

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: NIGERIA

**Transcript of Yemisi Ransome-
Kuti**

Interviewer: Ronke Olawale

**Location: Lagos, Nigeria
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Olutola Oluyemisi Ransome-Kuti was born on December 18, 1947. She was an only child and grew up with her male cousins, including Nobel laureate Prof. Wole Soyinka, late Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, and late Beko Ransome-Kuti, all of whom were activists. Today, she is the matriarch of the Ransome-Kuti family. Ransome-Kuti was educated in both the United Kingdom and Nigeria, where she earned her degrees in business management, aesthetics, counseling, and human resources management. She was involved in the struggle for democracy in Nigeria. In addition to walking out with other civil society organizers, she became so frustrated with the late military dictator, Gen. Sani Abacha, that she mounted increased pressure on him. She wrote to the Queen of England and British government threatening to return the MBE honor awarded to her late father if Britain continued to stay neutral. She was arrested and sent to prison on her way to attend the Beijing Women's Conference (1995). Ransome-Kuti founded the Nigeria Network of NGOs, an umbrella organization that coordinates and regulates the activities of NGOs in Nigeria. She once ran Girl Watch, an organization that focused on educating young Nigerian girls from low socio-economic backgrounds. In 2006, the World Bank appointed her as the civil society advisor on Nigeria's working groups on millennium development goals and poverty eradication.

Ronke Olawale is a PhD Candidate in Social Work and Anthropology at the University of Michigan. She is interested in culture, care, and infectious disease; death and dying, and meaning-making; kinship and child welfare/wellbeing; and intergenerational care. Her dissertation explores the social and cultural context in which the 2013-2016 Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) epidemic occurred in Liberia.

Ronke Olawale: Good afternoon, Ma. My name is Ronke Olawale, and I'm here to talk with you today - Thursday, November 8th-

Yemisi Ransome-Kuti: 7th.

RO: November 7th, 2019. This interview is part of the Global Feminisms project, a multi-site international project sponsored by the University of Michigan, and our goal in undertaking these oral histories is to create and preserve conversations with women whose scholarship and/or activism has contributed to women's activism, as that is broadly conceived. We also think about women whose work, scholarship and activism has contributed in very critical ways to issues that are important to women. We are glad that you accepted to participate in this project. I would like to tell you that we will talk about a couple of things - your background, your life and work, your reflections on your work, how your thoughts about relationships between feminist scholarship and activism really is going, and your thoughts and insights about your work in the context of a broadly conceived notion of women's movements, both in Nigeria and globally. We want to also look at the connections that you see between your work and those of other activists in other parts of the world. Right now, I would like to ask about you - so tell me briefly, as you think about where you are today, how would you depict the journey that brought you to this point?

YR: Well, the work I have done in terms of development hasn't really focused on women, per se, because personally, I think it's a partnership that's needed, and a focus on issues. I know the challenges that face women in particular, specifically, because of history. But it varies from country to country. When you have countries like Ghana that had more matriarchal traditions, you'll find there are strong women and very much in control of a lot of the economic and social life of the country. So I like to be nuanced and critical in the work I do, because I don't see a future where, maybe we laud women, we champion their causes, and then we get resentment from the men, and we lose the goals that we are trying to achieve.

So, what I have done, apart from my own personal life and work, which is just work as a human being, I often don't remember I am a woman, (laughs) in a lot of the things that I do! Partly because I wasn't brought up to focus on gender. I grew up in a family where the Ransome-Kutis, you were just dealt with based on what you did and the actions rather than your gender - whether you are male or female.¹ We were all taught the same skills; all the men were taught to cook, and do chores around the house, all the women were given the same type of education based on their capacity, and we were all just told to go get it, you

¹ The elite Nigerian Yoruba Ransome-Kuti family is known for its members' political, religious, artistic, educational, and medicinal achievements. Members of the Ransome-Kuti family are also known for their marriages with other elite Yoruba families. The name "Ransome" was adopted by Josiah Jesse Ransome-Kuti and comes from the Anglican missionary who converted the family to Christianity. ("Ransome-Kuti Family." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ransome-Kuti_family, 5/9/20).

know. I think that would have influenced people like Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and Eniola Soyinka, all the women in the family.²

From the work I have done with civil society, like I said from the work arena, I really have no problem, I've got the successes that I wanted because I went for the targets and goals I set for myself -- so no problems there, work-wise. But I think one shouldn't lose sight of the fact that not every woman is in those same circumstances, and there is a lot of prejudice, there is a lot of discrimination faced by women. But again, I think the way to address it is to look at the broad picture. If we do not want discrimination for women, we should not want discrimination for men, or based on tribe or religion or proclivities. So, if we wipe out discrimination, generally, women would benefit. I'm always conscious of the fact that women are the gender -- we are the gender that bring children into the world! We are the gender that train, nurture, provide the first principles to every child -- male or female. And the more educated women are, and in countries where education is available, accessible to women, the girl child in particular, we've seen great strides in development, generally. The numbers are there, from IMF World Bank, that when you educate the women and, in fact, make sure education is accessible to the population, you get a society that develops rapidly, because everybody is able to bring their best into the system.³ I have strengths, shall I say, in networking people, because I believe that every capacity is useful when you want to solve problems. So I was able to, with other like-minds, found the Nigerian Network of NGOs, which works globally with the UN, with other international partners, with domestic and in-country civil-society organizations, and the private sector to develop policies and practices that hopefully, or has, to an extent, elevated the society.⁴ I have worked at state-levels as well, because I think when you develop the national levels and you do not key it and embed it at the sub-national levels, then you cannot get the results you want. So state-level programs and the bringing together of the ideas, of the focus of the capacities, has also been of great interest to me.

² Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and Eniola Soyinka were Nigerian aristocrats and political activists. In the 1940s, they co-founded the Abeokuta Women's Union to advocate for women's rights and governmental representation. Funmilayo also led the establishment of the Nigerian Women's Union and the Federation of Nigerian Women's Societies, received the Lenin Peace Prize, and became a member of the Order of the Niger. (Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funmilayo_Ransome-Kuti, 5/9/20; "Grace Eniola Soyinka." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grace_Eniola_Soyinka, 5/9/20).

³ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank are complementary United Nations institutions involved in reducing poverty and stabilizing the global economy. ("The World Bank Group and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)." The World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/history/the-world-bank-group-and-the-imf>, 5/9/20).

⁴ The Nigeria Network of NGOs is a network of over 1,800 civil society organizations that advocate at local and national levels for human rights, sustainable development, and poverty reduction. ("Know More About Us." Nigeria Network of NGOs. <https://nnngo.org/about-us/>, 5/9/20).

Presently, I am actually working at the local levels because, again, unless you bring the global to the local, and the local to the global, then again, you fall short of your goals and targets. So, this gives you a, sort of, brief precis of where I've been over time. Seventy-two years is (laughs) too many years to try and remember all that's been happening!

RO: How would you say, for instance, would you say that your life experiences, maybe you want to go back in time and space, how your life experiences might have impacted the kind of work you now began to do?

YR: Well, I think, growing up in the Ransome-Kuti family, you were always being made to be conscious of social issues. The fact that you cannot be okay if people around you are not, and all our parents - my parents, their brothers and sisters and other members of the family - have always wanted to see an egalitarian society, a society where everyone can aspire and achieve their goals. So, life experiences, again because coming from a family that is very cosmopolitan -- I travelled to the U.K. when I was very young and went to school there for many years -- gave that broad perspective on my worldview, and of course that would impact my work. The fact that I was able to interact with world bodies like the World Bank (I was a consultant for the World Bank); I was on the African Peer Review Mechanism Task Force of the government, and various committees of federal and state governments -- it kind of gives you a very, very broad perspective and the capacity to understand how difficult it is to actually change and transform societies and systems and institutions.⁵

So having got that kind of very deep understanding of issues, it's not easy to just say it was Mr. Buhari's fault, or this person's fault, because a lot of other issues and things creep in.⁶ It gives you that understanding that everybody has a role to play in development, whether it's the leader, the followers, the citizens, the professionals, private sector, the youths in particular -- and that's much of the work that I'm doing these days: how do we bring this burgeoning demographic into the development space and build their capacities, invest in them in such a way that they can run with the economic and social changes that we want to see? Because you are only as good as your people are, you know. You cannot preach development, it has to be something that is embedded in your citizens, in their capacity, in the knowledge that they have, the skills that they have, and the opportunities that you have created for them. Where *do* they get these skills? Do you have first-rate academic institutions? Do you have institutions that address 21st century issues? Because we have to leapfrog, we cannot go at the same pace that other developing countries do. So, you have to have your citizens be creative, innovative, and they cannot do it if they don't have light, if

⁵ The African Peer Review Mechanism is a voluntary self-monitoring agency for African Union Member States. It submits national performance and progress reports to promote political stability and sustainable economic development. ("The African Peer Review Mechanism." African Union. <https://au.int/en/aprm>, 5/9/20).

⁶ Ransome-Kuti is referring to Muhammadu Buhari, Nigeria's current president. ("Muhammadu Buhari." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammadu_Buhari, 5/9/20).

they don't have water, if they don't have basic services, if they are travelling on horrible roads. Everything impacts everything else. You have to take care of all those things that have been outlined in the sustainable development goals, you have to take care of the environment, you have to ensure that poverty is defeated and minimized completely. You have to ensure that corruption is not the predominant practice in your country. So, you have to bring people back to those values. And of course, the fact that I grew up in a time and space where values were critical -- you had to remember who you are.

We have a saying in Yoruba "Ranti ọmọ ẹni ti iwọ'n se."⁷ So, wherever you went, if you were a Ransome-Kuti, or a Fawehinmi or a Soyinka or any of those families that grew up at that time, you had to ensure that your integrity mattered-- not just your integrity, the integrity of the family mattered.⁸ So much as you might be tempted -- and there are no saints out there, I tell people, there are no angels in the world. Everybody is susceptible to temptation. Given circumstances, we would all probably behave pretty much like everybody else. So, the conditions to ensure that people can maintain their dignity and their honor is the responsibility of everyone, particularly the state. If people are poor, you can't expect them to be as straightforward as they would be if they had the basic necessities of life.

But having said that, I think in our country anyway, I have been happy that we chose honor and integrity in our last elections.⁹ It was clear that that was what swayed the votes for the winner of those elections, and it's something that we must capitalize on because if people chose integrity and honor and the particular credentials such candidates bring to the table - - and they don't deliver on their promises and they don't discipline themselves enough to show the citizens that they are about the citizens' issues, they are totally focused on ensuring that the citizens are front and center in their policies and activities -- then you are going to have a setback. Citizens are going to say, "*Oh okay, they are all the same, who cares, put somebody, whoever, there.*" We see some countries that are going through hell because they have made those choices. The turmoil that such decisions create is, I think, a salutary lesson in the world that we live in today, so while you are looking at your own issues and how policies are affecting and decisions are affecting individuals in your country, you also have to have a global view and learn lessons from what is going on elsewhere, so you don't make the same mistakes.

⁷ A Yoruba saying meaning "remember the child of whom you are." (Admin. "Building a national culture (II): Between omoluabi and t'ifun loran." Qed. <https://www.qed.ng/building-national-culture-ii-omoluabi-tifun-loran/>, 5/9/20).

⁸ Members of the Fawehinmi and Soyinka families are prominent political activists in Nigeria. ("Gani Fawehinmi." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gani_Fawehinmi, 5/9/20; "Wole Soyinka." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wole_Soyinka, 5/9/20).

⁹ Ransome-Kuti is referring to Nigeria's 2019 general election, in which incumbent President Buhari of the All Progressives Congress defeated opposition leader Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party. (Busari, Stephanie & Adeoye, Aanu. "Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari reelected, but opponent rejects results." CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/26/africa/buhari-wins-nigeria-election-intl/index.html>, 5/9/20).

RO: Thank you. Also, we will still talk a little bit about that. At what point in time did you really get involved in activism and social justice work?

YR: There isn't a specific time, I would imagine, because like I said, it's a family thing -- Ransome-Kuti, when we were young-- Where I live now is where I lived as a child before I developed the property. And at the back of us lived the Akintolas, who as you know, are very famous in the western region politics.¹⁰ So from a very early age, we were exposed to the discussions about Operation Wetie¹¹ and, you know the fights, the struggles between Akintola and Awolowo.¹² We were very exposed right from a very early age to the struggles of the nation, colonialism. My father, who has an MBE, had a lot of European friends, so I remember having to be conscripted to make salads whenever we had his British friends come to stay.¹³ So, the activism kind of was something you just saw as normal. It wasn't a *decision* that you had to make, because it was just there, it was just part of your life, and the family tradition of standing up for the poor and the oppressed. I remember my father who, in those days, they used to have lay magistrates and this young lady had been beaten, molested.¹⁴ I don't think it was a serious beating, but some young thugs, I guess, bullies, had harassed her and manhandled her, and her parents were really very furious and wanted to take her to the magistrate's court.¹⁵ My father said, "*look, make sure you wrap her in lots of*

¹⁰ Samuel Akintola was a Nigerian Yoruba politician regarded as one of the founding fathers of modern Nigeria. He was a member of the Nigerian National Democratic Party and helped form the Action Group (AG) situated in the Western Region of Nigeria. Akintola served as the Action Group Parliamentary Leader/Leader of Opposition in the House of Representatives of Nigeria, as well as Minister for Health and Minister of communications and Aviation. Akintola was killed in 1966 during Nigeria's first military coup. ("Samuel Akintola." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Akintola, 5/9/20).

¹¹ Operation Wetie (translated as "soak him in petrol and set him ablaze") was a violent protest in Western Nigeria between the Hausa-Fulani natives and members of the Nigerian National Democratic Party in which political gangs set politicians and their properties on fire and used violence to disrupt elections. Operation Wetie eventually led to Nigeria's first military coup on January 15, 1966. ("Operation Wetie." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Wetie, 5/10/20).

¹² The early 1960s power struggles between Action Group leader Chief Obafemi Awolowo and his deputy, Chief Samuel Akintola led to an ideological divide in the party and contributed to the violence associated with Operation Wetie and Nigeria's first military coup. (Oke, Deji. "How Power Tussle Between Awolowo and Akintola Plunged Western Region Into Crises." Within Nigeria. <https://www.withinnigeria.com/2018/03/21/power-tussle-awolowo-akintola-plunged-western-region-crises/>, 5/10/20).

¹³ Yemisi Ransome-Kuti's father, Azariah Olusegun Ransome-Kuti was appointed Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, a British order of chivalry, by King George VI in 1951. ("Yemisi Ransome-Kuti." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yemisi_Ransome-Kuti, 5/10/20; "Order of the British Empire." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Order_of_the_British_Empire#Current_classes, 5/10/20).

¹⁴ Lay magistrates are community members without legal qualifications appointed by the British Crown to carry out specific judicial responsibilities such as participation in minor court cases, administration of oaths, and officiate marriages. (Akinloye, IA. "An examination of the legal status, powers, and roles of the Justices of the Peace in the Nigerian legal system." Journal for Juridical Science. <http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/jjs/article/download/3595/3380/>, 5/10/20).

¹⁵ Nigerian Magistrates Courts deal with all offenses except for capital ones. (Umukoro, Marshal. "Access to Justice in the Lower Courts: Re-examining the Civil and Criminal Jurisdiction of Magistrate Court in Nigeria."

bandages when she comes to give evidence.” So, always looking at how you can defend those who are unable to defend themselves. That’s just something we all do as members of the Ransome-Kuti family, even the young ones, these days, who kind of interacted with us, with our parents, just know that it’s not on to let other people suffer, and if you are able to help, you have a *responsibility* to help. You can’t say, “*oh gosh, I am successful, I have achieved my own aims and I’m all right, Jack, nevermind anybody else.*”

So that’s kind of the culture in the family, and that lifestyle kind of permeates your work in civil society. I even ran for election as a senator some years back because I thought, well, if we just keep complaining and don’t get in the game -- I knew I would lose but I wanted to set an example, I wanted to show people that you can aspire to do it.¹⁶ Nobody’s going to *kill* you, so young people, young women -- the opportunity is there, and you should do it. Also, when we had the challenges around the military era,¹⁷ when Abiola died¹⁸ and the turmoil and the country were allegedly killed, let me put it that way, I remember writing to the queen to say “*Look, I am going to come to the British Parliament and publicly renounce my father’s MBE if Britain doesn’t step up. You’ve left us in this mess and you can’t just step away.*” Even though you might want to throw up your arm and say, “what’s my own? If people don’t want peace in their country, I am alright, let them sort themselves out,” but you can’t. There’s something in you that drives you to say, “what can you do?” Even if it’s a small thing like writing a letter, or speaking out on the radio program, or registering your voice to say, “it’s not acceptable for this to go on.” I think that’s been an important tradition in the family, and you find that most of my young cousins, Femi, Yeni, Seun, they are also all out there, speaking out, finding ways to advocate and somehow, no matter what little way - you may think it’s unimportant, somehow, make an impact.¹⁹ Make *your* impact. Make *your* voice heard. Do things that-- I

National Judicial Institute. https://nji.gov.ng/images/Workshop_Papers/2016/Conference/s02.pdf, 5/10/20).

¹⁶ Yemisi Ransome-Kuti ran for office in the Lagos State Central Senatorial District on the Social Democratic Mega Party platform in 2011. (Aka, Jubril Olabode. Nigerian Women of Distinction, Honour, and Exemplary Presidential Qualities. Google Books.

https://www.google.com/books/edition/Nigerian_Women_of_Distinction_Honour_and/sZ1XAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=yemisi+ransome-kuti+politic&pg=PT302&printsec=frontcover, 5/10/20).

¹⁷ Nigeria was under military rule between 1966 and 1999 with the exception of a democratic era between 1979 and 1983. (“Military Coups in Nigeria.” Wikipedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_coups_in_Nigeria, 5/10/20).

¹⁸ Chief Moshood Kashimawo Olawale Abiola was a Nigerian Yoruba businessman who ran for president in 1993. While the election was annulled, Abiola declared himself president of Nigeria and was detained for several years by Nigeria’s military government. Abiola died under “suspicious circumstances” on July 7, 1998, the day he was supposed to be released from prison. (“Moshood Abiola.” Wikipedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moshood_Abiola, 5/10/20).

¹⁹ Siblings Femi, Yeni, and Seun Kuti are Nigerian musicians known for using their music for political activism. Femi and Yeni Kuti are co-manages of the New Afrika Shrine. (“Femi Kuti.” Wikipedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Femi_Kuti, 5/10/20; “Yeni Kuti.” Wikipedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yeni_Kuti, 5/10/20; “Seun Kuti.” Wikipedia.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seun_Kuti, 5/10/20).

don't believe that revolution is going to solve anything, anybody who reads history knows that revolutions have been bloody and no family is spared, and often replaced with equally dubious characters who will do worse things. It's much more difficult to engage with the institution, to have those incremental changes and to find out where the impact spots are where you can maximize the transformation you want. It's much more difficult to be intellectual about it, to identify similar change agents and form your little hubs of change, your little catalytic groups that transform the society eventually.

So I'm hoping that with the activism, as you put it, of people like myself and many others out there, it would be good if we are able to link up -- I don't think enough of that happens - There's still a lot of us working in our little silos. And a lot of networking is happening, but not enough. We need to be able to find each other, join hands, strengthen each other-- personally and within the objectives that we're all aiming for, for a better country and a better world. If Nigeria sorts itself out, I can imagine the multiply effect for Africa and the world. We're the most populous nation in the world, we're probably the most educated in terms of the numbers, not only of those who are in the country but of those who are out there in the diaspora. If we are able to link up with ourselves and link up with our shared objectives of Nigeria stepping up to its greatness that it was meant to be-- that would transform Africa and certainly impact the world. Again, I think a lot of education is needed. Africa itself is not teaching itself about its history-- the fact that it's the cradle of mankind, the first human beings walked the earth, and that everybody evolved from Africa. So, I think a lot of work still needs to be done, not just by active activists, but there are some very passive activists. Those who think the same way, don't particularly want-- maybe they've got small children, or whatever their personal circumstances are at the time, but definitely feel the same passion and need. So those passive activists must be able to find a way of partnering with those who are able, because maybe they are old and, on their way out like me, who are quite happy to die for the cause! (laughs) Or, you know, younger ones who have the energy and the dynamism to actually be the numbers that tell those, the powers-that-be that this is what we want, this is how we want it, and we are able and capable of being the change that we want to see out there.

RO: Very quickly, in terms of looking at the global feminist movement in this country in the last ten, twenty, thirty, forty decades. How would you analyze that and reflect on the beginning from the time of your aunt, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti?

YR: Feminism globally?

RO: In Nigeria. The movement, since her time until now-- your reflections.

YR: Well, as with everything, I don't think change works on a trajectory that is a straight line. I think, to an extent, historically, and again, Nigeria is not a homogenous society. I mean, if you're talking of Nigeria, are you talking of the women in Purdah, are you talking of women

who live in parts of the country where they don't have the same freedoms as those in the South and the Southwest have?²⁰ So you have to look at what is peculiar to these different regions.

I think I would say we have made progress. Again, it hasn't been a straight line, it's been up and down and up and down. I think during the military era, it wasn't a good time for women. Because, of course, your leaders were soldiers and they were mainly men. So, of course, again, you could say that that was not just the oppression of women, that was oppressing everybody, but I think women definitely do suffer more when you have military regimes. It has reflected itself in a way or being reflected by the fact that the numbers of representations that we have had, the various houses of assembly, the national assembly - it went up, then they went down, and now we're down, you know. So, it's not straightforward, but I think the awareness has been constant. It's now something that is part of the national discourse-- that women have to be given their role. The current President hasn't given as many women positions in his cabinet as has the past administration.²¹

But I think, at the sub-national levels, maybe there's been, here and there, some improvement there. But I've always felt that, while yes, we want gender parity, but it's also critical to have quality representation.²² You don't want to put women there just because they're women. You want people who have the same capacity, who have the same knowledge, abilities, and who have the heart, because that is what you want from your representatives-- those who actually care about you before they are elected so that when they get there, they will be having your issues front of mind. So we want women, we want greater numbers in our leadership cadre, and I'm not just talking of politics. I'm talking of boards of various private sector organizations, public sector organizations, in the civil service. You need to have that balance, because nature does not really work very well when it's unbalanced. You want capacities whether it's for male or female, but fairness at the same time, so that you get the richness because definitely, we're different. Men are different from women, we think differently, and we bring different capacities to the table, and we temper each other's excesses, and we enrich each other's experiences and world views and knowledge systems.

²⁰ Purdah is a practice in some Muslim and Hindu communities in which women are physically separated from men, wear coverings that conceal their skin and shape, and/or engage in similar practices. Purdah has been implemented in parts of northern Nigeria, particularly in places impacted by the Boko Haram uprising. ("Purdah." Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purdah>, 5/10/20).

²¹ This refers to Goodluck Jonathan's administration from May 5, 2010, to May 29, 2015. ("List of Heads of State of Nigeria." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_heads_of_state_of_Nigeria, 5/10/20).

²² Gender parity is a way to statistically compare a specific measurement between men and women, such as income, to provide information about gender progress. (Swenson, Haley. "What Is 'Gender Parity'?" New America. <https://www.newamerica.org/weekly/what-gender-parity/>, 5/10/20).

So, I think if we're able to work together, find that space where there's equal respect for what we're both bringing to the table. When you have that mix and you can pick the brightest and the best and the most worthy ideas and make it work, because at the end of the day, the beneficiaries are our children, and they are all male and female. We want to make sure that everyone in the society - whether it's male, female, physically challenged, old, those who don't have the capacity to actually even be part of the system, they may have mental challenges, they may have various other reasons why they are unable to be part of the workforce-- we have to provide for them. We have to make sure that anybody who is born a Nigerian says, *"thank God I'm a Nigerian. My people get me, my people protect me. My people secure me. I know I may not become the president because of whatever it is, or the governor, but if I have the capacity, I know if I want to get there, I can get there."* So people shouldn't feel that (sighs) *"Don't even bother. You are a woman - don't even try it. You are from this part of the country, I don't want you here."* We have to begin to, as Nigerians, think Nigerian. I don't think we are doing that enough. We're so tribal in some ways, and we need to get past those things that divide us and bring our strengths together to develop the country that we really want our children to be proud of.

RO: Quickly, during your reflection, is there anything, for instance about Mrs. Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, that you know that we don't even know that informed her person, and the kind of work and activism she was involved in?

YR: Well, probably. You know, you have people who are born that way, in some ways. Even if they come from nice, quiet families who really like the status quo, you have that child who is a bit of a rebel. I think from very early on she showed that she is also somebody who is kind of, progressive in her thinking. Being educated-- Once you're educated things come to you, ideas come to you, and your mind is able to fertilize and shape your views and actions going forward. I think marrying into the Ransome-Kuti family must have added some petrol to the fire that was already in her!²³ People always forget that she was a Thomas-- she was Miss Thomas, became a Ransome-Kuti and kind of, imbibed all the characteristics that we are famous for from our grandfather, J.J. Ransome-Kuti, who was very much a creative thinker, a progressive mind, and stamped his understanding of the world, onto the time that he lived in and changed many things and many people.²⁴ I think Funmilayo's ideas, again, cross-fertilized with her husband's and the progressives of the time because she enjoyed politics and having people like Azikiwe and all of them around her gave her, I think, the kind

²³ In 1925, Funmilayo married Israel Oludotun Ransome-Kuti, a teacher and President of the Nigeria Union of Teachers. ("Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Funmilayo_Ransome-Kuti, 5/10/20; "Israel Oludotun Ransome-Kuti." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israel_Oludotun_Ransome-Kuti, 5/10/20).

²⁴ Josiah Jesse "J.J." Ransome-Kuti (1855-1930) was a Nigerian clergyman and musician. He is responsible for adopting the name "Ransome." ("Josiah Ransome-Kuti." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josiah_Ransome-Kuti, 5/10/20).

of missionary feeling that comes to some people, “look, I have this ambition and this burning wish and will to do things differently.”²⁵ And once you’re able to partner with other people who are of like-mind, and then her co-conspirator Eniola Soyinka, who then decided that okay, women in Abeokuta are not going to pay taxes and we are ready to die there, none of that. We are ready to face the king and say, “if we don’t get it, you are gone!”²⁶

So it’s that kind of passion that transcends the personality of him or herself. I’m sure nobody would have told her, “you are only a woman.” That didn’t matter, and her activism affected and influenced so many people. I’m sure there was a time when people almost forgot people like her, Funmilayo, Margaret Ekpo,²⁷ Amina of Zaria,²⁸ because we were all facing maybe military rule and some of the things, you know. So not always settling down and going back into our history and I think it’s really important through what you are doing to now bring to the fore the activities, over time, so that people realize that being a Nigerian, and a Nigerian woman, was *always* progressive, was *always* very dominant in the domestic and societal milieu, in which these ladies grew up. Historically, African women were strong-- Cameroonian Army, made up of all women, at a time, and there’s lots of historical evidence of the strength of the African woman. And why are we surprised? As we said, Africa is the cradle of mankind, and the first women-- We must have been *tough*, ornery creatures who were very, very capable and able to shape their societies. We still have communities like the Hadza tribe in Tanzania, those who have not been touched by Western or Eastern ideologies, where you see women just right there, equity, equal partners with their men-- everybody just has different roles, one is not more important than the other.²⁹ We had our own tribe that was discovered in Benue³⁰ during Babangida’s³¹ time, I forget their name...

²⁵ Nnamdi Azikiwe was Nigeria’s first President from 1963 (when the country became a republic) to 1966. He is known for being the primary driver of Nigeria’s independence from Britain and a strong proponent of nationalism. His presidency ended in a military coup. (“Nnamdi Azikiwe.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nnamdi_Azikiwe, 5/10/20).

²⁶ Abeokuta is the capital of Ogun state in southwestern Nigeria. (“Abeokuta.” Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Abeokuta>, 5/10/20).

²⁷ Chief Margaret Ekpo (1914-2006) was a grassroots women’s rights and decolonization advocate as well as a politician during Nigeria’s First Republic. She was part of the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons and worked closely with Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti in the 1950s. (“Margaret Ekpo.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Ekpo, 5/10/20).

²⁸ Amina of Zazzau (present-day Zaria) was a Hausa warrior queen known for expanding the territory of Zazzau between 1576 and 1610. (“Amina.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amina>, 5/10/20).

²⁹ The Hadza tribe are hunter-gatherers in the Eyasi Valley area in northern Tanzania. (“Hadza.” National Geographic Encyclopedia. <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/hadza/>, 5/10/20).

³⁰ Benue State, named after the Benue River, is located in the northern-central part of Nigeria. (“Benue State.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benue_State, 5/10/20).

³¹ General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida was a key contributor to Nigeria’s military coups and served as the country’s military President from 1985 to 1993. (“Ibrahim Babangida.” Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibrahim_Babangida, 5/10/20).

RO: The Koma?³²

YR: The Koma tribe. They were still pretty much living what you would call a primitive existence, because they didn't have fancy, mechanical stuff. But, equity-- the women are very respected. The first artifacts that you can discover in history were women, so you can imagine that women were not just respected but I can imagine feared, in those early years of human history when men didn't quite understand how they brought children into the world, they didn't quite understand what the sexual act-- they couldn't connect it to birth, the birthing of children. So, women must have had a holy aura around them. So, historically, Africa and African women have demonstrated the strength, capacity, innovation. I'm sure the first farmers were women, the first who discovered-- because that was probably the terrain of women, to be agrarian, to look for food, while the men were more distant hunters, going away from the home. The first cultivations must have been by women! Again, today, I think you find that women are beginning to find that, yes, you know, these natural abilities of procuring, of cultivating, of harnessing nature, are now becoming front and center in human survival. We need food, we need lots and lots of it, we need the kind of foods that we can harness and maybe manage, that will be enough to feed our growing population.

RO: So, we have two final questions, big ones. The next question I want to ask you, I don't know what your response would be-- what do you think is feminism? What does feminism mean to you?

YR: To me? I think, because there was this gap and there was this descent into ignorance, where women were not recognized, where women or the world was influenced by ideas that I frankly think contributed to the underdevelopment of women, coming from religion, coming from culture. These are recent developments and once we imbibed them, we had to go through the brainwashing system - now we're going through the de-brainwashing part of our development, where we have to understand facts, science, what is real, what is fiction, what is imagined, what is ideology that is very useful to make society understand how it should manage itself, how it should relate with itself, how it should relate with our creator. We now have to kind of give it a name. If we didn't have that friction or that chasm, that bridge, breach of history, then there wouldn't have been-- it would just be normal, and everybody would be human beings! You wouldn't have to have masculine, and gender and labels and all of that. But because, yes okay, we have to define that there was a point where a very critical and important part of humanity was being subjected to some degree of oppression and discrimination and disrespect-- that, okay, we have to now address it and give it a name, and that's what feminism is to me. It's a name to recognize the fact that a lot

³² The Koma tribe is located in the Atlantika Mountains in northern Nigeria. They have their own language and maintain their traditional culture. ("Koma in Adamawa." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koma_in_Adamawa, 5/10/20).

more needs to be done to bridge the gap, to restore the balance so that our young men and women can once again begin to cooperate with each other, respect each other, support each other. We've been to programs in schools where you would talk to a young secondary school boy of ten or eleven, and he's already saying he's the master, looking for some slave somewhere. So conflict is already set up for those young people down the road, and that's what feminism is.

RO: And African feminism, is it different?

YR: I imagine every movement would have its own historical underpinnings, and the traditions around it. African feminism grew out of a different set of circumstances. European women had to fight to be able to vote, to get the same salaries. We don't have those same challenges here. Then with Europe and America you had Black feminism, and White feminism, so we have different issues that we need to address here. I think it might be easier for us because, deep down, the African man respects his mother. The average African man respects his mother, definitely every Nigerian man I know respects his mother.

RO: So what is the problem respecting their wives, now? Or other women they see?

YR: Exactly, now, the mother may have been the one that went through this history of learning that she was weak, that she is weak, that she is not the same, that the Bible says that the man is the head. These things that came, like I said, historically, from when we were all kind of respecting each other and we had 'Ubuntu'³³ or 'Umuntu'³⁴ or that African culture of supportive and collaborative societies. So when we had the introduction of these other ideologies, okay, these women who are the mothers would have been influenced by that, and would have passed it on to their sons, and they would have also lived it in some ways. Remembering when I was young, growing up in Lagos here, we had very very strong women

³³ "Ubuntu" derives from the South African Nguni Bantu word for "humanity." Ubuntu philosophy emphasizes the shared human experience and influenced African countries' progressions toward majority rule throughout the 1980s and 1990s. ("Ubuntu Philosophy." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_philosophy, 5/10/20).

³⁴ The Zulu phrase "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" translates as "A person is a person because of people." It emphasizes human reliance on and formative interactions with others. (van Niekerk, Susanne. Umuntu, Ngumuntu, Ngabantu. Montessori Centre South Africa. <https://www.montessorisa.co.za/5390-2/>, 5/10/20).

in the social hierarchy of society: Lady Ademola,³⁵ Lady Alakija,³⁶ Kofo Abayomi,³⁷ Rotimi... There were lots of very strong role models, but it may not have been the same in other parts of the country. I think in the East it may have been the same, because the Eastern culture is a little bit more egalitarian-- not all together, because some practices were still very oppressive and all of that. So, there are lots of issues to tease out. And understanding it is critical. Bringing the body of knowledge that will educate people to understand why this was like that in the past, and why it wasn't normal, it wasn't brought from heaven, it emerged at a particular time, and with every custom, history, tradition, it changes, you know. It's not set in stone. Traditions are supposed to help mankind, not the other way around. So, when practices and customs are no longer useful to you, you have to get rid of it. But the ability of women who have that knowledge, and men who learn it because they take the time out to understand the issues, to understand the history, to understand the science, to understand the facts. Their ability to have the critical mass of them in the society, in the education sector, in the health sector, in the public service, in the private-- in every sphere of human activity, will begin to impact to some extent. I think it's already doing so.

I think it would be very difficult to find in a place like Lagos, which is very cosmopolitan, someone who doesn't understand that there are issues around gender and that it's important to understand the position of women and that it's not going to be foreign to them to find that the woman is the chairman of First Bank, as we do have a woman there now, because these things are in their face, it's part of the environment in which they're now growing up.³⁸ I think, with time and with the energies that women bring in, and I have to salute the women that are out there fighting and living the struggle, but I also have to appeal and encourage those who may think, "*oh, with all that I have on my plate, looking after my home, looking after my little babies and grown-up children and all the rest of it, I don't have the energy to worry about whether some other woman somewhere is not getting her rights,*" you know. I want to appeal to them that your children are going to meet the children of those that-- who are being incapacitated now, and who have been brought up in an environment that will, in fact,

³⁵ Olori Kofoworola Aina Ademola was the first president of Nigeria's National Council of Women Societies as well as the co-founder of the Girls Secondary Modern School and New Era Girls' Secondary School, both in Lagos. In 1959, she became a Member of the Order of the British Empire and was also rewarded membership in the Order of the Federal Republic by Abubakar Tafawa Balewa's government. ("Kofoworola Ademola." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kofoworola_Ademola, 5/10/20).

³⁶ Folorunso Alakija is a Nigerian businesswoman and billionaire. She is the executive vice-chairman of Famfa Oil Limited and is the managing director of the philanthropic organization The Rose of Sharon Group. Lady Alakija is considered to be one of the most powerful women in Nigeria. ("Folorunso Alakija." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folorunso_Alakija, 5/10/20).

³⁷ Oloye Sir Kofoworola Adekunle Abayomi was a co-founder of the Lagos Youth Movement, a nationalist organization, in 1934. He also served as chairman of the Lagos Executive Development Board between 1958 and 1966. ("Kofo Abayomi." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kofo_Abayomi, 5/10/20).

³⁸ First Bank of Nigeria, centered in Lagos, is a multinational bank. Ibukun Awosika is its chairman and the first woman to hold the position. ("First Bank of Nigeria." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Bank_of_Nigeria, 5/10/20; "Ibukun Awosika." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibukun_Awosika, 5/10/20).

impinge on you and your children in the future. So, find that extra strength to also see what you can do to influence people around you, in your workplace, in your community. There are lots of little ways you can do it without expending too much time and energy.

RO: Alright, so your final thoughts as you reflect on the global women’s movement in light of the global climate change and how it affects women?

YR: Well, everything affects women, doesn’t it? (laughs) Whatever it is, climate, whatever, we get impacted one way or the other. I’m so proud of this young lady, the climate change activist, I forget her name. Norwegian, is it? Swedish?

RO: The little girl, yes.

YR: The little girl, please speak her name when you are reporting on this [Note: she means Greta Thunberg].³⁹ I am so proud of her and other young women and other young people, because definitely the future belongs to the young, there are more of them. And they have to take responsibility, and I see them taking responsibility. I see them in the ‘Me Too’ movement, I see young women and young men stepping up, I see them fighting gun cultures in parts of the world-- strong, articulate, educated voices.⁴⁰ The ‘Me Too’ movement came in with a bang, has been facing challenges because I think with such movements, we are bringing a disparate group together. Yes, we all want to fight against sexual harassment and discrimination and violence. They’re real. But we must also be very clear-headed about who it’s affecting, men are also sexually violated, we have to be clear-headed about the fifth columnists, like I put it-- those who want to spin it and use it in ways that are actually detrimental to the movement and color it in a whole different way.⁴¹ We have to be aware that there are women that take advantage of men, and we have to empower our sons to recognize quality character, values, so that they are not taken in by women who use different tactics to violate them, and go after them for their money, and for other things rather than love and their character and who they really are.

³⁹ Greta Thunberg is a Swedish environmental activist born in 2003. She is best known for creating the Fridays for Future, also known as School Strike for Climate, movement. She has given speeches at the United Nations Climate Action Summit, the World Economic Forum, as well as the legislatures of various countries. (“Greta Thunberg.” Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Greta-Thunberg>, 5/10/20).

⁴⁰ The ‘Me Too’ movement was created by Tarana Burke in 2006 as a resource for women and girls of color who have experienced sexual violence. In 2017, #metoo went viral on social media after actress Ashley Judd accused Hollywood executive Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment. The hashtag has come to represent the anti-sexual violence movement as many survivors of sexual violence have used the hashtag to speak out about the harmful actions of powerful entertainers, athletes, and politicians. (“#MeToo: A timeline of events.” Chicago Tribune. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/ct-me-too-timeline-20171208-htlstory.html>, 5/10/20).

So there are all kinds of things that we-- women who have been subjected to sexual harassment-- I don't think you will find a woman who has been exposed to normal activities in her career or in her world, that would not have been subjected to it. Let's share our stories of how we overcame. What ammunition do you need if you are going into a workplace and you know that it is likely? What are the things you have to say, what are the ways you have to behave? I'm not saying this nonsense about, "men are so weak, that when they see a woman that is showing her neck, they're going to go crazy." We train our boys to be disciplined as well. There was a time when we were all walking naked and nobody was jumping any woman. So it's something that has all sorts of angles to it that we have to be clear-headed and clear-eyed about, and embrace all the issues and have a way of discourse and dialogue with each other, that we're able to come to common ground and find ways of collaborating and lifting ourselves up, and ensuring that we do have that, we get to that world where the better angels, as we put it, becomes predominant, and that you don't open your TV, or radio, and you are assaulted by words and actions that are unnatural, inhuman. People are denigrating other people, people are abusing each other, people are lying. We don't want that to be what we admire in our world, and it's up to each and every one of us to work together, to come to that world, that place, that set of values that makes human beings bloom and really achieve their true potential. We're beautiful things, but we also have that dichotomy of-- everybody is good and bad, we can swing either way, so let's find ways that the very best of us is what is the dominant discourse, the dominant behavior, the dominant value that controls and shapes our world for - not just for us, those that are living today, but those that are yet to come.

RO: Right, thank you so much Miss Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, it's my pleasure-

YR: Not Miss Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti.

RO: Oh, I'm sorry Miss Funmilayo - Miss Yemisi Ransome-Kuti! I know that you love your aunt so much, you love your family, I've seen a lot of pictures around that-- you are a family woman and you like to keep memories alive, and we are so excited to have you as part of this project. I wish you the very best in life and thank you so much. I am concluding this interview today, November 8th, 2019.

YR: 7th.

RO: November 7th, 2019. On Lagos Island, Onikan.

YR: It's my pleasure.