

Religious tolerance and difference in Nigeria – research trip

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From 2012 to 2017 DASA is host to a research project funded by the European Research Council exploring everyday religious encounters between Christians, Muslims and traditionalists in Yoruba-speaking southwestern Nigeria, a region with a relatively high degree of religious tolerance. The project is led by Dr Insa Nolte of DASA, and involves a team from DASA and Oşun State University in Nigeria.

I joined the project as a Research Fellow in April 2012, combining this role with my doctoral research on Nigerian travel writing in Yoruba and English, which is also based in DASA. For the past year, we've been working intensively on administering a door-to-door survey in selected southwestern Nigerian towns, looking at attitudes to everyday religious encounters. We began with a pilot survey in Ede, a small town with a 90% Muslim population.

A saying we've heard a lot during our research in Ede is: 'Ede, iyara kan ni' or 'Ede is one room', meaning that Ede is a small, unified place, where people can't help but interact with one another despite their possible religious differences. In December 2012, Insa and I returned to Ede, together with our colleague Professor Olukoya Ogen and the team of Nigerian field officers, to run a workshop designed to look at what is distinctive about Ede and everyday encounters between religions in the town. The workshop, which was organised in conjunction with colleagues from Adeleke University in Ede, began with a day of papers from a number of Nigerian academics. Topics ranged from daily interactions between university staff of different faiths, to the experiences of couples of inter-faith marriages, the role of Sango worshippers in Ede and the place of popular music in negotiating religious difference. On the second day, we invited the people of Ede to join us for a town and gown discussion about religious difference in the town, and to give us feedback on our research findings so far. We also enjoyed a short play devised by students from Adeleke University exploring religious difference and mutual understanding in Ede.

Though I'd previously spent some months in Nigeria for my doctoral research, it was an interesting experience for me to visit several small towns I hadn't been to before, particularly since my research so far has been based in big cities such as Ibadan and Lagos. It was also my first experience of attempting to MC an event in Yoruba, certainly a test of the language skills I've been developing over the last few years! Moreover it was great to work as part of a team of Nigerian colleagues, most of whom are fellow postgraduate students. Their long hours on the road collecting survey responses, often in torrential rain or blazing hot sunshine, put my deskbound number-crunching into perspective. The experience of seeing how the workshop was organised also came in handy for the Sites of Memory conference I co-organised with Tom Penfold in DASA more recently. I hope to return to Nigeria with the project team later this year, when I look forward to getting more involved in the fieldwork side of the project.