

BEFORE NOLLYWOOD . . .
THE IDEAL PHOTO STUDIO





WELCOME!

Before Nollywood . . . The Ideal Photo Studio is a living exhibition and an ongoing research and photography project that explores the lives of patrons from the Ideal Photo Studio and a history of Benin City and its community through the photographs of Solomon Osagie Alonge. We are seeking your help in naming people in the Ideal Photo Studio portraits, and inviting you to share personal stories and memories of your childhood, friends, family, social life, and community in Benin City, Nigeria, at the Tapestry of Benin Memories wall. To provide information about people in Alonge's photographs, submit information to the Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives via the QR code, in-gallery cards, or elisofonarchives@si.edu (place Ideal Photo Studio in subject line). Once the information has been verified, exhibition labels and archives records will be updated.

above

Solomon Osagie Alonge
(self-portrait)
1942
EEPA 2009-007-0104

opposite, top to bottom

Types of the Lagos Fire
Brigade
Lagos, Nigeria
Photograph by Neils Walwin
Holm, c. 1905
Postcard, collotype
EEPA 1992-004-0046

Rest After Toil. Yours
Sincerely, D.O. Osagie"
Daniel Egate Osagie
Photograph by Solomon
Osagie Alonge, 1938
EEPA 2009-007-0080

All images were photographed by Solomon Osagie Alonge in Benin City, Nigeria, unless noted otherwise, and are silver gelatin modern prints from the original glass plate negatives in the Chief S.O. Alonge Collection, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives.

BEFORE NOLLYWOOD . . . THE IDEAL PHOTO STUDIO

Before Nollywood . . . The Ideal Photo Studio celebrates the photography of Solomon Osagie Alonge (1911–1994) and honors the work of African studio photographers. Largely unknown today, early Nigerian studio photographers struggled like their Nollywood successors with minimal equipment and finances, yet made significant contributions to the history of African photography and portraiture and to representing Africa’s changing communities.

Commercial photography studios were a thriving business in port cities across West Africa by the 1920s. Many Nigerians were first introduced to photography by itinerant photographers or by the growing number of photo studios in the coastal cities of Lagos and Calabar. During the 1930s and 1940s, rising urban centers like Ibadan and Benin City became hubs for small town photographers and local photo studios. In 1942, Solomon Osagie Alonge opened the Ideal Photo Studio, the first commercial photographic studio in Benin City.

Alonge’s studio portraits of Benin City residents in the 1950s and 1960s illuminate an untold history of Nigerian photographers and African studio portraiture. The portraits of the individuals and families on display here—featuring Alonge’s carefully selected costumes, furniture, flooring, backdrops, and props—are historical precursors to the celebrity portraits on view in *Iké Udé: Nollywood Portraits*. For many first-time visitors to the Ideal Photo Studio, Alonge provided a creative space for unique expressions of culture, ethnicity, and style through his subjects’ choice of textiles, fashion, poses, and with whom they chose to be photographed. In the years leading up to Nigerian independence from Britain, many of these portraits embodied optimistic aspirations for the future.



Amy J. Staples
Curator/Senior Archivist
Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives

IDEAL PHOTO STUDIO

For many Benin residents, a trip to the Ideal Photo Studio was their first encounter with a professional photographer. Some patrons chose to be photographed with their prized possessions—sports trophies, bicycles, motorcycles, and automobiles. Others posed for Solomon Alonge and his large format glass plate camera in front of Victorian-style backdrops and tableau-type scenes accentuated with props that included clocks, flowers, newspapers, phonographs, and product advertisements.

The Ideal Photo Studio became a creative, imaginative space in which individuals fashioned their identities through expression, dress, pose, props, and with whom they chose to be photographed. Alonge offered his patrons a variety of backdrops, flooring, furniture, and studio props, working with them to achieve the desired image. One of the more popular supports was a waist-high wooden handrail that patrons could lean or sit on in novel ways.

Alonge also documented the civic and social life of Benin City. From the 1930s onward, emerging leaders and professional classes, new businesses, churches, schools, and industries were among his subjects. He often traveled by bicycle with his assistant of 30 years, Samuel Arasomwan, to photograph large groups of school-children, civic organizations, and athletic and social clubs and to cover a variety of social events and special occasions, chief among them weddings, birthday parties, and graduations. Priceless keepsakes, today these family photographs hold special memories of emblematic moments in the lives of the residents of Benin City.



above

Solomon Osagie Alonge
(self-portrait)
1942
EEPA 2009-007-1799



right

c. 1937
EEPA 2009-007-0109



left column, top to bottom

Prince Solomon Akenzua
(center) with his uncle Edison
Eweka (seated left) and
brother David Akenzua
(standing left), others
unknown

c. 1937
EEPA 2009-007-0135

c. 1960
EEPA 2014-004-0126

c. 1942
EEPA 2014-004-0187

Samuel Arasomwan,
Alonge's assistant for
30 years
2019
Photograph by Victor
Ehikhamenor

above, top to bottom

Eghosa Anglican Grammar
School soccer team
1963
EEPA 2009-007-0063

Birthday party
c. 1960
EEPA 2009-007-0313

Alonge's assistants washing
prints outside the Ideal Photo
Studio
c. 1960
EEPA 2009-007-1220

LIVING LEGACIES: BENIN THEN AND NOW

Living Legacies: Benin Then and Now is a collaborative photography project with Nigerian artist Victor Ehikhamenor. Inspired by Alonge's early portraits and the discovery of his patrons in Benin City, Lagos, London, New York, and Washington, DC, Living Legacies explores the photographic history of Benin City through the lives of longtime residents and the Ideal Photo Studio Collection. While many of these individuals are in their 70s and 80s, they still have vivid memories of Alonge and his studio. Their individual stories and the re-photography of local community members, schools, social clubs, civil workers, as well as historic sites and shrines, are part of a then-and-now approach to the living history of Benin City.



top to bottom

(Chief) Ajayi Okao with his first car in front of the Ideal Photo Studio
1971
EEPA 2009-007-1208

Chief Ajayi Okao in front of his mural at the Alonge exhibition, National Museum of Benin, Benin City, 2019
Photograph by Amy Staples, Benin City, 2019



left to right

Christiana Alonge, Alonge's eldest child, at age 3, 1948

Christiana Uzebu (née Alonge), New York City, 2019



left to right

Adeola Aderiyike Agbontaen (née Kester) at age 22, 1952

Dame Adeola Aderiyike Agbontaen (1930–2021), Benin City, 2019



left to right

Princess Adesuwu Akenzua (in veil) and Emmanuel U. Emovon at their church wedding, Holy Aruosa Cathedral, 1959

Chief (Professor) Emmanuel U. Emovon (1929–2019), Obayagbona of Benin kingdom, and Princess Mrs. Adesuwu Emovon, Benin City, 2019

Unless noted otherwise, "Then" images were photographed by Solomon Osagie Alonge in Benin City, 1930s–70s.

"Now" images were photographed by Victor Ehikhamenor in Benin City, New York, and Philadelphia, 2019–20.

left to right

Chief Gausi Obaseki, Iyase
of Benin, c. 1940



left to right

Reverend Osadolor Imasogie
and Yewande Abebe
Akinwunmi wedding, Ile-Ife,
1958



Reverend Professor Osadolor
Imasogie (1928–2022),
Philadelphia, 2019

left to right

Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien and
wife Ebiuwa holding wedding
photograph taken on
February 22, 1966, by
S.O. Alonge
Photograph by Amy Staples,
Benin City, 2013



Dr. Ekhaguosa (1930–2021)
and Ebiuwa Aisien on the
porch of their new home,
Benin City
Photograph by Amy Staples,
Benin City, 2019

THE ART OF HAND-COLORING: INNOVATIONS IN COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY

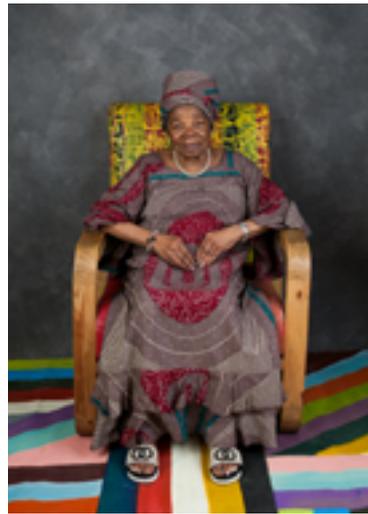
Prior to the introduction of color film in West Africa, photographers had to be not only technically proficient, but artistic—experimenting with hand-coloring and tinting—to satisfy their clients’ demands. Edo women, in particular, wanted their vibrant dresses, jewelry, and head wraps depicted in color. Using a Marshall Photo-Oil Colors paint set imported from New York, Alonge taught himself how to hand-color prints. His skills with hand-coloring and imaginative use of color are evident in the beautifully toned image of young Stella Gbinigie and the portraits of Madam Ogiugo and Chief Edo Osagie.

Alonge photographed Madam Stella Gbinigie and her sisters in 1950. At 16, Stella’s beauty, grace, and youth embodied the promise and optimism of Nigeria’s future and upcoming independence from Britain in 1960. Educated in London, Stella returned to Nigeria and worked as a secretary for 32 years, ultimately retiring as head of the secretarial department, in the Federal Ministry Cabinet office, Lagos. Known as the “live wire of the End room,” Stella received the National Award of the Member of the Order of the Niger (M.O.N.) in 1979, one of the few women to receive such an honor, in recognition of her loyalty and service.

Stella also posed for a portrait with her sisters Imarayi Gbinigie, Helen Uzzi, and Helen Uwaifo. A harbinger of the “Auntie style,” Nigeria’s current fashion trend, the sisters dressed up in their mother’s outfits—her lace blouses, skirt wrappers, and headties—and distinctive jewelry. The only item of clothing they owned was their shoes. Their ease of expression and individual charm create a memorable image that illustrates Alonge’s gentle and respectful manner with his patrons. Over 60 years later, Madam Stella reminisced, “He treated us like his own children, not a client.”

Alonge’s lens also captured Madam Esther Egharevba Ogiugo in 1950. A successful merchant and trader whose wares included building materials and cured tobacco leaves from Britain, Ogiugo belonged to Akugberetin (Unity Is Strength), an enterprising women’s association. The Edo inscription “Esehosa nerakugbe’vb’Edo” on her hand-woven textile translates as “God’s glory encompasses unity in Edoland.”

Chief Francis Edo Osagie was an up-and-coming entrepreneur in the Nigerian timber trade and a member of the board of directors of Shell-BP Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria. A connoisseur of traditional arts and cultures, Edo Osagie built a house, known as Erinmwinorose House, in Benin City that stands as a private museum today.



top row, left to right

Stella Osarhiere Gbinigie
at age 16
1950
EEPA 2009-007-1787

Madam Stella Osarhiere
Gbinigie
Lagos, Nigeria
Photograph by Victor
Ehikhamenor, 2019

middle row, left to right

Stella Osarhiere Gbinigie
and her sisters
Left to right: Imarayi Gbinigie,
Helen Uzzi, Stella, and
Helen Diagonya Uwaifo
1950
EEPA 2014-004-0249

Imarayi Gbinigie, Helen
Uzzi, and Helen Diagonya
Uwaifo
Lagos, Nigeria
Photograph by Victor
Ehikhamenor, 2019

bottom row, left to right

Madam Esther Egharevba
Ogiugo (1909–1991),
deaconess, merchant,
and trader
c. 1950
EEPA 2009-007-1771

Chief Francis Edo Osagie,
Obarisiuwa of Benin,
chieftaincy title-taking
portrait
c. 1960
EEPA 2009-007-1775



BENIN SOCIAL CIRCLE

The Benin Social Circle was at the center of an evolving elite citizenry in Benin City. Founded in 1938 by Elijah Osahene Gbinigie and other prominent citizens, the circle counted among its members respected businessmen, teachers, chiefs, and educated individuals. They held monthly meetings, hosted lectures and debates, and sponsored social events like ballroom dances and picnics. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's first president, was a guest lecturer for one of the first meetings in 1938 (seated first row, center left).

Alonge was one of the founding members of the Benin Social Circle (back row, far left) and was highly respected among his peers, teachers, and community leaders. In 2018, the Benin Social Circle celebrated its 80th anniversary. Its current membership includes the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of the founding members.



top to bottom

Benin Social Circle with invited guest speaker Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, who would become Nigeria's first president in 1963 (first row, center left)

Government School,
Benin City
1938
EEPA 2009-007-0149

Benin Social Circle taken on the 77th anniversary of its founding
Benin City, Nigeria
2015
Photograph by Francis Odupte, *Nigerian Observer*

AKWETE SOUND: HOMAGE TO SIR VICTOR UWAIFO

If you remember “Joromi,” a popular Edo highlife tune from the 1960s, then you might be familiar with Victor Uwaifo (1941–2021), the original Guitar Boy. He and his band, the Melody Maestros, released 100 singles and eight LPs on the Phonogram label,¹ between 1965 and 1976. Among them was Uwaifo’s Ekassa series, which he described as “progressive traditionalism”² and included the song “Kirikisi (Ekassa 24)” as part of Uwaifo’s re-invention of new forms of music based on traditional sounds and rhythms. With his Akwete sound, Uwaifo transposed the colors and patterns of a traditional Igbo handwoven textile into sounds, creating a “moving rhythm of color.”³

Ekassa is a traditional dance performed during the coronation of a new *oba* (king), but Uwaifo’s version, in his own words, “incorporates the beat of the tom-tom and agba drums, Western wind instruments, two guitars and, of course, me on the guitar singing in the Edo language.”⁴ “Ekassa 24” expressed a time of creativity and optimism for the people of Nigeria during the early years of independence. Like Akwete, the melody and lyrics weave together the past, present, and future in ways that speak to Alonge’s aspirational portraits of an Edo community grounded in their past but looking toward their future.

ENDNOTES

1. Collins, John. 1985. *Musicmakers of West Africa*. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 74.
2. Interview with Victor Uwaifo. <https://afropop.org/articles/uwaifo>. See also Austin Emielu. 2018. “Tradition, Innovations, and Modernity in the Music of the Edo of Nigeria: Toward a Theory of Progressive Traditionalism.” *Ethnomusicology* 62 (2).
3. Collins 1985, 78.
4. *Ibid*, 78–79.

Ngozi Patrick weaving Akwete cloth at her vertical loom
Afikpo village-group,
Nigeria

Traditionally restricted to the southern Igbo women in the Akwete area, Akwete weaving has now spread among Igbo to Afikpo in southeastern Nigeria.
Photograph by Simon Ottenberg, 1992
Simon Ottenberg Collection
EEPA 2005-001-3741



Album cover for *Guitar-Boy Superstar 1970–76*
Soundway Records Ltd., 2008
Artwork: Tim Moore
© Soundway Records Ltd.





Igbo artist
Akwete, Nigeria
Akwete wrapper
1964
Cotton, synthetic fiber
187.6 x 105.7cm
(73 7/8 x 41 4/8 in.)
Gift of Linda Millette,
2010-7-1
Photograph by Franko
Khoury

Akwete wrapper

Akwete is a sustainable and wearable fabric adopted across the African continent. With its playful colors, durability, and traditional designs and motifs, it has become the inspiration for global fashion featured in trendy design studios today. The women-owned cooperatives in Akwete have enhanced female autonomy, creativity, and empowerment.

Handwoven on upright looms by Igbo women in Akwete, Nigeria, wrappers of sisal, hemp, raffia, cotton, and synthetic fibers consist of distinctively wide stripes that bear geometric patterns or individual decorative motifs that reflect social status, royalty, or family and can serve as talismans for protection in pregnancy and childbirth. Here, yellow, white, blue-green, and red-orange synthetic fibers float across the black cotton warp producing striped, chevron, and checkerboard patterns.

This exhibition is dedicated to the living memory of our friends and supporters.

Dame Adeola Aderiyike Agbontaen (1930–2021)
Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien (1930–2021)
Chief (Professor) Emmanuel U. Emovan (1929–2019)
Flora Edouwaye S. Kaplan (1930–2021)
Reverend Professor Osadolor Imasogie (1928–2022)
Princess Dr. Irene Ododo Odaro (1950–2021)
Captain Idahosa Wells Okunbo (1958–2021)
Sir Victor Uwaifo (1941–2021)

Special thanks to the citizens of Benin City, His Royal Majesty (HRM) Oba Ewuare II N’Ogidigan, Omo N’Oba N’Edo, Uku Akpolokpolo, Oba of Benin, and members of the Royal Court of Benin, Benin kingdom, who generously shared their personal stories, photographs, and memories of S.O. Alonge and the Ideal Photo Studio

(HRH) Professor Gregory I. Akenzua
Prince Ademola Iyi-Eweka
Prince Aghatise Erediauwa
Chief Sam O.U. Igbe, Iyase of Benin
Osagie Ehanire, Minister of Health, Nigeria
Godwin Osahiere Obaseki, Governor of Edo State, Nigeria
Ohen Osa Edebiri Igbinoghodua, Holy Aruosa Cathedral
Chief Stanley and Magdalene Obamwonyi
Chief Harrison Ehanire
Chief Ajayi Okao
Chief (Professor) Emmanuel Emovan and Princess Adesuwa Akenzua
Chief David Edebiri
Chief Gabriel and Lady Cherry Igbinedion

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Abba Isa Tijani, director-general, NCMM (2020–present)
Yusuf Abdallah Usman, director-general, NCMM (2009–17)
Theophilus Umogbai, curator, National Museum of Benin, Nigeria

The Alonge family and Benin-Edo community

Esther Alonge, Helen Oyawale, Omoregie Alonge, Uwaila Alonge, Aigbedo Alonge, and the children, grandchildren. and great grandchildren of S.O. Alonge
Samuel Arasomwan and family
Christiana Uzebu (née Alonge) and family
Madam Stella Osahiere Gbinigie and sisters Imarayi Gbinigie, Helen Uzzi, and Helen Diagonya Uwaifo
Omoregie Agbontaen and family of Adeola A. Agbontaen
Osato Edo-Osagie and family of Chief Francis Edo-Osagie
Ebiuwa Aisien and family of Dr. Ekhaguosa Aisien
Eghosa and Aime Osagie
Enis Ehizibue Ekhikamenor and family
Patricia Fadaka Iginovia and family of Madam Ogiugo
Sola Adepetu and family of E. Agbe-Davies
Osagie Imasogie and the family of Reverend O. Imasogie
Diana Ramsey Oduwa and family
Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona, University of Benin
John Ogene, University of Benin
Ademola Williams, University of Benin
Ekhator-Obogie Osaisonor Godfrey, Institute of Benin Studies
Eghare Igbinosun, Edo Association of Washington DC

BENIN COMMITTEE

Yinka Omorogbe (chair), Olumide Akpata, Daniel Inneh, Chief Elizabeth Jibunoh, Chuka Mordi, Ivana Osagie, Bola Tinubu

BENIN SOCIAL CIRCLE

Mr. E.I. Okundaye (president), Mr. Eghosa and Aime Osagie, Mrs. E.O. Osayande (vice president), and the children and grandchildren of S.O. Alonge and the founding members

Before Nollywood project team

Amy Staples
Ngairé Blankenberg
Michael Briggs
Kevin Etherton
Migs Grove
Jeremy Jelenfy
Brad Simpson
Haley Steinhilber
Lisa Buck Vann



The full gallery of images may be viewed at
[https://africa.si.edu/exhibitions/current-exhibitions/
 before-nollywood-the-ideal-photo-studio/](https://africa.si.edu/exhibitions/current-exhibitions/before-nollywood-the-ideal-photo-studio/)



Edo language prepared by
 Ekhator-Obogie Osaisonor
 Godfrey, Institute of Benin
 Studies, Benin City, Nigeria

Edited by Mtgs Grove
 Designed by Lisa Buck Vann

above

Comfort (Merry) Oritsetimeyin
 Ehanire (née Cardigan) at
 age 18
 c. 1940
 EEPA 2009-007-0114

front cover

Young woman on scooter
 (detail)
 c. 1965
 EEPA 2009-007-0209

back cover

Stylish couple
 c. 1960
 EEPA 2009-007-0045



Smithsonian
National Museum of African Art

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