Elizabeth Oladunni – Write-up on Thesis research in Nigeria

I was awarded the Arthur Felix Broomfield Prize and the JCR travel grant to do some oral history research in Nigeria for my undergraduate thesis over the summer vacation of my second. My thesis research is focused on how elite women and their organisations influenced government policy in Nigeria. I centre my research on the political lives of four elite women, these women are: Mrs Wuraola Esan, Mrs Elizabeth Adekogbe, Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and Mrs Margaret Ekpo. My research led me to several south-western states in Nigeria such as Lagos, Ibadan and Abeokuta.

Lagos:
This was my first stop. None of the women I was researching were from Lagos, but as the most populous city in Nigeria, I hoped that I would find some useful information on the women. Some tutors in the Africa Studies Centre had already put me in touch with a professor at the University of Lagos (UNILAG), Professor Rufus Akinyele, I contacted him upon my arrival to Lagos and arranged a visit to UNILAG.

Through Professor Akinyele’s help, I was able to look through past undergraduate theses in the university’s collections and focus on theses that were related to my own thesis topic. Nonetheless, the most useful aspect of my visit to UNILAG was the opportunity to speak to some of the professors at the university. I was challenged and urged to think broadly about my thesis topic. A sociologist at the university urged me to think about the legacy of the women I am researching and assess whether these women were ‘exceptional’ or representative of Nigerian women as a whole by exploring the representation of women in politics in Nigeria today.

Even more, books and theories on gender in Yoruba culture that I had taken for granted as being unopposed and had used as the bedrock of my research were challenged by Yoruba professors who urged a consideration of what I defined as ‘power’, ‘patriarchy’, and ‘politics’. Others quizzed my use of the term ‘organisations’ – were these women actually merely leaders of ‘associations’ – and what is the difference between leading an association and leading an organisation?

The opportunity to do research in Lagos was invaluable, it got me assessing every assumption I had and challenged me to think more broadly and intentionally about the terms I was using and the questions I was asking as part of my research.

Abeokuta:

I then moved to Abeokuta, the home of one of the women I was researching, Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (FRK). My time here consisted of trying to find newspaper reports at the archive pertaining to Mrs Kuti. That proved somewhat fruitful.
However, the greatest insight I received was by speaking to local people about her. She was still revered in the community and affectionately called “Beere”, meaning first daughter. Her husband too, Reverend Kuti, was greatly respected in the community, and with Fela Kuti, her son’s great success in music, it seemed that the Kuti family were the pride of Abeokuta. My visit to Abeokuta allowed me to visit Mrs Kuti’s home in Abeokuta, the Grammar school where her husband taught, and both her and her husband’s burial place.

Nevertheless, it was interesting trying to navigate actual history and memory. FRK famously and successfully campaigned for the abdication of the Alake of Egbaland (who was the traditional ruler of Abeokuta). His restoration to the throne was greatly opposed by FRK and many of her women. Both were respected historical figures of the community, so any effort to ask the locals about this famous squabble was met with deliberate attempts to change the topic.

Surprisingly, the person most willing to share more about this historic event that truly highlighted FRK’s influence in local and national politics was a chief in the palace. Perhaps the fact that he too is a historian and his aunts were part of Mrs Kuti’s group of women influenced his openness to share about FRK’s campaign to bring about the abdication of the Alake.

My short stay in Abeokuta was greatly useful in shedding an insight into FRK’s life and how she is remembered today.

Ibadan

One can consider Ibadan as the intellectual hub of Nigeria. I knew that this would be where the majority of my findings would take place, and I wasn’t proved wrong.

Again, through my supervisor and some members of the Africa Studies Department, I was already in touch with some professors in Nigeria such as Professor Adesina and Dr Oladejo. Another professor, Professor Adeniran also guided me during my stay at the university. Their connections were to prove invaluable for my research. Through them, I interviewed elite women such as Professor Bolanle Awe, a former commissioner in Nigeria and Oxford alumni. Her insights were crucial as
she too was a woman in politics. Professor Odejide, another woman I interviewed was one of the first female Deputy Vice Chancellors of a university in Nigeria, and she confirmed my choice of the term ‘elite’, even though Mrs Kuti was a socialist and prided herself on being a voice for the common Egba woman, the opportunities she had in being educated in England in a time where few women were educated, equipped her with skills for and the language of activism.

Lastly, speaking to Professor Ogunsheye, who mingled with women like Mrs Adekogbe and Mrs Esan and was herself the secretary of the Nigerian Council of Women’s Societies, was the true highlight of my trip. Her spirit, and her continued activism inspired me and confirmed my interest in learning more about the lives of female activists and female political figures in Nigeria.

I was also able to use the archives of the university and their library collections. At the end of my time at the universities, I was surprised at the vast amount of material I was able to find; thrilled at the women I interviewed; and eager to use some of the material I collected in my thesis.

**Concluding thoughts:**
In conclusion, I am very grateful that the Arthur Felix Broomfield Prize and the JCR travel grant allowed me to undertake this research. The experience challenged me, taught me and provided me with a tremendous amount of material to use for my undergraduate thesis. My time in Nigeria was extremely insightful and encouraging and I hope to stay in touch with some of the connections I made on the trip.