

Unpacking the Suitcase. The handover.

When my mother, Luisa Guadayol, was already very old, she decided to move to another house and discovered in the basement a trunk that had been left in her custody forty-five years ago by Prince Emmanuel Adewale Oyenuga, a Nigerian photographer and artist. Her wish was to return the content to its owner or his family.



Emmanuel had arrived in Barcelona in 1968 with a scholarship to study art at the Massana School. There he met my mother who treated him like a son. Shortly after, his wife Elizabeth arrived and was also welcomed. When they decided to move to London after a few years, they left the trunk with the idea of coming back to pick it up. They never came back, and it was forgotten in the basement.

The trunk had been closed during all that time and before moving it we had to see what it contained. Inside we found hundreds of photos from Nigeria in the 1960s, hundreds of letters, notebooks, drawings, pencils, brushes and paints, books, records and a large 70 cm knife with a leather sheath, traditional clothing and African fabrics. The story of a Yoruba family at the time of the Biafra war. Nigerian history.



To facilitate its transfer, we put the contents in an old leather suitcase, discarding blank papers, brushes and pots of paint in poor condition, hair curlers, combs and clips since Elizabeth was a hairdresser.

Luisa wrote to the addresses that appeared on the envelopes of the letters that Emmanuel received, without obtaining a response.

Luisa died in 2016 at the age of 99 and left me with the suitcase and her wish that it be returned to its owners. So, we had to find them.

We thought it would be easy in this age of the Internet and social networks. But this was not the case.

I explained the story to my friend Dr. Carmen Pérez González, a professor at the University of Wuppertal and a specialist in the history of photography, who, enthusiastic, began to investigate the photographic archive that I sent her by email.

I contacted Foto Colectania, a gallery in Barcelona, and showed them the photographs. Pepe Font de Mora, its director, gave me the email address of Azu Nwagbogu, a Nigerian curator, founder of the African Artists Foundation (AAF) and organizer of the Lagos Photo Festival. I wrote him a message telling him the story and attached some photos. He replied by return mail: "I am very interested in this story if it were not for the pandemic, I would take a flight and go immediately to Barcelona but, since that is not possible now, I am going to ask Moritz Neumüller, a historian of photography, who lives near Barcelona, to see the archive and confirm the importance that I believe it has".

Moritz came home, reviewed the file and, in agreement with Azu, they decided that the photos and letters had to be scanned and the entire contents of the suitcase

documented. So, it was done. He and Verónica Losantos were photographing the photos and scanning the letters.



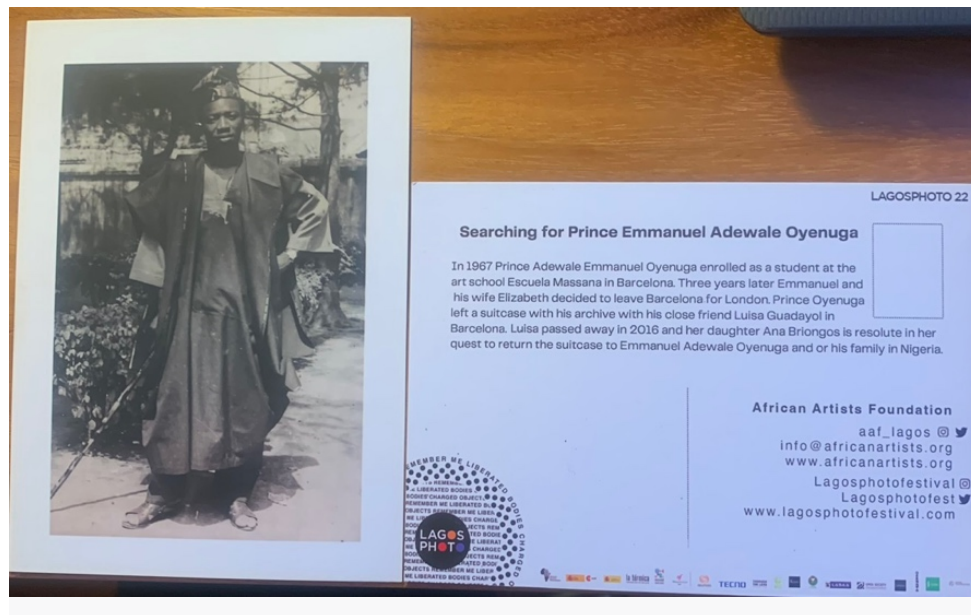
Emmanuel kept the letters he received and made copies of the ones he wrote and sent. There are letters written in English and others in Yoruba. At the African Artists Foundation (AAF) they translated the ones in Yoruba into English.

Azu set up a team to investigate the archive, consisting of Asya Yagmurian in Berlin, Carmen Perez González in Cologne, Moritz Neumuller and myself in Barcelona, and Azu and his AAF in Lagos.



In June 2021, with the pandemic subsiding, Azu and Asya were able to travel to Barcelona to see the archive and organize the search for its owners.

During the Lagos Photo Festival, October-November 2021, the AAF published some postcards that were distributed among the visitors, with the photographs of Prince Emmanuel Adewale Oyenuga, Elizabeth and other characters that appeared in the archive and a note on the back explaining that we were searching for these people.



Postcard printed by AAF for the LagosPhoto 2021

Searches were made without success at the Nigerian embassy in London, at the embassy in Madrid, at the Nigerian associations in Barcelona and London.

We came to think that we would never find Emmanuel or his family.

The Magnum agency of photography organized an international Zoom in June 2021 to discuss the ownership of files whose owners have disappeared, and the example was our suitcase.

In February 2022, the AAF invited Moritz, Asya and me to travel to Lagos, with the idea that we would continue searching on the ground.

At the AAF headquarters they had set up an exhibition with the large photo of Prince Oyenuga and copies of the archive photos that looked like an altar. A presentation was made right there for the artists and friends of the Foundation. The next day it was presented to an EU commission that had traveled to Lagos and was visiting the AAF.



Moritz, Asya and I, accompanied by Julius from the AAF, walked the crowded streets of Lagos with the addresses of the studios of photography where Emmanuel Adewale had worked and those of his family. After much walking in an unsuccessful search, because the studios of fifty years ago no longer exist, Moritz and Julius found the family home, at 5 Orogiri Street. On the façade, next to the roof, in large white letters on a brown background, was written PA. S. A. OYENUGA'S HOUSE. 5 OROGIRI ST. LAGOS



Great joy, that was something that brought us closer to our goal. But the family no longer lives in that house. A woman from a nearby shop had the phone number of a relative of the family who lives outside of Lagos.

Then we traveled to Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, invited by the Spanish Embassy, which organized a presentation for the media. All this with the aim of spreading the history of the suitcase and finding its owner.



Ambassador of Cuba, Princess Onadunny, Ambassador of Spain Juan Sell, Ana M Briongos, Azu Nwagbogu in Abuja.

After that trip, the AAF was in charge of calling the relative of the family and following the trail. They spoke to her on the phone, invited her to Lagos and showed her copies of the photos in the archive. And yes, she recognized them! Prince Emmanuel Adewale Oyenuga was her uncle, Elizabeth her aunt. Unfortunately, her uncle had died in 1979 in a car accident. But Elizabeth is still alive and lives with her son, Adedoyin, and his family, near Lagos. Aunt Oyenuga provided Adedoyin's phone number to her AAF interviewers. When I heard this news, I understood why they never returned to look for the trunk. The mysteries were becoming clearer.



Auntie Oyenuga sees the photos at AAF

The AAF called Adedoyin to explain that a lady from Barcelona had a suitcase that his father had left behind when he was in that city...

Adedoyin did not understand what they were telling him and dismissed them saying that he was very busy and had no time for stories.

The AAF felt unable to go any further and gave me Adedoyin's phone number so that I could continue with the investigations.

I wrote a WhatsApp to Adedoyin. Unanswered. A second message. Unanswered. I called on the phone. Unanswered. So, I decided to write a third and final message as touching as I could, along with some photos of him when he was little, photos his parents had taken with them when they left him with his grandparents in Nigeria, to see if it would soften his heart. And it worked. One very hot summer day, while we were taking a nap, the phone rang. It was Adedoyin. He was willing to talk, but first we had to exchange current photos of ourselves and our families. He sent a photo with a caption that read "Prince Adedoyin Oyenuga, eldest son and heir of Prince Emmanuel Adewale Oyenuga." Then came a photo of him with his wife. I sent him a photo with Toni, my husband. From here, I began to tell him the story of the suitcase and of his father and mother in Barcelona, of my mother, of the long time that had elapsed until I found him and of the many people who had helped in that search. Everything I told him was new to him. I told him what the suitcase contained and that it had no financial value, only sentimental. And finally, I communicated my intention to travel to Nigeria in November to deliver the suitcase since that was the wish of my mother who had kept it for decades. He agreed and even told me that he was very pleased.

My brother Miguel, who had maintained a good friendship with Emmanuel and Elizabeth, just like me when they were in Barcelona, expressed his desire to join the trip.

On October 22, with Moritz and his collaborator, the photographer Irene Pietrella, we took a last look at the contents of the suitcase and new photos were taken.

At the beginning of November 2022, coinciding with the LagosPhoto22 Festival, we traveled to Lagos, Toni and I from Barcelona with the suitcase and Miguel and Marta from Madrid where they live.



Marta, Ana Maria, Toni and Miguel in Lagos with the suitcase

On Monday, November 7, the Embassy of Spain organized, at its Consulate in Lagos, a ceremony for the delivery of the suitcase to the Oyenuga family.



The event took place in the garden of the consulate where they had set up a tent, several rows of chairs for the guests, a table where Azu, Adedoyin, Eva Barta from the embassy and I sat. The act was presented by the consul Daniel Losada, with the guests being the Oyenuga family, Adedoyin, his wife Esther Abosedo, a son Ademayowa and a daughter Aderonke (they have two more daughters, Adetolani and Kanisola, who did not come because they were studying at the university). Elizabeth couldn't come either because she suffers from Alzheimer's. The ambassador, Juan Sell, excused his presence because he was presenting credentials in Benin.



Oyenuga Family with Ana Maria, Miguel and Azu. Photos: Luisa Guadayol and Prince Emmanuel Adewale Oyenuga.

The Oyenuga family had traveled to Lagos to attend the ceremony from Ogun State where they currently live. Representatives of the Nigerian press, TV and media, members of the AAF, l'Alliance Française and other attendees unknown to me also attended. Behind us they had placed a large poster with a photograph of Emmanuel and a sign "Unpacking the suitcase handover", on one side the photo of my mother Luisa Guadayol and a large painting by a Nigerian artist with his peculiar interpretation of the story. There were parliaments and finally we opened the suitcase. Inside Doyin saw the photographs where he recognized himself as a child, recognized his parents, his grandparents, great-grandparents and other family members and decided to put everything back to discover it calmly at home with his family.



Adedoyin and Ana Maria

Too bad Elizabeth already has her mind in another world and can't share these emotions. We returned home with the feeling of “mission accomplished”.

During the return trip, my brother and I talked amusedly about the comment of a Nigerian friend upon learning that our father's name was Restituto, -did his name already implicitly carry an esoteric sign of our future mission? - he said, since that currently in Africa and in Nigeria in particular, there is talk of "restitution" of what the colonizers had plundered and now exhibit in their museums. As an example, are the Benin bronzes. Although restitution, among other meanings, is the return of something that has been stolen, in our case, it was not about that but the return of something that was left in deposit.



Ours has been an act of goodwill and this is how the Oyenuga family and the people who have participated in it have understood it, all altruistically, and those who here and there have learned of this adventure.

We have resumed a friendship that began fifty years ago, a story of emigration, uncertainty, distance, suffering, reception, friendship, exchange of experiences, mutual aid and affection.