

# Fieldwork in Nigeria Explores Gender, Sexuality, and Popular Music

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This summer, PhD candidate Rosemary Popoola conducted nearly three months of fieldwork in Nigeria with support from the 2024 Ebrahim Hussein Fellowship and Aliko Songolo Summer Award. The fellowship made possible 86 days of archival research, site visits, and interviews spanning May 29 through August 21.

Popoola's dissertation, "The Lyric is Male, but the Voice is Female: Gender, Sexuality, and Queering African Soundscapes," explores the role of women, queer, and non-binary artists in Nigerian popular music. While past scholarship has often centered male musicians, her work highlights the cultural contributions of those whose voices have historically been silenced or overlooked. Moving beyond visibility politics, the project emphasizes what Popoola calls "politics of articulation," recognizing these artists as cultural actors in their own right.

During the first phase of the trip, Popoola worked extensively in the National Archive at the University of Ibadan, consulting newspapers, tabloids, and periodicals to uncover how women and queer musicians were represented or omitted in the popular press.

In June, Popoola turned to the relationship between visual culture and music, visiting the Tunde Odunlade Gallery, the Kalakuta Museum, and the Center for Contemporary Art (CCA) Lagos. At CCA, research into the photography of J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere revealed resonances between women's hairstyles of the 1960s and contemporary performance aesthetics, including those of pop star Yemi Alade. The Kalakuta Museum prompted further inquiry into artists like Yeni Kuti and Sandra Isadore, whose contributions have often been overshadowed by male figures such as Fela Kuti.

In her final month, Popoola focused on "othered sounds," including marginalized voices and sonic archives often excluded from mainstream narratives. Highlights included research at the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria on Area Scatter, a popular cross-dressing performer of the 1970s, and exploration of over 200 songs of the Abeokuta Women's Union, linked to feminist musical traditions. Additional visits included the Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti Residence, the Women's Research and Documentation Centre (WORDOC), and the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan.

Popoola's findings from this summer's fieldwork will inform upcoming dissertation chapters and future conference presentations, including the 67th Annual African Studies Association Conference, where she will present the paper "Queering Nigerian Popular Music: Temmie Ovwasa's Sonic and Visual Transgressive Act."

Reflecting on the experience, Popoola noted the challenges of conducting research amid rising costs of living and security concerns in Nigeria but emphasized the invaluable insights gained.

"This fellowship allowed me to pursue sources and archives that are central to my project," she said. "The work not only addresses erasures in Nigerian popular music scholarship but also reclaims space for women and queer artists as agentic cultural makers."