

## Student Unionism and Cultism in Nigeria

### JESSICA MOREY

In the summer of 2009, I spent 8 weeks at Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife Nigeria as part of a Fulbright-Hays Group Project Abroad program. Monday through Friday, the other nine participants and I had three morning Yoruba classes, focusing on grammar, culture, and conversation. In afternoons, we engaged with guest lecturers, observed cultural performances, and worked on our research. We took mid-week trips into Ile-Ife to visit the Oni's Palace, the Ife Museum, the day market, the nearby night market in Modakeke, a local shrine, and to see a primary school celebrate its cultural heritage day. On Saturdays, we went on longer excursions to other Yoruba cities, including Ibadan, Osogbo, Abeokuta, Imesi-Ife, Ondo, Akure, and Idanre. Our Sundays were free to spend with our host families, study, and rest.

My research is on the history of university student unions in Nigeria, but for the program I wrote a paper (in Yoruba!) on campus cults. I was able to meet the Vice-Chancellor and his predecessor, the Dean of Student Affairs, and current and former student union members. I witnessed the effects of union activities, in this case the academic and senior staff unions, as they went on strike two days into our stay. The federal and state universities were closed indefinitely. In addition, the week before our arrival, the students' union at OAU led a peaceful demonstration on campus and held a two-day lecture boycott, ostensibly over lack of water. I was able to gain insight into how and why students organize through discussing this event with both the Dean of Student Affairs and members of the Students' Union. The students' union remained active even when the university closed. For example, they led a group of students to Lagos on July 10th to commemorate the deaths of six OAU students who were slain by cult members on July 10th, 1999.

The trip had several highlights beyond research.



One of my favorite days was a trip to the famous Mapo Hall in Ibadan. We went to see Toyin Falola give the Adegoke Adelabu Memorial Lecture. Before the lecture, I was excited to greet Dr. Akinwumi Isola, who I recognized from his role in my favorite Nigerian movie *Campus Queen* (he also wrote the script). We also got a taste of Ibadan politics, as there were cheers and jeers from the audience every time the governor and his deputy's names were mentioned. I later returned to Ibadan to interview Dr. Isola and tour the University of Ibadan. Other highlights include visits to where the peace treaty

ending the Yoruba wars was signed in Imesi-Ife; climbing the five hundred steps to the top of Idanre hill and seeing its old palace (while looking at the sprawl of the new city below); visiting the Osun grove, seeing artist Nike's gallery, and chasing an Egungun through Osogbo; and making new friends in Ife—all while improving my Yoruba.

I had a great experience in Nigeria and can't wait to go back!

*Jessica Morey is a doctoral student in African History. Her trip to Nigeria was made possible by funding from the U.S. Department of Education Fulbright-Hays Summer Intensive Yoruba Group Projects Abroad (GPA) program.*

