

# LAGOS: FOUR WORDS FOR A CITY BEYOND LANGUAGE

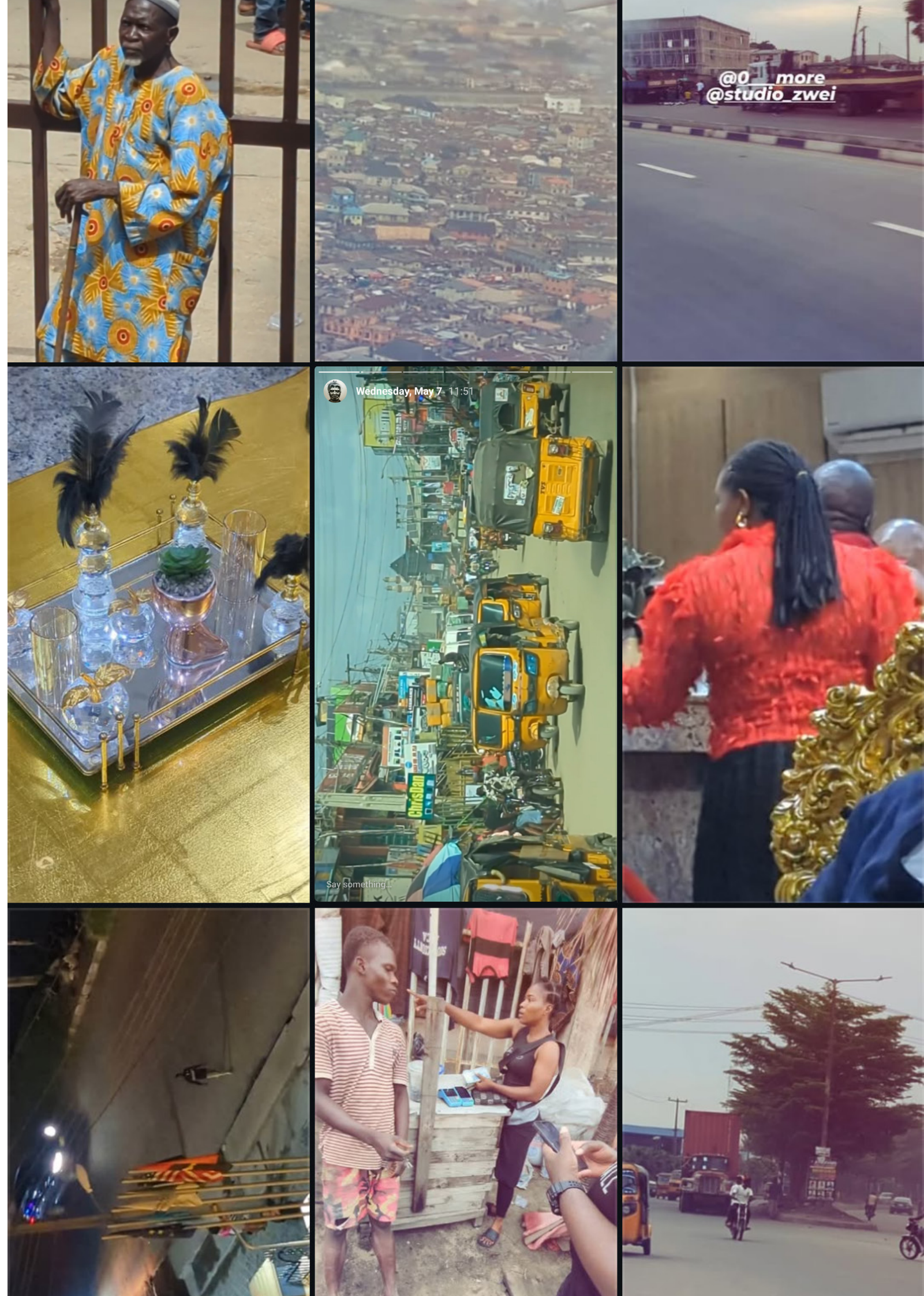
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Lagos in four words: improvisation, fluidity, youth, and code—a city built without a script, shaped by water, driven by the restless energy of youth, and held together by invisible codes: codes of behavior, codes of negotiation, codes of the digital. *Beyond the natural body.*<sup>1</sup> *Beyond the Turing Machine.*<sup>2</sup> *Beyond the standard model?*<sup>3</sup> *Beyond Good and Evil.*<sup>4</sup>

How do you tell a story that refuses to be summed up? How do you tell a story beyond the checklist of crisis? Beyond overpopulation, sprawl, broken pipes, and bureaucratic ghosts? This is a personal impression.

Lagos resists summary. It exceeds diagnosis. It is not just a city of problems—it's a city where life insists on being lived, every hour, against the odds. Here, institutions collapse into the background, and the foreground is filled with improvisation, invention, and movement. To speak of Lagos is not to list what's missing, but to trace how things move: people, money, water, electricity, trust. The story begins not with what's broken, but with how the city works anyway.

- 1 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*
- 2 Kittler, *The Truth of the Technological World*
- 3 Penrose, *The Road to Reality*
- 4 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*





# IMPROVISATION

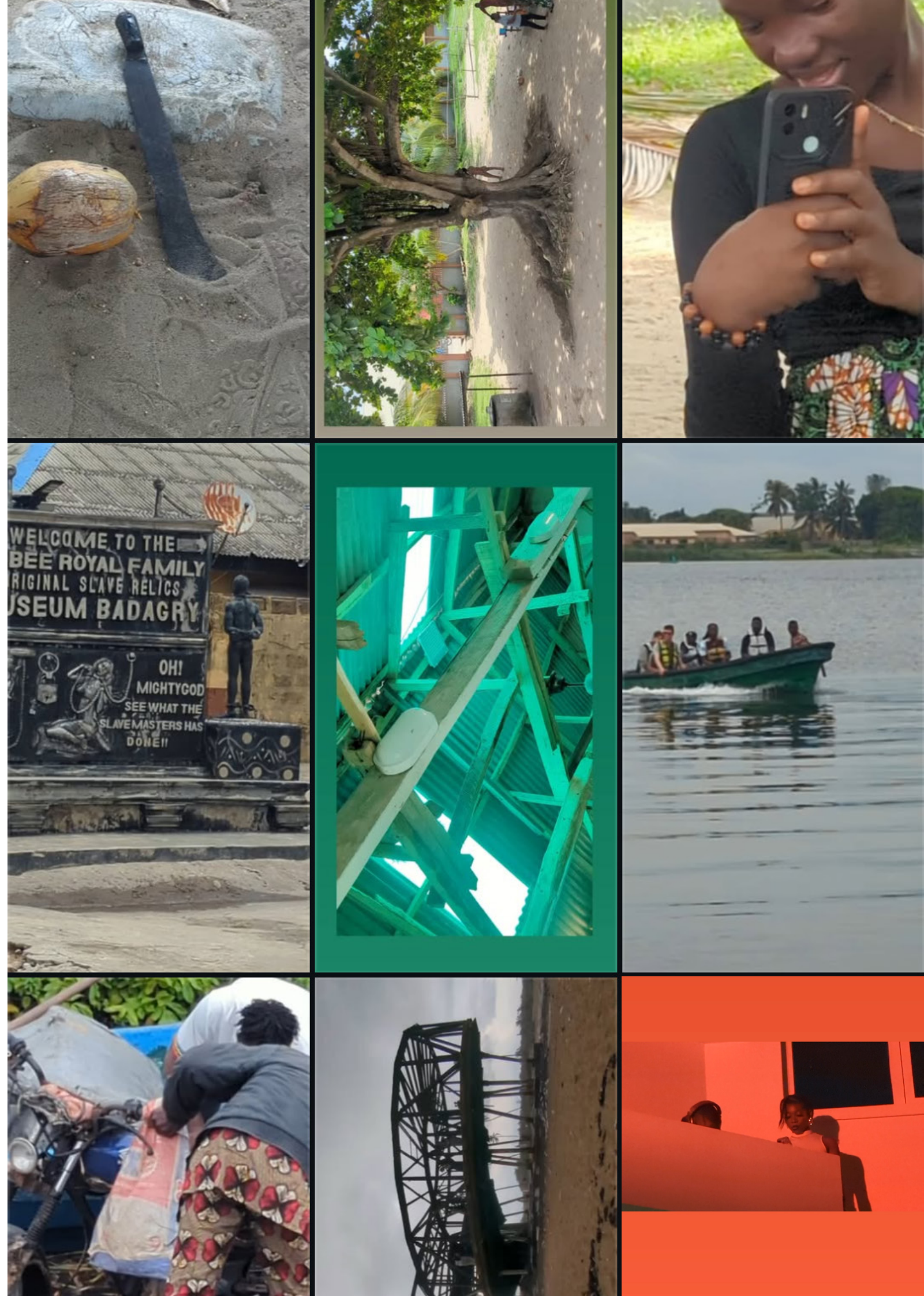
Lagos is not about planning<sup>5</sup>—not in any sense that fits a Western vocabulary.<sup>6</sup> There are blueprints here, but they're unwritten. They live in the mouths of bus drivers, the hands of roadside electricians, the rhythm of sellers who chant prices into the air like open-source code.

Improvisation articulates the city:<sup>7</sup> only the main infrastructure is fixed, if even that. Everything else—money, security, electricity, traffic, water, food, communication—is a series of live updates. The official grid exists in theory. The real city lives elsewhere.

Improvisation doesn't mean anarchy. Lagos is not a city where order emerges from top-down regulation, nor from relentless bottom-up negotiation, but from both directions. The streets function not because of traffic laws, but because people look each other in the eye. *Memory has a lot to do with improvisation.*<sup>8</sup> Every action is a social contract, rewritten hourly. The rules are flexible, but not absent. You break them at your own risk.<sup>9</sup>

Improvisation here is not a lack. It is an unwritten constitution. It's architecture without architects. Logistics without headquarters. Urbanism as participation. Governance as hustle. You don't plan Lagos. You improvise with it.

5 Koolhaas, Mutations, <https://www.stellenboschheritage.co.za/wp-content/uploads/koolhaas-mutations-2.pdf>  
6 Architect Rem Koolhaas interviewed about Lagos, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/97503875>  
7 LAGOS / KOOLHAAS, 2002 movie, <https://youtu.be/uFwK7rwRd5Y?si=chb1NHbp7pyi05Aj>  
8 Rosemont, Black Brown Beige, Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora  
9 A History of Nigeria by Jide Olanrewaju Naij, <https://youtu.be/KgrVHTvx08?si=uk2YEhUB-3uRX50B>





# FLUIDITY

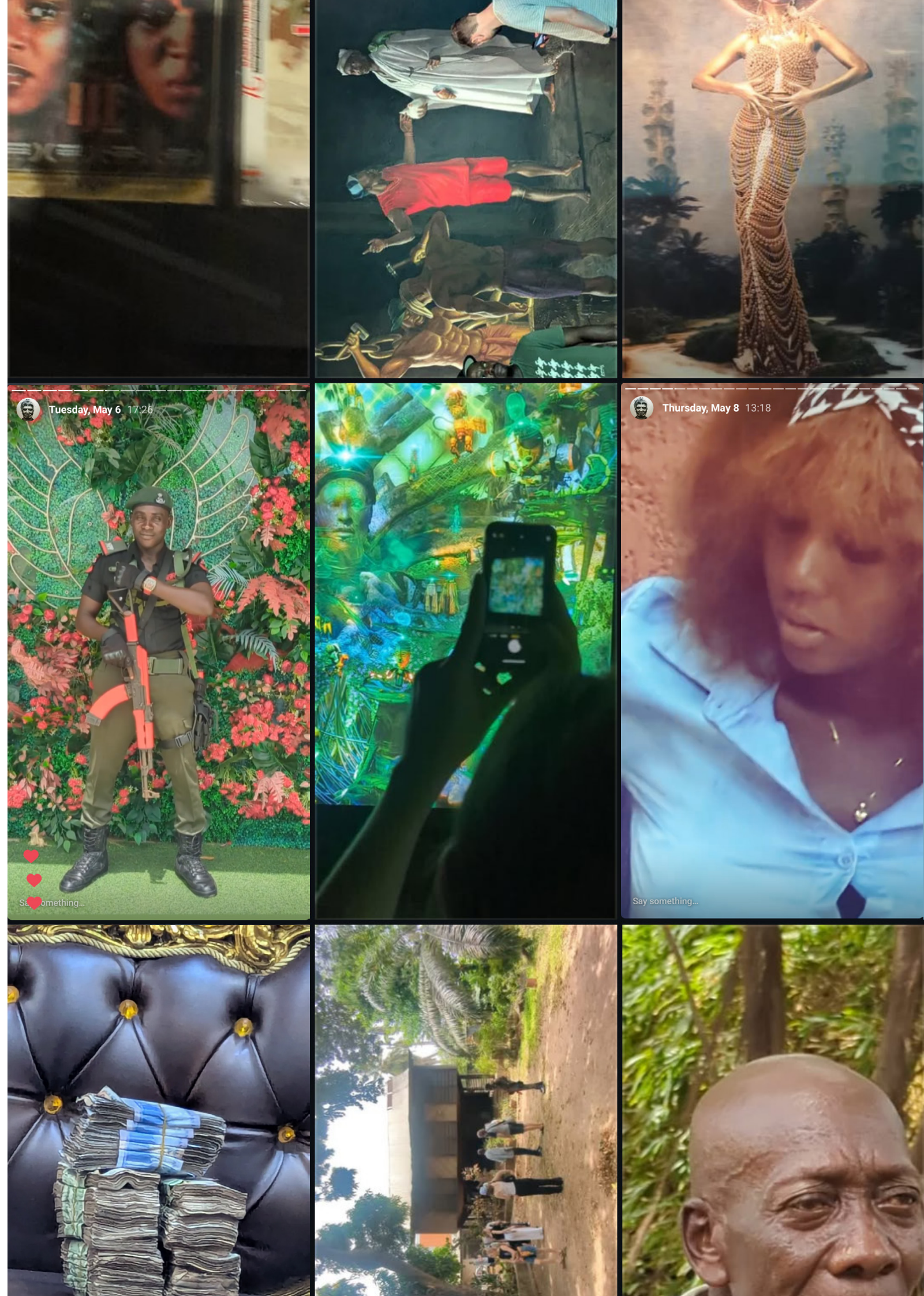
Lagos is fluid, like its name—laguna, the bay—where water shapes the city as much as concrete. From the open Atlantic to the stilted homes of Makoko, everything flows. Nothing stays put for long. Toyotas<sup>10</sup> dominate the roads, Bajaj Boxer<sup>11</sup> bikes slice between lanes, Keke buzz like insects. Huawei and ZTE keep everyone online, while local ingenuity stitches it all together. In other terms: Japanese cars, Indian motorcycles, Chinese tech, Lagos glue. Local oil fuels the engines.<sup>12</sup> Chinese investment builds the paths.<sup>13</sup> Together, they make objects flow—*The performance becomes ‘fluid energy’*.<sup>14</sup> Roads, rails, markets—rewired with yuan and ambition. Traffic is fluid and aggressive—part river, part riot.

On the front seat of our bus, a commando rides, pink machine-gun makes things smoother—his presence is like oil in the engine of chaos. He is not the police. He is a signal. Power always has its own security—state is weak, and safety, like electricity or clean water, is just another privatized necessity. Meanwhile, outside the window, everyone moves in all directions, like particles freshly split in a collider— it’s chaos mapped only in retrospect.

Lagos is a city driven by commerce, where fluidity extends beyond water into the flow of money. Currency shares its root with current—the same movement, the same force. Here, the current never stops. Cash is king, and money always comes in bulks—wrapped, counted, carried, often in plain sight. Lagos is one of the largest economies on the continent, but even the rich don’t have it easy. To be rich, the environment must be rich too—and in Lagos, the environment demands negotiation. The rich forget this, and the city reminds them.

The markets are infinite, folding into each other like waves. The Alaba Market<sup>15</sup> buzzes with literal and metaphorical power. Each segment is its own republic: with judges, gatekeepers, entry fees. It may look informal. It’s not. It’s coded, ordered, and alive.

In Lagos, nothing stays still. Not water. Not wealth. Not people. Not you.



- 10 Tyota domination in Nigeria, <https://blog.naijaspider.com/2024/05/25/why-toyota-cars-are-popular/>
- 11 Indian motorbikes in Nigeria, <https://global.globalbajaj.com/en/Brands/Boxer>
- 12 Oil industry in Nigeria, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petroleum\\_industry\\_in\\_Nigeria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petroleum_industry_in_Nigeria)
- 13 On China partnership, <https://merics.org/en/nigeria-sees-china-steady-partner-and-its-largest-lender>
- 14 Ito, Tarzans In the Media Forest
- 15 Alaba\_International\_Market, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alaba\\_International\\_Market](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alaba_International_Market)



# YOUTH

Lagos is 18 years old.<sup>16</sup> Not by law, but by spirit, sound, and speed. The average age is 18, and the city moves like it: fast, bold, beautiful, reckless, alive.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most populous cities on the planet, Lagos has grown from 3 million people in 1975 to nearly 28 million in 2025.<sup>18</sup> That's 25 million new humans in just over 50 years—half a million per year. This isn't growth. This is detonation. Expansion without permission. Multiplication as resistance. In any European city this scale of demographic acceleration would trigger a civil war. In Lagos, it triggers another market.

Makoko<sup>19</sup> goes beyond. A floating settlement of love and tide, children and laughter, sun and smoke. A floating Venice from hell, reimagined by necessity, and ruled by joy. The background makes you cry. But the foreground will force you to smile. Optimism here is not naivety—it is survival. *La vita è bella*<sup>20</sup> under tin roofs and oil drums.

Lagos is young in body, young in noise. It pulses. It flashes. It reinvents. Beauty is everywhere, because there's no time to standardize it. In Lagos, youth is not a phase. It's a force. It builds, sells, hustles, fixes, codes, reinvents. Lagos doesn't wait to grow up. It writes its own adulthood every morning. *The mobile beauty of youth.*<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Young population, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/nigeria-population/>

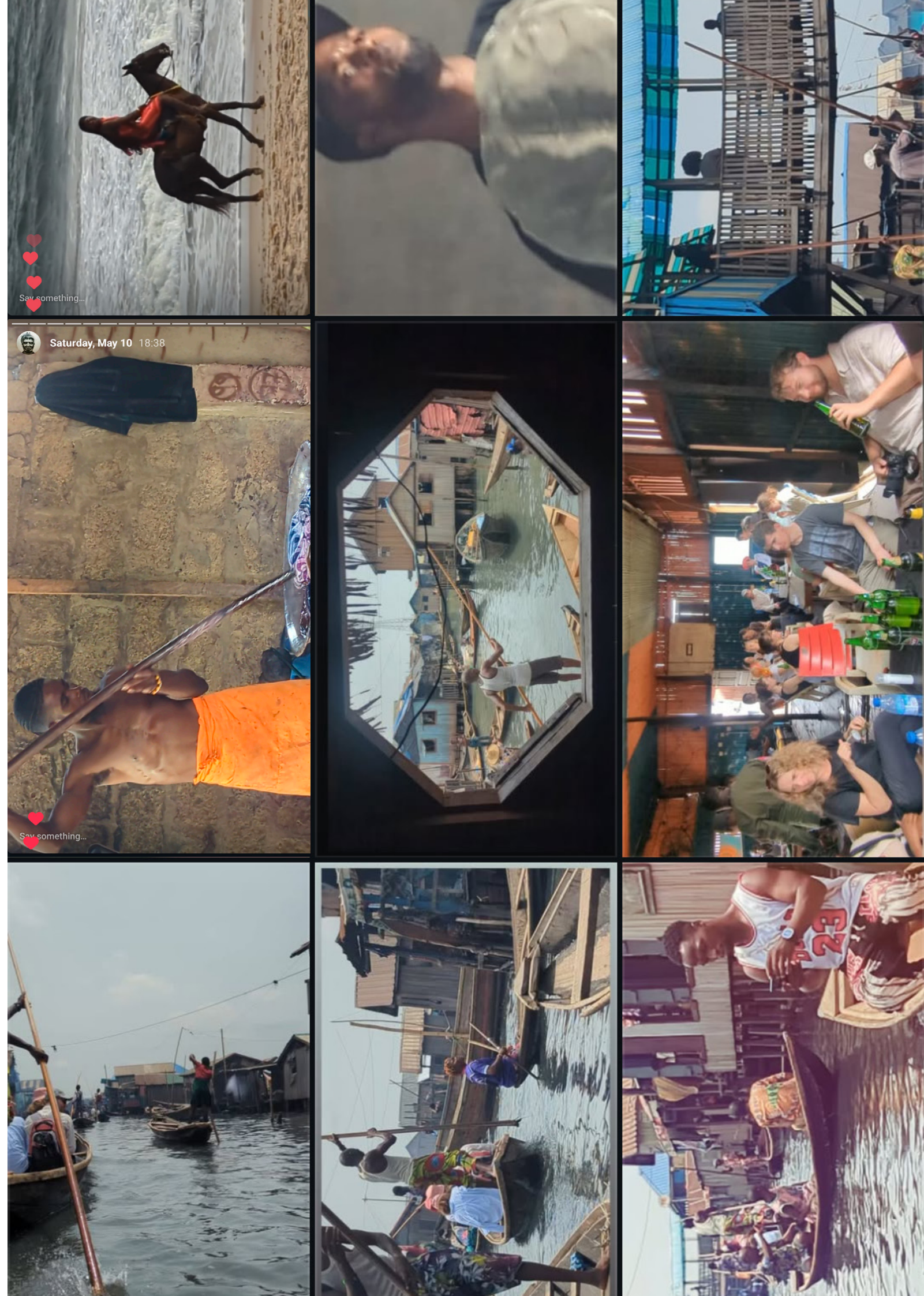
<sup>17</sup> Rema - Calm Down <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQlSdm1ZyAw>

<sup>18</sup> Lagos population of 28 milion, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lagos>

<sup>19</sup> Makoko, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Makoko>

<sup>20</sup> La vita è bella, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life\\_Is\\_Beautiful](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Life_Is_Beautiful)

<sup>21</sup> Proust, In Search of Lost Time





# CODE

Lagos runs on code<sup>22</sup>—but not the kind found in rulebooks or zoning ordinances. Here, code means behavior, protocol, gesture, flow. It's the code of the street, of who gets through, of how to look, how to speak, how to ask. Everything is negotiated. Everything is encoded. *All matter is coded; all code is material.*<sup>23</sup> You either know the code, or you learn it quickly, or you die.

The grid might fail, but the cloud survives. There is always internet. Even when the lights go out. This is the digital code. In this city of 18-year-olds, the internet is both mirror and megaphone. It delivers knowledge. It builds desire. It creates escape routes and new identities.

In Lagos, the screen is the school, the market, the passport. The street knows this. So do the towers. On the 15th floor next to Freedom Park, you're in Berlin: queer sophistication drifts above the noise—glass, air, encrypted elegance. It's all proper: the rail, the stairs, the cocktails. And yet, the possibility remains—to accidentally fall and die. A non-safe safe space. The city is being reprogrammed.

The logic isn't binary—it's quantum. Nothing here runs in straight lines. The answers are never 0 or 1, yes or no. Is it formal or informal? Yes. Are the roads one-way? Yes—both ways. Lagos is both and neither. A city of probabilities, of flickering truths. The code isn't written. It's improvised, felt, updated in real time.

Lagos doesn't just consume the internet. It becomes it. Fragmented, fast, improvisational, permanently online—not a city that was built, but one that's constantly being streamed.

Lagos isn't a smart city—it's a quantum teenager stuck in a Mad Max movie set, where the future is present and the past is in beta version.

22 A Quantum City, [https://alice-ch3n81.net/files/data/Hovestadt\\_Buehlmann\\_Quantum\\_City.pdf](https://alice-ch3n81.net/files/data/Hovestadt_Buehlmann_Quantum_City.pdf)  
23 Watkin, Michel Serres

