

DIGITALLY PRESERVING TRADITION: THE EHWA RITE AND ISOKO CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Abstract

Many cultural practices that were considered relevant in the continent of Africa in time past are no longer in existence today. Some others are shadows of what they used to be due to the influence of modernization, leaving no form of visual documentation for posterity. The Ehwa marriage rites are rites of passage practiced by the Isoko people of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria that also has gone extinct. Every young maiden due for marriage was expected to perform the Ehwa rite in order to be admitted into the league of women in her community. Despite its importance as an educational platform where young women were tutored on marital issues, Ehwa has ceased to exist leaving no form of visual records for posterity. This paper therefore attempts to highlight how digital image manipulation can be used to create and recreate visual imagery through oral history as documented by the researcher for posterity. Adobe Photoshop CC computer software is the manipulative tool to be used for the manipulation process in this project. The result and impact demonstrate a realizable dream of recovery of lost Ehwa rite.

Keywords: Ehwa, Rites of passage, Digital, Image manipulation, Visual metaphor, Photoshop.

Introduction

Ehwa is a Rite of passage carefully designed to equip the young Isoko woman with all she needs to make a success of her marriage. The word Ehwa, is derived from the red dye that comes out of Camwood when extracted. The reason why the rite is referred to as Ehwa is probably lost to antiquity because none of the people interviewed in the cause of writing this project seem to have any faint idea about its origin. It probably may have arisen from the prominent and transformatory look which it gives to its user when used as beauty treatment. The process of Ehwa rite is so elaborate that it takes between four markets (16 days) and five months for the full process to be completed, during which the young woman is placed in seclusion. The duration however depends on the community in which it is carried out. The rite is designed to cover topics such as chastity, child bearing and child

care, personal hygiene, care for spouse, humility, sexuality, hospitality, control of emotions and general home management to mention a few.

Although the *Ehwa* rite is a composite of many activities, this project will limit itself to just one aspect (child care), to demonstrate how visual imagery recovery can be carried out through digital image manipulation as historically and orally documented by the elders of the Isoko community.

Image manipulation

Image manipulation, is the art of transforming an image (using image editing techniques) to achieve what you want. The manipulation of an image is done through various means ranging from clever Lab/Studio techniques to present-day digital editing. Although this project will focus on digital editing, it is pertinent at this stage to take a brief look at how image manipulation began.

Brief history of image manipulation

Image manipulation as recorded in Wikipedia “dates long before the invention of the camera, as portraits of people (as well as landscapes and scenes) were painted with little „artistic“ interpretation.” With the introduction of photography however, true and exact representation of people and scenes became possible with absolute reality, leading to the dictum that „the camera never lies“ (Mullen, 1998:13). This notion however, did not last because it soon became apparent that a great deal of manipulation goes into the out-putting of an image, ranging from the manipulation of the camera settings to the captured image itself. Early manipulations were done using inks, airbrushes, negative scratching photomontage and darkroom techniques which include dodging and burning, masking, double exposure and other techniques that were experimented upon by the artist photographer. Present day editing however, is achieved using the computer through a process commonly referred to as Photoshop, named after the popular image editing program created by *Adobe* systems ([www. Curtus.com](http://www.Curtus.com)). There are also other programs similar to *Adobe* Photoshop that can be used for image manipulation, some of these are: Corel shop pro, Microsoft paint, Ulead photo impact and Micro media freehand, just to mention a few. With digital editing, there are no limits to what can be achieved. Of all the manipulation techniques and editing software’s mentioned above, this paper is based on digital editing by the use of *Adobe* PhotoshopCC software, due to its popularity and amenability to the writer.

Motivation and Ethics of Photo manipulation

Image manipulations are carried out for various reasons and these may range from simple image editing such as subtle color correction and altering backgrounds, removal of spots and blemishes to give the illusion of a perfect skin, all the way down to full blown manipulation which is an art in creative process. Due to the traditional belief which people have, and the confidence placed on photography right from the onset that photos have always told the truth, they get offended when they discover that they have been fooled by a particular presentation. This is

how ethics of digital manipulation came into existence. Therefore, it becomes ethically important that the digital artist tells his viewers upfront what he is doing, coupled with the methods well explained in a caption such that no one gets upset.

The Documentation Process Step 1: Gathering of verbal data

The documentation process begins with the gathering of data in the form of oral history and relic of items used for the rite. Information gathered in this case revealed that when a maiden had been betrothed to a man and was ready to participate in the *Ehwa* rite, a young girl of about the age of three to five years was given to her from the man's family to be with her throughout the period of her confinement. The idea behind this was to see how she would be able to care for her own child by comparing the way she handles this little girl. On no account must this girl have any reason or desire to go back home to her parents. The bride therefore ought to pamper her and would do everything possible to please her. She ate in the same plate with her, bathed with her, and went everywhere she went with her just to make sure she was always available to attend to her needs. Her ability to successfully manage this little girl could serve as proof to her in-laws that they did not make the wrong choice for a wife.

Step 2: Sourcing images

With this information at hand, the next thing is to make a visual composition that will adequately represent the scenario orally presented such that anyone looking at the image will immediately relate it to the position of *Ehwa* rite on child care.

For this reason, the images to be used for the composition must be carefully selected such that the resultant picture will evoke the memory of *Ehwa* in the minds of those who knew about it and also provoke sense of history. This is where the use of visual metaphors comes to play.

Visual metaphors

A visual metaphor is defined in Webster's Ninth New Collegiate as a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of idea is used in place of another to suggest likeness or analogy between them (Mish, 1984: 746). This definition however, points to verbal or textual metaphor and not visual metaphor. Lack off (1983:5) took this definition further by saying that metaphors lead us into "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another". Coming closer in meaning, Williams, stated that „a visual metaphor is one image or set of images used in place of another to suggest an analogy between the two images or set of images" (p.1). The chosen image must evoke familiarity and understanding with the idea it is representing. For the theme „child care", the image that readily comes to mind to represent it is the Hen. The hen is known for its caring nature towards its chicks. With the hen in mind, the next thing was to get a model dressed on *Ehwa* attire to pose for a photograph in a protective posture as the hen does with her chicks as shown in *fig. 1*. Another thing that was also put into consideration when this shot was taken was the delicate nature of children which demands care in their

handling. To represent this, two delicate items (a glass bowl and eggs) were brought into the picture. To complete the items needed for this composition, the picture of a hen with her chicks taking refuge under her wings was also included.

The internet is a very useful source for stock images in a composition of this nature especially when one cannot photograph everything needed. The hen and her chicks (*fig. 2.*), and the basket of eggs (*fig. 3.*) for instance, were picked out of thousands of options provided on the internet, as most appropriate for the composition.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2, Fig. 3

Source: <https://123halleluyah.wordpress.com/2014/09/09/ahengathersherchicks/> **Source:** <https://authoriynutriti ons.com/wp content/uploads/2013/07/eggs-in-a-basket.jpg /09/09/a-hen-gathers-her-chicks/>

Step 3: Opening images in Photoshop

The collected images are opened in the chosen editing software (Photoshop cc) for editing. This is done by clicking on the software icon on the programmes section of a computer, or on the desktop, if already placed there. While in Photoshop environment, one can then go to the file menu on the menu bar. Click on the file menu and in the drop-down menu, navigate to open, and click on it. From the dialogue box, select the appropriate folder where the relevant picture is saved. Locate the file name, click on it and click open to open the image in Photoshop.

Step 4: Isolating image from background

Every image comes with a background and because the background may not be needed in the new picture to be created, they are always removed. To remove a background, one must first of all unlock the picture or else it will not respond to any tool used on it. This is done by dragging the padlock icon attached to the image panel on the layers" panel to the trash can. With this done, the image is now open to be worked upon. The background is selected using any of the selection tools. When selected, the unwanted areas are deleted leaving the image ready to be used for the manipulation exercise. This process was carried out on all the elements used in the child care composition.

Step 5: Image composition: All the prepared images were brought together in their raw form onto the canvas to be used and placed in their relative positions and scaled to size as shown in *fig.4*, before any further modifications like colour correction, blend modes, light effect etc. are applied.



Fig. 4

Source: Artist researcher (Screen shot)

Step 6: Creating a matching background

Since the different elements did not come with backgrounds, a background suited to the composition was created behind all the layers. It should be noted however that all the elements in a Photoshop composition are seen as independent layers that are stacked together to make the composition. This enables each of the layers to be modified independently without affecting the others. The background was done by creating a new layer and filling it with gradient fill using the gradient tool located in the tools bar (Fig. 5).

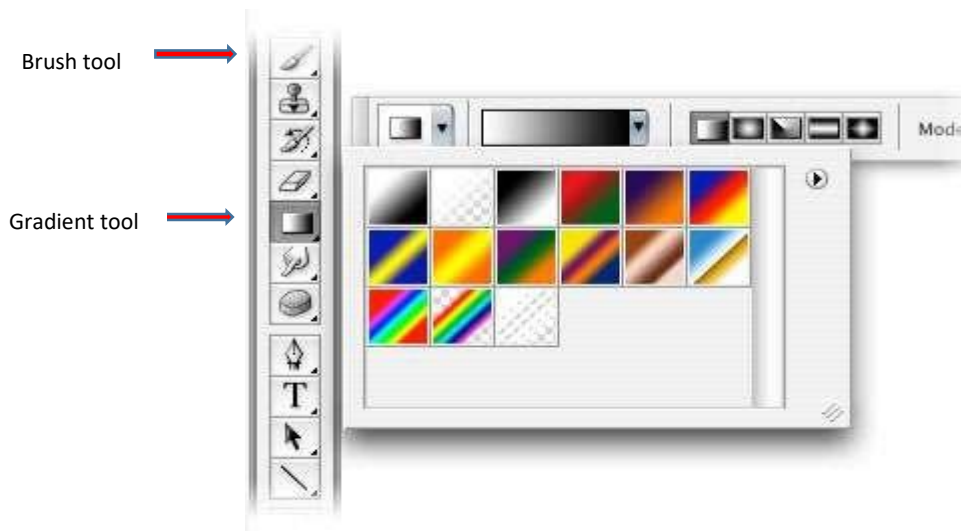


Fig. 5 Tools Bar

Source: <https://sites.goggle.com/a/desdk12.org/intro-to-computer-graphics/home/beginners-guide-to-adobe-photoshop/drawing-and-painting-tools>

Step 7: Introducing shadows

To unify the different elements into one continuous image so as to create the illusion of reality, shadows are introduced. This is done using the brush tool, indicated in fig. 5, set at different hardness and opacity to suit the application while painting with black.

Step 8: Applying adjustments

Adjustment layers were created to achieve colour unity and uniform light and shade throughout the image. The following adjustment layers were used for the child-care composition; Gradient map, Hue saturation, Selective colour, Levels and finally Curves (Figs. 6-10). All these are accessed when one clicks on the adjustment layer button located at the bottom section of the layers panel (Fig. 11).



Fig. 6
Gradient
Map
Adjustment
Layer

Fig. 7
Hue and
Saturation
Adjustment
Layer

Fig. 8
Selective
Colour
Adjustment
Layer

Fig. 9
Levels
Adjustment
Layer

Fig. 10
Curves
Adjustment
Layer

Source: Artist researcher (Screen shot)

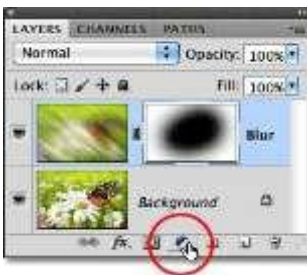
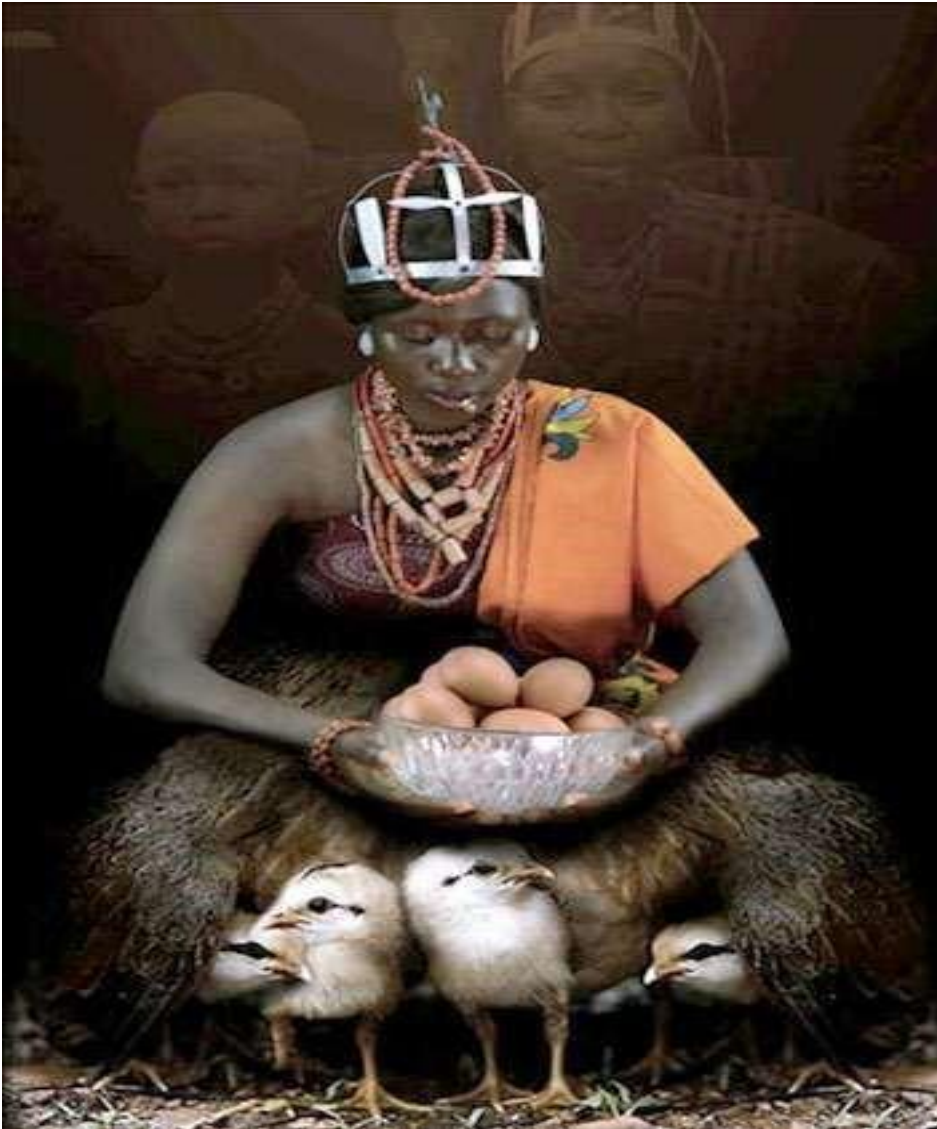


Fig. 11 Adjustment layers' button

Source: <https://www.photoshopessentials.com/basics/layers-panel/>

Step 9: Finishing touches

To achieve the final result as shown in Fig.12, an image of low opacity was placed just above the background but behind the major image of the composition. The idea behind this was to create a thought line linking the portrayed aspect of *Ehwa* in the manipulation and the real life situation.



The finished Manipulation titled ‘Oyewo’

Conclusions

As the loss of valued cultural practices without proper visual documentation continues to be the pain of many African societies, modern digital technology has brought relief because with digital image manipulation, almost anything is possible. The successful creation of the imagery of the child-care aspect of the lost *Ehwa* custom of

the Isoko people as exemplified in this project is a proof that the issue of lack of visual documentation can finally be put to rest.

Modern technology and communication software's using computers have rekindled hope of Isoko community as image manipulation technique has proved to be a reliable and creative process to recovery of lost visual imageries as a consequence of neglect and the so-called modern civilization.

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