

This is the text of an email-interview conducted on behalf of the African Studies newsletter at Gent University.

Who is Felicitas Becker?

‘Like a cow who’s a ballerina’ my oldest daughter said recently, and her word is as good as mine (to be fair, she was referring to my running). In my experience, people aren’t that good at giving an account of themselves, and I can’t logically claim to be an exception. But for what it is worth: I grew up in Germany and have spent the last twenty years living and/or working in the UK, Tanzania, Hungary, Canada and the US before coming to Gent. Consequently, I have given up trying to determine where I am supposed to belong. From my German roots, I retain a love for Bach’s music and Christmas cookies, and mistrust against powerful institutions, religious ones particularly. I like cooking, but with three primary-school age children only ever do it in a hurry. I run (slowly) and swim when I get the chance (rarely). I dream of getting to the cinema more often, ideally with my husband, a one-time film critic.

How would you describe your area of research?

I am a specialist in the modern history of East Africa, with particular focus on Islam. I also have a strong interest in the history of rural poverty and development, and have just had a book manuscript on this topic accepted by Cambridge University Press. I was attracted to the history of religion and that of development for similar reasons: both involve complicated relationships between people’s normative claims, the way they actually behave, and the collective changes (or lack of them) that result. I have also written on the anti-colonial Maji Maji War (1905-1907), on Tanzanian political culture and the aftermath of slavery. Currently, I am trying to understand how everyday religious tolerance among East African Muslims coexists with their rhetorical endorsement of the messages of often quite illiberal preachers. I am also looking for funding for proper fieldwork on the aftermath of slavery in East Africa: where did those hundreds of thousands of ex-slaves go, and how has the history of slavery shaped political rhetoric in the region? I am wary of attempts to ‘learn from history’, but I am quite invested in the historian’s ability to poke holes into social and political myths derived from history.

Where did you work before you came to Gent and what did you do there?

My last job before Gent was as a University Lecturer (a junior permanent post) at the University of Cambridge, but I did not enjoy working there; the micro-culture of the institution is so strong that it felt a bit like a cult, and views on the public role of history were very conservative. I taught the modern history of all of Africa as well as what they called ‘wider world’ history, i.e. the history of empires, European and otherwise, since ca. 1400. Before that, I worked at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver as Assistant Professor in African History. There, I was free to focus on African and specifically East African history. Before that, I was a post-doc at the University of London, researching Islam in twentieth-century Tanzania. I did my PhD in Cambridge, but PhD students do not count as employees there.

What is your impression of UGent, the African Studies Programme and the students in it?

I find students very curious, willing to learn and to be challenged, notwithstanding unease about how to put together a written assignment. They deal remarkably well with being taught in English. I have learned much from my students, not only about Belgium (which still feels very new) but also about aspects of 21st century living that tend to pass my own generation by. As for the African Studies programme, I like the fact that language teaching is taken seriously, and I like its interdisciplinarity; it's nice to have anthropologists, literature and linguistics specialists to talk to. That said, I also like talking to fellow historians over in the History Department, who have been explaining Belgian politics to me, among other things. Overall, I find the tone in both departments collegial and fairly unpretentious. I would like to see more students from Gent's and Belgium's immigrant communities come through into the programmes I teach in as they appear currently under-represented, but that is a much broader problem than just the university's.