

Still media as means of cultural documentation: The Ekpoma's Ihuen visual paradigm

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Abstract: This article explores the cultural documentation of Ekpoma's Ihuen through the lens of still media, specifically photographs. Grounded in media anthropology and the concept of indexicality, the study adopts historical analysis, photographic-content analysis, observational methods, and interviews. Its focus is on understanding the relationship between images, cultural objects, events, and community histories as embodied in Ihuen, an annual religio-cultural ceremony/festival among the Esan-speaking people of Ekpoma in Edo-central senatorial district of Edo State, Nigeria. Through the artistic agency of still media, the study categorizes discernible trends in Ihuen over time and space. These include the conferment of chieftaincy titles, the presence of the king-in-state, ancestral worship, paying homage to the Onojie, sacred objects, and the presence of innovations and syncretic tendencies. The study argues that the materiality and annual observance of Ihuen have become strong cultural indices for the individuals and community engaging with the ceremony. Beyond their potential as acclaimed pieces of art, the photographs documenting Ihuen possess the power to effect change and contribute to a more sustainable cultural future for the Ekpoma people. The festival serves as a hub for cultural solidarity, fostering consciousness, and a renewed sense of community and cultural identity. In conclusion, this study highlights the significance of still media, particularly photographs, in documenting and understanding the cultural dynamics of Ihuen. The engagement with Ihuen serves as a source of cultural solidarity, fostering a sense of community and cultural revitalization.

Keywords: Cultural communication. Cultural documentation, Cultural future, Ekpoma's Ihuen, Media anthropology, Onojie, Still media, Visual paradigm

1. Introduction

The diversity of traditional festivals associated with the different ethnic groups in Nigeria is indicative of the country's rich cultural diversity. A festival may be defined as an event periodically celebrated by a community that revolves around some characteristic aspects of communal life, be it religion, occupation or philosophy. Isekure (2007) asserts that all festivals anywhere in the world represent the experiences of human beings. It may be the experience of an individual, a group of people, or a nation. There is nothing inherently evil or superstitious about it. It has been said that a people without a culture is a people without a future. Accordingly, there are many types of festivals as there are celebratory motives across the various communities in Nigeria. As the collective expression of a people's way of life, festivals encompass a multitude of creative enterprises and art forms (Ben-Iheanacho, 2019). The majority of festivals in Nigeria are calendar events that mark the advent of new seasons, celebrate rites of passage and facilitate connections to ancestry or ancestral worship and fellowship. Consequently, festivals remain authentic communal expressions, as diverse as the numerous communities that are their principal owners.

Ellis (2017: 211) posits that "photographs and related ephemera have artistic and social significance. They imaginatively and powerfully speak to relationships between peoples and places." In this study, we present and analyse a variety of pictures from Ihuen that speak to the cultural trappings and leanings of the average

traditional Ekpoma person in terms of social space, cultural essence, and cultural communication and promotion. This endeavour is analogous to the one undertaken by the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre, under the direction of Sheetal S. Agarwal, in the project "#Mutation." This is a series of artworks that explore the profound transformation in the utilisation and function of photographs in people's lives. Agarwal observed that in the pre-digital age, photographs constituted a primary means of collecting, preserving, and recalling memories that were deemed valuable and worthy of documentation by both individuals and societies (through mainstream media). The advent of digital photography over the past decades has led to a significant shift in the way photographs are used. Rather than being a means of preserving memories, photographs have become the principal instrument for instantaneous "status updates," news dissemination, and the expression of individual opinions about events. This is evidenced by the rise of social media platforms (SMPs) such as Facebook and Twitter (now X), which have become popular avenues for sharing and discussing news and opinions (Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre, 3 March 2016). This article, therefore, examines Ekpoma's Ihuen from the perspective of still media (i.e., photographs) as a means of cultural documentation.

2. Literature review

Prominent among Nigeria's varied traditional festivals are the New Yam festival (Iri Ji Ohuru) among the Igbos; the Durbar festival of the Muslim North; the Awan-Okere festival among the Itsekiris; the Agbasa Iju festival among the Urhobos; the Eyo Masquerade festival (Adámú Òrìṣà) of Lagos State; the Osun Osogbo festival of Osun worshippers of Yorubaland; the Igue festival of the Benins of Edo State; and the Argungu fishing festival (Fashin Ruwa) in north-western Nigeria. Many of them have received and continue to receive scholarly attention (Ukachukwu, 2007; Shyllon, 2007; Isekhure, 2007; Omoera, 2008; Omoera & Atuegbe, 2010; Akenzua-Ebeigbe, 2015; Uwawah & Wekpe, 2015; Shuaib & Lẹwú, 2020). However, there is limited scholarly information on Ihuen that is celebrated by the Ekpoma people in Esanland in Edo State despite its religio-cultural and artistic worth. This article, therefore, examines Ekpoma's Ihuen from the perspective of still media (example, photographs) as a means of cultural documentation. It is significant that the cultural policy for Nigeria recognizes festivals as authentic factors of communal interaction and cohesion autonomous to their primary owner localities. Aig-Imoukhuede (1991) informs that:

Article 7.8 sub article (a) and (b) of the Cultural Policy of Nigeria state that; the state shall:
a) promote traditional festivals in order to preserve them in situ so that they may continue to be factors of communal interaction and cohesion in their localities and develop interaction of larger national and international dimensions; b) promote arts festivals at the federal, state and local government levels for the purpose of discovering talents, developing skills and promote creativity in the arts.

Uwawah and Wekpe (2015) affirm that Nigerian festivals are potent platforms for community and indigenous reinforcement of identity within a national framework. This is because they are socio-political symbols and icons of the people even as they serve as instruments for documentation. It is in this context that this study examines the relationship between images, cultural objects and events, and community histories as embodied in Ihuen, a religio-cultural event among the Esan-speaking people of Ekpoma.

2.1. Ekpomaland: People, culture and worldview

Ekpoma is one of those communities in Edo State, Nigeria that has a very rich tradition of festivals through which the people either thank or appease their various gods and ancestors (James, 2014). Ekpoma is a large town that serves as the headquarters of Esan West Local Government Area of Edo State. It is one of the oldest settlements in Esanland or Edo central senatorial district. The people of Ekpoma are believed to have migrated from the old Benin Empire. It has been historically accepted that the present-day Ekpoma was resuscitated about

1485AD during the reign of Uda, the Great (Omo-Ojugo, 2014). Since then, Ekpoma has grown and expanded into quarters or villages. It is made up of many quarters, including Equare, Emaudo, Emuhi, Irukepken, Illeh, Idumebo, Ihunmudumu, Uke, Uhiele, Ujemen, Ujoelen, and Ukpenu (Omoera, Edemode, & Aihevba, 2017). Each of these villages has an 'Odionwele' and 'Ekhaemon' at the helm of affairs.

Socio-politically, Ekpomaland operates a monarchical form of government, and the paramount ruler is addressed as the 'Onojie.' The present traditional ruler of the Ekpoma kingdom is His Royal Highness (HRH) Anthony Ehizojie Abumere II. He is the 17th traditional ruler of the kingdom (Hanson Anegbe in an interview with the researcher in 2020). The community has an enviably rich cultural heritage. The biggest traditional festival celebrated by the people of Ekpoma is *Ihuen* (Uda festival). It is celebrated to commemorate the founder of modern Ekpoma, Uda the Great (Osetale Akioya in an interview with the researcher in 2020). *Ihuen*, a three-day annual festival, usually marks the beginning of the traditional new year in Ekpomaland. It is usually celebrated around February/March of every year. *Ihuen* is not only edutaining but also helps to strengthen the bonds of love, peace, unity and social harmony among the people. It provides an opportunity for family or clan members to meet, socialize, interact, and express cultural oneness. During the feast, all Ekpoma sons and daughters, both far and near, usually return home to participate in the celebration. Some aspects of their heritage are often displayed in their numerous traditional festivals and dances which include *Ikhinaboje*, *Ejeleghe*, *Igbabonelimhin Asonogu* and *Ihuen*.

Traditionally speaking, the Onojie performs tripartite roles as spiritual, judicial and social head of Ekpoma. However, it should be noted that he does not have rights over criminal and grave civil cases. But where parties involved in any non-criminal litigation agree on arbitration, the king's palace is always open to amicable resolution of such disputes (Okojie, 1994; Aluede & Okakah, 2022; Aluede, Okakah & Ehiemua, 2023). The native Ekpoma people believe in ancestral worship, reincarnation and propitiation of the gods of the land but modernity has brought Christianity and Islam, which has occasioned the conversion of some of the indigenous people to such foreign religions. Ekpoma is one of the fastest developing communities in Esanland, with infrastructure such as roads, schools, hospitals, banks, modern markets and government agencies, such as the Nigerian Police, Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Federal Road Safety Corps, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, among others.

2.2. Theoretical scaffolding

Media anthropology or anthropology of the media is a relatively interdisciplinary area; with a wide range of other influences. As a concept, it emphasises ethnographic analysis as a means of understanding producers, audiences, and other socio-cultural aspects of the media. The models used in the anthropology of media range from practice approaches as well as discussions of the appropriation and adaptation of new technologies (Rothenbuhler & Coman, 2005). Theoretical approaches have been adopted from visual anthropology and from film theory as well as from photography, studies of ritual and performance studies (example, dance and theatre), studies of consumption, audience reception in media studies, new media, and network theories, and many more. (Spitulnik, 1993; Dickey, 1997). This transformational development has made scholars increasingly rethink media anthropology, including visual analysis (Otobo & Tukur, 2021; Guanah, 2022).

Otobo and Tukur (2021: 296) argue that pictorial culture has gone from being a useful manifestation in history (performative triangulation), art history, film and media studies, sociology, anthropology and other aspects of picturesque to a fashionable, if provocative, new means of doing interdisciplinary work, following in footsteps of the arena as cultural studies. The goalmouth most often advanced for this heightened visibility is that human experience is now more pictorial and envisioned than ever before. Prevalent columnists constantly remark on digital imagery in cinemas, the advent of post-photography and developments in medicine (neuro aesthetics) imaging, not to mention the endless tide of comments purveyed or ascribed to the internet. This

globalization of post-photography, taken cooperatively, stresses new means of interpretation. At the same time, this makeover of pictorial presence is also a prerequisite in rephrasing historical justification of innovativeness and modernity in order to account for 'the pictorial turn.'

Deploying visual anthropological technique, a considerable number of still media were gathered or taken during the Ihuen festival over a period of time (2014-2019) as observed in Ekpomaland. These photographs were later sorted out into discernible tropes of meaning as they relate to the communal identity of the traditional owners of the festival. Panofsky (1972) argues that an art form as a cultural phenomenon can be synthesized, photographically presented, described and interpreted to produce different strata of meaning. In other words, photographs can be juxtaposed to produce meaning within a cultural context.

Asamoah, Adom and Kombui (2024: 16) affirm that Panofsky's tripartite stages in iconographic analysis introduced in art historical writing, art historians in the United States of America began to pay attention to the content of a work of art in the mid-20th century. The first stage of this analytical approach is focused on the formal or visual qualities of a piece of work. The second stage delves deeper into the historical, religious, political, and socio-cultural narratives in connection with the work under study. The third or the iconological level identifies symbolisms, and also unearths the poetic, and philosophical significance. This, in a sense, explains why traditional art forms in Africa (Ekpomaland inclusive) are carriers of meanings beyond the conventional level. In Africa, symbols, images, stories, allegories, proverbs, etc., constitute different levels of appropriation of traditional art forms as well as negotiation of meanings. In the specific case of this study, we are interested in the visual anthropology of a cultural phenomenon, that is, Ekpoma's Ihuen, as captured in still media or photographs taken at the site of the event and their import to the Ekpoma people and beyond.

3. Methodological insights

The study uses historical, photographic-content analysis, observational and interview methods to examine the different layers of meanings in the symbols and icons used in Ihuen, with a view to espousing the relevance of the festival to the Ekpoma locality, and by extension, to the Nigerian society. We conceptualise photography to mean still media in this study. It has sometimes been called still life media and even more recently digital still photography. But whatever the case may be, the researcher as an amateur photographer of Edo extraction who seeks to bring to scholarly notice the colourful Ihuen festival as celebrated by the Ekpoma people of Edo, Nigeria. This thinking is underscored by Oha's (2019) assertion that the photographer is today perceived as a visual historian and a creative artist who tells stories visually as a cultural avatar. Hopefully, the visual impressions from this article would make a contribution to Nigerian indigenous studies in general, and specifically give us an understanding of the ethos and vision of both the celebrator, who is the 'Onojie' and the people who are his co-celebrators in the communal revue.

4. Still Media as Pictorial-Artistic Agencies

Still media are fixed pictures as against motion pictures that are continuously in motion and constitute what is commonly known as films, which are viewed or watched via cinemas, television, video compact disc (VCD), smartphones, and YouTube, among other outlets. Pictures are artistic/creative agencies used to keep memories. Paraphrasing the words of Seymour Parrish (Robin Williams) in *One Hour Photo* (dir. Mark Romanek, 2002), pictures are used to concretise reality and sustain its vitality. They help human beings to remember good days and great moments of life. Photography as a method of picture-making developed in the early 19th century, based on principles of light, optics, and chemistry. The word photography comes from Greek words and means "drawing with light" (Rubinstein, 2015). Photographs serve as scientific evidence, conveyers of news, historical documents, works of art, and records of family or community life. Edwards and Hart (2004) claim that millions of people around the world own cameras and enjoy taking pictures. Every year more than 10 billion exposures

are made with still cameras. They further assert that “a photograph is a three-dimensional thing, not only a two-dimensional image [...] Photographs are both images and physical objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience” (Edwards & Hart, 2004: 1). Consequently, the analysis in this article follows both the aesthetic and social trajectories of Ekpoma’s *Ihuen* portraiture to highlight the people’s story and follow the dynamics of a community life using a visual paradigm.

Guanah (2022) asserts that a photograph is so powerful that it qualifies as both a medium and a message in communication. As a ‘medium’ it is a means through which information can be passed, and as a ‘message’ it can communicate on its own easily. Photographs do not only pass information; they also serve as historical materials. Photographs enable us to go back memory lane to recount where we were as per historic visual records which serve as a historical document of a person, city, or nation. The photography format of the media is dynamically being used in different ways in contemporary society, including Ekpomaland. The new trends involve the use of social media or networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, X, Flickr, SmugMug, Flickr Pro, etc., which are some of the largest photographer-focused communities for archiving, retrieving and curatorial services. These technologically-enabled platforms assume the position of co-creators with human beings and give meaning to life and the environment. In fact, social media is arguably the best way to do great photography, preserve memories without any worries and recall memories in the form of photographs via a technological agency. Netizens (people who are internet compliant) connect with each other and even amateur, professional and creative photographers.

This is because some of the world’s most iconic; most priceless photographs are without stinting available to the entire world on social media. For instance, Alessandro (2018) draws attention to Seydou Keïta’s photographic-artistic agency and how its construction of meaning in different contexts has made photographs become internationally acclaimed pieces of art. This community is home to more than 100 million accounts and tens of billions of photographs that provide avenues for sharing and bonding among different nationalities that now arguably belong to one virtual community – net. This explains why human beings are now referred to as netizens, which literally means citizens of the net or internet. It curates billions of photographs every single day. It is huge and it speaks to the relevance of still media even in the 21st-century world.

Ellis (2017: 211) posits that "photographs and related ephemera have artistic and social significance. They imaginatively and powerfully speak to relationships between peoples and places." In this study, we present and analyse a variety of pictures from *Ihuen* that speak to the cultural trappings and leanings of the average traditional Ekpoma person in terms of social space, cultural essence, and cultural communication and promotion. This endeavor is analogous to the one undertaken by the Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre, under the direction of Sheetal S. Agarwal, in the project "#Mutation." This is a series of artworks that explore the profound transformation in the utilization and function of photographs in people's lives. Agarwal observed that in the pre-digital age, photographs constituted a primary means of collecting, preserving, and recalling memories that were deemed valuable and worthy of documentation by both individuals and societies (through mainstream media). With photography transitioning entirely to digital over the past decade and the ascendance of social media, photographs have become the principal instrument for instantaneous "status updates," news dissemination, and the expression of individual opinions about events (Hong Kong Visual Arts Centre, 3 March 2016).

5. Observable Visual Tropes in *Ihuen*

The researcher observed six main tropes that were consistently visually at play within the period of the study, which spanned from 2014 to 2019. These included: a. conferment of chieftaincy titles; b. Onojie (king)-in-state; c. ancestral worship/fellowship; d. paying homage to the Onojie; e. sacred objects/images; and f. innovation and syncretic tendencies. From the numerous images captured during the *Ihuen* events held on the palace grounds

at Ekpoma between 2014 and 2019, a selection of 12 images was made for thematic analysis. These images are designated as figures 1-12 and synthesized into six discernible visual thematic categories. These six categories form the basis of further analysis and discussion in this study. As previously stated, the festival occurs in February or March of each year. The average Ekpoma indigene adheres to traditional beliefs and practices, including those related to ancestral worship, reincarnation, and the propitiation of the gods for bountiful harvests and peace and tranquillity in the land. In this communal celebration, the king serves as the primary celebrator, while all sons and daughters of Ekpoma and their friends, families, and well-wishers participate as co-celebrators. The populace anticipates *Ihuen*, which serves as a reminder of their ancestral customs and traditions.

5.1. A. Conferment of Chieftaincy Titles

Figure1: The Onojie (king) conferring a title on a deserving individual.

It is a traditional mark of honour for a son or daughter of Ekpoma to be conferred with chieftaincy title. The king is seated and clad in white robes with the accompaniment of beaded cap (symbol of authority and royalty) while the chieftaincy title recipient is also clothed in white and the king is putting on his neck choice coral beads, which symbolise honour.



Photographer: Osakue S. Omoera, Venue: Royal Palace, Eguare-Ekpoma, Date, 14 March 2014.

Figure 2: Celebrating chief honoured with a title during *Ihuen*.

Immediately the king pronounces the chieftaincy title the recipient is surrounded the senior chiefs and priests who are glad in red robes. Usually, the chieftaincy title recipient is decorated with white chalk and leaves, which signify peace, honour and solidarity. In some cases, he may be accompanied by the wife who is equally given a title as seen in figure 2.



Photographer: Osakue S. Omoera, Venue: Royal Palace, Eguare-Ekpoma, Date, 14 March 2014.

Figure 3: Celebratory dance by chiefs honoured with titles during *Ihuen*.

Here, we see a band of chiefs dressed in white robes, with coral beads and leaves around their necks and holding royal maces, which are insignia of their chieftaincy titles, traditional offices and merriment. They are accompanied by families and friends as they rejoice across Ekpoma on their way home from the royal palace.



Photographer: Osakue S. Omoera, Venue: Royal Palace, Eguare-Ekpoma, Date, 14 March 2014.

Figures 1-3 constitute the thematic category A. conferment of chieftaincy titles. In them, we see photographic tropes of conferment of chieftaincy titles on deserving indigenes of Ekpoma or any well-meaning individual who have contributed to the growth and development of Ekpomaland. The conferment of titles by the Onojie and acceptance by the deserving individuals demonstrates the tenacity of history and the resilience of the people to continue to promote their culture and tradition in the face of the raging digital modernity. In a concrete way, figures 1-3 are indexical of the continued relevance of traditional system of government in modern day Nigeria as it provides the Ekpoma people the opportunity to appoint responsible and responsive elders for the different quarters who are expected to help the king in maintaining peace and order, especially concerning governance, community responsibility and leadership.

5.2. B. Onojie (King-in-State)

Figure 4: Onojie (King-in-State) during the *Ihuen* Ceremony.

The king is the traditional head of the Ekpoma people. The seat is hereditary and every eldest male child is expected to succeed his father in due course of time. During the *Ihuen*, the king is robed in his royal regalia ready to confer deserving subjects with titles. Here, we see photographs of past kings and some members of the royal family in the background of figure 4. We also see the royal diadem (made of pure bronze) hanging on the wall and the chief priest garbed in red and white. There are also busts of ancestors, including that of Uda cast in bronze in the background. They all culturally index the historical and ancestral might of Ekpomaland.



Photographer: Osakue S. Omoera, Venue: Royal Palace, Eguare-Ekpoma, Date, 14 March 2014.

Figure 5: Onojie (King-in-State) (ii) during *Ihuen*.

The king-in-state (first from the right) with some palace chiefs and Esan West local government are functionaries during an outdoor entertainment event during one of the three days of *Ihuen*. On this occasion he is fully apparelled in red with adorning beads and cap (another set of royal robes). Figure 5 demonstrates that the king is in touch with his subjects and he appreciates whatever good endeavours they are involved in. It also shows that wherever the king sits automatically becomes the state, whether within the palace or outside the palace grounds.



Photographer: Osakue S. Omoera, Venue: Royal Palace, Eguare-Ekpoma, Date, 15 March 2014.

In figures 4 and 5, we are able to apprehend the thematic trope B Onojie king-in-state. In both photographs, we see the king clad in different sets of royal robes during *Ihuen*. He is on the dais as sons and daughters as well as friends and well-wishers of Ekpomaland from far and near come to pay homage to him. The dressing, the paraphernalia and people around the king are cultural indexers of his acceptance by the people and the warmth and hospitality of Ekpomaland.

5.3. C. Ancestral Worship/Fellowship

Figure 6: Traditional priests conducting traditional rites during *Ihuen*.

The *Ihuen* provides the king and the people of Ekpoma the opportunity to honour their ancestors while honouring prominent sons and daughters with respective titles. In figure 6, we see the traditional priests performing cleansing rites on an about-to-be made chief. Usually coconuts, kola nuts, palm wine are some of the items used to pray to the ancestors to grant the Ekpoma people peace and good harvest. In the background, we can see a large photograph of a past king (who is now an ancestor but a visible actant in the *Ihuen*).



Photographer: Osakue S. Omoera, Venue: Royal Palace, Eguare-Ekpoma, Date, 15 March 2014.

Figure 7: Palace functionaries conducting traditional rites during *Ihuen*.

Here, palace functionaries are carrying out their traditional duties while the priest and senior chiefs guide them concerning an about to be titled couple (husband and wife) who are seated. We can see kola nuts, coco nuts, palm wine, and many more, that would be used in the fellowship.



Photographer: Osakue S. Omoera, Venue: Royal Palace, Eguare-Ekpoma, Date, 15 March 2014.

Figures 6 and 7 graphically describe aspects of the ancestral worship of Uda, the great and fellowship with worthy ancestors of the Ekpomaland by the chief priest and designated functionaries on behalf of the entire community during *Ihuen* (thematic category C). A close look at the colours of robes of the traditional priests, chiefs, palace functionaries, about-to-be-titled citizens and even the photographs of the ancestors on the palace walls shows that they are all either red or white of different shades. This is culturally indicative of peace, authority and royalty in Ekpomaland.

5.4. D. Paying Homage to the Onojie

Figure 8: An individual paying homage to the Onojie during *Ihuen*.

The *Ihuen* gives people from all walks of life who live and work in Ekpomaland the opportunity to pay homage to the Onojie. Figure 8 is showing individual paying homage to the king while they exchanged pleasantries. This outdoor ceremony usually happens on the third day of *Ihuen*.



Photographer: Osakue S. Omoera, Venue: Royal Palace, Eguare-Ekpoma, Date, 16 March 2014.

Figure 9: Leaders of the Hausa, Yoruba communities, among others, who live and do business in Ekpoma pay homage to the Onojie during *Ihuen*. The king uses the opportunity to meet with the non-indigenes and make advisory comments as per the relationship between his subjects and the foreigners who ply their trade in Ekpomaland.



Photographer: Osakue S. Omoera, Venue: Royal Palace, Eguare-Ekpoma, Date, 16 March 2014.

In figures 8 and 9, the thematic trope D, which spotlights how individuals and different ethnicities that ply their trades or businesses in Ekpomaland pay homage to the Onojie during *Ihuen*. This is an outdoor ceremony that takes place on the third day of *Ihuen*. Between the people paying homage and the king we can see the royal

sceptre placed on a table. It is indicative of the authority of the traditional ruler. Also, from the dressing of the visitors we easily know that they are members of Hausa and Yoruba communities in Ekpoma locality.

5.5. E. Sacred Objects/Images used in *Ihuen*

Figure 10: A traditional priest sitting beside some scared objects/images during *Ihuen*.



Photographer: Osakue S. Omoera, Venue: Royal Palace, Eguare-Ekpoma, Date, 16 March 2014.

Figure 10 highlights the visual trope E that identifies some sacred objects/images used in *Ihuen*. Here, we can see a bronze head of Uda, the great. Although the public is not allowed to see some of the sacred objects/images that are used in venerating Uda, the great, permission was sought from the royal palace to take the photograph. Also, we can see some photographs and images to the right of the priest who is expected to ensure the laid down procedure for conducting certain traditional rites are followed during *Ihuen*. The priest is attired in full regalia of red and white apparels with beads on the neck and hands.

5.6. F. Innovation and Syncretic Tendencies

Figure 11: Some actants/participants performing during *Ihuen*.

The *Ihuen* has grown to the extent that it now allows some innovations such as performing artists (actants) from around Ekpomaland come over to the palace grounds to perform. The outdoor ceremony usually takes place on the third day. The actants in figure 11 are performing modern acrobatics (calisthenics) amid cheers and admiration from the surging crowd. This is a relatively new development in *Ihuen* but an innovatively syncretic addition that can attract the younger generations of Ekpoma people to be part of the traditional festival.



Photographer: Osakue S. Omoera, Venue: Royal Palace, Eguare-Ekpoma, Date, 16 March 2014.

Figure 12: An actant/participant using a motorcycle to display and entertain during *Ihuen*



Photographer: Osakue S. Omoera, Venue: Royal Palace, Eguare-Ekpoma, Date, 16 March 2014.

Figures 11 and 12 constitute the thematic category F (innovation and syncretic tendencies). We can see the actants performing amidst cheers from other excited participants. We can also see other innovative components that were not originally part of *Ihuen*: loud speakers for musicals, banners of corporate sponsors (e.g., MTN, Nigeria), canopies, among others, in the palace grounds.

6. Key findings and implications of the study

The study on has yielded several key findings. Firstly, the research highlights the immense cultural significance of *Ihuen* within the Ekpoma community. The festival serves as a vital religious and cultural event that fosters community cohesion and strengthens cultural identity. It is deeply rooted in history and holds spiritual and ritualistic value for the participants. Understanding the cultural significance of *Ihuen* contributes to our knowledge of the Ekpoma community's traditions and beliefs. Moreover, the study reveals the evolution and transformations that *Ihuen* has undergone over time. It identifies changes in festival practices, such as the incorporation of new elements, syncretic tendencies, and innovations. Despite these changes, the festival retains its core cultural traditions and serves as a platform for preserving and transmitting cultural heritage across generations. This understanding of the festival's evolution enhances our comprehension of cultural change and adaptation within the Ekpoma community.

A significant finding of the study is the recognition of the value of still media, particularly photographs, in documenting *Ihuen*. Photographs serve as visual artifacts that capture and preserve the richness of cultural practices, costumes, rituals, and material culture associated with the festival. The study demonstrates how these photographs indexically represent cultural practices and meanings, contributing to the documentation and preservation of cultural heritage. Furthermore, the study acknowledges the artistic potential of *Ihuen*'s photographs, highlighting their ability to transcend documentation and become celebrated pieces of art. This recognition expands our understanding of the intersection between cultural documentation, visual arts, and broader artistic discourses. The research findings also underscore the importance of still media documentation in the preservation and promotion of cultural practices and traditions. By capturing and archiving visual representations of *Ihuen*, the study emphasizes the role of photographs in safeguarding cultural heritage. It suggests that still media can serve as catalysts for cultural preservation, change, and identity formation. The study's findings shed light on the potential of visual documentation to contribute to a more sustainable cultural future by ensuring the continuity and appreciation of cultural practices.

7. The contributions of the study

The study on Ekpoma's *Ihuen* and its documentation through still media makes several valuable contributions to knowledge. Firstly, it highlights the significance of cultural documentation in contemporary society, specifically emphasizing the artistic potential of still media, such as photographs, as a means of capturing and preserving cultural practices and events. By employing media anthropology and indexicality as theoretical anchors, the study expands our understanding of the role of visual documentation in cultural anthropology. Furthermore, the study provides an in-depth exploration of *Ihuen*, an annual religio-cultural ceremony/festival among the Esan-speaking people of Ekpoma. Through historical analysis, photographic-content analysis, observations, and interviews, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of the festival's cultural significance, evolution, and various elements associated with it. This contributes to our knowledge of the specific cultural practices and traditions of the Ekpoma community, further enriching our understanding of their cultural heritage.

The study also categorizes discernible trends within *Ihuen*, both in terms of time and space, utilizing the artistic agency of still media. By identifying and documenting elements such as the conferment of chieftaincy titles, the role of the king-in-state, the use of sacred objects, ancestral worship, and innovations and syncretic

tendencies, the study provides valuable insights into the cultural dynamics and transformations within the festival. This contributes to our understanding of cultural change and adaptation within the Ekpoma community. Moreover, the study emphasizes the materiality and annual observance of *Ihuen* as a strong cultural index for the Ekpoma people. It highlights how the festival serves as a hub of cultural solidarity, fostering a sense of community and cultural rejuvenation. This understanding of the festival's role in enhancing cultural identity and providing a sense of belonging contributes to our broader knowledge of the socio-cultural dynamics of community festivals and their significance in maintaining cultural heritage. Additionally, the study suggests that the photographic documentation of *Ihuen* has the potential to go beyond capturing moments and become nationally and internationally acclaimed pieces of art. This recognition of the artistic value of the festival's photographs expands our understanding of the intersection between cultural documentation, visual arts, and broader artistic discourses.

8. Limitations of the study

The study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the scope of the study is limited to the specific context of *Ihuen* within the Ekpoma community. While this allows for a detailed examination of the festival's cultural significance in that particular community, it may not be easily generalized to other cultural festivals or communities in Esanland. The findings may be specific to the unique cultural context of Ekpoma's *Ihuen*. Methodologically, the study relies on various approaches such as historical analysis, photographic-content analysis, observations, and interviews. However, each of these methods has inherent limitations. Historical analysis is subject to the availability and reliability of historical records, which may introduce biases or gaps in the understanding of *Ihuen's* historical context. The interpretive nature of photographic-content analysis and interviews introduces subjectivity and potential biases in data collection and analysis. Additionally, still media, such as photographs, may not fully capture the intangible aspects of cultural practices. *Ihuen* likely involves sensory experiences, such as music, dance, and oral traditions, which may not be adequately conveyed through still media alone. The focus on still media limits the exploration of these important dimensions of the festival.

9. Recommendations/suggestions of the study

The study recommends that community members actively participate and engage in the preservation and promotion of *Ihuen*. It suggests raising awareness about the cultural significance of the festival and its role in fostering community cohesion. Workshops or seminars could be organized to educate younger generations about the history, traditions, and values associated with *Ihuen*. It is also recommended that the festival organizers incorporate diverse forms of media, such as audiovisual recordings or live performances, to complement still media documentation and capture the full sensory experience of *Ihuen*. It emphasizes the importance of ensuring the accessibility and availability of documented materials to researchers, scholars, and community members interested in studying or learning about *Ihuen*. Establishing collaborations with academic institutions, cultural organizations, or museums to showcase the cultural significance of *Ihuen* and its documentation through exhibitions, publications, or online platforms could reach wider audiences. Furthermore, implementing strategies to involve a wider range of community members in the planning and management of the festival would ensure inclusivity and representation. As well, the study recommends that the government and cultural institutions recognize the cultural significance of *Ihuen* and provide support for its preservation and documentation efforts. It suggests offering funding, grants, or cultural heritage programs to support these endeavors. Collaborating with community members, researchers, and cultural organizations is crucial in developing policies that protect and promote the festival's cultural practices and traditions.

Establishing cultural centers or museums dedicated to preserving and exhibiting the documentation and artifacts related to *Ihuen* and other local festivals would further contribute to their safeguarding.

10. Conclusion

This study has considered the visual paradigm of Ekpoma's *Ihuen*. It has assessed the significance of cultural documentation in contemporary society, utilising the artistic potential of still media. It has identified discernible tropes, including the conferral of chieftaincy titles, the role of the king-in-state, the use of sacred objects, the practice of ancestral worship and fellowship, and the veneration of the Onojie, as well as some innovations and syncretic tendencies that now contribute to the cultural event. The conclusion of this study is that the deliberate media anthropological capture of *Ihuen* can serve to imaginatively check fast-disappearing local knowledge forms of the indigenous Ekpoma community while the simultaneously re-enacting and concretely reaffirming its identity.

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