical, and theoretical links and ecologies (Mentz, 2024). Blue humanities explore novel perspectives on freshwater and saltwater geographies, including through the physicality of water itself. In this regard, the green and blue humanities have an affinity with ‘new materialism’ which acknowledges the liveliness of all matter. In the case of tropical Lagos’ the recent pronouncement of ‘tropical materialisms’ (Benitez & Lundberg, 2022) is of further value as it argues for the agency of tropical environments and elements—including, in this instance, water.

Blue humanities for Oppermann (2023) challenges the cultural supremacy of conventional narratives and critically investigates the planet's problematic oceans and freshwater domains from a variety of angles, advocating for transdisciplinary collaboration. It addresses urgent water issues and encourages disanthropocentric discussions regarding water ecologies. From a material ecocritical standpoint, the blue humanities advance “other” discursive practices by proposing that new tales and fluid-storied matter may alter aqua-oppressive practices by altering our viewpoint, to one that includes the watery element as an active actor in our worldly environment.

Ecocriticism, especially as rendered through blue humanities, offers a valuable framework for examining the environmental themes in the performance of Ojo Bakare’s “Ekun Omi” in the context of Lagos, where issues like water pollution and urbanisation have significant ecological consequences. By focusing on the material<sup>1</sup> role of water and its interaction with humans, ecocriticism illuminates how Bakare’s work portrays

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<sup>1</sup> Again, it is pertinent to note how this relates to the philosophical work of “tropical materialisms” which takes up the prestigious theory of new materialism and its analysis of how nonhuman materials—including the elements—are active agents in the world. ‘Tropical Materialisms’ extends this liveliness of the world to consider the animal, plant, elements, and ancient spiritual agents of the tropics (Benitez & Lundberg, 2022).

water as both a literal and metaphorical force for change. The performance explores the struggles between nature and human-made development, emphasising the importance of water as a life-giving and sustaining resource under threat of environmental degradation. Ecocriticism helps to reveal how “Ekun Omi” critiques the unsustainable practices of modern society and advocates for an eco-conscious future. Through this theoretical lens, the work becomes a call to action “to save and sustain the bleeding and nearly collapsing ecological system of which we humans form a part” (Nsah, 2018, p. 108). It is a reflection on the importance of symbiosis between humans and the environment, including, and urgently, in tropical urban spaces like Lagos.

### **“Ekun Omi”: Synopsis and Setting**

“Ekun Omi” is a compelling play devised and directed by Ojo Bakare. Its opening was performed in the Chris Alabi Theatre of Bowen University on 23 May 2024, and the play was booked to be performed across 12 universities in Nigeria. It explores the theme of water as both a vital resource and a powerful entity capable of resistance. Set in a typical Yoruba community, the narrative centres on the agency (through personification) of water, which has long been oppressed and disrespected by humans. In the performance, the first wave of tropical monsoonal rain, has caused extensive damage and the people have gathered in the palace of the king to report their losses ranging from deaths and incapacitation, to flooding of homes and farmlands. The King tries to placate his subjects and advises the people to pray to their various Gods and deities to forestall future deluges. In agreement, the community begin to pray; Christians among them moved to a corner of the stage, Muslims to another, and traditional worshippers to a third corner. In the heat of their prayers, the thunder strikes even louder, signalling a second wave of the rains. As they try to scamper for safety, suddenly they freeze, heralding the entrance of Omi (Water) and her acolytes of the aquatic realms of the region.

As Omi angrily laments the anthropogenic actions of humans, she reveals that the rain and its consequent damage are her way of fighting back against long years of water abuse and degradation. She vows to keep wreaking havoc upon humans until they desist in their destruction of the aqua realms. She exits, unleashing the second wave of the rains, which claim the lives of Aremo Kabiyesi (the Prince), and the third wife of Baba Dayo (a renowned chief in the land). As the community grieves their loss, Olu Awo the Chief Priest arrives back from his journey, where he had been held up by the flood for seven days. He vows to proffer solutions to the flood disaster through divination. As he consults the oracle, he commands the people to prepare items for

sacrifice including seven heads of white cats, the tail of a crocodile, seven heads of penguins, seven heads of parrots, and the head of a human Albino. The people set about providing the sacrificial items, but find getting an Albino head, a difficult task. As they commence the preliminary phase of the rituals, Bowale, a son of the village who is based in America where he works as an climatologist/environmentalist, enters the scene with Clara, his White wife.

The people are happy to see their son but ask him to offer his wife for the ritual as Albino and White are the same to them. He refuses and instead asks for a room to change into his work-clothes so he can help the people go tackle their environmental problems. He comes out to see his people almost sacrificing his wife. He fires a gunshot into the air to deter them, rescues his wife, and angrily tells the people that rituals will not abate their environmental woes, then proceeds to narrate the reasons why they suffer. The performance utilizes flashbacks to provide a picture of the aqua-oppressive acts of the community ranging from blocking the water ways, building on water courses, poor and corrupt waste management systems, to dumping of biological and chemical wastes in waterbodies. At the end of the narration, he leads the people in cleaning up the water ways and evolving policies to protect and restore the waterbodies in the region. They sing joyfully as the play ends.

### ***“Ekun Omi” between Metaphor and Material Reality***

One of theater's special powers is its ability to put us in other people's shoes. We learn more about the world around us by observing the struggles and lives of people from different cultures, ethnicities, and viewpoints. Our everyday lives are impacted by this newly discovered empathy, which motivates us to be more compassionate and open-minded people. By drawing attention to these problems, theatre inspires us to examine our own prejudices, question our assumptions, and have important conversations. (Evans, 2023)

“Ekun Omi” in Yoruba is translated to mean “When Water Cries”. The play takes a historical tone in the exposition of anthropogenic activities of the people on the waterbodies. These actions range from using the waterbodies as a dumpsite for all manner of human and industrial wastes, to the forceful extraction of land from the waterbodies as revealed in the sand filling of waterbodies for the construction of industries and estates in the play. It explores how humans’ traditional survival and

recreational activities like fishing and beach partying are uniquely enmeshed in the wasting of aquatic life. The characters in the play represent different perspectives on nature, highlighting the tension between modern development and traditional respect for the environment.

As a character in the play, Water (Omi in the Yoruba language) actively participates in the narrative, voicing her annoyance at human carelessness, pollution, and exploitation. She displays her agency and the effects of its subjugation through a succession of interactions with many individuals, including villagers, environmental activists, and traditional figures. Flooding of homes and farms, which effects the existence of terrestrial life, is an example of this. The piece deftly combines comedy and drama to highlight the transformational potential of water and its capacity to resist the injustices meted out to it.

**Figure 1: *The Water Character (Omi) voicing her grievances in “Ekun Omi”***



Photo credit, researcher, 2024

Through vivid imagery and symbolic incidents, the play emphasizes the interconnectedness of life and the urgent need for humans to recognize water’s intrinsic value. Theatre has the power to connect us to humanity’s common experiences. It provides a social reflection through the art of storytelling, revealing our aspirations, fears, and hopes (Evans, 2023). The society remains the creative pool from where theatre draws its themes, as well as the recipient of the theatre’s treatment of such

themes. Through imageries, dialogues, and special effects, theatre paints pictures that force its audiences to reflect and re-evaluate their place in the world. The environmental imageries in “Ekun Omi” resonate with the human and aqua-terrestrial relations in Lagos, Nigeria. The play is a compendium of issues that are tantamount with the colonization, oppression, sustained extinction, and displacement of water in the tropics of Lagos. Such actions sit side-by-side with the cries of Omi as she interacts with the audience:

...the children of the earth insist they must keep poking sticks into our eyes. When the fly bites the man with an open wound, nobody complains; but wait till the wounded man bites the fly in return and hear the children of the earth scream in protest. Is it not here we stay [referring to the water bodies]? Do we leave this, our abode, and occupy their space? Have we ever, unprovoked, moved out of our kingdom to block their ways in their kingdom? But they, how do they pay us in return? When they feed and overfill their bowels, where do they pour the remnants?... when they drink their liquid... where do they drop the waste? When the dirty among them look for where to defecate, where do they...? And when they want to wreak the highest havoc with their ill-gotten wealth, don't they come here leaving all the vast land Olodumare [God] gave them, to build their mansions within our territory, blocking our flows and tumbles? ... What is our offense? (Ekun Omi, 2024)

Water pollution is a pressing concern in Lagos, primarily driven by biological and industrial waste, sewage discharge, reckless littering of waterways, and inadequate waste management practices. Rivers and coastal waters are often contaminated, posing health risks to communities that rely on these waterbodies and depleting animal and plant communities that inhabit the water ecosystems. Adeyemo (2003, p. 297) supports this thought when he avers that fish and marine resources [symbolised as the acolytes of Omi in the performance] in the country face total collapse or extinction due to overfishing and destruction of marine life and natural habitats by pollution of the waters. Dumping of human biological, chemical, and plastic wastes; shanty and squatter structures on and around rivers; and land extraction from the waterbodies through dump and sand-filling are some of the aqua-oppressive activities in Lagos. “Ekun Omi” addresses these issues squarely in the light of how they culminate into obstructing the

water's "flow and tumbles" ("Ekun Omi", 2024) which triggers the destructive agency of the water, both in the play and in the Lagos metropolis.

**Figure 2: The symbolic dumping of human and plastic wastes in 'Ekun Omi'**



Researcher, 2024

**Figure 3: Plastic litters on the waterways in Sura, Lagos**



Channels Television (2017). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BY15knuHJns>

Affirming the symbiotic relationship between theatre and society, the environmental imageries in the play are the realities of tropical environments like Lagos where water bodies which have been denigrated by humans have also begun to ‘fight back’.

Lagos stands as a heartbreaking illustration of how past injustices exacerbate present climate and environmental challenges. Lagos according to Májà-Peace (2023) is treated as a convenience, a stopping point; as if the population are mere visitors passing through, rather than inhabitants. In Lagos, a lot of plastic waste and other non-renewable trash is dumped into the water from a huge number of households, leading to the clogging of waterways.

Walk along any street, or drive behind any car, and you will witness people tossing empty packets onto the streets, highways, and pavements, as well as into the open gutter system (see Figures 2 & 3 above) where the garbage eventually dams up the water’s flow. The government is slow to clear garbage and blockages due ineffective management, or because have already spent the funds allocated for clean-up operations. The result is floods which causes the garbage from the gutters to enter the canals that flow into the Atlantic Ocean, polluting the catfish, tilapia, and mackerel that are caught locally and sold in the market. As reported by fdsafrica (2021) there has been a rise in the frequency, severity, and spatial extent of floods caused by storm surges and rain since 2000. Water has begun to invade terrestrial life in the city which annually impacts the economy and the very quality of life. The onset of the monsoon rains has become the nightmare of Lagosians. This growing climatic-environmental concern leaves the “Ekun Omi” audience to reflect upon Omi’s position in her action to avenge against her human abusers and empathise with her when she states:

...our response to their [humans’] wickedness against us is our tears. We merely cry and the tears we shed build into a pool of water that flush their homes and lands. Yes we cry and they are in ruins because of our tears. Our tears tear their lives apart. So, Eledumare [God], if you are really a God of justice, then these mortals are merely praying in vain. When they stop poking their sticks into our eyes, our tears will stop raining chaos into their existence. (“Ekun Omi”, 2024)

Also highlighted in the play is the displacement/extraction of land from waterbodies; an act that is conspicuous in Lagos. The sustained migration of peoples and industries to, and consequent population increases in Lagos, have escalated demand for water in the

region as well as spiked the demand for land. Developers thus turn to waterbodies in the region for land extraction to erect housing and industry structures. “Ekun Omi” captures this thought in the words of Olowolafe (a wealthy Chief in the community) during the flash-back sequence. The Chief insists on building factories on a river course, as revealed in his dialogue with his contractor:

Chief Olowolafe: ...I was saying that three-bedroom flats will be right there... and this is where I will have the 25 storey buildings, four of them. [pointing to a corner of the stage]

Contractor: But sir, that is a waterway...

Chief Olowolafe: What is water way? Leave water. I have the money. When water sees money, it will find another way... I will fill it up. When water sees money even water will be afraid. (“Ekun Omi”, 2024)

Referring to the Lekki Peninsula in Lagos, which lies between the lagoon and the Atlantic Ocean, Olawale (2024) avers that activities in the affluent Lekki neighbourhoods and surrounding areas have received a lot of attention. The principal cause of this scrutiny is ocean dredging and rampant building by property developers and owners on water channels and major drainages. For instance, the coastal city called Eko Atlantic was built on a large expanse of land reclaimed from the Atlantic. To restrict the water, a great wall was built to demarcate/prevent the Atlantic from inundating the city (Nimi, 2021; Májà-Pearce, 2023). More prominent and recent is the newly commissioned Dangote Refinery owned by Aliko Dangote, known as “Africa’s wealthiest person” (Orji, 2024). During the construction of the refinery, some rivers and streams have been dredged to make room for pipeline networks and ships, while, in order to build foundations, waterways and swamplands have been filled with sand. It is reported that fishermen’s catches of prawns and crayfish have drastically declined (Orji, 2024).

These forms of water oppression have resulted in the present shortage of clean water in Lagos and the overarching effect on the liveability and viability of the ecosystem in the area (Daramola, 2021). The water bodies’ expansion into terrestrial spaces in the “Okun Omi” theatre production, as well as in Lagos city, not only signals the resistive agency of water but also a foiled aqua-terrestrial relationship orchestrated by humans. As the growing population of Lagos continues to fuel more extraction and despoliation of water, so too will water’s resistance continue into the future. Given the degree of flooding in

Lagos every year since 2000, water appears to be determined to erase terrestrial life in the region in a quest to regain its flow and tumbles.

**Figure 5: Water obstructing Terrestrial Life in Lagos**



Source: [The Nation](#) (2019)

## **Futures of Lagos' Aqua-Terrestrial Life**

### ***Imminent Ecological Apocalypse***

what we didn't know was that Bar Beach's seemingly vast expanse of pristine white sand was rapidly succumbing to the Atlantic Ocean. The erosion had little if anything to do with climate change but rather with the construction, half a century earlier, of a three-and-a-half-mile breakwater on the seabed, built to protect access to the busy Lagos harbor in Apapa, just to the northeast. (Májà-Pearce, 2023)

In a report for BBC (Nimi, 2021b) on Nigeria's coastal environments, including Lagos on its Atlantic coast, a rise of just 1 to 3 meters "will have a catastrophic effect on human activities". Scientists estimate that if emissions levels do not drastically drop, a rise of up to one metre could occur by 2100. Another study, published in *Nature*, found that some of the world's low-lying coastal cities could be permanently submerged by then (Nimi, 2021b). This forecast puts Lagos on the verge of a catastrophic future. Following the

negative environmental indices of industrialization, urbanization, climate change, and over population in Lagos, an apocalypse is imminent. Adding to the catastrophic futures scenario for Lagos are poor waste management and ineffective environmental policies. Additionally, poor urban and building design, instigated to meet the fast-growing population of more than 20 million people, is increasing the risk of flooding (Sanni, 2022).

The current terrestrial invasions by the aqua-bodies in Lagos are distinct signs that the city is on the verge of sinking following long years of human oppressive activities. Reports are replete with instances of displaced communities. The Eko Atlantic project (Nimi, 2021) has worsened the surge of water towards coastal communities, sweeping homes underwater. An example is the Okun Alfa Community which has had to relocate three times as a result of water encroachment; time and land for them are running out (Olukoya, 2021). Against these trends, the human-triggered destructive agency of the waterbodies of Lagos are a cause for concern for the future of the city.

Lagos may soon become a city of humans without life (life in this sense connotes the liveability and viability of the Lagos environment), especially given the intensified annual flooding of the area since 2000. Adetayo (2022) and Nimi (2021) corroborate that Lagos is a sinking city whose wetlands have been sacrificed on the altar of real estate gains and may soon become unlivable. Water as an element, infrastructure, and ecosystem has been profoundly abused in this coastal city leading to a drastic shortage of clean water which adds to the factors that ground Adetayo (2022) and Nimi (2021) conclusion above. The impending catastrophic future of Lagos is presently no longer a matter of how and why; but 'When', as coastal communities continue to become victims of the terrestrial conquest of the waterbodies.

Lagos' tales of aqua-terrestrial warfare have been prominent since the early 2000s. Climate change has only added to the rampant environmental recklessness of Lagos' residents and the inefficiencies of government. And the economy of this "engine driving Africa's economic powerhouse forward" (fsdafrica, 2021) has been greatly impacted in the wake of this recklessness. According to statistics provided by fsdafrica (2021), while the 2011 floods inflicted \$200 million damage, significant rainfall in 2012 destroyed assets valued at \$9.5 billion and harmed 7.7 million people. This increased progression of funding for environmental issues in Lagos is a testament to a sinking city. Here material reality and economics is highlighted in the metaphoric utterances of the theatre production as audience is forced to reflect upon the cries of Omi where she laments that "our tears tear their lives apart" ("Ekun Omi", 2024).

**Figure 6: Water Claiming Lagos' Lands**



Okojie (2022) <https://leadership.ng/2-missing-as-heavy-rain-flood-wreak-havoc-in-lagos/>

**Figure 7: Water Invasion of Lagos' Lands**



Akomolafe (2021) <https://guardian.ng/news/lagosians-worry-over-wastes-flooding-as-plastics-take-over/>

Lagos is underprepared to manage urban flood risk. Limited coordination, a lack of technical skills and knowledge, as well as insufficient data and models, have harmed the public and private sectors' capacity to adequately manage flood risk. Added to this, is an economic partition between poor and rich, that is reinforced through water and land management, adding to an aqua-terrestrial divide. As landfilling shrinks the waterways in certain areas of Lagos (most prominently the bourgeois axis like Lekki, Victoria Island, and Lagos Island), the waters are forced into other terrestrial spaces (particularly poor and middle-class areas) of the coastal city, leading to the sinking of large swathes of these communities. This unsettling picture is clearly painted in the assertion of Májà-Pearce (2023) that to be poor in Lagos today is to be at constant risk of displacement, at the same time that local leaders funnel more money and land into exclusive developments for the wealthy.

Over the years, the government of Lagos has been more concerned with harnessing the economic boom of the city, than with governing her human-nature relations. In the light of the present ecological wasting, although it could be that government officials are either unaware of how to improve deteriorated landscapes or are too naive to develop effective remedies—a situation that has been observed in other post-colonial tropical contexts (see Muñoz Martínez, 2022)—in Nsah's (2022) assessment of the African situation, bad governance, manifested in absenteeism and corruption is a route cause, and this violates both human and environmental rights through water contamination and irresponsible urbanisation. In line with Májà-Pearce's (2023) position in the quotation at the opening of this section, political inaction and poor governance constitute governmental responsibility for ecological vulnerability exhibited through freshwater pollution and unrestrained urban sprawl. It is evident that, "humans are destroying nature and are consequently suffering from this very destruction" (Nsah, 2018, p. 94). Poor urban planning, anthropogenic activities, rapid urbanisation, and climate change are the broad fronts upon which the future of Lagos hangs in the balance.

### ***Averting Apocalyptic Futures in Lagos***

...we must no longer see the Earth as the submissive repository for supplying our resources or taking our wastes, nor as the docile victim of our rapacity or carelessness. We must understand the earth as a dynamic system with strong feedback effects, which can suddenly shift it to a new state when critical points are crossed. (Hamilton, 2014)

Significant threats posed by aqua-devastation in Lagos are primarily manifested through flooding, water pollution, and coastal erosion. These issues not only threaten the city's infrastructure, health, and the livelihoods of its residents but are capable of foiling the future viability of the city, and the nation's burgeoning economies. Generally speaking, water is considered contaminated when it is impacted by anthropogenic pollutants and either no longer supports human use, such as for drinking water, or experiences a significant change in its capacity to support the biotic communities that make it up, such as fish (Ekubo, et al., 2011).

As human activities are always in relation with the environment; human endeavours can only fruitfully be achieved and sustained where the environment is safe and healthy (Kingston, et al., 2018, p. 2). As much as it is important to acknowledge the efforts of the government to mitigate flooding in Lagos, it is also necessary to state that the major cause of ecocide in Lagos, remains with the reckless activities of both the government and residents of the city. While the government has politicised environmental issues with the rhetoric of heavy manifestos and grand projects, the city's residents, living in over-populated conditions of Lagos' "No Man's Land", have imbibed the associated culture of impunity.

In the play "Ekun Omi" environmental resolutions started with a realisation of the relations between humans and water. This was the recognizing of both the extent of harm caused by humans on the waterbodies and the destructive agency of the element of water. This is aptly sung by the characters in the play:

*Omi wo yarin gerere o*  
*Omi wo yarin gerere*  
*Omi o lowo, omi o lese*  
*Omi wa yarin gerere*

[Water sweeps everything on its way  
Water sweeps everything on its path  
Water has no hands  
Water has no legs  
Yet water sweeps everything on its path]  
(“Ekun Omi”, 2024)

Humans have crossed a critical threshold in their aqua-terrestrial relations in Lagos; hence, their present survival is threatened by strong aquatic feedback effects from the

environment. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that combines improved infrastructure, community engagement and advocacy, sustainable practices, and effective policy implementation. In essence, a large portion of the environmental issues in Lagos could be tackled if the consciousness of environmental devastation can be moved from the domain of knowledge to that of feeling. The knowledge of aqua-terrestrial problems can be seen through the numerous undone, unmonitored, and incomplete environmental projects that are scattered throughout the city. Their abandoned remains are a testament to dispassionate implementations. To create a sense of compassion, it may prove of great value for the government to partner with theatre companies in order to raise consciousness and create human commitment to the environment in the Lagos metropolis. The ability of theatre to frame pictures and conjure feelings makes it a viable tool in the efforts of governments to mitigate the present ecocide in Lagos.

Looking at these aqua-terrestrial relations from a broader national scale, the socio-political configuration of Nigeria poses a great threat to the ecosystems in Lagos. The country seems structured to favour Lagos socio-economically, adding to the push and pull factors that fuel migration to the coastal city as well as consequent demands from, and abuse of, its eco-resources. At the moment, Lagos has the only functional international seaport and the only international airport in Southern Nigeria. Despite the existing international standard airports in Delta, Owerri, and Enugu and seaports in Rivers, Bayelsa, and Calabar (which were operational in years past), import and export activities for businesses take place in Lagos, as these other ports have remained closed to international operations. According to this setup, Lagos appears to be the threshold to the outside world, fuelling further migrations of industries, businesses, and individuals to the region and, indeed, the further eco-exiling of our more-than-human natural and spiritual environmental collaborators.

To make any headway in atoning for the years of human ecological warfare in Lagos, it is necessary to decongest the city. One prospect is to grant other states with similar prospects the licences to operate international movements of goods and people. This approach will help alleviate migration to Lagos and promote a balance of human, terrestrial, and aquatic spaces in the megacity. This scenario also facilitates governance of the area in terms of forecasting environmental issues, tracking and data collection, and implementation of environmental-friendly policies. When humans are in a more equitable relationship with the natural resources of a region, sustainability is better assured. Unless efforts are made to relieve the congestion of the city through the

effective extension of infrastructures and resources in other states of the federation, Lagos State's shifting socioeconomic and infrastructure development in the near future will be further impacted by increased water demand brought on by population expansion (Owolabi, 2017. p. 69), while further infrastructural development to mitigate flooding will merely prove to be tantamount to further eco-oppression in Lagos.

An alternative creative strategy to lessening flooding is advancing environmentally friendly infrastructure. Rainwater absorption and surface runoff reduction can be achieved by incorporating urban features like city and suburban parks, permeable pavement, and green roofs. These methods contribute to a better environment by reducing flooding, improving air quality, and boosting urban biodiversity. The coastline can also be protected by reforesting mangroves and establishing other environmental coastal protection measures. For instance, mangroves offer vital habitats for marine life and act as organic barriers against erosion; restoring them can improve community resilience to coastal floods and increase biodiversity.

It is also essential to maintain and upgrade water drainage systems to avoid obstructions from garbage and debris. This entails not only building new drainage channels but also routinely cleaning the ones that already exist. In places prone to flooding during heavy downpours, this risk can be considerably lessened by increasing the drainage capacity. Another crucial element of combating Lagos' water pollution is waste management. Water bodies become contaminated as a result of the city's poor waste management methods. It is imperative that improved waste management techniques be put into place, including more recycling initiatives and public awareness campaigns regarding littering. A culture of environmental responsibility can help communities safeguard their water supplies and drastically reduce pollution.

On a more conceptual level, there is also a need to reconsider the notion of development. Our perception of development in Nigeria is distorted. Indeed, there is a need to rupture the tropes of development, civilisation, and industrialisation. These colonial and neocolonial ideals serve to maintain the country—and many other places in the tropics—in toxic neoliberal economic entanglements (Abakporo & Ohenhen, 2023).

In Lagos, development amounts to the oppression and displacement of our other, more-than-human ecosystem collaborators. For Abakporo and Ohenhen (2023), development in Nigeria is industrial and humancentric. With each new development milestone, other environmental stakeholders—both human and non-human—are poisoned, evicted, and excluded, which has an impact on our future. For instance, in the photograph (*Figure 8*)

below, there are no trees in the entire expanse of the development project and the surrounding urban setting. To avert an impending catastrophic future for Lagos, development must be looked at from the position of ecological balance and the standpoint of environmental stewardship. The hitherto displacement of our other beyond-human stakeholders of the ecosystem for economic, urban, and industrial gains can no longer be seen as development. Development must be understood as the capacity of individuals, economies, societies, and cultures to take an active role in managing the benefits of nature for human well-being and creating a robust biosphere for coming generations. It is imperative that development, through active stewardship, be reconnected with a foundation in Earth's ecological systems (Folke, et al., 2021). Including, in the case of Lagos, both terrestrial and aquatic systems.

**Figure 8: *Development displaces other forms of life in Oshodi, Lagos***



<https://www.dreamstime.com/panoramic-view-commuters-oshodi-lagos-showing-overview-popular-market-which-now-demolished-present-site-houses-new-image163444598>

The complex issue of Lagos' aqua-devastation necessitates a comprehensive approach. Improving policies and involving the community will be essential. Residents' sense of ownership over their environment can be fostered by involving them in conservation initiatives and awareness-raising activities. Citizens can be empowered to actively participate in protecting local aquatic ecosystems through programmes that promote community involvement in clean-up campaigns, tree planting, and water quality monitoring. By strengthening policy frameworks, putting sustainable practices into

place, engaging communities, and upgrading infrastructure, Lagos may move closer to a more resilient future. As the city battles the effects of urbanisation and climate change, proactive measures will be crucial in protecting its water resources and ensuring the welfare of its citizens.

## **Conclusion**

Ojo Bakare's "Ekun Omi" is a performance examination of the complex and frequently tense interaction between people and water, particularly in the monsoonal tropical region of Nigeria. The performance challenges the predominance of Euro-western development by examining water's significance as a resource that sustains life, as well as its active role in determining Lagos' future. "Ekun Omi" addresses important issues of sustainability, environmental justice, and the resilience of coastal communities by interacting with the material and symbolic qualities of water. In the production, Bakare shows how water, literally and figuratively, resists the invasion of urbanisation, colonial heritage, and human exploitation through its vivid depiction of the natural and sociopolitical forces influencing the city's future. This performance reading of aqua-terrestrial futures challenges us to re-evaluate our presumptions regarding sustainability and development, calling for a more thorough examination of the environmental issues posing a growing threat to the life of tropical coastal cities such as Lagos. In "Ekun Omi", Bakare pushes us to reconsider how we interact with nature and promotes a more peaceful coexistence in which water in all its manifestations is valued and understood as a force rather than as a mere resource to be controlled.

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